



# challenges for a global sociology

by michael burawoy

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The city of Taipei under a cloudy sky.

The idea of a national sociology may appear strange to U.S. sociologists accustomed to thinking of their sociology as universal, but from outside the United States our sociology can look quite provincial, expressing the peculiarities of our exotic society. Indeed, each nation has its own distinctive field of sociology—we can define the features of a French, German, English, Indian, South African, Russian, Brazilian, Portuguese, or Chinese sociology. It isn't surprising that sociologists have produced distinctive national sociologies, given that sociology has always been bound by the nation-state and defined national society as its basic unit of analysis.

Can sociologists transcend this “methodological nationalism,” as German sociologist Ulrich Beck calls it? In this era of globalization, can there also be a genuinely global sociology? Many global issues need to be studied collaboratively and acted upon collectively, from war and climate change to tyranny and terrorism, but are sociologists ready for this, or are they too divided, their community too unequal, their professional livelihood too precarious to pursue a common agenda?

The Council of National Associations, one of two wings of the International Sociological Association (ISA), explored these questions during a three-day conference in March 2009. Representatives from 43 countries, rich and poor alike, assembled in Taipei to thrash out the obstacles to our becoming a global community. The point was to confront what divides sociology and sociologists around the world, to look inward in order that sociologists might better look outward. Discussions centered on unequal resources, unequal legacies, new patterns of domination, and alternative sociologies. It was amazing to behold how

the very process of discussing our differences and inequalities created a local global *communitas*.

#### **taiwan at the crossroads of global sociology**

Global inequality reared its head even before the conference began. Getting the 60 delegates to Taipei was, in itself, a triumph of meticulous planning, involving detailed negotiations with a state that, like any other, privileges some foreign nationals over others. Moreover, most of the participants could never have made the trip without funds from ISA, the Taiwanese National Science Council, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Institute of Sociology at Academia Sinica, which, together with the Taiwanese Sociological Association, hosted the conference.

International relations affected participation in other ways, too. The Chinese Sociological Association, despite the mainland's thriving sociology, wasn't represented here or at any other meeting of the ISA, for no other reason than Taiwan is a member. In many ways the ISA is like a miniature United Nations.

Apart from providing an organizational tour de force, Taiwan was the perfect place to host a conference on global inequalities. Facing East and West, sandwiched between North and South, Taiwan is the meeting point of powerful but contradictory forces. Michael Hsiao, a leading Taiwanese sociologist, pithily captured the significance of Taiwan's geopolitical position: “Taiwan may be a small potato, but it's also a hot potato.”

Just how hot became apparent in a paper by Mau-kuei Chang, Ying-hwa Chang, and Chih-chieh Tang. They described Taiwanese sociology as shaped by a succession of foreign overlords: the Japanese, who introduced surveys as an arm of



Displaced Southern Sudanese civilians.

UN Photo by Tim McKulkaoto



colonial rule; U.S. sponsorship in the early years of Kuomintang rule, which prompted the elevation of (mainland) Chinese thinking; and when Taiwan lost its international status in the early 1970s to the People's Republic of China, sociology took a turn toward indigenization even as it continued its close connection to U.S. sociology.

As in other beleaguered countries, sociology in Taiwan took up the defense of civil society against predatory states, whether domestic or foreign. The vitality of Taiwanese sociology, showcased in a special session, demonstrates that, within limits, subjugation can sometimes be a spur to sociology.

### the power of english

In his keynote, ISA President Michel Wieviorka spoke of sociology's contribution to the understanding of the international financial crisis, criticizing economists for their limited and erroneous interpretations. Today's crisis, he argued, was produced by the "end of the actor," by which he meant the demise of collective actors—those who play a role in building society—or social movements. The resolution of the crisis would only come through the creation of new actors (here he proposed anti-globalization movements) or the return of old ones (such as trade unions). In searching for such collective actors, what he did not ask was whether sociology itself could become one, and more generally, what effect the crisis might have on the practice, the organization, the unity, and even the very possibility of sociology in different parts of the world—the focus of the rest of the conference.

Perhaps the deepest inequality, the most profound domination, lies in language. In Taipei we spoke in English, some better than others, but it poses an intractable problem. ISA's three official languages are English, French, and Spanish, but

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when we consider how so much of the global South—India, China, much of Africa, and many other places—clings to English as a second language, we can see how English becomes the *lingua franca*, giving the Anglo-Saxon world an enormous advantage in the domination of world sociology.

It's painful for non-English speakers to struggle through their presentations, unable to effectively convey what they mean or forced to sacrifice content. The ISA can provide interpretation and translation and more time for non-native speakers of English, and PowerPoint presentations can also help those speaking and listening, but these are small concessions to soften the supremacy of English.

