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World Society: An Ice-Breaker for a Global Shift in Sociology?

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

Conceptualizations of world society represent elementary breaks with traditional thinking styles in sociology. In this research field, nation-state myths have been disenchanted, the local is identified as global and vice versa, and the central concept of sociology—that of society, which has always been manifold and controversial within the discipline—becomes relevant again. World society approaches require the self-reflexive perspective of the constitutive conditions of the discipline of science. They also make essential contributions to the de-nationalization of concepts and to methods of empirical research. Thus conceptuality refers to the stepping out of a national context and the opening out to the global level as a reference framework for analysis. In addition, conceptualizations of world society are an important contribution to the *global social responsibility* of science. Sociology has, thanks to world society approaches, constructive plans to put forward a *global shift* of the discipline of science. For sociologists, this project will be a central challenge of the twenty-first century at the *construction site of sociology*.

Keywords: world society, elementary breaks with traditional thinking styles, development trends of sociology, global social responsibility, global shift

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of sociology's establishment as a scientific discipline, a plurality of approaches has existed. The increasing internationalization of the social sciences makes it difficult for a *national sociological tradition* to take the initiative to strengthen the intellectual cohesion of this scientific discipline. However, what intellectual development has not been able to achieve itself has been done almost unnoticed by social processes. The decisive factor

for the new phenomenon of homogenization of sociological theory, research and teaching has undoubtedly been the multidimensional process of globalization [1].

One of the most diverse and often unthinkingly used concepts of sociology in literature is that of society. The quasi self-evident equation of the state with the concept of society is found in many theoretical approaches and empirical studies of this scientific discipline. A sociological theory that accepts without reflection the assumptions of the surrounding social reality does not get beyond the description and interpretation of this environment. Another perspective becomes visible, if the reciprocal interdependence of the *local* and *global* is included in analyses. Referring to theories of world society, Klaus Seitz [2] notices that a profound world society theory should be able to reconstruct the emergence of global structures of local events and describe interactions between macro structures and occurrences in the social micro area.

Sociological theories that incorporate the *global* conceptually have to question the proven concept of progressive system of relevance and causal references systematically. 'State' and 'society', 'culture' and 'economy' have so far been valid as the quasi self-evident analytical concepts by means of which sociological knowledge of inclusion and exclusion, status and power distribution, poverty and social inequalities, norms and values, etc. are produced, and so these concepts even remain a problem to this day. This is because to recognize the *global* as the supreme system of relevance means nothing more than to create as a consequence an epistemological challenge; to analyse from now on inevitably all social phenomena in their *world reference* [3].

Sociology has gradually improved and deepened its theoretical basis in the course of history. At the same time, it has had to react to developments and thereby consider new theoretical statements. It makes a difference, if only national or even global perspectives have to be considered and are to be processed [4].

An outdated sociology, as discussed by Ulrich Beck [5] with the polemical accusations of the *zombie science of the national outlook* which thinks and researches in categories of international trade, international dialogue, national sovereignty, national communities, etc., is becoming the unreality science of a 'national sociology'. Just as national economy, national sociology is at the end of its tether. There is also a low level of *self-reflection* about to what extent the discipline is facing the challenges and opportunities of a continuously globalizing and already globalized social world. This is visible in particular in the use of the term society in sociological literature. Niklas Luhmann [6] states that despite the immense global relationships in modern society, sociology shows emphatic resistance when it comes to recognizing this global system as a society. Those authors that grant the modern state a central role in their social theory again do not recognize for this very reason the global system as a society. Such a focus is considered by Niklas Luhmann [7] as one of the *current knowledge blockages of the theory of society*.

Rudolf Stichweh [8] points to an interesting science-systematic indicator that in his view suggests that a regionalization of the concept of society cannot be thought of as consistent. Thus, there is for the discipline of political science the subject 'international politics' as opposed to 'political science' and for the discipline of economics the subject 'world economics' as opposed to 'national economy'; meanwhile, there has never been a comparable dichotomy in the history of sociology as a discipline. He [9] therefore argues that what is still missing in the

sociological writings on science in the system of world society is an approach which enables an explanation of the dynamics of the process of globalization of science. The lack of bisection in the discipline of sociology may be a reason that there is still a long way to go for sociology in the direction of becoming a globally oriented scientific discipline, and the path towards a *world sociology* will take some time to complete.

