

T HE RESEARCH COUNCIL CONFERENCE AND BUSINESS MEETING A SUBJECTIVE ACCOUNT

Oñati, Spain, 6-9 April, 1992

by Daniel Bertaux, Chair, Research Council

The Research Council Conference on the Market Situation of Socio- logical Research and Expertise

It is a well-established custom in the ISA that between two World Congresses, the Chair of the Research Council organizes a meeting of the Research Committees' delegates. The real purpose of this business meeting is obviously the meeting itself: people get to know each other better and, in the best cases, an



aggregation of individuals begins to transform itself into a community with shared perceptions, orientations, and objectives. Without such moments any organization would remain a bureaucracy, with no common spirit,

no other purpose than meaningless self-perpetuation.

The problem is, of course, that ISA resources are limited; in order to organize such meetings we have to find sponsors.

and I had been told not to spend ISA money.

One of the crucial issues was therefore to find a good topic for the research conference. It had to be a *thème transversal*, a topic



The usual way to solve this riddle is to find a topic around which a conference is organized: each delegate can then ask her/his own institution for a plane ticket.

In the case of the 1992 meeting, hotel expenses also had to be covered individually, since like previous Research Council meetings, no institutional hosts could be found to cover them. The previous ISA barter practice which was to get invitations from academics of sciences in communist countries in exchange of copies of our journals and books, was no longer valid;

on which every Research Committee could hook its own experiences and knowledge. After ten years of reaganomics there were growing doubts about the usefulness of our discipline, hints at growing difficulties for getting research funds for sociological projects, and rumors about «the end of sociology». Why not look at it squarely? Why not ask every Research Committee to tell others how well or how badly its members were faring in their own field.

I circulated the idea among members of the Research Coordinating Committee, who liked

it and offered suggestions about how to develop it. Therefore, on 5 July, 1992, I wrote to all Presidents and Secretaries of Research Committees, asking them to prepare a report for the Conference in which they would tell us whether there still is a **demand** for **sociological** re-

ceiving echoes of difficulties the Research Committees had in assembling the relevant data, it became obvious that the only places where synthetic information could be found were those governmental agencies or large foundations which **were** actually financing sociological research.

search Committee to the next, sketches of an overall picture began to emerge. Basically, the demand for sociological research and expertise seems actually *quite stronger* than a few years earlier, and growing. But it seems also both more sophisticated and more action-oriented.

On the second day we turned tables and focused on the points of view of the funding agencies. Guido Martinotti, who chairs the European Science Foundation's Social Sciences Committee, developed a very articulate demonstration of the necessity of public funding to support long-term pathbreaking projects. Felice Levine, who is now with the American Sociological Association but has had a long experience in the National Science Foundation, gave a detailed and fascinating account of the views held within this institution. David Makinson, who works with Francine Fournier at the Social Science Division of the UNESCO, told us about the new projects of this Division. Alan Fox, working in the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, gave us statistics on the real career opportunities of social sciences graduates in this country. Marga Pröhl described the application-oriented ap-



search in their own field; which **institutions** carry this demand—governments, national or local, foundations, enterprises, unions, others—how big is this demand, whether it is growing or diminishing, or shifting in contents; whether sociologists follow these shifts; and so on. I asked for these reports to be as much based on statistics as possible, and as worldwide as possible, not limiting themselves to one country, even one as large as the United States themselves.

Of course it was a kind of impossible assignment for which - to put it worse - no reward was offered. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the Research Committees' Presidents or Secretaries took the assignment seriously, and began to collect information. Given that some Research Committees are by their very orientation disconnected from demand, this proportion of two-thirds can be considered as a very healthy sign.

As the date of the Conference was approaching, and I was re-

Quite late in the day - but having no budget inhibits initiative - I decided to try and have some of these institutions send a delegate to our conference. Seven of them sent one of their officers.

The Conference met on 6 April, 1992, on the premises of the International Institute for the Sociology of Law in Oñati, in the Spanish Basque Country. Oñati is a small town in the hilly country of Guipuzcoa, on the southern side of the Pyrenees mountains. A beautiful XVIth century building has been entirely renovated by the Basque government and entrusted to the ISA Research Committee on Sociology of Law to develop an international institute for this growing field. The Institute's personnel was very helpful. Thirty-two Research Committees' delegates attended (five more Research Committees sent a written report). Reports were not read but quickly summarized, delegates showing great skills in going straight to the most relevant issues and statistics.

As some patterns and issues were recurring from one Re-



proach of the Bertelsmann Foundation in Germany, and pointed out that more often than not, its expectations were not met by sociologists. Our colleagues, Shujiro Yazawa com-

mented some impressive figures about research financing in Japan, and Afonso de Barros did the same for Portugal. And as a treat, Maria Angeles Duran gave us a very vivid and frank account of the relations between Spanish academics and funding agencies, underlying graphically the fact that to get research funds, as big as possible, meant not only access to means for research, but also power and other kinds of highly desirable social goods. That such an outspoken and substantial account could be given is indicative, I believe, not only of the strength of the new Spanish women in general and of our colleague in particular, but also of the conviviality that had been built all along.

