Sociological Research online

Global Attentiveness and the Sociological Ear

by Les Back
Goldsmiths, University of London

Sociological Research Online 14(4)14
<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/4/14.html>
doi:10.5153/sro.1992

Received: 16 Jun 2009 Accepted: 3 Sep 2009 Published: 31 Aug 2009

Abstract

This paper argues for the training of a global attentiveness that reconfigures the epistemic apparatus of sociology, to admit not only the legacy of empire but also an appreciation of how the dynamics of the British social formation are intimately tied to imperial and postcolonial networks. It argues not for provincialising British sociology and its modes of thought but for rendering explicit the implication near at hand and the postcolonial elsewhere. Sociological knowledge as a consequence needs to challenge what it dismisses as unthinkable - be it the history of empire in its own modern formation or the contemporary turn to the sacred and otherworldly - in order to extend its imagination to a truly global scale.

Introduction

1.1 Gayatri Spivak once asked provocatively 'can the subaltern speak?' That was over twenty years ago. My interpretation of this difficult text is that she was tying the distribution of geopolitical power and economic wealth to the shape and quality of Eurocentred forms of knowledge production, what she refers to as the 'ferocious standardising benevolence' of US and European social science including sociology (Spivak 1988: 294). The argument here, if I have understood it right, is that subalterns are silent not only because their interpreters and cheerleaders speak on their behalf but also because of a particular epistemic structure in which an 'other' is created by particular European thought and then this creation, like Fanon's primal scene of racial sociogeny ('Look Mama a Negro'), is assimilated into that which created it in the first place. She wrote that this need not apply to all modes of reporting and witness: 'The cautions I have ... expressed are valid only if we are speaking of the subaltern woman's consciousness – or, more acceptably, subject. Reporting on, or better still, participating in antisexist work among women of colour or women in class oppression in the First world is undeniably on the agenda.' Her critique is directed at the constitution of the muted subaltern subject and the confident authority of the Western subject that speaks in her place. I want to suggest that a shift to explore the nature of the relation between subjects offers another set of challenges relevant to the concern with global social inquiry and also possible alternatives to the damage done by such modes of authority. Spivak does not dissolve the potential for European writers to develop a sociological attentiveness to the world: 'We should also welcome all the information retrieval in the silenced areas that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history, and sociology. Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilisation, And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever' (Spivak 1988: 294).

1.2 The limits of the sociological imagination might be posed a different way if we ask 'can sociology hear beyond the boundaries Europe and America without committing violations of this sort?' Or, better still how has the intellectual apparatus of sociology and its relationship to modernity been limited? What also has it been deaf to closer to home? Gurminder Bhambra argues (2007a) that British sociology remains unable to confront the centrality of the colonial and postcolonial experience to its constitutive theoretical formation. She argues for 'difference to make a difference' to our ways of conceiving the social and not to reduce issues of difference to 'identity' that, following Spivak, is assimilated as an 'add on' sociological specialism.

1.3 The first point that I want to make is to suggest that if we are to develop 'global sociological modes of sociological inquiry' – and I want to argue very strongly for the urgency of this - it necessitates re-thinking the near at hand as well as the elsewhere. This should not be a license for a global scramble for exotic informants in Africa or China who will only be assimilated in an age old and self-serving way. Part of the challenge of global social inquiry is to re-think how we understand the traces and presences of global relations in and across localities.

1.4 Again this comes back to a point that Gurminder Bhambra made in relation to the way the birth of

sociology is twinned with modernity but also its estranged third presence i.e. the inability to link the history of empire and colonisation to both its objects of investigation and its epistemic structure. This is an inability to comprehend that the dynamics of British social formation are integrally connected to an imperial elsewhere. George Orwell commented in 1939: 'What we always forget is that the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa' (Orwell 1968: 437).