In this chapter, social responsibility is understood as a worldwide endeavour. Therefore social responsibility here means *global social responsibility*. Social responsibility stands for an ethical framework that proposes an entity—be it an individual or an organization—that as such has an obligation to act for the benefit of society as a whole. Here the term of society is not equated with a nation-state, but the article discloses society in a worldwide frame of reference: world society so to speak. World society approaches refer immediately to a global reference frame. Furthermore they point to social responsibility beyond a nation-state or a world region: a global social responsibility (of scientists) so to say.

2. World society: elementary breaks with traditional thinking styles in sociology

The formative idea of social science production in the nineteenth century was the discovery of 'society'. The twenty-first century is faced with the task of saying *farewell* to traditional ways of thinking, to all 'homeland theories of society' [10] and instead to reconsider the 'world reference' of the social [11] against the fixed idea of 'self-containedness', 'territorial enclosure' and 'boundedness' (of societies, states, cultures, and identities). This farewell to traditional thinking styles of sociology and reconsidering of the 'world reference' of the social, establishes an ad hoc connection to the concept of globality. This plays a role in many theoretical conceptualizations of world society.

The term of globality implicated three elementary fractions with the thinking styles of classical sociology as a new—and for all social relations relevant—*sense and operational framework*: firstly it caused the separation of class-structural systems and its classification systems through identity-political aspirations; secondly it caused — the globe and the global — an identification pattern that is contrary to national symbolism and rhetoric and is focussed on transnational structure formation taking the place of territorially defined value orientations and related ideas of enclosed spaces, historical resistance and social cohesion; and thirdly, it meant the rejection of *deterministic globalization narratives by profound sociological analysis*, which may reveal the specific embedding of culture and economy as well as technology in structures of social relations. World society as the sum of social relations is the result of historical development [12].

The scientific issue of whether and on which structural formations a world or global society is recognizable, is one that has to be answered by sociologists in the twenty-first century. While it is for Martin Albrow [13] a 'society beyond boundaries', other approaches in their theoretical programme, for example, aim for the concept of movement and state a 'sociology

beyond societies' Urry [14]. John Urry dares to suggest the most demanding attempt to design a new agenda for sociology, whose main concept — that of human society — has been lost. He inserts in that empty space, which the concept of society leaves behind, conceptual terms such as *networking*, *mobility* or *horizontal fluids*. The concept of society as a region is here substituted by *networks* and *fluids* [15].

At this point it is worth noting that the world had already been selected by some sociologists as the primary frame of reference for analysis decades earlier, that what now due to global processes is formulated as a contemporary requirement for the sociological discipline is, strictly speaking, a reformulation of approaches that already exist. In fact, 50 years ago a few sociologists chose the world as a benchmark for their analyses. Decades before 1989, explicitly in the 1970s, four theoretical approaches were already relatively independently formulated in sociology, which focused on the topic of world society. Among these approaches are the stratificatory approach to world society by Peter Heintz, the sociological systems theory by Niklas Luhmann, the world-polity approach by John Meyer, and the world system analyses by Immanuel Wallerstein.

In the *first* approach of Peter Heintz [16], world society is designed as a global field of interaction. At the centre of his conceptualization is the issue of the internationalization of inequality. The formation of a global stratification system after the end of World War II is here the central assumption. This is systematized in accordance with the concept of development, so that all people and countries worldwide are included in this field of activity.

The *second* theoretical approach that of sociological systems theory by Niklas Luhmann, comes to the adoption of the *old European* related concept of society on statehood, territoriality and normative integration. At this point, modern society is understood as an effect of an evolutionary new formation of systems, which have functional differentiation as a basis.

Society forms here as a comprehensive and inclusive communication connection in the context of all parts and functional systems—which indeed fulfil social functions, but have no place in the conceptual framework of the term of society. Neither is there a functional primacy of a subsystem, nor do spatial boundaries exist. The limits of communication are also the limits of society, and world society is to be understood in terms of the functions, requirements and results of functional differentiation [17–21].

