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To Be a Sociologist Without Borders

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J. Blau & K. E. Iyall Smith / Sociologists Without Borders 7:4 (2012) 480-487

To Be a Sociologist Without Borders

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Abstract

In a conversation with Keri E. Iyall Smith, Judith R. Blau shares her thoughts on the early days of Sociologists Without Borders/Sociólogos Sin Fronteras (SSF). She explains the impetus for the organization and some of its early victories. She then describes her work today with the Human Rights Center (HRC), where members of Carrboro and Chapel Hill are working together to live the dream of human rights.

Keywords

Human Rights; Sociologists Without Borders; American Sociological Association; Teaching; Research

KEIS: Judith R. Blau was instrumental in the formation of Sociologists Without Borders/Sociólogos Sin Fronteras (SSF). The organization owes her a great debt for her careful and tireless efforts to grow a thriving, vibrant academic NGO. While her attention has now shifted to the Human Rights Center (HRC), working in Carrboro and Chapel Hill, Blau continues to influence the work of SSF and its members in large and small ways. In honor of this Special Issue on “Social Science without Borders: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” Blau offers some insight into her early years with SSF and her work today.

KEIS: What did it mean for you to be a sociologist without borders when you began your work with the organization?

JRB: When the president of the Spanish Chapter, Alberto Moncada, invited me to form a U.S. Chapter, he couched the challenge in terms of human rights. This was the very moment in my career that I discovered the U.S. had isolated itself from the international human rights community by failing to ratify a single human rights treaty. At the same time the U.S. is an imperial power, pushing its weight around

~480~

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J. Blau & K. E. Iyall Smith / *Societies Without Borders* 7:4 (2012) 480-487

economically and militarily. Why, I asked myself, was the U.S. so adverse to human rights?

Already by 2002 I was teaching courses on human rights, and around that time gave a paper on “The Leading Rogue State” at the International Political Science meetings in Durban, S.A. The American political scientists stormed out in protest, while at the end of the session, African political scientists swarmed around me in solidarity. A couple of years later, I organized a campus “Constitutional Convention” where students revised the U.S. Constitution, incorporating human rights provisions into the Constitution. We invited Black Workers for Justice, NAACP, and local women’s organizations. Both mayors came and talked. I asked each of them whether they would support their town adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Each said “yes,” and the HRC proposed this to their councils. Both Chapel Hill and Carrboro adopted the UDHR in 2009.

To answer your question, I felt it was important to provide robust criticisms of the U.S. along with international, egalitarian conversations about human rights. In 2003, SSF got a resolution on the ASA ballot condemning the invasion of Iraq. It passed! In 2009 we proposed to ASA that ASA adopt a Human Rights Statement. Council approved it: http://www.asanet.org/about/Council_Statements/Council%20Statement%20on%20Human%20Rights%20%28August%202009%29.pdf

At the same time, SSF conversations included sociologists from many countries.

KEIS: Can you elaborate on how the field of sociology responded to these early efforts of SSF?

JRB: The anti-war resolution certainly brought SSF into the hearts of many sociologists. And into the corridors of ASA. Sally Hillsman copied me on a note to the ASA president (I believe it was Arne Kalleberg) indicating that SSF was ASA’s main watchdog.

KEIS: How did SSF change your teaching and research?

JRB: Completely. SSF drew me into the challenge of founding the

~481~

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HRC of Chapel Hill & Carrboro <http://www.humanrightscities.org/>. The HRC works with day laborers, impoverished migrants, and refugees. It draws from the UNC student body for volunteers, and the emphasis is empowerment, not charity. I have become a local activist, but I see everything we do through the prism of international human rights. When I saw that I was becoming a poor citizen in SSF, I resigned as president.

KEIS: What is the focus of the HRC's work?

JRB: I can give you the “short version” of the evolution of the HRC. Just to mention first that Centers such as ours exist in many countries, but in the United States we are unique. All other human rights centers in the U.S. are affiliated with a university and for the most part do research on human rights violations in other countries. One of our missions relates to blowing the whistle on human rights violations in our own community.

The Center received its 501.C.3 status in February 2009, and in the same month we moved into an extremely poor neighborhood where most of the residents work as domestics or as day laborers for construction or landscaping companies. The economic crisis has had a crushing effect on our neighbors and they have no safety net as many citizens, if not most, do.

Earlier, the Center had sponsored eight days to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I tried to be as inclusive as possible, including panels on collective goods, many of which are human rights, such as local food and fair trade, as well as panels on labor rights, immigrants' rights, and so forth. The “birthday” of the UDHR falls at an inconvenient time on the academic calendar, so we hold our one-day Human Rights Festival a little early (instead of December 10th).

The mission of the Human Rights Center is four-fold.

- To promote inter-cultural understanding and peoples' full recognition of the dignity and fundamental rights of the others --- across the many lines that divide us; race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion.

~482~

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- To be advocates for those who suffer exploitation and abuses of power and greed. Our neighbors in Abbey Court do, and we will not be silent.
- To provide opportunities for college students in courses that highlight experiential learning. These include courses on human rights but also courses on immigration, poverty, inequality.
- To work with other community organizations to combat poverty, racism, exclusion, abuse of workers and tenants, sexism, and homophobia in the broader communities of Chapel Hill and Carrboro.

