

ENGAGING WITH SOCIOLOGICAL BORDERS¹

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Abstract:

In this paper I ask the reader to reconsider the possibility of “sociology without borders.”

What does or might a border-free sociology look like? Is it in fact possible to be a sociologist without borders? I begin by examining the public face of the organization Sociólogos Sin Fronteras, or Sociologists without Borders (SSF), a radical organization which describes itself as “an academic and professional alliance committed to advancing transnational solidarities and justice.” Drawing from the works of multiracial and postmodern feminist theorists, I argue that it is impossible to pursue successfully SSF’s anti-oppressive, decolonialist agenda within the confines of disciplined sociology.

Though the members of SSF have indeed taken many initiatives to transcend contemporary sociological boundaries, they remain governed by a series of disciplinary, professional and practical borders, all of which are political in nature. I conclude by suggesting that rather than aspiring to become border-free sociologists, we might do better to work towards an “un-disciplined” sociology – a sociology that would require constant engagement with the borders (geographical, disciplinary, and otherwise) which shape our scholarship, our teaching, and our lives.

Introduction

In this article I ask the reader to reconsider what it means to be a “sociologist without borders.” When one declares her/himself a sociologist without borders, which borders is s/he transcending and for what purpose? Is it in fact possible to be a sociologist without borders, or does the identity of “sociologist” and the practice of doing “sociology” in fact require that some attention be paid to particular boundaries?

In answering these questions I begin by considering the public face of the organization *Sociólogos Sin Fronteras*, or Sociologists Without Borders (SSF), which to my knowledge is the only sociological organization which has so directly tackled the politics of borders. Drawing from the works of multiracial feminist thinkers including Chandra Mohanty, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, June Jordan and others, I argue that it is impossible to pursue successfully SSF’s anti-oppressive, decolonialist agenda within the confines of disciplined sociology. Though the members of SSF have indeed taken many initiatives to transcend contemporary sociological boundaries, they remain governed by a series of disciplinary, professional and practical borders, all of which are political in nature. I conclude by suggesting some ways in which poststructuralist and multiracial feminist thought might help us to think about sociology with and without borders.

Background:

Sociólogos Sin Fronteras describes itself as “an academic and professional alliance committed to advancing transnational solidarities and justice” (SSF 2006). It was founded in Spain in 2001 and according to the organization’s website, was inspired

by medical professionals (e.g., Doctors Without Borders) and journalists whose moral commitments required them to look beyond political boundaries. According to the group's manifesto, SSF "embraces the principle that all humans have inalienable rights to their dignity, their wellbeing, and their agency. As it is, imperialists, commodifiers, warmongers, capitalists, financiers, and global racists have usurped these rights." "Sociologists," it adds, "have acquiesced by studying variation in misery and vulnerabilities. Instead, we advocate that sociologists participate, democratically, with others to set standards for human wellbeing and devote our energies to understanding how to achieve these standards" (SSF 2005).

In order to meet these goals, SSF promotes cooperation among academics, professionals, and communities around the globe. The organization regularly issues public statements calling for peace and social justice, and it has sponsored fellowship programs for university students to study and volunteer in Nairobi, Kenya and Minas Gerias, Brazil. SSF membership dues are relatively low and are used primarily to fund its social justice fellowship programs; SSF members who are also members of the Association of Black Sociologists (ABS) and the Latin@ section of the American Sociological Association pay a reduced membership fee to SSF. The membership fee is waived entirely for self-identified "Third-World Sociologists." The organization's journal, *Societies Without Borders* aims to promote dialogue among academics, activists, teachers and practitioners around the world and, to this end, solicits jargon-free manuscripts written in English, Spanish and French. In brief, the group's initiatives over the past five years, as well as the organizational structure of SSF, suggest that the organization is entirely committed to creating a more just global community.

Despite the organization's clear political commitment to transcending borders, I argue here that SSF remains governed by a series of disciplinary, professional and "practical" borders, all of which are political in nature. Examining the public face of the organization, I find elements of what Mohanty has termed "discursive colonization" in combination with several institutionalized practices that together reinforce the borders on which inequalities of power and privilege rely. Because I believe in both the mission of *Sociólogos Sin Fronteras* and the political and ethical commitments of its members, it is with some trepidation that I make this argument. I emphasize here, however, that I highlight the borders of SSF not because they are more "oppressive" than those of any other sociological organization – in fact they are almost certainly among the most committed to an anti-oppressive agenda. Rather, I focus on SSF to demonstrate that even those who are aware of border politics might benefit from ongoing reflection upon and engagement with borders.

