ISA eSymposium for Sociology

Global sociology, live!

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Introduction

When sociology began as a positivist enterprise in the 19th century the goal was to develop laws of society that were universal in character, that applied everywhere and through all time. Such were Durkheim's theories of the division of labor, of suicide, and of religion; such were Weber's categories, classification and ideal types; and such was Marx's theory of capitalism. A global sociology, on the other hand, is the culminating phase of the reaction against universal sociology, introducing geographical space as central to the formation of knowledge. Global sociology directs attention to the particularity of many universal claims, but without dissolving everything into particularity, without abandoning the search for the universal.

We might say that global sociology is the third stage in the scaling up of sociological practice. In its first phase, sociology began as very much concerned with communities. In the US, the Chicago School was really about one city, Chicago, even if it claimed to be about the world. The second phase – and, the chronology is not a linear one – was about the nation state. Here, we get not only the classic studies of Weber and Durkheim, but also research programs that drew on national data sets, focusing on national political systems and civil society of national dimensions. Again, this unit of analysis was often not thematized but rather presented as the universal. The third phase is a global sociology, which while not discounting the local or the national, reaches for global forces, global connections, and global imaginations. The danger here is that global sociology once again becomes a universalization or extension of the experience of the North, in particular of the US. Global sociology, like community sociology and national sociology, must continually guard against the particular masquerading as the universal.

While global sociology may be a novel enterprise in the Global North, it might be said that sociologists in the South have always had to take a global perspective, insofar as they have long been acutely aware of how their societies are shaped by forces emanating from the North: whether through forms of violent subjugation or more subtle forms of hegemony. Paradoxically, Northern approaches – with their universalizing mission – have nonetheless often dominated Southern sociology, if only for the reason that leading sociologists in the South have largely been trained in the North. There is a profound imbalance, therefore, between, on the one hand, the sociologies of the North backed up by enormous academic capital and, on the other hand, emergent, indigenous sociologies of the South, bereft of material and intellectual resources. For the most part, this imbalance has led to a struggle on the terrain of Northern sociology rather than a frontal assault against its universalizing tendencies.

These are some of the dilemmas with which any global sociology must grapple, and which we sought to address in our experimental "Global Sociology, Live!" course at the University of California, Berkeley. Most crucially, we aimed to include an internationally diverse array of scholars who contributed their varied

perspectives to our discussions. Using video-conferencing and Skype we invited sociologists from different parts of the world – the Philippines, India, China, Colombia, South Africa, and Lebanon – as well as sociologists in the US studying different countries, to partake in a discussion of global capitalism and the counter-movements to which it has given rise. They each gave short 15 minute lectures, after which they engaged in a 45 minute discussion with our students, who themselves also came from a variety of different nations and backgrounds. Having studied, posted written comments and discussed the lecturer's work prior to each lecture, the students were well prepared to ask informed questions and participate in a lively discussion. All of these sessions were recorded and posted on line at , making them available to global audiences with internet access. The lecturers are well-known sociologists who, even if they were based in the South, were all trained in the North and speak fluent English. In this sense, we recognize that this project – rather than being counter-hegemonic – takes place on the contested terrain of global hegemony, seeking to develop a sociological understanding of global capitalism by exploring its instantiations in different parts of the world.

Sociology as the Standpoint of Civil Society?

What does it mean to develop a sociological understanding of global capitalism? In other words, what should we mean by global sociology? This requires answering the prior and more difficult question: *what is sociology*? Here, too, there is the danger of false universalization, but we will have to take that risk. We have to start somewhere. We approach sociology as the study of the world from the standpoint of society, understood as civil society – the institutions, organizations, and movements that are neither part of the state nor the market. This does not mean that sociology only studies civil society and its components – family, parties, trade unions, churches, etc. – but rather, that it studies the world from the *standpoint of civil society*. This immediately differentiates sociology from economics, which studies the world from the standpoint of markets, and from political science that studies the world from the standpoint of the state and political order. In a world where states and markets conspire to destroy society, sociology finds itself in a challenging position. It takes the standpoint of a civil society in which human survival is endangered by the destructiveness of unregulated markets and predatory states.