The *third* approach to world society in this period was developed by John Meyer and his research group at Stanford University in California. The intended research target can be described in this context as exploring in the axiomatic horizon of world society the geographical diffusion of institutional patterns and structural similarities which are realized over compulsion, imitation and normative pressure [22–25].

The main focus at this point is the concept of world polity that is to be understood as a broad cultural regulatory framework of occidental origin which caused processes of global homogenization.

The world-polity approach boils down to conceptualizing the world as a unified system that provides the context for the description of *globally circulating knowledge and standard stocks that equip the elites of the world with recipes and blueprints* on the basis of which the state and society as well

as citizenship can be organized. The distinction of knowledge areas resulting from the power of functional differentiation creates global expert systems that in turn affirm global isomorphies [26].

The *fourth* theoretical approach, developed in the 1970s, is that of the world-system by Immanuel Wallerstein. This is one of the most outspoken critiques of the categorical state-centrism, for which reason the concept of society no longer has any function [27, 28].

Immanuel Wallerstein [29] rejects the concept of society and opposes equating the concept with that of the state by arguing that if we also alter the limits of society by changing state borders, how can we justify that the legitimacy of a government determined by a society is different from the rule of legitimacy as provided by a state? In his view the concept of society should give us something solid on which we can build. He then subsequently equates the singular concept of society with that of the capitalist world economy by stating that only our society, the capitalist world economy (and even that is only a partial contract-defined entity), created our diverse meaningful communities [30].

The focus of the world-system approach is the perception of capitalism as a geographically extensive and historically distinctive system. In this sense, the global space is not conceptualized through a state-centrist list of words such as society or culture, but is seen as a *modern world system*. The emphasis here is not states but empires. Modern states are not the original framework in which historical development took place. It would make more sense if we imagine them as a particular set of social institutions within the world capitalist economy. Furthermore, the latter is the context in which and from which we can analyse structures, conjunctures and events [31].

The specific logic of the capitalist world system is firstly the result of a spatial mismatch of economic structures and secondly due to political and cultural arrangements. The modern world-system is divided in terms of supranational zones of centre, semi-periphery and periphery; on the other hand, states are those geographic base units from which these zones are constructed. There are territorial states which undergo positional battles for their locus in the centre-periphery structure [32]. A major criticism of the world-system approach is that of economic reductionism; the approach stands for the carelessness towards other sub- or transnational phenomena [33].

This analysis of the world-system was intended to be a critique of nineteenth century social science; it remained, however, according to Immanuel Wallerstein [34] an *incomplete, unfinished critique*. In this sense, he argues in his book 'Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth Century Paradigms' [35] for a reorganization of the social sciences by demonstrating the limitations of nineteenth century paradigms. He considers the overcoming of the misleading but lasting legacy of social science—the division of social analysis into three levels: the economic, the political and socio-cultural—as a key challenge of the present: This trinity obstructs the way like a granite block that impedes our intellectual development [36]. Immanuel Wallerstein considers the global structure and the processes of its development to be *the* central agenda of social science research in the future.

The four approaches of sociology that have developed since 1970 which turned their thematic focus on world society have, in spite of their different theoretical conceptualizations, one common denominator: they establish elementary breaks with traditional thinking styles in sociology.

3. Development trends of sociology in the twenty-first century

In sociology, as in other social science disciplines as well, there are numerous recognizable phenomena of de-nationalization. So, for example, an increase of transnational co-authorships and citations is detectable. There is a continuous rise of transnational and transregional interactive contacts between scientists as well as an increase of transnational co-authorships and citations detectable. Furthermore there has existed for several decades sociological associations beyond a national framework such as the International Sociological Association and regional sociological associations. That is, the academic discipline in the fields of literature and at professional associations moves away from a national context towards a regional and global policy framework.

Due to global processes that affect every part of the world, sociology is not only forced to embrace global issues, but as a discipline it must also ask itself self-critically again and again the question of which research agendas will be relevant in the future, in order to be able to design innovative and contemporary scientific discourses within the discipline. Required here is a formulation of future trends, which will be indispensable for sociology.

