

Internationalization of the Social Sciences

A reflection

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Abstract

This article is a brief critical reflection on the issue of internationalization of Social Sciences, seen as a crucial factor for the circulation of ideas. It examines to what extent such process, which is not new but gets redefined in the context of globalization, impacts the intellectual work. The analysis is focused in particular aspects of the current debate: the criticism over Eurocentrism; the insufficiency in analysing power relations in the field of Social Sciences from the perspective of a “North/South” dichotomy; the presence of English as the language of world-modernity; the dominance of rationality emerging from the system for evaluating the intellectual work.

Keywords: Sociological theory. Internationalization of social sciences.

Internationalization became a topical issue in contemporary social sciences. Research institutes, international organizations (UN and UNESCO), scientific associations both national (e.g. Brazilian Society of Sociology) and international (e.g. International Sociological Association) see the matter as a crucial factor in the circulation of ideas. In Brazil, the government agency responsible for promoting high standards of graduate courses, CAPES, holds the international dimension of the graduate programs as a major criterion in its assessment methodology. However, I will leave aside this institutional dimension – my purpose here is to discuss this issue from another perspective: let's say, a critical one, as it is focused on the changes that directly affect intellectual work. Due to journal requirements for a short text, my reflection will be organized into specific topics. These are concise and seek to synthesize a wider problematic; they carry the virtue of explaining certain aspects of the debate, but they are incomplete and deserve further elaboration on my part.

1. Those who study globalization are familiar with the distinction between globalization and internationalization. The globalization process could hardly be understood as resulting from the inter-action between nations – in order to understand its logic, it is necessary to step aside from the national context. A question arises, then: should we speak of internationalization or globalization of the social sciences? At first glance, the term internationalization seems more appropriate, as the field of social scientists is constituted through the support of national institutions. This does not mean that its consolidation is exempt from external influences. International exchanges have occurred since the constitution of this field. However, it is in their relation with the nation-state that teaching and research are developed. Hence, there is a close connection between the expansion of Social Sciences and the State policies. In an article of the early 1990s, relatively unknown for his readers (it was translated to French in 2015), Bourdieu (1991) asks this

same question: is it possible the formation of a worldwide field of social sciences? His answer is negative. It would lack the necessary autonomy to be defined as such. Writing decades later, Johan Heilbron (2013) will say that we are now witnessing its emergence – what he seeks to apprehend through the circulation of both journals and researchers. I doubt it. A global field implies some degree of autonomy in relation to both political demands (from State, party, social movements) and the market. On the other hand, an organic interaction between the actors in this global space is presumed, which, in my view, does not exist and perhaps will never exist. It is still interesting to note that some authors even speak of an existing “world science system”, a term that stem from the analyses of Wallerstein on the world system. My skepticism towards this perspective emerges from the structural weakness of this supposed “world system”: it is not formed by elements systemically articulated to each other. Nevertheless, I think that the globalization, as it happens in other fields, also affects the configuration of the Social Sciences. This does not strictly define a worldwide field, yet a transnational space is indeed emerging, which gradually imposes itself. Thus, the previous internationalization is now manifested in a context of globalization, that is, the current changes are not limited to the interests and rules that exist within national borders.

2. In the constitution of such transnational space, the history of the disciplines is relevant, particularly with regard to Sociology. A discipline involves the organization of research and teaching according to specific rules and standards; its foundation is rooted in the delimitation of a particular object and an appropriate methodology. This is how Sociology gradually stands out from other knowledge fields in the nineteenth century, becoming established as a specialized area aimed at understanding the social. The discipline, hence, has a history. It arises in some European countries (France, Germany, England, Italy) and in the United States to then spread to different places. This process

