



Opening address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the Nordic Sociological Association's Conference
"THE NETWORK SOCIETY:
OPPORTUNITY OR OPPRESSION?"
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Kære konferensegjester
sociologer og andre forskere
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed a great pleasure to welcome this impressive sociological conference to Iceland, especially for those of us who more than thirty years ago were given the responsibility of initiating and developing the teaching of social sciences at the University of Iceland.

At that time, there hardly existed accepted terms in the Icelandic language for the names of the different social science disciplines, and we faced the challenging task of creating an Icelandic social science terminology out of the old language of the Vikings.

Many of you may know that while our friends in the other Nordic countries gave way to English and French influence in the evolution of their languages, the descendents of the spirited settlers who came to Iceland more than a thousand years ago remained faithful to the roots of the old Nordic language. One result of this is that it is not possible to adapt international terms to the structure of the Icelandic language.

We therefore had to invent an Icelandic terminology for sociology, political science, anthropology and other branches of the social sciences. In the creation of new Icelandic words, we had to meet the transparency requirements of our language, so the new words had to indicate clearly the meaning of the scientific concepts.

I think it is safe to admit now, more than thirty years later, that through this process our respect for the theoretical and conceptual clarity of the discipline suffered some setbacks, because in too many cases we failed to find a clear meaning in some of the theoretical fireworks which at that time were in high fashion.

This experience led a few of us to formulate, discreetly and almost in a clandestine way, a new sociological principle which we termed “the Icelandic test of theoretical soundness”. This principle stated that if a theory could not be made transparent in the Icelandic language, the fault probably lay not in our language but rather in the hot air nature of the theoretical formulations.

Since we did not want our students to lose faith in the soundness of their new field of studies, we kept this principle to ourselves as our private prerogative, but I think it is safe to reveal it now because the Faculty of Social Sciences is so firmly established that it now has more students than any other faculty within the University.

This account might sound somewhat light-hearted, so let me make it absolutely clear that the pioneering of the social sciences in our country was one of the most fascinating and challenging endeavours of my life, especially since it required us to deal with the very essence of the relevance of our studies both to society and to the advancement of scientific knowledge.

Perhaps it is an illusion created by being away too long from the everyday dialogue of the academic community, but somehow I feel the need for the social sciences at the opening of this new century to attempt to deal with some of the most fundamental questions facing our nations and people all over the world.

When we examine the nature and the effect of social change, study new opportunities and analyse the creation of new communities, it is important not to forget that, despite the newness around us and the constant flow of innovations, we are still deeply moulded by history, by our cultural heritage, by the roots created by previous generations, by the identity which other ages have passed on to us as their legacy.

We can never escape the boundaries formed by our historical heritage; nor can we avoid the philosophical and moral challenges involved in looking for the fundamental purpose of all this, of the media, new and old, of the available technologies, new and old, of the different communities, whether newly emerging or long established.

The evolution of our civilisation has been primarily judged by criteria inspired by democracy, human rights and the search for knowledge. We honour the philosophers and lawmakers of ancient Athens and Rome, and here in Iceland we still refer to the example provided by the establishment of the Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament at Thingvellir, more than a thousand years ago, which made the democratic rule of law the essence of the new community of settlers. It is indeed striking that the populations of Athens, Rome and Iceland in these ancient times, when foundations were laid for our philosophical and democratic traditions, were similarly small. Perhaps that should be a reminder to us today that unions of nations, creating a common market or common systems and measured in hundreds of millions of people, are not necessarily the best way to realise the lofty goals of human and social development.

Democracy, knowledge and human rights – these have been the cornerstones of the political system which the Nordic countries have proudly advanced and which in the 21st century seems to be the aspiration of nations all over the world.

These must also remain the criteria when we examine how the new information technology will affect our communities and how new generations, empowered with these new tools of communication, will conduct their affairs.

How will democracy change? How will political parties adapt? How will organisations and pressure groups dedicated to specific issues utilise the new opportunities to strengthen their influence? How will elections be affected? How will parliaments and legislative process be transformed? How globalised will the impact be? How dominant will the market be in determining the relative influence of different forms of participation? How will the free or cheap forms of expression created by the new technologies affect the powers of the established and financially strong institutions? How fragmented will society become? How will the individual be affected, the citizen, the voter, the activist – the thinking human being who, in the tradition of western civilisation and democracy, is supposed to be the cornerstone of our open society?

How will the youngest generation, which is now using computer centres in the kindergartens, become democratically active when, in twenty years time or so, it enters the political system with full force as the first generation in world history empowered to seek knowledge and establish allegiances based entirely on its own free will – unhindered by the boundaries of established associations or powerful institutions?

How can our scientific and scholarly endeavours help to predict the evolution of democracy in the 21st century, or estimate how the transformation of our social communications by these new technologies will affect the relationship between the individual and society and make the human rights we have inherited into the living experience of a more profoundly civilised world?

There will undoubtedly be great diversity in the answers given to these questions, and some will even claim that these issues are not even relevant at all. But Nordic scholars are above all fortunate in being at the same time citizens of the most open democratic societies in the world, the most highly interconnected communities in modern times, and also culturally empowered with a strong sense of history and tradition.

It is therefore highly appropriate that the Nordic Sociological Association should have made "The network society: Opportunity or oppression" the title theme of this conference and thus direct the attention of our academic community to some of these fundamental issues.

The Nordic societies are world leaders as regards mobile phone usage, internet access, the spread of personal computers and the availability of information technology to the general public. In this sense we have already established what for most of mankind looks like the society of the future.

We are therefore uniquely well placed to lead the examination of this social development in a sophisticated and rigorous way and thus contribute significantly to the discussion on how this process should be measured.

This is by no means an easy task, but like the pioneering of the social sciences here in Iceland more than thirty years ago, it offers fascinating challenges and will test our theoretical capabilities in a critical way.

As we make our way forward into this uncharted territory, the legacy of the Vikings, who settled in our country more than a thousand years ago and sailed from here to discover the vast continent in the west, can indeed be a worthy beacon by which to set our course. This legacy, left to us in the form of the Icelandic language, makes the absolute demand that the meaning of every term and every theoretical formulation should be transparently clear.

Only in this way can the study of the people become the common knowledge of the people and thus direct the democratic process towards the progressive goals which society hopes to achieve.

With these reflections I welcome you again to our country and wish you both enjoyment and success in dealing with some of the most fundamental questions of our times.