

Times of Turmoil

Emerging Visions from Three Years of *Global Dialogue*

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the resurgence of social movements in recent years in the Arab world, Europe and the United States, through the lens of a number of articles published in *Global Dialogue*, the magazine of the International Sociological Association (ISA), which existence coincides with such movements. These, although having national and regional specificities, share connections and mutual inspiration. Featured articles represent a sociology *in* times of turmoil that becomes a sociology *of* turmoil, which examines the social movements from the standpoint of both their commonalities and their divergences as seen through a global lens. Finally, the essay addresses the question of a sociology *for* these times of turmoil that links the movements to the world-wide ascendancy of marketization.

Keywords: Social movements. Arab uprisings. Occupy movement. *Indignados*. Third-wave marketization.

The short life of *Global Dialogue*¹ coincides with the resurgence of social movements – the Arab uprisings, new labor and land struggles, *indignados*, the student movement and the occupy movement. These all have their national and regional specificity but they are also closely connected and act as a mutual inspiration. How has *Global Dialogue* understood these social movements? This account of articles published in *Global Dialogue* sets out from broad visions of sociology as a vocation attuned to our times of turmoil. They represent a sociology *in* times of turmoil. It then turns to a sociology *of* turmoil that examines the social movements themselves from the standpoint of both their commonalities and their divergences as seen through a global lens. Finally, the essay addresses the question of a sociology *for* these times of turmoil that links the movements to the world-wide ascendancy of marketization, what I will call third-wave marketization. By declaring war on society third-wave marketization has threatened the material and existential foundation of sociology as well as stimulated diverse social movements battling to defend the integrity and viability of human existence. These times of turmoil are both a crisis and an opportunity for sociology, which is where we begin².

A sociology *of* turmoil, therefore, begins with the social movements of the last three years. We must recognize that these movements are of the right as well as the left, against as well as for the expansion of freedom. The claim of this essay is that market expansion, as the source of turmoil, involves processes of disembedding from society, that is a process of dispossession that affects politics, labor, finance, nature and

¹ Global Dialogue is the magazine of the International Sociological Association <http://www.isa-sociology.org/>, appearing 4 times a year in 15 languages. It draws on essays, reports, debates, interviews, photo-essays, reflections on the past and future of sociology from all over the world. This paper touches on a few issues that appeared in the first three years (2010-2013) of its publication. It is an abridged and expurgated version of a paper presented at the Meeting of the ISA's Council of National Associations in Ankara, Istanbul, May 13, 2013. The complete essay can be found at: <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Global%20Sociology/Times%20of%20Turmoil.pdf>.

² Substantial excerpts have been removed from the original paper after this paragraph, including the following heading: *Imagining Sociology*.

knowledge. As I will show in the following sections, broadly speaking these dispossessions, separately or in combination, have been the impetus behind the Arab uprisings, labor movements, *Indignados*, Occupy Movement, environmental struggles and the student movement.

Political Dispossession: From Arab Uprisings to Islamophobia

There is some debate about when to date the beginning of the Arab Uprising. There are those who think it began with the US conquest of Iraq and the deposition of Saddam Hussein. Others think of it as prefigured by the Green Movement in Iran, the massive protests against electoral fraud in 2009 (Fadaee, 2013; Kazemi, 2013).

Conventionally, however, the inauguration begins a year later, in 2010, with a round of social movements that caught the world by surprise in countries that seemed to have their populations firmly under control. It was the self-immolation of a Tunisian vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi's, on December 17, 2010 that sparked a nation-wide movement to overthrow the Ben Ali dictatorship, which spread to other Arab countries, especially Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria with echoes in Jordan and Palestine.

Sari Hanafi (2011) wrote a wide-ranging prescient analysis of these Arab Uprisings, pointing to their antecedents: economic and social grievances as well as their political animus; the social base in educated and unemployed youth as well as middle class professionals; and the supporting role of civil society organizations; their leaderless character as well as their internal fragmentation. He was agnostic about their future but insisted that the Arab world would never be the same, if there had been a revolution it was a revolution in consciousness. Arab populations would no longer have to settle for two unacceptable alternatives – military dictatorship and Islamic extremism.

