

REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM AND A GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY

Pil Christensen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

As a student of the global sociology course, I feel a strong inclination to continue the discussion that we began on the first day of the course and that carried us through to the last day. Along with the different topics, theorists, and cases that we discussed to locate and shape a global sociology, we continued to consider the most basic elements of our analysis: what is sociology, what is society, how should we conceptualize it, and what does it mean that we want to understand it in a global perspective. These questions kept leading us back to a fundamental discussion of the structures and actors of society, the economy, the meaning of organization, and governance, just to mention a few.

Even though Behbehanian and Burawoy offered a clear framework on the first day of the course, the same one that they presented in the article under discussion, we all remained open towards questioning this framework. The many different perspectives and analyses presented to us in the course kept pushing us to reflect, to criticize, and to return to this basic framework. A fundamental openness characterized our discussions and I definitely felt I was a part of the common project to investigate and develop new ways of understanding sociology and our global world.

Science—and especially social science—is always a common project and the development of new ideas, models, and theories never happens in solitude. The idea of a single theoretical genius is one we need to get rid of and instead focus to the collective process of creating new knowledge. Therefore I am very delighted to be able to continue to participate in the collective process of developing a framework of a global sociology—especially as I now write this response, sitting on the other side of the world.

First, I want to question the basic model on which Behbehanian and Burawoy built their analysis. Is it possible and desirable today to analyze our society by compartmentalizing it into three main spheres—the economy, the state/politics, and civil society? And what problems do we create for the rest of our analysis by using this model?

Secondly, I will reflect upon the question of whether contemporary capitalism can be understood solely as neoliberalism or whether we forget some important aspects of capitalism by understanding it only within this frame.

Lastly, I will discuss the perspectives of counter-movements on the background of my own analysis as well as the one made by Behbehanian and Burawoy. Furthermore, I will criticize what role the state gets in the basic framework presented by Behbehanian and Burawoy.

Sociology as the Standpoint of Civil Society?

Behbehanian and Burawoy base their sociological analysis of the contemporary world on a tripartition of society into an economic, a political, and a civil society sphere. As they write they “approach sociology as the study of the world from the standpoint of society, understood as civil society” (Behbehanian and Burawoy 2011). This model is based on mainly two important sociological theorists—Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi. As Behbehanian and Burawoy acknowledge, the two theorists developed their analysis of civil society and capitalism in the first half of the last century. The two theorists both focus on the “transition to advanced capitalism” (ibid) in the 1930s and, therefore, industrial capitalism and the concomitant industrial society. It is under the hegemony of industrial capitalism that the analysis of society as comprising three main spheres makes sense and, therefore, also here it makes sense to understand sociology as the study of society from the perspective of civil society. My argument is that capitalism has changed radically and can no longer be characterized as an industrial capitalism. In my view, the form of the industrial and Fordist capitalism was the one that made the foundation for dividing society into an economic, a political, and a civil society sphere.

So how does capitalism look today? And why does it break down the boundaries between the different spheres? With inspiration from a different theoretical standpoint than the one adopted by Behbehanian and Burawoy, broadly represented in the autonomist Marxist tradition and, especially, in the common work between Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2001, 2004 and 2009), it is possible to identify a transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism from the beginning of the 1970s onward. This transition can be characterized as a paradigm shift. A paradigm establishes the frames for how society is structured in a certain historical period and history can, in this way, be said to consist of a range of different paradigms. The structures in a certain paradigm are generally seen determined by the hegemonic forms of production, and different paradigms are structured by different hegemonic tendencies. Fordism and Post-Fordism represent two different paradigms. The industrial production constituted the dominating and hegemonic form of production in the Fordist era and, therefore, pervaded all other forms of work, production, and social organization in general. Concretely this meant that all social institutions, for example, the school, the hospital, and the military base had the factory as its respective model (Hardt and Negri 2004:140-142). The society under industrial capitalism was, hence, organized by the sharp divisions between work life and other forms of life *and* between the directly productive work conducted in the factory and the reproductive work done in other spheres of society. This helps us to understand why civil society by Gramsci and Polanyi was sharply separated from both the economic and the political sphere. And why it made sense to understand society this way and, therefore, to base the sociological analysis on this foundation.

