The Politics of the Academic Agora

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What is the purpose of the academic conference? Ideally, the role of the conference is to provide a space for academics and others to gather in order to debate a topic or theme and discuss the state of a discipline. Through the presentation of work and discussion of ideas those gathered at the conference should learn or have their views influenced by the words and thoughts of others and potentially reach some kind of synthetic vision, consensus, or dissensus around the topic in question. Of course, this synthetic vision may and perhaps should be entirely open ended and provisional, but the key idea remains—the conference should function as a kind of academic version of the ancient Greek agora, where people would gather in order to debate, disagree, test ideas, reach conclusions, and make decisions.

While this vision of the academic meeting as laboratory remains the ideal, and there is probably little doubt that this is the hard core of the conference idea in most cases, there is a sense in which large academic events in particular struggle to realise this pure vision because debate of key themes tends to be dispersed across the conference which becomes something other, more, or perhaps less than a space for democratic discussion. In pursuit of the ancient comparison, we should note that the same was, of course, true of the original urban agora. The ancient meeting place, the ur-space of democracy, was not only about debate, critique, and decision, but also became concerned with trade and economic exchange with strangers. Is this division not essentially present at the academic conference? The conference is a space of debate and democratic engagement, but it is also a professional event for those who present their work in order to update their CV, disseminate findings from projects, and network with a view to career advancement. In other words, the conference is simultaneously a space for friends to enter into true debate and actually engage in open communication, and strangers to exchange cognitive commodities, but never really open themselves up to each other, because self-transformation is never the object of commodity exchange that instead projects the possibility of change into the thing—in this instance, change takes place through the improved CV, for example.

Although it is possible to argue that career enhancement and so on is important in respect of the way it enables academics to find a platform for the communication of political views, it is problematic if the professional structures of

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a discipline harden to the extent that there is no room for the views of others because what matters above all else is institutional position and the value this confers upon particular views. While some sense of recognition of development is necessary, this must be tempered by the need to understand the possibility of the outsider or minority view. The problem is, therefore, how to balance these two aspects—institutional order and extra-institutional potential or politics—in a single space that is both within and external to organisational frames of reference.

My view is that, unfortunately, it is not easy to balance these two aspects of the conference function, which connects institutional logic to free debate, because sociology is, like every other discipline, an institutionalised form, which hopefully lives on through the emergence of new ideas, new thoughts, and new participants. Essentially, it is in this respect that I think that the idealism, or what Habermas would call the communicative rationality, of the conference is fundamentally marked by a more instrumental, or institutional, function which means that the event may be found wanting and appear constrained by pragmatic concerns that mean that true democratic, political, debate never really gets off the ground.

The conference is, therefore, in my view a space of tensions and it is important to note that this is not a problem particular to ESA events, but rather marks sociology, and academic, gatherings across the board. In light of this perspective, which I would define through the idea of *the politics of the academic agora*, I think it is possible to develop a broad, political response to Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová's critique of the 2015 ESA conference in Prague.

My initial reaction to Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová's critique is that this kind of self-criticism is absolutely necessary in the discipline of sociology because it highlights the political tension present in not only the academic conference, but also the discipline more broadly. Unlike many other disciplines, which have more easily adjusted to the neoliberal global hegemon, my view is that sociology has been marginalised, primarily because of its abstract envisioning of social relations that necessarily opens up a space for thinking otherwise. Under pressure of marginalisation, sociology has seen the emergence of branch disciplines, such as criminology and social policy, which start with a broad recognition of existing social structures and then work within these for the improvement of *neoliberal* society. The critical potential of sociology is, therefore, sublimated in these sub-fields, and the rhizomatic structure of the root discipline itself seems to disappear, simply because nobody knows where to place it in a world where boundaries that enable (quantitative) valuation and measureable impact are essential.

The result of this process of disappearance in rhizomatic complexity is that sociology has become a kind of spectral discipline on the outer limits of neoliberal higher education. This means that it is simultaneously more or less invisible in a mono-lingual system that only speaks economese and recognises isolated individuals who behave like rational calculators of competitive advantage, *and* also potentially revolutionary by virtue of its key message that makes no sense in the neoliberal universe: the fantastical, utopian, idea that social relations are

irreducible and similarly incomprehensible view that it is impossible to abstract individuals out of their environment. But what is the relationship between this vision of the key message of Sociology, which makes no sense from a neoliberal point of view, and Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová's critique of the ESA?

My point is very simple. Through their basic assertion—which I take to be that the conference cannot simply be an institutional, professionalised, meeting concerned with the enhancement of CVs and so on, but must engage with wider political issues in a very real way in terms of both its content, but also form—I think Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová are symbolic of the essential political desire of sociology, which will surely prevent the discipline from ever hardening towards a cold, professional, neoliberal institutional form where what matters is position, rank, and so on.