The problem runs much deeper, though. Scientists are

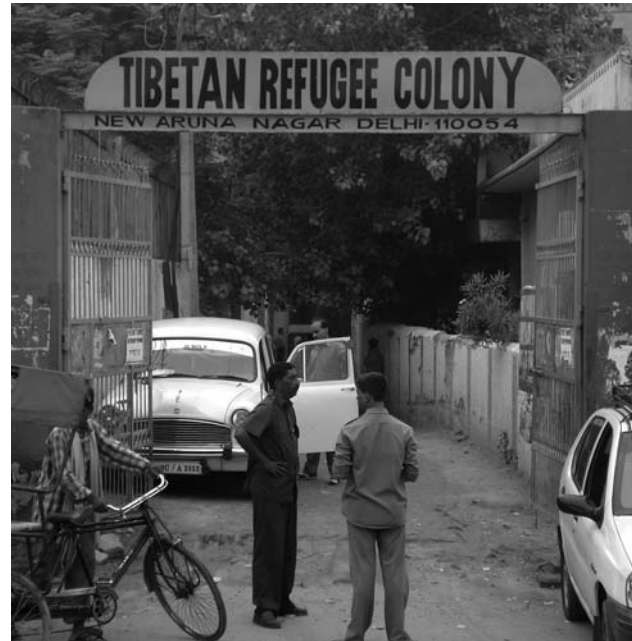


Photo by Ann Meier

A colony of Tibetans in India.

increasingly evaluated on the basis of publications in "international," usually English-language, journals. If you want an audience you have to speak, write, and listen in English. Perhaps we should think along with Tom Dwyer, from Brazil, of a multi-polar world, a world of regional sociologies in which language can be more easily shared, and out of these build international or inter-regional sociologies. We have excellent examples of this, including the vibrant Latin American Sociological Association and the International Association of French Speaking Sociologists. At the same time, as Christian Fleck showed for Europe, we have to beware of jumping to the conclusion that a common scientific language spontaneously leads to an integrated community. We need to build global sociology brick by brick from the bottom up, rather than from the top down.

But it's not so easy to forge such a global sociology from below. Thus, Takashi Machimura argued that Japan is an advanced economy where sociology has deep roots with a strong institutional base, but it's hardly known in the rest of the world. Western sociology makes its way into Japanese research and teaching, but the flow in the other direction is miniscule by comparison. We know about Japanese sociology mostly from foreign commentators.

Yoshimichi Sato argued that it was more than limitations posed by the Japanese language—its disciplinary language caused problems, too. Japanese sociologists haven't learned to take their thick concepts, derived from local contexts, and turn them into thin concepts that will travel the world. His example was social capital, which, despite its problems, has wide international currency, while the Japanese *aidagara* or

en, or the Chinese *guanxi* don't. It's not simply the power of English but the way it's deployed scientifically that makes the difference.

Sato and Machimura are concerned about the isolation of Japanese sociologists, but their desire for internationalization can't be taken for granted. Indeed, within Japan there's a struggle between cosmopolitans, who try to pursue transnational ties (for example, there are emerging regional ties with South Korea and China as well as with the United States), and nationalists, who are more protective of the autonomy, integrity, and authenticity of Japan's own sociology.

### the material divide

Language also concealed something less visible in Taipei—the material divide. We heard just how difficult it is to be a sociologist in Bangladesh in the face of disaster and poverty, or in Sri Lanka in the face of civil war. Here, being a sociologist, whether student or teacher, researcher or administrator, takes second place to the imperatives of economic survival. These precarious worlds are unimaginable from the protected fortresses of Paris, Berkeley, London, or Copenhagen. Emma Porio, from the Philippines, pointed out that even those attending the conference from poor countries form a global elite, often located in capital cities and cut off from far more hard-pressed sociologists in the hinterland.

In many parts of the world the only way to survive is to become a consultant for one or another international organization, but that access, too, is only for the privileged elite and depends on Western academic credentials. Indeed, in many parts of the world commercialization is rapidly eroding what little academic depth sociology might have. In a survey of Arab countries, Palestinian sociologist Sari Hanafi described the dense networks of non-governmental organizations that have absorbed and commodified social science, draining universities of their best talents and, at the same time, impoverishing research.

From other quarters we heard how political conditions can sometimes trump the economic. Mona Abaza spoke of the pendular swing between the commodification and criminalization of sociology as she unraveled the complex struggle between the famous U.S.-trained, U.S.-connected sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and the Egyptian state. Notwithstanding his enormous prestige in Egypt and beyond, notwithstanding the private funds he brought to Egyptian social science, and notwithstanding his close ties to President Hosni Mubarak, when Ibrahim became critical of government policies he was thrown into jail.

