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CHAPTER 7 SOCIOLOGY: SOME CURRENT PROBLEMS

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Introduction

Following the end of the second world war there was an acceleration in the pace of development of sociology as practised in Europe. There is a clear gap between the founding fathers of sociology - Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tocqueville - and the period which began at the end of the forties, to the extent that it is possible to speak of a new beginning, in the context of a Europe which was in a process of economic, political and social reconstruction.

This kind of discontinuity did not affect sociology in the United States in the same way. It was for this very reason that it was possible for US sociology, to a great extent, to feed and nurture the development of European sociology after the war.

There were various ways in which the flow of knowledge, methods and sociological techniques from the other side of the Atlantic was made possible: through books and articles, of course, but also as a result of a new generation of European sociologists travelling to America. Having obtained invitations and scholarships, they went there to learn the theory and above all the techniques of research in the field which were afterwards applied in the empirical domains of each country: France, Germany, Great Britain - where the vitality of the anthropological tradition had never been lost - and Italy. This learning process was all the more important in that the future sociologists had different backgrounds, but one thing in common: their basic qualifications were generally alien to a specific training in sociology. Finally the flow of scientific knowledge was also brought about by established American sociologists travelling to Europe to visit universities and research centres in order to give lectures and to publicise both their work and their knowledge.

In this way a new generation of European sociologists emerged. They in turn had a dynamic effect on the very rapid rate of growth of sociological practice in much of the continent, and on the teaching thereof as well (Mendras H. 1995). This whole process increasingly brought European sociology to life and gave it a certain independence, leading it in turn to develop its own capacity to spread this new knowledge.

However, for a long time, part of the common terminology of European sociologists had to continue to use north American points of reference. There was a kind of implicit triangulation whereby European sociologists communicated amongst themselves not by working directly together, but through the medium of sociology as practised on the other side of the Atlantic, by reference to the theories, methods and products which came from that source.

It was not without some surprise that the first efforts to build a scientific community in Europe showed up some extraordinary failings at a European level. There is in fact a lack of databases which can effectively communicate across borders, conceptual and methodological tools are rarely shared, and there is little truly comparative research. To put it in other words, the undoubted vitality of sociological research in various European countries at the close of the century exists alongside, and contrasts strongly with, a lack of research projects in which the empirical scope encompasses the whole of Europe and in which Europe is also the place where the research is being produced.

The struggle to overcome such inadequacies and difficulties is in itself a very useful learning process in terms of procedures, and can in part be applied to the experience of building cultural and scientific sub-zones such as the space occupied by "lusophony" or the Portuguese-speaking world.

The world of lusophony is itself highly heterogeneous as far as the development and functions of social science (and particularly sociology) are concerned.

The Portuguese-speaking African countries, which were subject to colonial domination up to the middle of the 1970s, suffered thereafter in periods of more or less complex political and social transition. They still lack sufficient economic resources and have only recently, in a rather disparate fashion, begun to provide acceptable conditions for the development of social science and of sociology.

The recent history of science in Brazil is of course very different. The intervening period of military dictatorship, as always, saw the social science area persecuted and oppressed. But the traditions of the field were not lost, and the vigorous affirmation of anthropology and empirically-based sociology - particularly in some of the universities - is highly visible and promises well for the future. Furthermore there is the beneficial effect of cross-fertilisation from both north-American and European sources.

Portugal is also a specific case. Here the right-wing dictatorship which ruled from 1926 to 1974 lasted long enough to extinguish completely the first tentative attempts to outline a discipline of sociology which had been made in the first quarter of the century.

Up to the 1970s there were neither the institutional conditions nor the sectors which, above all in the United States, encouraged the development of the social sciences. In the US, as in some European countries, certain groups

acquired a stronger voice and achieved greater visibility after the war: they believed it would be possible to resolve the "social question" provided that certain policies were defined on the basis of systematic empirical investigation of social structures and processes. This led to the development of a situation where there was direct interaction between the intervention of the Welfare State on the one hand, and on the other hand the research which claimed to guide it and provide the rationale for its actions. Each one provided legitimacy for the other.

Portugal remained almost completely immune to such processes. Very cautious attempts at creating, within institutions, small nuclei which would benefit from the emerging socio-cultural changes which were taking place at the end of the sixties, were only really able to come into their own and establish the discipline after the democratic revolution which took place in the middle of the following decade.

Clearly the period of construction of the discipline was not straightforward (Almeida, J.F. 1990; Almeida J.F. 1991; Almeida, J.F. 1992; Pinto 1993; Santos 1994; The Round Table 1994; Fernandes 1996; Machado 1996; Almeida A. 1996; Lobo 1996; Casanova 1996; Costa 1996).

