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Comment on Julian Go/2. Moving On

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Comment on Julian Go/2

Moving On

by Charles Crothers

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1. Introduction.

Julian Go's essay [2016] is a useful clearing of the throat which seems to overcome some troubling aspects which have slowed Sociology's aspirational trajectory towards a more global scope, although it seems underpowered in terms of pushing global sociology much further ahead. My comments attempt to clear some further misunderstandings around the central task of global sociology and to build further on Go's essay. In particular, it is not enough to provide the intellectual scaffolding for global sociology to advance, but equal effort is needed to ensure that its currently slender support base is massively strengthened so that it becomes of global sociological importance.

The movement within Sociology Go is aligned with "[...] can be variously called "Southern Theory", "epistemologies of the South", "indigenous" [*Ibidem*, p.2] or hereafter Global Sociology (GS). Go wishes to straighten out some conceptual kinks in the conceptual apparatus of global sociology and wishes to

[...] craft sociologies that escape sociology's Anglo-European provenance [*Ibidem*, p.1].

Instead, Global Sociology (GS) should seek to harvest knowledge from the Global South and thereby cultivate alternative sociologies. Interestingly, Go is concerned about how avoid a Balkanised sociology in which each "national sociology"

(or similar local unit) remains confined within its own national scope. He usefully (but ambivalently) detaches the provenance and parentage of theories from being over-emphasised rather than their content. In responding to these key messages I cover:

- My Positionality
- The Nature of Global Sociology
- The illusion of New General Theory
- “Indigenous” Peoples
- Multi-Perspectivism: *Regaining the lost elephant*
- Extending the Examples: Soft Imperialism, and
- Fitting GS into mainstream (Northern) Sociology.

2. My Position(ality)/Perspective.

Pakeha/Europeans from New Zealand (and Australia) cannot make a strong claim to be in the Global South, although as geographically detached portions (settler colonies) of the North they have a close relationship with closely surrounding portions of the Global South. In my personal case meaningful relations as a sociologist must be forged not just with local indigenous (Maori), but also with Pacific Peoples, not to mention the considerable influx to New Zealand of (Asian: Chinese and Indian mainly) “new settlers.” This has particularly required an involvement with literature (overlooked by Go and many other Southern writers) of “fourth world” methodologists/epistemologists (more on this below). In my case, too, local relations have been fructified by a five year teaching stint in South Africa as Professor of Sociology at the University of Natal. So I have some relevant “ethnological capital,” which I make explicit to point out the opportunities and limitations of my experience. I might finally add I’ve long been interested in how “Northern” sociology needs to be adapted to “Southern” circumstances and have been somewhat diligent in tracking relevant literature and debates. Unfortunately, some such discussions have “over-promised” so it is heartening to engage with an essay which is moving the debate forward.

3. Nature and Scope of “Global Sociology.”

Some indication of the scope and purpose of a “global sociology” is needed: although we can reasonably quickly begin with the idea it would encompass Global North and Global South and also that it would be (*inter alia*) attentive to the global level, that is, to emergent properties of the world system and the contextual effects of these. A half-way house is comparative sociology - based on the inclusion in so-

ciological studies of several societies or other social units - which must be a central component of any global sociology. Presumably global sociology would draw its empirical substance appropriately (representatively?) from the full range of peoples around the world. The idea of representativeness lies at the heart of much survey research: a global survey, for example, would attempt (undoubtedly with complex weightings and design) to draw on the views from a hypothetical list of all people in all populations. An alternative operationalisation of the scope would be that a global sociology would be based on adequate consideration of all known forms of social unit (rather than people). The depth of the time dimension is also pertinent and a global historical sociology might include – in principle – all social units and peoples known to the contemporary world.

One indication of what is covered by global sociology has been various textbooks with global sociology in their titles: such books are western but do at least endeavour to cover a wide range of societal circumstances and include the “world system” and macro-sociological models within their material.

4. The New General Theory Illusion?

Go provides some argumentation in support of the view that general sociological theory needs to be revamped to provide the conceptual foundations for a global sociology. He asks

And why is “agency” in this debate theorized mainly in terms of individual capacities, consciousness or intentionality, which is a very specific way of thinking about agency that occludes group action and the agency of non-humans? [*Ibidem*, p.6].

But this is only partially true: discussions of agency/structure do need to include collective and non-human aspects and certainly some do, and the relevant theorists do indeed need to work more on such aspects to make crystal clear that collective aspects are encompassed. But the need for inclusion of these aspects is hardly limited to situations from the global south but is a difficulty that applies generally.

Experiences of those in the Global South (or writing on their behalf) do and should put pressure on the general theoretical formulations of Northern general theory, but I don't think there is a strong need to get hung up at this theoretical level. Let's confront it: structure and agency (although we do need to be careful in their formulations) are analytical tools which apply across all human situations. Almost all of the rest of the conceptual apparatus of “Northern theory” also applies (with nudges) despite its provenance.

Of course we need to keep an open mind about possible alternative formulations of general theoretical tools, but in the meantime let's press on with the analytical tools that we've got.