In terms of the particular points Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová make about the ESA Prague conference, I would support the view that exclusivity must be avoided at all costs in order to open the event to young scholars, and postgraduates, who represent the future of the discipline. Where finance is an issue, I would suggest that the entry of postgraduates should be more or less free and their attendance subsidised by the fees of waged colleagues on the basis that we should support the dynamic development of sociology across Europe. Regarding the concern that the conference represents the 'ivory tower', and that it should open out to wider publics including policymakers, I would agree that a conference should not become a symbol of the solipsistic enclosure of a discipline upon itself. However, I would note that there is a difference between a critique of the narcissism of a discipline, which means that it is unable to speak to others, and a recognition of the need to provide a critical space for intellectual debate somewhere between the common sense of wider publics and the pragmatics of policy makers where the essential concern is how to make ideas work.

My view is that sociology, and as a consequence the sociology conference, must sit somewhere between these two forms of knowledge which are rooted in practice and provide a space for intellectual experimentation free of habit, tradition, necessity, and pragmatism. In this respect, I regard sociology as a kind of avant garde, and think about the conference as a space of possibility for utopian speculation, which I consider absolutely essential in a world where poetics have been endlessly undermined by instrumental rationality and the demand for quantitative measure—X produces Y impact. For this reason, I have less sense of the problem of the 'ivory tower' than Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová and if anything would argue that a secure space free from the intrusion of instrumental, institutional, concerns is essential today.

In order to balance this concern for what we might call a conspiratorial space for sociological experimentation, however, I completely agree with Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová's view of the importance of social responsibility, but would take this further. Although it is important that the conference itself is sustainable, my broader view concerns epistemological and methodological issues, and re-

lates to my sense that it is no longer enough for sociology to think of itself simply in terms of a 'fact'-based discipline in a world characterised by a range of potentially catastrophic problems, including economic division, impending ecological collapse, and more or less unmanageable demographic stresses caused by an ageing population and the refugee crisis.

In light of this catastrophic situation, which is not being addressed by the neoliberal elites more interested in profitability and growth than any kind of human sustainability, I think the concern with social responsibility that Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová highlight should really be extended beyond a critique of the ESA Prague event to become about the need for sociology to return to its roots in Comte, who first wrote about sociology, and Durkheim who imagined social science, in order to conceive a 'new sociology', or neo-sociological project, centred around an ethical opposition to neoliberal economese and the reduction of people, animals, and the world itself to the status of commodities to be bought and sold on the free market.

Although this may sound like the partisan assertion of a kind of red-green political programme for a new sociology, and some may question whether this normative vision of a discipline is epistemologically sustainable, my view would be that this is absolutely essential. Sociology cannot live on the margins of the neoliberal knowledge economy, pretending to find Durkheimian truths, because neoliberal politics suspended the sociological object (society) and disclaimed its existence in the 1980s. In other words, there is nothing to return to in order to produce 'facts' and this means that sociology must take a stand on the basis of its key insight—the individual is made in social relations, power is ever present in these relationships, and the social fabric that holds the individual is founded upon a natural eco-system that is, essentially, our life-support system.

This is what I think sociology must seek to achieve over the course of the next twenty years and the conference form plays an important part in the creation of this oppositional identity. In this respect Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová are correct in their efforts to politicise the ESA event—the conference cannot become a space of commodification, but must serve a wider purpose concerned with the advance of a critical utopian vision for a discipline best placed to oppose the un-dead neoliberal hegemon. Nobody believes in the neoliberal system these days and it is deeply depressing for sociologists to work under this regime that absolutely opposes their mode of thought. From my point of view, silent complicity is no longer really an option.

In the UK, higher education and the university sector is a militarised space which can be understood through Foucault's work on discipline, governance, and biopolitics. The critical educationalist Henry Giroux writes about the US system in terms of the military-industrial-academic complex and I think we find exactly the same kind of machine in the UK. In this system research has a very specific meaning relating to its use value for the state, while teaching is concerned with the production of trained workers, rather than critical thinkers. Under these con-

ditions, the conference becomes part of the instrumental, industrial, machine. One presents research in order to demonstrate 'impact', improve one's profile, and apply for promotion. However, what I have tried to explain, and what I think Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová touch upon, is the other side of the conference form—the political utopian potential of the academic gathering. It is this potential, this possibility, that I think we need to nurture and foster in the name of the future. For this reason, I think the spirit of Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová's critique is more important than the content of their suggestions. Inside of their critique of costs, exclusivity, and the need for responsibility resides the political desire of sociology to engage with the end times of neoliberal capitalism, beyond the limited spaces of the institution.