

# Invitation to transnational sociology

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## Introduction

What does it mean to study and understand a global social problem from the perspective of global sociology? When invited to share some thoughts on this question for the 2022 Agenda for Social Justice, we realized that any perspective or direction for such problem-solving that we might articulate would first require substantial problem “dis-solving.” How we frame the problem in the first place shapes how we examine and understand it. In this chapter, we revisit a common discourse in sociology that distinguishes between a “social” and a “sociological” problem. This discourse suggests that there is an inherent aspect of sociology’s disciplinary logic and orientation toward representing society that leads it to question, rather than reinforce, the framing of problems deployed by administrative disciplines. Then, we challenge the underlying assumption of this argument by highlighting examples of sociology’s pernicious entanglement with administrative disciplines. We reflect on two critical agendas working not only within, but also beyond certain confines of, global sociology to discuss how each frames global sociology itself as a sociological problem—one that often reproduces structural inequalities too. We then discuss what it means to frame public sociology as a global social problem from a transnational perspective and explain how doing so can contribute to greater precision in research on the complexities of, and possibilities for, social change. We suggest that such a perspective may also help identify and create networks of critical global sociologies that transcend national borders.

Ultimately, we offer not so much a *particular* global sociological approach, but rather an invitation to transnational sociology. An invitation to transnational sociology is meant to be a critical, self-reflexive shift from sociology’s legacy of democratic imperialism, which, in part, has been reproduced through the discipline’s penchant for methodological nationalism and methodological eurocentrism. Certain global sociological approaches

have not managed to effectively escape these problems. However, bringing a transnational *perspective* to bear on our research and analysis, while necessary, is not in itself sufficient to enable this shift. How we organize the social relations of our production of sociological knowledge is equally critical. As we will see, ours is an invitation to collaborate within a transnational perspective on social problems. However, it is also an invitation to reorganize the social relations through which we produce sociological knowledge about social problems, recognizing that such problems differently and unevenly impact us, even as we are linked across communities and societies. In short, we seek to deepen the democratic production of sociological knowledge on social problems of transnational significance and consequence.

### **Sociology of social problems**

It has been nearly 60 years since Peter Berger (1963) published *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, a classic that, for many a student of sociology, has served as an introduction to the discipline. Berger, who (with Thomas Luckmann) would publish *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* only three years later (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), introduced a distinction between a “social” problem and a “sociological” problem:

the problems that will interest the sociologist are not necessarily what other people may call “problems.” The way in which public officials and newspapers (and alas, some college textbooks in sociology) speak about “social problems” serves to obscure this fact. People commonly speak of a “social problem” when something in society does not work the way it is supposed to according to the official interpretations. They then expect the sociologist to study the “problem” as they have defined it and perhaps even to come up with a “solution” that will take care of the matter to their own satisfaction. It is important, against this sort of expectation, to understand that a sociological problem is something quite different from a “social problem” in this sense.... [T]he sociological problem is not so much why some things “go wrong” from the viewpoint of the authorities and the management of the social scene, but how the whole system works in the first place, what are its presuppositions and by what means is it held together. (Berger, 1963: 36–7)

Berger trained his readers’ attention on the process through which social problems are socially constructed and encouraged them to critically question how they come to be constructed as they are. In his view, the sociologist’s task was to problematize (even reframe when necessary) the preidentified social

problems we inherit from authorities, public opinion, or even disciplines outside of sociology, which all vie to represent the “social.” His concern was to situate any issue that might be framed as a social problem within what he called a “sociological frame of reference”:

The sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his discipline, to debunk the social systems he is studying.... [T]he roots of the debunking motif in sociology are not psychological but methodological. The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given by the official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other. This unmasking imperative is one of the characteristics of sociology particularly at home in the temper of the modern era. (Berger, 1963: 38)

For Berger, the sociological frame of reference was not simply a psychological predisposition shared by sociologists, nor even a cognitive process that we might associate today with cultural framing, but rather a methodological orientation inherent to sociology’s disciplinary logic—to reiterate, “a built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given by official interpretations of society” (Berger, 1963: 38). Describing this logic as an “unmasking imperative” would seem to imply that sociology not only seeks to identify alternative realities to officially sanctioned ones, but also that the reality it does articulate may be somehow more real.