Discursive Colonization:

In her groundbreaking essay "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Mohanty (1984) demonstrates how even well-intentioned feminist scholars frequently contribute to the colonization of so-called Third World women by uncritically relying on a "singular, monolithic" understanding of "Third World woman." Focusing her analysis on the Zed Press Women in the Third World series, Mohanty argued that these feminist texts frequently produced a homogenous category of "Third World women" – women without power, without agency, and without their own histories. "What is problematical about this kind of use of 'women' as a group, as a stable category of analysis," Mohanty writes,

“is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups *within* particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities” (1984, 344). Understanding Third World women in this way presumes both that gender is the most salient aspect of Third World women’s identity and that Third World women’s interests are primarily a product of their sexual status. Third World women as a group have shared interests, from this perspective, and First World women share these material interests as well.

Following Mohanty, I suggest here that despite the deep commitments of its members to justice and human rights, *Sociólogos Sin Fronteras* contributes to the discursive colonization of “Third World” men and women and other oppressed groups in at least three ways.² First, by globally privileging particular axes of inequality, SSF obscures the systems of inequality that operate *within* both the “First World” and the “Third World.” As a result, the complexity of “First World” and “Third World” individuals’ identities, interests, and experiences is lost in much of SSF’s rhetoric. Second, by relying on a mutually exclusive dichotomy of the oppressed/colonized and the oppressors/colonizers, the public rhetoric of SSF reinforces a notion of static, impenetrable borders between these two groups and further simplifies the lived experiences and material interests of both Third and First World people. Finally, by failing to sufficiently address the members’ and the organization’s own position of power, SSF passively sustains many global hierarchies including those of class, education and authority. The self-identification as “sin fronteras,” I suggest, discourages continual

² I am drawing on Young’s (1990) discussion of what constitutes “oppression.”

engagement with the borders that govern the members' and the organization's practices. I discuss each of these individually, but note here that in practice these three elements of discursive colonization are often intertwined.

Historically Situated Global Matrix of Domination

In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins puts forth a comprehensive approach for understanding intersecting systems of oppression. Arguing against those who would posit one "fundamental" system of oppression, Collins argues that "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (2000: 18). She uses the concept of a "matrix of domination" to refer to "how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized" through "diverse local realities" (18). Both the concept of the matrix of domination and her intersectional framework more generally suggest that in any given context, both the salience of a particular system of oppression and the ways in which it interacts with others may change across time and place.

At first glance, SSF's perspective seems largely compatible with Collins' intersectional framework. When, for example, Blau and Moncada (2002, 2) write, "[T]he critical tradition of sociology now needs to focus on the growing inequalities in resources, rights, and well-being between developed, western peoples and formerly colonized, Third World peoples," the crucial "now" suggests that the dichotomy they propose is historically situated. The West / Third World dichotomy is the most significant divide today, but it may not have been yesterday, and it may not be tomorrow. SSF's clear commitment to racial and class equality (e.g., Golash-Boza 2005), migrants' rights (e.g., Smith 2006), demilitarization (e.g., Gould 2004) and global equality more

generally indicate not only the organization's recognition of multiple systems of oppression, but also the members' acknowledgement that creating a more just global society requires that multiple systems of oppression be contested simultaneously.

Where SSF's framework differs from Collins' intersectional perspective, and where it falls into the trap of discursive colonization, however, is when it suggests that the material and political inequality between the "developed, western peoples" and the "formerly colonized, Third World" is now *the* most important issue for contemporary sociologists to study. This is problematic in at least two ways: First, this statement suggests that sociologists can determine what is in the interest of various people and groups. While sociology has a long history of scholarly authorities determining "objectively" what is in the interests of the poor, the exploited, and the oppressed, it seems to me that this perspective rests uneasily with the democratic, empowering vision of Sociologists Without Borders. Second, and perhaps more importantly, SSF's assertion that the division between the "developed, western peoples" and the "formerly colonized, Third World" is contemporarily *the* most significant axis of inequality around the globe ignores the fact that inequalities based on gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity or nation, for example, may be more relevant to the lives of many "Third World" people than those based on First World or Third World status.

