

# A Renewed Global Sociology<sup>1</sup>

GEOFFREY PLEYERS<sup>2</sup>

President of the International Sociological Association

---

The great challenge of our times is the progressive emergence of a planetary consciousness that will enable us to face together the common challenges that we face, starting with global warming, the environmental crisis, rising inequalities, and the threats to democracy. If we, sociologists, are up to the task, sociology will contribute to this planetary awareness and take its place in solving some of the challenges of this century.

While sociology aims at understanding the transformations of our world, our discipline is also affected and itself transformed by them. This is notably the case of the project of *global sociology*, which needs to be revisited considering the transformations that our world and social sciences have gone through over the past decades. I started studying globalisation in the late 1990s. By then, it was a central topic in sociology. ‘Sociology for One World’ (Archer 1991) was already the theme for the ISA 1990 World Congress. Three decades later, global challenges have become even more critical. Our world has become increasingly ‘global’. However, in the meanwhile, how we see the world, globalisation and sociology have changed dramatically. In this short address, I will briefly mention four of these changes, why they require renewing the project of a global sociology, and what they have meant for ISA.

---

## NEW TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

One of the most dramatic changes since the 1990s is the massive use of ‘new information and communication technologies’. The Internet and the cyber world had just started in the 1990s, but connectivity was soon considered foundational to an era of intensifying globalisation

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is an extended version of the inaugural address as new president of the International Sociological Association given at the XX World Congress of Sociology in Melbourne on 1 July 2023. A shorter version has been published in the ISA magazine *Global Dialogue* as well as in Italian (*Sociologia Italiana*), Spanish (*Revista Mexicana de Sociología*), French (*Socio-Logos*) and Arab (*Idafat*, Arab Journal of Sociology) journals.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Pleyers is the current President of the International Sociological Association. He is a FNRS Professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) and holds a doctorate in sociology from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris, 2006). His research focuses on social movements, global studies, youth, religion and Latin America. He is the author of ‘Alter-Globalization. Becoming Actors in the Global Age’ (*Polity*, 2011). His recent articles in English include ‘For a Global Sociology of Social Movements. Beyond Methodological Globalism and Extractivism’ (*Globalizations*, 2024), ‘Global Sociology as a Renewed Dialogue’ (*Global Dialogue*, 2023) and ‘The Pandemic is a Battlefield. Social Movements During the COVID-19 Lockdown’ (*Journal of Civil Society*, 2020). His latest edited books include ‘Chile en Movimientos’ (with K. Henríquez, CLACSO, 2023) and ‘Social Movements and Politics in the Pandemic’ (with B. Bringel, Bristol University Press, 2022).

(Castells 1996). Nowadays, digital media and technologies have become a major part of the lives of most human beings. They have dramatically changed how we communicate, inform ourselves, and live together. They have deeply transformed the public space in democratic, illiberal and authoritarian regimes.

Digital communication technologies have brought challenges and opportunities to ISA and to global sociology. Digital communications provide tools to reach larger audiences among citizens and policymakers. They are also instrumental when implementing editorial policies that aim at making visible sociological analyses by scholars from different regions of the world and increasing their access to international academic journals and events. The ISA organised the first large online congress in social sciences during the pandemic, attended by over 3.500 researchers. Today, the ISA social media keeps our community alive and informed. Online meetings have also allowed more participatory dynamics among the global community of sociologists, for example, through the ISA online meetings of the Research Council or the multiplication of webinars.

## A LIMITED PLANET

The *climate disaster and a growing ecological consciousness* have dramatically changed the meaning and experience of our globality. In the 1990s, 'globalisation' referred to the expansion of the Western model of the market and formal democracy in a world reunited after the Cold War and seemed limitless. Nowadays, the core questions of global sociology have taken a new form with the climate meltdown and the destruction of nature.

*'How can we live together on a limited planet?'* This is arguably the most important question that sociology must address in the 21st century. Ecology and environmental issues are more than specific objects for sociology: they intersect with all the objects and fields of research topics and have become central issues for sociology and science in general. They will transform our discipline and what is expected from sociology and sociologists. This will be a central topic in ISA over the next four years.

## RISING AUTHORITARIANISM RATHER THAN THE EXPANSION OF DEMOCRACY

In the 1990s, most intellectuals, policymakers, and civil society actors shared the conviction, or at least the hope, that the intensification of globalisation and interconnection enabled by the Internet would imply the expansion of democracy and respect for human rights.

A quarter century later, the theme chosen for the 20th World Congress of Sociology in 2023 was 'Resurgent Authoritarianism'. Unfortunately, this was a timely choice by our ISA President Sari Hanafi. The hopes of new waves of democratisation that had surged again with the Arab Spring faded away in the following decade. Illiberal and authoritarian regimes strengthened on all continents. They learned efficient ways of using social media and communication technologies to control their people, orient elections in other countries, and project their narratives and authoritarian model globally.