Writing a half-century later, French sociologist Luc Boltanski makes a similar argument about sociology’s disciplinary logic in his book *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*:

Like detective fiction, and perhaps especially like spy fiction, sociology constantly tests the *reality of reality*, or, to put it another way, it challenges *apparent* reality and seeks to reach a reality that is more hidden, more profound and more *real*. It does this while also relying on the identification of enigmas or *mysteries*, that is, events or phenomena that appear to contradict reality, or at least cannot readily be integrated into the pictures generally used to give meaning to what is happening. This deconstruction of apparent reality has gone in very different directions with different authors and traditions. (Boltanski, 2014: 32, emphasis in original)

Boltanski persuasively explains how we find this deconstruction of reality expressed over the last half-century not only in works inspired by phenomenology, pragmatism, interactionism, or ethnomethodology, “in

which the enterprise of *constructing* reality is central to their perspectives” (Boltanski, 2014: 33, emphasis in original), but also in sociological traditions (inspired, in particular, by positivism) that seek to sketch social reality as a whole, that is, as it *really* is. Such approaches, Boltanski (2014: 34) explains, do not initiate their analysis with individuals immersed in situations, but rather “adopt a global perspective and base their descriptions on relations among entities known as ‘collective,’” that is, individuals subsumed in categories and typically explored through statistical techniques. He identifies numerous versions of this paradigm, diversely inspired by US structuralist functionalism, Marxism, and Durkheimian thought. However, Boltanski devotes particular attention to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984 [1979]) analysis in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, and it is in doing so that he begins to echo Berger’s argument about the critical logic inherent to the sociological enterprise.

Bourdieu, he explains, differentiates between the “official” and the “unofficial,” particularly the difference between the officially recognized power of certain actors (individual or collective) holding a legal mandate and the real power that other actors whose solidarity is based on different forms of connection (family ties, common economic interests, or personal bonds) surreptitiously exercise. Boltanski argues that if sociology is to operate as an autonomous science, not as an administrative extension of the state that serves merely to confirm and reproduce the state’s representation of reality, it must remain able to identify and examine unsanctioned forms of social power that challenge the power, order, and reality that the state seeks to produce and maintain. We might recall that C. Wright Mill’s (1959) imagery of the “cheerful robot” warned us of precisely this point. As Boltanski (2014: 34) puts it:

The expectation has to do with the difference between sociology and administrative disciplines, and thus with the nature and importance of the added value offered by sociological description as compared to the descriptions of society that can be procured by state-sponsored agencies relying solely or primarily on officially recognized, legally defined categories and divisions.... [T]he broader sociological enterprise I am describing necessarily includes, at least potentially, a critical orientation ... since it challenges official reality and unveils a different, much more real but hidden reality.

Thus, like Berger, Boltanski suggests that there is an inherent aspect of sociology’s disciplinary logic and orientation toward representing society that leads it to question, rather than reinforce, administrative disciplines.

Depictions of sociology like Berger’s and Boltanski’s, while immensely instructive for a sociology of social problems, may also appear to be more

aspirational than actual. As sociologists Julian Go (2016), George Steinmetz (2013, 2017), and Ali Meghji (2021) have convincingly observed, throughout the discipline's emergence in the 19th and 20th centuries, sociologists also worked directly with and in support of colonial administrations, and sociological knowledge was also explicitly invoked by colonial administrations to justify their colonial policies. Significantly, such sociological "problem-solving" was not confined to the margins of the discipline. As Steinmetz (2013) documents, Britain's Colonial Social Science Research Council (CSSRC) informed the British colonial office in 1944 that its journal *The Sociological Review* would start publishing the material most valuable to understanding the colonies. Between 1944 and 1961 (shortly prior to the publication of *Invitation to Sociology*), the CSSRC substantially funded sociological research for colonial development and the British Colonial Office implemented the Devonshire system that aimed to formally train colonial military personnel and civil servants in sociology at British universities for application under colonial conditions (see Steinmetz, 2013, 2017, cited in Meghji, 2021: 18). Given these applications of sociological research, one might reasonably question the inherent critical orientation of the sociological method or enterprise.

One of the promises of global sociology is that it can help us to transcend the limitations of the discipline's penchant for what Ulrich Beck (2005: 22) has identified as "methodological nationalism." Studying social problems, such as structural inequality, within the relational confines of a single nation-state (say, the US) can blind us to the exploitative transnational relationships upon which the US has achieved its wealth, security, and rule of law relative to poorer nation-states. By constraining our field of vision to an exclusively national outlook and issues framed as domestic social problems, we risk further marginalizing the poor within our nation-state by blinding them to any significant sources of transnational solidarity and agency that might address local, national, international, and transnational obstacles generating and perpetuating inequality and poverty. To the extent that sociology does frame social problems within the constraints of methodological nationalism may therefore imply that sociology's method is less inherently critical than we often tell ourselves.