Generally speaking, the success of this conference shows that it is everybody's interest to mix Research Committees' delegates with other people. The active participation of officers from research-financing bodies obviously added a specific dimension to the conference. Be-

cal shifts and present orientations of such bodies; if made available to outsiders it throws instant light on many aspects which appear, when considered from the outside, like as many mysteries. For instance, many of us were interested to hear from such an officer that the long period during which only «quantitative» projects (based on surveys) had a chance to be selected, was drawing to an end. Besides, these managers receive projects from various social sciences and evaluate them against each other. Enlightening were their points of view, usually expressed privately, on the specific strong and weak points of each social science, its inner culture, its scholars and their usual style of work. From our exchanges I got, among many new ideas, an hypothesis that I would like to share. It is that, to a large extent, the whole tradition of sociology and the training sociologists receive orients them away from meeting the existing demands. Perhaps this is particularly strong in France, where durkheiminism

social laws, by some social mechanisms which it is sociology's task to discover, this scientific postulate may have had the unintended consequence of breeding skepticism towards reforms and reformers, towards



do-gooders who believe they can change anything; it may have promoted the skeptical attitude to the status of a core value of our profession. We take it (mistake it?) as equivalent to cartesian doubt, which is obviously a cornerstone of the scientific attitude. Is it not true that we consider the objective attitude as somehow antinomic not only to political involvement but also to a policy-oriented stance?

Since demand is always somehow policy-oriented, to take it as face-value and answer it may appear as a kind of betrayal of our genuine professional ethics. What is strange however is that neither economists nor political scientists seem to carry similar worries; is it only because they do not seem to care as much as we do about structural injustice, or also because some deep philosophical taken-for-granted assumption lying at the very heart of the way the sociological endeavour is defined by sociologists?

Other participants will have drawn different intellectual conclusions of this conference, but I do not believe it left anyone indifferent*.



cause of their position and experience such persons carry within themselves a «view from the centre»; and this view includes insider's knowledge on histori-

and structuralism have loomed so high; but in any case, my hypothesis is that sociology's basic postulate, i.e. that the social world is ruled by (hidden)

* The list of the available «first drafts» which were written for the conference is given below. If you are interested, please address your request directly to the author. In spite of the very interesting contents of these texts, there is no plan to publish them as a volume for the next Congress, since there seems to be a general dissatisfaction with the well-established practice of including Research Council proceedings «free of charge» in the next World Congress kits.

The Research Council Business Meeting

Thanks to the success of the Conference, the stage had been set for a good business meeting. There were three main points on the agenda: the problem of the fast-growing number of Research Committees; suggestions for the organization of the next World Congress; and the reform of ISA statutes. The last point, according to the present Statutes does not formally lie within the competence of the Research Council, but I thought necessary to associate it to the discussions preparing this crucial event in the life of the ISA.

For quite a while I had been aware of the existence, among quite a number of Research Committees' officers, of a diffuse feeling of resentment against «the centre», i.e. the Executive Committee of the ISA. It showed up in private conversations, sometimes in meetings, seldom in writing. The «centre» was accused of bureaucratic conduct, and of spending most of the ISA budget on other grounds than helping the Research Committees, which was all the more irritating to the Research Com-



mittees given that they perceived themselves as being the blood and flesh of the ISA, its genuinely active and productive parts.

The latter point was, by the way, also the centre's opinion; however, in the Executive Committee some were quick to point

out the reluctance of Research Committees to ask their members to join the ISA as individual members or to inform the secretariat about their activities, and the democratic deficit in some of them. RC Presidents



were perceived as barons jealous of their independence.

Knowing both sides from within I could see that some of these feelings were based on reciprocal misperceptions; but some derived from well-founded criticism. I could also see that reciprocal misperceptions were based on built-in constitutional dysfunctions whose correction would require a modification of the ISA Statutes. Given the chronic difficulties of the ISA, which make it indispensable work together rather than against each other, I considered such reciprocal feelings not only a waste, but a danger for the organization as such.

What could be done to lessen the misperceptions? Studying carefully their possible origins, I realized that the successive ISA Executive Committees had never made public the budget of the ISA. So, six months ahead of the Council, I asked the Executive Committee permission to circulate it. Eventually I was given a green light on the principle, accompanied with a strong warning on the possible conse-

quences... The raw figures are indeed shocking: the annual ISA budget is \$330,000 out of which each Research Committee receives \$1,000 once every four years. But when one is allowed to look at the detailed figures,

when one is given explanations about the hows and whys of each detailed line of the budget, it becomes more plausible. Taking a bet on the rationality of my colleagues I opened the business meeting by distributing copies of the detailed budget, complete with explanations. The ISA President T.K. Oommen was besides me, silent but obviously agreeing with this move. Well, everybody read the budget, but nobody complained or even commented on it during the whole day. I don't think it means universal consensus; it takes time to digest figures. But at least one more wall has fallen down.