Mohammed Ghaneirad spoke of the dilemma of Iranian sociologists caught between Westernization and Islamization as the country lurches between repression and reform. Here Westernization marks resistance to Islamization, although Iranian sociologists are painfully aware not just of the political risks

but also the intellectual costs of adopting Western perspectives. Even a country such as Turkey, often interrupted by military rule but still with an independent intellectual history, has nonetheless spawned a sociology dominated by one or another Western power. More extreme was Sammy Smooha's representation of Israeli sociology as an appendage of U.S. sociology. Boycotted by Arab nations and accustomed to Western patronage, it chose to join the European Sociological Association. The other side of the coin is the besieged sociology of the Occupied Territories, where students and faculty are regularly incarcerated without charges and where restrictions on internal and external travel make serious academic work difficult or impossible.

### regional legacies in an unequal world

We've seen that in different proportions and at different scales economics and politics conspire to create unfavorable terrains for sociological endeavors. As the conference unfolded, it became apparent that such terrains can't be understood apart from their histories.

For example, the post-Soviet world exemplifies a specific

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articulation of market and state. From a sociology that was the transmission belt of party ideology, having little professional backbone, it has been thrown open to market forces, national and global. Here and there niches of sociological professionalism have developed, such as in protected enclaves in Moscow or St. Petersburg, but even these only survive with difficulty. Post-Soviet sociology is dominated by opinion polling for wealthy clients with little serious research.

Of course, the situation does vary. In Azerbaijan, Armenia, and even Slovakia the landscape is especially treacherous while in Poland and Hungary sociology is more robust, blessed with stronger pre-communist legacies sustained under communism, often underground. But Janusz Mucha pointed out that even in Poland national heritage is losing ground in the post-Soviet era, precisely when one might think it would flourish. He showed how the distinctive "sociology of Poland," inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has become merely "sociology in Poland," an international amalgam that loses sight of Polish specificity. On the other hand, coming from Bulgaria where sociology flourished, albeit as an arm of the communist state, and where sociology has sustained a public presence to this day, Georgy Fotev noted the challenges and dangers of a public sociology vulnerable to the manipulations and temptations of mass media.



A man dials his cell phone in Dubai.

Postcolonial Africa presents a different legacy. Even as it recedes into the past, colonialism has left its mark in the poverty of higher education. Most countries of Africa don't have sociological associations and even individual sociologists can be scarce. Here sociology can be a luxury, and so it's often united with other disciplines, such as in Ethiopia where it's been successfully combined with social work. Where sociologists do exist, their survival often depends on multiple jobs, including, where possible, contract work with international agencies and non-governmental organizations. Abdul-Mumin Sa'ad from Nigeria and Patricio Langa from Mozambique described the distortions wrought by governments encouraging policy research—a major lifeline for the sociologist.

Undoubtedly South Africa has the most developed sociology on the continent. Its role in the anti-apartheid struggles is well known, but even here sociology has found the post-apartheid state anything but friendly. Simon Mapadimeng described faculty having to reach out into the policy world even as teaching loads increase and as universities become ever more bifurcated between elite and non-elite.

Perhaps the most encouraging accounts from the South came from Latin America. Marcos Supervielle described how the distinctive engagement of sociologists in the world beyond the academy became the spring board for original sociologies, creatively appropriating and critically appraising metropolitan theories and generating autonomous research traditions. Through its regional associations and international connections, Latin American sociology has survived military dictatorship and structural adjustment, even if in some countries it disappeared for a time. A common language has likely helped sustain a vibrant community of scholars through adversity. But the colossus of Brazil, together with Mexico, with their deeply planted sociologies, also show how domination can have benefits as well as drawbacks for smaller countries like Uruguay and Ecuador.

The situation in Europe is no less complex. But here, too, state and markets have promoted post-industrial knowledge production—so-called Mode-2 transdisciplinary knowledge created outside the university and aimed at policy matters. As we learned from the papers from Denmark and Finland, this is especially well developed in the welfare states of Northern Europe, which, in their own way, partake in the broader global movement toward the privatization of knowledge.

At the periphery of the European Union, new entrants such as Slovakia and Croatia can find the going tough. The standardizing of higher education in Europe, through the Bologna process, is often seen to clash with existing needs and national legacies. This was

not, however, the position of Inga Tomic-Koludrovic, who argued that the Bologna process was helping bring Croatia into the era of "second modernization," and making higher education responsive to the needs of marginalized groups.

