

EDITORIAL



Beyond the time of monsters: Keeping cultural and political sociology alive in a fragmenting world

To say that we are living “in interesting times” sounds like a euphemism. Five years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic brought much of the global economy to a standstill and disrupted daily life on an unprecedented scale. The shock of the pandemic shattered certainties, but it also inspired a sense of possibility. The hope was that in the face of this “never-ending crisis” turned into “a way of life,” the commitment to take care of “our shared terrestrial condition”—to quote Bruno Latour (2021)—would increase. Many believed that the lessons learned from the pandemic could result in more political support for social and environmental justice, greater inclusivity, openness to diversity, and perhaps even system change—toward a more substantial democracy and a more ecologically sound economy.

But things turned out differently. Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine three years ago was followed by the resurgence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with repercussions in Lebanon, Syria, and the broader Middle East. Now that Donald Trump has returned to the US presidency, long-standing economic and political rules are starting to fall apart, with global consequences. The European Union is now making rearmament a top priority, and EU citizens are being invited to increase their crisis and conflict preparedness (European Union External Action Service, 2025).

In his address presenting the report on the future of European competitiveness in the European Parliament, former president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi spoke gravely of a “Europe facing a world undergoing dramatic changes” (Draghi, 2024). In this Europe—a Europe whose “very existence is being called into question”—“trade is slowing down, geopolitics is fragmenting, and technological change is accelerating.” After the famously determined and confident willingness to do “whatever it takes” now comes a new slogan, filled with desperation and urgency: “Do something!”

Gramsci’s notion of “interregnum” has been widely used to define the current moment. In the translation made popular by Slavoj Žižek, the interregnum is described as “the time of monsters,” when “the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born.” In an insightful conversation with the sociologist

Walden Bello about “power, polarity, and polycrisis” in a “fractured world,” the economic historian and Columbia University professor Adam Tooze questions the relevance of such a label (Tooze & Bello, 2025). “I don’t think the twentieth century is going to be a good model for thinking about the twenty-first century, any more than the nineteenth century was a good model for thinking about the twentieth century,” said Tooze. “The future, for better and for worse, is going to be more complex and more polycentric. That’s the world that we’re actually in and adjusting to, and which has many attractive features (. . .) But it also comes with real risks.”

Sociology and the social sciences are facing extraordinary challenges as they strive to understand the transformations of social life in a fragmenting world facing multiple crises. At the same time, they are themselves confronted with serious threats. A worrying narrative has emerged—that “universities are the enemy,” as Vice President J. D. Vance stated in a keynote address at the Second National Conservatism Conference in 2021, prior to his election. Allegations of inaction against anti-Semitism during pro-Palestinian demonstrations were used to justify not only the threats of massive funding cuts against Columbia University and Harvard University but also foreign students being subjected to police raids and arrests.

Adam Tooze invites us to interpret these events beyond the lenses of the “time of monsters” and the clash between authoritarianism and free science. He highlights the attacks on Columbia and other US universities “as moments in the nationally specific unraveling of a globalization paradigm, a process which is at one and the same time particular and specific and interconnected and reverberating (. . .) What we have to reckon with is the unsettlement of the institutional, political, and cultural location of US big science. This has reached a new pitch under Trump and his crew. But it does not begin or end with them” (Tooze, 2025).

Since its birth more than a decade ago, our journal has established itself as a key resource for understanding the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary societies in Europe and beyond. Touching on issues such as the rise of various forms of populism and the cultural offensive of far-right parties, the political and cultural ramifications of neoliberalism, and new forms of mobilization, the articles we have published over these years outline a sociological stance that is curious and attentive to the emerging transformations of the political in relation to new ways of “doing society” (Luhtakallio et al., 2024). At the same time, we critically analyze the many faces of old and new forms of domination and exclusion. This kind of sociological posture is more needed now than ever.

The year 2025 began with the dramatic death of sociologist Michael Burawoy, who was killed in a hit-and-run car accident in Oakland in February. Burawoy was one of the intellectuals most committed to supporting not only the public

relevance of sociology but also the need for sociologists to engage with a variety of publics rather than isolating themselves within the academy. In his latest writings (Burawoy, 2021), he argued for the need for an “organic public sociology” that, on the one hand, “empathically” seeks to understand the distinctive “deep narrative” of right-wing populism and, on the other hand, actively opens itself to dialogues with the practitioners of real utopias. Indeed, as mentioned in one of his last interviews, had it not been for the publishers’ intervention, Burawoy’s famous *Public Sociology* would have been titled *Living Sociology*. That was his original intention, and one that encapsulates the idea that “sociology itself lives (...) [which entails] ever-greater significance in the context of struggles to keep sociology alive” (Burawoy & Benson, 2025).

