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Sociologists Without Borders and The Meaning of “Without Borders”: The Social Construction of Organizational and Scholarly Boundaries

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Abstract

This manuscript examines what it means to be “without borders” in an organizational and scholarly context.

Keywords

Without Borders; Sociologists Without Borders; Social Construction

Our organizational name, Sociologists Without Borders, shares a sentiment with organizations like Doctors Without Borders (DWB) or Lawyers Without Borders (LWB) in our focus on human rights around the world. But while the meaning of “without borders” would appear quite straightforward for these other organizations, we have yet to fully grapple with the meaning of that phrase for our organization. Practitioners in DWB and LWB ignore arbitrary political borders defining countries, traveling to war-torn regions, refugee camps and impoverished areas to minister to the sick, injured, or infirm, or to press for the fair legal treatment of prisoners, dissidents, and those seeking asylum. For these organizations, the meaning of “without borders” literally means no physical, political national boundaries confining where they will go to serve the rights of people to health care or legal defense.

The meaning of “without borders” for Sociologists Without Borders is less obvious. What borders do we mean? Do we mean the same physical political borders separating nation from nation that DWB and LWB mean? Do we mean disciplinary borders? Do we mean the presumed boundaries between scholarship and activism? Or do we mean all of these boundaries at once? The answers to these

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questions ultimately shapes the organization and its mission. It becomes crucial, then, to examine these carefully.

PHYSICAL, POLITICAL BORDERS

The concept of borders most obviously implies for most people the political confines of individual nations, separating one nation from another physically, politically, and economically, and creating national identities. For Sociologists Without Borders, the meaning of “without borders” begins with this understanding, and extends it to include a sense of global inclusion if not the complete refusal to acknowledge national borders entirely. Members generally respect the notion of the right to sovereignty and national identity. But there is also a clear understanding that this respect does not mean a refusal to respect the dignity or the needs of other nations or the human rights of people around the globe regardless of national citizenship. Brill Publishers of the Netherlands, the publisher of the organization’s flagship journal, *Societies Without Borders*, identifies this perspective as part of the journal’s guiding principles: “. . . People may live in societies, derive their identities from their societies, but the pursuit of human rights is pursued and coordinated across borders” (see <http://www.brill.nl/swb>).

Sociologists Without Borders is an international organization of social scientists devoted to human rights concerns. While its most active chapter appears to be in the United States, it has chapters around the world. Indeed, its original name, Sociólogos Sin Fronteras (SSF) originated in Spain. The organization has members in at least 23 countries; over 470 members identify no country of origin: for many of them participation in an organization such as ours comes at great personal risk. In order to encourage the full participation of global membership regardless of nationality or economic capacity, the US chapter maintains a policy of not charging dues of people in the Global South who wish to participate in the organization. SSF activities span a range of international initiatives. Officers of the organization were instrumental in the development of a Human Rights Thematic Group within the International Sociological Association. The US chapter is engaged in the process of gaining recognition by the United Nations for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; such recognition would enable the

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organization to contribute to United Nations information-gathering efforts and provide research and scholarship in support of its international mission.

In addition to these organizational mechanisms and strategies of “borderlessness”, the increasing presence and accessibility of the internet and social media facilitates interaction between individuals regardless of national boundaries (or physical restrictions of movement into and out of nations); it enhances the possibility that people everywhere can exchange ideas and strategies to implement, enforce or encourage human rights everywhere, and provides a vehicle for learning about human rights or human rights abuses around the globe. In that regard, technology helps erase national boundaries in cyberspace if not eliminate them in the flesh-and-blood world. SSF’s discussion listserv and its former think tank web site foster this expansion of “borderlessness.” While SSF itself was not instrumental in the emergence of the so-called “Arab Spring,” the use of social media to spread the democratization movement there was a key factor is the quick eruption and expansion of that movement across borders. In the Global North, use of social media similarly leapt past national borders to spread Occupy Wall Street’s message and energy into an international resistance to the impoverishment of most people for the benefit of a tiny but powerful elite. These two cases illustrate the power and potential of technology to make physical borders matter less.

