EDITOR’S MESSAGE

Whilst it may only feel as if a few weeks have passed since we all met in Geneva for ESA’s 10th conference in Geneva, preparations are now well underway at the University of Turin, who will play host to our next full assembly between August 28th and 31st next year.

Behind the scenes there is a great deal of work being carried out to ensure that this will be the most successful ESA conference to date. This is, however, by no means an easy task. It involves not only bringing together some 3,000 sociologists from all parts of Europe and beyond, but ensuring that the relative infrastructure is set in place ready to cope with thousands of abstract submissions, hundreds of workshop sessions, tens of plenary and semi-plenary speeches, and a pre-conference doctoral student workshop. In addition to these, the local organising committee is also hard at work organizing a programme of optional social events to entertain us in our free time also.

The conference’s theme has been decided upon – Crisis, Critique and Change – and the call for papers has now been released (click here for the call), thus giving us ample time to submit our abstracts before the February 1st, 2013 deadline. Reflecting the upcoming conference, then, in this issue Frank Welz (ESA’s Conference Programme Committee Chair) introduces its theme and Giovanni Semi (a member of the Local Organizing Committee) presents Turin, the urban laboratory in which the conference will take place.

In his President’s Message, Pekka Sulkunen discusses the development of the EU’s 8th Framework Programme, Horizon 2020, and the ways in which ESA has sought to intervene in the decision-making process. In regard to ESA’s publications, Göran Therborn, editor of European Societies, reports upon the activities of and some changes to this well-established journal, whilst a new editorial team present ESA’s recently established, second journal publication, The European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, which will be released in 2014.

In addition to the above, this issue also includes a thought provoking viewpoint article titled “On doing the sociology of anti-Semitism” by Professor Robert Fine; a report from Research Network 20’s successful midterm conference titled “Curiosity and Serendipity”, which took place in Lund, Sweden between the 20th and 21st of September this year; an introduction to the Westermarck Society by the association’s current president, Anssi Peräkylä, and secretary, Pekka Rantanen; and a testament to Jiří Musil (1928–2012), a leading figure in Czech sociology whose contributions helped inspire a generation of urban sociologists both in the Czech Republic and across the globe.

Finally, I again wish to invite all ESA members to make use of this newsletter as a forum for discussion. We welcome contributions to future issues from all, particularly as personal reflections, notes for discussion and human-interest stories. Furthermore, we are grateful for feedback and suggestions from our readers. Please address all correspondences to peter.holley@helsinki.fi.

Peter Holley
Helsinki, December 2012.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Robert Fine on doing the sociology of anti-semitism.

My experience is that, with a certain proviso, it’s basically ok to speak about antisemitism in the past but it gets trickier to speak about it in the present...

Read more on page 4.
Robert Fine: On doing the sociology of antisemitism.

Sociologically speaking, I have been a bit of a fly-by-night. Instead of devoting 40 years of my life to the study of One Thing, I have flown from prisons and asylums, to police and the law, to Marx and the Enlightenment, to South Africa and the non-racial unions, to Trotskyism and Stalinism, to nationalism and cosmopolitanism, and to Kant and Hegel. It keeps me busy but is perhaps not to be recommended as career trajectories go. My saving grace, if I have one, is that beneath the Many Things there is, I feel, One Thing to which I kept coming back.

This brings me to another of my ‘topics’ that I have begun to explore in recent years. It is the question of antisemitism. I have to say that of all my subject matters I have attempted to research, this has been by far the most fraught, troubled and anxiety-producing. So I thought that rather than bottle it up in the corner of my study, I would share it with my European colleagues and ask those of you interested what you think about this particular concern.

My experience is that, with a certain proviso, it’s basically ok to speak about antisemitism in the past but it gets trickier to speak about it in the present. For many years I taught an MA course on the Sociology of the Holocaust. It always attracted an interested group of students and despite its heart-breaking and stomach-churning content it excited lively and even good-humoured discussion. No problem. The proviso I mention was that on the first occasion I presented a paper on this theme at a conference – it addressed debates around the Nuremberg Trials – I was greeted with the question of why people keep going on about the Holocaust. I noted it was the only paper at this large critical legal conference that had anything to do with the Holocaust. Since then I have observed that it has become almost a fashion to say that we go on too much about the Holocaust, that we do so at the expense of other human disasters, that we focus on the suffering of Jews at the expense of other victims of Nazism, and – yes – that we have ulterior motives when we speak of the Holocaust that are connected with turning a blind eye to contemporary forms of domination. Sometimes I wonder if once is already too much.

