



# ISA Forum of Sociology

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## Social Justice and Democratization in the 21st Century

### Welcome and Opening Address

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*Buenas noches.* On behalf of the International Sociological Association, it is my great honor to welcome you all to the Second ISA Forum of Sociology in this wonderful city of Buenos Aires! After many months of preparation and anticipation, it is hard to believe that this day has finally arrived and that thousands of you are here. As you know, this forum is organized around three main objectives: 1) To provide a meeting place for ISA's Research Committees, Working Groups, and Thematic Groups; 2) To develop a socially significant theme involving public actors and to which different areas of sociology can contribute, such as social justice and democratization. And 3) To hold the interim ISA Research Council Business Meetings

This forum is a great opportunity to strengthen relations and research collaborations between ISA, the Association of Argentinean Sociologists and the Association of Latin American Sociologists. Over the last eighteen months a tremendous amount of work has been done by a global community of people into preparing this Forum! So it is fitting that I begin by thanking some of you who have helped make this Forum a reality. First, I want to thank the 55 ISA Research Committees, Thematic and Working Groups and their amazing program coordina-

tors. Their immense efforts together with the hard work and dedication of the members of the Local Organizing Committee, headed by the co-presidents of the local organizing committee Alberto L. Bialakowsky and Alicia I. Palermo, has resulted in what I know will be surely be an intellectually stimulating and engaging Forum. I don't know what we would do without the ISA Secretariat in Madrid, led by Izabela Barlinksa, Executive Secretary, and her staff. They have been incredible in every sense of the word in preparing for this big event. A special thank you to ISA President, Michael Burawoy, to our Research Coordinating Committee, and the Executive Committee who have been an integral part of this journey.

Last but most importantly, I want to convey a deep appreciation to our generous host, the University of Buenos Aires, but particularly to Dr. Alberto Edgardo Barbieri, Dean of Economics and Vice-Rector and Dr. Sergio Caletti, Dean of Social Sciences, for opening this wonderful academic venue to all of us. Much thanks also to the local staff, volunteers and Liaisons.

Over the course of this 2<sup>nd</sup> ISA Forum you will have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of sessions including 4 plenary sessions, 2 open

forums, and hundreds of sessions. I hope the next four days are not just a culmination of many months of work, but the beginning of a broader discourse on social justice and democratization.

While some may have thought that by now, I

would be able to give my opening address in Spanish, my son quickly informed me that *mi español no esta bueno*. So, rather than spoil a beautiful language, I will give my opening address in English.

## Opening Address: Sociology, Social Justice and Democratization in the 21st Century

(14 minutes)

### Introduction

In July 2012, Radha Krishna, a 40 year old farmer from Miryalguda, India tried to commit suicide by immolating himself in front of the governor's house. The police immediately pinned the farmer down and arrested him. In his shirt pocket, they found a note stating that he was committing suicide to protest against the injustice in society. More than a quarter of a million farmers have committed suicide in the last 17 years in India, making for the largest wave of recorded suicides in human history.<sup>i</sup> Many of these individuals faced mounting debts, the inability to get credit from banks, and failures of their cash crops—all factors associated with neoliberal policies adopted by the states.

The tragic consequences of the global economic crisis and political repression can also generate moral shock that leads to resistance and mobilizing for democracy. On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi—a 26 year old, high school educated, street vendor and breadwinner for a family of eight, working in the city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, immolated himself after his livelihood was threatened. A policewoman had confiscated his vegetable cart and its goods, collected the fine of \$7, and then according to witnesses slapped him, spat in his face and insulted his dead father.<sup>ii</sup> Bouazizi unsuccessfully sought justice from the state. He repeatedly requested meetings with local officials and had lodged a complaint that was refused less than an hour be-

fore he set himself on fire. Bouazizi's suicide tapped into and amplified resentments against rising unemployment fueled by the power of the state and its oppressive policies. A wave of demonstrations in the streets immediately ensued, sparking the Tunisian Revolution and the greater Arab Spring.

The consequences of poverty, lack of opportunity, and gendered violence can be particularly severe for women and children. On December 16, 2010, Marisela Escobedo was shot dead as she continued to protest the lack of justice in the murder of her 16 year old daughter, Rubi two years earlier. Rubi's body (39 pieces of charred bone) was found in a dump in Juarez, Mexico. Marisela's fight for justice for her daughter directly confronted a system of sexism, corruption, and impunity. Juarez, has been called the city of femicides for the murder of hundreds of young women, often raped and tortured. This border city of over one million, has been decimated with more than 3000 murders since 1990, giving it the title of the "murder capital of the world".

These stories are not only about India, Tunisia and Mexico. In fact these situations exist in the most developed countries too. These stories tell us of despair, but also of struggles for social justice and social change. They are also emblematic of the inequalities and both significant challenges to and opportunities for promoting social justice and democratic institutions. These examples also highlight similar injustices in very different societies. Many activists have also identified these similarities and have joined together across borders to challenge a global economic and political system that deepens social injustices globally.

