



Debates on Global Sociology: ‘Unity and Diversity’ of Interpretations

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Abstract

This paper critically looks at the ways in which ‘global sociology’ has been debated and conceived in the past decades. It provides an historical overview of various proposals and ideas and the institutional contexts within which they are put forward and criticized. Two different periods are distinguished. Until the early twenty-first century, on the one hand, criticism of the ‘ethnocentrism of the West’ was often supported by ideas and pleas for an ‘indigenization’ of sociological knowledge. A commitment to the unity of science and to its universalist aspirations remained strong, however. In the course of the twenty-first century, on the other hand, criticism of the ‘northern dominance’ in sociology has become much stronger. Instead of a ‘multicultural’ understanding of global sociology, a ‘critical’ sociology that contributes to ‘global justice’ is now often advocated. Based on this historical overview, it is suggested that global sociology might contribute to more self-reflexivity within the discipline. It helps us to see how different contexts reverberate into the ways in which sociology itself is imagined in this world and provides an analysis of the debates for a better understanding of the challenges which sociology currently faces.

Keywords International sociology · Northern theory · Southern theory · Indigenous sociology · Global south

Introduction

The topic ‘global sociology’ has been generating much debate in the sociological literature (e.g., Bhambra, 2015; Burawoy, 2015; Hanafi, 2020; Patel, 2010). In part, this debate has been triggered by discussions about globalization and its manifold

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challenges. The nature of sociology itself also seems to be at stake. The debate is at the same time about how sociology needs to be imagined – both as an intellectual program and as a community of researchers. This paper attempts to contribute to this debate, by looking at what the history of the debate might be able to teach us about sociology itself.

In the recent past, debates about ‘global sociology’ have often been elusive. The rise of the idea of global sociology seems to constitute a reaction to perceived social and scientific crises (Szelenyi, 2015), but the term itself is used for a variety of geographical imaginaries and a variety of perspectives on sociology (Cohen & Kennedy, 2012; Sorokin, 2016, 2018). For some, the ‘dream’ of global sociology is a late response to the inequalities at work in the world system. It is then linked with theoretical visions, such as dependency and postcolonial theory. At times it is also linked with calls for ‘equal access’ for all to the main publication outlets in the discipline. For others, the debate has been dominated by ideological, not by scientific arguments (e.g., Sztompka, 2011). Most participants in the debate probably agree that ‘global sociology’ does not (yet) exist, but they clearly disagree about the direction into which sociology has to develop and the ways in which the discipline has to deal with its own intellectual past and heritage.

Of course, the institutional context needs to be taken into account. In the recent past, ‘global sociology’ was the topic of a number of international conferences and events, such as the World Congresses of the International Sociological Association (ISA) in 2010 and in 2014, as well as the interim ISA Forum of Sociology in 2016. The journals of the ISA, viz. *Current Sociology*, *International Sociology* and *Global Dialogue*, have also provided much space to the debate. The International Institute for Sociology (IIS) devoted its 40th World Congress in 2012 to the topic of ‘After Western Hegemony: Social Science and its Publics.’ Within the American Sociological Association (ASA), a section devoted to stimulating research on Global and Transnational Sociology was established in 2008. For these institutions and associations, the idea of a new global sociology clearly seems (or seemed) able to provide both a program and a *raison d’être*.¹

A critical reflection on how the debate has taken place in these institutional contexts is hitherto lacking. Pleas for taking ‘internationalization’ and ‘globalization’ in sociology seriously abound. Some energy has been invested in introducing various local, ‘indigenous’ traditions to the ‘international’ sociological community (e.g., Alatas, 2006; Burawoy, 2011; Patel, 2010). The elaboration of a global southern perspective – directed at providing sociology for the whole world – has been proposed to address inequalities within sociology itself (esp. Connell, 2007; see also Sklair, 2013). But while empirical tests of the globalization of different aspect of publishing formats in sociology have seen the light of day (Beigel, 2014; Collyer, 2018; Jacobs & Mizrahi, 2020; Koch et al., 2020; Koch & Vanderstraeten, 2019; Vanderstraeten & Eykens, 2018), hitherto systematic sociological-historical reflections on the particulars of the debate on global sociology do not exist (see also Abbott, 2020).

