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# Accomplishments Behind, Barriers Ahead: Doing Sociology Without Borders

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## **Accomplishments Behind, Barriers Ahead: Doing Sociology Without Borders**

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### **Abstract**

The mission of *Societies Without Borders* (SWB), to bring “scholars from different continents closer together by showing their different approaches of the same research materials”, creates a space for scholarship like none other. In this article I assess several approaches to doing a sociology without borders that have emerged from SWB, explore some of the remaining barriers to doing this sociology, and offer some ideas on how we might break down the borders that still impede our lives and sciences.

### **Keywords**

Methods, Review, Practice, Borders

### **LOVE AND BORDERS**

Perhaps the only way I can explain the beginning of my trying love affair with the discipline is to say that sociology got me excited. I came to sociology having been raised by a single mother who today still works far more than the average person. After watching my mother climb the ladder at her job I discovered sociology and learned she worked so much she did the job of two men who had come before yet was paid less than either one of them. That is, my mom worked two jobs and was paid less than a man who worked one of them. In a world where most just said “that's life”, sociologists sought to offer me critical, evidenced-based assessments of inequality.

In these early days, I came to understand the various inequalities that shape our lives; that women get paid less than men, that I had been raised in an undeniably racist world, that the vast majority of us are being exploited to fill the pockets of the extraordinarily wealthy with more wealth. This was a time when sociology offered me nothing but answers and while it was

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disheartening to learn the American Dream was a lie, it was nonetheless academically exciting to know there were generally answers to the questions I raised concerning the pervasive existence of inequality and the more general organization of society. Unfortunately, I also came to learn this is, by and large, where the discussion stops. Many are happy to wade into the complexities of correctly defining and articulating the shape and nature of complex social formations but few are willing to take the next step and work toward solutions. Sociology is like an incomplete sentence or a story that ends abruptly just as it gets exciting. Whatever reason you prefer (institutional constraints, intellectual laziness, disciplinary trajectory, etc), the sad realization I came to after years of study is that the science of sociology loves to talk about problems but is largely silent on solutions, segregating their formation to the fringes of the discipline.

Driven by a desire to make the world a better place, I pressed on this silence and discovered I did have some support in Sociologists Without Borders (SSF). Here I found like minded social scientists raising difficult questions and seeking to create a space in which we could safely work to provide answers. We all know inequalities exist at the local, state, national, and global levels so the members of SSF asked the logical follow up; namely, what are we going to do about it and how?

In the years since its formation, SSF has emerged as the lead sociological player in the furtherance of human rights; the scholarship of SSF has pressed us to support human rights in whatever way possible. With many fantastic discussions of human rights from both inside and outside *Societies Without Borders* (SWB) (e.g. Blau, Brunnsma, Moncada, and Zimmer. 2009; Blau and Moncada 2009; Turner 2006), I will not touch on these issues. Instead, I focus here on *how* we might *do* a sociology without borders in the context of an academy that provides little support for such activities.

Ostensibly, the very purpose of science is to go beyond borders, to expand our understanding of the world. But, as we all know, going beyond borders is no simple task. We have been deeply trained to think with barriers in mind. Borders mark out our nations, telling us who counts as American and who should be shunned as an outsider. Borders drawn between people tell us who is a “good”

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person to be included and who is a “bad” person to be shunned. Borders separate sociology, economics, political science, geography, and many other disciplines into neat categories to give a select number of special people the sort of secure jobs most of the world wishes for. Borders shape every aspect of every second of our lives.

In this article, I first outline a few of the ways that social scientists have tried to go beyond the borders that shape our lives and our disciplines and then discuss a few of the borders that continue to restrict our ability to do Sociology Without Borders. I argue here that creating solutions to the problems we articulate should be central to the process of doing sociology, not relegated to a marginalized sub-discipline. We have not answered our own humanistic questions, creating instead an atmosphere in which the measure of a scientist lies in publication numbers and journal rankings.