of international extension occurs with a clear division of intellectual labor. I recall the distinction made by Tiryakian (2001) between "Great" and "Little" traditions of sociological theory. The first would constitute the axis of the discipline – around which the central problems and arguments of knowledge and research would be structured. The "little tradition" would have a minor role: it would be limited to the research focused on the contextual realities of individual countries. The monopoly of the universal would be concentrated in the hands of the heirs of the founding fathers, to which a variety of local studies, important, although limited to their localities, would be matched. The authentic theoretical reflections would, thus, be an attribute of the "West" – not so much as a matter of discrimination, but simply because the essence of modernity would be located in this same West (see, for example, Weber's introduction to "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism"). Outside it modernity would be incomplete, truncated, unfinished. Strictly speaking, any productive and original study of peripheral modernity would always be unsatisfactory; after all, it would lack the density denied to it by history. Thus, Eurocentrism used to legitimate a courteous coexistence of the international division of intellectual labor, in which universality of method was the prerogative of a few, but its use was available to all¹. On the other hand, the emergence of the social sciences, particularly in Latin America, will strengthen this local dimension. As pointed by Leopoldo Zea, in order to free itself from the foreign chains, the *pensamiento latino-americano* should consolidate the bonds of national identity, focus on understanding its own reality, on what the categories of analysis produced in outer contexts do not consider. In order to develop, Latin American Social Sciences value their unique features, those traits that distinguish them from others. This means that they are marked by duplicity. There is, on the one hand,

¹ I take here some arguments earlier developed in "As ciências sociais e seus sotaques" in *Universalismo e Diversidade*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2015. Translated to Spanish as *Universalismo y Diversidad*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2014.

the effective consolidation of the discipline, creation of universities, research institutes, appreciation of a tradition of thought. On the other hand, however, the opposition universal *vs.* local is reiterated, since the domain of the thought is limited to the borders of each country: Brazilian, Argentinian, Mexican, Peruvian sociology etc. The national focus enables identity affirmation, but distances the thought from the desired theoretical scope.

3. The monopoly of the universal falls apart in the context of globalization, it is no longer, as Foucault used to say, a convincing “regime of truth”. There are several reasons for this. First, a widespread criticism over the Eurocentric perspective of the world. This happens at the level of ideas – for example, in the writings of Jack Goody – but also with the emergence of new theoretical movements and the disciplinary rearrangement occurred in the late twentieth century: the debate on postmodernity, the issue of interdisciplinarity (gender studies, environment), cultural studies, postcolonial theories etc. In the case of sociology, it can be said that the prevailing version of modernity becomes partial, its validity is perceived as limited to a moment in the history of the discipline. Or, as Chakrabarty (2000) says, Europe is just a “province” of the world – its geography, while enabling it, also limits the scope of the sociological thought. In this sense, modernity is no longer seen, in its “essence”, as a virtue intrinsic to the western world; by expanding, it performs differently depending on the history of each place. Modernity “is not”, I contend, European in its Being. In this case, it is just temporally prior to the others, what does not mean to be superior to them. I said earlier that the widespread criticism over Eurocentrism weakened the belief in monopoly of the universal – widespread, I stress. By that, I mean: it is not new, many authors made this criticism before (Franz Fanon, for example). However, it had not yet acquired citizenship in the scientific community. The courteous coexistence of the international division of intellectual work restrained it

as an undue theoretical exaggeration. I believe that the generalization of the criticism develops according to the consolidation of an empirical basis represented by the maturation of the Social Sciences in the “periphery”, a maturation expressed in the emergence of an institutionalized and coherent field of interlocutors. State policies, research funding, creation of graduate courses – all these place the sociological knowledge at a level that is distinct from that of mid-twentieth century. In this context, to use a view of Walter Mignolo (2009), the “epistemological disobedience” becomes possible and plausible.

4. How to understand the forces that operate in this transnational space? To what extent they affect intellectual work? One possible answer is to consider the asymmetry of academic relations in respect of the center-periphery opposition. Some authors advocate a kind of renewal of the concepts developed by dependency theory in the 1960s. There would be, thus, an imbalance between the countries, which emphasizes the academic dependence of the periphery in relation to the metropolis. A more careful reading of this literature shows that the concept of imperialism, implicit in its reasoning, acquires new contours. It is not restricted to a nation (e.g. the United States) – its scope is broader –, there is reference to the predominance of a polysemic geographical space: the “North” (often synonymous with “the West”). The social sciences produced in this “place” would have a dominant role in the hierarchical structure of sociological thought. A relevant work in this regard is the *2010 World Social Science Report*, which empirically demonstrates such inequality, by considering some of its aspects: the countries where Social Sciences journals are produced; the degree of international co-authorship of articles written in collaboration between authors from different countries; the citations. The conclusion is clear: internationalization is unequal; the countries of the global “North” concentrate the best results to the detriment of the others. To the “North” category, it is opposed the “South”. This would correspond to those that are marginalized