I would say that we are working in ways that are consistent with these missions, but it has been inevitable that we have also become a service organization. However, as we have added services our criterion is that the service is empowering and not a form of charity. Currently, we (my students) provide job assistance, an after-school program that is collaborative with an elementary school, an English language program run by a group of UNC college students, weekend soccer games, and a family outreach program run by a faculty member from the School of Education. The Assistant Director, Rafael Gallegos, tracks down cases of employer abuse and wage theft. Soon we will have a Know Your Rights workshop and a festival for Las Pasadas, a Mexican holiday.

The students from my classes have been fantastic in all these projects.

KEIS: What are challenges and assets for sociologists who want to do work in the community?

JRB: Few sociologists probably would want to start an NGO on their own, but in towns larger than Carrboro there are many opportunities for partnerships. The idea would be to partner with a Center that advocates some sort of rights, such as labor rights or housing rights, and build a sturdy relationship that includes, ideally, placements for students. In departments in which public sociology is valued it is likely

~483~

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that the department would support a faculty member starting an NGO.

KEIS: What is the role of values in your work?

JRB: A willingness to take personal and professional risks is important, but most central is a commitment to human rights.

Eleanor Roosevelt chaired the committee to draft the Universal Declaration – a proclamation for countries and, in principle, a document that would guide countries to set policies, create programs, and create a national human rights climate. The discussions in this committee were about nation-states. But then Eleanor Roosevelt made this remarkable statement:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.

This statement appears on the Center's web page, and guides my work.

KEIS: In your work with many different publics, what have you found to be the best ways to talk about human rights?

JRB: It is easy to talk with students in my classes who have read international human rights treaties and see the connection between these treaties and what we are trying to achieve at the Center. It is much harder with adults. Human rights were banished from America during the Cold War and have never made a reappearance, except when our government lambasts another country for human rights abuses.

~484~

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KEIS: What does it mean for you to be a sociologist without borders today?

JRB: My routines cross international borders – with Mexicans, Burmese, Bolivians, and Karen, among others.

KEIS: Can you say a little more about working without borders in your local community?

JRB: The HRC is a crossroad for people from different cultures. To give an example, Saturday is the day that a Salvadorian, a Burmese refugee, and two Mexicans go to the Farmers Market to collect food donations from farmers. When they return to the HRC, they are met by what may be compared to the United Nations – Bengalis, African Americans, Burmese, Karen, disabled Americans, Chinese and South Korean students, and Latinas from different countries. They share in the experience of multi-lingual exchanges – helping one another with bags, offering food to one another. “Beto,” who is Mexican and lives at the HRC, makes sure that shy people have their share.

KEIS: Looking back, how has SSF changed?

JRB: Since I am off the list, I am not sure. However, the journal is flourishing.

KEIS: What challenges have you found while working without borders?

JRB: Language!!

KEIS: Where do you see SSF in the next ten years?

JRB: It is not for me to say.

KEIS: Can you possibly say a little more here?

JRB: SSF expands our understanding of empathy with others, egalitarianism, respect for difference. For me, SSF is grounded in

~485~

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profound cosmopolitanism and a deep understanding of human rights. Eleanor Roosevelt clarified the profound challenges for a sociology of human rights. In my mind, and consistent with her contributions, I believe sociologists can advance an epistemology of universal human rights while seizing opportunities to advance human rights “in the smallest of places.”



Judith Blau was founder and President of the U.S. chapter of Sociologists without Borders, and co-founder of its Think Tank, an international interactive site devoted to human rights, and founder and director of the Human Rights Center of Chapel Hill & Carrboro. Her most recent books are *Human Rights: Beyond the Liberal Vision* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), *Justice in the United States: Human Rights and the US Constitution* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), *Freedoms and Solidarities: In Pursuit of Human Rights* (2007); *Human Rights: A Primer*

~486~

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J. Blau & K. E. Iyall Smith / *Societies Without Borders* 7:4 (2012) 480-487

(Paradigm Publishers, 2009); *The Leading Rogue State* (2110); *Human Rights and Sociology* (Sage, 2011). Her earlier books include *Race in the Schools* (recipient of Oliver Cromwell Cox Award in race studies). She helped to launch human rights sections in the International Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association. She was awarded the 2012 Distinguished Practice Career Award by the American Sociological Association.

Keri E. Iyall Smith's research explores the intersections between human rights doctrine, the state, and indigenous peoples in the context of a globalizing society. She has published articles on hybridity and world society, human rights, indigenous peoples, and teaching sociology. She is the author of *States and Indigenous Movements* (Routledge), editor of *Sociology of Globalization* (Westview), co-editor with David L. Brunnsma and Brian K. Gran of *Handbook of Sociology and Human Rights* (Paradigm, forthcoming), co-editor with Judith R. Blau of *Public Sociologies Reader* (Rowman and Littlefield, and co-editor with Patricia Leavy of *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations* (Brill and Haymarket). She is an assistant professor of Sociology at Suffolk University in Boston, MA where she teaches courses on globalization, sociological theory, Native Americans, and introductory sociology.

~487~

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