

GOING GLOBAL: A NEW GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY AND A METHODOLOGY FOR TRANSNATIONAL INQUIRY

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For Behbehanian and Burawoy, the inauguration of a new-fangled global sociology first requires a definition of sociology. In contrast to economics (which studies the market) and political science (which studies the state), they define sociology as the study from “the standpoint of civil society” (Burawoy 2010:25). Global sociology would then study “a global civil society, knitting together communities, organizations and movements across national boundaries” (Burawoy 2010:25). Like its father, sociology proper, global sociology would ultimately study global political economy and global states to determine their effects on the possibility and vitality of a civil society with world-wide influence. In short, Behbehanian and Burawoy propose a scheme for a global sociology that catapults Gramsci’s conceptual framework from a national Italian stage to a global theatre.

Who’s Afraid of Civil Society?

As significant and productive as a Gramscian framework may be for inspiring contestation from, within, and between institutions, where a war of position finds articulation and negotiation, Behbehanian and Burawoy’s confident reliance on Gramsci to address contemporary transnational processes and global social inequalities comes with a few problems that deserve some comment here.

First, Behbehanian and Burawoy’s definition of global sociology, relying on a Gramscian framework, is not formulated from an on-the-ground empirical imperative but through a theoretical, rhetorical, and reductionist gesture. Behbehanian and Burawoy reduce global sociology into two parts: sociology and global. Sociology is treated as the key linguistic foundation—a fundamental noun that takes as its constitution a definition of sociology fashioned from the discipline’s traditional inclination to halt a “sociological imagination” at state borders. This sociology that sees civil society as the supreme object of analysis, to be clear, issues from a methodological nationalism—which “assumes that the nation, state and society are the ‘natural’ social and political forms of the modern world”—that characterized Gramsci’s work (Beck 10-11). What is more, the global in Behbehanian and Burawoy’s formulation simply denotes something beyond the nation-state. As a pure and stand-alone adjective, the global does not transform sociology—a stalwart and defensible noun. The global is simply a blown-up view from a standpoint of a civil society.

Second, the formulation of global sociology as requiring a world-scale civil society presupposes that a healthy society needs a set of global institutions and congealed social movements. This advancement of a global civil society—including, particularly, various NGOs from regions with more material means—necessitates a more critical discussion of the faults and failures of existing global civil society organizations in alleviating social inequalities and delivering various resources and community needs. Given the anthropological critique of the “mana from heaven” delivered by transnational civil society organizations, we cannot simply assert that global organizations always, only

benevolently respond to globalized market and coercive state forces without being muscularly critical. Even more, the preference for a civil society as the object of analysis par excellence for the entire subfield of global sociology is alarmingly dissatisfying given that some communities do not have vibrant or even extant global or local civil societies. How does one study the Thabo Mbeki settlement outside central Johannesburg, where global civil society is thin, while still studying how transnational economic forces have determined a precarious community? Do we simply study the absence or impossibility of a global civil society and, thereby, assume that a blown-up civil society (likely funded by Western transnational organizations) is the panacea for global-turned-local troubles?

Third, the formulation of a global sociology from the standpoint of a global civil society potentially undercuts many feminist projects. Since sociologists rarely view the domestic sphere as part of the public sphere (despite the blurring of the public and private distinction by feminist scholars and sociologists of the family), the Gramsci-inspired definition of sociology harbors the insidious exclusion of the sociology of everyday life proposed by scholars like Dorothy Smith. Furthermore, since “girls and women around the world, especially in the Third World/South ... bear the brunt of globalization,” a global sociology that turns its analytical gaze away from production and reproduction in the home (or with effects found most starkly in the home) effaces the communities most vulnerable to the onslaught of global economic restructuring (Mohanty 2002:514). Constructing a global sociology that does not explicitly extend feminist lessons dangerously brings us close to reproducing the masculinist assumption that the most significant global transformations and their egregious impacts occur outside the domestic sphere. To avoid this problematic and empirically inaccurate assumption, which so sharply excludes labor and life in the home, we must continue the search for a more flexible global sociology that either expands the meaning of “public” or explicitly incorporates the domestic sphere in an analysis of civil society.