The bigger problem I experience, however, arises when we speak about antisemitism in the present. I have noticed that there is a tendency in sociology to treat antisemitism as always in the past. Modernists treat it as a symptom of modernity. Postmodernists treat it as a symptom of post-modernity. Postmodernists treat it as a symptom of the age of nationalism. Theorists of the second modernity treat it as a symptom of the first modernity that is no longer with us. And so it goes on. We are told that antisemitism used to be a blot on the European landscape but that it has become so discredited after Auschwitz that it now exists only on the margins of society among right-wing extremists. We are told that antisemitism is that of the Hagel-Marx relation; on labour movements in Southern Africa and their relation to nationalism; and on critical theory, Hannah Arendt, and more generally social and political thought after the Holocaust. He has recently been working on cosmopolitanism, human rights, antisemitism and natural law.

Whilst at the University of Warwick Professor Fine chaired the Department of Sociology and co-founded of the Social Theory Centre. He is a member of ESA’s Executive Committee and co-founded Research Network 31 which focuses upon Ethnic Relations, Racism and Antisemitism.

Robert Fine is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick, UK. He has published on Marx’s legal and political thought, its relation to the Enlightenment, and on the Hegel-Marx relation; on labour movements in Southern Africa and their relation to nationalism; and on critical theory, Hannah Arendt, and more generally social and political thought after the Holocaust. He has recently been working on cosmopolitanism, human rights, antisemitism and natural law.

One effect of this pastification of antisemitism is that if people say that there is antisemitism in the air today or that they themselves are victims of antisemitism, they must either be mistaken, over-sensitive, delusionary or worst of all dishonest. Those who complain about antisemitism, or fight against antisemitism, or even wish peacefully to study antisemitism, can’t be right since it is already established that antisemitism no longer exists except on the fringes of right-wing extremism. The secret agenda some people see behind the ‘charge’ of antisemitism is that of defending Israel against its critics. We are told that the charge of antisemitism is abused in order to defend the indefensible. In this discourse antisemitism appears as a ploy designed by Zionists to let Israel get away with murder. The ad absurdum of this argument is that in one case of antisemitism that had nothing to do with Israel, the abuser’s defence was that he was a critic of Israel and this is why the antisemitism question came up.

One dodgy presumption behind this argument is that Israel cannot be defended openly, so that its defenders have to resort to underhand tactics. Another is that criticism of Israel is not ‘as such’ antisemitic or more strongly that no criticism of Israel can under any circumstance ever be antisemitic. A moment’s thought should disabuse us of this prejudice. It’s a bit like saying that no criticism of, say, India culture in the European Union that has put an end to antisemitism. For radicals it is Islamophobia and anti-Roma racism that have taken off where antisemitism ended. Either way, it would appear that the long history of European antisemitism was strangely resolved shortly after the unprecedented killing spree against Jews. Of course, things have changed since 1945, but the wonder of this narrative is that antisemitism seems to be dissolved by the very horror of its deeds. The Europe that brought us the Holocaust in the 1940s can once again pride itself on being the civilised continent.

One effect of this pastification of antisemitism is that if people say that there is antisemitism in the air today or that they themselves are victims of antisemitism, they must either be mistaken, over-sensitive, delusionary or worst of all dishonest. Those who complain about antisemitism, or fight against antisemitism, or even wish peacefully to study antisemitism, can’t be right since it is already established that antisemitism no longer exists except on the fringes of right-wing extremism. The secret agenda some people see behind the ‘charge’ of antisemitism is that of defending Israel against its critics. We are told that the charge of antisemitism is abused in order to defend the indefensible. In this discourse antisemitism appears as a ploy designed by Zionists to let Israel get away with murder. The ad absurdum of this argument is that in one case of antisemitism that had nothing to do with Israel, the abuser’s defence was that he was a critic of Israel and this is why the antisemitism question came up.