#### LOOKING BACK

Whether in the Friirian approach to abolishing the dualism of the student/teacher relationship (Freire 2000), bringing studies and concepts across national borders, breaking down disciplinary and methodological boundaries, or pushing specific fields into new ground, there are certainly people working to do sociology without borders. In this section I offer a brief sampling of articles from SWB to draw attention to a variety of ways in which writers for this journal use the language of human rights in an effort to go beyond borders. In formulating this narrative, I reviewed titles and abstracts of all the articles published in SWB since its inception and filtered these articles through the lens provided by Moncada and Blau (2006) in the first issue. It should be emphasized this is a loose categorization used for rhetorical purposes and to help readers find the sorts of resources they might need to do their own work.

In the first issue of SWB, Moncada and Blau (2006) set the stage for all that will follow, briefly articulating the basics of the human rights approach and the increasing frequency of its use in the constitutions of the world outside the U.S.A. then concluding with a discussion of how social scientists might further both understanding and implementation; in other words, how social scientists might do a sociology without borders. For Moncada and Blau (2006), the social

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scientist can play four key roles: the critic, the realist, the ethicist, and the utopian. I will treat each briefly in moving to a broader discussion of doing sociology without borders. It is important to note the authors of the articles cited here do not necessarily claim to fall into the categories into which I am placing them. The categorization simply serves as a convenient way to organize the wealth of scholarship that has come out of SWB thus far.

First, Moncada and Blau (2006) argue the critical sociologist has a long and rich history in the west. While problematic “epistemological blinders” remain, they may be broken down through the integration of international approaches and perspectives. Pressing for a real cosmopolitanism marks perhaps one of the most central features of doing a social science without borders for SSF. In this project, SWB has been fairly successful by bringing us scholarship on, for instance, the working conditions of Brazilian call center operators (Braga 2007), the post 9/11 shifts in Canadian law enforcement (Neve 2007), the story of the creation of the Organization for African Unity (Selassie 2007), and the gender boundaries of the Balkans (Tarifa 2007). Whether this rising cosmopolitanism actually changes the shape of critical American sociology is another question entirely but judging from critical works in SWB like, for instance, Imani’s (2008) discussion of eurocentrism in human rights discourse, Noy’s (2007) exploration of the principles of public sociology, or Robinson’s (2007) analysis of global capitalism, it seems fair to say that SWB has at least partially achieved its goal as many of its authors do integrate or articulate international perspectives. The availability of this international critical perspective is no small thing to be taken lightly; there are an extremely small number of journals bringing together scholarship from different nations.

Second, Moncada and Blau (2006) tell us the realist ethnographer conducting global case studies can give us the details we need to understand the dynamics of capitalism at the local scale. While it is important to have broader trend data with which to conduct statistical analysis, these closer studies are an ideal place for doing sociology without borders. The realist, in this respect, can teach us a great deal about what is happening on the ground around the world, providing us with knowledge that helps in critically assess the specifics of, for instance, policy outcomes. In SWB, this approach is so popular

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that you can pick at least one article with these realist tendencies from nearly every issue. The popularity of this approach is, of course, fairly common across the field of sociology so it should come as no surprise that it is also prolific in SWB. In the context of this journal dedicated to the furtherance of human rights however, the realist work takes on particularly difficult issues in particularly difficult places and works to develop the complex knowledge needed to understand both the shape of global social problems and their solutions.

Third, Moncada and Blau (2006) take a wide view of ethics and give the sociologist a central role in understanding the shape and nature of ethical principles like cooperation and solidarity. Since this point is so broad, one can find articles seeking to understand ethics everywhere and nowhere. While an argument can be made that nearly all of the articles in SWB at least begin to address ethical principles, there are fewer that directly address ethics with exemplars to be found in Ugalde and Homedes' (2006) assessment of the influence of capitalism in the pharmaceutical industry, Noy's (2007) discussion of the principles of public sociology, or Smith and Hattery's (2007) critique of the U.S. prison industrial complex. In trying to go beyond borders, these studies can help us to deeply consider the relationship between action and outcome, our connections to research subjects, the uses of policy, and a great deal more. Ethical principles lie at the foundation of doing a sociology without borders so these articles should be given close attention. That ethics articles are not readily published speaks to the difficulty of grappling with ethical issues more generally. In this respect, the social scientist walks a fine line between asking good questions and guiding action and must be careful to avoid trying to take on the role of the expert manager when engaged in research and writing.