Some European countries have indeed benefited from the European Union, despite seemingly unpropitious legacies. Favored by its smallness and its history, Portugal has one of the most thriving sociologies in the region. It's well-placed both within universities and beyond, influential in the corridors of power but also in public places, the media, cafés, and the streets. It's managed to turn the centralizing pressures of the EU to its own advantage.

## globalization and its discontents

Common history gives rise to common problems within regions, but global trends also bound us together. One of the most intensively discussed subjects throughout the three-day conference was auditing higher education.

States around the world actively seek to regulate and evaluate scholars, bench-marking academic output to international standards, which means placing a premium on publications in peer-reviewed, English-language journals published in the United States or Britain. Alicia Palermo described the trials and tribulations of trying to keep a sociology journal afloat in Argentina, especially when local academics have their eyes on internationally ranked journals.

From her case study of South Africa, Tina Uys argued that evaluation schemes intensify stratification within nations, rewarding the few at the expense of the many, drawing research away from national issues and local publics to the concerns of Northern sociology. This impoverishes sociology in the South as well as the North. Indeed, auditing in the North leads to its own perversities. John Holmwood described the situation in UK universities, subject to the infamous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) approximately every five years, which

consumes much time and energy. He showed how the RAE has encouraged the break-up of sociology, encouraging the migration of sub-disciplines into business schools, media studies, and other programs.

But there were encouraging stories, too. Dwyer described how Brazilian sociologists manage to define and control their own rating system so they themselves can decide, for example, which of their own journals are of “international” quality. After describing how Philippine sociologists are ensnared by the twin pressures of state evaluation and the drive for policy research, Porio called on sociologists to protect arenas of autonomy so they can get on with their teaching and research.

Another common theme throughout the conference was the development of alternative or indigenous sociologies—those that deviate from the canonical paradigms found in the North. Indigenous sociology has a long history in ISA, going back to a debate first launched by Nigerian sociologist Akinsola Akiwowo in the 1980s. Singapore’s Farid Alatas, a leading proponent of alternative social science, argued that the material and institutional foundations of Northern dominance—a form of academic dependency rooted in the concentration of resources, training facilities, journals, foundations, and prestigious universities in Europe and North America—can’t be overturned. Yet, Southern sociologists do control the theories and frameworks deployed in studying their different worlds, and so Alatas proposed drawing on neglected, forgotten, or never known theorists. His own paper excavated thinkers from Asia’s past, but he was careful to say it wasn’t a matter of supplanting Northern theory but of enriching it with alternative sociologies from elsewhere, a point he has illustrated with the work of Ibn Khaldun, combining Khaldun’s cyclical view of history with a Marxist theory of modes of production.

Raewyn Connell, from Australia, took a more radical position. She called for a Southern theory that superseded an arbi-

trary and myopic Northern canon. In her presentation she criticized Australian sociology for mimicking the North, a process she describes as “extraversion,” following one of her favored Southern theorists, Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji. Her more general proposal for “Southern Theory” draws on an impressive range of thinkers—historians, philosophers, economists, and psychologists but, interestingly enough, very few identifiable sociologists. Other conference participants, such as Sujata Patel from India, were more skeptical of such a Manichean division into Southern and Northern theory. In her

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keynote, Patel emphasized not only the diverse traditions within the North and South, but also connections across any North-South divide, connections that stem from patterns of global domination.

### **sociology on the move**

Sociologists direct a litany of complaints at the twin towers of market and state but their home terrain—civil society—isn’t paradise on Earth. Far from it. It’s constituted locally, nationally, regionally, and even globally, but at whatever scale it never escapes the gamut of dominations and inequalities.

That is, indeed, why sociologists can be so divided. Yet, civil society is still the best terrain on which to imagine and then defend the common, human interest in a flourishing community based on collective organization, mutual recognition, and self-expression.

And that brings me to where I began. If, as Michel Wieviorka claimed, there is a deficit of collective actors in the world today, can sociology become its own movement, an actor in its own right? If so, can it reach beyond trade union defensiveness, important though that is, to embrace wider interests and global awareness? Can we look for the actors of tomorrow in the legions of sociologists, whose peculiarity is to simultaneously diagnose and confront the unequal world they inhabit? Certainly, one can only come away from Taipei encouraged by that possibility.

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*All the papers, together with PowerPoint presentations and audio recordings, are available at the conference website <http://www.ios.sinica.edu.tw/cna/index.php>. A film and three volumes of Conference Proceedings are in preparation.*



Photo by Seth Werner

**An American girl watches Chinese dancers.**