

SOCIOLOGY CONFRONTS THE WORLD: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Thank you, Verónica, for the kind invitation to join this learned group today to talk about several things close to my heart — sociology, teaching, textbooks, and the importance of global education. I am honored to have this opportunity to spend this time with all of you. Typically, textbook writers in sociology, unlike their counterparts in a number of other fields, are unknown for much else and attract little attention; I will leave this curious pattern for now, and perhaps return to it at the end, if someone is interested, during the time we'll have for some questions.

A Visit to India

I'd like to start off, as I usually do in my own classes, with a story. Some years back, I arrived in the city of Madras, which is now called Chennai, the major city of Tamil Nadu along the western coast of southern India. This was my first visit to India, and it was a moment of great excitement not only for me but for all the hundreds of students and faculty who were sailing westward together as part of the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea program. We had already visited Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia, so it was easy for us to imagine ourselves as seasoned travelers. But we had yet to visit a country where we would encounter what I might delicately call "world-class poverty," and everyone was up early the morning our ship approached the city, looking from the upper decks through the haze, full of wonder about what this large and very different city held in store. While we were still a mile or so from our dock, the wind coming from the west carried quite a smell.

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The Cooum River, which flows east into the harbor, was at that time the means by which some part of the city disposed of its sewerage, a fact that was quite evident to us even at this distance.

Within an hour or so of securing the ship, the first groups of students and faculty were ready to disembark and to begin exploring this new place. I had arranged to take the students in my social stratification class across the city to a squatter settlement, where recently-arriving migrants from rural villages had constructed a small community. With about thirty people in tow, I walked down the gangway and out the gate into a crowd of people attracted by our ship's arrival. The experience was startling. For one thing, we were immediately surrounded by hundreds of people—vendors selling all sorts of small items, people shilling for local merchants and restaurants and, most disturbingly, children who were begging. A few were crippled or disfigured, which made our inability to respond to all of them almost unbearable.

There was a bus waiting for us only ten yards away, and I suspect a number of the students made their way through the crowd and stepped up through the open door having had enough of Madras for the moment. Once a head count confirmed that everyone was on board, we were off through the city, with wide eyes peering intensely through the windows.

It is probably fair to say that few of us had ever seen anything like the lively and very different street life of this Indian metropolis. As our bus moved slowly through waves of pedestrians, small motor vehicles, and even a few cattle, we gazed on people eating, sleeping, washing, dressing—activities we were accustomed to thinking of as taking place behind closed doors.

The students were amazed by the breadth of this outdoor life, and also by how poor the people seemed to be. No doubt, the anxiety was heightened by the fact that we were traveling to the western edge of the city to visit newly-arrived squatters—people who we told would be far poorer still.

It is worth noting the reason for our anxiety, which was that we in the United States tend to associate poverty with anger and violence. As we drove through Madras, I got to thinking about another field trip I had been on several years before that, this one to New York City. A group of us were doing a walking tour of Manhattan and, as it was getting dark, we were moving along 125th Street in Harlem when a police van drove by and the officer behind the wheel "goose-necked" out the window looking back at us, and then made a quick U-turn and came alongside. The driver and another officer got out and came up to us. As I recall, both of these men were wearing what looked like bullet-proof vests, and I thought to myself that they looked like a baseball umpires. As they surveyed the gaggle of well-dressed young men and women from a small Midwestern college, most with expensive cameras in hand, one blurted out "What are you doing up here? It's getting dark!" In a half-hearted effort to put everyone at ease, I parried back, "Don't worry, officer. I'm a

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sociologist. And we're all doing *fieldwork*! They were not amused, and immediately they herded us a block or so to the nearest subway station offering stern advice that we "get back downtown" as quickly as possible.

The point of this little story-within-a-story is that, especially in New York and other big cities of the United States, poor communities are often places where there is a lot of crime. There is also a lot of hopelessness and often a lot of anger. That's why many of us have learned to link poverty and danger. Following this logic, of course, a place like Chennai, with poverty the likes of which we had never seen before, would be absolutely deadly! Or, so many of us were thinking. With that idea in mind, as the bus reached the squatter settlement and pulled to the side of the road, no one was especially eager to be the first one to get out. The door of the bus stood open and the driver turned to look back at everyone, motioning with his right hand that it was time for us all to move on. With all eyes ending up on me, I had little choice but to make a good show of it, stepping out on to the dirt and surveying the squatter community, which included about a dozen small houses—huts, really—made of branches, leaves, bits of wood, cardboard, and whatever else was available to build with. These shelters had been put up on the side of a small river—a branch that flowed into the Cooum, I think. As we would eventually learn, there was no indoor plumbing; the entire community of perhaps a dozen families had only a small latrine and one water pipe coming out of the ground.

