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13.3

3 issues a year in multiple languages

Talking Sociology
with Rita Segato

Breno Bringel
Vitória Gonzalez

Spotlight on the ISA

Margaret Archer
Michel Wieviorka
Michael Burawoy
Margaret Abraham
Sari Hanafi
Geoffrey Pleyers
Martin Albrow

The World According
to Critical Theory
(and Vice Versa)

Stephan Lessenich
Gurminder K. Bhambra
Manuela Boatecă
Patricia Cipollitti Rodríguez
Bruna de la Torre de C. Lima
Esteban Torres

Decarbonisation and
Green Colonialism

Breno Bringel
Maristella Svampa
Hamza Hamouchène
Nnimmo Bassey
South-South Manifesto

Theoretical
Perspectives

Kathya Araujo

Open Section

- > **The Politics of Fear and the
Authoritarian Political Imagination**
- > **Water Struggles as Resistance
to Neoliberal Capitalism**

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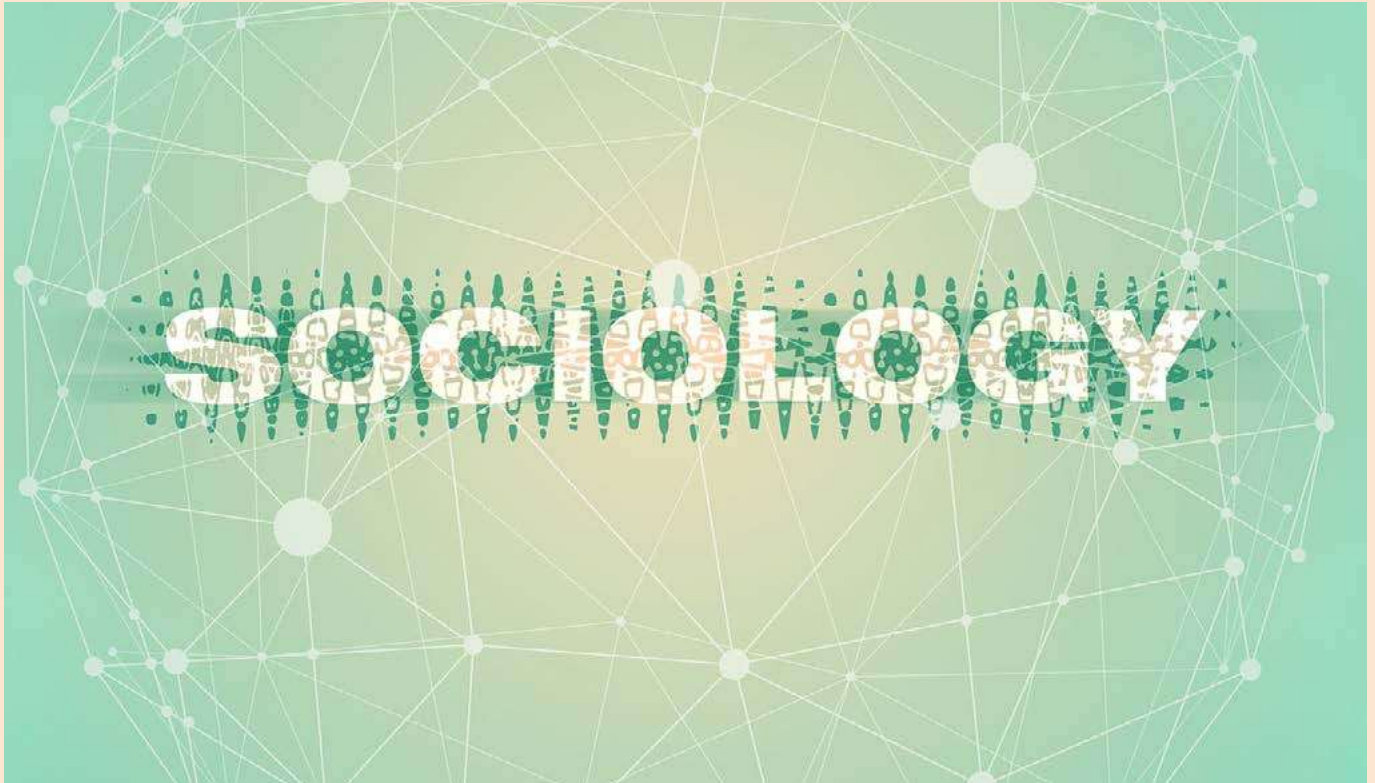
VOLUME 13 / ISSUE 3 / DECEMBER 2023
<https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/>

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> Global Sociology: Four Transformations

by **Geoffrey Pleyers**, FNRS & Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, and ISA President (2023-2027)



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12

New President's Address, XX World Congress of Sociology, Melbourne, July 1, 2023

While sociology aims at understanding the transformations of our world, our discipline is also affected and itself transformed by them. This is notably the case of the project of *global sociology*, which needs to be revisited considering the transformations our world has gone through over the past decades. I started studying globalization in the late 1990s. By then, it was a central topic in sociology. “Sociology for One World” was already the theme for the ISA 1990 World Congress. Thirty-three years later, global challenges have become even more critical. Our world has become increasingly “global”. However, how we see the world, globalization, and sociology have changed dramatically. In this short address, I would like to briefly mention four of these changes, why they require renewing the project of a global sociology, and what they have meant for ISA.

