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e-bulletin

Teaching Sociology: One case, many challenges

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This text will briefly address some of the challenges involved in the experience of teaching sociology anywhere in the world. Before, however, I will make a short overview of the experience of teaching sociology in Portugal, which, in many respects, presents a case of quick success, at least in the European context.

To reflect, even if briefly, on the practice of sociology teaching should involve the adoption of a strategy similar to what Knorr-Cetina calls *epistemic practice*, that is to say, spelling out the factors that condition and interfere with the production, diffusion and appropriation of sociological knowledge.

I should start by pointing out that the teaching of sociology is a recent activity in Portugal, beginning in a sustained manner only in the mid-1970s, in the wake of profound political changes that led to the democratization of the country. The deficit that existed until then in the teaching of sociology and other social sciences was rapidly overcome, and today there are 16 BA courses, over 20 postgraduate courses, around some 30 research centers, and 600 incoming students per year. This means that the teaching of sociology has had a remarkable success in Portugal, as witnessed by the dimension of the APS (Portuguese Sociological Association), which has over 2000 members in good-standing.

Concerning the relations between teaching and research in sociology, which continue to consolidate, I would like to highlight that sociological teaching and research in Portugal are located somewhere between the two extremes established by what one might call the “international division of scientific labor”: on the one hand, the *center* of scientific production (with solid and varied resources, dedicated to the production of hegemonic theory); on the other hand, the scientific *periphery* (with scarce resources, “incapable” of theorizing, and restricted to providing others with raw empirical material). It seems to me that sociology in Portugal is one of those exceptional cases in which there are significant contributions for the production of a virtuous mixture of empirical and theoretical reflection, showing a felicitous articulation of different methodological and theoretical strategies and the adoption of distanced and critical perspectives in relation to hegemonic sociological knowledge.

Being aware that the hegemony of knowledge is primarily transmitted through the teaching of what is established and conventional, this strategy involves several challenges to the act of teaching that are well beyond national borders. Let me give only the

example of the “classics” of sociology. Once the major and most relevant theoretical and/or methodological contributions and theoretical constructs of the discipline’s “founding fathers” are known, a strong effort is needed to not give students a sense of the rapid erosion of knowledge. One way of avoiding that is to argue for the profound changes in the practical meanings of sociological concepts as they migrate from a specific socio-temporal and geographical context of production to another the context where it is supposed to be appropriated and applied. It is more than likely that, in this movement, the fundamental sense of its efficacy is lost. Furthermore, the teaching of sociology, in Portugal and elsewhere, has to pay attention to the erasing of the discipline’s memory. Thought diversity is required here and more often than not teachers do not point towards disputed views within “classic sociology” for they are generally excluded from text books circulating worldwide, despite their potential contribution for a well-grounded education in sociology. Names such as Kaldhun, Martineau, Lévy-Bruhl, Schmalenbach or even Simmel, among others, may well apply here.

With this in mind, one might argue for the need to decanonize and postcolonize the discipline. These may be heavy-handed expressions, yet, I believe they point to a way of maintaining and continuously reinvigorate the teaching of sociological everywhere. Such decanonization and postcolonization of sociology involve making a conscious effort to counter both onesidedness (i.e. western-bound sociological views) and the sense of the rapid erosion of sociological knowledge. Needless to say that professional uncertainty and the unprecedented valorization of a culture of velocity – and the concomitant loss of the *longue-durée* vision – reinforce one of the most embarrassing though prosaic questions that sociology students may raise: what is sociology good for? Such a question will be all the more repeated, and lead to lack of motivation, if we are unable to interrogate its deepest origins. I believe that this question is only legitimate and uncontestable if, as teachers and researchers, we fail taking into account the conditions (and the contents) under which sociological knowledge is taught – in other words, if we do not interrogate where and how is sociological knowledge produced, how it circulates, and how it is appropriated and consumed.

A final note on how the teaching of sociology is related to the impact of the New Information/Communication Technologies (NICTs). They often give rise to a sense that sociological knowledge is “disconnected” from society, and sharpen the appetite for the so-called *sociology beyond society* issue. Can one say that sociology is, paradoxically, the science that better discerns the end of the social?

It has been argued for quite a while that the efficacy of “intellectual technology” (sociological knowledge as infrastructure) is all the greater the more territorialized or contextualized it is. In order to work on those contextualized territories we need to know them closely... not from a distance. Therefore, due to the NICTs is the global knowledge that comes to us from afar the most adequate for local action? Is this distinction still valid? Or, on the contrary, are the local and the global so interconnected today that we are no longer able to think about the one without by the same token to think about the other? But then how do we explain territorialized sociology? How do we justify its recent expansion throughout the world? How can we explain the growing institutionalization of *regional, national and local sociologies* in times of the globalization of knowledge and the “end” of frontiers?

My hypothesis for reflection is that the process of globalization has allowed sociology to extend the reach of its contribution, both geographically and in terms of numbers of scholars and practitioners. We are thus better prepared to identify the continual change in objects of study, analysis and intervention. This represents an aspect of *empowerment* of sociology that is usually neglected. Sociology expands not only awareness about citizenship rights, but also knowledge of nature and of the *driving forces* behind social dynamics. In addition, it allows us to make a more enlightened inventory of needs for research on the most recent macro-processes that affect the quality of social existence. What I mean to say is that there is no room for pessimism in sociology today, including the teaching of sociology. Rather, there is room for the multidisciplinary combination of sociology with other knowledges, including *other sociologies*, and for the adoption of broad and critical perspectives concerning institutional changes, as well as of a democratic governance that is able to sustain a better life around the world.

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