Just as Mohanty critiques those Western feminist texts which rely on the "'Third World difference' – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries," and in so doing "discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World" (2003: 19), here we might ask how SSF's use of gender-neutral "Third World difference"

obfuscates the complexity of “Third World” peoples’ lives, regardless of their gender. While it is certainly true that many colonized and formerly colonized people share experiences and material interests, these interests clearly are not shared by all Third World or colonized people. Indeed, even in those cases where material interests are shared, they may be prioritized very differently. As Black-feminist-poet-theorist June Jordan explains, “partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership in change: *When we get the monsters off our backs, all of us may want to run in very different directions*” (2003, 13, emphasis in original).

Static Dichotomies

Sociologists Without Borders’ tendency to rely on a global, though historically situated, matrix of domination feeds into two additional elements of discursive colonization. The first, which we might call the fallacy of static dichotomies, is illustrated in the “Sociologists without Borders Manifesto,” which was issued in March of 2005. It reads:

Sociologists without Borders embraces the principle that all humans have inalienable rights to their dignity, their wellbeing, and their agency. As it is, imperialists, commodifiers, warmongers, capitalists, financiers, and global racists have usurped these rights. Sociologists have acquiesced by studying variation in misery and vulnerabilities. Instead, we advocate that sociologists participate, democratically, with others to set standards for human wellbeing and devote our energies to understanding how to achieve these standards.

In this Manifesto SSF suggests a clear separation between the “imperialists, commodifiers, warmongers, capitalists, financiers, and global racists” on the one hand, and those whose rights have been usurped – the members of the Third World, the

colonized and the formerly colonized – on the other. A similar divide is proposed in Blau and Moncada's (2002, 2) "Sociological Manifesto for a Nonviolent International Order". This document emphasizes why sociologists should not speak *for*, but rather *with* peoples in the Third World. "This is particularly important as sociologists relate to peoples in the Third World, whose autonomy and freedom have been denied by colonists, missionaries, undemocratic political leaders, reformers, and capitalists."

While I agree completely with what I see as the sentiment behind these statements, i.e., that it is important to name and hold responsible those groups which have exploited, dominated, and oppressed (as well as those which have benefited from these acts), I want to suggest here that relying on such a dichotomous framework risks masking other acts of domination that take place within and across this unitary dichotomy. The borders between these two seemingly mutually exclusive groups remain relatively uninterrogated in this framework, and the overlap between these groups is ignored. There is no place, for example, for the colonizing scholarship of Western feminism, which seeks to create a more just and equal world but in the process contributes to the colonization of many Third World women. There is also no place for the working-class man who is exploited by global capitalism while he abuses his wife and children. The First-World / Third World, oppressors / oppressed framework marginalizes those whose lives cannot be reduced to one and only one side of this dichotomy (i.e., the majority of the world's population).

The Border-Free Sociologist

SSF's reliance on a both a global matrix of domination and a dichotomous understanding of global power leads to the third instance of discursive colonization,

which involves locating the “sociologist without borders” within the global power structure. From its website, it is clear that SSF sees its members as deliberately interfering with global power structures. As their website (SSF 2006) states, “Sociologists without borders supports the right to peaceful meddling, and opposes States’ practices and programs that advance their own sovereignty but diminish peoples’ human rights.” Moncada’s (2006, 2) “Deontology for Sociologists” similarly reads, “One has to choose between pleasing the powerful people or rocking the boat, and if we follow our proposed deontology, we should be inclined to go with the second option.” True to its word, SSF has for many years has been outspoken against the U.S. led invasion of Iraq and has gone so far as to file a case against the United States for breaching the Declaration of the Responsibilities of the Present Generation to Future Generations (Blau 2004).

Again, while I agree with the spirit behind these statements and actions, namely that sociologists should not allow others’ disciplinary aspirations of objectivity to prevent us from working towards a more just global society, I argue here that the location of the sociologist “without borders” within the global power structure is far more complex than SSF’s website suggests. SSF envisions itself as “working with” and “serving” Third World peoples. As Blau and Moncada (2002, 2) write, “Sociologists do not have visions, doctrines, or reform plans for others.” Moncada continues, “[W]e aspire to provide specific diagnoses that will help the activists and advocates of social change carry out their work with the highest likelihood of success.” But while SSF repeatedly positions itself as an agent of social change, nowhere does the organizational rhetoric address the

possibility that Sociologists Without Borders, either individually or collectively may be part of the colonizing force that SSF seeks to combat.