In the following the extent to which conceptualizations of world society can make relevant and constructive contributions in terms of development trends of sociology in the twenty-first century is discussed. Based on the assumptions of Dirk Kaesler [37] four developmental tendencies of international sociology can be recognized in and for the twenty-first century. According to Kaesler, the following developments will occur:

The *first* development states that there will be an increase in the *self-reflexive* perspective on the constitutive conditions of the sociological discipline.

The *second* development predicates that there will be more intensive efforts towards *de-nationalization* both of sociological conceptuality and methods of empirical social research. In addition there will be a *de-essentialization* of the narrative in the emergence and development of Western 'modernity', which is characterized by an intercrossing enculturation in the dialogue of cultures.

The *third* development assumes that the *disciplinary self-consciousness* of sociology will increase, and at the same time the challenges of inter- and transdisciplinary fields will be accepted.

The *fourth* development postulates that there will ultimately be a rise in the formation of *transnational* intellectual links, which instigates a common sociological theory development together with shared elementary ideas and basic concepts as well as methodological strategies.

Given these formulated development trends, the approaches of world society can be regarded as pioneer work, since they make significant contributions to a sociology of the twenty-first century in all four mentioned points. This is justified as follows:

World Society approaches require the *self-reflexive* perspective of the constitutive conditions of sociology mentioned in the *first* paragraph. Where the global is appearing as a reference framework of analysis, it is essential to show what little value it has had until now in many

approaches in sociology. This may on the one hand be connected with the history of the discipline, but on the other hand also with the fact that many sociologists are to the present day focused on conducting studies mainly in a national context. The world as a framework for sociological studies has been ignored for the most part, or deemed as not relevant.

World society approaches also make essential contributions to the *second* mentioned point, the more intensive efforts to *de-nationalize* sociological concepts and methods of empirical social research. The subject of world ad hoc presupposes a de-nationalization of sociological terms as well as methods of empirical social research. Referring to the former, the merger of the conceptuality of the *world* and the terminology of *society* alone—the *world society* so to speak—already relegates the use of society as a concept from a national or local context to a historical one.

The *third* mentioned development trend of international sociology in the twenty-first century—the simultaneous increase in *disciplinary awareness* with the assumption of the challenges arising from *inter- and transdisciplinary* fields—is also evident with reference to the issue of world society. Thus, with reference to the last point, the disciplines of political science and international relations in particular [38–41] as well as history [42], have also adopted the concept of world society.

Issues of social, political, economic and cultural developments in the world are directly related and de facto cannot be dealt with by one discipline alone. At this point, inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation is an indispensable requirement for taking on the global challenges of the present in a scientifically constructive way. There is no profound scientific progress without pointing out the political formation of world society, without its economic interdependence, its cultural hybrid formations and without its historical bondage. It needs the constructive cooperation of all social science disciplines in order to meet global realities.

At the same time, apart from this required inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation, individual scientific disciplines must also devote themselves to their genuinely specific topics. For sociology, this means turning to the conceptual apparatus again—especially to its central terminus of society—to relate the analysis of the social in a theoretical perspective on the world context and to advance the development of empirical methods to study global interdependencies.

The *fourth* point mentioned, which refers to the increase in the formation of *transnational intellectual links*, is also given on the subject of world society. So the conceptuality already refers to the stepping out of a national context and the opening out to the global level as a reference framework for analysis.

The discipline of sociology is confronted with complex tasks in the face of global reality. In order to keep pace with rapidly occurring social transformations, indispensable conceptual innovations are necessary within the discipline.

Global trends call for groundbreaking visions for social action and for the social order. There is sufficient evidence that it is not easy for sociologists around the world to cope with the complexity and urgency of these tasks. Research and teaching in the field of sociological theory have become a self-referential undertaking, which is much more inspired by the classics of

the discipline than by the social problems that surround us [43]. One result of this is certainly that there has been an increase in heterogeneous and strongly divergent orientations in the formation of sociological theory, as well as a lack of intellectual and institutional coherence within sociology itself. On the other hand, a homogenizing effect of globalization can also be observed in the formation of sociological theory. These internal turbulences and the products of intellectual processes are the essential motor for present day sociological self-reflection within the discipline [44].

