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## INTERVIEWS

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**K. Murji, S. Neal**

### HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS KEEP UP WITH A SOCIAL WORLD?

HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS KEEP UP WITH  
A SOCIAL WORLD?

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ВРЕМЕНЕМ?

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*Q: Thank you, dear colleagues, for agreeing to participate in this interview. It will be published in the special issue of the Public Opinion Monitor journal. Its focus will be the development of sociology between two ISA Congresses: Yokohama, 2014 and Toronto, 2018. So, if we can start with the questions about the ISA Congresses. Do you observe differences between this year ISA Congress in Toronto and the ISA Congress in Yokohama in 2014? And what are your expectations with regard to the next ISA Congress?*

**Karim Murji:** The ISA Congress theme seems to be decided by the President of the ISA and the executive committee. In 2014 the President was Michael Burawoy and the theme was very much around global sociology which reflects his interests around things like ‘Global Dialogue’ an ISA e-journal he started, and making sociology not just more international but more public and global. By 2018 the President was Margaret Abraham, and her interests are more to do with things like violence and power. So, that was the main theme of the Congress. And the President gets to have some presidential panels and to invite some speakers, so, her topic around power and violence was more evident in 2018 than it was in 2014. And in 2022 we don’t actually know what the theme will be, because the new President from the Middle East, Sari Hanafi, will decide upon it, with the executive committee.

*Q: And how about expectations for the next ISA Congress?*

**KM:** Well, it’s going to be in Australia. In Canada it was a bit of a focus on indigeneity because of the history of Canada I think this will also be evident in Australia, on indigenous communities.

*Q: Some sociologists believe that such Congresses in spite of uniting professionals make research communities in a way more divided? What is your assessment?*

*Q: Not only conferences, but international academic organizations in general.*

**Sarah Neal:** I think your question answers itself. Because conferences do have this potential, they can do some of that work about bringing a dialogue and sociologists together, but on the other hand we see kind of entrenchments in terms of who is writing, who’s getting published, who’s submitting to the general. And that’s one of our concerns as editors, to globalize the content more and it follows Burawoy’s concerns. So, I think, the ISA in some ways is successful being an international organization, but on the other hand we see the replication of some older divisions between global North academics and global South academics being much more marginal in getting published and leading conference panels. So, I think there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of being truly international.

*Q: Let’s try to reflect on how sociology has been changing through the years... Both of you have been working in this field for many years, so probably you might identify the key current challenges for the sociologists?*

**SN:** Big questions! Well, from our position as editors — we were the editors of the British Sociological Association’s, key journal, «Sociology» before — and then moving to edit one of the ISA’s the key journals, and one of the things we like, I think, is being at the heart of what sociological work is being done, and we are excited and feel privileged about that. But it’s also a vantage point that’s supposed to see what sociologists are actually working on. So, taking a look at, say, a couple of volumes of *Current Sociology* recently, what would be really striking is the diversity in what sociologists are writing about. But in terms of big patterns I suppose migration, mobility is something you would

see a lot of work on, feminism, gender, a lot of material gets written and submitted to us around those themes. Globalization, of course, and the rise of new populism and nationalisms... There is definitely a kind of shifts towards things like intimacy and emotion, perhaps the non-human and environmental sociology, sociology of science and medicine, some of those kinds of frontier sociologies are really beginning to come through. So, for me there's also still preoccupations with the classic sociological areas. We continue to see submissions on social divisions, stratifications, class identities. But I think, on the other hand, we are definitely seeing work around new areas: around intimacy, emotions, materiality, objects, non-humans; they are all coming through too.

