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What Does A Sociology Without Borders Look Like?

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Abstract

In this essay, I consider what a sociology without borders would look like through an exploration of two questions: 1) How can sociology be mobilized to make the world a better place? and 2) What does a sociology of human rights look like? To answer these questions, I take the reader through a discussion of the history of Sociologists without Borders, the influence of Professor Judith Blau, and my own excursions into the sociology of human rights in the United States and abroad.

Keywords

Human Rights; Sociologists without Borders; Utopia; Judith Blau; Sociology

The excitement in her voice was contagious when Judith Blau told me, then a graduate student at the University of North Carolina (UNC), about her plans to start a chapter of Sociologists without Borders in the United States. The name itself was enticing and provocative – what was sociology without borders?

Although it was unclear what sociology without borders was or could be, two principles were clear from the start: 1) Sociology can be mobilized to make the world a better place; and 2) human rights merit a place within sociology. When Judith Blau invited me to join in 2001, she had recently decided to form a US chapter of Sociologists without Borders, inspired by the work of Alberto Moncada in Spain. I readily accepted the invitation.

As a graduate student in Sociology at UNC, Judith Blau's vision was like a breath of fresh air. At UNC, many of my other professors espoused another vision – that of a value-free sociology – where the study of sociology involves the objective, social-scientific analysis of society. For me, however, it was hard to imagine how you could dedicate your life to the study of society and social problems

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without some vision of how to make the world a better place. What else would make sociology meaningful?¹

The second component that was clear from the beginning was Judith Blau and Alberto Moncada's human rights vision. As sociologists, we have the tools necessary to understand how society works, and to measure inequality and social mobility. To what end, though? Do we really need yet another study showing that African Americans earn less than whites or that women are less likely to be promoted than men? What good do these studies do if we don't have a moral framework to interpret them? For me, it makes perfect sense to say that African-Americans and Latinos were disproportionately affected by the housing crisis and this is a problem because adequate shelter is a human right. A human rights vision provides sociology with a moral compass from which to understand and evaluate our work.

Signing on to Sociologists without Borders and to these ideals was easy. Figuring out where to go next was a bit more complicated. One of the issues with which we struggled from the beginning is how Sociology can be deployed to make the world a better place. Unlike Doctors without Borders or Engineers without Borders who have a clear set of tools they can use to provide direct help to people in need, the role of a Sociologist without Borders is less clear. Once the organization had formed and we had several hundred people in our ranks, the question became – what do we do?

We put our heads together and one of the ideas we developed was to start a Fellowship program that would allow a graduate student to study in Brazil. That way, we could expand US sociology by encouraging US students to do fieldwork abroad; and we could enhance the ties between the US and Brazilian chapters of Sociologists without Borders. The fellowship was successful, and we sent two students to Brazil to carry out fieldwork. However, we eventually decided to discontinue the fellowship as it was not clear that it was advancing our vision or that it was the best use of our limited funds.

We have tried other means to move the organization and its ideals forward: we have held conferences and developed a journal – *Societies without Borders*. We formed a Human Rights section within the American Sociological Association. We developed a thriving international Think Tank discussion forum. We awarded scholars who

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advanced the vision of Sociologists without Borders. Perhaps most importantly, we have created a space where progressive sociologists can come together and develop a vision for what a better sociology would look like.

I would argue that we are still in the process of answering the questions with which we began: 1) How can sociology be mobilized to make the world a better place; and 2) What does a sociology of human rights look like? We have made progress in answering both of these questions, but much work remains. The mission of sociologists is grand indeed. We have realized that we may not have the skills to build a house or to suture a wound, yet we sociologists have a vision that enables us to see beyond immediate social problems and imagine a world where communities are able to build their own houses and tend to the wounded.

In the remainder of this essay, I will lay out some thoughts that represent my current thinking on these questions. I would like to make it clear that these are the questions I see as most important for the organization, but am open to the possibility that others may have a different vision. I imagine my thoughts will continue to evolve as the organization grows and its mission expands.

THE MILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION: HOW CAN SOCIOLOGY BE MOBILIZED TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

In 2010, I was in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, when the earth shook in Haiti on January 12. Being on the same island where such devastation had occurred, I felt compelled to do something. I thought about what I could do. I could mobilize my networks in the United States to join the march of foreign aid to Haiti. I could help as a translator in hospitals. I could donate money. But, what could I do as a *sociologist*? What could I do that would make the best use of my skills?

I decided I would write about Haiti. I had the tools at my disposal to research the history of Haiti and write about why Haiti was, as one heard over and over again, “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.” I could write about the history of slavery and global capitalism. I could explain why Haiti has the most NGOs per

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capita in the world. I did, and I posted my articles to blogs, newsletters, and online magazines.

As I was writing, thinking, and researching about Haiti, I received a call from a Haitian-American friend and academic, Jemima Pierre. Jemima planned to travel to Haiti in an exploratory mission to perform a needs assessment of a Haitian NGO. She believed that strengthening Haitian NGOs in the aftermath of the disaster was a crucial step, and assembled a group of people to travel to Haiti for that purpose. The airport in Haiti was closed, and they would have to fly to Santo Domingo. I offered them a place to stay in my apartment in Santo Domingo, and she asked me if I would join them in their trip to Haiti. I agreed to go, although I still was not certain how I would be of use in the immediate aftermath of such devastation.

When I arrived in Haiti, it did not take long to see exactly how I could use my skills. The media representations of Haiti clashed with what we saw on the ground. I could use my sociological and ethnographic skills to describe what I saw in Haiti and to write about what was going on. I took notes, thought, analyzed, researched, and wrote about what I saw in Haiti. Unlike the doctors and nurses among us, I could not help to heal the sick. Unlike the engineers and architects, I could not help to build new houses. As a sociologist, however, I could create a different representation of Haiti, one that did not sensationalize suffering and violence, but that put Haiti in its proper historical and global perspective and that humanized and valued the Haitian people. This is what I could do as a sociologist.

When we went to Haiti, we also collected money and distributed aid, as it seemed to be the right thing to do, and we felt compelled to do what we could to alleviate the immediate suffering we could not ignore. But, I did that as a citizen of the world, not as a sociologist.

As a sociologist, it was evident that the rush of foreign aid after the earthquake was unlikely to have enduring effects. As a sociologist, it was also clear that the moral economy of aid created a situation where helping was not only about the victims – it also had a lot to do with the helpers. This understanding crystallized for me when I saw crates of 16oz bottles of water being unloaded from airplanes in Santo Domingo. These bottles of water came all the way from Europe, and were headed to a place that had plenty of bottled

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water. Why didn't they just send money to buy clean water or to sterilize water? What would happen to those little plastic bottles once the water had been consumed? A sociologist can answer those questions as well as provide critical insights into best practices for disaster relief.

That experience taught me that we sociologists do have critical skills we can mobilize to make the world a better place. For this reason, I think that Sociologists without Borders should nurture these skills and be a place where we can envision sociological projects that expose the roots of injustice and that present a comprehensive, critical, global vision of the world. Collectively, we need to think critically about what we can do as sociologists to make the world a better place.

WHAT DOES A SOCIOLOGY OF HUMAN RIGHTS LOOK LIKE?

In addition to a desire to make the world a better place, a central mission of Sociologists without Borders has been to make sociology a better place. One of the ways we have done that is to develop a sociology of human rights. Two concrete manifestations of this effort are the journal *Societies without Borders* and the ASA Section on Human Rights. The institutionalization of the sociology of human rights is crucial – as it provides a space where we can do the kind of sociology we believe is important within the official reward structure of our profession.

Sociology, especially in the United States, has shied away from human rights, because of the normative slant of the human rights tradition. Members of Sociologists without Borders, with the leadership of Judith Blau, have been working to change this by pointing out that a human rights framework permits sociologists to use their empirical skills to do more than simply describe global inequalities: we can use human rights doctrine as a moral compass to evaluate social inequalities and conditions.²

As Judith Blau often points out, US Sociology is behind the times in this regard. In the United Kingdom, the sociology of human rights is more entrenched. There, sociologists have focused on using sociological tools to assess the legal and moral frameworks of human rights doctrines and their implementation,³ to consider the socially

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constructed nature of human rights,⁴ and to explore the challenges associated with the enforcement of human rights in national arenas.⁵ In the United States, legal scholars, political scientists, and anthropologists have longer histories of engaging with the human rights tradition than do sociologists.

The space for a sociology of human rights is broad – ranging from analyses of human rights doctrines and their implementation, to examining the historical and moral implications of these documents, to analyzing how countries measure up to the ideals set forth in the human rights tradition. For scholars in the United States, the urgency to study human rights is perhaps most pressing. As Nancy Matthews explains in a recent essay, the United States often frames itself as a champion and leader in human rights, even though the United States rarely signs or enforces human rights treaties within its own borders.⁶

In my own work on immigration policy, I have found the human rights tradition to be particularly useful for two reasons. First, many activists frame immigration policy debates in terms of human rights, rendering it crucial for any researcher to understand these debates. Immigrant rights protestors carry signs that read: “immigrant rights are human rights.” Advocates at Amnesty International and other organizations argue that U.S. immigration policies violate international treaties. As a researcher allied with activists, it is essential to understand the terms of the debates. Secondly, using a human rights framework to understand immigration policy forces researchers to take on a global understanding of the issues: human rights have no borders. A human rights framework requires focusing on the rights all people share and resists giving privilege on the basis of citizenship in particular nation-states. For immigration researchers, this is an essential reminder.

ENVISIONING A SOCIOLOGY WITHOUT BORDERS

This reflection on my own journey alongside the growth of Sociologists without Borders is simultaneously a tribute to the leaders in this organization, particularly my dissertation advisor, Judith Blau, and a reminder of the importance of continuing to grapple with the provocative questions with which this organization began. 1) How can sociologists make the world a better place? 2) How can we make sociology a better place? I think it is fabulous that we don’t think we

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have the answers to these questions because that means we can continue to dialogue and to welcome new voices into this conversation. Through these dialogues we can begin to answer these questions. I am excited about the possibilities for the future and the directions of these conversations.

Endnotes

1. Notably, this conversation has emerged again in quite different quarters. Sociologist Mark Regenerus published an article on the consequences of having gay parents. Some sociologists believe that his views as a Christian who thinks homosexuality is immoral may have influenced his questions as well as his findings. (http://thenewcivilrights_movement.com/bombshell-letter-scores-of-ph-d-s-ask-for-retraction-of-regnerus-study/legal-issues/2012/06/29/42413) It is likely his beliefs influenced the way Regenerus designed his analysis, as he lumped together stable families with two gay parents with any person who had any sort of same-sex encounter. For fundamentalist Christians, any gay encounter is immoral, meaning he is likely to see these two disparate situations as parallel (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/us/mark-regnerus-and-the-role-of-faith-in-academics.html?_r=0). My point here is that of course our moral frameworks influence our research. The point is for us to acknowledge that and move forward from there.

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5. Woodiwiss 2002. "Human Rights and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism; See also: Ruhs, 2012, "The Human Rights of Migrant Workers"

6. Matthews, N. A. (2012). "Learning the Truth and Stating the Facts": US State Department Claims-Making and the Construction of "Human Rights ." *Societies without Borders*, 7(2), 132–164.

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