Societal Challenges – Sociological Answers?

5th Conference of the Academy of Sociology

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JOHANNES GUTENBERG UNIVERSITÄT MAINZ

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Societal Challenges – Sociological Answers?

Today's societies are facing enormous challenges, whether due to climate change, health epidemics, armed conflicts, economic upheavals, demographic ageing, migratory movements, multifaceted social inequalities, political populism, or public disinformation through, among other things, generative artificial intelligence. How to deal with these problems is the subject of considerable public debate and controversy. These issues are, furthermore, increasingly accompanied by the emergence of new social divides, all of which is putting liberal democracies under extraordinary pressure. At the same time, however, progress has been made in various areas, be it in the reduction of the global poverty rate, the promotion of gender equality, or the legal recognition of social minorities.

Describing and explaining such developments – and dealing with the concomitant societal issues – also presents a challenge for science, and for sociology in particular. Contemporary sociology is thus, as a result of the social causes and repercussions of many of the phenomena described, a genuine problem-solving discipline. Due to both improved data infrastructure and the accompanying expansion of analytical and empirical knowledge, our discipline is in a better position than ever before to make an informed contribution to solving social problems. What solutions does sociology currently offer? Which role does it play in the concert of disciplines when it comes to policy advice and media attention? How can the influence of sociology be strengthened?

The Academy of Sociology aims to provide a platform for and contribute to this discussion by promoting scientifically sound, evidence-based policy through rigorous sociological research. The 5th Conference of the Academy of Sociology will be dedicated to societal challenges and sociological answers.

We encourage contributions from sociology and related fields, as well as interdisciplinary research on a wide range of substantive topics. Discussions of current methodological challenges in the areas of theory, description, explanation, intervention, and prediction are particularly welcome.

The social sciences have a broad range of *theories* of varying scope. Some of these focus on principles of individual attitudes and action, others on social interaction and cooperation, and still others on the functioning of organizations and entire societies. Which of these theories have proved successful, and which also have practical benefits? How do current theories need to be developed and tested?

Evidence-based policy advice requires reliable empirical *descriptions* of social phenomena. How can sociology make a well-founded diagnosis of both long-term trends and rapidly changing social phenomena (such as the processes by which public opinion is formed)? How should our data infrastructures be further improved? What criteria should be applied to replicative research to better validate empirical findings? What contributions can the field's various research methods make?

Causal research is necessary to provide *explanations* of the emergence, reproduction, change, and consequences of social phenomena. Sociology has made considerable progress in identifying causal effects, revealing social mechanisms, and testing alternative explanations. However, debates on how to construct and test causal theories continue. This raises the question: What are convincing examples of sociological explanations in current research, and how do they work? Which roles do cases, variables, narratives, mechanisms, processes, structural models, and situational logics play?

The identification of a causal effect may serve as the starting point for practical *interventions*. How successful is sociology in deriving evidence-based proposals for political reforms? To what extent can social institutions and public policies be transferred between social contexts, e.g. in regulating the labor market, or preventing crime? What about the scientific evaluation of policy measures? What resistance from stakeholders must be overcome to implement scientific recommendations? And how can sociological findings be communicated to the public and politicians in a comprehensible way?

As a result of digitalization and "big data", *predictions* are becoming increasingly relevant. Algorithms are often used to derive recommendations for action from correlation patterns in complex, process-produced data sets, which have typically been collected without explanatory ambitions. How satisfactory is this for sociology, which advocates theoretically derived research designs, methodologically controlled data collection, and the specification of explanatory mechanisms? What about the prognostic quality of sociology in general? How can the tools of computational social science be integrated into the research program of analytical-empirical sociology?

The 5th Conference of the Academy of Sociology invites researchers in sociology and related disciplines with an analytical-empirical orientation to present their current research on a wide range of topics. A particular focus will be on the relevance of science for tackling social problems and on issues relating to the transfer of evidence-based findings to the public and to policy makers. However, since understanding social phenomena is often a necessary preceding step, there is also great interest in presentations of fundamental research.

The call for papers will start in early 2025.

Local organization: Prof. Dr. Gunnar Otte and Prof. Dr. Natascha Nisic, Institute of Sociology