Some thoughts on the relation of the Real Utopias theme to GATS

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November, 2010

The Global & Transnational Sociology section deals with some of the most challenging topics for sociology. Traditionally sociological research is carried out at most at the national scale (and often, in fact, is anchored in more micro-levels of analysis in which even the national context disappears). While there is a long tradition of comparative research in sociology, this is mostly cross-national – comparing national cases rather than engaging global processes as such. Only in the last few decades has the idea of a truly global level sociological analysis gained systematic traction. There is a host of issues connected to the theme of real utopias that need to be posed at this level of analysis. Here are a few:

• The problem of global governance, or even global democracy. A wide range of institutions have emerged that have some kind of supra-national status and are involved in coordinating, monitoring, or governing aspects of global interactions. A real utopias question concerns the extent to which such institutions could embody meaningful democratic mechanisms and serve social justice goals. What could a viable form of transnational democracy look like? What empirical evidence is relevant to this problem?

• Global migration and the vision for open-borders. The global movement of people is obviously one critical aspect of the increasingly integrated character of social relations on a global scale. What is the real utopian design of a global migration and citizenship regime? Is it possible to imagine a stable equilibrium consisting of global capitalism, open-border migration and democratic institutions?

• Ecological crises and the conditions for their solution. There is a consensus that environmental problems, especially but not only global warming, are truly global problems, and their resolution (or even containment) requires global action. What mechanisms could be created to enforce global solutions?

• Global social justice and global redistribution. What would constitute a socially just international trade regime? Just as social justice within a nation – by most accounts anyway – requires redistribution from rich to poor, can we speak of global social justice without there being global redistribution? Does nglobal social justice require a decline in standards of living in the developed world, and if so, is there any conceivable mechanism that could accomplish this?
• The emergence of a transnational social economy. The idea of the “social economy” is only in recent decades getting serious theoretical attention. Defined negatively it is economic activity that is not organized by capitalist firms, by the state, or by families. It includes a wide range of activities producing goods and services to meet needs: peer-to-peer production of various knowledge products (wikipedia, open source software, etc.); community based service production; worker-owned cooperatives with a social mission. Some of these forms clearly have global reach: open source software is generated by peer-to-peer collaboration across the world. There are also efforts to create networks across borders of cooperatives and other unconventional economic forms to facilitate direct South-North collaboration without capitalist intermediaries.

• Global social movements for social justice and the emergence of a global civil society. The World Social Forum is the most vivid example of the collaboration across borders of social movements and the constitution of something like a global civil society. There are countless transnational NGOs and some of these (a few? many?) are deeply connected to social movements and popular struggles. What are the prospects for such movements and developments? Can they constitute a serious arena for resistance to the power of global corporations?

There are many other issues which I am sure members of the Global & Transnational Sociology section can think of that could be added to this list. My hope is that these kinds of questions get serious attention in the thematic panels at the 2012 American Sociological Association meetings. Of course, on all of these topics it is easy enough to engage in speculative, free-wheeling and relatively undisciplined discussion. From late night discussions as undergraduates to sophisticated dinners of aging academics, intellectuals are familiar with animated discussions that mix social justice, visions of a better world, and despair at the present state of affairs. What is much harder is to bring systematic empirical evidence and careful theoretical reasoning to bear on these topics, to explore and clarify the limits of our understanding rather than pretend we know more than we do, to worry about the dilemmas and trade-offs we face rather than imagine there are emancipatory alternatives to contemporary institutions which would have no negative unintended consequences. This is the weight carried by the “real” in real utopias: thinking about alternatives for a better and more just world while being fully attentive to the hazards and difficulties of how real institutions would function.