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COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

Intellectual Solidarity and Reflexive Dislocation: Sociology in the Age of Global Authoritarianism

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to current debates on the ethics of critical scholarship in an era of authoritarian consolidation and institutional erosion. It introduces *intellectual solidarity* as an ethical stance and *reflexive dislocation* as a methodological practice that together offer a grounded response to the complicities and constraints of academic life today. Drawing on personal experiences of academic migration—from the Philippines and the United States to Germany and the Netherlands—it explores how authoritarian logics are embedded in institutions often assumed to offer refuge, including the university. These logics manifest through marketisation, surveillance governance, and epistemic austerity. Situated within critical traditions of engaged scholarship, this commentary argues that sustaining sociology's relevance requires more than reflexivity—it demands a commitment to epistemic humility, public accountability, and institutional courage. In calling for a renewed public vocation of the social sciences, it offers *intellectual solidarity* and *reflexive dislocation* as provisional tools for thinking, acting, and relating in times of systemic crisis.

1 | Introduction

Across diverse political contexts, we are witnessing the erosion of public institutions, the normalization of surveillance, and the growing influence of authoritarian logics (Fúnez-Flores 2024; Monahan 2025; Regilme and Parthenay 2024). These are not isolated national crises, but signs of a transnational pattern: a global condition marked by institutional hollowing, democratic backsliding, and epistemic closure (Glasius 2023; Regilme 2023; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The university—while often imagined as a space for critical inquiry and civic learning—is not exempt from authoritarian drift, nor from its complicities in exclusion, elitism, and institutional reproduction. It is increasingly shaped by market logics, performance metrics, and managerial rationality (Kim 2025; Ross et al. 2019; Collini 2017).

While these developments are political and institutional, they are also deeply sociological. They raise questions about how

knowledge is organized, who holds epistemic authority, and which futures remain thinkable within academic spaces. In this context, this commentary proposes two interrelated concepts—*intellectual solidarity* and *reflexive dislocation*—as modest tools for navigating and confronting these conditions. *Intellectual solidarity* refers to a scholarly stance grounded in epistemic humility, public relevance, and institutional courage. It calls for aligning research with the communities and struggles most affected by systemic harm. *Reflexive dislocation*, in turn, is a method of intentionally repositioning oneself—geographically, intellectually, and ethically—away from structures that normalize complicity. These concepts did not emerge fully formed in my work. Rather, they arose from a long process of personal and professional reckoning. This piece reflects on that process—not as memoir, but as autoethnographic reflection, albeit provisional, of how ideas are shaped by lived experience in the face of authoritarian drift (Reyes 2020; Rutazibwa 2016; Doty 2010).

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2 | Intellectual Solidarity

Intellectual solidarity is a mode of scholarly engagement that resists detachment and the illusion of neutrality. It rests on three commitments: first, epistemic humility and accountability, recognizing the scholar's positionality and partiality; second, rigorous, public-oriented research that contributes to justice rather than prestige; and third, institutional courage to confront complicity and resist structural harm. The concept draws on critical traditions that challenge abstraction, elitism, and insulation in academic knowledge production (Said 1994; Collins 2019; Santos 2014; Fraser 1997; hooks 1994). Edward E. Said (1994) insists that the intellectual must remain affiliated with justice rather than institutions (Said 1977). Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 2006) advocates for community-rooted, accountable scholarship, while Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) argues for “ecologies of knowledges” that resist epistemic hierarchies. Nancy Fraser (1997) distinguishes between justice and solidarity, urging scholars to embed critique within collective struggle. Indeed, we need to reimagine the intellectual not as a distant observer but as a co-struggler (hooks 1994).

In my own journey, however, this stance was not always clear. I came to recognize *intellectual solidarity* as something I had lacked. While initially motivated by a search for career opportunity and intellectual growth, these migrations were also responses to growing unease with the systems I inhabited. I believed I was searching for clarity or refuge. In hindsight, these moves revealed something more fundamental: a discomfort with the structures I inhabited and a growing awareness that my scholarship, while critical of systems, had not fully accounted for how I was implicated within them.