Such was optimism at the beginning, expressed also in Mona Abaza's stirring account of the January 25 revolution in Cairo (Abaza, 2011). This was followed a year later with Samia Mehrez's (2012) more

cautious optimism, celebrating the still unfolding “spectacle” of Tahrir Square while recognizing the rising tide of state violence. In her second contribution, two years after the first, Mona Abaza (2013) describes the Muslim Brotherhood’s redirection of the movement as marked by escalating violence. We are in the period of counter-revolution, the restoration of the dictatorial world of the Mubarakist past, only now the violence is shameless, ruthless and out in the open.

Counter-revolution was not the only possible outcome of the Arab Uprising. Vedi Hadiz (2011) wrote about “New Islamic Populism,” which seeks a sort of class compromise between the Islamic street and a new bourgeoisie. Turkey is the *locus classicus* of that “passive revolution,” as Cihan Tugal calls it. There are elements of it in Indonesia. But during the Egyptian uprising when the Muslim Brotherhood first began to flex its muscles, there was much talk about the adoption of the Turkish model – talk that has since evaporated amidst the political domination of the Muslim Brotherhood and an open struggle with the military.

The Arab uprisings have also sent a shock wave through the sociology of Islam as we can see in the debate about the relation of Islam and modernity. Riaz Hassan (2012) poses the question: why do Muslim societies suffer from deficits of democracy, development and knowledge and draws on the available literature to pose some answers. He ends by wondering whether the Arab Spring can dislodge the heavy weight of history. Mohammed Bamyeh (2012) and Jacques Kabbanji (2012) respond by calling into question the orientalist framework of “deficits” – the one opposed to its reductionism and the other to its culturalism. Both point to the Arab Spring as questioning the assumptions of Orientalist frameworks and creating an opening for alternative sociologies.

Nor should we forget another side of Islam that has been exacerbated by the Arab uprisings: Islamophobia in Europe and elsewhere. In an original deployment of Hirschman’s famous conceptualization of exit, loyalty and voice, Catherine Delcroix (2011) investigates the responses of Muslims to their rejection by French society. There are those who

leave for greener pastures, there are those who stick it out passively absorbing the blows of discrimination, but there are those who openly voice their opposition. Into the latter category fall those girls who defy French law and don their veils at school. This, it turns out, is not just in defiance of the state but also a rejection of the “loyalty” of their parents. Their turn to Islam is a reaction to the exclusivity of the French state.

Following a similar theme but in the German context, Helma Lutz (2011) writes about the debate around “multi-culturalism” triggered by Thilo Sarrazin’s anti-Muslim bestseller, *Germany Does Itself In* – a conservative tract written by a prominent political figure that points to the genetic basis of cultural decay and the threatened extinction of the German *volk*. We can dispassionately analyze the debate, but, she says, borrowing from Adorno, we can also enter into a public discussion about how to live difference without fear, a discussion that could benefit all by de-escalating hostilities³.

Austerity: from the Indignados to Feminists

The labor movement faces serious challenges not because material factors are no longer important, but the opposite because material reality is becoming ever more important as the erstwhile proletariat becomes, in Guy Standing’s language, a precariat. Material insecurity lies behind so many of the new social movements of the last three years, including the Arab Uprisings, but most emblematically it lies behind the mobilization against austerity in Southern Europe. We can begin with Teresa Sordé and Tatiana Santos’s article (2011) on the M15 movement (May 15, 2011). As they describe its manifestation in Plaça Catalunya, its distinctiveness lay in the development of a participatory “dialogic” democracy with a daily General Assembly supported by commissions based on the more specific needs, requirement and concerns of the movement.

³ Substantial excerpts have been removed from the original paper after this paragraph, including the following heading: *Labor: From the Global Labor Movement to the Global Movement of Labor*.

