The Challenge of Global Social Inquiry

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Abstract

Calls to provincialise sociology have been criticised as relativistic and self-contradictory. Utilising the arguments of Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Peter Winch, the present paper defends a provincialised sociology against these criticisms and argues that only a provincialised sociology can meet the challenge of global social inquiry.

Introduction

1.1 A number of those who have responded to the challenge of global social inquiry have done so by arguing for a 'provincialised' approach which seeks to reduce the dominance of US sociology and other 'Eurocentric' approaches (Chakrabarty 2000; Burawoy 2005a, 2005b; Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2007). Such terminology often causes unease among those who associate the 'provincial' with its everyday connotations of a blinkered outlook and an unwillingness to learn. Clearly this is not what is meant by its advocates. Thus, to argue for provincialised sociology is not to run counter to what Barrington Moore once called sociology's aim of providing an 'exercise in de-provincialisation' (1984: 267). Rather, it is to accept that any ambition for a truly comparative sociology needs to recognise the different local contexts from which global interconnections and comparisons might be addressed. It must, therefore, provide an account of how we might learn from others without assuming a 'centre' through which communication and learning must flow and without assuming common categories that ground that communication.

1.2 Much of the argument for 'provincialised' sociology derives from various kinds of challenge to orthodox accounts of sociological knowledge claims that have come from different kinds of standpoint approaches, beginning with feminism and culminating, perhaps, in the postcolonial critique (Bhambra 2007). For some, these critiques have simply inverted the standard sociological position and, by that token, have not really resolved its problematic claims, giving rise to various kinds of impasse – essentially, associated with a politics of identity - to which 'deconstruction' rather than reconstruction has been a debilitating response.[1] This, in turn, has given rise to the argument that some common categories – some degree of universalism – is necessary to secure any sociological practice that has critical and transformative ambitions.

1.3 Moreover, over the last several decades there has been a 'dialogic' turn in sociology with the 'monologic' universalism of positivism having been thoroughly displaced. This 'dialogic' turn is associated with an increased emphasis upon agency, set against various forms of problematic structuralist (and functionalist) approaches that were held to efface agency (or produce a ventriloquism of the subject, or actor as cultural dope, etc). Spivak's (1988) challenge, 'can the subaltern speak?' would seem to have an answer from many social theorists that it is misdirected; sociology – social theory – when properly understood, it is argued, is already constituted in the idea of dialogue.

1.4 The general tenor of the argument, however, is to introduce a form of 'dialogic universalism' around a set of categories that are argued to be presupposed in social inquiry and can be expressed in terms of concepts of structure, action, system, lifeworld and the like. These categories are expressed in a general frame of reference whose articulation does not depend upon any particular inquiries and whose categories are not open to reconsideration as a consequence of any inquiries. There are two aspects to this argument. The first concerns the postulation of a scheme of categories as a precondition of social inquiry. The second inscribes the subjects of inquiry into those categories as actors endowed with socially acquired meanings and reflexive capacities, where shared meanings become part of the cultural repertoire for actors. These arguments are evident in Habermas, Giddens, Alexander, Archer and many others.[2]

1.5 Whether between actors, or in the relation between actors as 'lay' social scientists and 'professional' social scientists, the condition of any dialogue is held to be agreement on the categories that found it

(although actors may not be aware of that agreement, it is implicit). There can be no dialogue, except that it takes place within these categories. Likewise, the categories themselves are not the proper object of dialogue; they are unchanging (transcendent). Given the foundational status of these categories, it is not surprising to discover that the various critiques, mounted by feminists, those engaged with postcolonial studies, and others, of hegemonic knowledge claims are discovered to be misdirected and, when properly understood, to be an expression of the categories of the very tradition that they thought they were challenging (see Sayer 2001 and Holmwood 2001 for a critique). Those who seek to deny the categories are 'unreasonable' and, as such, can be excluded, though, in truth (as it were), their exclusion is a form of self exclusion.