Now we should not think that civil society is a holistic, romantic entity, defending all that is good! Civil society is a divided entity, traversed by all manner of exploitations, oppressions, and divisions that are likewise reflected in sociology. Just as civil society is Janus faced, supporting the state but also potentially challenging it, the same can be said of sociology. Just as civil society overlaps with the economy and state, their borders often blurred, so too are the borders between sociology, economics and political science. And where civil society is primordial and gelatinous, so too is sociology. In countries where civil society does not exist, sociology cannot emerge except as an underground network, and where civil society is weak and fragmented – as in Russia today – so is sociology. Where civil society is bifurcated as it was, for example, in Apartheid South Africa, sociology too is bifurcated. Moreover, in places where civil society is colonized by external forces, rather than indigenous, there is often only a "mass society" of "bare life" comprised of individuals without formal organizational presence.

This vision of sociology as rooted in civil society derives from two theorists – Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi – who observed the transition to advanced capitalism during the critical time of the 1930s, and from the critical location of the semi-periphery. From this standpoint they developed grand vistas of the global order, acutely sensitive to its different parts. Gramsci saw civil society as providing new means for the dominant class of advanced capitalism to secure consent to its domination. However he did not examine where this civil society came from – it just happened to emerge toward the end of the 19th century in Europe, or what he called "the West." Karl Polanyi, on the other hand, was more interested in its origins, arguing that civil society (he simply called it society) emerged as a reaction to the over-ex-

tension of the market, particularly the unregulated labor market. He 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. Those reactions were built on the local organizing of society aspiring to the national level and seeking state regulation of the market.

The next round of marketization, after World War I, was spurred on by open trade and exchange rates fixed by the gold standard. It led to the Great Depression and a subsequent counter-movement by states, impelled by the mobilization of civil society, to regulate their economies so as to insulate them from the ravages of international markets. State-society relations, as varied as the dictatorial regimes of Stalinism and Nazism and various forms of social democracy in Northern Europe or the New Deal in the US, set limits on the free play of markets. While Gramsci and Polanyi provide us with a conceptual framework for a sociology that studies the world from the standpoint of civil society, neither of them conceived the possibility of a *global* civil society that could become the basis for a global sociology.

Global Capitalism as Neoliberalism

Polanyi did not expect another round of marketization, but this is just what happened in the 1970s with the rise of what we call neoliberalism. In this era, state and economy collude in the promotion of a capitalism that involves, on the one hand, the deregulation of markets, privatization, and a broad offensive against labor; and, on the other hand, the expansion of markets to entities that were hitherto protected, in particular natural resources or the environment (water, air, land), associated with what David Harvey has termed "accumulation by dispossession".

This third wave of marketization, characterized in particular by the development of finance capital, has a new global character in that it operates outside the control of nation- states. This surely is the lesson of the denouement of the 2008 financial crisis where, in contrast to the 1930s, the US state has done little to regulate finance capital. The power of finance capital makes its presence felt across nation states, but in different ways as David Harvey explains in his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Thus, in Latin America and Africa, it manifests as the consequence of defaulting on loans that result in the imposition of harsh structural adjustment programs by the IMF. But markets play a very different role in post-Soviet Russia where they were introduced in an unregulated manner as compared to China where they are incubated under the direction of the party-state. Despite these variations, third wave marketization assumes a global character. Thus, our project was to explore its global dynamics, as well as its various manifestations in specific local and national contexts in order to identify the possibilities for a global civil society.

Thus, we began our course with David Harvey who provides a framework for approaching neoliberalism as a global class project aimed at capital accumulation through forms of dispossession. We then examined how neoliberalism implants itself differently in different places. Michael Watts discussed the consequences of the oil boom in the Niger Delta which has devastated the surrounding communities and given rise to insurgent groups. The oil industry in Nigeria results in national political structures that are fragile and unstable as they are dependent on oil revenues rather than being based on the social ties of robust social institutions. Ananya Roy then talked about micro finance loans, designed as development from below. In the case of Bangladesh, we see an example of the success of these loans administered by the Grameen Bank, especially when considered in combination with other organizations that have provided social protection. But precisely because the "beneficiaries" are poor women who can be relied on to pay back their loans, finance capital reaps enormous profit. Conversely, in other places, such as Egypt, micro-finance has been underwritten by USAID and shaped by geopolitical goals of stabilization, making it less effective as a strategy of economic development.