This “real democracy” is promoted and expanded through social networks embedded in Facebook, Twitter, various blogs, the web and an online forum. Anyone can participate in these assemblages and in the voting that leads to decisions. This is a model of communicative democracy that had already been developed by the University of Barcelona sociologists at CREA (Institute for Research into the Overcoming of Inequality).

It has also become the model for the Occupy Movement – emanating from New York’s Zuccotti Park and spreading across the US and indeed reverberating across the world – but at the same time it has made the critique of finance capitalism central to its political activities, refusing to engage with electoral politics that has been hijacked by the 1%. As Markus Schulz (2012) points out the new social movements have opened the doors to alternative futures, futures that appeared to have been closed down by the neoliberalism of the 1990s. We see the same democratic horizontalism, not just in Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal, but also in the Israeli protest movement in the Summer of 2011 that brought massive numbers out against the austerity measures (Kalekin-Fishman, 2011).

But self-organized, disciplined participatory democracy has not been the only response to austerity. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2011) explains the riotous response in England to the combination of four factors: the brutal increase of inequality coinciding with a free for all individualism, rampant commercialization of everyday life, the continuing racism that infects urban UK (including the police force) as well as the violent denunciation of a democracy that bales out banks but not the marginalized youth with credentials but without jobs. The true disorderly, he concludes, are those in power not those on the streets. Sylvia Walby (2012) paints a somewhat different picture of English austerity. She shows how women are suffering differentially from cut-backs in welfare and jobs and respond in creative fashion, for example, occupying banks and setting up crèches on their premises. They were part of the “Big Society Bail-Ins”, a protest against cuts organized by the

inventive group, *Uncut*. Inventiveness is the hallmark of so many groups. Dora Fonseca (2013) focuses on an inventive Portuguese movement, called the “Inflexible Precarious”, which combat precarity through autonomous organizing, separate from unions and parties, building a positive identity of the “precarious worker”. She describes the dilemmas of this group in trying to be effective in the political arena without developing hierarchical organization.

With regard to the struggles against austerity the post Soviet world presents an enigma of contrasts. On the one hand, the complex political situation notwithstanding, we can read the protests in January 2012 in Romania as a response to cut-backs in welfare and health services. Cătălin Stoica and Vintilă Mihăilescu (2012) show how the response was influenced by the indignados and occupy movements. Something similar erupted in Sofia (Bulgaria) in the early months of 2013, sparked by withdrawal of subsidies for fuel. On the other hand, the protests in Russia and Ukraine seem much more focused on engaging directly with the state. Anna Temkina (2012) in the case of Russia, Tamara Martsenyuk (2012) in the case of the Ukraine and Gohar Shahzaryan (2011) in the case of South Caucuses all show how the “gender question” has been politicized by the state and become a terrain of struggle not just around gender but around the very mean of democracy. Russia and the Ukraine are the exceptions that prove the rule for here the population retains a belief in market solutions to market failures because the state has never regained legitimacy since the fall of communism. Hatred of the state is only rivaled by love of the market⁴.

Third-Wave Marketization

The recent wave of social movements, described above, all have their own national specificity. Shaped by national political and economic

⁴ Substantial excerpts have been removed from the original paper after this paragraph, including the following headings: *Nature: Privatizing Land, water and Air; Knowledge: From Commodification to Rationalization.*

terrains, they are also connected through social media that shapes their common discourse and common projects. Thus, over and above their differences they nonetheless share a number of features, in particular their repudiation of electoral politics as expropriated by dominant economic classes, especially finance capital. This break with liberal democracy is expressed through an assertion of alternative modes of participatory democracy, which in turn accounts for the fragility and fluidity of the movements.

But can we make any further claims as to what lies behind these new social movements, what is impelling them? Addressing the European Sociological Association assembled in Geneva to discuss “sociology for turbulent times”, Anália Torres (2011) focuses on the policies of neoliberalism and deregulation that have given finance capital freedom to rampage across the world, tearing up the social fabric, weakening civil society and generating radical uncertainty. The result is explosions of rage against deepening inequalities. Confirming these trends, Göran Therborn (2011) offers a searing account of how inequality within nations, manifested in the concentration of wealth within a small elite, is outstripping inequality between nations. This resurgence of class, he argues, can lead in different political directions: toward a middle class retreat into consumption, middle class protest against crony capitalism, working class rebellion or multi-class alliances against the new plutocracies. This is surely an important backdrop to the social movements described above, but is inequality sufficient to explain collective organization?