Finally, Moncada and Blau (2006) indicate that the utopian approach can do a great deal to further human rights discourse. On the one hand, this may be the most complex of the four roles outlined for social scientists and, perhaps because of this intensity, it is more difficult to find articles in SWB that focus explicitly on utopian social change. We can nonetheless find examples of this work in, for instance, Bonilla-Silva and Mayorga's (2010) attempt to forge ground for human rights focused academics to eliminate race-based inequalities, Miller, Rivera, and Gonzalez's (2011) exploration of

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community-based research as a space for human rights education, and Walsh's (2012) discussion of universal moral grammar. On the other hand, it is common to see the authors in SWB slip into a utopian mode of thinking in their exploration of the realm of study in which they are embedded. If we then look across SWB for the times that utopian thinking simply shows its face, we can find great examples that, for instance, discuss the possibilities for SSF to press human rights dialogue forward in the U.S. (Brunsma 2010), articulate a path forward for public sociology (Arena 2011), or provide us with fresh ideas like a rights based school feeding program (Kent 2011). In this sense, it could be argued that while the utopian projects in SWB are not generally organized around a grand vision for the future, they *are* generally organized around articulating a better future for those close to their research.

In surprisingly prescient manner, the outlines offered by Moncada and Blau (2006) in the first issue of SWB turned out to describe much of what follows. The authors who write for SWB tend to fall into one or more of these various strains of sociology that contribute to the study of human rights and, implicitly or explicitly, work to go beyond borders. When measured by its own standards, it seems that SWB has been surprisingly effective. Where 10 years ago, for instance, it was nearly impossible to find sociological work written by scholars from another country, you can now find a good deal of that work in SWB. Where there was once little discussion of human rights in the field of U.S. sociology, there is now an ASA section specifically organized around human rights! These are significant victories; yet, this same survey of SWB still leaves me wondering whether or not anything we social scientists choose to do actually helps anyone in the world. Does our work lead us down the path of social justice or does our work simply feed our own career through the exploitation of those who suffer? Can research and writing contribute to the processes of breaking the very real borders that impede and destroy our human lives or are we trapped in the iron cage?

These critical questions are difficult if not impossible to answer, but this difficulty should not be taken as reason to give up the utopian project. Since the inception of SSF and this companion journal, it feels like the group of people engaging in a dialogue to

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expand this creative project for human rights and a difference respecting justice has expanded significantly. If momentum can be gathered, perhaps change will follow. In the rest of the article I take a critical look at some of the impediments to the work of going beyond borders and offer some of my thoughts on how they might be surmounted.

#### BEYOND BORDERS: SPACES OF SCHOLARSHIP

In trying to develop a cosmopolitan social science, SWB does great work in bringing international scholarship together under one roof. At the same time however, one source among many does not shake the sciences. As scholars from various fields have illustrated (Gutiérrez and López-Nieva 2001; Lauf 2005), few journals cross national boundaries and “international” is often claimed by high ranking English only journals, meaning access to truly international scholarship is not widespread. The translation process alone for international scholarship often takes a number of years even for the great works of popular authors, leaving us a long way from getting into the intricacies that emerge in our run-of-the-mill journal conversations at the national level. Furthermore, even when scholarship does manage to reach across the physical and ideological oceans that lie between the U.S. and the rest of the world, we utilize things like journal rankings to privilege the scholarship of the global north over that of the global south (Maloutas 2012). In the scientific sense, expanding access to international scholarship is certainly a great idea, but it turns out to be an impractical and slow process offering little in the way of reward.

