



## Teaching Gender and Resistance From a World-Systems Perspective: “We Are in this Dance Together” in the Classroom and Beyond

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Shortly after its publication in 2012, I taught two chapters of *We Are in This Dance Together* (WAITDT) in my 200-level Sociology course on Gender and International development. The reading went over so well that, over a year later, when I had the opportunity to design a Massively Open Online Course (MOOC) on global sociology, I got in contact with the author, and requested an interview with her about the book. The interview would later become part of the course materials for Sociology 108X, Introduction to Global Sociology, a course that went live on the edX platform in the Fall of 2014 to a large audience around the world.<sup>1</sup> During the same semester, I used the video materials, along with the introduction to the book, in my classroom version of Sociology 108 (Fall 2014) to great effect.

Drawing on these experiences, I demonstrate in this essay the remarkable power of this book to teach fundamental global system concepts to a wide range of students. My reflections suggest that WAITDT makes not only a significant scholarly contribution, but also a pedagogical one.

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<sup>1</sup> To see the archived version of this course, including the video interview with Nancy Plankey-Videla, which appears in week 9, go to: <https://www.edx.org/course/wellesley/soc108x/introduction-global-sociology/830> . Signup is free and open to all.

By providing a useful counterpoint to the overwhelmingly bleak portrayal of factory work in the global South that currently pervades scholarship and media on the topic, WAITDT allows students and faculty to explore the possibilities for resistance and protest in the current global economy. Students grapple with the ironies of women's empowerment, and finally, with the constraints placed upon empowerment and resistance within the world-system.

### Teaching Materials and Context

The “data” for this review draws from my experience teaching WAITDT in contrasting environments. The first of these environments consisted of two Wellesley College classrooms, including a 200-level course on Gender and International Development (Soc 234, Fall 2012), and a 100-level introductory course in sociology (Soc 108, Fall 2014). Wellesley College is a small, women's only, elite liberal arts college located in suburban Boston. Both of these classes had an enrollment of around 20 students. The second, markedly-different environment was that of Soc 108X, taught as a MOOC on the edX platform. The online course had an enrollment of 28,000 students from over 150 countries, but only a fraction of those registered ever logged onto the course, a common phenomenon with MOOCs. After week 5, the number of active students dropped significantly, a trend that is also consistent with MOOC courses in general. By the time WAITDT materials went live in week 9 of the course, there were approximately 500-600 active students.

In all these contexts, I assigned the book's introduction, and in my 2012 classroom, I also assigned chapter 4. My two courses in Fall 2014 drew significantly from my interview with Plankey-Videla as well. Our 90-minute, in-person interview at Wellesley College turned into a nine-part sequence of video materials, edited into 2 to 8 minute segments. In that hour of video, Plankey-Videla conveyed the essence of her book in a compelling, compassionate way. An overview of the details of these three pedagogical contexts is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Course Contexts in which WAITDT Was Taught**

|  | Term      | Enrollment | Active Students | Materials   |
|--|-----------|------------|-----------------|---|
| <b>Sociology 234<br/>Gender &amp; Dev't</b>                                    | Fall 2012 | 23         | 23              | Introduction,<br>Chapter 4                                  |
| <b>Sociology 108X<br/>Introduction to Global<br/>Sociology</b>                 | Fall 2014 | ~28,000    | 500-600         | Video Interview,<br>Introduction (not<br>accessible to all) |
| <b>Sociology 108<br/>Thinking Global: An<br/>Introduction to<br/>Sociology</b> | Fall 2014 | 22         | 22              | Introduction<br>(required), Video<br>interview              |

### **Teamwork, Protest and the Relevance of Marx**

Do the lessons of large-scale social cooperation, learned in the context of industrial work, translate into the tools for protest and eventually, revolution? Marx thought they would, but history has been equivocal on this point. Overwhelmingly, when students encounter images of industrial work in the global South, whether in scholarship or in the media, it seems to prove that Marx was dead wrong. For example, in my three classes, students had read or watched accounts of factory work in China in which the organization of industrial space and the tactics of management explicitly prevent workers from organizing.<sup>2</sup>

WAITDT, in contrast, provided students with a brilliant counterpoint: as it turns out, in *some* circumstances, the skills learned on the shop floor really do translate into skills for organizing. In both the book and in the interview, Plankey-Videla stressed how workers who might have otherwise lacked confidence were trained to speak up about problems occurring in their work teams, communicate directly with management, and take responsibility for their work. They established specific pathways of communication among workers, between teams, and with management. It was those same systems and processes, practiced in the modernized “teamwork” model that yes, improved efficiency and profits for the firm, but also provided the infrastructure for the protest and strike that followed when the company continued to cut benefits.

One segment of the video interview focused on this topic, but I did not ask an explicit question about this theme in Soc 108X. Thus, I lack data to understand whether MOOC students grasped this connection as fully. In my classrooms, however, we engaged in a dynamic, in-person discussion of this point. Students observed that the specific conditions of factory work—the organization of the work, and even the thing itself being produced—could plant the seeds for protest or systematically prevent it. In my classrooms, this discussion flowed organically into a discussion of women’s empowerment.