1.6 Quite apart from the questionable merits of the argument in terms of these particular debates, it also has a curious relation to other challenges to positivist conceptions of knowledge. After all, we are several decades on from post-positivist critiques of the philosophy of science associated with writers as various as Popper (1963), Kuhn (1962), Lakatos (1970) and Rorty (1980). One powerful conclusion is that of anti-foundationalism; that is, it is increasingly recognised that science progresses by the reconstruction of its categories and that there are no presuppositions that ground science. Indeed, as this argument is developed, science comes to be seen as a path-dependent activity of epistemological communities oriented to the practical contingencies of knowledge-making about the worlds constituted in those practices (Nelson 1990, Barnes 1977).

1.7 Of course, what lies behind these arguments is the spectre of relativism, going back to debates about Winch's views on understanding 'alien cultures' (1970) or what, following Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), we might now call 'Southern epistemologies'. Critics allowed that there are practices and understandings that made sense in context, but that alongside context-specific rationality, there were criteria of rationality as such, which are universal and not context-specific (see, for example Lukes 1970 and Hollis 1970). These turn out to be the criteria of Western knowledge, of course, and, thus, a hierarchy of knowledge claims is introduced alongside an equally necessary, but apparently limited, 'relativism'. While Winch was criticised for self-defeating relativism, his critics seemed to embrace a contradictory universalism-plus-relativism of their own, which they denied was equally self-defeating. It was rarely noticed that Winch's argument was not relativist in the sense of suggesting that cross-cultural criticism was impossible. In fact, while his critics felt comfortable with the incorporation of non-Western thought under the 'universal' categories of Western thought, Winch developed a Zande critique of Western thought: "our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life" (1970: 106). Winch's argument, then, pointed to the idea of cross-cultural criticism as requiring both a principle of generosity (in our interpretations of what they are doing) and of symmetry (if they can learn from us, we can learn from them).

1.8 In his plenary address at the British Sociological Association's annual conference in 2009, de Sousa Santos referred to an encounter between a Government minister and indigenous village elders in a remote region of Columbia over the possible development of forestry on their land. After listening and being asked their opinion, the elders said they would need to consult the ancestors. For the minister this was an irrational response and one that made dialogue impossible (he subsequently left, refusing to engage in discussion on this basis). But why should the manner in which an opinion is formed be the basis of judging whether it deserves to be listened to? Indeed, in the example, we must assume that the elders were genuinely interested in how the ancestors might respond, and they were to be addressed precisely because the minister's proposal had discernible benefits for the villagers (*they* had met the Minister on his ground and were putting the matter of these benefits to the ancestors). In other words, the ancestors' views were not 'automatic' and the process could, therefore, be regarded as a form of deliberation. Perhaps the minister had read Habermas and was more interested in the process; might the matter not have been put to all the villagers? But why assume, as a matter of course, that putting the matter to the elders is not also putting it to the villagers, except that we are reflecting our own preferences about appropriate forms of deliberation?

1.9 One problematic feature of such arguments might be the implicit idea that different communities are self-contained and self-referring. However, a better account would be to conceive of problem-solving activities within overlapping 'epistemological communities' (Nelson 1990). We can learn from others where their practices bear upon our problems; practices do not only make sense within forms of life, but also across forms of life through acts of translation. In this way, we can address the problem posed by Les Back in this issue, that by affirming the context-specific practices of different communities with which we have a partial engagement, we might end up implicitly affirming their negative practices in other contexts. His example is Hindu organisations in the UK with connections to extremist nationalist groups in India; but it might also be the case, to extend the argument in the previous paragraph, that the villagers may not only have views different from the Minister, but may also differ among themselves, though it should not be regarded as automatic that they do (or do not). Learning and recognition is never *in toto*; we can affirm some things, without affirming others, and criticisms can move in either direction. The problem is the residual universalism that assumes that there is some 'trump card' to be found that can be played in all situations, if only we could find it (and, usually, when we claim to have done so, it is a card that is already in our own hand, in 'our' tradition as it were).

