

Social relations in turbulent times

In the wake of the ‘credit crunch’, one of the worst financial crashes in modern history, the economic system has been shaken to its core. European economies teeter on the brink of collapse: The rest, fearing the domino effect, rush to prop them up. Share prices and currency exchange rates fluctuate extravagantly as the successive economic tremors push them up and down. The tremors are felt on political landscapes across the continent. Will established practices and institutions crumble and die and if they do will the public sphere be marked by the birth of new configurations and alliances? Is a future of debt and material insecurity the prospect that faces the next generation as it strives to cope with the complexities of an ageing European population? In an era when economic growth will be constrained by both unprecedented fiscal deficits and the ‘moral’ pressures of environmental activism, how will the social fabric of Europe cope?

In this extraordinary context will social relations be marked by deep uncertainty and chronic pessimism or will people find opportunities to explore and develop creative solutions? One might expect emotions to run high and fears to be stoked by pervasive references to the ‘external’ threats posed by *inter alia* immigration and radical Islam and the ‘internal’ dangers associated with high unemployment and the decline of public services. On the one hand, the present conjuncture points towards a future of commotion and unrest, of anomie and alienation but on the other it may announce novel forms of social, cultural and emotional life that grow out of new solidarities? How we face up to the challenges posed by the turbulence and unpredictability of our times is the key dilemma facing contemporary social analyses. The European Sociological Association invites scholars from around the globe to come together, in Geneva in September 2011 to debate the most pressing sociological questions of the day.