I think, too, there are necessary constraints on expectations concerning the further development of general theory. In practice, sociologists from the global south aren't heavily into theory – beyond useful theory. I think there can be an over-emphasis on the term “Southern theory” as so many sociologists in the Global South have neither the resources nor inclination to engage in extensive theoretical work. There is much to be done in applied sociology, and better to use (and adapt) the conceptual tools to hand. For example, in her very important text on indigenous methodologies Linda Smith [2012] argues that social science projects need to be useful to those being studied (preferably in partnership). To emphasise by repetition: this is a pragmatic statement and one that should definitely not preclude giving an audience to such Southern general theories that are advanced.

There are also some conceptual barriers to some theorizing from the Global South: as the sociology of knowledge shows, the social knowledge stocks of different societies vary in levels of abstractness (although not necessarily in terms of other dimensions) and this may make developing conceptual tools of the requisite conceptualisation difficult. In short, e.g. African poetry is part of the cultural apparatus of the relevant societies and needs careful consideration (as do all “lay theories” or “indigenous social knowledges”) but these are not a substitute for analytical models. Local knowledges are very important for understanding peoples but they often preclude consideration of the wider environments within which these peoples are located. Such extended viewpoints were not their purpose.

There can be an overemphasis on provenance of theorists ... and theory. This may even be experienced as paralysing. Yet, there is no particular need to develop further critique of northern theorists. Marx was after all mainly concerned to develop a theory of capitalism since it was the overwhelming source of social ills before him. But he did also attend to the social structures of other formations. That he should have attended more to North American slave plantations in his consideration of capitalism (as Go argues) would require further argumentation to become pertinent. On the face of it, it seems to me that the US plantations were indeed inserted within a wider capitalist structure but their immediate slave-based formation belongs to another mode – also occurring at other periods in history. This is surely the distinction between mode and formation (which might have several modes).

Connell [2007] has criticized Giddens, Bourdieu and Coleman for their lack of attention to Southern issues. But Bourdieu's sociological work was forged in the war-torn crucible of colonial Algeria (albeit by a Northern theorist) as several books

have more recently pointed out at some length. Giddens in a series of books did attend to long sweeps of historical development of societies. Even, although arguably Coleman is guilty as charged, maybe his ethnocentrism was ameliorated by his attention to major development issues such as access to schooling.

5. “Indigenous” Peoples.

I think Go’s deployment of the concept of “indigenous” is interesting, perhaps concerning. The term “Global South” presently seems very well-established. However, this is a very complex category which might be usefully split into several sub-categories (following to some extent categories represented in the UN system):

- ancient civilisations and/or currently powerful nation-states (e.g. China, Brazil) with a substantial “civilizational” stock;
- the various ethnicities and nationalities of the world outside the western or similar portions of the rest of the world;
- the “fourth world” of “native” tribal peoples which are often still organised in small tribal units and often in a difficult position in relation to the countries encompassing them.

I’m used to thinking of this last category as the core “indigenous” and hope that wider use of the term doesn’t divert from separate attention to this group (recognised of course through the UN system through its *Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*).

6. Multi-Perspectivism: Regaining the Lost Elephant.

Go’s Weberian perspectival realism seems quite sound, but has limitations. The difficulty with perspectival realism is that it works best when each particular perspective relates to a particular ontological level: e.g. interactional experiences for subalterns compared perhaps with more structural experiences of overlords. Then, the different perspectives do not clash as much as operate past each other at different levels, and nor is there pressure to connect them up. Yet more often, connecting up is an important further step. Often the experiences of people in different parts of a structure are related: sometimes they are direct mirror images of each other. Landlords might regard tenants as feckless while tenants regard landlords as grasping and uncaring. Even if experiences cannot be directly related to each other, the set of relations forms (something of) a whole. In the classic metaphor of blind people feeling different elephant parts, discussion amongst each of the individual researchers (or subprojects) might lead to the cognitive assembly of the elephant. Why not assemble

the structures of relations which hold social categories more or less together rather than leave separate?

The outlined standpoint approach could/should apply across all of sociology. Starting with experiences and categories of subjects and then tracing through the experiences (the “follow the experiences!” “study up!”) into the structures generating them is a sound rule. And essentially an extension of Weberian social theory.

I’m not so sure, in principle, though, about privileging the most deprived, although this is undoubtedly an excellent pragmatic strategy. The “bottom” level may have different characteristics than that one step up: for example revolution is to be expected (if at all) from those with at least some resources. Moreover, any analysis should be extended to cover those occupying other positions in the immediate social structure and eventually all (significant) positions in the whole system needs to be unravelled.

7. Extending the Examples: Soft Imperialism.

It is great that Go illustrates his sally with two very well-known but pertinent examples (Frantz Fanon and Raúl Prebisch) to exemplify Southern Theory. However, reflection on these cases may throw up difficulties as well as useful points. There are at least two features of these examples which are striking:

- both deal with relations between modernity (Northern) and the local (Southern) and notably on intermediary formations which span the two;
- both deal with “authoritative” rather than “soft” power.

Restraining himself to these two examples, Go doesn’t make it clear where he might go for further examples. A lesson I draw from their provenance is that maybe studies internal to the Global North and the Global South are each well-covered by orthodox sociology and orthodox anthropology (as Go avers) but that where global sociology needs to particularly develop attention is on the intermediary forms which span the two. This needs to extend far more widely than North/South since there are a variety of “south-on-south” relation to consider (eg. the emergent BRICS power bloc). Briefly, whereas classic anthropology (which Go sees as limited) attempts to reconstruct classic (often pre-contact with Northern) phases of a society, what is needed are sociologies which show the multiplex ways in which societies rub against each other across a wider range of settings and trajectories.

Soft imperialism/colonialism such as the worldwide diffusion of western culture may well be even more powerful in its consequences than economic trading. A global sociology would obviously include relevant studies.

8. Strategies for Building GS into Contemporary Sociology Strategy.

We need a conception of sociology which enables and valorises knowledge from the South. Yet, installing global sociology may be very problematic since it seems to run “against the grain” of the internal processes of any science which necessarily emphasises “originality”, but does not always valorise an extended range of empirical material supporting this. Connell’s hypothesis is that the North vacuums up data from the South. I think the evidence more points to the North not being much interested in the South: as the adage goes the North says “I’m just not that into you”. And yet its attention needs to be drawn to Southern data.

The North is also safely cocooned within the language fortress of English. Already, though there are some moves to bring in other languages in abstracts. This could be extended by journals using more non-national reviewers as part of their editorial process.

Curriculum reform may be possible too, slipping past the research structures of the discipline to the underlying teaching structures. Urging the inclusion of global sociology in university curricula may be a successful strategy. In part, it may usefully build on the curiosity of sociology students for other places, even if faculty’s interests are firmly centred on narrower empirical scopes.

Since the advent of third wave feminism, informal representative quotas have applied at least in some sectors of Sociology such as speaking platforms. Where there are “controlled” situations such as these, representative speakers from the global south might now be expected to be invited. (In turn of course this generates difficulties about the criteria for such invitations and who might legitimately count as being sufficiently representative).

Another strategy might be to build up publishing frameworks which don’t have the capacity and “prestige” limitations of the existing journal/book publishing structures of sociology. In many disciplines there is a structure of “technical reports” (or equivalents) which carry the routine empirical investigations generated by that discipline. Science journals are able to cover much more in the way of more routine material than social science journals since they often allow quite formulaic presentations of “facts” – often in short articles. Similar means might be found of enabling southern knowledges to be stored and made available to the wider sociological community without necessarily requiring this information to be encased within “original” articles.

9. Global Social Research.

“Southern theory” needs to catch up with global social research which has already considerably developed over recent years with a network of global surveys and with indices/databases summarising the performances of states and other social units. Qualitative research has also become aware of the global setting into which it might be placed (as Burawoy’s writings have suggested). These burgeoning research enterprises need theoretical guidance and critique, but also provide a reservoir of useable data for assisting with honing analyses. Such data collection is prone to fall prey to the “Connell condition” where Northern research interests are accused of vacuuming up South-sourced data for Northern purposes – although this data also has the potential to allow “self-study” by southern scholars. The questions and framing of such global surveys undoubtedly reflects the Northern control of these operations and critique should be developed.

10. Global Justice.

Global Sociology should not just be a cognitive enterprise but needs to also attend to ideas concerning distributive global justice. An empirical foundation for this normative model-building might be laid through investigations of relevant people’s values and investigations of the form and extent of social ills wrought by the global system.

11. In Sum.

Current debates about Southern sociology are necessarily limited by too much dichotomous argument. It is interesting that no problems seem to be raised about generalising Northern sociology across the many and diverse countries of the north. And that there is a major barrier to further generalise to the global south seems slightly too stark a delimitation. As GS matures many of the dichotomies will be more usefully replaced by continua (as I have argued above).

Go’s essay sets or revisits several parameters for the debate, while needing augmentation in other directions. He is unnecessarily asking for too much reform of general theory which is a citadel that doesn’t need to be stormed. Perspectival Realism may well be a useful way of getting ahead but multi-perspective realism is a needed extension. A viable (and hopefully intellectually exciting) program for GS needs to be developed. And rather than frontally storm the citadel of disciplinary prestige

structures, we may be able to implement more favourable “norms” and publishing structures that will support GS within the wider discipline.

There is much to be done across many fronts.

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Abstract: The further clarifications of this important sociological concern are welcomed but built on, by providing some discussion of the goals of a “global sociology” while agreeing with the dampening-down of overly-ambitious aspirations for sociology from the South. Ambiguities of the term indigenous are pointed out while it is suggested that the perspectivism is augmented to also examine interlocking social positionalities. A wider range of mechanisms beyond “soft imperialism” are suggested and organisational arrangements to build-in sociologies from the South suggested.

Keywords: Global Sociology; Indigenous Peoples; Multi-perspectivism; Soft Imperialism; General Sociological Theory.

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