**KM:** Yes, and I agree with what Sarah is saying. I was just going to answer the question in a slightly different way because I heard it slightly differently: in terms of relationships between sociological organizations and what is going on in sociology. I think that what is being going on in the international, global sociology for a while is a big interest in the Global South; and particularly what relationship between the South as a not just a geographical place but as the way of thinking about relationships within the world, and the way in which relates to what is called the Global North in sociology. What is interesting about talking to you, based in Russia, is the way it made me think about the way in which whatever is called the North is itself not undivided, not unproblematic. For example, with the ways in which Europe and Eastern Europe in particular has changed in last twenty years and so on... I think, there is an interest in how these kinds of sociologies do not get represented in what we think of is being an international sociology. So, for example, while Sarah was talking, I was thinking: it is interesting how the sociology of the state which I think was quite prominent when I was a student and for some time... I am not sure we see as much of that we might expect to see, and I am interested in thinking about changes, about how the state is changed particularly in Eastern Europe but also how governance has changed in other parts of the world as well. I am thinking about India and China — it is about the relationship between new forms of capitalism, new forms of state and the ways in which those are governed. And then I think the other thing that is intriguing talking to you from being based in Russia is what are the dimensions of stratification and inequality, and the ways in which very rapid social change in what we think of as being a kind of Eastern European beyond that, some referring all the way to Asia? And it is kind of created new patterns, new sort of cleavages, new differences and new inequalities. And I am not sure that we as sociologists (when I says 'we', I mean people based in Western Europe of the Anglo-American tradition) have a proper understanding, a proper sense of that. And I think in terms of being editors of *Current Sociology*, I think that we might want to say that, as an international association. Sociology should be reflecting those changes, getting an understanding more what do those changes mean, not necessarily in terms of particular nations but in terms of nations and regions. So, that is how I heard your question and how I would comment on it.

*Q: Let me turn for a moment to great figures in sociology. This year is the 200 anniversary of Karl Marx. How would you estimate the importance and relevance of his legacy for social research in the XXI century?*

**SN:** It's a really interesting question. Yes, it's a nice provocation asking how relevant are Marxist approaches in the world that we're seeing. I think in some ways it's about

what Karim said, the decline of work on the state. We see in terms of the way we move away from foundationalist thinking, definitely. So, a lot of the work that we see is filtered through Bourdieu, Lefebvre, Adorno, perhaps — these developments of Marx. I would say we don't get, as editors, we don't really see people working through the classic Marxist traditions or approaches so much. I think we see a lot of Bourdieu, definitely, I would say he is one of the most widely and well used social theorists currently.

*Q: The presupposition was that Marxist views are becoming sort of a fashion these days. But as editors Current Sociology, if I understood it correctly, you don't feel that Marx is really coming into fashion and you don't observe more attention to Marx than usual?*

**KM:** No, we don't. I think it's interesting that you have this perception. But there are journals like *Capital and Class* and *Critical Sociology* which would do more Marxist sociology. That's not to say that we wouldn't be happy to get that. I think it's because of what Sarah is saying that it's so much of background: classes are understood through Bourdieu now rather than through Marx. But that's what we see. One colleague of ours did a count of the abstracts of the British Sociological Association conference last year trying to find out who was the most represented theorist, and it was Bourdieu. But the point you are raising is very interesting because there is class and inequality, there is a lot of stuff that scholars like Piketty and Boltanski are discussing. I think, in terms of what we thought of foundations of sociology, which is kind of tricky: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, may be Simmel, that is kind of background, it's still taught to students. But it's not clear how much of those thinkers are present in contemporary sociology in general. So, there is a general issue about what is called 'founding fathers', I'm not fond of using this term, also because it's been a Eurocentric way of thinking about sociology.

*Q: May be we can move forward and to talk about your experience as the editors of sociological journals. Could you describe how demands for scholarly papers in the field of sociology changed from Yokohama to Toronto? Has there been a change at all, and if yes, what kind of change?*

**KM:** That's quite a hard question to answer. There are from five to six thousand people at these conferences. On the ISA website<sup>1</sup> we have a table that shows how many people attend it from each country and how many of them were female and how many were students. That is just in rough number terms.

*Q: And what about papers that have being submitted not to the ISA Congresses but to professional sociological journals you've been engaged with?*

**KM:** Well, it's a good question. We have been editors of *Current Sociology* for one year but we've been editors of another journal... So, we moved from the British journal to the international journal. And what do you think Sarah?