I had been reflexive about power, but I lacked a consistent, grounded ethic of solidarity. Without it, each institutional transition risked becoming an act of escape rather than engagement. *Intellectual solidarity* gave language to what was missing: a stance that resists comfort and detachment, that centers responsibility, and that commits to thinking and acting with—not just about—those at the sharpest edges of inequality. It transforms reflexivity into accountability and critique into relation. In an age of intensifying injustice, it offers not a solution, but a baseline—a compass for how to live and work with integrity within the academy.

What makes this solidarity “intellectual” is its insistence that epistemic and ethical labor are inseparable—that knowledge production is solidarity with those at the edges of society. While sharing ground with engaged scholarship (Collins 2019; Hale 2008; Icaza and Vázquez 2013), intellectual solidarity shapes how research, methods, analysis, and dissemination are guided by ethical reflections and commitments. My scholarship on Duterte's drug war perhaps exemplifies this approach (Regilme and Parthenay 2024; Regilme 2021; Regilme 2020). Geographic and institutional distance from the Philippines enabled documenting violence and naming state atrocities that would have been dangerous to undertake in Manila. This dislocation was ethical repositioning: confronting complicity while remaining accountable to those harmed. As a Catholic, I wrote on January 2019 to Pope Francis urging him to support the very few Filipino bishops who condemned Duterte's

campaign of violence—when many in the clergy remained silent. This extended my scholarship into an appeal for moral clarity. On the genocide in Gaza, scholars have faced censorship and reprisals even within universities that claim to protect academic freedom (Fúnez-Flores 2024). The repression is global—from the criminalization of refugees, to the erasure of Uyghur identity, atrocities in Sudan, persecution of the Rohingya, and mass killings in the Philippines. Intellectual solidarity demands thinking *with* and *for* those facing systemic harm—even when doing so risks professional backlash and personal safety. This commitment transforms critique into an ethical vocation.

3 | Reflexive Dislocation: Migration as Method

Migration is often described as a search for opportunity, safety, or freedom. For me, it was also a form of *reflexive dislocation*—a sociological method for repositioning myself in relation to systems I could no longer inhabit in good faith. Reflexive dislocation refers to the intentional act of moving—geographically, intellectually, and ethically—away from structures that directly, substantially, and persistently confer privilege and normalize complicity. It is not exile imposed from above, but a chosen rupture: a method of critique and a practice of becoming otherwise.

This idea builds on traditions of situated knowledge and echoes Said's exilic intellectual (1994) and Ahmed's willful subject who resists institutional comfort (2014). Yet reflexive dislocation centers the affective and political stakes of breaking from inherited epistemologies. It also diverges from Bourdieu and others' (1991) notion of the epistem break by emphasizing not only critical distance, but lived risk and ethical transformation. It insists that dislocation is both an epistemic tool and a sociological condition. I left the Philippines not out of desperation, but from a quiet refusal to remain complicit in a system where upward mobility depended on looking away. By 18, I had entered junior management in two multinational financial firms. Professional and material success was tangible, but it came at the cost of internalizing elite norms and distancing myself from the city's visible socioeconomic inequalities—gated villages beside slums, elite schools next to crumbling ones. These landscapes etched themselves into my ethical imagination. Migration became a way to dislodge myself from these structures, to see more clearly how I had been shaped by them.

Germany offered a momentary sense of clarity. Its universities still held to some public ideals, yet beneath the surface were forms of austerity cloaked in neutrality and exclusionary nationalism veiled in bureaucratic civility. In the United States, particularly at Yale, the contradictions became sharper. Monumental institutional prestige existed alongside racialized poverty and infrastructural decay. It felt like a fast-forwarded preview of what Europe might become if its institutions continued to unravel. The architecture of inequality was not a deviation from liberal modernity—it was its foundation.

