

Andrew Blasko
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria

Vessela Misheva
Uppsala University, Sweden

Introduction to the Special Issue

Expanding Social Interactionist Horizons: Bridging Disciplines and Approaches

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Andrew Blasko is a Professor of Philosophy with a specialization in European Values and Culture whose present institutional affiliation is the Institute of Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He defended his doctoral dissertation at Sofia University under the direction of Asen Davidov on the question of how Sartre's conception of the progressive-regressive method, particularly as it is employed in the second volume of *Critique de la raison dialectique*, casts light on historical development as a process of totalization that does not have a totalizer. His publications have discussed a range of theoretical and empirical questions arising from the ongoing social and cultural changes that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe during the last three decades. He has also recently co-edited *Jane Addams and the Spirit of Social Entrepreneurship* (2018). Blasko currently serves as a member of the board of the European Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction and is Secretary-Treasurer of Research Committee 36 on Alienation theory and Research at the International Sociological Association.

email address: Andrew.Blasko@abvm.se

Vessela Misheva is a Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University. She has also served as a Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Skövde, Sweden. She was awarded a Ph.D. in the philosophy of science from the Bulgaria Academy of Sciences, as well as a Ph.D. in sociology from Uppsala University. Misheva has also specialized in sociology and systems theory at Bielefeld University under the direction of Niklas Luhmann. From 1998 to 2006 she was a Vice-President of Research Committee 51 on Sociocybernetics and Systems Theory at the International Sociological Association (ISA) and served as a President of the Research Committee 36 on Alienation theory and Research at the ISA between 2010 and 2018. Her current research interests include the sociology of peace, the sociology of knowledge, classical sociology, the theory of self-conscious emotions, and the theory of self. Recent publications include *Jane Addams and the Spirit of Social Entrepreneurship* (co-edited) (2018), "Jane Addams and the Birth of Micro Sociology as a Science and a Social Enterprise" (2018), "Guilt: What's So Good about Feeling Bad about Yourself" (2018), and "Lost in Vicissitudes of Greatness and Decline: Charles Horton Cooley's Unique Contribution to Sociology" (2018).

email address: Vessela.Misheva@soc.uu.se

This volume of selected articles is intended to present topics and questions that were discussed at the *VIIIth Annual Conference of the European Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (EUSSSI)*, which was held in Topola, Bulgaria, July 04-08 2016. The EUSSSI is a rather young scholarly society that will celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2020. It emerged from a conference organized by the University of Pisa in 2010 where, for the first time, efforts to create a permanent transatlantic interaction between American and European scholars working in the symbolic interactionist tradition met with success. Since then, the EUSSSI and the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI) have enjoyed close cooperation, including the support of our American colleagues of our efforts to consolidate the European scholarly community promoting symbolic interactionism.

This conference was organized jointly by the EUSSSI and the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which hosted the meeting. The venue was chosen with the idea in mind of continuing the existing tradition in Bulgaria of holding large international scholarly events on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Such spaces at a distance from working places have been proven to create good conditions for extending discussions beyond the lecture halls to all other times of day. This serves to strengthen both collegial and friendly relationships and networks in ways that facilitate future cooperation.

The Topola Conference sought to build upon a series of similar events previously organized in other European countries, beginning with the first confer-

ence in Pisa (2010), followed by meetings in Kassel (2011), Rotterdam (2012), Uppsala (2013), Aalborg (2014), and Salford (2015). Conferences were then held in Lodz (2017) and in Lancaster (2018). Much as in previous years, the VIIIth EUSSSI Conference brought together over 70 prominent scholars in the fields of social psychology, sociology, symbolic interactionism, social work, and qualitative methods. This truly international event was attended by scholars representing Bulgaria, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Norway, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, and Austria. The participants included senior scholars and recognized authorities who, during the course of their careers, have left their personal mark on the development of their disciplines, as well as younger scholars beginning to make names for themselves within their own communities who are now venturing into larger arenas. The conference brought together a number of varied traditions with distinct perspectives into a common discussion, the results of which could be seen not only in presenting, articulating, and sharing different views in a uniquely fruitful way, but also in expanding the knowledge horizons of the fields of common interest.

The texts of presentations at the conference were further elaborated for the purpose of this publication, and the various professional contacts and interactions that emerged from the exchanges at the conference have been particularly useful in this regard. They also have led to research, writing, and teaching projects that have been presented at subsequent scholarly events. As with the previous conferences, one purpose of the Topola Conference was

to involve scholars of differing generations, backgrounds, cultures, and national identities in face-to-face interaction, thus applying the principles of symbolic interaction to discussions of the theoretical and applied issues of symbolic interactionism itself. The EUSSSI conferences over the last eight years have proven to be particularly valuable for the participants, not least because of that particular feeling at the end of each conference that a new community is being born during the week that we are together each time we meet. This certainly was also the case in Topola, where old friendship continued to grow and deepen and new friendships emerged in a way that promised to influence what we read, think, say, and write. EUSSSI conferences and activities have also been held in Lithuania (2018) and are now being planned for Iceland (2019) and Pisa (2020), in addition to other meetings held on a yearly basis in Europe and participation in the activities of the home organization and main partner of the EUSSSI in North America, the SSSI.

We hope that the collection of papers presented here provides a faithful representation of the variety of approaches accommodated within an extended conception of symbolic interactionism, which possesses the potential to intersect and integrate a variety of distinct research fields and viewpoints. This collection may be regarded as a good illustration of how most such views serve to complement each other and highlight the central role of symbolic interactionism in the social sciences and humanities as a theoretical and methodological paradigm capable of promoting and reinforcing integration between, as well as within, diverse disciplinary fields.

The Topola EUSSSI conference was also significant in another way. Previous conferences had been held in Southern, Northern, Western, and Central Europe, and the activities of the EUSSSI as a scholarly association had not been extended to Eastern Europe, where no formal collegial relations had yet been established. Bulgaria thus became the first country in the region to host the activities and share in the work of the scholarly communities associated with both the SSSI and the EUSSSI. The number of scholars from East European countries who have since joined the network is regarded as evidence of the success of this undertaking.

This type of yearly conferences for social scientists in constant motion, who move from one end of Europe to the other, crossing geographical, political, cultural, economic, and disciplinary borders, should of course be regarded as serving more than one strategic goal. These goals are not limited to the further development and strengthening of the symbolic interactionist tradition and the revitalization of the various disciplines involved. Symbolic interactionism is useful not only for research, but also as a social practice with the potential to resolve conflicts and heighten the quality of everyday life through interaction in a modern society in which all social relationships, even love, depend on discourse. The international scholarly communities committed to symbolic interactionism can make valuable contributions not only to expanding its boundaries as a research and disciplinary field, but also to the process of the economic and political integration of the continent. The European Union has grown over the last two decades in both geographical size and population to an extent that had perhaps not been fore-

seen when the still ongoing process of European realignment was initiated. The general impression is that the consequent integration has been more or less successful, but there nevertheless are regions of Europe, including some of the oldest nations and states on the continent, that have not yet come to be regarded as full partners in the current project of European unification.

We hope that the EUSSSI conferences may establish a pattern of engaging scholarly communities in

larger interactions concerning the most acute problems of our time, lending credibility and supplying a rationale to diverse national efforts. It is hoped that the contributions to this volume that we are presenting to you will give you a sense of what was accomplished at the Topola Conference—a step towards greater diversity in unity, not only across disciplines and research orientations within the framework of symbolic interactionism, but also across differing nations, histories, languages, and traditions.

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