On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2011, vast numbers of people

took to the streets and squares in over 1000 cities and 82 countries to end inequalities and for global change. They raised their voices to let politicians and bankers know that they do not represent the 99%. Condemning poverty, inequality, environmental devastation and corporate and government collusion, they firmly but without violence demanded for social justice and insisted that the will of the majority be heard.<sup>iii</sup>

### **A few comments on the state of the world**

The emergence of the information and high-tech economy has redefined notions of time, space, distances, boundaries, and borders. By altering the social and natural environments, these developments have also changed patterns of global interaction. States have increasingly enabled and accommodated the economic forces of the global market economy—often in the interests of a new class of global/transnational elite, but with little opportunities or protections for the poor, marginalized and dispossessed.

Remarkable strides in technology, science, medicine, and communication have been accompanied by deepening social and economic inequalities and the persistence of human rights violations. Over 1.4 billion live in poverty. 3.5 billion or 50% or of the world lives on less than two and half dollars (2:50) a day.<sup>iv</sup> Over 780 million people still use unsafe drinking water; that is approximately one in nine people.<sup>v</sup> On the other hand the ten richest people in the world are cumulatively worth 395.4 billion dollars.<sup>vi</sup> If they created their own country, they would have the 30<sup>th</sup> largest GDP of the 182 countries in world. The International Labor Organization, in its annual report on global labor conditions released on April 30<sup>th</sup> 2012, forecast that more than 200 million workers will be unemployed in 2012. 50 million jobs have been wiped out since the 2008 financial crisis and do not expect worldwide recovery in jobs and incomes for at least another five years.<sup>vii</sup>

The recent UN women's progress report notes that while there have been strides in women legal

rights, vast numbers of women continue to be denied the control over their own bodies, excluded from decision making and denied protection from violence. 603 million women still live in places where domestic violence is not considered a crime and even where there is some progress in legal framework, millions of women report experiencing violence in their lifetimes and usually at the hands of an intimate partner. The systematic targeting of women for brutal sexual violence is also characteristic of modern conflicts.<sup>viii</sup> Human rights still seem to be out of reach for large numbers of women. The consequences of poverty and lack of opportunity can also be particularly severe for LGBTQ, ethnic and religious minorities.

Deep social inequalities exist not only across economic regions, but also within societies, including some of the wealthiest economies. In the United States, the top 1% controls 40% of the total wealth and almost a quarter of the total country's income.<sup>ix</sup> There are approximately 50.7 million uninsured in the U.S., which is roughly 16.3% with no health insurance. To put this into some perspective, that is 1.5 times the population of neighboring Canada.<sup>x</sup>

These stark inequalities and injustices have led to growing unrest across the world among those who face the brunt of economic exploitation, social exclusion and political repression. Issues of social justice and democratization are being pushed to the forefront. We have witnessed the use of new social media as well as the growth and proliferation of horizontal, transnational networks of individuals and NGOs. (Examples of the utilization of new social media—the mobile media center practices of the Egyptian protesters which defused to OWS).<sup>xi</sup>

Ordinary people across the globe are mobilizing and challenging oppressive social, political, and economic regimes with indomitable courage; striving for social justice, and daring, against all odds, to take difficult and by no means linear or standard roads to democratization. In some societies the struggle to achieve social justice has involved efforts to dismantle the existing state apparatus and to either establish or reform electoral systems and systems of governance so that they are more representative of

different groups, and that the representatives are more accountable to these groups. In others, it has involved efforts to increase popular participation in state policy formation and implementation. Still in others, movements have sought to create alternative institutions that embody direct democracy and delink communities from corporations and states. The roads taken depend upon the strategies and power relations among the particular states, corporations, and movements.

### So what is the Role of Sociology in the 21st century?

The 21<sup>st</sup> century poses its own quagmire of complex issues and formidable dilemmas that require us as a global community of sociologists to increasingly participate as stronger societal stakeholders in building a more just society. We as sociologists, have much to offer, if we form research and teaching partnerships with organizations promoting social justice and democratization. These partnerships deepen our understandings of local manifestations of dominant global processes, differing aspirations and conceptions of social justice and democracy, and effective transformative strategies in certain social contexts.<sup>xii</sup>

In a gathering of primarily sociologists, I don't have to recount the history of what we have done. We know that sociologists and social scientists have long been interested in generating research that affects social transformation. Take, for example, the works of Karl Marx, Harriet Martineau, Emile Durkheim, Jane Addams, W.E. B. Du Bois, Gunnar Myrdal, M.N. Srinivas, Aníbal Quijano, Susie Castor, Pablo González Casanova, and Florestán Fernández — just to name a very few. We are also familiar with transformation brought by groups of sociologists for instance feminist sociologists, have highlighted gender inequalities and their intersectionality with other forms of inequalities, providing important theoretical frameworks and methodologies and practices to proactively address social justice. They have also shown women's contributions and the challenges women encounter in the process

of democratization. As sociologists have documented, social movements in different parts of the globe have challenged dominant structures and various types of systematic discrimination. Latin American Sociologists have historically played an important role in addressing issues of social justice and democratization.