To jump directly to its results, it can be said that, twenty-odd years after the revolution of April 1974, sociology as practised in Portugal can now be considered a normal part of European output in this field.

There are of course continuing institutional difficulties and problems of financing, which should not be forgotten, and of course the country is small in size. But some circumstances which are adverse in themselves may end up by generating positive attitudes and having a beneficial effect.

The long period of censorship of the social science field in Portugal probably helped sociologists to adopt a salutary attitude of openness when finally it proved possible to do so. On the other hand, the small number of members of our scientific community, together with the variety of their qualifications, required them (and continues to require them) to look outwards. By contrast with the possible tendency to self-satisfaction and to shut themselves off which is visible in the cultural and scientific domains of some of the larger nations, we have no option but to keep a constant eye on the multifarious sociological output outside our own four walls, and to gather there all that which it seems to us will enrich our own work.

In the final analysis the small size of our community, together with its open attitude, have prevented the field of sociology in Portugal from splintering into small schools and factions. This has had the effect of preventing also that which often occurs when such factions exist, namely the rationalisation on scientific grounds of what are in fact personal and group strategies. The consequences of such rationalisation are that a desirable debate on research projects often gives way to sterile and inappropriate arguments or degenerates into mutual ignorance.

Scepticism, Utility, Cumulative Knowledge

It is curious how, as the body of knowledge on social processes has grown, so too has criticism grown of scientific activity in general and of the scientific activity of sociology in particular. This criticism has taken on a variety of forms.

Raymond Boudon suggested a typology of contemporary scepticism in relation to sociology (Boudon 1996). He distinguishes between the nostalgic sceptics like Peter Berger, for whom sociology has reached the end of its useful life; the dogmatic sceptics like W. LePenies, who maintain that sociology has never contributed to knowledge; the moderate sceptics, of which Daniel Bell is an example, who consider that sociology is an imperfect art and not a science; the utopian sceptics like H. White who estimate that there may come to be a science of sociology if and when it comes to be well-founded; and lastly the disenchanting sceptics ("*desabusés*"), like S. Turner and J. Turner, who put a negative valuation on sociology because of its lack of a coherent and stable programme of study.

All these positions have at times - and possibly with some unjustified oversimplification - been grouped under the heading of post-modernism. In any event they are part of a lively current of thought from both sides of the Atlantic. We are not here dealing with variations on that old criticism which came from certain areas of the "hard" sciences and which described the social sciences as pre-paradigmatic. Moreover, there has been a narrowing of epistemological perspectives in the whole area of science, to the benefit of "studies of complexity" (Report of the Gulbenkian Commission, 1995). Essentially, therefore, we are looking here at attitudes which emanate from inside sociology itself.

It would certainly be interesting to undertake a sociology of that sociological scepticism. This would of necessity involve an analysis of the institutional and material conditions of knowledge in our societies, but it would also involve the study of the system of values and social representations as a whole.

Schiller, and after him Weber, spoke of world disenchantment to describe the process in modernity whereby the veil of the sacred, which used to cover everything on Earth, had been vanished. Perhaps today we may speak of a second world disenchantment to describe the many instances where dimensions which were united in ideal form by the traditions of the Enlightenment have become uncoupled, in particular the acknowledged taking for granted of the link between scientific rationality and economic and social progress.

The excesses of scientism and the end of the illusion that rationalism is unique may most probably be among the elements of the spirit of the age on which the above-mentioned variants of scepticism feed.

The important issue in any case is to assess the effect of those attitudes.

Even after extreme postures in the style of Feyerabend have been abandoned (Feyerabend 1975) it seems to be clear that such attitudes are less concerned with the debate, the comparative analysis and criticism of the results of research work, and are rather more visible in the global devaluation of scientific knowledge as a whole and of sociological knowledge in particular.

The end-result of these attitudes would therefore be the complete and utter abandonment of the discipline. Or, what is worse, the adoption of points of view which claim to be sociological but which produce arbitrary assertions, resting only on the rhetoric of persuasion and backed up, if possible, with maximum media support. Concern with theoretical and methodological rigour, and the attempt to be as objective as possible, cease to make any sense in such a context.

The Nietzschean assertion that there are no facts but only interpretations is thus taken over and put to the service of a fundamentalist relativism, and is no longer a pointer to the need for a constructivist and anti-positivist epistemology.

Of course some of the sceptical attitudes in relation to sociology and its practice are in themselves productive and worthy to be taken into consideration, even if they appear to question above all the positivist varieties of sociology which today no longer seem to be so prevalent. But on the other hand they do not justify defensive positions such as that adopted by Barbara Heyl (Heyl 1997).

