

Marx, Weber and NGOs

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This article offers a sociological understanding of intermediary NGOs in the modern world. It does so by drawing on certain epistemological insights of Marx and Weber, and this entails methodologies of both deconstruction and reconstruction. In arguing against a sociological behaviourism that pervades the NGO literature, the article conceptualises intermediary NGOs as a 'social form' embodying contradictory relations. For analytical purposes, the contradiction between 'the global' and 'the local' is brought to the fore. NGOs are immersed in processes of 'glocalisation'. More specifically, the social field of NGOs is marked by ambiguities and tensions, and NGOs seek to 'negotiate' and manoeuvre their way through this field by a variety of organisational practices. At times, these practices entail attempts at stabilising and simplifying the world and work of NGOs. It is concluded that, as a general trajectory, intermediary NGOs privilege the global moment, problematise the local moment and prioritise their own organisational sustainability.

Key words: deconstruction, form analysis, glocalisation, NGOs, reconstruction.

Introduction

Sociology continues to draw its life-blood from the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Indeed, many theorists recognise that sociological investigation is best (or at least properly) located somewhere between Marxist and Weberian analyses, with their respective emphases on 'structure' and 'meaning'.¹ The prospect of 'combining' Marx and Weber in some form does not involve eclecticism or relativism in some sort of methodological mish-mash; nor does it entail pursuing an integrated and synthetic methodological approach at all costs. Rather, in a manner consistent with the philosophy of Critical Realism, it involves the simple recognition that – ontologically – social processes are complex stratified realities that necessitate multi-dimensional and flexible epistemologies.

1. Drawing on the methodological work of Marx and Weber raises the prospect of what Burawoy (2003) refers to in a different conceptual context as a Marxist sociology or a sociological Marxism. Burawoy discusses Marxism and sociology with specific reference to Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi. He argues that Gramsci and Polanyi, both from within Marxism, incorporate a notion of 'society' into their analyses as 'a specific institutional space within capitalism between economy and the state' (Burawoy, 2003:198). Yet, the distinctive sociological concept of 'the social' is not necessarily synonymous with 'society', whether in terms of a 'space' within capitalist societies or more broadly in terms of the nation-state-society nexus. As Urry (2000) points out, there is the rich tradition in interpretive sociology which associates 'the social' with 'meaning' (or intersubjective meanings). It is in this sense that I would prefer to speak about the prospects of either a Marxist sociology or a sociological Marxism. For reasons explained in the body of the article, I do not intend to presently pursue this endeavour with any vigour.