The development of sociological knowledge must face global challenges in the third millennium. Genuine innovation and the discussion of continuity and discontinuity in sociological theory and concept formation, as well as the development of methods for detecting global social change, are contemporary requirements of sociology in the face of global reality. Schisms, variations and repetitions are characteristic of the history of sociological ideas. In this respect, sociology can not only be described as a scientific discipline characterized by many paradigms, but there are also often dominating styles in contrast to constructive innovations. What is interesting at this point is the question of whether there has actually been progress in the development of sociological knowledge in the last half-century, or whether it is just a change in certain ways of thinking which is characteristic for the very heterogeneous knowledge landscape of sociology.

When discussing the future of sociology, the year 1989 is often cited as a major turning point in the history of humankind over the last century. Dirk Kaesler [45] states that sociology as *the western science* can not ignore the crucial breakthroughs since that year. The year 1989, with its profound political, social, economic and cultural changes, has relativized many of the discipline's theoretical considerations and practical. In that respect, Nikolai Genov [46] argues that it is now clear that there is a main path of social development and this is called globalization. This process has become the most important reference point and was a homogenizing factor in the development of ideas in the 1990s.

From this perspective a consolidation effect is attributed to globalization, and the anthology 'Globalization. Knowledge and Society' by Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King [47]—distributed to the participants as part of the XII. *World Congress of Sociology* in Madrid—is designated as a prelude to a new stage in the development of world sociology. In this anthology, globalization is understood as all those processes by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society; global society [48].

Globalization is considered here to be a new and far-reaching thematic orientation of the sociological discipline. While the decades before the two world wars were not able to provide *a compelling vision of a world society*, as these were conducted under the banner of national interest and—in the following decades—sociology had been deadlocked despite increasing internationalization processes in political and ideological dividing lines, so is the era after 1989 characterized by diverse networking and a mutual dependence of the entire globe on structures and processes. These processes are the main cause of substantial changes in world sociology, including the emerging mutual reconciliation and amalgamation of sociological approaches and the results of sociological studies into a strong complex that makes the issue of globalization a unified point of reference. During the 1990s, sociologists blessed this rather

complex issue with a great deal of attention. The fact that sociologists gave it so much attention is unique in the development of the discipline and is likely to endure [49].

World society approaches of sociology, as is the case with sociological system theory, world system analyses, and the world-polity approach, were already formulated at the time of the bipolar world order. That is to say, long before the epochal era of a 'globalization boom' [50] began in social sciences.

During the second half of the twentieth century, no scientific revolutions took place in sociology according to Nikolai Genov [51]. He argues that scientific paradigms were ousted and temporarily replaced—but not overturned. Moreover, despite the enormous social and cognitive challenges the discipline faces, one can only be surprised by the self-satisfaction and narcissism in some parts of the sociological community.

The development of sociological ideas in the second half of the last century concretely and clearly revealed the strong embedding of sociological knowledge in a specific social context. This embedding has in turn had an effect on the selection of problems of social reality as well as on the interpretation of these problems by sociologists. In the scientific disciplines, a reality is investigated that is characterized by continuous change as well as by the emergence of new configurations, social actors and processes. Therefore a balance of historically rooted and universal analytical concepts must be considered as an essential task of sociology.

This equilibrium of historically rooted and universal analytical concepts can be found in the global shift of sociology. While at the beginning of its institutionalization as a scientific discipline there was an *international orientation* present, a *national shift* began in sociology that characterized the decades until the end of the bipolar world order, an opposing trend now begins with the turning to a *global shift* of the discipline. The issue of a global shift in sociology in addition to the focus on the world level as a reference framework for analysis also refers to the thematic relatedness of the globalization of the discipline itself, in terms of its *self-reflection*—a major challenge but a social responsibility for sociology in the twenty-first century.

4. Global Shift in Sociology

The term *society* is still the 'grand idea' [52] of the sociological discipline. Martin Albrow [53] assumes that *the global* as an idea is currently not only a strategic locus in public opinion, but has also led sociologists to return to the basic theories of their discipline. The global shift includes actual progress in the thinking about society. In the entire period of the last half-century, the global has fundamentally renewed the discipline of sociology, especially in the 1990s. But if we anchor the global in the foundations of sociology, we will find a strong theoretical renewal. This has already happened, but it has yet to be recognized in its entirety [54].