The people living there expected us. They had agreed to our visit, which had been arranged by a local sociologist with whom I had corresponded. But she had yet to arrive, and the locals had left their homes and gathered in a large crowd, watching us come off the bus. Unsure of the surroundings, our group formed a tight defensive cluster. There the two groups stayed, for several long minutes, in an uncomfortable paralysis (uncomfortable for us, at least) until the children—the ones with the fewest fears—ran forward to see what these new and strange people were all about. Surrounded by smiling and shouting little kids, members of our group responded by giving out candy, photographing the children, and showing them the images. Before long, we were being led by little hands back to meet the parents.

The afternoon turned out to be one of the most interesting and instructive of my entire life. Although we had no spoken language in common, our hosts were gracious and kind, taking us into their very modest homes, trying to show us how they lived, and sharing what little they had with us.

As the day was coming to a close, the sociologist from Chennai joined us and took us to a classroom at her university where we learned more about the people we had met. She explained that most of them had come from several rural villages to the west of the city. Like millions of urban migrants before them, they had come to the city hoping for more economic opportunity and better schooling for their children. There were dozens of questions from the U.S. students. But what puzzled students the most was the fact that people who had almost nothing—in a material

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sense—had been so warm, generous and gracious to us. We contrasted this pattern with the presence of many poor and angry people in the United States. I recall that someone added that our country has more than a few rich, miserable people as well. Perhaps, as one student thought aloud, the lesson of a visit to a place like this is realizing that there are more than different answers to familiar questions. Rather, we need to learn to ask different questions. We soon settled into a discussion of what being "rich" really means. In the United States, we think of wealth in terms of "things"; here, we had confronted people with almost no wealth of this kind, but with strong traditions, vital kinship ties, and a clear sense of who they are. There is certainly more than one way to think about what it means to be "well off."

Factors Increasing Globalization

This little story makes clear the importance of comparative experience to understanding not only another society but our own way of life. We live in an age of globalization, a time when the societies around the world are becoming increasingly interconnected. Such a trend calls for a global way of thinking—a multi-societal, comparative approach to learning—not just as an effective way to learn about others but, in the process, to learn more about ourselves.

Almost everyone is aware that the world is "getting smaller." What this means is simply that societies are now far more connected than they were in the past. One simple indicator of this: The number of "active" languages in the world, which was as high as six or seven thousand a century or two ago, is now less than half that; the majority of the world's people now speak one or more of only a few hundred languages. Another indicator is that it is now possible to travel around the world speaking only English. Global connections are increasing due to at least five factors:

1. **Mass media.** A century ago in the United States, the spread of the mass media had the effect of encouraging a national culture. Today, much the same process is happening in the world as a whole. Of course, the effects of mass media are not necessarily symmetrical. In other words, a few nations (including the United States but including other countries such as India) are the creators of most films, television programming, and other forms of virtual culture; these nations impose patterns and change on other (typically lower-income) countries whose people consume these media.
2. **New computer-based technology.** The Internet now links most of the world, and the share of the world's adults who make use of the Internet is estimated to be about one-third (roughly 1 billion people) and is increasing. Cellular telephones are also spreading in both high-income nations (two-thirds of U.S. adults now have a cell phone) and lower-income countries (about one-third of adults have them). Overall, global cell phone users now number roughly 1.5 billion. This technology links people not only within

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countries but across national boundaries, encouraging economic activity as well as cultural diffusion.

3. **Immigration.** Global awareness and immigration tend to go together. People who gain information about other places are more likely to move (and, within their means, also to travel); in the same way, a significant foreign-born population shares new cultural patterns with others in their new land. We have long been a nation of hot dogs and hamburgers; but we now consume more salsa than we do ketchup. In this case, compared to the flow of mass media, rich nations tend to be on the receiving end. In the United States, almost 35 million people (about 12 percent of the population) were born in some other country.
4. **Economic activity.** The level of international trade in the world is higher than ever before in history. More and more companies produce their products in more than one country, with the content of a consumer item such as a typical laptop computer containing components or labor from ten different nations.
5. **Military activity.** A fifth factor that contributes to globalization is military activity. There is an official presence of U.S. troops in more than three dozen countries around the world; in addition, military personnel are on board ships in most world regions. This wide deployment both increases awareness of the world on the part of military personnel and their families but also gives people in other nations impressions of the United States.

