ПРЕТХОДНО САОПШТЕЊЕ

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Introduction Speech to the 12th ESA Conference Prague, August 25th 2015

I would like to start my introduction from the third of the key words of this conference - differences, inequalities and sociological imagination. I strongly believe that sociological imagination has the potential to motivate our scientific community to continue in the effort to engage with contemporary, often dramatic, social processes.

When Charles Wright Mills first used the concept in the late 1950s, he meant to lend visibility to a very specific sociological project. Sociology, in his view, was not only called to act as a "navigation device" capable of 'unveiling' what lies behind things that seem familiar, things that we take for granted. The 'Promise' of sociology, the title of the first chapter of 'The Sociological Imagination', is based on the critical approach that, according to Mills, sociology enables us to develop. As we know and as has been underlined by many, this critical approach is in turn the basis for constructing a publicly engaged sociology, in opposition to what the author aptly calls the "bureaucratic ethos". Mills uses this term to refer to the mindset of the "intellectual administrator", far removed from the notion of intellectual work in the sense of critical exploration of the present and future.

In particular I would like to draw here attention to the latter, namely the future, and its connection with the sociological imagination. Sociology, in Mills' view, helps us 'see' possible futures, beyond what exists here and now and behind the veil of common sense. This means what could potentially exist, the possibilities that the present contains. The sociological imagination enables us to pinpoint these possibilities, and this is another of the elements that makes it a strategic tool for empowerment.

The close connection between present and future made possible by the sociological imagination recalls the view expressed by Alberto Melucci in one of the last texts he wrote before his untimely death in 2001. In 'Cultures at Stake' - a text published in

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Italian - Melucci highlights the close link that exists not only between the actions of the present and the future, but also between our everyday ability to *imagine* a different future and the opportunity to redefine and reframe the problems of the present. Appadurai also explored this essential issue, referring to the connection between the capacity to aspire and the opportunity offered by the latter to construct a map of the future based on the priorities and choices of the present. For both Melucci and Appadurai, this approach makes the future open to action and social and political participation. For Europe, now facing multiple problems, starting from the unresolved question of its political and economic integration, the idea of the present having the power to construct a different future could not be more relevant.

In this conference the sociological imagination is connected to differences and inequalities. In Europe poverty is on the rise, with large swathes of the population excluded from economic activity, and sweeping occupational and existential precarity, while private wealth in the hands of the few has increased exponentially. In our continent, as we know, these gaps are particularly evident in Mediterranean and Anglo-Saxon countries. Then there are the forms of inequality related to the symbolic sphere - such as resources for self reflexivity and individualization, the social importance of which grows year by year, and whose distribution is no less unequal than that of material resources. The exacerbation of the overall scenario of inequalities, also following the longest global economic crisis since 1929, therefore calls for a surplus of sociological imagination - with its capacity to link biographies and history, and thus to hold together past, present and future.

But the conflicts of our time cannot be explored fully without touching on the issue of differences. I refer to the vast field of cultural and political debate that revolves around the issue of differences between cultures and identities, and the requests for recognition that accompany them. In the global arena we live in, differences in ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and so on are part of our everyday experience. As we all know, 'elsewhere' no longer exists. Hence the need to build new forms of coexistence between differences, new opportunities for cosmopolitan integration. We therefore need a moral attitude fitting to our era, an ethical standard capable of engaging with differences and producing new forms of responsibility and solidarity.

Today, in Europe, this is now more pressing than ever, particularly in relation to the plight of refugees and displaced persons from war-torn countries who, in unimaginable conditions, cross first the desert, then the Mediterranean, in attempt to save themselves and their families. I come from a country, Italy, which for some years now, has been witnessing the repeated, tragic loss of human life that results from these attempts to cross the Mediterranean. And when the migrants come to shore, it is

the start of the third part of their journey, often no less dramatic, from the South to the North of Europe. Then there are the attempts to reach Europe on foot, crossing the Balkan countries and their borders. By the time this conference ends, the Hungarian Government will have completed a four metre high fence along the length of Hungary's 175 kilometre border with Serbia aimed at preventing refugees from entering. And in record time: the plan was only announced in June. Bulgaria is also planning a 160 kilometre fence along its border with Turkey to combat illegal immigration (a 30 kilometre fence is already existing). In this case, symbolically, the barrier stands in the same place as a previous wall, built to stop Soviet bloc citizens escaping in the opposite direction. The already existing Bulgarian wall was built with funds from the European Union; similar funds have been used to erect barbed-wire fences to separate the two autonomous Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla from Morocco. These barriers are regularly stormed by migrants, many of whom lose their lives in attempts to cross them. In short, 26 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a true watershed in European and world history, barbed wire risks becoming the symbol of Europe once more.

In his book *Histoire du barbelé*, the political history of barbed wire, Olivier Razac stresses how this technology-free object, virtually unchanged since it was first invented, continues to be extraordinarily effective for actively drawing dividing lines, marking the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. As Simmel wrote more than a century ago in his essay 'Bridge and Door', "Only to humanity, in contrast to nature, has the right to connect and separate been granted". Alongside the traditional economic and social walls, this period in history is marked by new barriers of barbed wire - tangible but also cultural barriers - erected to prevent migrants entering Fortress Europe. This is reflected in the recent statements of Philip Hammond, UK foreign secretary, on 'marauding' migrants and how it is impossible for Europe to "protect itself, preserve its standard of living and social infrastructure if it has to absorb millions of migrants from Africa" - those were his exact words - "millions of migrants from Africa".

I would like to conclude by recalling once more Simmel's reflections on connections and separations: while a wall is "a dead geometric form", "path-building (...) is a specifically human achievement." This achievement, according to Simmel, "reaches its zenith in the construction of a bridge". Stari Most, the bridge in Mostar that was destroyed by Croatian and Bosnian forces in 1993 was rebuilt in subsequent years. The solidarity of many European countries proved crucial in completing the reconstruction work in 2004. I am convinced that this conference, thanks to the sociological imagination of the thousands of scholars gathered here, has all the potential to build the bridges we need today: to actively prevent the consolidation of a Europe of walls, Fortress Europe.