The global, like society, is referred to by Martin Albrow [55] as a 'grand idea'. In a historical retrospective, the global represented a field of comprehensive communication between people in the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, thereby this was more related to territorial expansion; that is, more the conquest of space and the means of communication

than the relationships of people. During this time the idea of the global was still separate from ideas of peace and international law. There is no reason why scientists should not be able to note the places and occasions on which there was a focus on the global, by analogy, as one might do for a nation-state [56].

The global serves as a *symbol of collective identity* in the concrete case of all humanity, and it is regarded as the central subject of history. In this sense, the current era is also referred to as the 'Global Age' [57–59]. The term global has gradually replaced the term international when referring to the structures and processes that affect people as a whole. The concept 'global' always applies to the planet or the earth and therefore also to the interests of all humanity. The term global/globe has two main meanings: the earth and the sphere: and it also implies that human actors live in world society, which encompasses the whole of humankind.

The various social science disciplines adopted this new terminology at a different pace. The disciplines of political science, business administration and cultural studies were the first; sociology came quite late. It is the plurality and the *well-being of a world society* which go far beyond the characteristic dispositions of globalization [60].

Sociological research can, when it develops parallel to theoretical renovation, lead to the introduction of innovations and can therefore provide groundbreaking impulses. New trends can emerge through the acquisition of imported ideas from other scientific disciplines. The reorientation of the thinking on the global and its impact on public affairs and thus on political strategy in recent years has penetrated all disciplines and is the main driving force behind the global paradigm shift. An endogenous source of modification in science is the technology of electronic data processing, which accomplishes progressions in knowledge that *were a subject for science fiction stories one generation ago* [61].

In the last five decades, it has been modernization as rationalization, and not the global, which has dominated the public agenda. In general, this has also had an impact on social sciences. This process was accompanied by the dominance of a paradigm in which the nation-state was equated with society. The reorientation to the global changed all this and much of today's theoretical renewal of sociology flows from the challenges globality poses to modernity [62].

Due to the extent of the challenge, society is now again in the new focus of theoretical renovation. The global has pushed society as a central and controversial concept back into the contemporary debate. In Western European countries, the discussion was limited to the fact that society was interpreted as an organized citizenship. Society in political, economic and cultural terms served the *welfare or warfare state* [63].

Due to globalization processes, areas such as culture, politics and economics were considered relatively separate from the state and ultimately detached from society. This deconstruction of the nation-state recognizes the ever-present potential to reform social relationships and to transgress boundaries addressed to the future and also in a comparative perspective. Subsequently, it was the change of orientation to the global which gave reason to look at the large number of transnational relations and to imagine what form of social order would be appropriate for a world in which national demarcations cannot provide answers to global problems. In this context, Martin Albrow [64] poses the question of whether a global society

exists in the form of a world society: A world society is neither the society of the nation-state nor the sum of international relations. We can now ask whether a global society exists in the form of a world society.

For example, global civil society, visible due to the formation of transnational non-governmental organizations, is dependent on the contribution of world citizens committed to global issues. The identification takes place here with the whole of humankind and not with any nationality. It is the globality that intensifies this new identity policy [65]. Society beyond borders, networking and identity politics draw our attention to social relationships more than to autonomous social units.

Holistic natures are seen as conditioned by their relationship to other entities in a global environment, which in turn raises a number of questions about the dissolution and transformation. Exceeding the boundaries of society, we are forced to rethink social relations in general. For Asian and African traditions of social thinking, it will be possible to have a much more effective impact on global society than was possible in the Western thinking framework, which is focused on the relationship between the individual and society [66]. From this perspective, relevant contributions are expected from those regions of the world in which social relations have always been regarded as a medium in which collectivities connect. The construction of these collectivities in a global arena will be a setting of trends for the sociological discipline.