Taken together, these indices point to an understanding that at least one of the meanings of “without borders” to the organization is one of inclusion: we maintain a global perspective, welcome members from all nations regardless of economic wherewithal, and work to expand our connectedness using all organizational and technological tools at our disposal. Human rights transcend arbitrary physical political boundaries delineating nations one from the other and as such SSF embraces the notion of “without borders” to mean global inclusion: all people are entitled to human rights.

Such a position is not without controversy, to be sure. For example, are rights relative or absolute? While we maintain that all people everywhere are entitled to human rights as human beings regardless of citizenship (as emphasized by international human rights legal instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), the

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specific delineation of those rights is frequently at odds with sovereign rights to self-determination and self-identity. Where does one right begin and the other end? Do individual human rights always trump national rights to sovereignty and self-determination? Who gets to decide the hierarchy of rights? While there are no easy, straightforward answers to these questions or to how to reconcile these contradictory conceptualizations of rights, that does not prevent us from adopting an inclusive, global understanding of “without borders.”

Moreover, while we maintain a perspective and a practice of global inclusion and global perspectives, many object to the common assumption evident in the Global North that human rights violations and problems are concerns in the Global South but not the Global North. The United States in particular often regards itself as the “gold standard” of human rights, a position that is certainly subject to investigation. A growing number of us embrace the practice of global inclusion, but also pursue an examination of human rights specifically in the United States to explore and interrogate that assumption of the “gold standard” (see Armaline, Glasberg, and Purkayastha 2011; Blau, Brunsma, Moncada, and Zimmer 2008). In that regard, while we seek to transcend borders in a global effort to elevate human rights, some of us turn our focus inward in an attempt to examine the progress of human rights within the borders of the presumptive national leader in human rights.

DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

In 2012, SSF’s online listserv opened a conversation about the disciplinary meaning of “without borders” by raising the question of whether we were *Sociologists Without Borders*, or more accurately *Social Scientists Without Borders*:

Our organizational identity officially and formally is *Sociologists Without Borders*. However, there are a growing number among us who work takes a more interdisciplinary approach, and a growing number of scholars and activists involved in the organization whose home is not sociology but is a social science other than sociology. And indeed,

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the subtitle of our flagship journal, *Societies Without Borders*, is “*Human Rights and the Social Sciences*.” Is our informal identity limited to sociological lenses on human rights, or is it more expansive and broad, to include all social science lenses? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these identifications for us organizationally, professionally, and practically?

The conversation foregrounded the notion of disciplinary boundaries, including scholarly ‘silos,’ the permeability of perhaps falsely scholarly definitions, and the value of interdisciplinary perspectives.

Academic departments at colleges and universities have traditionally struggled to protect their ‘turf’ from perceived incursions from other departments, and many often denigrate or disregard interdisciplinary work at key professional milestones such as tenure and promotion or merit determinations. The energy expended to distance themselves from other, related, disciplines creates a ‘silo’ mentality that isolates and insulates scholars from each other, even when the substantive work they do is obviously related in many ways.

However, there are a growing number of scholarly pursuits that increasingly draw on the work of researchers from a wide range of departments, producing work that is quite rich for its diversity of information. For example, interdisciplinary work in Women’s, Gender, and Sexualities Studies; Multicultural Studies like African and African American Studies, Asian and Asian American Studies, Latin@ and Latin American Studies, Native American Studies, and Judaic Studies; Environmental Studies; and Global Relations Studies all draw from a wide range of academic traditions, including sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, public policy, history, journalism, and philosophy. Scholarship in human rights has until recently been dominated by work in political science and legal studies, but now is increasingly informed by work in all of these academic disciplines, including sociology. Sociology as a discipline has always traditionally embraced and incorporated other social science perspectives and scholarship; indeed the classic social theorist Augustus Comte once referred to sociology as the “queen” of the sciences because its rich

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perspectives drew from multiple bases and synthesized them into a coherent whole (see Lenzer 1975).

Sociology is quickly emerging as a strong voice in human rights scholarship, contributing its unique perspective to the overall conversation and breaking open new perspectives. So, are we *Sociologists Without Borders*, or are we *Social Scientists Without Borders*? The online discussion made it clear that the membership still preferred to retain our identity as *Sociologists Without Borders*, all the while recognizing that we do indeed draw from scholarship in many other social sciences and humanities disciplines, and our members are not restricted to sociologists alone. Human rights scholarship is thus generally “without borders” in that it respects and readily incorporates the work done in many disciplines. But we retain our identity as Sociologists in bringing our unique perspective to bear on the conversation.

What exactly do we contribute to human rights scholarship that is unique? Political scientists and legal studies scholars have tended to take a top-down perspective, focusing on legal international human rights documents and instruments and on the state as both a source of human rights violations and enforcer of human rights. This focus introduces a curious contradiction that is rarely addressed: if human rights instruments exist because the state cannot be presumed to guarantee human rights and to act accordingly, why is that very same state entrusted with the responsibility of enforcing and ensuring human rights? Scholars in political science and legal studies thus tend to treat human rights as a static thing to be given or denied. Sociologists, in contrast, shift the focus: some study non-state institutions like major corporations when examining human rights violations; others take a bottom-up perspective, focusing on community activists and non-governmental organizations and the work they do in local settings to fill the void left by states who refuse to enforce human rights or worse, violate human rights; still others focus on social movements that build pressure on states to provide for and enforce human rights; and others emphasize the interplay between top-down and bottom-up processes in the ongoing dynamic process of the human rights enterprise (see, eg., Armaline & Glasberg 2010; Armaline, Glasberg, and Purkayastha 2011). And much of this work draws freely on the scholarship done in many other disciplines,

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as sociologists have always done.

One meaning, then, of “without borders” for us is the ability to transcend traditional, and often arbitrary, scholarly boundaries, breaking out of the academic silos that have too often stunted perspectives and narrowed a full appreciation of the wide range of knowledge, information, and existing research that can inform and enrich our own scholarship. To be “without scholarly borders” is to ‘violate’ the boundaries segregating academic traditions and departments in the service of human rights scholarship.

BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SCHOLARSHIP AND ACTIVISM

Controversy over the boundaries between scholarship and activism is common. The very mission of sociology has always been subject to debate: should we restrict ourselves to simply reporting what we empirically observe? Should we further that simple reporting in an analysis of why or how what we observe occurs? Or should we extend observation and analysis to a prescription or a call for action, and in some cases actual activism by scholars informed and inspired by the findings in their research? Although this question of the boundaries between scholarship and activism has ebbed and flowed for decades we have never fully resolved the debate. Recall Becker’s (1967) challenge half a century ago to the very possibility of bias-free sociological research. Many believed Becker had cleanly settled once and for all that it was absurd to argue that there was any such thing as unbiased or value-free scholarship at all: the work we do in and of itself is by definition biased, implying an activist role in the simple act of asking questions to be explored and subsequently engaging in sociological research.

Michael Burawoy, in his Presidential address at the 2004 meeting of the American Sociological Association, ignited a renewal of the debate when he challenged sociologists as scholars to essentially take their research to the streets, emphasizing the importance of “public sociology”. He argued that there exists an “umbilical chord that connects sociology to the world of publics, underlining sociology’s particular investment in the defense of civil society, itself beleaguered by the encroachment of markets and states” (Burawoy 2005: 4). His call to activism as a natural extension of our scholarship was met by some as a refreshing turn from pure empiricism to the

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logical application of our research; but others saw his invocation of public sociology as a violation of the boundaries of the canon and the academic mission: the ivory tower is and should be isolated one from the other, many argued.