These are times when public sociology seems to be both the least wanted and the most needed. We share the belief that the past holds lessons for the present, but we also need to cultivate a perspective of indeterminacy that takes seriously the radical novelty of the current moment. Our commitment can only be strengthened as we strive to develop our journal as a forum for lively, research-based discussions that explore the interdependence of culture and politics from a variety of approaches while questioning the meanings of “European” and “Europeanness” in the current scenario of a fractured world.

The articles in this year’s second issue feature diverse ramifications of the challenges of the present time, showing how sociological tools can illuminate cultural and political transformations at different levels.

In a world that is rapidly and overwhelmingly changing, can longing for the past crystallize into everyday populist politics? While nostalgia has been identified as a prevalent feature of the ideological narratives and strategies of right-wing populism, Colm Flaherty focuses his attention on ordinary people—mundane voters with no participation in political groups or movements. In his article “**Toward a Cultural Repertoire of Populism in Denmark: Nostalgia and Disengagement**,” Flaherty draws on data from focus groups with right-wing populist voters in Denmark to investigate the formation of a cultural repertoire of populism. This repertoire blends and transforms existing elements of Danish—and, more broadly, Nordic—cultural repertoires. Diverse participants in terms of age, class, education, and geographic location discussed their experiences of the past and present, particularly in relation to societal changes associated with migration, digitalization, and gender. Feelings of dislocation and a perceived inability to control an ever-changing world—and their place within it—anchor a turn toward an imagined past, collective values now seen as lost or no longer upheld. Paradoxically, Danish-like ideals such as solidarity and equity are reshaped by the prevailing feelings of loss and longing. Notably, this nostalgia-saturated cultural repertoire translates into a repertoire

of disengagement, marked by its paralyzing nature, that is very different from the nostalgic communication of right-wing populist parties. Indeed, the very aspects that prompt this repertoire—maladjustment, isolation, incomprehensibility, and powerlessness—are only reinforced by it. The result is a growing gap between ordinary populists and the unavoidably dynamic world, with profound implications for the social groups targeted by populist policies.

When it comes to political participation, are some forms of social struggle more valued than others? In **“Invisible Links between Volunteering and Activism: Newspaper Coverage of Pro-Migrant Mobilization in Germany,”** Priska Daphi, Melina Bonerz, and Verena Stern explore whether and how the hybridization of volunteering and activism is reflected in media representations of the 2015 so-called “refugee crisis,” an unparalleled period of struggle and support for the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. The authors juxtapose media coverage of protests and volunteering, performing an inductive content analysis of articles from three widely circulated German newspapers published between 2014 and 2019. Although both protests and volunteering involve claim-making and direct support, Daphi, Bonerz, and Stern find a “hierarchy of struggles,” permeated by quantitative and qualitative differences. The analysis reveals not only the separation of the two forms of pro-migrant mobilization—403 articles on volunteering and 264 on protests—but also the reproduction of something of a charitable-contentious divide. Volunteering is mainly highlighted for its utility in helping refugees and facilitating their integration into German society, while protests are represented as an aspirational mode of fighting for social change, often seen as disruptive and rarely effective. The political and critical nature of protests contrasts with the humanitarian and benevolent portrayal of volunteering, even though many individuals engage in both forms simultaneously. This downplaying of their hybridization carries the potential to fragment broader mobilization efforts and to limit coalition-building among diverse collective actors.