> New tools for communications and connections

One of the most dramatic changes since the 1990s is the massive use of “new information and communication technologies”. The Internet and the cyber world had just started in the 1990s, but connectivity was soon considered foundational to an era of intensifying globalization (Castells, 1996). Nowadays, digital media and technologies have become a major part of the lives of most human beings. They have dramatically changed how we communicate, inform ourselves, and live together. They have deeply transformed the public space in democratic, illiberal, and authoritarian regimes alike.

Digital communication technologies have brought challenges and opportunities to ISA and to global sociology.

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Digital communications provide tools to make visible sociological analyses from different regions of the world and to reach out to larger audiences among citizens and policymakers. ISA organized the first large online congress in social sciences during the pandemic, attended by over 3,500 researchers. Today, the ISA social media keeps our community alive and informed daily. Online meetings have also allowed more participatory dynamics in ISA, notably through the online meetings of the Research Council.

> A limited planet

The climate disaster and a growing ecological consciousness have dramatically changed the meaning and experience of our globality. In the 1990s, “globalization” referred to the expansion of the Western model of the market and formal democracy in a world reunited after the Cold War, and seemed limitless. Nowadays, the core questions of global sociology have taken a new form with the climate meltdown and the destruction of nature.

“How do we live together on a limited planet?” This is arguably the most important question sociology must address in the twenty-first century. Ecology and environmental issues are more than specific objects for sociology: they intersect with all the objects and fields of research topics and have become a central question for sociology. They will transform our discipline and what is expected from sociology and sociologists. This will be a central topic in ISA over the next four years.

> Rising authoritarianism rather than the expansion of democracy

In the 1990s, most intellectuals, policymakers, and civil society actors shared the conviction, or at least the hope, that the intensification of globalization and interconnection enabled by the Internet would imply the expansion of democracy and respect for human rights.

A quarter century later, the theme chosen for our 2023 World Congress was “Resurgent Authoritarianism”. Unfortunately, this was an excellent and timely choice by Sari Hanafi. The hopes of new waves of democratization that had surged again with the Arab Spring faded away in the following decade. Illiberal and authoritarian regimes strengthened on all continents. They learned efficient ways of using social media and communication technologies to control their people, orient elections in other countries, and project their narratives and regime model globally.

Sociologists and social scientists have dedicated a great deal of research to authoritarian regimes and actors, and to movements that threaten democracy; very often, they also threaten sociologists. The freedom of research has been challenged in many countries, whether by increasing state control or by the multiplication of threats by far-right actors or paramilitary militias. In our times, a global sociol-

ogy requires particular attention and support for sociologists who face threats while conducting their research. On January 25, 2016, Giulio Regeni, a young Italian sociologist and member of ISA RC47, was arrested and murdered by the Egyptian police while researching independent unions in Cairo. Our 2021 Forum started with a tribute to Marielle Franco, a sociologist, local politician, and activist against state violence who was murdered by gangs in Rio de Janeiro on March 14, 2018. One of the most insightful contributions to the 2021 ISA Forum was written in Ankara jail by Cihan Erdal, a PhD student at Carleton University, who was arrested while conducting fieldwork in Istanbul.

> The rise of the Global South

In the 1990s, globalization was associated with Westernization, expanding the Western market economy, culture, way of life, and worldview. In the twenty-first century, globalization refers to the rise of actors and countries from different regions of the world. Global media focus on their rise as economic and geopolitical actors. Their increasing role as producers of knowledge is at least as significant.

Few disciplines have been impacted by this rise as much as sociology. The deeper connections and dialogues between sociologists from different continents, the broader diffusion of groundbreaking work by scholars from the Global South, and new perspectives on the histories and geography of our discipline have turned the meaning of “global sociology” upside down. In the 1990s, the global sociology literature was entirely dominated by Western scholars. The Global South and the “East” were often seen as sites for empirical research fed by Western concepts. Nowadays, the heart of global sociology lies in making contributions by scholars and actors from the Global South visible and challenging the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge. Theories, concepts, and analyses by scholars from the Global South have helped us to understand social challenges as much in the Global South as in the Global North. They have transformed the way we see concepts as crucial as modernity, inequalities, and environmental justice. They have shown different ways to relate to nature, the world, and ourselves.