I recognize that the capacity for dislocation—especially across borders or institutions—is not always available. Reflexive dislocation extends beyond physical movement or professional

autonomy. It is an ethical repositioning—geographically, intellectually, or politically—away from systems that normalize complicity and sustain inequality. This repositioning can occur under structural constraint. A precariously employed lecturer may use curricular freedom to include critical texts on Gaza, Xinjiang, or Duterte's drug war—despite pressures to avoid “controversial” topics. They dislocate from institutional expectations by aligning their teaching with communities under siege. Similarly, a researcher banned from discussing Gaza in the classroom may enact reflexive dislocation through digital platforms, teach-ins, or community forums outside the academy—continuing to speak out and remain answerable to those affected. These acts confront power through ethical realignment, exemplifying reflexive dislocation: purposeful refusals that reposition one's scholarly role in solidarity with those facing violence and exclusion.

These realizations did not immediately lead to solidarity. They were disorienting, and at times I sought distance rather than direct engagement. But over time, *reflexive dislocation* helped me see that migration could be more than a search for safety—it could be a method of critique. It taught me that we cannot stand fully outside the systems we interrogate, but we can choose how we inhabit them. It offered a way to hold contradiction without paralysis, and to view movement not as escape, but as recalibration.

In a world shaped by oligarchic governance and epistemic enclosure, migration does not guarantee refuge. But it can offer a different perspective; after all, we are all situated within the same broken global structure underwritten by hierarchical differentiation. *Reflexive dislocation* helps shift our vantage point, allowing us to see across the fractures—and to rethink our roles within them. When joined with *intellectual solidarity*, it opens a modest pathway: a way of doing scholarship that is rigorous, relational, and answerable to the world it seeks to understand.

4 | No Safe Institutions

If *reflexive dislocation* helped me see through the fractures of institutional life, it also dispelled the illusion that there are safe institutions—or safe countries. After completing my PhD, I accepted a tenure-track position at Northern Illinois University while finishing a postdoctoral fellowship in Duisburg. I later took up a visiting professorship in Manila, hoping to spend time with family before returning to Illinois in 2018. That return never happened.

By mid-2016, both the United States and the Philippines had become, in my view then and now, uninhabitable in different but related ways. Trump's rise was no longer spectacle but already guaranteed; Duterte's presidency inaugurated a regime of open violence and fear. Friends and colleagues urged caution against moving to Leiden (and consequently abandoning a tenure track position in a major US university). Some believed Duterte was simply “making necessary changes.” Others warned that leaving a tenure-track position at an R1 institution was a serious mistake: “You'll be fine in the U.S.,” they said. But my instincts—perhaps shaped by the volatility of the system in

Manila—told me otherwise. I moved to the Netherlands. It was not purely a strategic career decision. It was another act of *reflexive dislocation*—a refusal to adapt to a new normal I could not accept.

At the time, I held hope that Northwestern Europe's postwar social democracy might endure. I became a Dutch citizen, drawn by its promise of civic stability and reliable investment in public institutions. But that promise has eroded. The Netherlands is now governed by a far-right coalition intent on dismantling the welfare state, defunding public education, and protecting the interests of the ultra-wealthy, all while significantly expanding military expenditures in the name of national security—an agenda advanced through the systematic devaluation, and at times dehumanization, of the *buitenlander* and other minoritized groups.

Dutch universities are not exempt from these shifts. Like their global counterparts, they are increasingly recast as technocratic service providers, governed by audit cultures and market logics. Critical scholarship is tolerated only when legible to funders or cloaked in abstraction. The public university—once a space for contestation—is now shaped by performance metrics, managerialism, and institutional self-preservation. Sociologists are encouraged to study inequality but discouraged from embodying resistance.