One dodgy presumption behind this argument is that Israel cannot be defended openly, so that its defenders have to resort to underhand tactics. Another is that criticism of Israel is not ‘as such’ antisemitic or more strongly that no criticism of Israel can under any circumstance ever be antisemitic. A moment’s thought should disabuse us of this prejudice. It’s a bit like saying that no criticism of, say, India culture in the European Union that has put an end to antisemitism. For radicals it is Islamophobia and anti-Roma racism that have taken off where antisemitism ended. Either way, it would appear that the long history of European antisemitism was strangely resolved shortly after the unprecedented killing spree against Jews. Of course, things have changed since 1945, but the wonder of this narrative is that antisemitism seems to be dissolved by the very horror of its deeds. The Europe that brought us the Holocaust in the 1940s can once again pride itself on being the civilised continent.

One effect of this pastification of antisemitism is that if people say that there is antisemitism in the air today or that they themselves are victims of antisemitism, they must either be mistaken, over-sensitive, delusionary or worst of all dishonest. Those who complain about antisemitism, or fight against antisemitism, or even wish peacefully to study antisemitism, can’t be right since it is already established that antisemitism no longer exists except on the fringes of right-wing extremism. The secret agenda some people see behind the ‘charge’ of antisemitism is that of defending Israel against its critics. We are told that the charge of antisemitism is abused in order to defend the indefensible. In this discourse antisemitism appears as a ploy designed by Zionists to let Israel get away with murder. The ad absurdum of this argument is that in one case of antisemitism that had nothing to do with Israel, the abuser’s defence was that he was a critic of Israel and this is why the antisemitism question came up.

One dodgy presumption behind this argument is that Israel cannot be defended openly, so that its defenders have to resort to underhand tactics. Another is that criticism of Israel is not ‘as such’ antisemitic or more strongly that no criticism of Israel can under any circumstance ever be antisemitic. A moment’s thought should disabuse us of this prejudice. It’s a bit like saying that no criticism of, say, India
or Zimbabwe can ever be racist. If we criticise governments in India and Zimbabwe for being authoritarian or for abusing human rights, there might indeed be nothing racist about such criticism. But if we were to say that Indians and Africans are incapable of ruling themselves, we would be right back at ingrained notions of the superiority of the white race or of European civilisation. When it comes to Israel, of course some kinds of ‘criticism’ are antisemitic. We may disagree about particular cases, all of which need judgment and deliberation, but the principle is clear enough.

The working definition on antisemitism put forward by the European Union Monitoring Commission is one attempt to deal with this issue. According to this definition the following cases of ‘criticism’ of Israel may, depending on context, be examples of antisemitism: the nazification of Israel (e.g. when it is said that Jews treat Palestinians like the Nazis treated the Jews), the pathologisation of Jews (e.g. when it is said that as a result of the Holocaust Jews have become indifferent to the suffering of other peoples), the use of old antisemitic tropes (e.g. when it is said that Zionists engage in a world conspiracy to protect Israel or that Israeli forces steal the body parts of Arabs), or more simply the erasure of any distinction between state and civil society (e.g. when it is said that all Jews in Israel are responsible for the policies pursued by the government). We may or may not agree on particular cases, but what is clear is that some forms of ‘criticism’ lean toward antisemitism more than others.

The systematic treatment of Israel as culpable by standards that are not applied equally to other states is another case in point. Sociologists should be well equipped to understand this since we make distinctions all the time between, say, criticism of a work of sociology and denunciation based on extraneous ideological considerations. This is the stuff of our labouring lives.

Some forms of ‘criticism’ are not really criticism at all. When some fellow-academics in the UK call for a boycott of Israeli academics, what is involved is not so much ‘criticism’ as excluding Israeli academics alone from the world academic community. The policy of boycott is based on (a) holding Israeli academics to standards not applied to academics in other countries, (b) holding academics in Israel responsible for the actions of their state, and (c) discriminating against academics in Israel on the basis of their nationality. Then the policy of boycott is conjoined with iterative statements to the effect that criticism of Israel cannot be considered antisemitic, with disavowal of the European Union working definition of antisemitism on the grounds it restricts free speech (an old chestnut that was once roasted by racists objecting to anti-racist legislation), and with an unwillingness to hear complaints of antisemitism or to educate oneself in what antisemitism is. We are on dangerous terrain. None of these actions may be antisemitic in itself but, taken as a whole, it is difficult not to conclude that there is a culture of neglect in this setting as to whether antisemitism is or is not a problem.