1.10 Just what is it that universalism seeks to secure that seems so important that its advocates are prepared to accept self-contradictory statements? It would seem to have a lot to do with the idea that scientific inquiry needs to be understood as an approach (approximation) to the truth about an external world. But developments in the philosophy of science suggest that if we regard science (and other activities where learning takes place) as a problem-solving activity, we can think of problems as given within path-dependent processes and as solved in the present. Problem-solving takes us forward, but only in the sense of leaving something behind, not in terms of approaching something (as problem-solving's *telos*, as it were). And there is no reason to suppose that problems solved in one domain will provide resources in another domain and that they will all come together on one convergent path. In this way, then,

a (pragmatist) approach to problem-solving allows us to recognise it across cultures and within cultures, without assuming convergence upon a set of categories (usually ours), and without regarding it as predicated upon a set of categories. We do not need universalistic categories to capture what universalism seeks to secure. It is enough that problem-solving is *context transforming*, which is not to say context independent; contexts are transformed, always to produce new contexts with a discernible relation to their past.

1.11 The argument so far has treated universalism as an argument that sociology requires agreement on core categories. It is mirrored in contemporary political debates outside the academy in arguments that the wider political community requires agreement on values, that community cohesion requires shared meanings.[3] I now want to draw a parallel between sociological resistance to calls to provincialise sociology and disavowals of multiculturalism in contemporary politics. The 'alien' others that haunt contemporary political discourse are not the Azande made available to consideration by a colonial encounter, but 'alien others' no longer at a distance and brought within Western political communities by decolonisation.

1.12 Current arguments about public sociology resonate with earlier arguments by Mills and Gouldner to re-orient sociological understandings. The latter wrote a powerful critique of the doctrine of value-freedom (the cornerstone of professional sociology, in Burawoy's sense) in his essay 'Anti-Minotaur' (1962). Gouldner's view was that the contemporary University had become embedded in corporate welfare capitalism and that the doctrine of value freedom allowed the commodification of knowledge while declaring independence from the process by which it was occurring. More importantly, Gouldner also addressed this in the context of the 'end of ideology' and growing conformism with the US public sphere. This was occurring alongside increased global threats, in particular that of nuclear war. In this situation, he wondered at why sociologists and politicians placed such an emphasis on value consensus. His conclusion was that it was to do with recent experiences of war, where cohesion and consensus was perceived as necessary for mass mobilisation. However, the new situation of the threat of nuclear war was different. It would not be a mass mobilisation war and what was required was a different kind of mobilisation to prevent it happening: "if we no longer require the same degree of unanimity to fight a war, we do require a greater ferment of ideas and a radiating growth of political seriousness and variety within which alone we may find a way to *prevent* war" (1962: 202).

1.13 Is it too much of a stretch of the imagination to think that we now live in the context of a 'global war on terror', in which community consensus is regarded as necessary in order to face down the threat of terrorism. Perhaps one of the great challenges for global social inquiry is to recognise that this is not the constitutive experience for many in our world. Equally, we might consider how the idea of consensus as constitutive of social order has entered sociological argument, recognising instead that an effective political community can be expressed in dissensus, rather than consensus. Religious and epistemological differences may be unproblematic from the point of view of the coordination of action; it may, indeed, not only be possible to live together differently, but it may be something routinely accomplished.[4]

1.14 Inclusion need not be addressed in terms of coming to share meanings, that is, in consensus. In fact, it is odd that sociologists should invoke such a concept given that there seem to be no social processes that can be readily characterised in terms of consensus. Whether in Parsons, or in Habermas and Giddens, consensus functions as a regulative ideal in a similar way to truth in some accounts of science.[5] But, in the absence of shared meanings, we do not necessarily find that interactions are compromised. It is true that disruptions of action arise as problems of meaning, but that does not mean that previously unproblematic interactions were grounded in shared meanings; rather, it only implies that the different meanings of actors were mutually compatible. In these circumstances, any 'consensus' (or settlement) is a surface feature of social life, not its deep-rooted condition.