Because the paradigm shift in the capitalist production has changed society radically, approaching society in this way becomes problematic. Important to state though is that my analysis should not be understood as a structuralist determinist one—the paradigm shift in the capitalist production happens due to many different factors, among others the technological development and the various struggles against capitalism. Changes must, therefore, be seen as an interaction between many different forces and actors and not as a route determined by internal mechanisms in the capitalist production. At the same time, I want to stress that the capitalist relations of production, in general, does not determine the structures of all other social phenomena. The power relations between sex, race, and gender, just to mention a few, are related, but not subordinated to capitalism.

The important point is that we today live in a fundamentally new form of society and abide by a new form of capitalism. The Post-Fordist paradigm is characterized by what we could call *biopolitical production* or immaterial labor—that is, the production of knowledge, communication, emotions, communality, and relations or the things we as humans produce in common. Now it is important to stress that we should see this new form of production as hegemonic in a qualitative sense, not a quantitative sense. This means that immaterial labor or biopolitical production is not the form of labor that, necessarily in terms of numbers, dominates our society today (after all, most people still work in traditional forms of production or in the agricultural sectors). What it instead means is that the characteristics from immaterial and biopolitical labor permeates all other forms of production and the structuring of society more generally. Thus, all forms of labor tend to become informationalized, intellectualized, and characterized by communication and sentiments (ibid: 109). This applies both to the American service worker who must smile and be polite, the Northern European caretaker or nurse who must create solicitude, or the Eastern European factory worker who must communicate with her team. In fact, even the Latin American textile worker or the Asian customer service assistant uses communication or creates relations. Thus, the changes in capitalism must be seen as global, and although people around the world still live very different lives and have diverse working conditions, we are all subsumed to the new forms that capitalism has taken.

So how does this new production paradigm break down the boundaries between the three spheres? The essential change from industrial capitalism to Post-Fordist production is that the human life itself has become the main productive element. When production is based on and structured by things as communication, knowledge, sentiments, and communality, the common human life and interactions between humans come to the core of production—this is what mainly creates value (ibid: 107-115). Capitalism as an economic system is not the main creator of value anymore by structuring and organizing the production. It is, instead, human interaction itself.

At the same time, our lives cannot be separated from the political. Politics understood as the praxis, which concerns the change, organization, and management of society, has become immanent in social life since Post-Fordist production is characterized by the human ability to organize, manage, and change society. The production process is no longer structured by the assembly line, but by the human ability to cooperate (Hardt and Negri 2009: 174-175). Hence, politics become immanent in social life. Politics is ubiquitous, in our love life, in the culture, in our identities, in our work, and, generally, in our social relations. Through our social and common life, we produce both value and politics.

When our social and cultural lives are productive and, at the same time, always characterized by the political, it makes little sense to understand society as divided into three different spheres. We must as sociologist investigate society from the perspective of the new conditions created by a Post-Fordist capitalism. If we keep on studying society as if it had not changed since Gramsci or Polanyi wrote their theoretical canons, then we miss the possibility of understanding our world and creating bases for resistance. The activities that Behrman and Burawoy associate with civil society must, in the contemporary capitalist society, be understood as a part of the economic and political sphere since human interactions are basically of what civil society consists.

Unpaid reproductive work must be seen as productive together with different forms of

human activity located outside the sphere of traditional and paid forms of work. On an abstract level, the distinctions between productive and reproductive, between paid and unpaid work disappears since our social relations, community, and communication is what produces the value in society. The traditional forms of leisure connected to the forms of industrial production have withered, and we are always working and producing. Social production does not happen in a delimited room as the factory or within a certain time frame associated with the supposedly traditional 9-to-5 job. This must be understood as a theoretical and abstract model since we of course experience multiple and many boundaries in our lives. It is important, though, that the basic frames of society must be understood as different from the Fordist mode of production.

As Behbehanian and Burawoy note, Polanyi was: “arguing that civil society (he simply called it society) emerged as a reaction to the over-extension of the market, particularly the unregulated labor market,” and “[h]e largely focused on England, where industrial capitalism first took root and where reactions to the market took the form of cooperatives, trade unions, political parties, self-help organizations such as burial societies, as well as the factory and Chartist movements” (Behbehanian and Burawoy 2011). It is not because these reactions to a capitalist market economy do not exist anymore—capitalism is still destroying the human being, nature, and society and, therefore, it still meets resistance. But resistance takes and can take other forms, and resistance must not be analyzed as separated from productive and economic aspects of society.

Global Capitalism as Neoliberalism?