The Internet still holds great possibility as a point of open, international intellectual exchange but it seems appropriate here to broadly consider changing the publication process. While it is important to note here that calls for open access journals are growing in all quarters, the model of publication in which our careers are embedded privileges those journals that cost extraordinary quantities of money to read. In these instances the publicly funded scientific knowledge that ought to become publicly available is held in secret, only to be released on the whim of the publishers who now *own* that knowledge. These journals perpetuate rather than solve the vast array

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of social problems we face and, unfortunately, there is no reason to think they stop putting public knowledge behind pay walls as it is central to their profitability. More importantly here, there is no reason to think that we as social scientists will somehow be able to stop publishing in them. The maintenance of our careers depends on publishing in these very journals so changing the shape of the publication industry means that we must first change the shape of our jobs.

Beyond the apparent structural and procedural difficulties in creating an international dialogue, there are plenty of internal problems with our discursive process. In the age of the internet, when cutting edge data and analysis is freely at the fingertips of anyone who has access to technology and chooses to seek information, it takes months, if not years, for social scientists to bring our research products to the public. This lag is sometimes extreme enough that authors have to *defend* the time it took to complete and write up their research (Waquant 2007)! When you can find an infinite quantity of bloggers giving away claims to truth for free, it becomes important to articulate how a (slow) qualitative project offers better or more valuable knowledge. In this context, we must realize that we are competing with a vast array of writing available to the world and we have to start speaking so our audience can listen and understand or we will only be talking to ourselves. I am most certainly not making the argument that we should all be bloggers but it is abundantly clear that continuing to do what we have been doing is not going to suddenly make sociology relevant for a public audience. This isn't a call to rush publication or lower standards of quality, but we should hardly act astonished when our ten year old, just published research is treated as irrelevant outside the field. While there is great inertia to what we do, the tenured faculty who run colleges and departments are in a position to change the sorts of jobs they expect us lowly faculty to undertake. In this context, the decision makers can continue to press for more publications in costly, high-ranking journals that hoard knowledge or they can press for the sort of work that seeks to create a better world.

How can we go beyond borders in a field that survives by maintaining those borders? Since we wouldn't be employed without our fields of study, we must consider how a field without borders is

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truly constituted. In this respect, the very idea of re-imagining the publication process leads us down the path of reconsidering what makes an academic career. If we want to get and keep any job, we are going to publish articles; yet, with an ever increasing quantity of articles in an ever increasing number of journals at an ever increasing cost, each individual contribution becomes increasingly meaningless and increasingly difficult to find and access. In the broader scheme of information in the world, this unimaginably massive quantity of work done by academics in the social sciences is but a single pin dropping among infinite others. Is it possible for our voices to be heard in the cacophony? Should we continue down this road to nowhere or is there another way? I won't pretend to have answers to these complex questions and, being an early career scholar, I have exactly zero influence on the shape of the jobs I seek. If we are going to pursue a sociology without borders however, these questions must remain central in assessing current work and planning for the future.

#### BEYOND BORDERS: SPACES OF EXPLORATION

While SWB's support for a diversity of international research practices is on the cutting edge, the research process itself remains problematic. Since Burawoy's (2004) courageous but insufficient presidential address on public sociology, the interest in doing academic work *for* people has grown noticeably. From Nyden, Hossfield, and Nyden's (2011) *Public Sociology: Research, Action, and Change*, Jeffries' (2011) *Handbook of Public Sociology*; and Blau and Iyall Smith's (2006) *Public Sociologies Reader*, we get quite a diverse list of ideas on *how* to do public sociology. Yet with all the apparently growing interest, there is little support for one interested in doing work *for* communities. In this context there are two fundamental barriers in the way of doing this sort of work.

First, regardless of the rhetorical focus, the emphasis of a great deal of public sociology still lies largely on doing sociology for sociology. Burawoy (2004) made a courageous speech that legitimized doing public sociology but the proposed framework in itself doesn't challenge the way we do sociology. In other words, although there have been some successes, we have yet to really start doing sociology for the communities we study but have instead continued to do

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sociology for the furtherance of sociological ends. As Dorothy Smith (1987) has argued, the way we do research and publication leads us to continue treating the people and organizations we engage with as objects to be studied and written about instead of partners to work with. This barrier between subject and object remains, even among many of those who claim public sociology. While we have plenty of criticism to throw around about both society and sociology and are even willing make pronouncements about who should do what to change the world, we have done relatively little to change the way we do science.