Smith's essay, "Sociologists without Borders meet at the World Social Forum," which is linked directly to SSF's homepage, provides a good example of this phenomenon. Smith describes a series of sessions at the 2005 World Social Forum that were devoted to exploring "the possibilities for alliances between universities and civil society, to compare experiences in diverse campaigns for social justice and to address the question of 'where do we go from here?'" During the course of the sessions, in which more than one hundred people reportedly were involved, participants identified three primary ways in which academics are "involved in this global movement": in their "support for civil society"; in their "struggles over access to knowledge and education"; and in their struggles related to "neoliberal globalization on campus" (2). Smith concludes her essay by providing nine specific ways in which universities might better support the global justice movement. She tackles directly the location of academic sociologists within the global power structure; and she rightly critiques those academics who "want to claim a 'neutral' role of detached social scientists... (such as those hoping to 'save sociology' from the likes of public sociologists)". She even goes so far as to write that "whether we think about it or not, when we publish and teach we contribute to the limitation or expansion of the availability of information and educational opportunities to less privileged groups" (3).

What is problematic about Smith's framework is her division of academic sociologists into two clearly defined groups: those who struggle to maintain neutrality (and thus "side with the powerful") and those who actively seek social justice (and thus

“side with the powerless”). Moncada’s “Deontology for Sociologists” relies on a similar framework: there are, in his view, sociologists “who are servants of the powerful, [who] collaborate in exercises of obfuscation” and there are progressive sociologists who “choose to rock the boat.” Unfortunately, neither Smith nor Moncada genuinely allows for the possibility that sociologists in pursuit of objectivity frequently help to dismantle systems of inequality in the process, and neither addresses the possibility that well-intentioned progressive sociologists might inadvertently reinscribe systems of inequality.

SSF’s reliance on a global matrix of domination and mutually exclusive static dichotomies lays the foundation for this framework. By claiming that the divide between the oppressed Third-World and the colonizing First World is globally the most significant axis of inequality, SSF actively marginalizes those for whom inequalities based on sex, sexuality, religion, able-bodiedness, and/or nation are more or equally salient features of their lives. The organization’s constant refrain of static dichotomies facilitates a unidimensional conceptualization of power and enables the “Third World” and its allies (including SSF) to position themselves unproblematically as the defenders of global justice and human rights. In this sense, the sociological dichotomy on which Smith and Moncada rely forecloses any critical discussion of what it means to be a “sociologist without borders.”

Towards an Un-Disciplined Sociology:

“A social theory committed to democratic contestation within a postcolonial horizon needs to find a way to bring into question the

*foundations it is compelled to lay down.” – Judith Butler, 1992,
“Contingent Foundations”*

*“For we have built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and
response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the
same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those
structures.” -- Audre Lorde, 1984 “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women
Redefining Difference”*

In *Feminism Without Borders* Mohanty critiques U.S. feminist scholar Robin Morgan’s call for a universal sisterhood based on shared oppression under a universal patriarchy: “Morgan seems to situate all women (including herself) outside contemporary world history, leading to what I see as her ultimate suggestion, that transcendence rather than engagement is the model for future social change” (111). In calling for a universal sisterhood, Morgan (and others) seeks to marginalize the role that relatively privileged women have played in the historical and present domination of poor women, Third World women, lesbians, and racial and ethnic minority women (see also Combahee River Collective 1977, hooks 1984, Lorde 1984). Morgan implies that women around the globe should put other aspects of their identities on hold and unite under the common identity of “woman.” In practice what this translates to, however, is expecting racial minority women to put their racial status to the side, expecting lesbian women to ignore homophobia and heterosexism for the time being, and expecting poor women to put issues of poverty and economic exploitation on hold. White, upper middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied Western women, in contrast, need not put any aspect of their identity nor any of their experiences to the side, because it is their experiences that best

typify “women’s experiences”. In her efforts to transcend the borders of race, nationality, sexuality, and class, Morgan inadvertently sustains these very systems of inequality; the marginalized remain marginalized and the experiences of the privileged remain at the center. As Bulbeck (1998: 55) writes, “The researcher has chosen the interaction, not the researched... [T]he desire to see the same skin beneath its different colours” in this case, “might be the white woman’s project ‘which [has] render[ed] the other silent’”. Because she envisions herself as transcending racial, ethnic, national and class-based borders, she need question neither her position within these hierarchies nor her role in reproducing these inequalities.