The first point on the agenda was the **definition of a policy towards the fast-growing number of Research Committees**. In early 1992 the ISA had 45 of them, ten more than six years ago, and seven Working Groups were expecting to receive Research Committee status in June, while as many Thematic Groups were on their way to become Working Groups. Could we go on with the earlier «laxist» policy?

Yes, why not, said some Research Committees' Presidents; networks want the label ISA, what does it cost to grant it? But there is of course an added cost. It may be a marginal one, but if multiplied by seven, it becomes a sizeable one. Behind this, there is probably a symbolic cost, i.e. the relative depreciation in the long run of ISA-RC's status, if granted too easily. The Executive Committee has recently raised the minimum number of RC members at 50. To compare, the American Sociological Association requires 200 members to grant Research Committee status, and numbers only 35 of them.

One solution that has been repeatedly advocated by some would be to demote the Research Committees that have



fallen into relative somnolence. It is being done from time to time but, being a sanction, it invariably engenders protest, tensions, drama, losses of time, of energy, and of trust; which is why the Executive Committee cannot use it as a standard mean of government.

The solution I put forward was another one: to allow explicitly for **internal differentiation** of the Research Committees. There is actually, in the present ISA Statutes, a provision for the creation of **sections** within Research Committees. It does not specify further what a section would be, what would be its rights and duties, and which body would arbitrate eventual

conflicts between a section and the Research Committee it belongs to. I suggested that a section should have rights to a roughly proportional share of the Research Committee's communication resources such as sessions at the World Congresses, and pages in the RC newsletter; it could also organize its own workshop and conferences. I believe indeed that full use of the *section* status would solve several problems in one stroke: not only the «multiplication» problem, but also the management of large Research Committees (Sociolinguistics has long resorted to such a strategy with its «streams»), and the urgent necessity of opening the door to alternative theoretical or empirical orientations within some highly focused Research Committees with strong Presidents. It may even suit RC Presidents: with the *section* concept there is life after presidency.

One could have expected what we call in French *un levée de boucliers*, an unanimous protest of barons refusing to let the monarchic state create and protect enclaves within their own baronies. There were a few remarks going in this direction - «it will diminish the authority of the RC Presidents over their constituencies» - but they remained isolated, which I take to mean that RC leaders are in tune with their Constituencies and, on the whole, ready to accept internal differentiation. After a substantial discussion the Council did vote on my proposal and approved it unanimously minus one abstention. It will be incorporated into the new Statutes that an E.C. Sub-Committee chaired by Henry Teune has been busy preparing.

The second point on the agenda was **suggestions for the World Congress**. The debates focused around the allocation of adequate rooms and time slots. Fortunately the premises of the University of Bielefeld where the Congress will take place in July 1994, will provide enough modern classrooms and conference rooms, and the tentative schedule allows for three sessions each

afternoon. There were suggestions to determine the number of sessions of RCs according to the size of their membership (rejected, too difficult to implement); to allow for morning sessions for the Research Committees (the suggestion was approved and is passed on to the Chair of the Program Committee, Neil Smelser); and to give joint sessions priority in the afternoons, rather than exile them



to the evenings (warm approval, also passed on). As for the difficult issue of paper selection, no new solution was found besides the *poster presentation format*, but the general mood is towards a much stronger preselection of the papers that will be presented orally.

In the afternoon the Research Council took up the most difficult issue, that of the **reform of the ISA Statutes**. It must be understood that under the present Statutes, the Research Council has no vote in electing the ISA's President and three Vice-Presidents; among the latter ones even the Chair of the Research Council is elected by the ISA Council made up of representatives of national associations of sociologists (NAS). This feature of the ISA Statutes has been in my opinion one of the hidden origins of the feelings of alienation and resentment alluded to earlier, and of «isolationist» tendencies among some Research Committees. At the Oñati business meeting, the absurdity of the situation was highly visible among the forty or so participants, our President T.K.

Oommen, who had been listening very carefully to all our debates, was the only non-western scholar. With very few exceptions none of us had had a chance to vote for him: he had been elected by another body, the Council of NAS representatives.



Did he represent the NAS interests? What were these interests, and were they at odds with the Research Committees? Where did he stand in relation to Research Committees? To which extent was he recognized by RC presidents as their President? Such questions must have been on many a mind; and Oommen perceived it. So when the time came he was ready. He stepped forward and, in clear, concise statements expressed his own vision of the future Statutes of the ISA, of the new balance of power they would define (much more favorable to the RCs); and by his very openness he showed his readiness to discuss all the features of his project with the Research Committees' delegates.

