

LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD

My second term as the president of the ESEH started just a couple months ago. In July we held our general assembly and voted for the renewal of several offices, including that of the president (all the names of the newly elected officers are available at <http://eseh.org/about-us/board/>). I am proud and grateful to have gathered, again, the trust of so many colleagues and friends. The general assembly was part of a two-day event that included Jacob Dlamini's thought-provoking lecture on large predator attacks against humans and the inspiring roundtable 'The times we did change the world' with Sanjoy Bhattacharya, Robert Bullard, Liesbeth van de Grift and Alessandra Korap. Perhaps just the names and diversity of the speakers may say something about the path we have tried to walk during these few years. Indeed, nothing better than these two events could have closed my previous two years as the president of the society and opened the new term.

When two years ago I proposed my candidacy I would have never imagined what was in front of us. Only a few months later, the pandemic arrived on us, in our collective and private lives, changing everything. I feel deeply uncomfortable speaking about the multiple ways in which COVID-19 has affected our small community. According to the most reliable sources, almost four million people have died of COVID-19. According to the World Bank, the pandemic will push between 88 and 115 million people into extreme poverty by the end of this year. All the statistics point to the unequal effects of the pandemic, hitting harder the most vulnerable people in our societies. Clearly, those living in the slums, those working in warehouses or the logistics sector, or those with precarious jobs – together with many workers in the health sector – have paid a higher price to COVID-19. Having in mind the immense suffering of people affected in their bodies, their families and their means of survival, I feel almost uncomfortable speaking about our difficulties as an academic society. Let me take this opportunity to thank the entire ESEH for the support I received during my severe COVID-19 illness. That was clear proof that ours is, of course, a scholarly society but also a community of friends who care for each other.

How has the pandemic affected us, as an academic society? How has it affected us as scholars and perhaps the entire discipline? I wish I could be more precise about this; actually, I believe we should have a broad and creative listening campaign – some kind of questionnaire with a soul – to map the impact of COVID-19 on us, individually and collectively. We know that the pandemic has affected female scholars more than male scholars, especially where the lockdown has been more severe and female scholars have been squeezed between research and domestic care. We also know that PhD students have

been dramatically affected by the pandemic, often being forced to change their research projects and almost always trapped in a quite isolated work environment. Junior researchers and colleagues with precarious contracts have often lost their incomes. For all, isolation and anxiety have had a deep impact.

The drastic reduction – even erasure – of mobility has been the most crucial challenge for our society. Postponing our conference in Bristol, the most important and beloved event of our community, was not an easy decision. Staging the two-day event in July was not just a statutory requirement – we needed to vote for the president and other offices – more than that, we decided to get together, though only virtually, because in these difficult times we wish to nurture a community of care and hope. We did not meet despite the pandemic but because of it; everything we have done during this pandemic time in terms of webinars and other activities was not proof of our strength or ability to ignore the virus but was due to our fragility. We were looking for comfort and solidarity in the face of anxiety and isolation.

Asking for your vote two years ago, I stated that I would nurture our commitment as scholars to engage with the ‘grand challenges of our times’. I remain committed to this statement. It is not a matter of fostering some partisan agenda but of embracing our responsibilities to let the problems of the world interrogate us as scholars, citizens and human beings. The pandemic, then, is not a noise in the background or a bump on the road; it is the socio-ecological crisis knocking at – perhaps breaking through – the doors of our academic community. It reminds us loud and clear that, whatever we are studying, we need to keep in mind the questions of the present.

This engagement with the present – which does not mean at all studying ‘the present’ – has passed through a series of initiatives that I proposed in 2019 and that we have been able to realise. The ESEH now has a **committee on diversity** that has been instrumental in making us reflect on the limitations of our society, the challenges we are facing, and the opportunities for change. We have decided to think about diversity not so much in terms of an easy balance – almost an arithmetic implementation of diversity – but in terms of privilege (there is no inclusion without acknowledging privilege). Our newly created committee has organised a cycle of webinars starting from disabilities and feminism and has produced relevant materials for the society (for instance regarding our conferences). In the same direction, under my presidency, the ESEH board has issued statements in solidarity with the youth climate activists, Black Lives Matter and antiracist mobilisation. I also created a **committee on sustainability** that was working hard to create a set of recommendations for our society; obviously, the digitalisation of our events and the postponement of the 2021 conference have affected their work. I truly believe that the pandemic has not made such a committee obsolete but even more relevant. For the new term I have in front of me, I would like to encourage such a committee to work on sustainability in a broader sense, considering not only the implications of

large physical events but what it might mean to foster sustainability from an environmental history perspective. I still believe that our society could be more attentive to **teaching and education**. The pandemic has drastically changed our approach to teaching focusing our attention on its digitalisation. In the next two years, I would like to invest more energy in working on teaching and education. We have already very healthy signs of initiatives going on in that field, for example the Syllabus project, aiming to bring ‘more women and people of color into our courses’, and the teaching fair, organised in Tallinn. I will support these initiatives while fomenting new and creative ideas to make teaching an important part of ESEH activities. This is not only a set of things we can promote but implies changing our research-centric approach that has always made teaching a minor activity. Connected to teaching is the **third mission** or, if you prefer, our connection to the wider public. I know that many of us have been very active on this, working with museums and associations, publishing articles in newspapers or volumes for the general public, and experimenting with other media such as podcasts and videos. I believe the society should learn from those experiences, function as a platform, and multiply our visibility as a community. In the next two years, I would like to have a committee dedicated to the third mission, engaging with the public in new creative and meaningful ways. Wouldn’t it be possible to include in all our conferences some outreach activities? Could we design an outreach plan that could be adapted for each ESEH large event?

In my 2019 statement, I had envisioned fostering closer communication between the president and the ESEH regions. The pandemic has created problems, of course, but also offered us some opportunities to become more familiar with digital tools. This means the possibility to meet more frequently without increasing our travel. I plan to foster this approach by having more regular meetings with the regional representatives but also experimenting with a weekly open-door virtual room for the ESEH members.

I have started to work on possible funding opportunities for our society (in particular the COST Action framework) and I will continue to explore this and other paths. In particular, it is crucial to gather funds in order to launch two new prizes on teaching and outreach; prizes which will mirror my desire to bring these two activities to the forefront of our community.

We have started to reflect on the history of our society, trying to build our archive. I must say that it has been a difficult task and I would like to take this opportunity to encourage all of you who have materials about ESEH history (pictures, flyers, minutes, etc.), or would like to be interviewed, to get in touch with me.

For the next two years, I would like to engage with a large, creative and playful bottom-up mobilisation. The ESEH is and will be a well-structured academic association with its officers and institutional bodies; our internal life will be organised through the committees in charge of the rich activities

of our society. Some new committees will be created (on outreach, for example). Nonetheless, I would also like to create the conditions for wider and creative participation from all our members. Some committees will function as working groups where everybody will be able to join and contribute. We will welcome new ideas for activities and common projects. Every member should see the ESEH as a laboratory for common experiments or perhaps, with a more relaxed approach, as a common garden, a place to enjoy and care for. It will be our responsibility as elected officials to create the conditions and experiment with the practices that can make this happen.

Let me conclude by saying that whatever I have been and will be able to achieve has been because of the generous friends and colleagues who have worked on the board, as RRs, in the committees, or just as dedicated members of our society. But all the limitations, mistakes, delays, things that could have been done better – well those for sure are my responsibility.

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