Whether it is the oil economy or micro-finance, global capitalism needs institutions that perform the regulatory function of the state at the international level. Walden Bello outlined the history and role of

the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which orchestrates the world's financial order, the World Bank, which promotes specific development projects, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), which regulates international trade. These global institutions seek to prevent crises or contain them when they appear, but in doing so they impose austerity measures and harsh conditions on nations. In an apparent shift away from strict neoliberal policies, the World Bank has sought to develop strategies to reduce poverty and to support projects that are less environmentally destructive – yet, in reality, market fundamentalism still holds sway. Arguing that these multilateral agencies cannot be reformed, Bello proposed that regions should develop their own regulatory instruments and follow the lead of China, for example, which makes loans that seem to impose fewer conditions upon borrowing nations.

Of course, no attempt to understand global capitalism today can omit China. Ching Kwan Lee talked to us about the ways that China does not conform so easily to the model of neoliberalism, if only because the Chinese state has been such a central actor. Yet in the final analysis she argued that cheap migrant labor and the *hukou* system that patrols it has underpinned the staggering economic growth of China. Insofar as neoliberalism refers to an economy entirely dominated by the market, China is not neoliberal even if it has moved in that direction. But if, as Harvey argues, neoliberalism refers to an underlying project of strengthening and enriching a dominant class with the aid of the market, China indeed fits the neoliberal model.

The Global Logic of Nation States

Lee's description of marketization in China brought the state to the forefront of our discussion. While it had become increasingly clear that states have in fact played a crucial role in imposing and managing the third wave of marketization, we next raised the question of whether states also sometimes operate according to their own logics of governance which can't always be fully understood through the lens of neoliberalism or by reference to the economy. What are the logics of governance that characterize states, particularly those seeking to extend their power beyond their national territorial boundaries?

Sari Hanafi described the manner in which the Israeli state attempts to govern the Palestinian population through what he calls "spacio-cide": a strategy of rendering Palestinian spaces unlivable and reducing Palestinians to "bare life." He argued that Israeli state practices are characterized by the imposition of a "state of exception" that enables it to manipulate legal frameworks in a manner that ultimately deny Palestinians any rights. Furthermore, he argued that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions could be similarly understood as responses to being governed under "states of exception" which also reduced these populations to "bare life". In these contexts, the NGOs that compose civil society, largely funded and directed from abroad, often operate in line with state agendas. Hanafi, therefore, argued that any effective forms of resistance – as in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia – must come from outside civil society, through the informal connections and alliances of the subaltern.

Laleh Behbehanian shifted our focus from the Middle East to the counter-terrorism practices of the US state, which she argued invokes a "state of exception" that enables it to bypass the rule of law in its pursuit of "terrorists". The US "War on Terror" is a global project that involves extensive cooperation and collusion with the intelligence and security agencies of many other states throughout the world. She 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. In contrast to Hanafi, Behbehanian emphasized that the only significant challenge launched against the US "War on Terror" has emerged from within the institutions of civil society, through an international effort by journalists and NGOs concerned with human rights and civil liberty violations.

Counter-movements – Local, National, Global

Through these discussions, it became evident that insofar as sociology seeks to adopt the standpoint of civil society, it must be attentive to both the consequences of marketization in the age of global capital, as well as the increasingly global logics that shape the governance strategies of states. We then turned to the possibilities for counter-movements in the contemporary period, particularly those that might have global dimensions. Peter Evans began our discussion by presenting an optimistic panorama of what he calls "counter-hegemonic globalization." He argued that neoliberalism inevitably fuels opposition by virtue of its destructive social and economic effects, and that generic globalization (the development of new means of communication and mobility) creates opportunities for globalizing this opposition by generating ties among subordinate classes in different nations. He argued that this would require a "braiding" together of broad social movements across national boundaries that would include labor, environmental, women's and human rights organizations, and that these movements would have to operate at multi-levels – at local, national and global scales. Evans characterized this approach as a form of Neo-Polanyian optimism. But does this approach have any basis in reality? To address this question, we then turned to a number of scholars whose research focuses on existing forms of social movements.