**SN:** In terms of, as I said before we do have this commitment as editors to increase the reach of who is submitting to the journal, and working in a much more internationally inflected way. We try to challenge methodological nationalism, and the national limits in the focus of papers. I think in terms of a broader commitment, we definitely have that, but as editors we are reliant on all kinds of submissions that we receive. There is that dependency we have as editors, to work with the material that are submitted to us. Again, we are trying to make inflections, one of the things, initiatives Karim and

<sup>1</sup> Here is a table for 2018: <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/conferences/world-congress/toronto-2018/statistics-18/>.

I would like to develop, is to strengthen the links of the journal with the conferences and the research committees. So, that's something that we have been working on and try to develop as editors, so that there is a more coherent connection between the conferences and the journal.

*Q: Does it provide geographical diversity, is it enough? Or does it require any specific efforts to maintain it?*

**SN:** I think I was articulating the commitment to doing that as editors. It's our attention and our ambition. And to work to support authors from a range of countries rather than just Anglo-US, Northern European sociology community.

**KM:** I think the other thing that the ISA could do which the British Association couldn't is to work with national associations. And our previous editor, Eloisa Martin, was very active in going out and trying to work particularly with sociologists in Africa trying to make the journal representative in ways which Sarah is talking about. And I think, because the ISA has always affiliated with national associations, it's partly about what work we can do, what Sarah is talking about at conferences and at other times to work with sociologists in the countries or the regions as well. We need to look at how to make those links. We also have to have more people who are active in terms of editorial board of the journal or reviewing for the journal, so, that requirements become clear to people as they know what to publish in the journal. I also would like you, Sarah, to explain a bit more about how this complexity gets into the journal.

**SN:** Yes, I suppose there's always a need for that attention in the journal editing, to the journal's identity, and what it stands for, and what shifts are made and who develops or what drives those. And, certainly, in the journal which has 'Current' in the title it is the concern to reflect the idea of what is current. So, we are looking after the journal, that responsibility is what, as editors, you take on. And diversification and internationalization of the journal, again, there's commitment to that. Then, a responsibility to sociologists in terms of delivering the best quality of sociology writing and making sure we publish what people would read and find it useful for their own work. So, there's those issues as well as the whole thing about impact factor, journal rankings, listings and the journal's place within those. It's what any editor of a journal is going to worry about really, worrying about representing, developing and keeping the identity of the journal, as well as wanting it be dynamic and creative, as well as relying on the work of which sociologists are doing. As editors you are in an ambivalent and sometimes contradictory position when you are worrying or trying to be attentive to completing ambitions. We want *Current Sociology* to have a really strong impact factor so it gets the most interesting, highest quality work being submitted to it. But we also want to be open and creative, and new and fresh, and diverse. So, its how to maintain a balance between those ambitions.

**KM:** I can just add. I think in terms what we want to say about scientific requirements for a paper, we want people who are submitting from anywhere in the world understand that an international journal is situated in relation not so much to national debates in your country but to whatever international ramifications there are. How are the same or similar issues addressed in sociology in other countries, or better yet, internationally? So, sometimes we get papers and they could be from the USA, just as they could be from China, which are just all about what is going on in that country. And that's

probably very interesting for these countries, but it is not what our journal is about. And, of course, we want papers to be methodologically robust and strong, explaining what your methodology is, and we want good data and a conclusion that hold all things together. That's what makes sociological or scientific paper good. Most sociologists kind of know that but sometimes people get it wrong in terms of what kind of journal they are thinking about. So, a paper which might fit well in a British journal or an American journal would not necessarily fit into an international journal.

*Q: Have you noticed any national or regional specifics of submitted texts?*

**SN:** Not specifics, I think it's more the ability for an author to scale up from what can be nationally located study or a very localized study in a particular national context to what are the broader sociological learnings from these data that go beyond the national boundaries. What we are always asking the authors to do is to think how this particular project or empirical dataset is related with the discipline and disciplinary thinking and, I guess, how it is going to be useful from, say, sociologists in South Africa to sociologists in North America or sociologists working in the UK.