The Reasons We Need a Global Perspective in Education

There is little debate about the fact that people around the world are becoming linked more than ever before. For many of us, the reasons to push for a greater role for global education may seem self-evident. But, at the risk of presenting another short list, I would like to point out six reasons that, from my point of view, having a global perspective is necessary, especially within the discipline of sociology.

First, a global perspective is a logical extension of the sociological imagination. The basic wisdom of our discipline is that human experience reflects not just personal decision-making, but our location within a organized social system. As I like to say to my "intro" students, we may decide how to play the cards, but it is society that deals the hands. In the same way, the life chances of people who are born into this world reflect not only where they are located within a societal organization, but how their society is embedded within a world made up of 192 nations.

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Remember, too, that the founders of our discipline were all convinced of the importance of a comparative perspective. Think of the important work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim and we see sociologists using comparative (both historical and cross-cultural) research to understand issues such as capitalism, rationalization, and societal solidarity. More than a century ago, Durkheim proclaimed that "Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology, it is sociology itself..."

A second reason for us to embrace a global perspective is that, for many of us at least, the world has come to our classrooms. Across the United States, more than half a million students from other countries are studying at U.S. colleges and universities; there are many times this number of U.S. citizens who were born in other countries, and still more people who have one or more parents born abroad. A global view is both a way of acknowledging the ethnic diversity of our students and of encouraging them to add to the vitality of our class discussions by sharing their own experiences and perspectives.

Third, many of the issues we discuss in sociology classes are inherently multi-societal. Processes such as modernization—the issue that defined sociology at the outset—is one good case in point. Secularization, gender violence, immigration, popular culture, and the state of the natural environment are other examples from a long list that can only be fully understood in a global context.

A fourth reason for sociology to be multi-societal in scope is that many people in our discipline have always had a concern with addressing social problems, many of which are more serious in global context. Poverty, hunger, gender inequality, surging population, sex trafficking, and rampant disease are all examples of problems that are more widespread and more severe in poor nations of the world than they are here in the United States. To explain to our students the full importance of these issues and, of course, to address them in remedial terms, requires a global perspective.

Global Perspective in Sociology Textbooks

At this point, I would like to make a few observations about the extent to which the textbooks that introduce students to our discipline make use of a global perspective. Sociology textbooks have existed for roughly 125 years, beginning with Herbert Spencer's multi-volume *Principles of Sociology*, which he wrote, in stages, beginning in the 1870s.

Spencer's book is broadly comparative, at least in a descriptive sense. Pulling a volume of this text from my shelves, I found discussion of half a dozen societies in the first several pages. At a time when Great Britain was extending its colonial

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empire around the world, there was considerable interest in "newly discovered" ways of life.

In 1906, William Graham Sumner, who taught what was probably the first sociology course in the United States at Yale thirty years earlier, published his textbook, *Folkways*. This book is highly comparative, as well as historical, and certainly merits being characterized as global in scope.

During the next half-century, however, the trend in U.S. sociology textbooks was to offer less of a global perspective. By mid-century, sociology enrollments had increased, and there were many textbooks available from a more than dozen different publishers. New issues were developing in the field, and, by this time, just about all texts were including discussion of topics such as socialization with little focus on the societal or cultural context, as well as chapters on race relations, the various social institutions, and social movements, all of which tended to be focused primarily on the United States. Many of you will notice from this description that what my might characterized as the typical format for the "modern" sociology text was then beginning to take shape. In addition, a number of texts included (usually at the end of the book) sections that focused on "social problems," and those tended to be almost entirely focused on the United States.

By the 1970s, the number of sociology texts had increased to about four dozen, marketed by publishers vigorously competing for sales in a market that was growing in size. Partly because many faculty moved from one book to another over time, publishers and authors found that their sales improved when the books they offered were variations on the basic model. For our purposes here, this model was largely non-global and focused on the United States.

In 1975, the best-selling textbook of its day was written by Donald Light and Suzanne Keller. There was considerable mention of other societies in the discussions of culture, population, and hunger. Throughout most of the book, however, the global content was limited to an occasional sentence or photograph showing the ways people do some thing differently elsewhere. The only reference to anything "global" in the topic index of that text involved three pages dealing with global corporations. Although it made more use of global images, much the same can be said for Ian Robertson's text, the most popular book of the early 1980s.