The essence of the scientific attitude can be summed up, probably, in what Bachelard called the "sense of the problem". To this must be added an organised and systematic scepticism. We will need to foster uncertainty and even insecurity in relation to the critical pathways of research. We will need to recognise and cultivate the greater merit of the Princes of Serendip, which was the capacity to accept the discomfort of risk, of wisely observing the unexpected and of putting together the explanations for riddles which derived from surprises. But at the same time it is vital to pursue consistency and security in relation to the overall scientific objectives, values and methods.

Some misunderstandings remain however, as to the true meaning of research.

One of the most common of these is that which relates to the practice of drawing on a multiplicity of different models or paradigms.

Sociology always was and will certainly continue to be a form of scientific work which uses many paradigms, in the sense that it has recourse not just to one, but to several bodies of coherent theory which seek to lead and guide research in the discipline.

These different paradigms, those great highly abstract theories, have existed together in the history of the discipline, but with competitive divergences, and at times with irreconcilable differences. Between emulation and defiance, which are not always productive, certain general points of reference endure, examples of which are Marxism, functionalism, methodological individualism, the theory of rational decision-making, and

ethno-methodology. At different levels and having different aims, what these points of reference have in common is a particular vision of the whole which aims either to provide a model which explains society or, at least, a systematic and coherent set of guidelines for research.

In certain stages of development of the discipline which, with the benefit of hindsight, we may call infantile, many sociologists aimed to choose a field defined by a particular model and set themselves up in it, relegating to outer darkness, with the narrowness of orthodoxy, any "antagonistic" points of view. Others felt that they could escape the contradictory appeal of orthodox theories by making strictly operational and empiricist choices. They forget that in doing research it is impossible to resist the implicit elements of social theories. Such elements, by reason of their selection of certain problems and suggestion of certain issues, of necessity influence the answers obtained.

There was of course a political, cultural and institutional background which encouraged these entrenched positions. In some respects that background is changing. It is worth while giving an example of just one of those elements of change, which relates to the realm of the symbolic.

There is a clear tendency today for each citizen increasingly to claim and to practise the right to choose that combination of social values which to him seems most appropriate to his objectives and to the system of preferences which guide his day-to-day life.

In defiance of predictions of an early death forecast by some prophets, ideologies, meaning those bodies of symbolic points of reference which give meaning to and guide our actions, are alive and well. What is happening is that people are no longer feeling that they have to accept them or reject them *en bloc*.

Like choosing goods from supermarket shelves, they take some of one and some of another and make up on a case by case basis the combination of elements and reference-points which seem best suited to them. In other words, they practise a kind of workmanship, of home-made putting together of ideas.

An example from the realm of religion is the so-called "protestantisation" of Catholicism. Each believer now feels he has the right to accept certain beliefs and precepts and to reject other forms of behaviour and rules, even if they are all part of a strategic whole.

Something similar is happening in the realm of social science and sociology, probably a reflection of the "spirit of the age". Here too the theoretical and methodological "ready-made" thought dictated by exclusivist models is being slowly rejected. Here too practitioners are making a free choice of elements from the various models which the history of the discipline makes available.

This is happening without necessarily falling into an incoherent eclecticism. To give but one example, we may recall the criticisms of the functionalist school, basically directed at its analytical exclusivism and closed-ended finalism: but functional analysis does not have to be functionalist and

explanations which are based on functional arguments are a valid complement to other analytical principles.

There is therefore today greater acceptance of the coexistence of various paradigms, which is above all more productive.

There are still some pockets of resistance. These have their origins in various factors: among them, for example, a certain nostalgia for the "single paradigm" approach attributed to the "hard" sciences. They may also have their origin in the loss of a paradigm. In effect, there are as a rule two possible tendencies for those who at one time practised an exclusive and militant orthodoxy and then lost confidence in their attachment to it.

In the more moderate versions those who have lost their paradigm will tend to banish both the good and the bad points of that orthodoxy. What is happening in these cases is that the scientific memory of the paradigm is being erased, with the concomitant sacrifice of all its positive aspects and its theoretical potential. An obvious example of this today is Marxism, in relation to which there is a perverse type of amnesia which appears to want to exorcise everything associated with it.

In the more extreme versions those orphans of paradigm will make a radical critique of the very idea that sociology can be practised in a scientific manner.

In any event there is no alternative for the practice of sociology other than to accept that it must live with the co-existence of many different paradigms. When specific research situations so require it, there has to be recourse, at the operational level, to the practical use of different paradigms across the board. To put it in other words, the theoretical tools which we have inherited from the different traditions in the history of the discipline have to be combined in a creative and coherent manner.