*Q: Maybe there are some typical issues which are associated with papers coming from some countries? You get papers from all over the world, so maybe you can identify some tendencies like «we usually have this kind of problems when we are editing papers from people from this country»?*

**KM:** There are a couple of examples. One is that we sometimes get papers... just for an example, I was looking through some papers which are really about education and they are fine in themselves but from our point of view we often wonder why it has been sent to us rather than to a journal which is more about education. The other side of that, which I think sometimes happen to papers, I don't know whether it's a specific of Russia or not, for example, we might get a paper which is about ethnicity or ethnic groups in some country or some region of the world, and again, there is nothing necessary wrong with the paper in its own terms but from where we are sitting the debates on ethnicity are so huge that if those papers tend to have any recognition in an international context, ethnicity mean all these other things, it makes it quite hard to take that paper further. That's kind of what we mean by methodological nationalism — it's actually very narrowly in focus.

**SN:** I think there are inflections of this too in which you see how people have been trained around social science methods in particular ways. How some authors tend to write about data, how they are using hypotheses, and make arguments. We can see differences, perhaps, in methods training and how data get used. We sometimes see papers that just rely on data itself, and usually these papers are more reports than an analytical engagement with wider sociological debates. That's a kind of challenge we all face as sociologists who are doing empirical work. The need to move beyond the empirical and to go beyond reviewing what already exists, so to have balance between the empirical, the theoretical, the evaluation of the arguments already made but then have more. That's something we would want to be encouraging in the journal, those steers that we do try to give as editors along with the referee reports to authors — to ask them to push on the contribution being made.

*Q: I would like to ask you one more question about your editing practices. Have you noticed any changes in ethical norms and editing practices throughout your careers?*



*Have there been any shifts in terms of ethical norms to conduct research and to publish research outcomes?*

**SN:** I think papers written twenty years ago would not have as much methodological detail as we would expect now. Look at the sociological papers written then, it is so unusual to see methods written in the footnotes or endnotes. Now you don't tend to see research methods summarized in that way. I think methodological rigour and accountability reflects a greater and widespread engagement with ethics of fieldwork, research practice and the ways we work as sociologists. So, there has been definitely a shift in ethics in wider social life too and the attention being paid to ethical issues in social media and the questions raised in those kinds of environments, too, around privacy and confidentiality, anonymity. There has been an intensification of ethics, of being ethical.

**KM:** Sociologists are working within universities but also within national associations. There is now much more emphasis put on ethical protocols than probably was the case when I was a student. That's partly because universities but also individuals are worried about issues about privacy, anonymity, etc. But there are also the cases where sociologists disclose the information which shouldn't be closed or do other kind of harm. And all that stuff about the internet and social media has made it much more risky. I think ethics has been intensified as a kind of way which sociological research is governed, but not necessary governed only by sociological associations, like the British association, but also by employers, universities and so on. I would expect papers that reflect on this.

**SN:** I think it is partly about abilities of sociologists to be reflexive about what we do, the questions like: what does it mean to do sociological research? What kinds of relationships do have researchers with research subjects? There are also concerns about the power dynamics of such relationships and the representations we make as sociologists, and what and who we research, what questions we are asking. And I think as a discipline sociologists have become increasingly reflexive but there's room for more! There are questions about intrusion, the extractive nature of data and using these to drive papers and explore methodology. But I think ethical questions and methodological transparency are more apparent in the sociological work these days. So, there has been a change.

**KM:** Just another comment. Another thing is that now we often automatically electronically search against databases to make sure that authors are not submitting more less the same paper as they've submitting to someone else. That was not possible ten years ago. And that's a kind of internal ethical thing. It doesn't happen very often but it is sometimes the case that during monitoring we see that paper looks very similar to something that was published somewhere else.

*Q: Yes, we get our share from world mainstream, and all three trends you have identified are definitely came to Russia: technology, intensification of ethics, and methods. But what is coming next to all these trends? Some people, some editors claim that it's going to be sort of shift back because it's almost impossible to work in current conditions. What do you think?*

**SN:** I think that there will be no shift back. I think there is always a balance between the need to avoid harm, the need to be responsible researchers and what we doing as

sociologists, the outcomes of sociological labor but also about how ethics requirements might make some areas of research difficult to do. But I don't think there will be a retreat from where we are now. The question is more: how much further we will go? And that is difficult to predict: it intersects with wider questions of public life, personal data, privacy, surveillance, regulation. I think the question we are dealing with as sociologists exists beyond sociology as well. So, where it is going? It's difficult for us to predict. Do you have any ideas, Karim?