Torres and Therborn take for granted the ascendancy of market fundamentalism, what many call “neoliberalism”. But this is not the first time markets have been ascendant under capitalism. In fact it is the third time – the first being in 19th century, the second in the early part of the 20th century and the third began in the early 1970s and continues to this day. This third wave of marketization affects the entire globe, but in ways mediated and often abetted by nation states that have set the *terms*

and *context* of social movements but not necessarily their *driving force*. How should we think of marketization as the “driving force” behind the social movements we have witnessed over the last three years? What distinguishes this wave of marketization from previous waves? Following and extending Karl Polanyi (1944), I propose that marketization is experienced as a process of commodification – subjecting something to buying and selling -- and in particular the commodification of four crucial factors of production: labor, money, nature and knowledge. The movements described above can broadly speaking be seen as responses to the commodification of some combination of these entities – a process that threatens their viability as factors of production. When you commodify labor power, you create a precariat that makes the delivery of labor uncertain; when you commodify money, seeking to make money out of money, you create indebtedness; when you commodify nature, you create a local ecological disaster with global repercussions; and when knowledge becomes a commodity, serving the short term interests of money, it can no longer solve the planet’s problems, problems created by the other commodifications. Moreover, one might add that the commodification of politics, which is far advanced in many countries, implies its expropriation from those it is supposed to represent.

Each wave of marketization involves a different articulation of commodified factors of production. Moreover, the first two waves generated a counter-movement of de-commodification, i.e. (re)regulation. The question is whether there will be a counter-movement to third-wave marketization and what its relationship to the social movements of the last three years might be. If the counter-movement to the first wave sprung from grassroots social movements, largely organized around labor, the counter-movement to second-wave marketization revolved around state regulation of the economy (fascism, social democracy, Stalinism), and the counter-movement to third-wave marketization may include local, national struggles but will have to reach a global scale to reverse the contemporary commodification of

labor, money, nature and knowledge. And, even if social movements were to reach such a global scale, no mean achievement in itself, there is no guarantee that they will seek the expansion rather than contraction of freedoms.

But first we must be more precise in identifying the relationship between social movements and commodification. To turn something into a commodity requires “disembedding” it from its legal, political, or social context. So third-wave marketization involves *de-regulation* of labor power through the removal of welfare, pensions, unemployment compensation, health benefits, and of finance through the removal of controls over banking, such as the separation of commercial and investment banking – regulations that were established in response to second wave marketization. Third-wave marketization, however, also involves the creation of new commodities through *dispossession* of access to land, water, and air as well as to free public education and open public knowledge. It is de-regulation and dispossession – the *conditions* of expanded commodification rather than commodification itself – that generate social movements. Sociology’s first task, then, is to trace social movements back to third-wave marketization and forward to a feasible counter-movement.

The Fate of Sociology

We have a second task, however: to understand how sociology is shaped as an object of history – how the object of study (third-wave marketization) becomes a subject determining sociology, overwhelming it. More than ever we cannot escape the way the conditions of existence of sociology as a scholarly enterprise are being transformed by third-wave marketization. Along with other disciplines, sociology has to fight for survival in the university now subject, as we have seen, to hard budget constraints. In some countries, the sociology degree becomes worthless in terms of job market returns and the discipline faces decline, especially as compared to the halcyon days of the 1970s. In a country such as the

US, where first degrees are not as important as second degrees, sociology has maintained a high profile in the university (Lichtenstein, 2013). In social democracies, such as Sweden, Norway and Finland, sociological perspectives are built into the state, very different from the situation in England where sociology has shallower roots and faces absorption into other disciplines (Brewer, 2012). In the growing economies of the semi-periphery, such as Brazil, China, India and South Africa, sociology has maintained its public profile while in many places in the Global South it faces extinction.