1.5 The other point that I want to draw out here is the importance of challenging provincialism. Michael Burawoy, in his stirring 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association appealed for the renewal of sociology's commitment to public engagement. He also aimed to look at the ways in which American sociology had become globally dominant. His IX Thesis aimed at 'provincialising American Sociology.' This he summed up as: 'we have a special responsibility to provincialize our own sociology, to bring it down from the pedestal of universality and recognise its distinctive national character... We should apply our sociology to ourselves, become more conscious of the global forces that are driving our discipline, so that we may channel them rather than be channelled by them' (Burawoy 2005: 22). Others have also argued in a different way for provincialising of Europe (see Chakrabarty 2000) and while the impetus to cut intellectual arrogance down to size is admirable, I am less convinced that the move to provincialise helps necessarily to the development of the kind of attentiveness I want to argue for.

1.6 C. Wright Mills commented:

> To the world's range of enormous problems, liberalism responds with its verbal fetish of 'freedom' plus a shifting series of opportunistic reactions. The world is hungry; the liberal cries: 'Let us make it free!' The world is tired of war; the liberal cries: 'Let us arm for peace!' The peoples of the world are without land; the liberal cries: 'Let us beg the landed oligarchs to parcel some out!' In sum: the most grievous charge today against liberalism and its conservative varieties is that they are so utterly provincial, and thus so irrelevant to the major problems that must now be confronted in so many areas of the world (Mills 1963: 30-1).

1.7 Writing in the middle of the 20th century Mills predicts the conservative revolution that would tighten the grasp of liberalism. A global sociological imagination should seek to challenge this kind of provincialism, be it intellectual or political. This involves a modest but nonetheless difficult task of plotting the connections between overlapping territories and interconnected histories and excavating the implication of European power but at the same time focusing on its limit points. Rather, than provincialising the sociological imagination and confining its European particularity, I would argue the task is to plot the historical interconnections and the overlapping geographies produced through empire and modernity. What of for example the relationship between Cardiff, where the 2009 British Sociological Association conference was held, and its long history as a port town, its historic community in Tiger Bay and its ambiguous place as one of the oldest black communities in Britain. The black American sociologist St Clair Drake wrote his anthropological dissertation entitled *Values, Social Structure and Race Relations in the British Isles* about this community completed in 1954. He came to Tiger Bay in part because his white mentors thought he was 'too close' to the issues of African American life to study them as a dispassionate anthropologist. Although, by 1945 Drake had already published *Black Metropolis* with Horace Clayton, a groundbreaking study of African American life (see Drake & Clayton 1946). Drake's story reveals some of the double standards regarding proximity, bias, 'who can anthropologise whom,' and the damage done to sociological thinking by racism that is as relevant today as it was then.

1.8 Provincialism clouds critical judgment. Chetan Bhatt makes this point when he characterizes a 'methodological narcissism' in much of the debate about identity and alterity in Europe and North America. He writes: 'It seems puzzling that the overwhelming academic obsession with diaspora, racial, ethnic, mixed, hybrid, syncretic, passing self and all its variegated possibilities is occurring during a period of impersonal, brutalising geopolitics and the greatest relative and absolute impoverishment of large sections of the non-Western world' (2004: 34). The overdeveloped world's grievances and inequalities need to be set in the context of the larger social cleavages manifest on a global scale. The mind-blowing fact that at the high point of Michael Jordan's corporate sponsorship from Nike he earned more than the combined labour forces of South East Asian workers who made Air Jordan sneakers. This also involves a critical judgment that is supple enough to cope with the complexity of the relationships between the local and global. For example, unthinking Liberals or sociologists might herald a community organisation in Britain as an example of multicultural or religious diversity. Yet, the same organisation might also be implicated in religious motivated violence and extremism elsewhere.

1.9 In 2004 a report identified the ways in which British-based registered charities including Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh UK, Vishwa Hindu Parishad UK and Kalyan Ashram Trust UK were connected to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a paramilitary political organisation implicated in large scale sectarian violence and violations of human rights in India (Awaaz 2004). It is so easy to fall foul of what might be called the 'local trap' or the 'provincial trap'. Avoiding it requires the constant attempt to situate one's own concerns beyond the immediate setting from which they emerge. It is for this reason that sociological thinking needs to address the issue of scale and how to develop a worldly mode of investigation and thought.