**KM:** I agree with you. I think the question is whether existing models of journals, how they can carry on. Because some journals are quite expensive but also there is this huge demand to get published in them. And there are people experimenting with different models of publication which isn't quite the same as issue about ethics. For example, more open access journals are coming on, some open-access journals charge a fee; there are internet only journals also. And I think technology may drive all those changes further. I think good sociology and good social science need to be underpinned by ethical protocols we've talked about. But there may be change in way which publishing itself happens in the future which I think is hard to predict in next five years, not to say of beyond that.

*Q: Thank you for your time, for your open and sincere answers to the questions. If you want to touch upon any topic to add to our conversation, you are welcome to do so.*

**SN:** So, what I was thinking about — developing from your question about Marxism — is how does sociology keep up with the social world? And that is kind of intrigue for me because when we think about... For example, what happened when we've been editors of *Current Sociology* whether it is Brexit, or Trump, or European elections and the successes of far right politics in Hungary or Sweden or Brazil... All these things have happened during the fourteen months we've been editors of *Current Sociology*. So, for me the puzzle is: how do sociologists, but also journal editors, keep up with a social world? Social research and writing works to a different time. Look at the last two *Current Sociology* issues, looking at the articles, these were first published in 2016, but they're only now appearing in the journal, in the hard copy of the journal, although they have been available online. The publication process is really slow, the research process is really slow, our thinking is slow. That's not bad but the social world is fast running. Just as ethics is intensifying and I think social is intensifying as well. And for us, as editors of the journal which has 'current' in its title, it is a particularly important question about how do we keep up; what questions and concerns are always topical and timely and we are encouraging papers that are thinking about the most pressing sociological questions.

*Q: And when, do you think, academic journals will catch up with current sociology? So, you would be able to publish not may be immediately but within a couple of months or so.*

**SN:** There are things that do not change. Sociological writing does just takes time.

*Q: But you are the editors, you are the people who change things!*

**SN:** Yes, and I think we have to try to speed up. I guess in terms of what Karim was saying about online technologies enabling journals to be quicker that they are used to... I think most journals now have much quicker response rate. Its something we advertise on the journal's webpage! But still, most papers that are strong take at least



a year to be generated, revised, submitted, reviewed, revised, resubmitted. I would be surprised if the best, most rigorous papers that we've published were written in anything less than a year. So, writing times don't tend to change, and good sociological work takes time. We can speed up as editors, try to turn decisions around faster and encourage reviewers to get their reports to us more quickly and so on — all things we are doing, but takes sociologists need time to write good sociology.

**KM:** I have just a couple of lines, again. I think, your point is a good one, but as Sarah says, social research takes a bit of time, and writing it up also takes time, which is why any journal can't be as quick as your question implies. But I want to bring up the difference between commentary and research. For example, if you want to publish commentary — I've been at other journals in the past that had a commentary section which was a bit like extended journalism based in sociology when you took an issue whether it's Brexit or populism or whatever it might be, and you write about a few thousand words on it. That wouldn't be the same thing as ordinary journal article which would require data and theoretical context to be actually publishable. I think we can't fundamentally change the nature of the journal but we are thinking about how to have things in the journal that make it a little bit more dynamic, in the margins, not in a whole journal.

**SN:** The question is, as with this interview, how do we get dialogue, circulating between us, as sociologists as well. Conferences are one way. I think technology clearly, internet and social media, has been really instructive in expanding how we can talk to each other, and how quickly we can talk to each other and respond to each other in 'real time'. So, I suppose what is valuable and useful is a diversification of places in which we can publish but also the formats in which we write and the ways in which we talk to each other. And for us, the things that we have in *Current Sociology* — the special sub-sections, the monographs, the review issue, the Sociologist of the Month feature, making the content on the journal website engaging — all facilitate different types of interactions and support forums for dialogue and ways of talking together — and good publications.

*Yu. B. Thank you once again!*