If there are doubts as to how scientific sociology can be, there are also misunderstandings about the question of its usefulness.

Politicians, institutions which provide finance and the general public are all constantly asking questions about the usefulness of the practice and the end-product of sociology (Costa 1992) - and legitimately so.

The misunderstandings arise in the interpretation of the significance of that usefulness, both on the supply side and on the demand side.

Private or public institutions and finance providers which commission sociological research are often irritated when their expectations are frustrated by the lack of answers which correspond precisely to the terms of reference of those commissions.

But it is very rarely that there can be such a close match of expectations and results. Even the most applied forms of research do not work in this way. There are many translations and interpretations which have to take place between, on the one hand, the various forms which research commissions take and the problems associated with them, and the actual practice of research where those issues are first re-arranged and re-formulated and then worked on and processed. It is also not possible to define entirely at the outset what the

completion of the whole process of research and investigation is going to show and bring up. Finally, even after the research has been produced, there is often a need for further translation and interpretation in going back to the originators of the work.

Misunderstandings can also arise on the supply side.

There were times scientists became purists to the extent that in certain sectors they were so much on the defensive that, in extreme cases, they were unable to match up to the requirements of any commission. Those requirements were always regarded as an unacceptable interference in the field of pure research and would inevitably contaminate the end-results of it. The belief was that sociologists should define their own topics of research and address them in splendid isolation, cut off from all external noise. This phase did not last long in Portugal - it occurred when the discipline was just beginning to establish itself - and has tended to a certain extent to be replaced by the opposite.

The other temptation, which today is apparently in the ascendant, has to do with what we can call the "Zelig syndrome", namely with the attempt by the sociologist to be always like his opposite number, whether that opposite number be the Prince whose counsellor he is, or the market itself, which pays him to produce diagnostic reports and studies. Excess of zeal in responding to the work commissioned, with the uncritical assumption of what he thinks it is the client requires, transforms the researcher's analytical work into mere rationalisation.

Research is always commissioned by reason of the perceived relative profile of different social problems. As mentioned above, the first task of the professional sociologist is to re-organise and re-define the scope of the work commissioned so as to prepare it for the analytical-empirical treatment which will lead to scientifically-based results. There is no going back on this work of re-organisation, because it is precisely there that the independence and singular quality of the field of sociology is defined.

The desire to be useful may therefore be a bad counsellor. There is no need for sociology to abandon its scientific ambitions in order to produce socially relevant work. On the contrary, in fact, social relevance depends on there being scientific ambition in the first place.

The higher aims of the discipline go in fact beyond directly producing scientific knowledge and the knowledge that comes from reproducing the scientific field through the teaching of its theoretical and methodological tools. The discipline of sociology is the bedrock of an active and fully recognised profession. It informs political decision-making and its effects are felt in a variety of social contexts. And in the last analysis sociology also plays an important part in providing overall information to the general public, helping it to be more critical and objective in its perception of society and of its role within it. Sociology thus contributes to making society more reflexive and thoughtful,

and contributes to developing citizenship. There lies, perhaps, its most relevant social function and output.

One of the conditions for the development of sociology, as of any scientific activity, is that knowledge within it should be of a cumulative nature. No progression is possible if scant regard is given to that which has been achieved over the history of the discipline, and if pertinent results and methodological improvements are not shared and communicated amongst practitioners. Each research project must have a link to the global development of the particular field, in two ways: by drawing on it for resources which the project needs, and by adding to it relevant new ingredients of knowledge which it may have been able to produce.

In social science it is difficult to achieve cumulative knowledge for a number of reasons, including the very fact that social science draws on different paradigms. But the main issue is really its specific object.

Social evolution and change is a rapid process. Since we cannot ask the object of study to stop for a while so that we can analyse it better, what happens is that the reservoir of knowledge on society is constantly being emptied, so that the character of that knowledge is continuously changing from being synchronic to being knowledge about the past.

The tools of the trade - theories, methods and techniques - tend on the whole to last longer, in that they can be adapted as they go along and in part have their own independent rationale for existence. But because they are connected with the purposes for which they were designed, those tools also become less productive and grow old over time. They too need to be renewed or replaced.

The renewal and development of the existing body of knowledge, particularly in the context of that which is commonly described as fundamental research, depend in large measure on the availability and accessibility of scientific information and on the effectiveness of communication amongst research teams both nationally and internationally.

