In a recent sociology class, I was talking about the social position of women in Croatia, using, of course, the concept of gender, and I was explaining to my students the difference between sex and gender. This coincided with an official letter published by the Croatian Bishops’ Conference entitled “Man and Woman He Created Them,” in which Croatian bishops vehemently opposed what they call a “gender ideology” within which, as they describe it, gender as a social construct allows total freedom about one’s gender, which is completely unacceptable from the point of view of naturally given sex differences and is used primarily by those who want to promote the right to alternative sexual styles and behaviors. The letter came after years of heated debates about the content of sex education in public schools and about the position and rights of gay couples. After reading the document, it becomes clear that the bishops equate the term gender with “gender ideology,” and in a way they focus only on the content of this “ideology,” not referring to other social aspects of the social position of women and men to which the term gender applies.

As the term gender is a new concept that has been used in the Croatian society only in the last fifteen years, it has become burdened with opposing meanings. Thus, while using this concept in my class, I felt pressured to argue additionally that the sociological concept of gender was an analytical one, used to describe and understand the differences in the social position of women and men in different societies and in different times. Still, I felt many students looked at me with suspicion. I used much more time than I used in the past to explain the analytical value of the concept of gender, in varieties of its usage which, from my point of view, still do not discredit it as a scientific concept. From the looks of my students, I couldn’t be sure that I succeeded.

This story is certainly not an exception. It is what sociology has had to deal with since its beginnings: different ideas, interests, power of groups and institutions. Today, I live in a democratic society and can freely teach my students what I know and believe sociology is, but I have often felt, not only in class but even more in public, under pressure to think how to express myself faced with...
the reality of an extremely ideologically divided society. I have to think about how to say something without being misunderstood and without being “put” in an “ideological box.” I have been under pressure to try to defend sociology as science and to defend my sociological work from ideological labeling. I am also old enough to remember the time when an “inappropriate” sociological word could mean a real threat to one’s life. Therefore, the history of the sociology of religion in Croatia is not just a history of a science shaped by society in a sense that sociology is framed by the reality it analyzes. It has been the history of a science the pure existence of which has been seriously threatened.

That is why Bauman’s phrase “society under siege” (2002) is used in the title of this chapter, although with a different meaning. The phrase emphasizes the peculiar ways in which sociology has been shaped by social circumstances and underlines the main argument expressed several times in this chapter, which is that the history of the sociology of religion in Croatia (but also in other post-communist societies) is not only of purely historical interest but has contemporary relevance as well. Hence, the concepts of continuities and discontinuities are used as an underlying logic of this description, mainly in order to stress the need for more reflexivity about the long-term consequences of past development and about the peculiar ways in which social circumstances have shaped sociology today. Who sets the agenda in the sociology of religion and in which way remain open questions that are rarely raised. How is the agenda framed by history, by powerful social groups with their particular interests, and by uncritical use of concepts developed elsewhere?

Besides the introduction and conclusion, the chapter is divided in seven sections. It starts with the description of the development of sociology in the period before and after the Second World War, explaining effects of the social context on the development of both sociology and the sociology of religion. The development of the sociology of religion is analyzed in the course of two periods, during Communism and following its collapse. The last section aims to put the development of the sociology of religion in Croatia in the context of debates about its development in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

A Forgotten Early Period

Some might question the need to mention a very early period of the development of sociology (at that time not yet the sociology of religion), but its brief description is a telling illustration of the social circumstances which gave rise to the development of sociology and which lasted, in one way or another,