Edward Webster, Robert Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout, for example, have discussed the responses to downsizing and other new offensives against labor in the white goods industries in South Korea, South Africa and Australia. In the cases of South Korea and South Africa, rather than organized counter-movements, we find workers taking up defensive survival strategies and seeking new ways of sustaining themselves in the informal economy. Only in Orange, Australia were there signs of local organizing, involving collaboration with farmers to put pressure on the state to regulate capital and provide security for workers. While this is the sort of local national counter-movement found in reaction to the first and second waves of marketization, there were also some attempts to build alliances with workers from other white goods factories in the US and Sweden. However, these attempts came to naught. It turned out that the different nodes in this potential labor chain had incompatible interests, based on their different relations to capital. When talking about the defense of global labor standards, Webster stressed the importance of nationally based labor struggles, which he viewed as the crucial foundation for horizontal transnational linkages that could become the basis for a global movement.

We then turned to Amita Baviskar who spoke about environmental movements in rural and urban India. She suggested that environmental struggles, over deforestation, the construction of dams, and land appropriations for special economic zones, have witnessed more success among the rural poor. In contrast, urban "bourgeois environmentalism" seeks to clean up the city by targeting and dispossessing migrant populations living in slums, and closing down enterprises that pollute the air, while at the same time pouring resources into road and bridge constructions to facilitate the movement of the greatest polluter of all – the automobile. In focusing on the class dynamics of these struggles, Baviskar shows how apparent counter-movements, such as environmentalism, may actually be the soft side of neoliberalism.

Cesar Rodriguez-Garavito then shared with us examples of struggles by indigenous communities in Latin America against the encroachment of global capital and particularly extractive industries. He showed how these struggles are absorbed in a global socio-legal field that stretches from the communities themselves to include NGOs, the state, and global actors like transnational corporations, the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO). While the terms of this global socio-legal field generally disadvantage indigenous communities, he argued that it nonetheless provided the best opportunity for these movements to contain, or at least delay, the devastation of their lands by attempting to hold the state and capital accountable to international legal conventions. Rather than searching for horizontal connections of a transnational "counter-hegemonic" character, Rodriguez pointed us to the absorption of

actors in a vertical field where their struggles necessarily occur on the terms of a global hegemony.

Finally, Erik Wright proposed a different approach – one that looks for alternatives not in vertical global fields or horizontally linked transnational movements, but in emergent institutions that expand the power of civil society vis-à-vis the state and economy. Here the goal is to search for "real utopias" – actually existing institutions with a potentially socialist or democratic character. He identified four such institutions: participatory budgeting, which advances the social vis-à-vis the local state; worker cooperatives, which advance the social vis-à-vis the economy; Wikipedia, which represents a direct collective self-organization of the economy; and unconditional basic income, which enables all manner of new forms of social empowerment. The project of "real utopias" is to take each case and examine its internal contradictions and conditions of possibility, and thus the possibilities for its dissemination. So, for example, participatory budgeting: which initially emerged in Brazil, spread throughout Latin America, and then came to be discussed at the US World Social Forum where it was taken up by an Alderman in Chicago and has since become a model for other districts. The project of "real utopias" seeks to generalize locally based efforts, with the hope of making them globally accessible and thus nourishing a global imagination of alternative possibilities to the neoliberal order.

Global Sociology without a Global Civil Society?

In our search for a global civil society that might launch an effective counter-movement against the collusion between global capital and nation-states, we found only fragments and failed attempts. At best, we can say that there may be an embryonic form of a global civil society that has yet to fully develop. But if sociology studies the world from the standpoint of civil society, and if there is in fact no real global civil society to speak of – then what does this mean for the possibility of a global sociology?

We concluded this course by identifying three possible approaches to developing a global sociology given the embryonic nature of global civil society. The first involves focusing on the forces, like global capital or states, which seek to fragment and contain civil society. Global sociology must identify those forces which obstruct the possibilities for developing a global civil society. A second approach would involve working with existing embryos, whether they be "real utopias" or ephemeral cross national alliances, and examining their conditions of existence, perpetuation, dissemination or destruction. Global sociology must work with the realities of a fragile civil society, seeking ways to develop and expand it. A final approach would involve sociology actively partaking in the construction of a global civil society. Rather than passively studying the world from the standpoint of civil society, the realities of the contemporary period necessitate a global sociology that actually contributes to building a global civil society. No longer standing outside the world it studies, sociology needs to develop reflexivity about its role in constituting and shaping that world. Global sociology becomes a project of public sociology.

Readings assigned by and for each guest lecturer

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Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
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Wright, E. O. (2006). 'Compass Points: Towards a Socialist Alternative.' *New Left Review* 41, pp. 93-124.
_____. (2011). 'Real Utopias.' *Contexts* 10:2, pp. 36-42.

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