¹ The official histories of these associations focus for the largest part on their aims and social structures, not on the roles they actually play in the internationalization processes (see Platt, 1998; Rhoades, 1981; Schuerkens, 1996). For a broader perspective, which focuses on the internationalism in American sociology, and particularly aims at increasing American sociology’s reflexivity about the national conditions of its own production, see Kennedy and Centeno (2007).

The best attempt to review the rise of the concept of global sociology was made by Martin and Beittel (1998), who analyzed the position of both proponents and critics of the approach, and tried to provide a ‘map of ideas’ in global sociology. But more than twenty years have passed since this article was published, and several new ‘chapters’ have been added to the debate in recent years. A new analysis, which looks at the arguments and the specific contexts within which they are exchanged, therefore seems mandatory.

This paper aims to provide such a sociological analysis. It particularly looks at the ways in which the debate has been conducted within the main sociological association, which has identified itself with global sociology, viz. the ISA. Two periods in the history of the debate on global sociology are distinguished. The next section deals with the period from 1982 to 2006, within which many discussions about particularism vs. universalism in sociology are fueled by ideas about the indigenization of social knowledge. Afterwards the focus is on the period from 2006 to the present, within which Burawoy’s views on the conditions of global equality and global dialogue generated much debate. For both periods, this paper considers how the debate on global sociology is embedded in specific historical practices of sociological research. Perhaps this approach might not only help us to better understand the social origins and the social nature of the discussion, but also point to alternative options that might be pursued in the near future.

Part I (1982–2006): The South Throws down the Gauntlet to the North²

One of the first discussions of global sociology was presented in 1966 by a student of Parsons, Moore. He started from the observation that sociology as a discipline had been spreading rapidly to many different parts of the world, but also noticed that society remained ‘operationally’ defined in terms of national units or cultures, if only because social data were mostly taken and aggregated at the national level (Moore, 1966: 479–480). Instead, Moore suggested considering the world a single system that could be analysed as a global order (see also Parsons, 1971). Global sociology thus had to focus on the ‘super-systems’ that structured human life on the globe (Moore, 1966: 482).³

A more ‘critical’ perspective soon started to dominate, however. Conflicts and inequalities in the ‘world system’ became the point of departure of many discussions of global sociology. In the 1970s and 1980s, sociologists from what is now called the global South also started to acquire broader, international visibility. They criticized the Western-centrism of academic sociology and the growing dominance of the Anglo-Saxon communication media and advocated for equal access to publication outlets and sociological organizations (Akiwowo, 1988; Amin, 1989; Said, 1978).

Many of the ensuing discussions centred around the question of whether the knowledge produced within sociology is universal. Two positions emerged. While adherents of universalism argued that sociology as a scientific discipline exists in a

² This phrase was taken from Burawoy’s article ‘Rejoinder: For a subaltern global sociology?’ (Burawoy, 2008).

³ Other examples of early uses of the term can be added. See, for example, the work of the Indian sociologist Motwani (Hallen & Prasad, 1970; Motwani, 1971).

single world and that its fundamental principles are applicable globally, they could also mark the opponents of this position (explicitly or implicitly) as supporters of ‘particularism’ (Archer, 1987, 1991; Sztompka, 1988, 1991). The opponents argued, more particularly, that local contexts play an important role in research, allow for the creation of a non-Western agenda and provide for an alternative point of view on both social and sociological issues (e.g., Akiwowo, 1986, 1988). By stressing the importance of local contexts, they also questioned whether sociology had to position itself within one world or within many worlds. Issues related to post-colonialism became also entwined with discussions about sociology and sociological knowledge (e.g., Alatas & Sinha, 2017; Bhambra, 2015; Keim, 2011; Oommen, 1991, 1995; Poncelet, 2020).