Surely, the social tsunamis of inequality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century require us as sociologists to critically re-examine and reassess existing theories and methods of research as well as offer **new formulations** that can illuminate the ongoing global crisis.<sup>xiii</sup> The times we live need even more equitable, collaborative relationships between sociologists and larger publics if we wish to contribute to the promotion of social justice and democracy. Activists theorize and have forms of knowledge often devalued in academia, particularly mainstream academia, though this is slowly changing. Collaborations with movements and communities make our scholarship not only more relevant, but also more rigorous. We have and can strengthen our theories and methods by partnering with communities to not only document social injustices, human rights violations, political and economic inequality, corruption, government and corporate collusion, but for offering paths to global fairness and develop effective strategies for social change.<sup>xiv</sup> In the process of these collaborations, we will have to reconsider what is meant by democratization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, effective forms of contestation, processes of democratic transition, and the social boundaries of communities.<sup>xv</sup>

The importance of our research is matched by the *importance of our teaching*. We must ensure that students and publics see how sociology offers important ways to examine, understand, and influence the world we live in. We need to expand the classroom to be more inclusive, effectively incorporating emergent technologies to create *free and open collective spaces* for collective knowledge production, consumption and distribution.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude by noting that despite all of the violent inequalities that plague the world, I am consistently struck by people's relentless pursuit of justice and democracy. Whether it is Radha Krishna, the farmer in India, Marisela Escobedo in Mexico, Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, the indignados and the hundreds of thousands of Occupy protestors across the world, people are increasingly conscious of the injustices that favor the few at the expense of the many. As a discipline, Sociology needs to intensify our focus upon critically addressing the connections and contradictions between globalization, social justice, and democratization.

This 2<sup>nd</sup> ISA forum is timely as it brings us together to truly explore how we as sociologists, as engaged citizens, and as human beings can substantively address issues of social justice and democratization. Four days with hundreds of sessions organized by the ISA research committees, important collaborations with the local organizing committee, ALAS and AAS provide an amazing opportunity to broaden and deepen our sociological lenses on social justice and democratization. We get an opportunity to think about the possibilities for how to further and more effectively partner with the broader public to reduce social inequalities. I am confident that when we look back upon this time, we will see it as a moment when our diverse voices came together, using our sociological imagination to leave sociological footprints for paths to a more just world.

*Thank you and welcome once again to all of you!*

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> These official numbers on farmer suicides undercount women who work on the land but do not hold titles to the land and hence are not included as farmers in the official statistics. Also see the writings and talks by Journalist P. Sainath, who has been on the frontlines on drawing attention to the plight of farmers and advocating for social justice.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/article3595351.ece>. See also: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/02/12/the-largest-wave-of-suicides-in-history/> and Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, *Every Thirty Minutes: Farmer Suicides, Human Rights, and the Agrarian Crisis in India* (New York: NYU School of Law, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup>

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044723,00.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.may12.net/>

<sup>iv</sup> (<http://www.statisticbrain.com/world-poverty-statistics/>)

<sup>v</sup> WHO/UNICEF "Water, Sanitation and Hygiene" <http://www.unicef.org/wash/>

<sup>vi</sup> "Richest People in the World 2012- Forbes Billionaires" July 12, 2012.

<http://www.therichest.org/world/richest-people/>

<sup>vii</sup>

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/may2012/pers-m01.shtml>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://progress.unwomen.org/>).

<sup>ix</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, (May 2011), accessed 4 June 2012,

<http://www.vanityfair.com/society/features/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>.

<sup>x</sup> Klein, Ezra. "How Big is 50.7 million uninsured?" *The Washington Post*. July 12, 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> However it is worth noting that old-fashioned, word of mouth, ways of mobilizing have also been critical in the Arab Spring movements and elsewhere.

<sup>xii</sup> (Need to include citations of such sociological research in full paper)

<sup>xiii</sup> Some assert that corporate globalization has contributed to development and democratization. Others assert the opposite<sup>xiv</sup>. Through our theories and our research, sociologists reveal contradictory ideas of what development, social justice, and democracy entail. Moreover, we highlight the dialectical process of corporate globalization; how, on the one hand, it presents challenges to social justice and democracy, and how, on the other hand, these challenges contribute to grassroots resistance and movements for

social justice and democracy. How, on the one hand, many states have dismantled their own sovereignty and bases of popular legitimacy, and how, on the other hand, these policies have contributed to mobilization for direct, participatory, deliberative democratic practices.

<sup>xv</sup> See <http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/strategies-for-social-change>. Also see, the writings of Mona Abaza, Michael Burawoy; Raewyn Connell; Nandini Deo; Peter Evans; Pun Ngai; Margaret Abraham and Bandana Purkayastha; Paul Singer; Evangelia Tastsoglou and

Alexandra Dobrowolsky; and Nira Yuval-Davis.

<sup>xvi</sup> The challenge that lies ahead is to seek ways to ensure a redistribution of resources as well as the ability of ALL to participate in decision making and breaking down the hierarchies of power, education, technology, that shape the relationships between individuals, groups, societies, and beyond. It means examining and offering alternative frameworks of personal, organizational, and institutional relations. Contemporary globalization has shifted power balances across relational, symbolic, and spatial boundaries.