1.10 This year is the 50th anniversary of Mills' classic text *The Sociological Imagination*. I want to return to the nostrums of C Wright Mills and in particular his invitation to turn 'personal troubles into public issues' (1963: 8). In the 21st century the quality and scale of these troubles have been transformed in ways that Mills could not have imagined. In particular, the shape of public life with all its troublesome elements does not fit into a stable local or even national entity. The challenge of sociological thinking is how to work in a global context where the nation state no longer remains the prime container of sociological analysis or imagination. Put simply, 'the here' of any sociological problem or personal trouble is almost always connected to things happening beyond the boundaries of the nation. Michael Keith calls the connectedness

the ‘elsewhere of place and the global familiar’ (2005: 187). These connections are not as productive or positive as the 20th-century court poets of globalisation imagined (see, for example Giddens 1999). This involves developing global perspectives that defy the languages of the global and not romanticising the regional specificities. Indeed, much of the discussion of globalisation that took place in the 1990s has been overshadowed in the new century by the imperial project enacted by American and British interests in the name of the ‘war on terror.’ Indeed, the work of writers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) and Paul Gilroy (2004) emphasises both the emergences of new empires and the continued disruption of the present by the legacy of old ones. As much as the here also contains the elsewhere, the now also contains the legacy of the past.

1.11 This is not simply a matter of geography and history, it also involves confronting what is imaginable in the sociological imagination. Are there limits concerning what sociological knowledge can be admit? Gregor McLennan commented recently that the moves towards a ‘postsecular sociology’ involve confronting strenuous intellectual issues. For him, the insistence that ‘sociology is an explanatory and descriptive form of understanding’ cannot be compromised (McLennan 2007: 869). This seems at the end of the day to result in a kind of ‘take it or leave it’ secularism that assumes our epistemological hand always contains the trump card of a superior truth. I think we need to be more attentive to that which the secular tradition of sociology has found hard to contemplate. As Stuart Hall has commented recently the resurgence of religious movements has surprised many on the Left because: ‘our secular sociological selves thought religion was going to go away [...] Culture has taken its revenge on our failure to understand history’ (Hall and Back 2009: 685). John Holmwood argues this means moving away from a universalistic position toward an inclusive and dialogic social inquiry centred on common problems (see Holmwood this issue <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/4/13.html >) and attune to that which is outside our modes of understanding. Otherwise, sociological judgment merely dismisses vast swaths of human experiences as ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ or simply inadmissible.

1.12 The scale of global sociology is precisely an attention to the implication of our most intimate and most local experiences in planetary networks and relationships. Sociological listening is needed today in order to admit the subaltern, the overlooked past, to allow the ‘out of place’, a sense of belonging. This is not some quick or blithe or romantic ‘one world’ ethos in which the wretched are listened to and heard. Returning to Spivak’s provocative intervention I am suggesting something much more difficult and disruptive. For ‘difference to make a difference’ to the way the sociological ear is trained. A form of global attentiveness that challenges the sociological listener’s preconceptions and position while at the same time it engages critically with the content of what is being said and heard. It also means entering into difficult and challenging critical dialogues with one’s allies as well as one’s enemies and this involves no simply assimilation or ventriloquism. It should be unsettling and uncomfortable - Spivak characterized this by recalling Derrida who: ‘does not invoke “letting the other(s) speak for himself” but rather invokes an “appeal” to or “call” to the “quite-other” (tout-autre as opposed to a self-consolidating other), of the “rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us”’ (1988: 294).