In the past year, that controversy was resurrected in the online discussion, sparked by the pointed rejection of what one member considered the inappropriate reach of scholarship to activism. The point for this member was that our conversations should be restricted to theoretical debates about human rights as a scholarly pursuit; the strenuous objection was to the extension of scholarship to activism, and the blurring of the traditional boundary between the two. Other participants in the conversation just as strongly embraced the notion of “activist” or “public” sociology, and rejected as insufficient or insular the notion that our conversations should remain purely theoretical when engaging in human rights analyses and research. It appeared that the majority, at least of those who were vocal and participated in the debate, favored activist scholarship and the permeation of the boundaries between theory and praxis; but those who objected were certainly passionate and insistent on the preservation of those boundaries.

Some would even argue that the very act of engaging in academic pursuits—research as well as teaching—is itself an activist endeavor. When we use a critical perspective in interrogating existing literature or identifying unexplored issues as needing examination, when we open controversial discussions in our classrooms or invite students to engage in ‘troubling the canon’ and questioning the world taken for granted, we are in fact engaged in activism. This is not necessarily a viewpoint shared by all (what ever is?), but it is one that many endorse and promote. To view our scholarship and our teaching as themselves forms of activism not only blurs the distinction between scholarship and activism; it falsifies the dichotomy between the two. Critics of this point of view deem it an inappropriate breach of academic protocol.

That we never really reached a resolution of the debate that satisfies all should not be a surprise, nor should it necessarily be our goal. That we had the conversation in the first place was what was important: it signaled a continuing need to interrogate why we engage in human rights scholarship, how we self-identity our mission, and

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how we define the boundaries of theory and praxis, scholarship and activism, value-free or value-laden scholarship, and whether the permeability of those boundaries is desirable, productive, or necessary. For many of us, it is difficult if not impossible to envision human rights scholarship as a purely theoretical or academic pursuit: the very nature of what we do cries out for a blurring if not an erasure of the artificial boundary between what we do and who we are. We “do” human rights every day, in all we do, including our scholarship in the academy as well as outside it; the dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between theory and application, is a false one.

CONCLUSION

The Statement of Purpose of Sociologists Without Borders identifies an organizational commitment to, among other things:

- Supporting scientific research, educational outreach, and charitable endeavors that promote human rights and political, economic, social, environmental, and cognitive justice;
- Collaborating with other scientific organizations in marshaling scholarly research, teaching, and service for the public good;
- Enabling active validation of all voices in sociology as an academic discipline;
- Supporting and encouraging transdisciplinary knowledge, including Indigenous, feminist, anti-racist, decolonial, environmental, and queer epistemologies that are compatible with SSF objectives

These commitments imply an organizational understanding of what it means to be “without borders.” But that understanding is not limited to these pronouncements, as has been evident in the various discussions, debates, and controversies we have encountered and in which we have engaged.

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While we've discussed the physical and political, the disciplinary, and the practical meanings of being "without borders," the meaning of the concept of boundaries is multilayered, and certainly more nuanced than would appear at first glance. I am equally certain that there are a myriad of other dimensions of "borderlessness" beyond those explored here—and I enthusiastically invite readers to enter into a lively discussion of those as well as of the ones discussed here. What is clear is that we continue to grapple with the social construction of boundaries, to debate its various dimensions passionately and sometimes heatedly, and to discuss what it all might mean, in our work and in our organizational identity. That process in and of itself weakens if not breaks boundaries, pushing us to think "outside the box" and chart new territory, as scholars and as activists. I consider that a healthy intellectual, organizational, and personal impulse.

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the State, coauthored with Deric Shannon (Sage/Pine Forge Press); and *Human Rights in Our Own Back Yard: Injustice and Resistance in the United States*, coedited with William T. Armaline and Bandana Purkayastha (University of Pennsylvania Press).

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