



Opening Speech by the President of the Portuguese Association of Sociology, João Teixeira Lopes

This congress is taking place during the third wave of a pandemic. It is neither the congress we wanted nor the one we deserved. Better than anyone else, sociologists are aware of the importance of in-person relationships, of the many possibilities created by physical proximity, of the communicational wealth provided by articulating the verbal and the non-verbal. All knowledge is interknowledge and the bodily aspects that go beyond words and touch upon contexts and interaction frameworks must not be neglected.

We are no strangers to moments of discontinuity, uncertainty, and multiplication of vulnerabilities, even though the pandemic crisis exacerbates the perception of lack of control over the future and forces people to undergo sudden and even violent resocialization processes. It is now well understood that the virus is an essentially social phenomenon, which results, in large part, from a predatory economic model that dismisses the limits imposed on us by nature, in an infinite search for accumulation. Downstream, the virus revealed and multiplied social inequalities (class, gender, ethnicity, age), striking those most vulnerable (the poor, the old, the racialized, women). Likewise, it exposed the enormous weaknesses of an extremely frayed social reproduction system, eroded by decades of public divestment (health, housing, care networks). No less important, the pandemic has more vehemently bolstered an ecosystem of hatred and mistrust, which feeds on and is fed by the artificial intelligence algorithms used on social media platforms and networks. These algorithms, far from being neutral, lead us through increasingly extreme and isolated inward facing and self-referential navigations, dropping us into closed-off “rabbit holes” and tearing down bridges with others. At the same time, the normalization of states of exception invites a certain naturalization of Fundamental Rights limitations, trivializing an era of

surveillance, control, and biopower founded on the latest technologies based on the panoptic (to see everything without ever being seen).

Sociologists have rallied since the beginning of the pandemic, seeking to map, on one hand, the impact of the crisis on various forms of social inequality and, on the other, the practices and organizations that, all over the world, often without support and locally self-organized, have redesigned collective action, mutual help sociabilities, and the defence of the common good. Special attention has been paid to forms of multilevel solidarity that are not only centred on macrostructures but also disseminated throughout families, communities, churches, social movements, and imbued with ethics of hospitality, reciprocity, and acknowledgment.

But there was a lack of sociological sensibility on the part of decision-makers. They did not want or did not know how to interpret social behaviours, and often reduced them to mere psychological or pathological manifestations. As a result, their capacity for coordination, organization, and strategic planning decreased. At a time when the return of science is happening before a background of heated dispute with the reality of alternative facts and post-truth, it is important to uncover the mechanisms that produce disbelief in scientific discoveries and even the possibility of reaching working agreements with regard to the critical discussion of arguments and perspectives. The atomization of opinions and points of view that are seen as irreconcilable and irreducible is plentiful in a context of isolation, fear, and insecurity that unbinds social belonging.

The clamour for assertive leadership and forceful attitudes is a sign of how uncertainty can be channelled to support false authoritarian solutions. Howling calls for coercive, stigmatizing, and securitary measures agitate Europe, long ago overrun by the spectres of new fascisms. Is the old continent up to the task of coordinating solidary responses, providing social security for citizens, shelving the deficit dogma and promoting public investment and social support policies? The drive to strengthen social bonds is more important than the illusion of security brought by sovereign authority, which increases the gap between those who decide and the subjects who obey. The worst that could happen would be a post-Covid-19 scenario in which societies surrendered, without democratic resistance, to the harbingers of racism, eugenics, and social hygiene.

As such, the virus must also be fought with democracy, that other way of signifying justice. Anyone who thinks that normality is a mere return to the past is tragically mistaken. Ecological catastrophe (destruction of ecosystems and wildlife habitats) allowed the virus to cross the species barrier. Social inequality and the weakness of states, impoverished by years and years of austerity, did the rest.

More than ever, it is important to strive for cosmopolitan and plural sociologists. Sociologists who articulate social roles and multiple ways of exercising their profession, in contexts of cumulative and collective work, breaking with the dogmatic neofeudalism of institutions, schools, currents, and self-referential groups.

Do not ask us to choose between the local and global scales. Do not ask us to pick between academia and other professions. Do not ask us to declare whether we prefer fundamental or applied research, conceptual innovation or public policies. Do not ask us to separate research and action. Do not reduce us to the stupid split between relevance and rigor. Do not require us to be hyperspecialized, alienated by the academic capitalism of rankings, impact factors, and the pencil-pusher rituals of sociologists as clerical workers. Do not ask us to follow the lazy path of easy and sectarian choices that have divided us in sterile struggles for classification for so long.

To mobilize sociological knowledge aggravates and destabilizes superficial and bureaucratic decision-making processes, by revealing competing interests, deep-seated prejudices, or mechanisms for producing platitudes. We should demand much more in imagining and experimenting possible futures, since the only realistic perspective is to not return to “normal”, which is nothing more than a reservoir of infinite crises where everything that is common melts away. Therefore, we choose the path of asking the difficult questions and seeking complex and transformative answers.

*Like the great poet of mankind American Walt Whitman, the sociologist can also say: I contain multitudes.*

Thank you very much.