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the aforementioned international sociological organizations became a platform for discussions about global sociology and associated sociological research programs. Although the IIS was created in 1893 (by René Worms in Paris) and the ISA founded in 1949 under the auspices of UNESCO, it is only in the late 1970s and 1980s that they began to stimulate and organize wider discussions on the topics of internationalisation and globalization. Both the Swedish sociologist Himmelstrand, who served as the ninth president of the ISA from 1978 to 1982, and his Brazilian successor Cardoso, who was known for his contributions to ‘dependency theory’ and was the first sociologist from the global South in this position (from 1982 to 1986), made efforts to advance the idea that the four-yearly world congresses of their association could be organized outside of Europe and North America. In the 1980s, the first of these were held outside the Western centre of the world: in Mexico City (Mexico) in 1982 and New Delhi (India) in 1986. These were significant events in the internationalisation of sociology and created more interest in sociologies from the global South. The focus on the location of the world congresses also had an effect on the discussions about the nature of global sociology or global sociologies, which took place within the ISA.

In this light, the notion of ‘indigenous sociology’ gained currency within the ISA. Important in this regard was the work of the Nigerian scholar Akiwowo (1986, 1988), who discussed in the ISA journal *International Sociology* various ways in which an indigenous language, Yoruba, could be used as a tool to approach social problems as sociological problems. While ‘mainstream world sociology’ was a product of the Western context, in which it had first emerged, an indigenous sociology could in his view be based on an alternative parental culture. He noted that the ‘mainstream world sociology could be enriched by insights brought from African oral poetry’ (Akiwowo, 1999: 116). Various sociologies could also become possible, when different cultures could constitute ‘the basis for sociology’ (Akiwowo, 1999: 117).

At the end of the twentieth century, this view seemed to become the official ISA view. Albrow, who was the first editor-in-chief of *International Sociology* (the first issue of which appeared in March 1986), thus suggested that the journal should provide equal publication opportunities for all sociologists regardless of gender, race or religious affiliation. He argued that ‘indigenisation’ was a countervailing force had arisen ‘in response to the ethnocentrism of the West,’ but also believed that ‘all [cultural traditions] can use the medium of sociology to be heard, acknowledged and accounted for’ (Albrow, 1987: 10). A ‘universal sociology’ could ‘never be so rigid as to exclude

a portion of humanity' (ibid). By contrast, 'openness to understanding other people is a core requirement of the discipline' (Albrow, 1987: 11).⁴

Ideas about a 'sociology of the global South' thus seemed able to gain some popularity with the tacit consent of sociologists from the global North. The ISA World Congress in Madrid in 1990, however, marked in this regard a turning point. In her presidential address at this congress, which was titled 'Sociology for One World: Unity and Diversity', Archer returned to the issue of universalism vs. particularism, and the distinction between the global North/South (or, in her terms, between unity and diversity). Building on her earlier critique of the assumptions of relativism (Archer, 1987), she advocated for a single discipline in a single, global world. Growing globalization in the world could not go along with growing diversity in sociology. Her program for 'Sociology for One World' rather stressed the need for integrating analyses of the diversity in the world into a common framework, based on the 'universality of human reasoning': 'if we accept the ontological status of One World, which globalisation is making smaller, the only epistemological basis for One Discipline lies in the unicity of human nature itself' (Archer, 1991: 144, capitals added by Archer). In her program for the ISA, support for indigenous views and sociologies did not meet with approval.

