



## Introduction – Global Social Inquiry: The Challenge of Listening

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### Introduction

**1.1** The four papers in this 'Debate' section address different aspects of the challenges currently facing sociology in developing a global social inquiry: the focus of the 2009 British Sociological Association Annual Conference in Cardiff. Three of the four papers, by Adkins, Back, and Vazquez, were initially presented in the sub-plenary session of the Theory stream at the conference. The fourth, by Holmwood, was written specifically for this Debate section as a consequence of his role as Conference Organiser responsible for the conference theme.

**1.2** The idea of 'global sociology' has recently been promoted as a way in which sociology can redress its previous neglect of those represented as 'other' in its construction of modernity and the modern world more generally. The arguments of Michael Burawoy (2005, 2008) and Raewyn Connell (2007) are indicative here with their calls, respectively, for a *provincialized* social science and *Southern* theory, which have culminated in a common call for global sociology. Similar interventions have also been made by scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), and his collaborators, in the international research project on 'Reinventing Social Emancipation'. This project, together with its associated volumes, focuses on the development of a conception of knowledge 'beyond Northern epistemologies' and addresses the possibilities for social and political alternatives in the future. While these scholars argue for a global sociology, the means of pursuing it are different for each.

**1.3** For Burawoy, a global sociology constructed from above would be ignored or would 'justify particularistic reactions and isolationist projects' and, in consequence, it 'has to be constructed from below' (2008: 442). He is cautiously optimistic when discussing the feasibility of such a 'subaltern' global sociology suggesting that a subaltern universality *could* be forged 'from the connections among particular sociologies' in the address of 'the common challenges we face in defending society' (2008: 443). Connell similarly argues for the necessity of engagement with scholars from the global South and suggests that the main problem facing the construction of a global sociology today is 'to connect different formations of knowledge in the periphery with each other' (2007: 213). While both Burawoy and Connell point to connections between sociologies and sociologists in the present, neither has a strong conception of interconnections *historically* informing their understanding of the global present. Nor is there recognition that global sociology would require sociology itself to be re-thought backwards, in terms of how its core categories have been constituted, as well as forwards in terms of the further implications of its reconstruction.

**1.4** Burawoy's (2008: 443) argument, for example, for the need for voices from the periphery to be 'allowed' to enter into debates with the centre, is based on the idea that sociology could be different in the future with little acknowledgement that, in order for this to happen, sociology would also need to relate differently to its past. Although Burawoy allows for new (postcolonial) voices within sociology, his understanding of the sociological endeavour is such that these new voices are not recognised as always having been there, if not heard. As I have argued elsewhere (2007), the recognition of 'difference' in the present has to *make a difference* to the conceptual frameworks that had occluded its presence in the past. In contrast, for Burawoy, global sociology is to emerge through the accretion of 'new' knowledge from different places with little consideration of the historical interconnections among the locations in which knowledges are constructed and produced.

**1.5** Some of what would be required, I suggest, is present in the arguments made by Santos (2007) in his framing of the 'Reinventing Social Emancipation' research project. There he argues that the epistemological privilege granted to modern social science rests, in part, on the earlier suppression of other forms of knowledge and so the 'universality' of modern social science needs to be understood in the context of unequal historical interconnections. As such, it is necessary to understand the interconnections in the past, as much as contemporaneously, in order to think through a truly global social inquiry adequate for our present needs. The four papers in this section begin this task.

1.6 Lisa Adkins's paper, 'Sociological Futures: From Clock Time to Event Time', addresses the issue of time in the reconstruction of sociology. She suggests that sociologists have tended to accept the hegemony of clock time inaugurated by modernity, arguing that any commitment to alternative futures, different to those shaped by current conceptions, will necessarily involve a different conception of 'time', namely 'event time'. Les Back's intervention, 'Global Attentiveness and the Sociological Ear', addresses the limits of the global sociological imagination by taking up Spivak's question of 'can the subaltern speak?' The issue he suggests is whether it is possible for sociology to *listen* to voices and make sense of experiences beyond the boundaries of Western Europe and North America. Building on this analysis, John Holmwood's contribution, 'The Challenge of Global Social Inquiry', while welcoming the turn to dialogue, critiques the move to a 'dialogic universalism'. He argues, instead, for the provincialising of sociology where what is aspired to is an inclusive as opposed to universal sociology predicated on listening and learning from others. The final paper in this set is Rolando Vazquez's 'Modernity Coloniality and Visibility: The Politics of Time'. In this paper, Vazquez brings together the concerns with 'time' and 'voice' articulated in the earlier papers and argues that the imposition of modern time, is coeval with the widespread injustice and violence associated with the modernity/coloniality civilization project. He concludes strongly with an argument that global social inquiry must be based on a different politics of time, one that rescues memory as a site of struggle and contributes to the development of a more adequate form of global social inquiry.

1.7 The four papers, in different ways, take on the issue of global social inquiry and offer novel, and, at times, provocative, approaches towards its further development.

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