

Teaching (for) the global



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**In this contribution, I reflect on
the experiences and challenges of
incorporating the central themes of
this network into academic**

teaching—particularly the intersections between qualitative research on the one hand, and global and postcolonial sociologies on the other. While debates about the agenda and methodologies of Global Sociology are far from settled, it seems fair to identify reflexivity regarding the orders, legacies, and practices of knowledge production as one of its core concerns. This reflexivity extends well beyond research practices in the narrow sense of data collection and analysis. It encompasses a wide range of issues, such as [rethinking the so-called “Western” canon of social theories](#) and methodologies, or confronting language hierarchies—just to name two examples that resonate strongly with teaching.

I will begin with an (auto)sociological exercise in self-reflexivity about teaching within an academic field that may eventually become institutionalized as global qualitative research. I then share reflections and observations from a course titled *Qualitative Research in the Context of Global Sociologies*, which I taught during the 2022–2023 winter semester at the University of Göttingen. I hope these reflections will be useful to colleagues teaching within the German academic system as well as elsewhere—or to readers interested in the peculiarities (or provincialities) of a “venerable” German university in a mid-sized provincial city.

I must begin by asking for your

indulgence regarding the somewhat cheesy—or even slightly sentimental—wordplay in the title. Readers familiar with debates on global sociologies will no doubt recognize the reference to Michael Burawoy's (1947–2025) introductory chapter, "Reaching for the Global," in the volume *Global Ethnography* (Burawoy, 2000). The British sociologist based in California, who passed away unexpectedly last year, played an important role in shaping discussions about practicing sociology as a global discipline, particularly within the International Sociological Association. He was also among the few scholars to make early and concrete contributions to the methodological realization of this agenda. Unsurprisingly, his work

was included in our seminar readings.

If I'm honest, Burawoy's intellectual accomplishments aren't the only reason I thought it clever to begin with a playful nod to his work. Another—and probably more relevant—reason is biographical, and sociological. Born in the early 1980s and raised in a monolingual German family in a small provincial town in northern Germany, the “cultural capital” (to borrow Bourdieu's term) that shaped my early socialization had little to do with cosmopolitan orientations or versatile academic discourses. It had, however, a great deal to do with U.S. pop culture. My parents belonged to the professional lower-middle class but had not attended

university. Looking back, the impression Burawoy made on me when I saw his presidential address opening the ISA World Congress in Yokohama in 2014 (isasociotube, 2015)—during the early phase of my doctoral studies and at my first international conference—clearly reflects the symbolic and linguistic orders that structure academia. To be fair, I could have opened with memories of a similarly brilliant talk by Gurinder K. Bhambra on *European Colonial Entanglements* in Göttingen (Bhambra, 2019), but I couldn't find a fitting wordplay (though we discussed her work in the seminar). Either way, when writing about global sociology and qualitative research, I would have begun with a reference to English-speaking

academia.

German, U.S.-American, and British sociology have long been historically entangled, especially in the field of qualitative social research. During my own M.A. studies in Göttingen, I took it for granted that the literature we read was written by US-American, British, and German sociologists. Many of them—such as Adorno, Arendt, Elias, Mannheim, and Schütz—had fled from National Socialism in Germany to English-speaking countries. Only later in my career did I realize that the canonical—and critical—sociologists who had expanded my intellectual horizons during my time in Göttingen actually represented a rather narrow slice of what

sociology could—and should—be. After the effort it took to grasp the Anglo-German qualitative research “canon”—which, in fact, was only a very specific and, in a sense, even marginalized canon within Western sociological “grand theories”—I began to learn more about the institutional inequalities and colonial legacies that continue to shape our (academic) world today. It is worth noting that colonialism in general—and Germany’s (post)colonial history in particular—have long been marginalized topics in the German educational system, in cultural institutions, and in public memory.



Auditorium Goettingen, 2020. Copyright: Klein und Neumann, CC-BY-SA 3.0.

This also applies to the local context of Göttingen and its university, where I have been researching and teaching for several years now. The University of Göttingen (“Georg-August-Universität”) is one of the oldest German universities, with a long history of Nobel Prize winners and

an international reputation. As history tells it, the university was founded in 1732/1734 by the British King George II—although locally he is mostly remembered as the Elector (“Kurfürst”) of Hanover. In my view, few students—and probably few staff members—are aware of the imperial context and the entanglements with the British crown in the university’s history. I myself learned about this thanks to my colleague and network member [Eva Bahl](#), who explored this connection as part of a research project on [*Individual and Collective Memories of Slavery and the Slave Trade*](#). Today, the university is internationally well connected and makes great efforts to attract students and scholars from around

the world. Nevertheless, Göttingen remains a mid-sized, historically Protestant provincial city in Lower Saxony. As in most German universities, the majority of students come from the immediate region, and BIPOC students are typically underrepresented in classrooms. Within the social sciences, concrete research on Global South societies—beyond ethnology or anthropology—remains scarce. In the methodology and methods courses I teach, M.A. students come from various social science disciplines, including sociology, political science, diversity studies, gender studies, and sports studies.