### **(Re)Locating "global" sociology**

The term "global sociology" has multiple meanings. Wilbert Moore (1966), a former president of the American Sociological Association and student of Talcott Parsons, seems to have first introduced the term in an article titled "Global sociology: the world as a singular system," published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1966. It has also been invoked to refer to the study of global social systems, such as the world economy or the emerging institution

of human rights norms. It is often used to refer to the study of non-Western traditions in sociological theory or even comparative research that includes all of the countries of the world as cases. Sociologist Salvatore Balbones (2017: 466) has recently suggested that the “global” in global sociology “is in the mind of the researcher, not in the objects being researched. It is fundamentally subjective and has to do with the level at which the researcher questions and presents research results.”

If global sociology has helped to overcome some of the limitations of methodological nationalism, it still struggles to overcome another type of methodological constraint. Tracing the emergence of the term “global sociology” and its diverse meanings, Kislenko (2021) identifies two recent and distinct agendas within global sociology that we particularly wish to emphasize here. Neither of these agendas is reducible to global sociology per se, but each deploys distinct global sociological perspectives in making their case.

One of these agendas calls for a “decolonial sociology.” There is good reason to argue that sociology as a discipline, far from being inherently in tension with administrative disciplines, has been fundamentally shaped by colonialism and imperialism. As Ali Meghji (2021: 3) has recently argued: “sociology did not ‘become’ colonized; rather, it was always colonial to begin with.... [S]ociology both internalized the logic of a colonial episteme, and also (re)-produced and bolstered that very episteme itself.” In other words, sociology was complicit in producing and extending the idea that the colonized were inherently different from and inferior to Western colonizers. At the same time, as Colin Samson (2020: 35–7) observes in *The Colonialism of Human Rights*, colonial and settler states (like the US, Canada, and Australia) could justify themselves as liberal because they did not see colonized people as fully human and, therefore, as qualifying under the putatively universal laws protecting the rights of man.

A common narrative within revisionist histories of sociology (see, for example, Connell, 1997) is that US sociology became increasingly insular after the Second World War, largely confining its research gaze to the study of US society. At the same time, European (and especially British) sociology imported this US sociology, especially structural functionalism. Yet, this narrative fails to account for the ongoing sociological production of colonial difference that, as we have seen, British and US sociology fostered. Moreover, as both Meghji and Samson make clear, Western sociology operating within a “global” scope remains today hypocritically complicit in promoting and exporting the idea that former Western colonial and settler states (that is, liberal states espousing democracy and human rights) are best positioned to solve the problems of inequality, violent conflict, and human deprivation in the societies that they helped to reorder.

In the 1950s and 1960s, during the pinnacle of modernization theory, Arjun Appadurai (2000: 4) reminds us: “[t]heory and method were seen as naturally metropolitan, modern, and Western. The rest of the world was seen in the idiom of cases, events, examples, and test sites in relation to this stable location for the production or revision of theory.” Meghji (2021: 40) describes this bifurcation in sociology as an epistemic dividing line between the West and the rest, which entails accepting, consciously or otherwise, “the idea that if one’s theoretical model works on ‘this side’ of the line—on the Western side—then it can achieve universality.” It is a mode of knowledge production that Gurminder Bhambra (2014) calls “methodological Eurocentrism.” Thus, decolonizing sociology—which both Meghji and Samson argue is still possible—relies upon a global sociological perspective. However, it does so while also critiquing a good deal of what passes for global sociological practice and acknowledging that, in itself, global sociology is necessary yet insufficient to decolonize sociology.

### **Public sociology as a global social problem**

A second agenda influencing and influenced by global sociology calls for more “public sociology” (Sorokin, 2016; Kislenko, 2021). This agenda was largely initiated by Michael Burawoy’s 2004 American Sociological Association Presidential Address, “For public sociology,” published in the *American Sociological Review* (Burawoy, 2005), and has spawned vigorous debate within and outside the US. Here, we wish only to draw attention to the conditions of possibility for the democratization of research about globalization in the context of sociological knowledge production, especially as it has been organized in the West. Burawoy never intended his call for public sociology to be a US global export, nor one more Western project of democratic imperialism. However, he did intend that it might contribute to a more democratic production of sociological knowledge that might countervail the institutionalization of neoliberal global development and authoritarian state practices, both within and beyond the US. As he states in “Thesis IX” (“Provincializing American sociology”) in his presidential address:

Without conspiracy or deliberation on the part of its practitioners, United States sociology becomes world hegemonic. We, therefore, have a special responsibility to provincialize our own sociology, to bring it down from the pedestal of universality and recognize its distinctive character and national power. We have to develop a dialogue, once again, with other national sociologies, recognizing their local traditions or their aspirations to indigenize sociology. We have to think in global terms, to recognize the emergent global division of sociological labor....

