

TAKING GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY GLOBAL:

WHAT IS GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY AND DO NORWEGIAN SOCIOLOGISTS REALLY NEED IT?

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“Take the ideas of this course to the furthest corners of the planet.”

—Behbehanian and Burawoy, "Global Sociology: Reflections on an Experimental Course"

Globalization is without doubt the most overused concept of the 21st Century. Without properly defining the term, everyone seems to be adding the prefix “global” to their work, and based on the number of textbooks in “Global Sociology” produced in the last decades,¹ it may be safe to say that the trend has inevitably also reached the sociological community. In cooperation with the International Sociological Association (ISA), Laleh Behbehanian and Michael Burawoy launched *their* contribution in the Spring of 2011, through the undergraduate course and online lecture series “Global Sociology Live!” at UC Berkeley.² As a contrast to the prefix-seekers however, they developed a thorough framework by which “global sociology” can be understood and studied. This paper looks at their approach and asks whether it is one sociologists in Norway should strive to adopt.

By discussing a small sample of research on what could be called global sociology in Norway, I join those who have concluded that Norwegian sociology lacks a global perspective, and I add that this clearly limits Norwegian sociologists in most terrains of study. I go on to identify a set of critiques to the approach taken by Behbehanian and Burawoy and to consider the challenges this approach might meet when adopted outside of its Anglo-American context.³⁻⁴ I conclude by presenting what I believe are the most valuable parts of global sociology, and what aspects Norwegian sociologists and others should take away from this course.

What is Global Sociology?⁵

In their final lecture in “Global Sociology Live!” and in the paper to which this is a response, Behbehanian and Burawoy stated that there are several possible ways of defining global sociology and that this is still an experiment, an ongoing process. However, Burawoy did provide a tentative definition, one that has served as the starting point for the course. Based on the notion that sociology is the study of the world from the standpoint of what Gramsci termed *civil society*, global sociology must ultimately be pursued from the standpoint of *global civil society*, but a problem emerges when we are not able to identify such a constellation. Without a civil society, there is no sociology (Burawoy and Behbehanian 2011a).

Still, Burawoy concludes that there are three ways in which global sociology can be approached. The first is by studying the very institutions that prevent or undermine global civil society from forming. This is the approach taken by Walden Bello, who claims that global sociology, “among other things, [is] the study of international power structures [...] of hegemony” (Bello 2011). A second approach is to work with the embryonic forms of a global civil society that do exist, for example, by taking the perspective of the emerging global labour movement. The third, and perhaps most interesting approach, is for sociologists to work to *produce* a global civil society, constituting their very own object of study through engaging in conversations of transnational character. This last approach presupposes that sociologists strive to be reflexive, and also that the sociology they pursue has a public dimension, in the Burawoyian sense of the term (Behrman and Burawoy 2011b).

Global sociology, as pursued in this lecture series does not strive to be a universal sociology nor yet another projection of American or Western views, but rather a sociology rooted in a number of national contexts, done from different points on the planet. This course, Behrman and Burawoy say, is global sociology because they have brought forward a variety of voices, and sought diversity in the classroom and in lecturers presented. It is globally accessible, with a global perspective, and with case studies from different parts of the globe.

Global Approaches from a Far Corner of the Planet

Burawoy calls for global sociology to come from different points of the planet, and one question that emerges is clearly whether such global approaches are already emerging. Research done mainly by master's students on the degree to which Norwegian sociologists engage in global questions, shows that the discourse prevalent in this far northern corner of the planet, overlooks most aspects of what Behrman and Burawoy call "global sociology."

Through her analysis of ethnocentrism in course material assigned to bachelor's and master's students at the University of Oslo, Ida Hjelde (2006) started a still ongoing debate in Norwegian sociology of the discipline's tendencies to, while speaking increasingly about globalization, continuously reproduce narrow western views of society without taking into consideration how this world is shaped by transnational institutions and global processes (Khazaleh 2006). Her thesis created strong discussion amongst students and faculty, more than thirty years after Said published *Orientalism*, a clear indication that such a voice had not previously been heard in the discipline. Hans Erik Næss (2007, 2008) continued the discussion Hjelde started, by studying the syllabi given to sociology students in the whole of Norway. He concludes that Norwegian sociology is suffering under a “transnational deficit” since only 5 out of 155 available bachelor's and master's courses in sociology offered in Norwegian institutions successfully incorporated a transnational approach.