Within the ISA journals, this discussion of the 1980–1990s enriched by sociologists from various parts of the world. The Bulgarian sociologist Genov, for example, was one of the first to refer to classical sociological literature in this context: 'the strength of Weberian theorizing and research stems exactly from this effort to universalize the sociological *Problemstellung*, going beyond the boundaries of local societies and cultures' (1991: 4). In other words, the 'national and regional specifics of cultural and social rationalization' had to be studied 'in a unified manner' (ibid). On the pages of *International Sociology*, Sztompka (1988) discussed the 'perennial problem' of the 'incommensurability of concepts' in the context of comparative research and argued for a sociology that would move away from 'the misleading cognitive patterns of natural science' and instead move towards the 'logic of interpretation' and the 'more relevant patterns of history and humanities' (Sztompka, 1988: 216). For his part, Himmelstrand (1991) argued against 'outdated analogies' and references to the 'two cultures' (Snow, 1961). Like Archer, he instead reiterated a belief in the universalism of scientific truth. He argued sociology could be 'oriented to attaining universal, and in that sense, international validity' by focussing on a 'humanistic universalism' (Archer, 1991: 85). The ISA could in his view play an important role in the internationalisation of sociology, provided it could stimulate international debates about 'universal human predicaments.' By so doing, he added, 'we will not only learn something about the limitations of our own specific understandings, but also be challenged to incorporate this new knowledge in our theoretical frameworks which consequently can become more and more universal and internationally valid' (Archer, 1991: 97).

⁴ Albrow and King also edited a volume, which provided an overview of the discussion at that time (Albrow & King, 1990). A related point of view has later been defended by Pavel Sorokin, according to whom 'global sociology implies an active, open, mutually beneficial and equal interaction between sociologists from different locations, countries and cultures, in their joint efforts to understand, explain and improve the social world' (Sorokin, 2016: 43). For a broader, critical overview of the international orientation of the journal *International Sociology*, see Vanderstraeten and Eykens (2018).

At the end of the twentieth century, the same arguments were often repeated. Even under the presidency of Wallerstein (1994–1998), who had made path-breaking contributions to world systems analysis and was arguably the sociologist with the highest academic reputation in this position, the positions and standpoints did not change much. The debate also lost momentum, because the various positions on the idea of global sociology were increasingly identified with ideological positions. But the terms of the debate started to change again at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly following a series of interventions by Burawoy. He had been president of the ASA in 2003–2004, was elected vice-president in 2006 and president of the ISA four years later. More than his predecessors, Burawoy (2005) seemed able to use these positions to create an agenda based on understanding sociology as a place of social activism, largely in line with his earlier plea for public sociology.

Part II (2006 – Present): Excellence Rather than Balance?⁵

Characteristic for this new period are the debates between Burawoy and his Polish opponent, Sztompka. It is, however, also useful to refer to some other perspectives that gained more visibility in the early twenty-first century.

The ISA and its journals, for example, provided a clear forum for the views of the Malaysian sociologists Syed Hussein and Syed Farid Alatas. In their writings, S. H. and S. F. Alatas focus on the academic imperialism of the Western world and the academic dependency of the Third World or the global South. In their view, academic and economic dependency still parallel each other. The centre-periphery divide in the social sciences corresponds roughly to the North-South divide in economic and political regard; sociological ideas from the North that have successfully been marketed globally also determine the sociological views held in the South. What is lacking in the global South is an ‘autonomous social science tradition, generated and developed by local scholars, guided by the selection of problems from within the society’ (SH Alatas, 2006: 7). Many of their proposals focus on the articulation of what are called new conceptions of ‘our’ relevant sociological knowledge. In this light, S. F. Alatas did not promote global interaction, but ‘greater interaction among the social scientists of the Third World’ (Alatas, 2003: 609–610). He also gave attention to ‘alternative,’ non-Western discourses for the social sciences and ‘lost traditions’ in sociology, such as the social thought of Ibn Khaldun.

The writings of Connell also need to be mentioned. If the idea of a global South implies the idea of a global North, Connell argues, the same logic would apply to sociology. Connell contrasts southern and northern theory. The way in which sociology is structured internationally – with the North leading and the South following – does not offer much prospect for global sociology. In different regards, the global imbalances of resources and reputation are damaging to sociology in both the ‘global periphery’ and the ‘global metropole’ (Connell, 2007; see also Collins, 1997). What is needed, in Connell’s view, is the articulation of alternative, counter-hegemonic approaches. A southern theory needs to speak up to the universalist version of sociology, which is to be regarded as the hegemonic project of a small group of

⁵ ‘Excellence rather than balance’ is the motto of Sztompka’s presidency of the ISA (2002–2006).

dominant (and non-universalist) northern actors. In Connell's words: 'my Southern Theory shows hidden geopolitical assumptions in northern social theory and discusses a wide range of powerful social thought from the colonized and postcolonial world' (2014: 211). The genre of social theory produced in the 'global periphery' may not exactly match the disciplinary criteria of the metropole, and it may thus not often be published in 'high-ranked' sociological journals, but no 'sociology for the whole world' is possible without giving proper attention to Southern Theory. In their own interest, Connell argues, sociologists from the global North will need to re-educate themselves and work on post-colonial theories, which have their practical bases in the problems of societies of the global periphery.