The first theorist we discussed in the global sociology course was David Harvey, who presented his conceptualization of contemporary capitalism as neoliberalism. Harvey gave us a range of different tools and very useful insights to understand neoliberalism and the conditions it exacerbates. But when we understand global capitalism solely as neoliberalism—as Behbehanian and Burawoy do—it creates at least one important problem in my opinion: We forget the progress within capitalism that has been made during the last 30-40 years as well. When contemporary capitalism is understood as neoliberalism, it is often interpreted only as a setback and retrogression. The idea is that the conditions for humans, nature, and society only have become worse during the neoliberalization of capitalism. Therefore, a nostalgic longing after a never existed past often follows from this idea.

Without discarding the theory of neoliberalism, we need to understand capitalism as Janus faced. Contemporary capitalism needs to be seen both as progress and as regress, something that is reflected in the new possibilities for emancipation and alienation. If one of the main productive forces is social life and human interaction, then the means of production must exactly become humans and human life (Hardt and Negri 2000:46). In this sense the human being “owns” the most important means of production in the form of the body and mind, and, therefore, the abilities to create communality, emotions, relations, communication, etc. This, at least in some ways, moves us closer to a society controlled by human needs and self-determination. The very concrete working conditions, mostly in Western societies and in more immaterial sectors though, are characterized by more flexibility in terms of working time, place, and content. More autonomy, creativity, and cooperation are often part of the working conditions as well. In addition, more mobility between jobs is a reality. There should be no doubt that these

things all have significant negative implications and consequences, but they still contain potentials for self-determined production and emancipation.

Again, however, contemporary capitalism must be perceived as double-sided, and besides what we could call the neoliberalization of capitalism, the drawback can be understood by a current and deeper form of alienation (Hardt and Negri 2000: 406, 2004: 66, 2009: 137-140). The new forms of production induce, too a much greater extent, control and absolute subjection under the domain of capital. Social life itself becomes the productive factor and therefore production seeks to commodify human capability, and our social and emotional relations become objects for and on the market. When our communities, passions, communication, and cogitation become central parts of the way we work and produce, becoming subsequently a product for sale, the possibility of alienation from exactly these abilities becomes more likely and, therefore, we become fundamentally alien to ourselves.

Neoliberalism is in many ways a good way to diagnose capitalism, but it needs this second perspective, this other side to be aligned with the conditions created by contemporary capitalism.

Counter-Movements in a New World

The perception of contemporary capitalism and its global forms is important for our analysis of resistance, the possibilities of resistance, and all forms of counter-movements. Peter Evens was the first scholar to confront the question of counter-movements in his very optimistic analysis. Evans (2008) writes about the possibilities of a transnational union movement and how the current globalization actual enforces the necessities of a global labor movement. Evans definitely offers good points, but a complete transformation of the union movement as well as our basic understanding of value production is necessary to deliver on Evan's optimism. It is not enough to transgress national borders; borders within society itself have to be dissolved as well. As I have argued, work is being transformed all over the globe and social production, cooperation, and immaterial products have become more important. Furthermore, a substantial production of wealth occurs outside a traditional labor market. Women's unpaid labor at home or people's traditional knowledge about nature are just two examples. This general transformation of production needs new and different forms of organizations that correspond to the contemporary forms of production. Therefore, it becomes important that the traditional labor movement include not only workers, but also people without work, students, undocumented workers, precarious workers, people who do unpaid labor, etc. A similar critique can be made of another scholar featured in the course, Eddie Webster (2008), concerning his ideas about the necessary strategic changes the labor movements will have to undergo to be able to fight the neoliberal restructuring process. He and his co-authors provide strong ideas in terms of strategies for the unions, suggesting cooperation between unions and the community and arguing for a dissolution of the distinction between productive and reproductive work (ibid: 188-211). But we must ask the question: Why does Webster et al not take a fuller step and suggest organizing around social production, in general, by letting the unions, not only cooperate with other civil society and community organizations but actually organize together with them and, thus, recognize the value produced in the reproductive and unpaid labor sphere.

But it is not only some of the presenters in the course that we can criticize for a lack of suggestions for resistance corresponding with the conditions created by contemporary capitalism. The critic can be directed at our class as well, since we, in some ways, had a hard time when it came to resistance. As Behbehanian and Burawoy argue (and what, furthermore, became evident during the course), new forms of sovereignty characterizes the global world today. Power is to a greater extent located on a global level and the traditional sovereignty of the nation state can be questioned. For example, Behbehanian, “suggested that we are witnessing the emergence of a global security apparatus, one in which other nations act as proxies for the US, enabling it to expand the power of its global reach.” Other examples of global power include the great influence many international corporations and international institutions have compared to nation-states (for example, the Nigerian oil industry that Michael Watts (2006, 2007) investigated). In spite of these insights and our collective discussion, we often did not apply the insights regarding power to the question of resistance. Most of our solutions to neoliberalism and destructive capitalism ended up being an appeal to the state and more regulation and control for a frothing and raging capitalism. Some times the appeal was directed toward an imaginary global state apparatus and many times the focus was on the nation-state.

I think our inability to transgress the state is connected to the general framework of the course, which I have all ready discussed. If we understand economy, civil society, and the state as three different spheres and as separated categories, we cannot move beyond a demand for state regulation. We are not able to develop ideas that exceed the boundaries made by the three spheres, if they become our fundamental way of conceptualizing society. To create and contribute to resistance and counter-movements that aim to take back power in our lives, nature, and society, we need to see the possibilities of using our basic productiveness and our political powers as something immanent in social live. Framing resistance as something that comes from a civil society—which is separated from both economy and politics—produces a passive appeal to the state since we do not see ourselves as capable of yielding significant power.

Furthermore, the division of the economy from what we call civil society, which renders them into separate spheres, reproduces a capitalist discourse and way of generating value because the distinction does not recognize that the actual value in our society is created immanent in human activity and not by a capitalist economy. The idea of civil society as detached from the economy does not recognize the fundamental productive value of human activity in a Post-Fordist era, and, therefore, the possibility of a transformation of the productive relations in society. Thus, the division of society into the three spheres thwarts, in my view, the basis for transcending society organized around capitalist production. It can restrict capitalism as we see in social democracies, for example, but such a framework does not offer a sustainable solution.

A Polanyian vision, where civil society control the market and the state—one that both Evans and Webster, to some extend, adopt—seems to ultimately be a variation on the regulated market, a social democratic, Keynesian idea, which doesn’t decisively break with the commodification and marketization of labor. Even more, although social democracies have created more equal societies within their borders, the societies are build on protectionism and foreign resource extraction, which is based on an absolutely unequal distribution of wealth on a global scale.

Therefore, it must be absolutely necessary to find permanent alternatives to capitalism, which Behbehanian and Burawoy underscore when they assert that “human survival is endangered by the destructiveness of unregulated markets and predatory states.”

A Global Sociology?

There is no doubt in my mind that a global sociology is necessary and that we should continue our discussion on this emerging field. The global condition of capitalism makes it absolutely necessary that we, as sociologists, find ways to investigate the contemporary world. On what basis we do investigate, with what theoretical lenses, and from what perspective are topics we should constantly discuss.

A global sociology should, in my opinion, not necessarily be the study of society from the perspective of a global civil society, as Behbehanian and Burawoy argue. Still I find the conclusions from our course as presented by Behbehanian and Burawoy very prudent. It is absolutely possible to use all three approaches (Behbehanian and Burawoy 2011), without having to accept that Gramscian tripartition of society since it makes sense to look at different parts of society with simultaneously not understanding them as spheres containing a certain area of society, for example, *the economy*. Furthermore, we need to use all approaches to get a diverse conception of our global society.

Finally, Behbehanian and Burawoy's suggestion that global sociology should become “a project of public sociology” is very important. Instead of framing the project as one that “contributes to building a global civil society,” a public sociology should contribute to the shaping of resistance and counter-movements against a neoliberal capitalism while developing alternatives to the society dominated by contemporary capitalism. We have to formulate a vision of a non-capitalist society. A society built on another form of economy is absolutely necessary if we want to care for both people and nature *and* if we want to create equality, freedom, and democracy on a global level. We must make these goals part of the common conception. We must use our sociological imagination to shape ideas of a society beyond capitalism.

References

Behbehanian and Burawoy. 2011. Global Sociology: Reflections on an Experimental Course. globalsociologylive.blogspot.com.

Evans, Peter. 2008. "Is an Alternative Globalization Possible?" *Politics & Society* 36 (2): 271-305.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude – War and Democracy in the age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press.

Watts, Michael. 2006. "Empire of Oil: Capitalist Dispossession and the Scramble for Africa." *Monthly Review* 58 (4).

Watts, Michael. 2007. "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate? Conflict & Violence in the Niger Delta." *Review of African Political Economy* 114: 635-658.

Webster, Edward, Rob Lambert, and Andries Bezuidenhout. 2008. *Grounding Globalization, Labour in the Age of Insecurity*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.