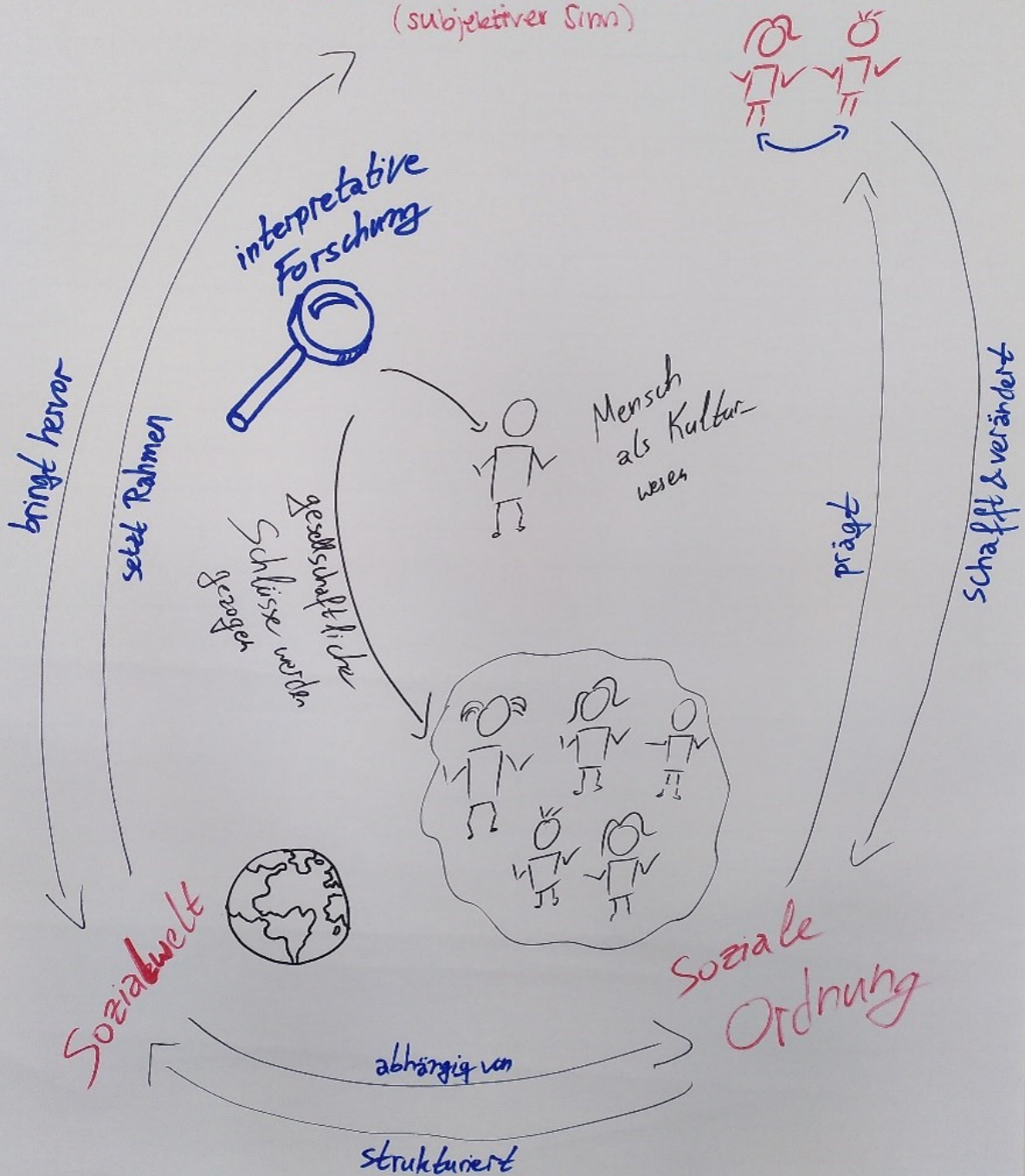
Let us now turn to the seminar *“Qualitative Research in the*

Context of Global Sociologies," which I taught during the 2022–2023 winter semester. Addressing the complexity of topics surrounding global qualitative social research—combined with the diversity of the student group—gave me quite a headache. In light of this diversity and complexity, I decided to approach discussions on global sociology and postcolonial perspectives from various "standpoints" within the German-speaking sociological field. This approach required largely dispensing with primary literature, but it allowed for a more systematic examination of the structures and discourses within the German-speaking academic landscape in which my students and I were primarily embedded. In the

syllabus, I announced that students would engage with the methodological, epistemological, and social-theoretical foundations of qualitative research on the one hand, and reflect on—or (counter-)read—them in light of current discussions on global sociologies and de- and postcolonial approaches on the other. We asked questions such as: What challenges arise for qualitative social research in the context of complex transregional and global interdependencies and power inequalities? And what contributions have qualitative methodologies made to developing a globally informed and reflexive sociology (for example, through case studies or multi-sited research)? For the 20–25 students enrolled, the topic proved engaging

enough to sustain thirteen highly interactive, discussion-based sessions (each lasting 120 minutes) that covered a wide range of readings.