Contrary to what some of their detractors claim, decolonial, subaltern, or postcolonial perspectives do not focus their epistemic proposals on erasing the contributions of “Western sociology” to start a “decolonial sociology”. As with knowledge produced in any other part of the world, European and North American sociology should be situated in its time and place, challenged in some of its claims to universalism, and develop in a renewed global dialogue with concepts, worldviews, and theories from the Global South.

Global sociology can neither remain rooted in the Western universities and canons that presented themselves as universal nor be limited to criticism of this Western sociology.



Decolonial, post-colonial, and subaltern perspectives invite us to situate social theories and revisit some of the key concepts of our discipline in a dialogue with realities and knowledge rooted in different parts of the world. Opening spaces for dialogue among researchers and approaches from different continents, and promoting better inclusion of epistemologies and scholars from the Global South and from oppressed minorities has been one of the main goals of ISA since its foundation; and even more so since the 1990s and the projects developed by Immanuel Wallerstein.

More thoroughly including sociologists, research, analyses, and theories from all continents is not only a matter of democratizing sociology, it is also one of the most insightful paths to improve our understanding of social realities and actors. Therefore, we must do much more than increase ISA membership in the Global South. We need to foster these colleagues' active participation and full involvement in ISA, our Research Committees, our events, and our projects; and support their National Associations.

> Openness and care

Global sociology is not only a theoretical project, a set of epistemological debates, and some methodological challenges. It is also a stance that is at once sociological, cultural, and personal.

Global sociology after – and with – the decolonial turn starts with an openness to perspectives grounded in different worldviews, cultures, and social backgrounds. It is rooted in the acceptance of exposing oneself to the risk (and hope) of losing some of one's certainties and learning from the encounter with the other. It is grounded in and fed by the commitment – and pleasure – to read and meet people from different continents, the openness to look at our research objects from different standpoints, to understand them in different ways, and maybe to understand ourselves and our place in the world differently.

Insightful research and theories from different parts of the world, tolerant dialogues among situated approaches and analyses, and a willingness to learn from each other are crucial components of a renewed global sociology.

Setting up spaces that encourage intercultural dialogues in which we can share our research results and perspectives in a supportive environment is the main role of ISA. Fulfilling it requires more than intentions, discourses, and analyses. It also requires practices of openness, tolerance, and care for each other, particularly in an international and multicultural environment.

Let me give you a concrete example. A few months ago, I attended the ISA PhD Laboratory. One of the participants arrived exhausted from a long and stressful journey from Palestine. During the dinner, she had a panic attack after being interrogated at the borders for so long. Two or three other participants discreetly took her to another table, listened to her and supported her. A young doctoral researcher took the initiative to book a room in a nearby hotel, cared for her during the evening and ensured she had a restful night. At nine in the morning, both were back with the group for the opening session, ready for what both would experience as an insightful week of learning and exchanges with fellow PhD students and researchers from all continents. It was done in such a kind and discreet way that I did not even notice it on that evening. However, this kind of concrete action teaches us that caring for each other is an indispensable part of developing a global sociology.

While it remains mostly invisible, this care and solidarity in action is crucial to ISA. The example I referred to also shows us that ISA and global sociology are not only happening in our large meetings and congresses. ISA is embodied in intercultural encounters, exchanges among sociologists from different continents, openness to perspectives and research from different regions of the world, and in practices of care that allow us to share them in a supportive environment. Developing this global sociology rooted in the opening to others' perspectives and in practices of care is even more important in a time of rising authoritarianism, nationalisms, inequalities, and environmental collapse.

As the XXth World Congress of Sociology is coming to its end, let us take some of this ISA with us and implement this openness to global dialogue and this care for each other in our practices. Let us build together a renewed, more open and global sociology, starting where we are active in our everyday lives as sociologists, as researchers, as teachers, as citizens, and as human beings.

The great challenge of our times is the progressive emergence of a planetary consciousness that will enable us to face together the common challenges we face, starting with global warming, the environmental crisis, rising inequalities, and the threats to democracy. If we, sociologists, are up to the task, sociology will contribute to this planetary awareness and take its place in solving some of the challenges of this century. ■

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Related publications by Geoffrey Pleyers:

[Global Sociology as a Renewed Global Dialogue](#), *Global Dialogue*, 13.1, April 2023.
[For a global sociology of social movements. Beyond methodological globalism and extractivism](#), *Globalizations*, 2023.