### **Women’s Empowerment?**

Perhaps the strongest pedagogical contribution of WAITDT is its ability to spark a wide-ranging, nuanced discussion on women’s empowerment. Students were struck by the irony that the jobs at Moctezuma offered women economic (and eventually, political) empowerment, but also relied

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<sup>2</sup> Materials included selections from Pun Ngai’s 2005 book, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press), and Micha X. Peled’s 2005 film, *China Blue* (Teddy Bear Films).

upon workers to identify with the narrow role of being mothers first. The jobs at Moctezuma were high-end factory jobs with good benefits and a relatively high degree of worker autonomy, *and yet* managers could be patronizing and even exploitative towards workers when it suited them because of their status as mothers. Both the book and the interview show that when the workers understood this contradictory positioning, they felt exploited and indignant. They felt they deserved better. Their identities transformed; they became worker-mothers—equally worker *and* mother.

Students in my classroom found this transformation striking, and made specific comments about it in written discussion comments. Many reflected upon their own assumptions about mothers who engage in waged work. In Sociology 108, a student commented in class, “I never thought about the fact that we always call mothers who have a job ‘working mothers,’ which automatically assumes that they are primarily mothers! I never thought about how *we* still have that assumption.” Students were also quick to note the gendered self-policing that Plankey-Videla observes among the Moctezuma workers. In Soc 234, one student wondered:

As long as women themselves are furthering these [constrained] gendered roles, will it ever be possible to completely deconstruct gender barriers? After reading this piece, I’m also left wondering if breaking down those barriers is actually feasible, or even desirable, given the fact that women may never fully relinquish some of the constraints placed on them, particularly as related to motherhood.

In both classrooms, I was impressed by the level of nuance, engagement, and reflection that WAITDT prompted on the difficult subject of women’s empowerment.

On the edX platform, students reflected, in response to a specific question, on whether or not they were disappointed with the outcome of the strike—the unethical treatment of workers and their eventual firing, and ultimately, the shutdown of the plant itself. In student comments, I caught a glimpse of how WAITDT helped students see the interconnections between the individual and the global system, and how gendered those interconnections are. Some students stuck to a narrow, individualistic understanding of women’s empowerment that is divorced from economic realities, focusing, as it were, on “the positive”:

This job changed their life's perspectives on their bosses, their government and even their responsibilities and voice at home. Even though they didn't win this battle, they now have the tools to fight many more and possibly, hopefully, win some.

Other students focused on the lessons they learned about the global system:

I am disappointed that eventually the women did lose their jobs and the factory closed. But this interview really drove home the interconnectedness we face in today's world positively and negatively. From the positive side workers in the second factory she mentioned we able to connect with USAS and have their demands met. From the negative side, financial and other events in one part of the world – like the East Asia crisis – can have a devastating impact on other parts of the world.

And still others seemed to be confronted with the deeply ambivalent personal consequences of the strike and its outcome:

All of them lost their jobs. Although yes winning is not everything. I'm left to wonder how many got same waged jobs elsewhere. The women workers did benefit by growing awareness of their rights and developed will to be assertive for their rights. But the outcome was a lose-lose situation for both the company heads and the workers. Although the Researcher Ms. Nancy [Plankey-Videla] points out one success story in the end, I wonder what happened to the rest. To decide what they gained out of this can only be determined if their lives after this are noted.

As an instructor accustomed to exploring these ideas in teaching contexts, I found the depth of these comments and conversations on gender and the global economy to be qualitatively new. Students forged connections on how women's empowerment is linked to personal identity, the organization of the local economy and culture, and the fluctuations of a global system over which they have little control.

### **“We are In This Dance Together” Right Here**

The first time I taught this book, one of the first responses posted to the course forum, in preparation for our class session, caught my attention:

The Plankey-Videla reading brought into focus many issues on the subject of work, and I want to use the reading as a means for discussing

and examining the contract negotiations that are going on **right now** between Union workers and Wellesley College. . .

Briefly, in the contract that Wellesley is putting forward, newly-hired dining service workers would be paid on a lower tier, and would face reduced pay rates from those currently working. . .Most dining service employees are **female**. The college is proposing to make the percentage they pay for health insurance flexible, which could result in \$300 additional costs per month. . . I was told that many of the changes that are happening are under the assumption that workers only come for a short time period, and that the jobs don't take a lot of skill, and are essentially going to make the jobs more appealing to people that only want them temporarily, which will help decrease the production costs/increase profits/and decrease corporate and institutional accountability to the workers. Sound familiar? . . .The Plankey-Videla reading led me to question what are the ways in which Wellesley College is functioning to perpetuate hegemonic power structures? How are Wellesley College, AVI [the company that Wellesley contracts to provide dining services], and other structures working to mask or take advantage of relations of exploitation? What is our role as students in challenging these structures, and in holding the institution to its own principles of making a positive difference by transforming its own practices relating to workers' rights and contracts? As students, we need to be aware of this situation; let's be involved in understanding the dynamics of gender, power, and work on this campus. "We are in this dance together," right here at Wellesley College.

The student's comments prompted us to open our class session with a discussion of the dining worker's situation, the college's proposed plan, and how students might get involved if they wished. There was a unique opportunity presented by this situation, however, that I did not adequately take advantage of in class. Here was an opportunity to prompt students to do a global analysis of why the college had taken the actions it did, not to justify those actions, but to be able to better counter the claims that were being made.

To what extent is there a "race to the bottom" underway with food service workers, even in coveted positions on college campuses? Where does their sense of constraint come from, and how can such a perspective open up a dialogue between various stakeholders on campus about

the priorities of an institution like ours? In other words, can students stand in solidarity with the workers *and* offer something more?

This book opens up space for these kinds of conversations in the classroom. By vividly illustrating the intimate contradictions of the global system, its analysis invites students to examine how their own immediate environments are implicated in a hierarchical world-system.