The decompartmentalisation of the sub-disciplines of sociology is also a necessary condition for the transfer of skills and, for that reason, helps to build cumulative knowledge, as is the maintenance of an open attitude towards multi-disciplinarity, inter-disciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity.

A Sociology for the Portuguese-Speaking Countries?

A nation's culture, institutions and politics have a strong bearing on scientific output: they are a heavy burden of inheritance and create their own limitations. Sociology in each country is therefore circumscribed by a range of possibilities and limitations which go to making up its particular characteristics.

However, those characteristics are also defined by the objects of research work.

When sociological research is carried out in a particular country, it will necessarily take into account that which is different and irreducible there: globalisation transforms and reconstructs social processes, but does not eliminate, for example, the specific nature of certain relations with the territory, and does not make social relations homogenous in spatial terms.

It is perhaps in part because they have been in too great a hurry to try to reach universally valid theoretical and analytical conclusions and to suggest equally universal working solutions that certain branches of economics and sociology, like their studies on development, have been the relative failures that they are.

Cross-cultural studies have rightly come to stress the importance of the local and of the non-eurocentric approach (Report of the Gulbenkian Commission 1995).

This does not mean that we should give up trying to make theoretical generalisations. But two aspects should be stressed here. The first is that social facts should not be regarded as being insignificant or worthless by virtue of the fact that they are taking place outside the core countries. The second point is that in order to formulate theories which are of general application you have to apply strict controls on comparative research and step carefully through intermediate platforms.

This is one of the levels at which we may consider the issue of sociological research in a specifically "lusophone" or Portuguese-speaking context.

The countries which have Portuguese as their official language are very different in many respects: geographical context, political context, size, resources and historical traditions.

There is no reason why diversity cannot be productive.

On the one hand, we only compare that which is different. So choosing these nations from different continents for comparative study can certainly contribute to increasing knowledge of each one of them. In this case, our strategy will also produce, at a straight international level, added value in terms of relevant knowledge.

On the other hand if we move on from the object of study to the scientific communities which work in the field of sociology in each of these countries, here too joint collaborative research may contribute to strengthening those same communities, above all by training young researchers as part of a team.

In a wider context where a shared language and the sharing of many cultural traits is of itself a not inconsiderable advantage, comparative research and collaborative research are therefore two ways of working which offer very significant potential.

The overall objective will be to reinforce the areas where there are complementary features at work, while ensuring that inconsistent or asymmetrical starting-points do not become institutionalised, and at the same time avoiding the risk of being condescending with so-called "safari research."

Recent experience with sociological research in Europe, at a national level, but above all in attempts to create the capacity for supra-national research - can provide some useful pointers to the obstacles and difficulties likely to be encountered, as well as to promising paths to follow (Martinotti, G. 1993; Mendras, H. 1995).

Some of the social problems and issues which are on the European political agenda and which social science is trying to address are also found in the Portuguese-speaking world, although of course there are very specific features to them.

Examples of these issues are national unity and questions of fragmentation and ethnicity; citizenship and social exclusion; the effect of globalisation and new patterns in the formation of identity; changes in the theoretical and physical linkages between population and territory; changes in the economic system and environmental problems. These are just a few examples among many possible ones. What they show is that there are multiple points of communication and interconnection, and that advances in knowledge of certain observable facts can justifiably be presumed to be of immediate relevance in other, spatially different, social environments.

It seems to me that, from the point of view of the way research is organised, there are also some paths which it seems to be desirable that Portuguese-speaking countries should follow.

Sharing research work and research tools always requires a lot of time and effort. It cannot be done at a distance or with short-term contacts, particularly if we are not yet up to cruising speed.

For this reason there is a need to create networks of research institutions and not just of individual researchers. Those institutions should be able to cope with large volumes of data and to host non-permanent working groups. They would either have to be created from scratch or - more often in Brazil and in Portugal - would be independent extensions of existing universities.

This is just an outline of initial suggestions.

There seems to be no doubt about the possible benefits of a joint development strategy for research programmes, and for training by means of research, which would involve countries whose official language is Portuguese as well as researchers who have that language in common and who live and work in different areas of the world. Properly focused, and with a high degree of interaction, those programmes, in order to succeed, would also need to bring multi-disciplinary research teams together around their common object.

There is no necessary contradiction between the regional - taken here in the sense of the Portuguese-speaking countries - and the global. Sociology is, by definition, global: and the better the quality of regional research output, the better sociology will be able to feed itself.

Amongst other possible clear advantages, the synergy generated by sociological output in Portuguese-speaking countries would also have the merit of contributing towards restoring the balance in the international division of

labour in the scientific field. In effect the small - or peripheral - countries continue to be allotted all the "small" science and none of the "big".

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