Burawoy's presidential address at the ISA World Congress in Yokohama (Japan) was titled 'Facing an Unequal World' (Burawoy, 2015). Based on a brief overview of the efforts which the ISA had made in the past to attract sociologists from underrepresented countries, he concluded that northern sociologies continued to reproduce their dominant position. He also questioned the possibility of horizontally connecting different national sociological traditions within a hierarchically structured world. As a way out, both for the ISA as a scholarly organization and for sociology as a distinct discipline, he suggested perceiving global sociology from the standpoint of its public version. In this regard, Burawoy focuses on promoting the involvement of people who are interested in sociological topics but are situated outside the academic world. Global sociology, in his proposal, is a program of concrete actions intended to create an 'accountable' and 'lively' international sociological community, which is able to actively involve various groups from outside the academic world. Global sociology has to face the unequal world; it has to be critical of dominant trends within society and defend civil society. 'Therefore, sociology's future lies with such neighboring disciplines as anthropology and human geography in mapping the destructive expansion of markets' (Burawoy, 2015: 29).

On several earlier occasions, Burawoy tried to present his position and gain support for it.⁶ But he also received sharp reactions. One response to Burawoy's views on the challenges for a global sociology was a critical review by Sztompka, titled 'Another Sociological Utopia' (Sztompka, 2011). For Sztompka, Burawoy's views present the 'most extensive elaboration and summary of the ideology which has pervaded the International Sociological Association (ISA) for quite a long time' (Burawoy, 2011: 388). Sztompka believed that these views build on three assumptions: the dominance of Euro-American sociology in the world, the suppression or exclusion of 'indigenous sociologies outside of the United States and Europe,' and the 'normative imperative' of an egalitarian representation of the many national sociologies actually existing in the world today, 'achieving a balanced unity of the discipline and eliminating presumed biases of American and European sociologists' (Burawoy, 2011: 388–389).⁷ But these

⁶ Burawoy was also founding editor of the ISA magazine, *Global Dialogue* (2010–2017).

⁷ Sztompka also summed up the labels used to disapprove of the Western traditions: 'academic dependency, intellectual imperialism, U.S. imperialism, colonization of sociology, intellectual colonialism, metropolitan domination, metropolitan theory, Western hegemony, North hegemony, Northern perspective disguised as universalism, mainstream U.S. and European sociology's imposition of European concepts and theories, exclusion of the South, exclusion of the East, English language domination, Eurocentrism and even "Westoxication", a truly innovative addition to the slang of anti-oxidentalism [sic]' (Sztompka, 2011: 389).

assumptions are, in Sztompka's view, as biased and ideological as the sociologies, which Burawoy accuses of being Western-centred and hegemonic types of knowledge.

For Sztompka, who was ISA president between 2002 and 2006, sociology had to strive for universal validity. He also defended a classical view of classical sociology. It is, according to this view, 'a hard historical truth that sociology ... was born in Europe in the nineteenth century,' and 'had its second birth in the United States, at the turn of century' (Sztompka, 2011: 390). It is, moreover, the 'intellectual strength of the European and American masters, and not their supposed imperialist ambitions or academic marketing that resulted in the adoption of the canon in all parts of the world, wherever sociology set foot' (ibid). Compared with the position he defended in the late-1980s, Sztompka now steered away from the cultures of interpretation and instead focused on universalist premises associated with the natural sciences: 'in some measure, at some level sociology is similar to natural sciences... Is anybody doubting that gravity works in Africa in spite of the fact that it was discovered in Britain? Why should the universalism of science be replaced by extreme relativism in sociology?' (ibid). The dream of global sociology, for Sztompka, implied that 'a universal methodological tool-box of sociology' (Sztompka, 2011: 395) was put to use all over the world, in different local contexts, all with their own particularities, in order to contribute to 'one sociology' for the global world.