A Global Sociology Revisited

A global sociology must respond to contemporary—not early 20th Century—global social problems in order to examine and find solutions to deleterious global forces. Ulrich Beck provides a robust and thick account of our world-wide current crises:

"Consider the following: global free trade and financialization, corporate deterritorialization and transnationalized production, globalized labor use, competition and class conflicts, globalized policy consulting and formulation (coerced by the IMF, etc.), internet communication and cyberspace, globally orchestrated bioscientific manipulation of life forms (gradually including human bodies), global risks of all kinds (financial crisis, terrorism, AIDS, swine flu, SARS), transnational demographic realignments (the migration of labor, spouses, and children), cosmopolitized arts and entertainments, and, last but not least, globally financed and managed regional wars" (Beck 2010:11).

While Beck offers a significant list, he leaves out climate change—another global transformation with significant transnational effects. Nevertheless, his sundry and significant enumeration offers an important cornucopia of empirically based transformations and crises. These are the conditions and the accompanying effects about which a global sociology can formulate its object of analysis and its definition.

Given Beck's global tableau of contemporary social problems, a newly minted global sociology should invert the reductionist relationship in Behrman and Burawoy's definition. Rather than understand the noun, sociology, as fundamental while viewing the global as an adjective that simply attaches to the noun by enlarging its scope, a new definition of global sociology would privilege the global—the adjective as the transforming term. In other words, the global determines sociology rather than the sociology determining the global. This last point likely appears to be a rhetorical move to scholars skeptical of discourse and language, but the privileging of the global actually corresponds with the empirical list of contemporary problems that Beck enumerates. The importance of the adjective issues from concrete, on-the-ground social processes and problems rather than from a discursive ether or (even worse) from an infatuation with mere word play.

We would be well served to correct Behrman and Burawoy's definition and privilege the following definition of global sociology: a subfield of the discipline that examines global flows and new global imaginings. This alternative conceptualization of global sociology can embrace the analysis of a global civil society since transnational actors working with and within global institutions are not outside various global flows—be they financial, discursive, material, symbolic, socio-biological, or corporeal. This definition of global sociology also offers room for other forms of global analysis that resist or cannot be cartographically represented on a map—what I call global imaginings. An analysis that seeks to unearth global imaginings invites and opens new possibilities for conceptualizing global processes that cannot be easily represented by traditional global maps (for instance, the virtual world of digital communications or the fictitious world of financialization). These global imaginings will require new representations that can only be delineated by reference to more complex spatial depictions of global processes and flows.

In Search of a Global Methodology

Therefore, global flows that may or may not be represented on a map would be the object of analysis for global sociology. Global sociology would study contemporary crises and their effects—be they in civil society or in other social fields or spaces. Given that global sociology would pursue transnational social currents and other global imaginings, the subfield will require a new methodology for complimenting and realizing these global inquiries. Already, contemporary scholars—who have studied global flows and problems with worldwide significance—have offered promising alternatives. They have inspired these three methodological tools for conducting and realizing a global sociology, particularly a transnational or metanational global sociology that searches for global flows and, thereby, moves beyond the clunky, 1950s international approach that simply compares nations or clusters of nations as a way of examining the global.

First, a global sociology presupposes a geographical sociologist—a scholar who is familiar with not only the importance of space but also the terms and tools already inaugurated and fostered by the discipline of geography. Second, since globalized political economy involves powerful clusters of social actors “from above” who are often linked to powerful institutions like the IMF and World Bank, a global sociology that studies political economy would need to have a rigorous and unambiguous

approach to “studying up,” a rare, under-practiced, and under-discussed research strategy within the discipline. Third, an empirically rich global sociology that can promptly produce knowledge to address social inequalities will need to relinquish the tacit cult of individuality that characterizes sociology and academia more generally. A global sociology will necessitate a methodological practice involving collaborative network of multiple scholars who come from different world regions and who study the same object of analysis with the same set of research questions and in multiple geographical sites.

First, given that the subfield seeks to map global flows and other configurations of global processes, global sociology calls for a familiarity with the tools of cultural geography including but not limited to rich concepts like sites and situations, cultural landscapes, distribution, space-time compression, and the multiple typologies of diffusion. Even more, a global sociology will require not just a sociological imagination but also a geographical imagination that can connect local empirical findings to larger global flows and forces. Sari Hanafi has already offered a viable example of rethinking the relationship between space and social inequality. In “Spacio-cide: colonial politics, invisibility, and rezoning in Palestinian territory,” Hanafi argues that Israel is pursuing a spacio-cidal project. Rather than directly exterminating a population, Israel’s policy targets Palestinian lands to make them uninhabitable—thereby producing conditions for a “bare life” that in the final hour encourages the “voluntary” removal of the Palestinian population (Hanafi 2009:107). He applies state governmentality (a term that analytically assembles “all the mechanisms and techniques that are used by the state to exercise ‘government’”) and states of exception (which refers to the power states exercise not just to delimit social order but to suspend that order for particular population at particular times) to highlight the mechanisms by which Israel renders a space so uninhabitable that it becomes a push factor that simultaneously obscures the coercion that precipitates migration in the first place (Hanafi 2010:152). Hanafi demonstrates the importance of both social and physical space to a promising global sociology.

