

HANDBOOK ON SOCIOLOGY OF INEQUALITIES IN BRICS COUNTRIES



With the Foreword by Sari Hanafi

Kiran Odhav • Jayanathan Govender

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Foreword

As president of the International Sociological Association and advocate for a global sociology, I am always delighted to see any work using a comparative perspective. The current volume *Handbook on Sociology of Inequalities in BRICS Countries* is particularly compelling for two reasons: one related to geography and another for the topic itself.

First, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) is an emerging entity where some countries (China particularly) aim to provide a new model of social and economic organisations. A search for a new model would be beneficial in the time of our late modernity where neoliberal capitalism has produced not only so many social and economic inequalities but also Anthropocene and destruction of our environment. Let us see whether BRICS can provide a new mode of organisation.

Second, it is an important issue about the Sociology of Inequalities in the time when our societies strive to have diversity but without undermining the possibility of the societal conception of justice. At the same time, this volume highlights the role of diversity, i.e. categories of diversities, that poses theoretical and conceptual problems for analysing inequality in BRICS; and plurality, i.e. the varied spaces and structures where inequality presents its unique formats.

I am impressed how the scholars coming from its countries have swiftly contribute in the 'Making of BRICS'. In less than a decade we have two major books: Peilin, Li et al, *Handbook on Social Stratification in the BRIC Countries: Change and Perspective* (World Scientific, 2013) and Dwyer, Tom et al, *Handbook of the Sociology of Youth in BRICS Countries* (World Scientific, 2018) and here is the third one.

The handbook took us on a journey of crosscutting themes (social stratification, social class compositions, labour sociology, gender, sport mega-events, etc) well thought out through research that was carried out mostly by senior scholars who are capable of producing critical and epistemological reflection on paradigms that directed these themes.

The book is an excellent reflection on where is social class studies today outside the Western world and to which extent the classical Marxist theory can be applied there. Here social class was understood in relation not only to economic capital but also to cultural and social capitals. The working class,

for instance, is characterised by restricted volumes of these three capitals. No matter how one can consider this notion of social class a universalistic one, the importance is how to be defined in a specific context and take into account biography and history. The handbook is an invitation to understand this kind of projection and construe the causality of inequality as historical, normative or structural: 'Historical inequality is shaped by kinship, age and prestige. Normative inequality is organised through race, class and gender. Structural inequality is framed by distribution of rights, political power, public goods and services, financial services and banking and public participation (p.9).'

This volume has a special focus on the middle classes but also what are the categories of the population that did not benefit from the economic growth. For instance, although China's economy and society are developing more rapidly than ever, there are more impoverished people and a large number of low-income rural population and migrant workers. In this volume Li Chunling points out the necessity to combine both the relative standard mode and absolute standard mode for the definition of middle-income group to fully embody the changes of social structure of China, in particular the changes in income structure.

When I wrote my article on my conception of a global sociology (Hanafi, 2019), I defined the Liberal Democracy as a universal political organisation. However, I argued that it is, but not as a model to be exported, nor as a concept with telos, but as a historical experience that could be traced back to the French Revolution, to the 1980s in Latin America, the 1990s in Eastern and Central Europe, and finally the 2010s in some countries in the Arab World. It is indeed a collective historical learning process. What is universal is an imaginary of desire for democracy, whose traces are in the slogans raised by the Arab demonstrators demanding liberty, justice, and dignity. Having said that, I am ready to see whether one of the countries of BRICS is ready to provide an ameliorated system of liberal democracy. Is China a candidate for that? China has succeeded to lift 800 million Chinese people out of poverty which represents 75% of global poverty reduction level (pp.348-49), yet I am not sure if its system allows pluralistic conceptions of the good life and the same thing for Russia. In fact, Mikhail Chernysh and Valeriy A Mansurov in their chapter admit that the social justice issues must find support in the principles of democracy. Thus the issue at stake is how to account for the importance of liberal democracy without falling into trap of the modernisation theory and the way this theory sees only one path to reach modernity.

What makes this book one of the contributions to global sociology is its capacity to bring new ideas out of the box on how to associate liberal democracy with social justice and reduce the extreme inequality that we have in the world. China used to champion this claim about this association. Each country in BRICS brought some interesting models: South Africa eliminated the Apartheid system, Brazil (at least under Lula) and China have succeeded to reduce the poverty rate and redress their Gini Coefficient, India champions the capacity of enhancing their economy and establishing rule of law to reduce the extreme cast system and gender inequality. Russia also enhanced its economy and created a minimum of redistribution policy but with the least democratic principles and with the construction of wealth in the hand of oligarchy.

Let me make it clear here, I am sensitive to liberal democracy as someone who grow up in an authoritarian state (Syria), I am aware of how social knowledge construction has been produced with many unspoken issues because of (self) censorship. I am aware of the limitation of knowledge production today in countries like China and Russia, and I hope the scholarly community has the courage today to confront the culture of political interventions of the state in academia.

I think the major issue at stake today is how to move our liberal democracy from one man one vote in politics to the economics sphere, i.e. to a sort of 'participatory socialism', that has been suggested by Thomas Piketty (2020). It is a socialism that enables workers and different stakeholders to vote in corporate enterprises and public institutions, and more broadly it is a system founded on an ideology of equality, social property, education, and the sharing of knowledge and power.

Let me finish by wishing long life to the 'Making of BRICS' in this direction.

24 December 2022

Sari hanafi

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