In other words, the effect of third-wave marketization on sociology is heavily mediated by national political terrains⁵.

In one way, however, third-wave marketization has had a direct impact on sociology, namely through the overwhelming presence of neoliberal ideology in which markets are seen as the solution to all problems. Here we might say that the standing of sociology as a discipline has suffered more than economics and even political science, a sprawling discipline that in recent years has sought to imitate economics. With its long history of anti-utilitarianism – stretching from Marx, Weber and Durkheim to Parsons, Habermas and Bourdieu – has been more or less impervious to such tendencies, making it more marginal but also more critical of market fundamentalism.

Why has sociology been so impervious? It is because sociology takes the *standpoint* neither of the economy nor of the state, but of civil society, and its fate is therefore wrapped up with the fate of civil society. When civil society is under threat – as it is today – from a collusive relation of market and state, so sociology, too, is under threat. How, then, can sociology defend itself? One way is to openly engage with entities in civil society that are also suffering from market and state offensives, advancing public discussion that calls into question the reigning assumptions of our times, showing how third-wave marketization is causing times of

⁵ Substantial excerpts have been removed from the original paper after this paragraph.

turmoil. This is none other than the strategy of public sociology examples of which abound in *Global Dialogue*: the defense of sociologists suffering various degrees of political harassment in Belorussia⁶, United Kingdom⁷, Turkey⁸, Hungary⁹, in Israel and Palestine¹⁰; and more broadly linking up with the movements that are responding to the (re)commodification of labor, nature, finance and knowledge.

Public sociology has proven to be very controversial in almost all national contexts. There are many who consider sociology to be already too public and the appropriate response to external challenges is retreat to a professional mode. Establish sociology as a science and legitimate its presence as a discipline among other disciplines. This is the view of Piotr Sztompka (2011), who argues explicitly for a singular, universal, context-free sociology. His “ten thesis on the status of sociology in an unequal world” sparked a debate in *Global Dialogue*. Thus, Nikita Pokrovsky (2011) endorses Sztompka’s position and denounces sociologists who enter the public arena. For him the public sociologist is a dangerous enemy within.

Yet others retort that the differential conditions of knowledge production are obscured only at one’s peril. Tina Uys (2011) expresses her suspicion of claims to universal knowledge masquerading as the generalization of a particular (northern) national experience. Fernanda Beigel (2011) writes of the situation of “dependency” in global knowledge production by virtue of which certain theories come to dominate sociology. Cognizant of global inequalities and the unequal opportunities to produce science, Helga Nowotny (2011) sees the future of knowledge as the erosion of boundaries, whether national or disciplinary. The striving for alternative knowledges becomes more

⁶ *Global Dialogue*, volume 1, issue 2.

⁷ *Global Dialogue*, volume 1, issue 5.

⁸ *Global Dialogue*, volume 1, issue 4.

⁹ *Global Dialogue*, volume 1, issue 4.

¹⁰ *Global Dialogue*, volume 3, issue 2.

necessary even as institutional pressures and inequalities make it more difficult. Continuing the debate Jeffrey Alexander (2012) points to the coexistence of local knowledges, but that they are necessarily inflected with cosmopolitan striving, challenging any simplistic universalism. His “local cosmopolitanism,” although sensitive to context, does not imply any public engagement of sociology.

There are two inter-connected issues here: the plurality of sociologies on the one hand and their public engagement on the other. Were there to be a singular and universal sociology it would be advanced in Sztompka’s eyes by those who have the greatest academic capital in community with one another, talking and writing largely in English (but also French) in the elite universities of the Global North. If this sociology prevails as the only sociology then it will be increasingly reflecting the interest of an academic elite cut off from publics both in those Northern countries as well as the Global South. It will, thereby, spell the end not only of public sociology but of a subaltern sociology sensitive to the very issues thrown up by social movements, not least those of the last three years. Moreover, in the face of the hostility to sociology’s abiding traditions, sociology may be doomed within the academy if it has no existence outside.

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