And yet, the university remains an ambivalent space; after all, they are institutions *within* a society. While deeply implicated in systems of exclusion, it also continues to serve as a powerful engine of social mobility. Unlike their medieval European predecessors—which largely reproduced elite power—contemporary universities now host a diverse range of students and scholars from across the global socioeconomic hierarchy. This pluralization matters. But the terms of inclusion are often shaped by the very forces—extraction, surveillance, commodification—that define our era.

There is no “outside” to authoritarianism—only variations in its manifestations. Whether through Duterte's necropolitics, Trump's populist theatrics, or Europe's austerity-rationalized illiberalism, the underlying logic is consistent: the disciplining of public life, the erosion of democratic institutions, the containment of dissent, and the dehumanization of individuals from minoritized groups through the politics of scapegoating. The university is not a sanctuary; it is a frontline site in the global struggle over justice and human rights. To study global structures of power without acknowledging how our own institutions are shaped by them is not an act of neutrality—it is a failure of scholarly responsibility.

To understand the present crisis, we must recognize that authoritarianism and neoliberalism operate as mutually reinforcing logics of power. Contemporary authoritarianism advances through austerity, technocratic control, surveillance, and privatizing public goods. Today's forms are veiled in bureaucratic procedures that render repression as administrative neutrality. Reflexive dislocation and intellectual solidarity offer starting points for critical scholarship in hostile institutional terrains. The university illustrates this: by rewarding grant capture and media visibility, it privileges market-aligned

knowledge while marginalizing scholarship that challenges dominant interests. This incentive structure rewards academics who secure large grants and maintain large media followership, and at times, with minimal serious scholarship, so long as they remain palatable to funders and political elites. In the Netherlands, the post-2008 push for internationalization—once framed as key to global competitiveness (Regilme 2025; ANP 2025; Dekker 2015)—now coexists with far-right scapegoating, institutional restrictions on dissent, and diversity policies that obscure enduring structural inequalities and precarity for marginalized communities (Regilme 2025; ANP 2025; Dekker 2015).

5 | Conclusion: The Minimum and the Mandate

I present the concepts of intellectual solidarity and reflexive dislocation not as fully articulated frameworks. They arose from lived experience—marked by movement, discomfort, and a slow recognition of what was lacking in my own scholarly practice. I had been trained to be reflexive about systems, but I had not fully asked what my knowledge was accountable to, or whom it served. The realization was not immediate, nor was it easy. But it was necessary. Remarkably, I recognize that intellectual solidarity and reflexive dislocation arise from a specific trajectory shaped by migration and institutional movement. These concepts are not universally prescriptive, but offered as provisional tools—grounded in one experience, yet relevant to broader scholarly dilemmas. While pathways differ, the ethical imperative to align scholarship with responsibility resonates across contexts, especially in times of systemic crisis.

Intellectual solidarity offers a modest but vital stance—one that grounds scholarship in humility, relevance, and responsibility. Reflexive dislocation offers a method for identifying when our intellectual lives are out of alignment with our ethical commitments, and for repositioning ourselves accordingly. Together, they offer one way—among others—of navigating the increasingly hostile conditions of academic life and global politics.

There is no neutral ground. Indeed, sociology must provide causal explanations that expose lies and unveil power (Go 2023). Reflexive dislocation and intellectual solidarity offer tools for that project: they orient scholars toward ethical self-positioning and relational accountability, which are important in producing knowledge that resists complicity and exposes power's hidden workings. These concepts invite us to explain not only the world, but our place within it.

In an era of authoritarian consolidation and epistemic narrowing, we cannot afford to remain detached. If sociology is to remain meaningful, it must move beyond critique for its own sake and toward forms of engagement that are situated, accountable, and collectively oriented. Intellectual solidarity is not a virtue—it is the minimum. Reflexive dislocation is not escape—it is a method of knowing. It demands that we remain accountable to the struggles we study, even as we move across borders. It insists on unsettling our assumptions, precisely because comfort often reproduces complicity. Together, they

remind us that how we live, think, and act as scholars shapes the world we claim to study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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