

Interview: Thomas Hinz

interviewed by Wojtek Przepiorka



WP: The Academy of Sociology was founded in July 2017 with the aim to promote analytical-empirical sociology. The academy now has over 250 members and constitutes an alternative organizational body to the long-standing sociological associations in the German speaking areas of Europe. You are one of the founding members and you were the academy's chairman for the first two years. Could you tell us a bit more about the rationale for founding the academy?

TH: Of course, you have to think very thoroughly about founding a new association from scratch. This requires many resources in terms of time and work. In addition, you can anticipate serious resistance of colleagues because you clearly signal that you are no longer satisfied with the "big tent" organization, German Sociological Association (DGS). In short, there were two main reasons to finally strike another match: First, the "big tent" existed more and more as lip service praising "pluralism". In fact, the DGS no longer represented analytical-empirical sociology appropriately with regard to its main conferences, to board membership, to research data policy etc. Second, the analytical-empirical orientation can potentially do more when it comes to the analysis of urgent questions in societies. The Academy of Sociology offers to bring in the expertise of its members and stimulate evidence-based politics.

WP: What does analytical-empirical sociology stand for?

TH: Analytical-empirical sociology builds on clear theory and necessarily confronts theoretical statements with empirical results. It is very important that research is transparent and uses adequate methods. It is open to all appropriate conceptual, theoretical and empirical approaches, methods and procedures. And, I think it stimulates a cumulative development of existing knowledge in the social sciences. As already mentioned, using analytical-empirical sociology, researchers can contribute to scientifically founded evidence-based policies. An example would be Dominik Hangartner's (ETH Zurich) excellent research on the integration of asylum seekers into the Swiss labor market.

WP: What effect has the academy had on the sociological landscape in Europe? I recall some people embracing the academy with great enthusiasm while others feared it would lead to more cleavages within the discipline.

TH: I see the foundation of the academy in Germany as a signal from those colleagues who want to strengthen the scientific orientation of sociology in general. My impression is that there are similar discussions in the US. Take for example the paper of Jonathan Turner in "The American Sociologist" (2019). He argues from his long-term experience with the discipline that the more "political" the discipline of sociology becomes (in the sense of promoting activism etc.) the more irrelevant it gets when it comes to addressing and potentially solving social problems. In Europe, I know many colleagues who share such thoughts on the future of sociology as well. Given this situation, some trouble within the discipline seems to be unavoidable.

WP: Let me ask you a last question. You already mentioned the work of Dominik Hangartner and colleagues, which has been influential in our coping with the refugee crises in Europe. What are the other big challenges European societies are facing and analytical-empirical sociology should feel empowered to tackle?

TH: Just to name one: not only in Europe social inequality within societies is growing. I find it a challenging task to better understand how this trend translates into political mobilization and policy outcomes. At my university, we have just started a research cluster "The Politics of Inequality" on these questions. More challenges are mentioned by Nan Dirk de Graaf and Dingeman Wiertz in their excellent book on "Societal Problems as Public Bads" (published 2019 by Routledge) covering among other topics corruption, crime, religious fundamentalism, financial crises, and environmental degradation. They offer a lucid perspective of analytical-empirical sociology to analyze them.

Thomas Hinz received a PhD in Sociology, Social Psychology, and Statistics from LMU Munich in 1997. Since 2004 he is a full professor of empirical social research at the University of Konstanz. Together with around 50 colleagues mostly from Germany, he founded the Academy of Sociology in 2017 as an academic association to promote analytical empirical sociology (<https://akademie-soziologie.de/en/>). He served as chairman until 2019 and organized the academy's second international conference on "Digital Societies" (<https://digitalsocieties2019.net>). Thomas' research interests cover labor market processes, social inequality, and survey research. Together with Katrin Auspurg, he published Factorial Survey Experiments in the Sage Series Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences (2015, #175). He is currently a board member of the research cluster "The Politics of Inequality" at the University of Konstanz (<https://www.exc.uni-konstanz.de/en/inequality>).

The interview was conducted via e-mail between December 10, 2019 and February 9, 2020.