In the face of socially divisive forces and unforeseen events, can people still build and sustain life together in challenging and potentially fragmenting situational arrangements? This question touches on the core of French pragmatic sociology, the framework within which Troels Krarup and Anders Blok position their article and to which they seek to contribute conceptually and methodologically. In **“Finding One’s Way in Urban Greenspaces: Engagement Compositions between the Familiar and the Public,”** they present a survey-based methodology to map cultural patterning in urbanites’ engagements—a bold move in a field that traditionally relies on qualitative methods. Drawing on Thévenot’s regimes of engagement, the authors operationalize these constructs into a quantitative instrument. Data from 1,130 Danish respondents were

subjected to factor analysis to identify how different modes of engagement group together along social and nature-related dimensions of cultural preferences. Krarup and Blok coin the term “engagement compositions” to describe cross-situational patterns shaped by aligning and conflicting configurations of familiar, planned, and justificatory engagements with greenspaces. Two main forms of planned engagement emerge: the “calm nature” profile, linked to older and wealthier urbanites, valuing quiet, biodiversity-rich environments, preferably untamed and evocative of reflective experiences, and the “social park” profile, representing young urban demographics who favor engagements tied to socializing, recreation, and cultural life. “Everything” and “Nothing” compositions refer to people for whom either both affordances coexist or who appear disengaged from local greenspaces—suggesting intriguing avenues for future in-depth research. Considering urban greenspaces as “intermediary objects” bridging personal attachments and public concerns, Krarup and Blok offer insights into how people value and engage with shared environments and how the methodological toolkit of the pragmatic approach can be expanded to shed light on population-level patterns, which can complement nuanced ethnographic accounts.

In a world where entertainment offers a path to imagine a renewed reality or escape from it altogether, how can the tensions between urban development anchored on a state-sponsored casino and potential gambling-related harms be navigated? This is what Matilda Hellman and Paula Jääskeläinen try to answer in their article **“Tampere Casino: The Last Bizarre Synergy between Addiction Capitalism and a State Gambling Monopoly?”** Based on interviews with city politicians, city directors, and high-ranking managers employed either by the casino venue or the main construction developer, Hellmann and Jääskeläinen identify three main strategies applied by the casino’s proponents, who marketed it as a driver of urban development and individual transcendence. The first was “let sleeping dogs lie”—that is, avoid stirring the waters by evaluating or publicly debating potential gambling-related harms before the city decided to host the casino. The second was to put forth a distinction between the “good” competent and rational casino gamblers and the “not-so-good” economically disadvantaged and rather reckless supermarket gamblers—a distinction that aligns well with addiction capitalism and reinforces social and cultural hierarchies. Finally, the casino was not only broadly presented as a cultural and economic asset for the city but also as a sophisticated, safe gambling space—one that is able to cater to the special brew of cosmopolitan consumers—namely due to the high public trust enjoyed by Veikkaus, the Finnish state gambling monopoly that operated the casino. In brief, the three strategies can be summed up as avoidance (perhaps even outright concealment), separation, and upscaling. This suggests an urban development model grounded in trickle-down economics rather than one

focused on widespread welfare, on the intersection of commodified leisure and addiction capitalism rather than sustainability. Yet the casino was short-lived, and nothing trickled down—it eventually failed to meet its annual visiting target and closed within two years.

Finally, we come to this issue's book reviews, both of which are concerned with the possibility and necessity of a critical sociology. In her review of the multi-authored monograph *A critical cultural sociological exploration of attitudes toward migration in Czechia* (Jaworsky et al., 2023), Ana Mijić argues that the “central strength” of the book “lies in its deep social–theoretical grounding,” combining the strong program in cultural sociology with the study of symbolic boundaries. With the exception of the concluding sixth chapter, “each chapter can be read entirely independently,” focusing on distinct perspectives on attitudes toward migration such as “labeling” (chapter 1), “visual culture” (chapter 2), and the local context of “cities” (chapter 5). Nevertheless, these chapters are woven into “a cohesive and thorough narrative.” While the reviewer considers the book exemplary, especially with regard to its integration of theory, concepts, and empirical analysis, she is critical of the fact that the methodology employed in the study is relegated to the backseat (that is, to the appendix of the book), being implied rather than explicitly elaborated. Discussing *A critical theory of global justice* by Malte Frøslee Ibsen (2023), Petr Zapletal credits the author not only for his erudite and persuasive reconstruction of the history of the Frankfurt School but in particular for unearthing “Horkheimer’s original interdisciplinary vision” of critical theory, “which is today the least known and least understood.” Inspired by Horkheimer, Ibsen distinguishes between the historical, sociological, and normative dimensions of critical theory, all of which are critical for a future critical theory of global society. Zapletal acknowledges the book as an important step toward such a theory but also points out that due to its lack of engagement with empirical sociological research, its attempt at reviving critical theory does not live up to its own standards.

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