In an earlier period, sociology was preceded by social equality and the purpose of the nation-state. Today, it is the complexity of global interdependencies. In that regard Martin Albrow [67] argues that the sociology of the twenty-first century must make a vital contribution to our species and the planet we inhabit. Accordingly, we expect no less than a synoptic vision and productive theoretical work at a level as was achieved by Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim in their days, but aligned with our present challenges. The task is extremely difficult, but it can be accomplished. Sociologists have the skills and technical capabilities beyond their visions to work together. There is no choice but to honour the achievements of the old masters, even if current scientists strive to make them obsolete.

At this point the reformulation and reorientation of the sociological discipline due to the demands of global reality is clearly addressed. It will be indispensable for the future to consider *classics of sociology* in their contemporary historical context, and at the same time not to be afraid to analyse to what extent they could provide relevant contributions for current challenges. If this does not happen, they must remain in the context of history and be mentioned in this setting; they would have, however, little to contribute to contemporary sociological thinking, which must be oriented towards a worldwide reference framework of the social with a simultaneously new conceptualization of society, and also at the opening up of discipline—especially beyond the familiar paths of Western Europe and North America—to other world regions. A first step towards this would be the perception of what exists in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Arab world region etc. with regard to sociological knowledge and a common discourse of scientists globally.

There are new realities that require a modified approach. The world, and therefore also the social role of knowledge in general, as well as the related scientific discourse in sociology in particular,

has as a field of the science of sociology undergone massive changes over the period of the last 100 years. It is only when a scientific work can change its appearance that it can be transformed; it grows a little further—especially when it breaks the boundaries of its immediate context, that is, its national and historical context—and becomes part of a global interpretation [68].

In view of how the social refers to the world, sociology in its historical form cannot meet a perspective on the world as a whole. It is its basic conceptual inventory which is indiscernible to world-social developments and global processes, and for this reason must be fundamentally renewed and changed. An essential part of this basic conceptual inventory is the term *society*. Sociology has conceptualized the term *society* more or less exclusively as a *nationally organized and territorialized unit* [69]. Over decades of time the concept of society was in its prevalent use no more and no less than *bounded nation-state* conceptualized [70].

The classic, and still highly influential, sociological theory designs contributed to the generalization of a very specific concept, resting on the principle of territoriality and the nation-state form of space. The question of the spatial organization of social relations found as such a clear answer. A historical specific formation—the territorial nation-state—was dehistoricized and was, as it were, a natural container in which all life takes place, institutionalized as an organizing principle of the theory of social science, without, on the other hand, becoming the object of theoretical reflection [71]. In this regard, also Immanuel Wallerstein [72] summarizes on the social science paradigms of nineteenth and twentieth century that we could not even explain why we implicitly assumed that each state has a society and every society has a state. A branch of knowledge that cannot explain such a central phenomena will inevitably be in big trouble. It is the view of sociology as '*homeland theories of society*' [73] that leads to the assumption that sociological knowledge is, despite all universalistic validity claims, essentially a regionally specific knowledge.

Conceptualizations of world society stimulate a critique of such a territorializing thinking style. In contrast to *traditional sociology*, world society approaches are a theoretical programme which tries to implement the sociology of the global as a counter-project. This requires the overcoming of the *methodological nationalism* as criticized by Ulrich Beck [74], the *zombie categories of the national view* [75] and also the *container theory of state and society* [76] as well as the development of fundamentally new conceptual terms, which meet the world as the totality of social relations.

Present sociological diagnoses have to take global reality into account, and world society approaches provide a pioneering work in this direction. These conceptualizations break with the model of *methodological nationalism*—until now long uncritically used in the discipline—by postponing questions about the spatial organization of social relations at the global level; and they break even with basic terminologies of the discipline which no longer meet social reality in the third millennium.

5. Conclusions

The bottom line of the article is structured along three main conclusions. The extent to which world society approaches represent elementary breaks with traditional thinking

styles is the focus of the first conclusion. The second refers to development trends of sociology in the twenty-first century and the nation–state related paradigm of this scientific discipline. The conclusions close with the theming of the global shift of sociology and thereby refer to the pioneering work of world society theorists.

It can be stated as a *first* conclusion that it has been proved that world society approaches are a counter-project to the classics of sociology. As a conceptual term, *world (wide) society* directly points to the diminishing importance of spaces and addresses a conceptualization of *society* which is understood to be extra-territorialized. The increasing use of digital information and communication technologies for the empirical processing of sociological studies can here contribute significantly to the abolition of the spatial concept as a unit of analysis.