from the center. The term “South” has different meanings according to the authors, but its main idea is that of an existing separate space within which, at least potentially, a distinct knowledge, as contrasted with its antipodean, is produced. There would lie the original roots of an alternative thought. It is in this sense that an author as Raewyn Connell devotes herself to understanding a set of “endogenous” theories developed in different regions of the world. “South” and “North”, thus, would intertwine with a set of power relations that connect intellectuals and institutions in the metropolis and the periphery (Connell, 2007)².

The analyses of academic dependence have a merit: they highlight the power relations involved in the transnational space of Social Sciences. This is not little. They also touch a neuralgic spot of the previous apparent consensus. By questioning the division of intellectual labor, they take away the monopoly of theoretical reflection from a privileged group. The distinction between “great” and “little” traditions assured to the latter a kind of “market protection”, as they were unquestionably the recognized heirs of the “founding fathers”. Rewriting the history of the Social Sciences (the matter of contention) means to reveal the degree of arbitrariness of this fragile and idealized narrative. However, from a conceptual point of view, the solution found seems unconvincing to me. “North” and “South” are dichotomous categories, would not this be a reductionism? I doubt that the diversity of social sciences on a global scale could be understood in this way, the relationships between research institutes, universities and researchers are far more complex than it is supposed. They would hardly fit in such a simple equation as center *vs.* periphery. “North” and “South” are still classifications that imply homogeneity of each of these poles. But does it really exist? In fact, the “North” comprises a diversity of distinct realities. The development of social sciences in Portugal and Spain is controversial and discontinuous,

² An interesting critique of this book was made by Burawoy M. (2015) «Travelling theory», Open Democracy / ISA RC-47: Open Movements, 21 March. <https://opendemocracy.net/michael-burawoy/travelling-theory>

because, among other reasons, the political history of these countries is conflictive. The dictatorships of Salazar and Franco have always been hostile to the flourishing of critical thinking. Something similar occurs in relation to Eastern Europe. The presence of ethnic conflict, Nazism, Soviet period, all impact directly on the sphere of ideas. This is not simply a matter of resource allocation – the examples provided refer to a Europe that is said “peripheral”. Suffice it to consider the Nordic countries. From the perspective of economic capacity, these countries actually belong to the group of wealthy nations; however, would such homology be valid for the social sciences they produce? Would Finland be able to establish theoretical and intellectual domination on a large scale, such as France and Germany somehow do? The same could be said regarding the “South”. It is characterized by a heterogeneity that emerges from the distinct history of social sciences in each country. The Brazilian sociology has a different purpose than that of Japan, because of its distinct path. Even their constitution and institutionalization (in the 1950s) occurred under different external influences. In Japan, after World War II, the American model prevailed, favoring quantitative research; in Brazil, such influence has another nuance, the American influence refers to Chicago School and merges with the French and German traditions. In sub-Saharan Africa, sociological research funding by the state is an exception. So, there is a strong dependence on foreign funds: NGOs, grants from European governments (Britain, France, the Netherlands) and US foundations (Ford, Rockefeller, Mellon, Kellogg etc.). In Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, funding comes primarily from the State. This is not a negligible point – funding sources have influence over the kind of research to be done. The “North”/ “South” dichotomy, in essence, conceals the existing conditions of intellectual work, it draws a dividing line that erases the diversity of accents.