Soziales Handeln (subjektiver Sinn)



Students' groupwork on the Interpretive Paradigm:
Social action (soziales Handeln) produces the social

world (soziale Welt), which is at the same time dependent on and structuring the social order (soziale Ordnung). Photo: Arne Worm, 2022.

We began with an introduction to the so-called Interpretive Paradigm (Keller 2012; Rosenthal 2015), which emphasizes the need to delve into the depths and contradictions of everyday lived realities when developing social theories. The following session adopted a postcolonial perspective (Reuter & Villa, 2010; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020) in order to establish a basic understanding of what the term implies and what directions postcolonial theories urge us to consider when conducting research. Next, we examined the concerns and perspectives of global sociology by reading Burawoy's introduction to Global Ethnography as an entry point into methodological

principles. This resonated strongly with a text on the relationship between theory and empirical research in qualitative sociology (Kalthoff, 2008).

Under the heading “Turning South,” we then discussed Julian Go’s “Perspectival Realism and the Southern Standpoint” (2016). Go’s argument that “social positions matter” and are not in contradiction to objectivity struck a chord with many students and seemed to offer pathways out of their unease with the androcentric and Eurocentric traditions that continue to dominate the social sciences. Some students raised complex epistemological and ethical questions—such as “Do we still have any concept of truth?” or “What

about universal human rights?" Interestingly, these "big questions" were less important to most participants than the practical challenge of transforming knowledge production and research practice. A (critical) pragmatic approach in the face of structural inequalities appeared more promising than waiting for philosophical absolutism. Elísio Macamo's essay "Before We Start: Science and Power in the Constitution of Africa" (2016) led to reflections on how knowledge systems shape the construction of epistemological and geographical territories—even before we begin doing research.

We then dedicated two sessions to a debate published in the journal

Soziologie by the German Sociological Association (DGS). Between 2018 and 2020, various authors discussed the aims and implications of a postcolonial sociology, beginning with an email exchange on “Postcolonialism and Sociology” between Manuela Boatcă, Sina Farzin, and Julian Go (2018). A sharp response by Markus Holzinger (2019) questioned “what is new about the ‘new postcolonialism,’” given that research on colonialism has existed for quite some time. Subsequently, Meinhof (2020) reiterated that “(p)ostcolonial sociology is not a sociology of colonialism, but a programmatic project to explore a new type of sociology—one that includes non-Western social theory and theorizes modernity in a way

that de-centers Europe and acknowledges the colonial origins of modern society.” In their response, Matthias Leanza and Axel T. Paul (2021) criticized oversimplifications on both sides of the debate while recognizing “the urgent need for further sociological investigation of the interconnections between colonial rule and global modernity.” Reconstructing this debate—where various authors directly responded to one another—proved extremely useful for gaining insight into the different arguments circulating within the German sociological discourse on what a post- and decolonial sociology might entail. We discussed the differing perspectives with great interest but ultimately concluded that many

of the arguments were either too abstract or required more background knowledge. Several students expressed a desire to see how the arguments for or against a post- or decolonial sociology might play out in concrete empirical research.

We then turned our attention to the tradition of biographical research, focusing particularly on contributions that call for a less Eurocentric or more postcolonial approach (Rosenthal, 2012; Lutz, 2009). Because Max Weber's writings remain a central point of reference for the German qualitative research paradigm—especially his concept of *Verstehende Soziologie*—we discussed his work through the lens of Manuela Boatcă's "Postcolonial

Critique of Weber's Theory of Race and Ethnicity" (2018). Gurminder K. Bhambra's online lecture "Segregated Sociologies of Weber and Du Bois" (Connected Sociologies, 2021) further inspired discussions about the neglect of W.E.B. Du Bois in the sociological canon and how this omission (mis)represents cross-continental and global intellectual legacies. In our final session, we explored Nina Baur's reflections on "Decolonizing Social Science Methodology: Positionality in the German-Language Debate."

Overall, there was strong interest in the topics and debates we examined. All of the students reported that they had rarely—if ever—encountered the authors and

discussions we engaged with in any of their other courses. Many considered the topics and critiques, particularly the methodological questions, to be highly relevant. Still, it was a learning process with many ups and downs, detours, and perhaps even dead ends. I recall several moments when students remarked that such theoretical interventions might be “useful and important when dealing with postcolonial societies.” “And what—and where—is a postcolonial society?” I would often reply. This prompted them to recognize how easily we fall back into Eurocentric and modernist “common sense” assumptions. The “global,” it turned out, was even more difficult to grasp than the “postcolonial” (capitalism often

served as the default explanatory framework). It took time to acknowledge that the global and the postcolonial are not elsewhere—they may, in fact, be right around the corner, entangled with what we do in research and teaching.

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