

# **Frontiers in Sociology and Social Research**

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Denise Jodelet · Jorge Vala ·  
Ewa Drozda-Senkowska  
Editors

# Societies Under Threat

A Pluri-Disciplinary Approach

 Springer

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# Foreword

What is the purpose of the humanities and social sciences? No sooner is the question asked than we usually get an emphatic response to the effect that they must not be defined in terms of any sort of purpose. This would lay them open to the risk of being used by the authorities or even by the opposition.

This is understandable but does not prevent us from considering the knowledge which they produce as serving a purpose—namely that of raising the capacity for analysis within society. The humanities and social sciences can provide the elements for clarification or arguments relevant to enabling an improvement in democratic life, in particular when an important issue is being discussed. They may bring something to light which, until then, was unapparent. This could be empirical, on the basis of grass-roots fieldwork, for example, or conceptual, by clarifying the imprecision or confusion in everyday vocabulary. Ideally, the humanities and social sciences update empirical work and amalgamate this with a more abstract theoretical discourse.

The humanities and social sciences are particularly useful in pioneering recognition of the gravity of a phenomenon or a new problem when they reveal, name and provide the key to understanding it. They are also useful in providing an insight into current affairs, which enables us to get away from the ‘here and now’ into which media temporality plunges us every day. Their task here particularly consists in setting the events in a context, showing the link with events which occurred at an earlier date and are now apparently forgotten. They also shed light on the diversity of the actors involved and the various levels of action from the most global to the most local, which brought them to the fore. As a result, they are also useful when they join forces and share their resources. The aim is not to conceal the specificities of each discipline, but to encourage sociology, social psychology, psychology, history, social anthropology, demography, economics, etc., to pool resources at the top level, while respecting their particular approaches and methods.

This joint publication, which Denise Jodelet, Jorge Vala and Ewa Drozda-Senkowska have prepared, corresponds perfectly to this approach to the value of the humanities and social sciences. The focus is on one problem: threat or threats, which to date have not attracted much attention in either public policy

debate or scientific life. The book suggests a conceptualisation, gradually taking shape with each contribution. The concept of threat is distinguished from other concepts that are relatively close in meaning and have emerged over the last few years. In the first instance, there is the concept of ‘risk’ to which the late Ulrich Beck drew our attention. He considered it the major characteristic of our modernity, which has now become, in his words, a ‘reflexive modernity’.

Numerous scientific disciplines, such as epidemiology, have adopted a rational approach to the concept of risk, even if they do admit to a degree of uncertainty. In contrast, threat or threats include dimensions which are, to a large extent, subjective and emotional, and liable to recall a period long since gone, in which dangers were predicted by ill omens or prophets of doom. This is what Norbert Elias called the ‘magic-mythical’ stage of development. In many ways, it evokes the present when fake news, rumours and conspiracy theories seem to combine in making truth obsolete to the benefit of an enigmatic post-truth.

From this perspective, the publication addresses phenomena such as migratory movements, climate change or terrorism, in which the concept of *threat* seems to increasingly predominate, thus substantially altering the representations and sensitivities of our contemporaries. However, by assembling the respective viewpoints of several disciplines and enabling interchange with critical detachment, *Societies Under Threat* allows for a much less emotional discussion of this concept. This enables us to maintain it, and ourselves at the same time, in the context of reflexive modernity.

This is why, as colleagues and as directors of FMSH, we are particularly happy to have supported the founding symposium and to have perceived therein what we consider to be a landmark publication.

Michel Wieviorka  
Jean-Pierre Dozon

**Michel Wieviorka** is Sociologist, Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris, France) and President of the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme. He was President of International Sociological Association (ISA, 2006–2010) and is Member of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes European Research Council. His main research deals with violence, terrorism, racism, anti-Semitism, but also democracy, multiculturalism and social movements. He is Author of several books, including: *The Making of Terrorism*; *The Lure of Anti-Semitism*; *Violence: A New Approach*; and *Evil*.

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# Acknowledgements

As editors of this book, we are particularly grateful to the scholars who agreed to take part in this project for their distinguished and innovative contributions. Their remarkable and stimulating ideas will certainly inspire new research into social threats as a crucial concept for understanding the dynamics of contemporary societies.

This book would certainly not have been possible without the generous support of the Fondation Maison des Sciences de L'Homme and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Equally important for the success of this venture was the support provided by the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (FCT Grant UID/SOC/50013/2019).

We wish to thank all these institutions for their help in the funding of this project.

The need for this book arose both from the editors' previous research into contemporary social threats and from a conference that they organised in 2017 with researchers from different disciplines operating in various countries. Devoted to the theme of 'Social Threats: an emerging transdisciplinary research domain', this conference was held at the delegation of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Paris with the collaboration of the Fondation Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, as well as the support of the University of Lisbon, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Réseau Mondial Serge Moscovici and Institut de Psychologie de l'Université Paris Descartes. We would like to express our gratitude to the researchers who participated in the conference for their important contributions to this project, with a special word of thanks being addressed to Michel Wieviorka and Jean-Pierre Dozon, respectively, President and Vice-President of the Fondation Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, for their involvement in this meeting. We would also like to thank the representatives of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Paris, Joao Caraça and Miguel Magalhães, for their collaboration and for the support that they provided in the hosting of the conference.

Brigitte Dufeutrelle from the Fondation Maison des Sciences de L'Homme and João Silva from the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon both made a most valuable contribution to the organisation of the conference. The editors are also enormously grateful to Mick Greer for his help in editing the chapters of this book and to Leonor Bettencourt Rodrigues, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences, for her help in organising the manuscript and for her critical contributions to its improvement.

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**Jorge Vala** Ph.D. in social psychology, University of Louvain, is Emeritus Researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal. His research focuses on socio-cognitive processes, namely in the field of social

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**Ewa Drozda-Senkowska** graduated in psychology from the University of Warsaw, received her Ph.D. in cognitive psychology at the University of Paris 5 and is currently Professor of social psychology in the Paris Descartes University, where she has been Director of both the Laboratory of Social Psychology and the Institute of Psychology. She also created a laboratory at this university for the study of social threats. Former President of the psychology section of the National Committee of the universities, she currently serves as Scientific Advisor to the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research. She was made Chevalier of the Legion of Honour. She has directed several research programmes on collective decision-making, supervised numerous Ph.D. theses and serves regularly as an expert for the National Research Agency. She has coordinated several works on collective irrationalities, the pitfalls of reasoning, psychology of anticipation and, more recently, social and environmental threats. She has written several manuals on experimental social psychology, several chapters and scientific papers focusing on group behaviour, validation of everyday knowledge and collective emotions.

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