

International Sociological Association
e-bulletin



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“Glocalities” as a metaphor for Regional Associations

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I shall start this brief talk by saying that it is meant to be supportive of the role played by regional associations in the development of today's sociology. In my view we should encourage the formation of regional associations and their effective membership into associations like ISA. For the sake of clarification I am assuming regional associations to be supra-national sociological organizations with shared concerns related to a number of social processes within a given geographical area of the world. We all know about the stimulating participation of such entities in the regular activities of ISA. The set of seven volumes prepared for the Montreal World Congress of ISA is surely one of the most significant examples of such dynamics in providing an overall picture of regional sociologies worldwide.

At this point in time, the number of regional associations registered at ISA may not be large but many of them, of a diverse geographical and cultural nature – Latin American, South-East Asian etc. – are, in one way or another, clear expressions of a dynamic institutional/organizational form of debating and producing sociology. In my opinion, such an organizational form of making sociology is likely to amplify and multiply over time. It may sound paradoxical but the fact remains that under globalization and side by side with “global” sociological knowledge we witness the emergence of different forms of sociological views encompassing varying units of analysis other than the global, and applying to diverse geopolitical and cultural scales (“local knowledges”). The point that I would like to make here is that rather than insisting on the possible differences existing between these forms of knowledge (the so-called global and local knowledges) we should rather look at the encounter of these knowledges and try understand what comes out of such complex intersection.

Let me underline, following Immanuel Wallerstein, the fact that by and large the numerous talks/debates on how to organize sociology worldwide reflect an old concern among scholars, especially from the post-WWII period, when many changes took place in the political, geo-cultural and scientific arenas. The result was a wave of optimism in which all sciences - including social sciences - were seen as carrying hope and virtue all over the world.

Gradually, many ideas regarding scientific knowledge and its apparent contribution to humankind began to crystallize. Many conceptualizations, methods and perceptions of the world lost their initial capacity to generate optimism. Serious concerns regarding the role of science followed in consequence.

In the last two or three decades, with the onset of globalization, many of these problems have grown, particularly inasmuch as globalization has remained a descriptive rhetorical view, with very little explanatory capacity if any at all.

However, it seems to me that there are still many reasons for optimism regarding the contribution of social sciences, and of sociology in particular, to the better understanding of the world and to the possibility of better solutions for social existence. This is part and parcel of the ongoing reevaluation of the nature of social knowledge and its explanatory capacity. The latter is increasingly made up of new epistemologies, and new processes of knowledge construction, which I will not develop at this juncture.

Let us turn instead to how we envisage the new ways of organizing sociological work on the world scale at a time when we face unpredictable sociological (and political) futures. As I have already said, my point is to argue for the relevance of regional sociologies i.e. regional forms of organization of sociological work. I am not ignoring the existence of national sociologies which have formed the foundations of sociology since its very inception as a discipline. However, national sociologies undergo a systematic erosion of their explanatory power. This is largely due to the erosion of the nation-state itself and the correlate privilege given to the study of “national” societies.

Arising from this erosion, the debate between “local” vs. “global knowledges” has intensified. This is in itself a significant sign of this erosion of the nationally-based social knowledge. To be validated, such “national” knowledge has to confront global premises and be submitted to a sort of comparative analysis.

Another outcome of current sociological debate refers to the confrontation of Western vs. non-Western (nowadays North vs. South) premises of knowledge and the denunciation of the primacy of the (hegemonic) conceptualization (and dogma) coming from the “North” and the “West”, which implicitly recognizes some inherent virtue to the views coming from the “South” and the “non-West” sociologies.

We have for long been working with this kind of binary descriptions and categories. We have worked on the presumption that virtue is somewhere in between the opposite binary categories. Although I am not sure of the extent to which this is true, the matter of the fact remains that we have had many contributions from respectable and outstanding scholars arguing for the mixture of local/global, north/south dichotomies.

We have been working with binary descriptions and categories like these for some time. Many of us have been working on the presumption that virtue is somewhere in between opposite binary categories. Doubtful as it may be, however, such a presumption is somehow included within the various contributions put forward by outstanding scholars in favour of the mixture of local/global or north/south antinomies.

“Glocal” knowledge is just one of those proposed solutions. It is a straightforward category meant to highlight the combination of both local and global processes (Roland Roberston). “Global” knowledge, like any other type of knowledge has to be “situated” knowledge. As a result, let me use the word “glocality” to refer to the spatiality in which “global” and “local” knowledges meet. With this specific application to knowledge construction I am diverging a little from the meaning assigned to “glocality” by authors like Michail Epstein or Stuart Carr, among others.

I think of “glocalities” as territories of encounter and the interplay of various forms of knowledge (of national origin as well as global “origin”). We should focus upon this territory

of encounter and look at the way in which “global” and “local” expressions of knowledge merge with or repel each other.

The argument is not for us to be for or against the “global” or the “local”. It is rather a question of attempting to understand what happens at these “glocalities”, regarding them as “zones of contact” (Marie-Louise Pratt) and intersection.

“Glocalities” foster contact between diverse or opposite sociological views whereby they promote the emergence of conditions for comparative analysis between fragmentary knowledges.

Metaphorically “glocalities” equal regional associations devoted to sociological work. They bring national (“local” for the sake of argument) and “global” perceptions into contact and by so doing they presumably help renew the dominant forms of understanding the world.

So, regional associations could very well be understood as concrete expressions of “glocalities” where national problems are confronted and compared with each other beyond the limits of national boundaries. By the same token they may be disputing global premises and anticipating supra-national processes.

Just as a footnote, I would like to add my opinion that with this line of reasoning one could argue for other forms of “glocalities” such as international research centers, exchange of international mobility and exchange programs and networks, in a nutshell diverse *fora* where new contributions and comparative analysis are regularly experimented.

Coming back to regional associations they work very much as Simmel’s “Door and Bridge” metaphor, that is to say, as *zones of passage* they tend to promote unity from within and diversity from without.

A final point on communication within “glocalities”: as an “intellectual technology” language is an infrastructure for a solid interplay of scientists, researchers and practitioners who share sociopolitical concerns at the “glocality”. This community of sociological encounters expresses itself in various tongues. It is actually very likely that they communicate in mutual respect for each other out of the so-called “imperium of monolingualism” (Emily Apter). Under an increasingly market-driven situation, minor languages are threatened by, and risk succumbing to the more widely spoken ones. On a “glocality” concert these various languages are supposed to try to find a common adequate base for overall human communication. In other words, along with the attempt to foster communication within and between different sorts of paradigms and languages (“local” and “global”), “glocalities” ought to speak the language of sociological concern and preoccupation with major multi-range issues and challenges, so as to bring them to the forefront of the sociological agenda and to render them open to reflection.

What has been said about “glocalities” can easily be adapted to expressions of regional associations. There are some practicalities, however, that give rise to some technical problems for an association like ISA such as those related to double registration or membership.

But let us not be overwhelmed by practicalities and turn to the more creative and challenging possible ways of counteracting any sort of pessimism that may erode our confidence regarding today’s contribution of sociology and its dynamic forms of organization. For the development of scientific knowledge, the betterment of democratic governance and for the improvement of social living conditions, it is important that more regional associations are created to work together with peer associations. There is a great

deal of activities to be undertaken in order to fulfill such an endeavour. But I will have to leave them for another round of conversation.