5. As opposed to what is taught by the narrative that prevails in Social Sciences courses, the history of the discipline is different from

its canonical version. Recently, several studies have emphasized the importance of national intellectual tradition in its constitution. Donald Levine (1997) identifies different types of traditions: British, French, German, Italian and American (Marxism, with its internationalist vocation, is the only exception). Each one of them is a starting point for building a plurality of theoretical problems that, later on, will define the classical legacy of Sociology. We are far from the idea that the discipline has emerged as a coherent whole, valid universally. Or, as Nisbet believed, that it would be organized around a core of ideas (community, sacred, authority, status, alienation) before spreading internationally. This reinterpretation of the history also highlights another aspect: the role of the state³. The matters raised within the discipline reflect the political issues affecting each country: for example, the unification process in Italy or the republican ideology in France. We should not forget that Durkheim, upon returning from his trip to Germany, defines Sociology as an “essentially French science”. The so vivid and captivating relationship between Social Sciences and nation, which prevailed in the nineteenth century, was thus sublimated. It was as if national, synonymous with localism, were a negative trait of the “marginal” countries; in the European and North American context, its sublimation becomes a categorical imperative for assuring the universality of the “great tradition”. Reviewing the origins of the social sciences enables us to ask to what extent these traditions (plural) affect the transnational space and the composition of the national fields of the discipline. What are the implications of this?

In analyzing the fashion field, Bourdieu considers brands’ age to be one of the factors behind reproduction and accumulation of symbolic capital. The unequal distribution of prestige must take into account the duration, i.e., the history of the fashion field. Thus, “traditional brands” take advantage of building up over time a value higher than that of

³ See Wagner (1989).

“recent brands” (Dior *vs* Paco Rabanne); there would be an asymmetric competition between them. Clearly this is not the only way of symbolic capital accumulation, but it is a relevant dimension, also seen in other spheres (education: prestige of traditional institutions). I believe something similar can be said regarding the sociological heritage. In its origin, it consists of national traditions, each containing an original cultural capital (the discipline did not exist before) that determines its position in relation to the others. Durkheim, Weber, Cooley are more than simply authors with whom we dialogue, they form the signifier of a broader signified, the intellectual traditions of which they are the iconic representation.

The consecration of their works and ideas is not limited to their personalities, it transcends them, legitimizing a geographically distinct heritage. Durkheim reminds us of French sociology, the other two respectively of German and American sociology. The founding heroes of the discipline do not end in their idiosyncrasies (these are, of course, important), they condense, in “the beginning of time”, a symbolic capital earned from their specific traditions. It is the value passed down through generations that guarantees a subtle and convincing hierarchy within social sciences. However, as Bourdieu says, for cultural capital to perpetuate, it must be reproduced, otherwise it declines, devalues. The case of Italy is worth recalling. In the late nineteenth century, the discipline enjoyed an illustrious past (Machiavelli, Vico) that influences the work of several scholars – Mosca, Pareto, Labriola. However, as noted by some authors, the retrospective analysis of its trajectory results a “considerable frustration”. Sociology was marked by discontinuity: a number of interruptions (fascism, hindrances to institutionalization) complicated its fate. Thus, its original capital was devalued, it is no longer a highly profitable investment in the stock market of sociological values. Something similar, though less intense, occurs with the British tradition. It was certainly relevant in countries colonized by the British Empire (what is worth debating), but seeing from another geographical

perspective one may say that in Latin America its role was secondary. Long ago, Perry Anderson (1968) wrote a polemical small text in this regard. He argued that British sociology was relatively insignificant as compared to others (of the founding fathers). Its fate had been the opposite of that of Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Literary Criticism. While these disciplines accomplished undeniable international recognition, sociology would have been limited to the borders of English provincialism. Or, as he puts it concisely: “Britain – alone of major Western societies – never produced the classical sociology”. Anderson's text gave rise to a heated debate among English scholars. Without going into this discussion, it is worth highlighting that his “insight” was partly true. The “classical” theorists of British sociology did not travel to everywhere. In other words, their symbolic capital has become more limited than that of the French, German and American competitors.