I do not wish to overplay the problem of the academic boycott, for the issue at stake is much broader. Take for instance the recent discussion of the Günter Grass affair in the pages of European Societies. Günter Grass, a rightly celebrated German liberal novelist, was criticised in large parts of the German press for his poem ‘Was gesagt werden muß’ [‘What must be said’]. Most of his German critics did not claim Grass’ poem was antisemitic and some explicitly declared this allegation overblown. However, Grass was criticised as self-aggrandising for his claim that he felt driven to break a silence imposed by the threat of being called an antisemite, whilst he had only recently broken his own silence about having been a member of the Waffen-SS. He was criticised as misrepresenting the political situation for his claims that Israel was threatening world peace, while Ahmadinejad was merely a “Maulheld” (‘gob hero’, somebody who brags, but does not act) and an Iranian nuclear bomb was a ‘mere legend’. Grass claimed that Israel is threatening not a conventional attack on Iranian nuclear plants, but a nuclear attack that could “extinguish the Iranian people” (“das iranische Volk auslöschen”). The key point for many of his critics was that Grass implicitly presented Israelis as the new Nazis and Germans as victims of Israel. His evocation of an unspecified ‘us’ as future victims of Israel’s planned nuclear genocide - “survivors” (“Überlebende”) who will be “at most footnotes” (“allenfalls Fußnoten”) - and his portrayal of Germans as cowed into silence by Israel were cases at issue. Debate around Grass’ poem serves to illustrate some of the difficulties we encounter in understanding contemporary antisemitism. The view that Grass’ poem was labelled ‘antisemitic’...
because he warned against an Israeli attack on Iran and in order to immunise Israel against criticism does not do justice to a social conversation that has as much to do with Germany's relation to its past as with Israel.

I find that the apparent closeness of the topic of European antisemitism to debates on the Middle East can introduce a 'friend or foe' way of thinking inimical to differentiated social analysis. Thus those who raise concern over contemporary antisemitism are in some quarters treated as inherently conservative or reactionary; it is as if opposition to antisemitism is necessarily affirmative of the status quo, indifferent to the plight of the downtrodden, and embedded on the side of power against resistance. This ignores the fact that a longstanding left wing tradition of opposition to antisemitism is still alive and kicking in Europe, and that the issue should indeed be of concern to any critical consciousness keen to avoid conspiracy theories and essentialist explanations of the ills of European modernity.

In some circles, however, we hear it said that while European modernity has in principle embraced universal principles via a postnational regime of human rights, Israel as a state for Jews is in principle an enemy of all universal principles. The same is said of theorists of 'new antisemitism' – that they are obsessed by the fate of Jews and categorise other peoples (Muslims, Europeans, the Left, etc.) as antisemitic. The portrayal of Israel and 'purveyors of antisemitism' as the Other of the Universal, the particularised people par excellence, picks up an old tradition of anti-Jewish typification. Comparative methodology is notable for its absence in this kind of designation. Of course, there are Jewish nationalists who are opportunist in their use of the term ‘antisemitism’ just as there are Black nationalists who are opportunist in their use of the term ‘racism’, but this does not mean that either category is reducible to its misuse.

What makes me most hopeful about the role of sociology in these public debates is that our discipline, for all its faults, was born out of a resistance to racist and antisemitic ways of thinking about the pathologies of capitalism. I am back at my One Thing: a sociology that embraces the universalistic spirit of humanity in which no individual and no group of people can be labelled enemies of the human race.

I should like to thank in particular Christine Achinger, with whom I co-edited the special issue, who authored in it ‘Threats to modernity, threats of modernity: racism and antisemitism through the lens of literature’, and who did the research on the Günter Grass affair; and Glynis Cousin, who co-authored with me the paper on ‘A common cause: reconnecting the study of racism and antisemitism’ and coined with me the concept of ‘methodological separatism’.

ESA Executive Committee Members in Turin May 2012