Sociologists and social scientists have dedicated numerous research to authoritarian regimes and actors, and to movements that threaten democracy; very often, they also threaten sociologists. The freedom of research has been challenged in many countries, whether by increasing state control or by the multiplication of threats by far-right actors or paramilitary militias. In our times, a global sociology requires particular attention and support for sociologists who face threats while conducting their research. On 25 January 2016, Giulio Regeni, a young

Italian sociologist and member of ISA RC 47, was arrested and murdered by the Egyptian police while researching independent unions in Cairo (Tondo 2024). Our 2021 Forum started with a tribute to Marielle Franco, a sociologist, local politician, and activist against state violence who was murdered by gangs in Rio de Janeiro on 14 March 2018. One of the most insightful contributions to the 2021 ISA Forum was written in Ankara jail by Cihan Erdal, a PhD student at Carleton University, who was arrested while conducting fieldwork in Istanbul.

## THE RISE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In the 1990s, globalisation was associated with Westernisation, expanding the Western market economy, culture, way of life, and worldview (Barber 1995). In the 21st century, globalisation refers to the rise of actors and countries from different regions of the world. China did not emerge as a major player in the globalisation process, and it was not until 2001 that the Asian giant joined the World Trade Organisation. Today, the role of Brazil, India and China as economic and geopolitical actors is discussed daily. The phenomenon is evident in the cultural sector, an area in which countries such as South Korea, India and, increasingly, several African countries (Walsh 2024) have a global reach.

While global media focuses on the rise of countries and actors of the Global South as economic and geopolitical actors, their increasing role as producers of knowledge is at least as significant. Few disciplines have been impacted by this rise as much as sociology. The deeper connections and dialogues between sociologists from different continents, the broader diffusion of groundbreaking work by scholars from the Global South, and new perspectives on the histories and geography of our discipline have turned the meaning of 'global sociology' upside down. In the 1990s, the global sociology literature was entirely dominated by Western scholars. The Global South and the 'East' were often seen as sites for empirical research fed by Western concepts. Nowadays, the heart of global sociology lies in making contributions by scholars and actors from the Global South visible and challenging the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge. A very limited number of concepts and approaches from the South were successfully integrated into global sociology. This has changed dramatically since the dawn of the 21st century.

The theories, concepts and analyses of researchers and actors from the South have helped us to understand the challenges facing societies in both the global South and North. They have changed the way we look at key concepts such as modernity (Dussel 1992) or ecological transition (Lang et al. 2024). They have taught us different ways of relating to nature, to the world and to ourselves. To the point that the core of global sociology now lies in the increasing visibility of the contributions of researchers and actors from the global South and in challenging the hegemony of 'Eurocentric' knowledge.

## GIVING UP ON UNIVERSAL PERSPECTIVES?

*Global sociology can neither remain rooted in the Western universities and canons that presented themselves as universal nor be limited to criticism of this Western sociology.*

Contrary to the claims of some of their detractors, decolonial, subaltern or postcolonial perspectives do not focus their epistemic proposals on denying the contributions of 'Western sociology' (Grosfoguel 2012). Rather, they assert that European and North American sociology, like knowledge produced elsewhere in the world, must situate itself in its time and place (Chakrabarty 2000), question some of its claims to universalism, and open itself to a renewed global dialogue with the concepts, worldviews and theories of the global South. As Aimé Cézaire

explained, 'We have never regarded our specificity as the opposite or antithesis of universality... We want to have roots and at the same time communicate... I believe in the importance of exchange, and exchange can only take place on the basis of mutual respect' (Césaire, Thebia Melsan 2008).

Decolonial, postcolonial and subaltern perspectives invite us to situate social theories and to revise some of the key concepts of our discipline in dialogue with realities and knowledge rooted in different parts of the world. Opening spaces for dialogue between researchers and perspectives from different continents and promoting greater inclusion of epistemologies and researchers from the South and oppressed minorities has been one of the main objectives of the ISA since its foundation, and even more so since the 1990s and the projects developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1996). Better inclusion of sociologists, research, analysis and theories from all continents is not only intended to democratise sociology. It is also the most effective and stimulating way to improve our understanding of the realities and social actors of the 21st century. Much more is needed, therefore, than simply increasing the number of members from the global South in the ISA or authors from the global South in sociology journals. We need to encourage their active participation in all areas of sociology and their full involvement in the academic and public debates that cut across our discipline and our societies. There is also a need to strengthen sociological associations at national and regional levels in all regions of the global South and to create spaces to make their contributions visible at the global level.