My point here is not to deride the very amazing accomplishments of those who have been trying to do public sociology or even to engage with the complexities of doing a truly public sociology (you should look to the above volumes for deeper interrogations of these issues); instead, I want to implore readers to consider how the production of “scientific” knowledge itself remains problematic in the pursuit of a sociology without borders. In this sense, the calls for public sociology have at best served to create or maintain sub-disciplines with various names like applied, humanist, policy, community-based, or activist sociology for the martyrs at the institutional margins. Just as Collins (2000) and Smith (2004) argued for the necessity of a sociology developed from the standpoint of the people, I am arguing here that a truly publicly valuable sociology needs to start with a rearticulation of the way we do our work. While we like to say that our research subjects have the most complete knowledge in regards to, for instance, the experience of racial oppression, we certainly don't let these subjects write the articles we publish. No matter how many quotes we use to fill out our ethnography, we are still *controlling* the output and staking our claim on the truth about our subjects. Although we most certainly do helpful work as a sidebar to the process that goes from research to publication, we are by no means simple public servants helping people create social justice, we are the *gatekeepers* of knowledge!

Second, there is very little support for doing sociology *for* communities within our departments as the structure of academic jobs and institutions discourages work for social justice or change. Instead of being assessed as individuals on what sort of contributions we might have made to the world in which we actually live, for instance,

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we are largely judged academically on how many articles we publish and the caliber of the journals in which those articles appear. Instead of being assessed on how much they do for students or communities, our departments are judged by metrics like student growth and grant dollars received. Instead of being assessed on how well they contribute to public discourse and whether or not they bring a positive influence to the cities that spawned them, our colleges and universities are judged by simplistic metrics like cost or easily manipulated student to teacher ratios. This is a recipe for *stability, not change!*

These institutional and organizational issues may in fact mark the most complicated of the barriers that lie before us but surmounting them is nonetheless central to doing things differently. Like the other problems we face in doing sociology for the public, the ability to change the shape of our jobs is largely in the hands of those who define those jobs. While I don't expect that we alone can change the oppressive structures in which we work, I do expect that they become a part of our discourse in considering how we might *do* a sociology without borders. If we don't work to change the organization of the jobs we do, the structure of higher education will continue on exactly as it stands and doing sociology without borders will continue to be a project for the future, not the present.

#### FORGING AHEAD

Overall, I have tried to be brief here, providing a sampling of citations from across the years SWB has been publishing and offering a basic assessment of barriers that remain. Ideally, this will help the reader find a few of the sources that might be most useful. In being brief I have certainly not done justice to the great complexity of the issues we face and implore the reader to explore SWB further.

While there has been great progress in the doing of sociology without borders, it is clear that we still have a long way to go. We have started forging a space for international scholarship but have been able to accomplish less in the way of changing the organization of the science, our departments, or our institutions. We have made significant advances in understanding how we might do work for our communities but have been less accomplished in changing the way we

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study and relate to these communities. These tasks may seem insurmountable but I am confident that we can continue to find ways over and around the borders that contain us. Further progress will require significant support on behalf of those tenured folks out there who get to define what it takes to get tenure in their departments. Without institutional support for doing this sort of work, the people who are driven toward it will instead be driven out of the academy.

Finally, I have not touched on teaching, the one area in which we have generally have greatest flexibility. Here I will only argue that we should use this flexibility to push our own boundaries and begin teaching for today. We may, for instance, want to teach the classics to intro students (testing to see how many names they can memorize), but if our student audiences are not interested then what purpose are we serving? We obviously can't cater to *every* interest but we should at least work to be both *relevant and useful* to the lives of our audience. As a simple illustration of what I mean, think about the quantity of available media for a moment. Both students and teachers are bombarded with a staggeringly large quantity of information everyday. If we can help students understand how to fit that information into a broader cultural context then we will have accomplished a great deal more than we would have training them to memorize conflict theory and, more importantly, we will have revealed the first stones on the path to becoming a sociologist without borders.

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