Burawoy and Sztompka both seem to accept that sociology is characterized by different national traditions: 'the building block of that [global] mosaic is the national sociology, for the nation has always been sociology's basic unit of analysis as well as defining the parameters of its field of action' (Burawoy et al., 2010: 4). But, for Sztompka, no egalitarian relations can exist within this mosaic: the domain of science is, 'by its very nature,' elitist: 'we know perfectly well, even if we believe that it is politically correct to deny it, that there are great scholars, good scholars, mediocre scholars, bad scholars, and people pretending to be scholars' (Sztompka, 2011: 395). There might be a great deal of discussion about the need for alternative approaches, but only a few traditions have hitherto stood the test. Although 'there are many social worlds,' Sztompka remarked, 'there are not and cannot be many sociologies' (Sztompka, 2011: 394).

Sztompka used a fictional example, namely, sociology in the fictional kingdom of Lailonia, to illustrate his point of view. Sociology in Lailonia could in different ways be influenced by its national context: sociologists might use national data, communicate the results of their research in Lailonian language, adapt to the expectations of their national university system, and so on. But theories of society and methods of sociological research 'are never indigenous, even though they are built on the foundation of local facts and experiences' (Sztompka, 2011: 393). Lailonian sociology might be sociology about Lailonia, but it cannot be written in Lailonian terms. Indigenous traditions should never be identifiable as such within global sociology: 'the most welcome contribution by sociologists from outside Europe or America is to provide evidence, heuristic hunches, ingenious, locally inspired models and hypotheses about regularities to add to the pool of sociological knowledge which is universal, as verifications, falsifications, or extensions' (ibid).

The title of Burawoy's rejoinder to Sztompka, 'The Last Positivist' (Burawoy, 2011), indicates that the debate on global sociology had at that time already evolved in other directions.⁸ Sztompka's position might be understandable – as he had had to

⁸ As Burawoy remarks in his rejoinder, Sztompka's dream for global sociology 'stakes out a disappearing position in a field of struggle' (Burawoy, 2011: 403).

live and work under a communist regime in Poland. But the situation was different in other parts of the world. According to Burawoy, ‘the study of sociologies in different countries is not a worthless self-indulgence but contributes to the sociology of knowledge and science’ (Burawoy, 2011: 397). And ‘most importantly ... national sociologies are a necessary foundation of any empirically grounded global sociology’ (ibid). Global sociology should hence stimulate self-reflexivity within the discipline; it should allow us to see how sociology itself is a social product, and how different national contexts reverberate into the ways in which sociology itself is conducted and imagined in this world.

Global inequalities, especially those that are the result of colonization, still limit southern sociology to be as successful as northern sociology. For Burawoy, international sociological associations, such as the ISA, had to give the ‘southerners’ access to the resources and opportunities accessible to the north. But no ‘universal’ sociology is to be expected. No national sociology can be imposed on other parts of the world. Southern theory is to be unique by itself and should neither follow the northern standards nor aim for the same indications of success (see also Patel, 2010; Wallerstein, 1997).