## OPENNESS AND CARE

*Global sociology is not only a theoretical project, a set of epistemological debates, and some methodological challenges.* It is also a sociological, cultural and personal stance (Pleyers 2023; 2024). It begins with an openness to perspectives grounded in different worldviews, cultures, and social backgrounds. It is rooted in accepting the risk (and hope) of losing some of one's certainties and learning from the encounter with the other. It is based on and nourished by the commitment (and pleasure) of reading and engaging in dialogue with people from different backgrounds, and the open-mindedness necessary to think about our research topics and ourselves from different perspectives, to reflect and question our positionality in this world (Haraway 1988; Rivera Cusicanqui 2018), and it moves us forward as researchers and as people.

Research and theory from different parts of the world, dialogues between situated approaches and analyses, and a willingness to learn from each other are crucial components of a renewed global sociology. In this perspective, one of the ISA's essential roles is to foster intercultural dialogues (Fornet-Betancourt 2010) in which we can share our research findings and perspectives in a welcoming environment that is open to differences and promotes the dialogue of knowledge and scholarship. Fulfilling this mission requires more than intentions, discourses and analyses. Practicing this global sociology in an international and multicultural environment requires 'active tolerance' and care practices in our professional environment.

Let me give you a concrete example. A few months ago, I attended the ISA PhD Laboratory. One of the participants arrived exhausted from a long and stressful journey from Palestine. During the dinner, she had a panic attack after being interrogated at the borders for so long. Two or three other participants discreetly took her to another table, listened to her and supported her. A young doctoral researcher took the initiative to book a room in a nearby hotel, cared for her during the evening and ensured she had a restful night. At nine in the morning, both were back with the group for the opening session, ready for what both would experience as an insightful week of learning and exchanges with fellow PhD students and researchers from all continents.

This initiative was taken so kindly and discreetly that I did not notice it that evening. It only adds to the importance of what these young researchers taught us: attention and care for others involves active solidarity and concrete practices and are indispensable elements of the practice of a global sociology. We need to pay more attention to them in our professional environments, and in particular in the ISA.

While it remains mostly invisible, care and solidarity in action is crucial to ISA. The example that I referred to also shows us that ISA and global sociology are not only happening in our large meetings and congresses. ISA is embodied in intercultural encounters, exchanges among sociologists from different continents, openness to perspectives and research from different regions of the world, and practices of care that allow us to share them in a supportive environment. Developing this global sociology rooted in the opening to others' perspectives and in practices of care is even more important in a time of rising authoritarianism, nationalisms, inequalities, and environmental collapse. Let us build together a renewed, more open and global sociology, starting where we are active in our everyday lives as sociologists, researchers, teachers, citizens and human beings.

*The International Sociological Association brings together sociologists from more than 100 countries, 83 national associations and 67 thematic research committees. The next World Forum of Sociology will be held in Rabat (Morocco) from 7 to 11 July 2025, and the next World Congress of Sociology will be held in Gwanju, South Korea, in July 2027.*

*www.isa-sociology.org*

## References

1. Archer, M. 1991. 'Sociology for One World: Unity and Diversity', *International Sociology* 6(2): 131–147.
2. Barber, B. 1995. *Jihad vs. McWorld*. New York: Ballandine.
3. Castells, M. 1996–1998. *The Age of Information*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
4. Césaire, A.; Thebia Melsan, A. 2008. 'The Liberating Power of Words: An Interview with Poet Aimé Césaire', *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2(4).
5. Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
6. Dussel, E. 1992. 1492: *El Encubrimiento del Otro. Hacia el Origen del 'Mito de la Modernidad'*. Lima: Plural.
7. Fonet-Betancourt, R. 2010. 'Teoría y praxis de la filosofía intercultural', *Recerca* (10): 13–34.
8. Grosfoguel, R. 2011. 'Decolonizing Post-colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy', *Transmodernity* 1(1). DOI: 10.5070/T411000004
9. Haraway, D. 1988. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–599.
10. Lang, M.; Bringel, B.; Manahan, M. A. 2024. *Más Allá del Colonialismo Verde. Justicia Global y Geopolítica de las Transiciones Ecosociales*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
11. Pleyers, G. 2023. 'Global Sociology as a Renewed Global Dialogue', *Global Dialogue* 13(1): 13–15.
12. Pleyers, G. 2024. 'For a Global Sociology of Social Movements', *Globalizations* 21(1): 183–195. DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2023.2173866
13. Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 2018. *Un Mundo Ch'ixi es Posible*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón.
14. Tondo, L. 2024, 20 febrero. 'New Trial in Rome of four Egyptians Accused over Giulio Regeni Killing', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/20/trial-opens-in-rome-of-four-egyptians-accused-over-giulio-regeni-killing>
15. Wallerstein, I. 1996. *Open the Social Sciences*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
16. Walsh, D. 2023, 28 Oct. 'The World Is Becoming More African', *New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/28/world/africa/africa-youth-population.html>