SSF’s claim of transcending borders, I suggest, works in much the same way as Morgan’s call to global sisterhood. By rhetorically positioning the organization as merely a servant of the oppressed Third World, SSF is able to ignore the complexity of the relationship between progressive “First World” organizations and the “Third World.” The public rhetoric of SSF tells the story of an organization that works “democratically” with a static and homogenous Third World. But is there another side to this story? A more nuanced telling might acknowledge that, while SSF legitimates the voices of some within the Third World, it helps to silence the voices of others in the process (if only inadvertently). Another side of the story might emphasize the ways in which Third World individuals and organizations must frame their goals and organize their movements in ways that are appealing to those who control the financial and academic resources (e.g., SSF) (Booth 2004, Sperling et al. 2001, Weber 2002). Still another perspective might explore how, in lending sociological and/or academic legitimacy to particular Third World individuals and organizations, SSF risks reproducing hierarchies

of knowledge, class, and language (see for example, Christian 1990, Collins 1990, Lorde 1984, Nnaemeka 1998).

In brief, SSF's relationship with the third world, involves more than just cooperation; in working with the "Third World," SSF legitimizes and empowers, but it also homogenizes, marginalizes, and excludes. The sociologist who envisions her/himself as "without borders" is in no position to critically engage with the borders that necessarily shape her/his scholarship, her/his teaching, and her/his life. Positioning oneself as "without borders," it seems to me, is a failure to position oneself at all.³

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest here that rather than positioning ourselves as, or aspiring to become, border-free sociologists, we might instead work to become "un-disciplined" sociologists: un-disciplined in the sense that we must actively work to disrupt the "old blueprints of expectation and response" that are built into both ourselves and our profession, while we simultaneously work to dismantle global material and political inequalities. We must identify the ways in which academia (even in its more progressive instances) sustains power and privilege at the same time that it builds the foundation for democratic citizenship. We must understand contemporary sociology within the context of an increasingly corporate university and a capitalistic global economy. We must understand that social science has had and continues to have deep ties with exploitation, racism, sexism, and colonialism.

An "un-disciplined" approach to sociology requires us to make explicit the ways in which the borders of sociology serve to perpetuate disparities in power and privilege.

³ The claim to be a "sociologist without borders," in so far as it is an identity, may reveal a particular set of political commitments, rather than a location on the social landscape. In so far as it facilitates disengagement with the social landscape, however, it is most certainly a problematic identity.

It requires us to re-evaluate our own and others' epistemologies, our assumptions, methods, and the means by which we distribute our research findings (see, for example Collins 1990, 253; Nnaemeka 1998). The Sociological Imagination is undoubtedly a valuable tool for this project, but there are other valuable tools as well (e.g., multiracial feminism, critical race studies, poststructuralism, postcolonial studies); If we are to be successful we must borrow tools from other disciplines. Furthermore, we must not hesitate to use these tools to deconstruct our own academic and activist projects – even if this means losing some academic legitimacy or slowing down the pace of our academic projects. We must acknowledge and then engage with the borders that shape our scholarship, activism, and our lives (Mohanty 2003). Because systems of oppression are dynamic and because even global systems of oppression interact with the local to create unique experiences, this critical engagement must be ongoing.

Readers familiar with Gender and Women's Studies will know that the postmodern/poststructuralist turn in feminist scholarship brought with it heated debates concerning the relationship between academic feminists / feminist theory and Feminist Movements and other movements for social justice.⁴ While some view postmodern-, poststructuralist-, and queer-feminist theories as more theoretically rigorous and ultimately more useful for understanding systems of power, others interpret this theoretical turn as a “retreat into the realm of discourse” (Smith 1996), a retreat that has distracted feminists from all too real material inequalities of race, class, sex, sexuality and nation (to mention only a few). My position here, with which I suspect many SSF members will agree, is that power operates in both the discursive and the material realm

⁴ See, for example the debate between Lerner, Springer, Kern Spear and Alexander in the *Journal of Women's History* (2004) vol. 16: 4 and Smith (1996)

(in so far as they can be separated at all); consequently, combating colonization in both of these realms is important if we are to create a less oppressive world (e.g., Moncada 2005). While SSF purposefully works to transcend state, class, racial and ethnic borders, its self-proclamation as being “without borders” ultimately works to mask some of the borders that help to maintain material and political inequalities. I acknowledge that some will disagree with my position and look forward to any constructive discussion that this disagreement might spark.

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