1.15 Just because there are unintended consequences of action (or, in the case of scientific activities, unexpected implications of new extensions of arguments and practices), action will give rise to further problems and, therefore, the need for new settlements. So, too, any new partners entering dialogue will alter the terms of a settlement as new criteria and meanings are enunciated and negotiated (and previous exclusions understood). These will be different from those previously held by the parties informing their actions prior to their mutual engagement. Any settled belief (or 'consensus') is only temporary and consensus is not a condition of dialogue (whether in science or other forms of social life). Learning is a consequence of dialogue where the greater number of participants and positions from which dialogue is engaged increases the potentiality for learning. We might aspire to an inclusive, rather than a universal social inquiry, but the condition of inclusion is an openness to learn from new partners and that openness can have no limit that learning can only take place within our terms.

1.16 Rorty (1998) may have been right that we can only approach others in the terms of 'our' traditions, but the consequence of learning is that they no longer remain *our* traditions but *theirs*, too, with the caveat, that they might have been theirs all along, as unacknowledged co-producers of what we had claimed as ours; as for example, in recent accounts of the colonial conditions of Western knowledges (Santos 2007). In his book, *Achieving Our Country* (1997), Rorty suggests that constructing a public is a continuous project that can't be done within a fixed frame of reference, but needs to be re-made in the light of current problems, while being motivated by belief in the possibility of a better future. I want to draw an analogy with sociology and suggest that it is a subject that resists formation as a discipline based around a fixed frame of reference or 'core'. In that sense, it is a discipline that has to be 'achieved', or continually re-invented in new circumstances. Global social inquiry, then, need not be thought of as a *challenge*, but as an *anticipation*; an anticipation of multiple locations and a radiating growth of political seriousness and variety.[6]

Notes

[1] It is noteworthy that Spivak's (1988) analysis of the silencing of the subaltern's voice and the appropriation of her subject, wishes to retain undertakings which challenge sexism, racism, and other injustices etc throughout the world. See Back in this issue. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/4/14.html>

[2] The argument is integral to the writings of these authors. For representative texts, see Habermas (1984, 1987), Giddens (1984), Alexander (1982), Archer (1988)

[3] For example, David Goodhart, the editor of Prospect magazine asks, "is Britain becoming too diverse to sustain the mutual obligations behind the good society and the welfare state?" Prospect, February 2004 <http://home.sandiego.edu/~baber/globalethics/TooDiverse.html>. Accessed 30th April 2009

[4] A classic opposition in sociology is to place 'shared meanings' as the counterpart to 'chaos', as in Habermas's statement that, "the fundamental function of world-maintaining interpretive systems is the avoidance of chaos, that is, overcoming of contingency" (1976: 118).

[5] This is familiar as Parsons's proposed solution to the 'problem of order' (Parsons 1937). Giddens, for example, writes that, "what *from a structural point of view* – where strategic conduct is bracketed – appears as a *normatively coordinated legitimate order*, in which rights and obligations are merely two aspects of norms, *from the point of view of strategic conduct* represents claims whose realization is contingent upon the successful mobilization of obligations through the medium of the responses of other actors (1979: 86. My emphasis). Habermas, for his part, refers to "achieved competencies, shared and respected norms and received cultural knowledge … [which] are brought together to form a reservoir that the participants in interaction use to build up shared action orientations" (1981: 183).

[6] The argument implies a 'provincialised' cosmopolitanism, in contrast to a 'universalistic' cosmopolitanism, where the difference is well-expressed by Pollock et al, that "cosmopolitanism is not a circle created by culture diffused from a center, but instead, that centers are everywhere and circumferences nowhere" (2000: 588).

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