We have to encourage networks of critical sociologies that transcend not just disciplines but also national boundaries. We should apply our sociology to ourselves and become more conscious of the global forces that are driving our discipline, so that we may channel them rather than be channeled by them. (Burawoy, 2005: 22)

In a telling article, “Can ‘public sociology’ travel as far as Russia?”—the product of a talk and discussion at the Center for Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg three years after his presidential address—Burawoy (2009: 203, emphasis in original) raises an additional “deeper issue”: “Can there be a public sociology without genuine publics? We need to think through a sociology *of* publics before we can have a sociology *for* publics”.

But what might such a sociology of “publics” entail? Are we to imagine “national” publics, or would such a conception include counterpublics (Warner, 2005) who might imagine themselves (and as perhaps we should imagine them) as transnational social formations? How precisely should we “think in global terms”? As we map an emergent global division of sociological labor, should we be mapping the production of sociological knowledge within siloed national boundaries for comparative purposes, laying the groundwork for dialogue with other national sociologies? We think that this risks reproducing sociological thinking about justice, law, and power as operating exclusively within the confines of a hegemonic international system of nation-states, thereby blinding us to the optics of a transnational legal pluralism that often provides social actors with alternative notions of justice and sources of power (Dale and Samara, 2008; Berman, 2012). We embrace the spirit of Burawoy’s message in this address, but we also perceive in this discourse a corollary form of methodological nationalism that is shaped by global–local binary thinking.

In the prevailing discourse on “globalization,” “global” and “local” social processes have been framed in binary opposition, that is, as mutually exclusive and inherently antagonistic explanations for urban and legal development, affecting how we apply our sociology to ourselves. We have learned especially from urban and legal research and analysis in sociology and anthropology (Smith, 2001; Goodale and Merry, 2007) that the global–local binary frame has been conflated with the economic–cultural and universal–particular dichotomies. The effect is that we are left with no conceptual space for analyzing the transnationally situated actors, relations, practices, and agency that most often shape the complexities of, and possibilities for, social change.

If we are to not only encourage, but also engage and understand with any precision, networks of critical sociologies that transcend national borders, as Burawoy suggests, then we will be required to think not only globally, but also transnationally. As Michael Peter Smith (2002: 3–4, emphasis in original) observes: “[u]nlike the globalization discourse ... theorists of



transnationalism tend to treat the nation-state and transnational practices as mutually *constitutive* rather than mutually exclusive social formations". If the globalization discourse trains our attention on social processes that are largely decentered from specific national territories, research on transnational processes sees transnational social relations and formations as anchored in, while also transcending, one or more nation-states.

### **Whose global social problem? Democratic production of sociological knowledge**

However, bringing a transnational "perspective" to bear on our research and analysis, while necessary, is not sufficient to enable a shift in US sociology becoming less "world hegemonic" and more "provincial." A global sociological perspective for framing global (or transnational) social problems, we have suggested, should vigilantly defend against methodological Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism, including global-local binary thinking, if it is to critically challenge official hegemonic discourses on the reality of globalization. As cultural structures, we find these concepts analytically useful for framing and critically challenging globalization as a sociological problem. For example, we might frame public sociology as a type of sociological knowledge embedded and produced within unequal transnational relations of power that partially constitute, and are partially constituted by, a transnational capitalist knowledge economy that is also, yet differently, socially organized to accelerate social inequality within and between networks, cultures, societies, institutions, and publics.

As normative guidelines, however, they undoubtedly will meet with a mixed reception, depending on the publics they address. The deeper challenge we see in collectively constructing both a sociology "of" publics and a sociology "for" publics is how we transnationally and democratically reorganize and institutionalize the unequal social relations of our production of sociological knowledge about globalization and its uneven development and impact on our experience. If we, in the US or in the "West," are prepared to move beyond a model of internationalizing sociological research that is mainly concerned with how others practice "our" precepts (and it is not clear that there is shared consensus about these precepts even within the US), then we must also be open to learning how to formulate research problems together by rethinking: the research ethics by which we judge and regulate sociological competency; the values we have ensconced within institutional review boards; the norms of ownership regarding data and intellectual property; the languages and styles of writing, publishing, and otherwise disseminating knowledge; how we fund, control, and share resources; how we organize our relations with our research subjects; how we collaborate in knowledge production with organizations and movements outside the

academy; how we construct and evaluate theory together; and so much more. Yet, deliberating and negotiating all of this on an uneven playing field will likely bias the endeavor toward internationalizing our own model. That is how hegemonic inequality works.

Our invitation to transnational sociology seeks more than a change in perspective on social problems. We seek to deepen the democratic production of sociological knowledge on social problems of transnational significance and consequence. This entails collaborative, transnational, democratic experimentation and learning, with an aim toward developing and deploying research, theories, and strategies to deepen democracy in formal politics, the economy, and civil society, all of which are critical to democratizing the transnational production of sociological knowledge—including knowledge for democratizing globalization.

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