6. In the context of globalization there is a redefinition of the market of linguistic goods. A new hierarchy of languages emerges, in which English takes on a central position. On the other hand, it is displaced from its origin and even from its expansion in the colonial era (United States) to become the language of world-modernity. The number of foreign speakers that handle the language is currently higher than that of native speakers. Such deterritorialization is what assures an unprecedented power to English, i.e., move it from its original geography to the center of a galaxy of languages. This does not mean the disappearance of national languages (in which most of the social sciences is produced), they will endure and continue to flourish, although in context of subordinate relationship to English. The transnational space of social sciences is therefore strained by a new variable, since the use of language is not a neutral activity (in this respect, the idea of a *lingua franca* is illusory). The main problem is related to the matter of authority. In the scientific field, visibility serves as a cultural capital that distinguishes researchers. Publishing in English and being cited internationally

ensures recognition among peers. The magic surrounding the notion of citation lies in this inference: it would denote the essence of the intellectual work (which is false). Let's take Thomson database and the distribution of articles published between 1998 and 2007 according to the world geographical areas of their production: Europe - 38.0%; North America - 52.2%; Asia - 8.9%; Latin America - 1.7%; Oceania - 4.7%; Africa - 1.6%; CIS - 1.2% (Gingras; Mosbah-Natanson, 2010). One possible interpretation can be made from a center/periphery perspective. Indeed, there is a concentration of articles in two geographical areas: Europe and North America, which means an unequal distribution of "capabilities", i.e., of resources among countries. This finding must, still, be complemented by another evidence: English hegemony. When analyzing the distribution of articles according to publishing language, a different picture appears: English - 94.45%; French - 1.25%; German - 0.40%; Spanish - 0.40%; Portuguese - 0.08%; Chinese - 0.00%; Dutch - 0.01%; Japanese - 0.06%; Polish - 0.00%; Italian - 0.01%. This language configuration in the communication of Social Sciences means the consolidation of new power relations. It strengthens the position of countries as United States and England, of countries of the "South" (or would it be "North"?) that use English, as Australia; it belittles the "marginal" Social Sciences publications as well as the production carried out in French and German. In this context, the symbolic capital accumulated by the French and German traditions is partially devalued, the market of linguistic goods of the world-modernity affects their previously attributed value.

7. The history of the science policies is relatively recent and is related to state planning needs and resource allocation issues. It involves different dimensions, interest groups, rationalization of the state apparatus, relationship between universities and companies, etc. However, all scientific policies share a common element: a prior understanding of the subject Science. It is presumed that it exists as a single subject and

that it must be evaluated and count on available resources. Then, the matter of evaluation becomes crucial. This debate strikes up especially in the 1960s and 70s in the United States. Ben-David's book *The Scientist's Role in Society*, a comparative study between the United States and other countries, intends precisely to establish a scientific policy of action. I say, "scientific", after all a "meta-science", i.e., a reflection "upon" science would naturally enjoy the attributes of scientificity of its object (this is the tautological illusion). Or, as De Solla Price puts it, writing still in the 1960s, "we need a scientific body of knowledge that may come to be the base of policies that governments and citizens may request" (De Solla Price, 1965, p.233). It is within this context that the idea of citation is consolidated. It embodies the objective trait by which scientific excellence is expressed. Objective, because measurable. It is therefore possible to establish rankings of journals, authors, departments, research institutes, universities. The measurement of academic productivity is a new element in the structuring of the national fields and transnational space of the Social Sciences. It establishes an "assessment" of what is "produced". This means that the practice of intellectual work is now before a set of rational references that affect the previous evaluation structure. The "value" of a work as Weber's was not set on the basis of its citations; by the way, it was disregarded in French at the time it was produced. The evaluation criteria are part of a rational domination. Their credibility stems from this dimension: the rationality of the system. This is a movement that is growing worldwide, since its validity becomes unquestionable before the apparently objective criteria it comprises. The proliferation of rankings sets another framework for the distribution of intellectual labor in domestic fields; in view of their statistical dimension, data also allow comparison. The performance of each place can be contrasted with others and rated at a worldwide scale, as if it was really plausible to order quantitatively such diversity. The belief in the rationality of evaluation is a dimension that is not external to the field of Social Sciences. In this sense, it differs from politics, religion, mass

media – external dimensions that contrast with the requirements of an “epistemological vigilance”. Rather, it is born in the academic space, is the outcome of a productivist mentality that finds in universities and research institutes the locus for its fulfillment. Its generalization on a transnational scale turns it into a planetary common sense, a crystallized knowledge immune to any doubt or questioning.

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