Second, sociologists have various methodological tools for “studying down” or researching marginalized and vulnerable populations. However, sociology as a discipline has not comprehensively considered the position of the researcher when “studying up” or researching extraordinarily powerful individuals, organization, and institutions that have Goliathian influence in mobilizing or hindering global flows. While some researchers speak of “going stealth” to “capture data,” a global sociology will need many more techniques and positions for studying the powerful. Ananya Roy and Walden Bello present two possibilities. A self-professed “double agent,” Roy interviewed “those professionals who research and manage poverty—people like myself” in *Poverty Capital* (Roy 2010:38) Aiming “to uncover the dynamics of poverty capital and to chart the historical moment that is millennial development,” Roy’s research demonstrates a way to “study across” or “study laterally” (Roy 2010:40, 34). In describing her position in the field, Roy offers that she researched from: “the impossible space between the hubris of benevolence and the paralysis of cynicism ... a space marked by doubleness: by both complicities and subversions, by the familiar and the strange” (Roy 2010:40). While some critics might argue that Roy’s position in the field means that she must play both sides of the fence, Roy offers one option for studying groups with extraordinary decision-making influence. Bello similarly provides an orientation for studying powerful groups and institutions. Rather than working as a double agent, Bello conducts research as a strident critic. Bello’s articles take the IMF

and World Bank to task, ardently sounding the death knell of their demise (Bello and Guttal 2005:11). Bello avers that the IMF caused the Asian Crisis of 1997 as well as financial failures in Russia in 1998 and Argentina in 2002 (Bello 2006:2; Bello 2009:2). Bello also reveals that the WB's poverty alleviation and environmentally sensitive aims are empty fictions, an exposure that now places the Bank in crisis. Bello's research and the route he has taken to procure data—including uninvited entry into the World Bank headquarters in Washington D.C and the extralegal borrowing of 3,000 pages of top-secret documents—presents a provocative alternative for a global sociologist without access to data and in the face of dominant multinational and transnational institutions.

Third, a global sociology will need to break free from the cult of individuality that assumes research should be an individualized project. If global sociology hopes to examine global flows or other global dynamics from multiple sites and in a timely manner (to more quickly address social inequality), then the subfield should work in teams of scholars who study the same set of research questions. The collaboration among Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout (WLB) offers a viable and encouraging example. They conducted research among workers in the white goods industry in Ezakheni (in South Africa), Orange (in Australia), and Changwon (in South Korea), and found that neoliberalism “consciously manufactures insecurity” to extinguish collective contestation among civil society actors and movements (emphasis in the original; WLB 2008:17-18, vii). Despite limitations for contestation, they further propose that “spaces of hope” harnessing a networking strategy will produce a new liberatory subjectivity and an “attempt to protect society against the unbridled power of the multinational corporation” (WLB 2008:202-203, 156). While WLB do not thickly describe the research relationship and dynamics required to produce *Grounding Globalization*, their book exemplifies and inaugurates an approach for global sociology that generates knowledge from research teams. Even more, one might imagine that a global sociology project that involves multiple sociologists from many parts of the world—that is, from the periphery as well as from the metropole—would increase the likelihood that social theory from the “South” would enter and/or gain authority within the global sociological academy. In this way, a team model for crafting and carrying out global sociology would soften and perhaps even mollify the critique that “Northern” sociology enables a project of Western intellectual domination (Connell 2010).

Conclusion: Promises and Possibilities

Burawoy and Behbehanian's invitation to formulate a new subfield called global sociology comes with overwhelming excitement but also a serious demand to critically reflect upon a best formulation for this “embryonic” field. This response expands the definition of global sociology beyond the limitations and problems that issue from a civil-society-centric definition. Instead, this response inaugurates a more empirically muscular definition: Global sociology is a subfield of sociology that maps global flows and new global imaginings. To promote this novel definition, global sociology would benefit from considering new methodological tools for studying complex and transnational global flows and dynamics. Thinking geographically, alternatives to “studying up,” and collaborative research teams are but a few possibilities for an emerging and encouraging global project.

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