It is one of the greatest intellectual challenges of the present for all social science disciplines to deal with the world as a framework of culture, economics, law, politics and social reality and to use them constructively for scientific analysis. It certainly needs the courage to say what is not yet explorable since, for example, the empirical methods have not yet been developed; and that since one sits on a theory building in which the '*universal and global house of sociology*' is to a large extent revealed as a house of few countries of the world, there is still much to do in the field of sociological conceptions and theoretical approaches. At this point conceptualizations of world society can make an important contribution to the *global social responsibility* of science.

In the sociological field of world society research, nation-state myths have been disenchanted, the local is identified as global and vice versa, and the central concept of sociology—that of society, which has always been manifold and controversial within the discipline—becomes relevant again.

The *second* conclusion of the article refers to development trends of sociology, to the nation-state paradigm of sociology and the breaking thereof due to world society approaches. Here it was discussed how world society conceptualizations can make a constructive contribution to the sociology of the twenty-first century.

In the face of world society research, sociology is confronted with an often unreflected nation-state paradigm and a state-centric vocabulary, which opposes the perception of the global as a perspective. Sociological knowledge about transnational social spaces or post territorial communions or the perception of the *social world as a totality* in a normative sense, is yet to be developed profoundly.

The rise of sociology began with the emergence of the nation-state and nationalism. Therefore, society as the central object of the investigation of sociology was equated with the nation. This form of sociology, which reached its peak in structural functionalism and modernization theory, is increasingly being critically viewed and questioned in the present due to globalization processes: A new, global sociology is taking shape which is no longer oriented towards 'society', but rather towards social networks, border areas, border crossings and world society. The sociology of a nationally restricted society deviates from a post/inter/national sociology of hybrid forms, times, and spaces [77].

The subject of world society requires of many sociological issues—such as class and social structure analyses, poverty and inequality research as well as research fields of cultural sociology or political sociology—an emergence from the analytical unit of a ‘nationally organized society’, which is often assumed to be self-evident. On the basis of sociology, questions about social change, inequality, culture, power and domination have not become obsolete, but they have been moved into a different perspective. In particular, their importance ratio changes at the moment when these questions are referred to at the global reference level.

In this sense, ‘the globe as a big idea’ has transformed not only sociological theories, but also the form of sociology as a whole. Sociology, which entered the historical stage as a science of ‘modern society’, is on its way to constituting itself as the science of one ‘social world’ [78]. World society approaches to this end had already been preparing sociological discourses on the way that the discipline can enter the contemporary stage of a *social world as a unit* decades before globalization. They have set trendsetting signposts for the discipline with their theory designs which have the world as a reference framework for the ‘*global house of sociology*’ to be established, which should openly and constructively address the social challenges of the twenty-first century.

The discourse on world society can be viewed as a seismograph of the state of current social science discourses in the face of processes of globalization and transnationalism. This seismograph shows how long inter- and transnationalism in the analysis of *society* have had a minor role in the sociological research of the so-called First World. It may be a great merit for world society sociologists from recent decades to leave the Euro- and North American centrism and to choose the global as the reference frame for the analysis. This implies, not least, the realization that the traditional empirical methods of capturing *society* are doomed to failure in the context of the global; and the traditional theoretical approaches of sociology as well as their conceptual instruments require a thorough revision.

In addition to the demonstration of theoretical and empirical challenges, the analysis of world society, themes of globalization and transnationalism, the issue of transnational social spaces and classes, the range of global inequality and questions about transnational citizenship and the extensive field of global justice are new and modern approaches of sociological research. The future will show to what extent, with this thematic selection of research approaches, the nation-state as a reference frame of analysis is abandoned and how a tension between questions of continuity and the discontinuity of sociological concepts to the analysis of globalization and transnationalization as well as world society approaches can be drawn in a convincing way.

Sociology has, due to world society approaches, some social responsibility to put forward constructive plans in relation to the *global shift* of its scientific discipline. At the moment, both the merger and the implementation of the plans are important. For sociologists, this project will be a central challenge of the twenty-first century at the *construction site of sociology*.

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