Looking back, the 1970s and early 1980s was probably the point at which the global focus in sociology was at its lowest point. (This is based on just one measure—introductory texts—which is not the only one. A quick comparison of several issues of the *American Journal of Sociology* for 1975 and 2004 shows no apparent differences in the extent of global content, but only about 15 percent of the articles during each period text deal with a country besides the United States.)

The early editions of my introductory texts, the first of which appeared in 1987, were guided by the goal of having more of a global focus. In support of global

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education, I set out to make several modest changes in texts, most of which were picked up by a number of other texts in subsequent years. First, the text included a chapter on global social stratification (1991). This chapter represented an important addition to the introductory class because it expanded the national focus, allowing students to realize that poverty is both more widespread and more severe in most of the world's nations than it is here in the United States. In addition, discussion of global stratification points out how the level of well-being of any national society is the result of a number of economic and technological forces at work in the world as a whole. Second, we introduced a global chapter on the natural environment. This was important because, like inequality, environmental issues cannot be understood without considering the world as a whole. Nor, for that matter, are environmental and population issues likely to be addressed effectively without programs and policies that are global in scope. Third, was the introduction of global maps. I recall when I proposed first global map for the *Sociology* text more than fifteen years ago, many reviewers and editors responded with puzzlement: Doesn't he realize that this isn't a geography book? But my belief then—which just as strong today—is that, for students to gain a global perspective, they must have some idea of what the world looks like. More recent editions of the text have added Global Snapshots, figures that compare patterns (such as the extent of economic inequality and what people believe are the causes of such inequality) in the United States and those in other nations, as well as author's journal entries, which share some of the experiences and insights gained from being in unfamiliar places.

I am gratified that the books that I have written and rewritten over the last twenty years have made a modest difference in the degree of global learning among college students in sociology courses. As many of you are aware, however, mine are not the most global texts out there. Joan Ferrante, my esteemed colleague from Northern Kentucky University, who will be speaking to us tomorrow with a focus on global inequality, has written a text with a unique approach, highlighting one country other than the United States in each chapter. The different approaches that are available show that there are a number of ways to advance global learning, just within the world of textbooks. And there are certainly different opinions about how much of it people wish to engage in. This brings me to the final point in my remarks, a brief consideration of the difficulties and limitations of global learning.

Global learning has become more important in our discipline over the last several decades. But global learning is often not easy to do. To return to the story that opened this talk—the visit to the squatter settlement in India—it is easy to understand why experiencing other cultures is typically difficult. The word "ravel," after all, has the same root as the French word *travail*, meaning "work." It is work, hard work at that.

A second difficulty, one a number of colleagues have pointed out, is feeling competent to engage in global teaching. Not only do we have to be experts on our own society, but we have to learn about other places as well. The good news is that

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there is plenty of help out there. Our discipline has a rich literature on social life in various other nations, and there is also a solid body of research on the process and consequences of globalization. Organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Population Reference Bureau offer volumes of data for dozens of variables and almost every country in the world. As I have noted, there are also texts that provide support for a global dimension of the classroom. Of course, with more than 12 million foreign students in the United States, and many millions more who were born abroad (or who have parents who were) the world has come to our classroom. We can use this resource to the extent that we invite students with international experience to share their knowledge with other in class discussions.

Finally, there is evidence that, as a discipline, the interest in global education is being challenged. Prentice Hall, the publisher of my texts, from time to time conducts surveys of sociology faculty, and we use this information in the planning of revision of the book. In recent years, these surveys suggest, interest in teaching global material has waned somewhat. What appears to be happening is that the discipline has an increasing focus on stratification issues—less on the mobility studies that were central thirty years ago and more on inequality based on race, class, and gender—and these inequalities are seen by most people as national rather than international issues. In practice, then, as faculty devote more of their teaching to social stratification, they have less interest in global material. This assessment is confirmed by a recent survey of teaching sociologists carried out by Ted Wagenaar, with results reported in the January 2004 issue of *Teaching Sociology*. Wagenaar found stratification issues to be of the greatest importance among teaching sociologists. Global material, by contrast, was deemed considerably less important, about on the same order as the teaching of population dynamics. If the trend I am reporting is real, we should be mindful that the gains in global education that have taken place over the last several decades may get smaller in the decades to come. There is no necessary conflict or contradiction between interests in stratification and global education, save the limitations of course time and resources. What remains important, then, is a steady and strong commitment, by word and by example, to global education among teaching sociologists, including ourselves.