What followed was, I believe, an important moment in the history of the ISA: for the first time perhaps the ISA President had a long, dense dialogue with the assembly of Research Committees' Presidents around the crucial issue of power within the ISA. There was no aggressivity, rather a mutual discovery and understanding;

one could almost see the negative misperceptions leave the minds and float uncredulously for a moment the room until they dissipated.

Always pragmatic, György Széll came to the blackboard and drew the scheme of the new political structure that seemed to emerge from the discussion. Its key new concept is the Assembly, made up of members of both the Research Council and the NAS Council (their numbers are roughly equal, 45 RCs for about 50 NAS). This Assembly would be the body which would elect the President and the three Vice Presidents of the ISA. The other member of the 17 members of the Executive Committee could be either elected at the same time, or separately by the two Councils meeting each on its own. With such a structure, the RCs would at long last have a say on the designation of the key officers of the ISA. It suddenly became clear to all that T.K. Oommen, seeing the necessity of such a reform, would defend it himself in front of the ISA Council made up of the NAS delegates that had elected him.

Other ideas were discussed too, in particular the idea of the ISA as an **individual membership organization**. This concept had been put forward by Melvin Kohn a few years ago, and defended at some point by, e.g. Vincenzo Ferrari, our jurist



in the Sub-Committee for Statutes. Among other consequences, such a reform would give much more weight to large Associations such as the American one, which under the present Statutes has formally no more voting power than the smallest of NAS's (an absurd situation). However, it would probably eliminate from the ISA whole regions of the world whose sociologists just cannot afford to



pay individually even moderate membership dues. For the time being, their only way of participating in the ISA decisional structures is through the Council of NAS; while the influence of the ASA or other highly active European associations is going to be indirectly but very significantly enhanced through the new balance of voting power.

It has become obvious long ago that the ISA Statutes needed more than marginal adjustments; that the distribution of power they define does not correspond any more to the reality of the ISA's *forces vives*, which are its Research Committees. From the Oñati discussion between the ISA President, defending the right of sociologists from developing countries to remain part of the decisional structure, and the claim of RC chairpersons - top professionals, all from the developed world - to get the lion's share in this structure, an agreement seems



on its way; moreover, each of the parties now understands the validity of the partner's position and is much more ready than before to accept it. A new unity may be on its way.

The last decision of the Research Council proved the RC delegates had understood the difficulties of the ISA as an organization, and were ready to give a hand. As we were discussing the prospect of the termination of the Spanish government's yearly grant of \$150,000, one of the RC Presidents came forward and said he felt necessary to make something concrete for helping the ISA: he was ready to give up his RC's right to the newsletter grant. Others followed suit, and it was decided that such grants would not be asked for 1992. The importance of such a move seems to me considerable; in dollars it weights only \$15,000 but in trust, willingness to help, moral support, it weights very much more. The hope that the Research Committees will join forces with

the Executive Committee in the ongoing struggle for the survival of the ISA is a tremendous asset.

Both the Oñati conference and the following business meeting were expressions, so I believe, of a new ISA philosophy which circumstances make compulsory: the philosophy of self-help. It is not sound for a non-governmental organization such as the ISA to be so heavily dependent on a given government as it has been since 1986. To focus on demand for sociological research is also to send signs that the ISA somehow is preoccupied with its own usefulness. To tilt the balance of power on the side of Research Committees as active communities of professionals also means that more will be asked from them in the years to come: more involvement in the organization's struggle for survival, more sharing of responsibilities. The ISA will need all the human resources it can get if it is to find a new momentum.

List of Reports Presented at the Research Council Meeting Oñati, 6-9 April, 1992

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RC 04 Sociology of Education

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«The Market Situation of Sociology of Education - Major Points»

RC 05 Ethnic, Race and Minority Relations

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«The Interaction between Research and Minority Consciousness»

RC 07 Futures Research

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«The Demand for Futures Research»

RC 10 Participation, Workers' Control and Self-Management

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«Contemporary Uses of Sociological Research»

RC 15 Sociology of Health

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«The Market Situation of Sociological Research and Expertise: The Case of Medical Sociologists»

RC 20 Comparative Sociology

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«Comparative Sociology in Perspective: Issues of Performance, Demand and Potential in the 1990's»

RC 25 Sociolinguistics

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RC 26 Sociotechnics - Sociological Practice

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RC 33 Logic and Methodology in Sociology

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Overview and Initial Results» and
«Images de la recherche sociologique actuelle», Bulletin BMS no.28, 1990

RC 34 Sociology of Youth

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RC 39 Sociology of Disasters

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