Burawoy has in more recent years played a less prominent role in the debate. Focusing on social movements and civil society in different parts of the world, he now seems to prefer the term ‘new sociology,’ which has to occupy ‘a place between science and politics,’ instead of ‘global sociology’ (Burawoy, 2016: 379). Many others, however, have tried to contribute to the articulation of global sociology. De Sousa Santos, for example, has argued that ‘epistemologies of the South’ call for new post-colonial methodologies and ontologies, which should allow oppressed groups to represent the world as their own and in their own terms (De Sousa Santos, 2015). Bhambra has likewise argued that ‘global sociology has been proposed as a way to redress the previous neglect of those represented as ‘other’ in dominant ‘Eurocentric’ constructions of modernity within sociology – and as a path towards a rejuvenated sociology for a newly-global age’ (Bhambra, 2015). Bhambra also speaks of ‘connected sociologies,’ of various sociologies in need of new, just connections within a cosmopolitan framework. ‘Engaging with different voices must move us beyond simple pluralism to make a difference to what was initially thought; not so that we all come to think the same, but that we think differently from how we had thought before our engagement’ (ibid). Global sociology, in this perspective, goes beyond a ‘multicultural’ understanding of sociology. It rather stands for a discipline that is aware of its location in the world (in both historical and geographical regard) and that, as a consequence, is able to contribute to social justice in an increasingly interconnected global world (see also Go, 2020).

Conclusion

Historically, many of the proposals for internationalization and globalization in sociology have been intended to complement existing national traditions and national sociologies. International sociological associations, and especially the ISA, began to put forward a new *raison d’être* and program in the course of the 1980s. Members of the ISA no longer understood their purpose in terms of stimulating the development of sociology in all parts

of the world, but actively started to discuss the validity of different traditions and various kinds of knowledge. Its new *raison d'être* led, among other things, to the organization of the first international or world congresses of sociology outside the Western world. The pleas for an indigenization of sociology, which were made in this context and period, remained questionable in the eyes of defenders of the universalist version of sociology, however. Throughout the final decades of the twentieth century, as we have seen, the opposition between universalist and particularist conceptions of sociological knowledge continued to define the terms of the debate on global sociology within the ISA.

The terms of the debate changed rapidly around the turn of the century, however. Critical in this regard has been the figure of Burawoy. As president of the ASA and later of the ISA, he was able to canalize ongoing discussions and give momentum to the debate on global sociology. The focus thereby shifted towards global inequalities and hegemonic relations between the global North and global South. Sociologists from all over the world have in recent years both criticized the universalist hegemony of the North and argued for the articulation of alternative, counter-hegemonic forms of sociology in the global South. Institutional back-up for this understanding of global sociology continues to be provided. The current president of the ISA, the Syrian-Palestinian sociologist Hanafi, for example, underwrites the 'critical' directions in which global sociology is developing (e.g., Hanafi, 2020). Editors of the ISA journals also intend to further the development of a 'genuinely global sociology' (e.g., Li, 2019). A new momentum seems to have emerged, although, of course, it might well be that the COVID-19 pandemic will divert attention to other types of research. Under the label of global sociology, epistemological diversity is now widely endorsed. The unity of the discipline seems to rely on ideas about social justice and on coordinated actions in the strive for a better world.

Where might this debate lead? Some 'outside' observers have been struck by the ways in which the debate has been conducted – both in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century. Positions in the debate are often presented as political, if not ideological choices. Participants in the debate regularly do not just claim to present better arguments than their opponents, but rather claim to defend the only possible legitimate or 'just' stance. The opponents are at the same time blamed for their political partisanship and ideological myopia. At various moments, epistemological arguments (whether in the universalist or the counter-hegemonic version of global sociology) have been subordinate to ideological arguments. No doubt, the debate about global sociology has been triggered by processes of globalization and de-colonialization, and their accompanying ideological conflicts, but the question also is whether and how we can capitalize on the momentum and use the interest in global sociology to reflect upon the nature of sociology itself, upon the social infrastructure of the discipline and its intellectual programs. The question thus also is how we can clarify the foundations of sociology as a global science.

In the course of recent years, sociologists from all over the world have felt urged to take a stance in the debate on global sociology. Of course, the distinction marked by global sociology leads to only one among many possible subdivisions in sociology (others include: gender, religion, language, and race). As this paper has shown, however, the history of the debate on global sociology allows us to obtain a good understanding of the challenges with which sociology is currently confronted. It provides us with a reflective prism that we can use to see what has been and what still

needs to be accomplished. The ‘dream’ of global sociology might continue to generate heated discussions, but it is also important to understand how the terms of the debate have changed over the past decades and how sociology itself might change for the better.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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