1.13 Consequently sociological listening needs to protect itself and those we listen to from a violating ventriloquism that makes them lost for words. Nirmul Puwar puts the challenge in this way: ‘How do we listen amid the risks of enacting symbolic and epistemic violence? How do we listen without objectifying and anthropologising the local global?’ (2006: 10). Part of the response I am suggesting here is that such forms of attention are embodied through relationships across difference and encounter. Perhaps, one starting point in avoiding the violations identified by Puwar is to insist that our accounts are always incomplete. To insist on a kind of modest attentiveness, that is positioned and contains particular vantage points to listen, look and make sense. This of course does not in itself solve the problem of critique and judgment. What about a situation where very different accounts and epistemologies are being used to know the rights and wrong of the same instance? Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1993) provides one solution to this problem through the idea that standards of judgment are internal to the communities within which differing accounts are produced. I don’t think the consequence of this argument is necessarily that these accounts are incommensurable and the task of translation always fated. As Gurminder Bhambra suggests, drawing on Nelson, ‘relativism is not prevented by invoking universal standards, but by invoking the negotiated standards of relationships within and between communities.’ (2007b: 148). Part of the task of global social inquiry is to aspire to an interpretive position that shuttles between these standards of judgment and horizons of understanding. Charles Taylor notion of ‘perspicuous contrast’ provides a useful tool to find an alternative to either ethnocentrism or relativism. Here what is implied is a multiple destabilisation in which contrasting understandings are brought into relationship with each other. This offers the potential for the listener’s frameworks of knowledge to shift alongside a critical questioning of the speaker’s terms of reference.

1.14 As Paul Rabinow has also argued, the daring light of the Enlightenment is at once arrogant and humble: ‘It is arrogant in so far as it acts for humanity with the confidence that it is right; it is humble in that enlightenment is an infinite project whose achievement lies in the future’ (2003: 94). We cannot any longer claim to act for humanity with such certainty.

1.15 Returning to Spivak’s question it is not that the subaltern cannot speak. They have voices, some being exercised within the discipline itself, it is rather that sociology has not been able to develop an ear for them on terms that are not already pre-set. Such a disposition that I want to call a global attentiveness needs to be trained, that both reconfigures the epistemic apparatus of sociology, as well as develops a new mode of attention. Sociology needs to think more about what it dismisses as unthinkable - be it the history of empire in its own modern formation or the contemporary turn to the sacred and otherworldly - in order to extend the boundaries of its imagination to a worldly scale.

References

AWAAZ 2004. *In bad faith?: British charity and Hindu extremism.* London: Awaaz South Asia Watch Ltd

BHAMBRA, Gurminder K. 2007a. 'Sociology and postcolonialism: another 'missing' revolution?,' *Sociology*, 41(5): 871-884. [doi:10.1177/0038038507080442]

BHAMBRA, Gurminder 2007b. *Rethinking modernity: postcolonialism and the sociological imagination.* London: Palgrave Macmillan

BHATT, Chetan 2004. 'Geopolitics and "alterity" research,' in *Researching Race and Racism*, eds., Martin Bulmer and John Solomos. London and New York: Routledge

BURAWOY, Michael 2005. 'For public sociology,' *American Sociological Review*, 70

CHAKRABARTY, Dipesh 2000. Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press

DRAKE, St. Clair and Horace R. Clayton, 1946. *Black metropolis: a study of Negro life in a northern city.* London: Cape

GIDDENS, Anthony 1999. *Runaway world: how globalisation is shaping our lives.* London: Vintage

GILROY, Paul 2004. *After empire: melancholia or convivial culture.* Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge

HALL, Stuart and Les Back 2009 'At home and not at home', *Cultural Studies*, 23 (2)

HARDT, Michael and Antonio Negri 2000. *Empire.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

KEITH, Michael 2005. *After the cosmopolitan: multicultural cities and the future of racism.* London: Routledge

MCLENNAN, Gregor 2007. 'Towards a postsecular sociology?' *Sociology*, 41(5)

MILLS, C. Wright 1963. *The Marxists.* Harmondsworth, Pelican bookshop

NELSON, Lynn Hankinson 1993. 'Epistemological communities' in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. L. Alcoff and E. Potter. New York and London: Routledge

ORWELL, George 1968. 'Not counting Niggers,' *The collected essays, journalism and letters: volume 1,* eds, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. Harmondsworth, Penguin

PUWAR, Nirmal 2006. 'What is an Inaugural,' *Goldsmiths Sociology Research Newsletter*, Issue 21

RABINOW, Paul 2003. Anthropos *today: reflections on modern equipment.* Princeton: Princeton University Press

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty 1988. 'Can the subaltern speak,' in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan