

When was “the global”?

Thinking without limits



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Some knowledge of world history is indispensable to the sociologist; without such knowledge, no matter

what else he knows, he is simply crippled.

C. Wright Mills, 1959, p. 215

Discussions on global sociology have primarily focused on spatial scales such as the national versus the international, the regional versus the transregional, or the local versus the global. However, there has been a notable lack of attention given to the temporality of “the global.” While the critique of methodological nationalism (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) has gained traction in the social sciences, the critique of methodological presentism (Elias, 1987) has largely gone unnoticed. This

oversight is exacerbated by the tendency that if invoked, historical explanations tend to serve culturally deterministic arguments: As Peter Wagner (2001, p. 78) puts it, “either ‘timeless’ snapshots are taken of the social world, or history is invoked to deterministically explain the present.”

I am writing this blog post to engage the sociological imagination proposed by C. Wright Mills (1959): he argues that the sociologist’s essential role is to place societies and biographies within broader historical processes. I combine this engagement with reflections on the origins and duration of “the global,” audaciously thinking against the

theoretical, methodological, and epistemological limits set by the bulk of canonized Northern sociological theories of globalization which date it to the second half of the 20th century and, in doing so, ignore that early sociological thought was concerned with global issues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Connell, 2007). With the current surge in global sociology publications, events, and classes, the question arises as to whether this interest can be attributed to a sudden realization that we are living in a global age that is distinct from earlier global connections. Several important caveats have been made about the distinctiveness of today's globality. Retrieving some of these objections, I urge global

sociological scholarship to address the temporality of “the global”: Does it follow the mainstream theories of globalization and locate it in the late 20th century, with globalization being one of the “consequences of modernity” (Giddens, 1990)? Or does global sociology identify global entanglements much earlier, regard them as constitutive of modernity, and make them the starting point for its theorizing? Inspired by connected fields such as global history (e.g. Subrahmanyam, 1997), non-Eurocentric anthropology (e.g. Randeria, 1999), and world-systems analysis (e.g. Wallerstein’s multi-volume opus starting with Wallerstein, 1974), an increasing number of sociologists have advocated for the latter, framing

global sociology as global historical sociology (e.g., Bhabra, 2007; Boatcă, 2013; Go & Lawson, 2017; Santos & Boatcă, 2022).

Within sociology, however, it was Stuart Hall who pioneered the interlinking of globality and history in the 1990s: an exercise in historical discourse analysis, his seminal essay “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power” (1992) exposes the geographical inaccuracy of such oversimplified binaries constructed by and in favor of the self-proclaimed West. To Hall, these are historical rather than spatial categories stabilized time and again through a system of representation in which the manifold groups othered as non-

Western have little to no say. It is hence no coincidence that the title of my blog contribution references and pays homage to Hall's work: in his influential text "When was 'the post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit" (1996), he defends the field of post-colonial studies against its critics and employs "thinking at the limit" as a method, arguing that instead of cementing essentialist binaries, the term "post-colonial" allows for the analysis of ambiguities and seeming paradoxes resulting from the global transformations set in place by colonialism:

It follows that the term 'post-colonial' is not merely descriptive of 'this' society rather than 'that', or of 'then'

and 'now'. It re-reads 'colonisation' as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural 'global' process—and it produces a decentred, diasporic or 'global' rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives. Its theoretical value therefore lies precisely in its refusal of this 'here' and 'there', 'then' and 'now', 'home' and 'abroad' perspective. 'Global' here does not mean universal, but it is not nation- or society-specific either. (Hall, 1996, p. 247)

Moreover, “the post-colonial” has led to much confusion as to its periodization: Hall clarifies that post-colonial thought offers a different storyline of capitalist

modernity, centering the peripheries and peripheralizing the centers, thereby anticipating Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) argument regarding the provincialization of Europe: Colonialism, Hall (1996, p. 249) writes, "is signifying the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonisation and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the 'outer face', the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492." Though the "post" in "post-colonialism" might suggest otherwise, these power imbalances have not disappeared with formal independence gained by most parts of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries: instead, they go beyond its historical context and continue

to influence contemporary global power dynamics. In dating global connections back to the euphemistic “discovery” of the Americas in 1492 and in emphasizing today’s legacies of colonialism, Hall’s thinking resembles that of decolonial scholars such as Enrique Dussel (1992), Walter Mignolo (2000), and Aníbal Quijano (2000). Quijano’s concept of the “coloniality of power,” in particular, asserts that the hierarchies and patterns established during colonial times have been ingrained into, or constituted modern structures. These structures outlived the end of formal colonialism, shaping a globally stratified system where some (in fact, most) groups continue to face systematic marginalization while others (a

numeric minority) maintain positions of power and privilege.

Post- and decolonial sociologies as well as its precursors such as world-systems analysis and Marxist-inspired British cultural studies thus open up a way to develop a kind of global historical sociology with links to, and relevance for, contemporary issues. I will draw on three works that illustrate the productive use of history in global sociology, though my presentation of these examples remains admittedly schematic due to the format of a blog post. All three sociological monographs illuminate the global through the local: a small village in Transylvania, a port in Rio de Janeiro, and a borderland in Amazonia.

In their book *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires*, Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă (2022) reconsider fundamental assumptions of literary modernism and sociological theories of modernity. This interdisciplinary examination is informed by, and contributes to, scholarship on coloniality and inter-imperiality. It does so from the perspective of Transylvania, a semiperipheral region sitting at the crossroads of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires that has escaped the purview of both literary studies and sociology. Parvulescu and Boatcă take Liviu Rebreanu's novel *Ion* (1920) and its fictional village Pripas as an extended case study (see Burawoy 2009 for its use

in ethnography) illuminating Transylvania's history and presence of multiconfessionalism and multilingualism, as the region has been home to Romanians, Hungarians, Germans, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, and Romani. Yet this diverse society has not only been stratified in terms of nationality, race, and ethnicity but also regarding education, class, wealth, and gender, with the "land question"—the distribution and commodification of land—being a decisive factor in all axes of stratification and an explanation for Transylvania's obscured place within global entanglements: Parvulescu and Boatcă position rurality and peasantry as an integral component rather than an antithesis of modernity, and

agrarian economies based on enserfment and exploited rural labor as a condition for a capitalist world-economy that is literally fed by semiperipheries like Transylvania. For a decidedly global sociology, this study thus offers an important temporal and regional corrective: it demonstrates that inter-imperiality predates coloniality, coexists with it, and persists beyond imperialism. The conventional division between premodern and modern European empires is thus upended by the authors who instead underscore the modernity of both Western and Eastern imperial formations as they contested and mutually shaped each other well into the twentieth century. Transylvania, like several spaces

across the world, defies the geopolitically biased classifications and chronologies that sociology has (re)produced.



The ethnic groups of Austria-Hungary in 1910. Based on "Distribution of Races in Austria-Hungary" from the Historical Atlas by William R. Shepherd, 1911.

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Sérgio Costa and Guilherme Leite Gonçalves follow a similar approach

in their book *A Port in Global Capitalism: Unveiling Entangled Accumulation in Rio de Janeiro* (2020), also reinscribing peripheral and semiperipheral places and people into global historical sociology and political economy. They combine a critical engagement with Marxist theories of capitalist expansion with a detailed analysis across different historical stages of a concrete place: the port area of Rio de Janeiro. In tracing its history and different usages, the authors frame it, first, as a place of mercantile capitalism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, a period in which the port gained a notorious reputation as the world's largest slave market. The transition to industrial capitalism occurred as

the slave economy gave way to a wage-labor system, rendering the port inadequate for the increasing volume of commodities and losing its status as Brazil's central point for capital accumulation, cemented by the shift of the capital to Brasília in the 1960s. In the 2000s, Rio's port area was rediscovered by the real estate and tourism markets, envisioning its integration into financial capitalism by transforming it into "Porto Maravilha," a gentrified revitalization of the historical port neighborhood. To conceptually capture these global transformations encapsulated in a single spatial unit—the port—Costa and Leite Gonçalves coin the concept of "entangled accumulation," arguing that

capitalist accumulation
fundamentally rests on the
interconnection and
interpenetration of different
mechanisms of accumulation, of
different spaces and times as well
as of different social
categorizations such as gender,
race, and class.



Part of the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site in Rio de Janeiro's historical harbor neighborhood. Having served as the landing site for approximately 900,000 enslaved

Africans and composed of several archaeological layers, it is the most important physical trace of the arrival of African captives in the Americas. Copyright: [Wikimedia Commons, Halley Pacheco de Oliveira.](#)

My last example draws on my past research project, encapsulated in the book *Bridging Fluid Borders: Entanglements in the French-Brazilian Borderland* (Santos, 2022). In it, I engage the sociological imagination by way of ethnographic fieldwork and thick descriptions capturing how people deal with increasingly strict border controls at a contested, yet rarely studied border: the one between France's overseas department of French Guiana and Brazil's northern state of Amapá. An official part of the European Union that has never achieved independence, French Guiana has become an important destination for

increasing numbers of differently positioned migrants from across the world. In the past years, the territory whose size is comparable to that of Austria has witnessed the introduction of several legal exceptions deviating from the status quo of the metropole, including fast-track asylum processing and deporting, legally facilitated identity checks marked by racial profiling, and the deliberate shortage of accommodation and financial support for asylum seekers. While such measures appear to be new ruptures, they are but the latest variant in a *longue durée* process revealing the exploitability and deportability of racialized and/or politically unwanted bodies to be the norm rather than the exception

in the borderland. As I show in the monograph, the deportation of metropolitan and Caribbean convicts during the time of the penal colony as well as of persons fleeing enslavement from Brazil are forgotten historical examples illuminating current developments and countering the coloniality of memory. Though seemingly remote, the French-Brazilian borderland and the infrastructural project of the Oyapock River Bridge linking Brazil and France serve as a magnifying glass making the global relevance in reproducing entangled inequalities visible: structurally similar observations can be made at the manifold “European elsewheres” across the globe that have remained under the control of a European state (see also Santos & Boatcă,

2023) .



Street art in the Brazilian city of Oiapoque, depicting the Oyapock River Bridge that was opened in 2017.

Hailed as a symbol of friendship, the first bridge between Brazil and France has turned out to be a one-way street reinforcing mobility inequalities.

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All three studies are informative for global sociology in that they shift the temporal and spatial specificity of global entanglements to inter-imperial spaces and

colonial contact zones. They are, borrowing from Hall (1991, p. 35), “hidden histories of the majority that never got told,” representing “[h]istory without the majority inside it, history as a minority event.” The excavation of such histories inevitably raises questions of how historically cemented inequalities impact our lives to this day—a vital theme in global sociology (see also Boatcă, 2016; Jelin et al., 2018; Korzeniewicz & Moran, 2009).

The guiding question of this brief essay—when was ‘the global?’—extends beyond the answers and examples presented here. Numerous other instances of temporal flashbacks, comebacks, and continuities that pinpoint global

interdependencies are conceivable (see Pieterse, 2012). A global sociological agenda aiming to overcome methodological presentism should consider and incorporate these various perspectives. The interest and expertise in our network (e.g., Bahl & Berger, 2023; Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023; Santos, 2023) signal that we have all it takes to think against limits by using our sociological imagination.

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