Although it is a salient indicator, one can certainly not say that global sociology is lacking in Norway based only on courses provided to students. There are, however, indicators that also sociologists that are no longer students, participate in a discourse in which Norwegian society is seen as disconnected from the rest of the world. Based on preliminary study of the work done by the country's leading sociologists,⁶ Neumann concludes that Norwegian sociology is blind to the internationalisation and

globalization of sociology seen elsewhere in the world. He points out that although some Norwegian sociologists do study globalization (Mjøset), global processes (Brockmann) and social life outside of Norway (Priour), it is the study of isolated Norway that dominates, treated as a separate unit rather than a part of a global network. This is a clear paradox according to Neumann, as neoliberalism increasingly permeates all aspects of Norwegian society (Neumann 2007: 277).⁷

Norwegian sociology has experienced a sharp decline both in the number of students applying for positions, but also in funding and overall standing relative to other social sciences. The reluctance to admit that a global focus must permeate Norwegian sociological studies has led to the weakening of the entire discipline, according to Neumann, especially as other fields are successfully adopting such an approach. “International Studies” is currently the most popular bachelor's program in social sciences at the University of Oslo, and the social anthropologist Thomas Hylland-Eriksen has had great success with his transnational research network Culcom, which had as one of its aims to reframe the question of migration from one of immigration to one of transnational migration. Up until funding was cut by the university in 2011, Culcom served as an arena of what one could call public social science, with research projects funded by the university rather than by state or outside donors. Sociologists were totally lacking from the program with the exception of a small group of master's students, amongst them the above-mentioned Næss. Based on the little research that has been done, one is led to conclude, at least preliminarily, that some kind of global sociology is indeed needed in Norway. There are arenas in Norway where these questions are being debated, but they seem to be dominated by non-sociologists, a trend which can arguably be seen as a threat to the entire discipline of Norwegian sociology.

(Why) Do We Need Global Sociology at All?

As was shown in the previous section, Norwegian sociology is in need of a global perspective and one could say that the framework presented by Behrman and Burawoy (2011a) would be a fruitful approach. Still, there are some reasons why one could argue that global sociology as it has currently been presented is not an approach that should be adopted by sociologists worldwide, at least not without slight modification.

Firstly, as it stands now, Behrman and Burawoy's global sociology is strongly biased towards northern perspectives. Although they claim that their approach should not be yet another attempt at exporting a Western or American framework upon scholars in the rest of the world, the effort to present this course as more global than it really is, is striking, and does not live up to the goal of the reflexive sociologist. To say that Gramsci and Polanyi are not Western thinkers because they are from the European periphery, is in my opinion not a valid claim, especially as Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformations* in English from London. The frameworks presented are built largely on the thoughts of white, old men from the West, and with the exception of Webster,⁸ all the lecturers involved in this course have the majority of their higher education from Western elite educational institutions.⁹ Rather than attempting to “globalize” this by speaking of the periphery of Europe and the dynamic backgrounds of the students, one should adopt a reflexive enough position to acknowledge this discrepancy. One could even go so far as to argue that calling a sociology developed in elite universities in the West “global” is an attempt by scholars to strengthen and legitimize their own positions

in the field of sociology (certainly, in addition to, not instead of contributing to a better understanding of global processes). To add the positively clinging “global sociology” label to a scholar’s work is certainly legitimizing, but may be seen as an attempt to divert attention away from the clear discrepancy between the attention given to sociology produced in the global South and sociology produced in the global North. If global sociology can not be part of removing these barriers, it should not attempt at legitimizing them. For Norwegian scholars and others aimed at adopting a more global perspective, more caution and openness about existing biases can not be emphasized enough. If we do not succeed in overcoming this barrier, global sociology may leave us stuck in the corner where we invented the term, rather than taking us to the far corners of the planet.

Secondly, as is made very clear by the Norwegian case, global sociology intersects with existing academic fields, and one argument against it may be that such an approach already exists in the vast number of emerging scholarly disciplines: international studies, international relations, development studies, global studies, etc. One could, for example, argue that certain International Relations scholars pursue the goals of this course’s “global sociologist.” Having historically been a discipline that studies global processes through the lens of the state, IR scholars are increasingly also examining aspects we may like to call global sociology, from the perspective of civil society. This is not necessarily an argument against the emergence of global sociology, but it is one that scholars approaching this field should be aware of and responsive to. Rather than limiting the potential for the framework developed here, it can be said to increase its possibilities, as also non-sociologists will be interested in seeing a strong global sociology emerging. To be aware of and acknowledge that others are working on similar projects, is however still important.

Within the framework: An Alternative Approach

Within the framework presented by Behbehanian and Burawoy, there lies immense potential, despite the weaknesses pointed out in the section above. Most specifically, it lies in what Burawoy names the pluralisation of conversation, a call which is not new to the discipline of sociology. Bourdieu asks of scholars that they form an international of intellectuals and Ulrich Beck calls for global cosmopolitanism, but as Burawoy (2010: 4) points out, it is unclear how all our divisions are to evaporate as we together meet global challenges, be they of neoliberalism, world system crisis, or deepening global inequality. In the spirit of this class, I believe it must start not within each national context, but rather, or in addition, within each global sociologist. As a generation of students are brought up in what is increasingly being referred to as the era of globalization, it is through increasing diversity in institutions of education all over the world, that the real possibility for a global sociology lies. It is through our education in sociology that our sociological habitus is formed.

When Burawoy (2010: 14), Bourdieu (1997) and others state that in order to understand a thinker, he must be situated in his national context, they are overlooking the important factor that national sociologies, such as in the Norwegian case, are taking the standpoint of a national(istic) civil society. Burawoy stresses that global sociology must be grounded in the national context, ergo, Norway should also seek to ground a sociology of its own. I would argue to the contrary. The house of global sociology can have national walls, but the foundation must ultimately be of a transnational character, where

scholars see themselves as belonging to more than one national discipline. Having worked, lived and done research in and around the world, and in the process learned a variety of languages and cultures, is what allows the lecturers in this class to think in global terms. This is the thought that strikes me when reading Burawoy's (2009) self reflection, in discussion with Behbehanian or with any of my classmates. Perhaps this is also a reason for why many of the scholars from the global south invited to lecture in this course on global sociology, are educated in Western institutions. It is precisely this sense of having a foot in each camp that make them proper global sociologists. Increasingly providing opportunities for sociology students to travel and work outside of their national arenas and including language training in the requirements of a trained sociologist, is ultimately where the possibilities for global sociology most clearly lie. Graduate students should be encouraged to do parts of their research abroad, we should work towards increasing the number of international students and faculty in our universities and most importantly join our efforts in securing that universities stay or become public. This is perhaps the best way sociologists can contribute to the making of a global civil society. At least, this is how we produce "global sociologists" of the future.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Norwegian sociology is in strong need of a framework that may allow for a shift towards a more global approach to sociology. Further, I have shown that the approach taken by Behbehanian and Burawoy (2011) holds great promise for Norwegian sociologists, but that it also has some pitfalls. Most importantly, it is not as reflexive and internationally based as it claims to be, and thus scholars adopting a similar model may find themselves legitimizing their own work by adding a nice label, the cost being paid by the voices not present, those that are not educated in Anglo-American elite universities.

One solution to this problem is to increasingly adopt global networks of scholars, such as is being done through the International Sociology Association (ISA). Global Sociology should also increasingly cooperate with existing scholarly fields, such as that of International Relations. But more importantly, one should move away from the rigid view that a global sociology must be grounded in national sociologies. Rather, it may be grounded in the many emerging global sociologists. To produce students with such a habitus, not only through dialogue, but with international experience, is needed, and the only way to do so is by providing possibilities and opportunities for sociology students to experience the world outside of their national setting. Sociologists can contribute to this by engaging in the fight for free public universities all around the world, and we might end up adding to the embryos of a global civil society in the process.

A search in Norwegian google for "global sociology"¹⁰ leaves us on both a pessimistic and optimistic note. It proves what this paper has attempted to show, global sociology is not alive and striving in this cold corner of northern Europe. However, it also shows that small attempts of global sociology in one part of the world, can have certain impact elsewhere, and although I encourage caution in attempting to spread the framework discussed here, it does hold some promise for the future. The first hit on Norwegian google is the blog for Behbehanian and Burawoy's class Global Sociology Live.¹¹

Notes

1. See for example Cohen and Kennedy (2007), Ferrante (2008), Lie (1994), Macionis and Plummer (2008), Sklair (1995) Sneider and Silverman (2009).[↵]
2. It should be noted that the idea of the course rests on them both having a long-term engagement with the topic.[↵]
3. Norwegian sociology is heavily dominated by American trends. One could argue that if this approach would meet challenge in Norwegian academe, it would certainly be more heavily challenged elsewhere. In that sense, exporting a framework of Global Sociology to Norway may seem as a simple “first step” if one wants a global outreach.[↵]
4. As will be discussed in this paper, I believe that the Anglo-American context is important for how this framework has developed, despite Behbehanian and Burawoy's (2011) attempts to avoid this.[↵]
5. This paper is limited to discussing the definitions and approaches to Global Sociology that are offered by Behbehanian and Burawoy (2011).[↵]
6. None of which produced a single article for publication in any of the top three sociology journals of the world (American Review of Sociology, American Sociological Review or British Journal of Sociology) between 2000 and 2004 (Neumann 2007: 276)[↵]
7. I would add a couple of names to this list, amongst them Kathrine Fangen. However, I largely agree with the tendency Neumann here points at.[↵]
8. Webster has his doctorate from Witwatersrand, South Africa, but also holds a MPhil from York.[↵]
9. Baviskar (Dehli, Cornell) Bello (Princeton), Behbehanian (New York, UC Berkeley), Burawoy (Cambridge, Zambia, Chicago), Evans (Harvard, Oxford) Lee (UC Berkeley), Hanafi (Strasbourg, Paris), Harvey (Cambridge), Rodriguez-Garavito (Wisconsin-Madison, New York University), Roy (Mills College, UC Berkeley), Watts (Michigan), Wright (Harvard, Oxford, UC Berkeley)[↵]
10. The Norwegian terms, “globalsosiologi” and “global sosiologi” searched 06.05.11 and 13.05.11.[↵]
11. The blog can be found on globalsociologylive.blogspot.com[↵]

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