

Sociologies in Dialogue

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Abstract

This article discusses the geopolitics of knowledge in the field of sociology, with the objective of understanding changes that have been taking place recently. We examine three successive models of sociological production: the emergence of Sociology at the end of the 19th century; the establishment of the disciplinary model of sociology in the United States between the World Wars, and the emergence of sociology on a global scale by the end of the 20th century. Our main objective is to discuss the geopolitical framework that privileges what is created in the old colonial and imperial centers as well as the challenges to this framework, like the publishing initiative of Sociologies in Dialogue – international journal of the Brazilian Sociological Society.

Keywords: Geopolitics of knowledge. Sociologies. Production and circulation of knowledge.

One of the challenges for a sociology of knowledge today is to reflect upon the different ways sociologists research and deal with theory in different parts of the world, with the awareness of the uneven forms in which results of any sociological endeavor are disseminated. Since the emergence of a global society, there has been growing criticism of the highly asymmetrical structure of production and circulation of knowledge. Besides the concentration of research in the Global North, there is a tacit division of intellectual work: European and US scholars produce 'legitimate' theory and research methods while sociologists from the 'rest of the world' dedicate their efforts to gathering data, analyzing case studies, or on applied research.

This article discusses the geopolitics of knowledge in the field of sociology, with the objective of understanding changes that have been taking place recently. *Sociologies in Dialogue* can be seen either as an indicator of the current process of altering the former organization of this geopolitics or as an instrument to advance this process. By acknowledging the existence of a diverse set of sociological traditions and currents of thought, our journal aims at contributing to the creation of dialogues between them. It also aspires to promote a more symmetrical exchange between scholars all over the world, collaborating to connect sociological traditions that historically have not been in direct contact.

Initially, we will examine three successive periods of sociological production. The first, inaugurated at the end of the 19th century, is characterized by the creation of a social science in Europe. The most remarkable event that defines the second period is the establishment of the disciplinary model of sociology in the United States between the World Wars. The third is the emergence of sociology on a global scale by the end of the 20th century.

Our analysis focuses on this last period, in which sociological production spread throughout the globe, within a geopolitical framework that privileges what is created in the old colonial and imperial centers. Challenges to this framework have been brought about by different

currents of thought, most relevant of which are views highlighting that the production and circulation of sociological knowledge should be placed in a global perspective. This could open a new axis of dialogue among sociologists from South-South or BRICS countries, or even create more symmetrical exchanges between North and South sociologies.

From European Positivism to the rise of a world Sociology

In her instigating and provocative work, *Southern Theory* (2007), Raewyn Connell reconstitutes the relationships between the ascension of a certain sort of social science towards the end of the European 19th century and the surrounding imperial context. Unsurprisingly, the social sciences emerged during a historical moment marked by the rise and consolidation of a model of social and political organization that understood Europe – France and England, in particular – as the quintessence of ‘cultured’ civilization. This consolidation would come to be known as *the West*.

Sociology linked European imperialist interests with the desires of colonized elites to follow the path of progress. Evolutionism was the common language mobilized in this endeavor, deploying a grammar that upheld European hegemony while promising the rest of the world that it would, some day, become like the metropolis. It was mainly based on an epistemology derived from natural knowledges that considered science objective, neutral and built by universal laws. In Europe and the US, sociology acquired authority and recognition, giving a neutral aura to a vision of the world that was committed to and based upon the interests and alliances of elites on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Brazilian and Mexican elites’ fascination with French positivism and sociology during this period shows that this paradigm stretched well beyond the North Atlantic boundaries. The acknowledgement of cultural and political elites legitimated the positivist stream of thought as scientific, as a form of public discourse that became widely diffused among the educated classes. By the end of the 19th century, in several

Latin American countries, it became one of the bedrock foundations for the formation of medical doctors, engineers and others university educated professionals (Gilson and Levinson, 2012).

This model of social science would not survive the turbulent and multidimensional crisis that took place between the First World War and subsequent years. According to Connell, the initial, Darwinian model of the social sciences was replaced during the interwar period by another more powerful model largely founded in the United States. During the 1920s and 30s, sociology in the US created its foundational narratives and was transformed from a political discourse employed by modernizing elites into a specialized profession. In the new paradigm, the social sciences became an integral part of the professional specialization of the middle classes.

If the first formulation of sociology connected the so-called “civilized” world to the interests of colonial elites, the second tended to specialize in studying the reality of countries of the global center. This was made possible because the teleological objective of progress, understood as a means of reaching the civilized European ideal, had been replaced by that of modernization. The Euro-American standard of modernity established the parameters for the analysis of the functioning of societies and for the production of the means to reproduce such modernity in other parts of the world, which led to the hegemony of a sociology of development that tended to transversally mold all areas of sociological research.

In this context, the hoary opposition between modernity and tradition was imposed not as a theme subjected to an objective analysis, but as a division of intellectual labor that was itself linked to geopolitical interests. In the context of a historical period marked by increasing levels of higher education among the middle classes, the social sciences employed professionalism to become an autonomous body of knowledge. These were thus transformed from a generalist discourse, used by political and economic elites, to a form of professional expertise

employed by the middle classes often to defend sectional interests of the State, market or civil society groups.

In sum, the creation of the social sciences in the 19th century was directly related to the modern management of an urban, industrial, colonializing society. Its transposition to the professional sphere was related to the creation of modern mass society, with the 'social' being situated within the sphere of administration and colonialism.

Connell's account of sociology's history is substantial and tries to place its European origin into perspective. However, there are other perspectives that argue that Sociology was born during the Industrial Revolution, following the French Illuminist ideals (Collins, 1994, p. 38-46); therefore, as an academic discipline, it could not emerge anywhere but in Europe. It is crucial to point out that Connell analyses both academic and societal knowledge, examining knowledge that emerges from indigenous or social movements as well. If we understand Sociology as a plural discursive narrative any social actor can use, we can accept Connell's view; but if we regard it as an academic field that should function under the strict rules of a 'scientific discourse' (Bauer et al., 1999, p. 10-17), the comparison between sociology and other forms of the production of popular knowledge could not be sustained on reasonable grounds.

In fact, sociology was not the only knowledge that emerged in industrial societies. The very idea of science as a structured body of knowledge, organized alongside specialized disciplines, emerges from these processes of modernization. Therefore, Sociology can be understood as a reflexive discipline focusing on understanding the transformations brought about by new forms of economic, political and social relations. Democracy, industrialism and urbanization were the main challenges the first sociologists had to deal with in the European and North-American scenario of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In point of fact, like in many other countries, sociology was only introduced as a professional area of expertise in Brazil in the late 1930's

and, until the 1950's, there were no graduate courses¹. It was only long after Europe and the US that Brazilian sociologists began to investigate the society they lived in. It is important to consider that, at the time, there was no alternative other than adopting the theoretical and research agenda laid down by the North. Notwithstanding, it makes sense to consider, as Connell did, that there was a lack of communication among sociologies from outside Europe and the US until the 1970's, when Latin American sociologists, as a number of other colleagues in the so called "periphery", began to produce and/or circulate their sociological analyses.

Given that sociology is a social product as well as a reflexive instance of society, the same force that moves societies drives sociology. Hence, the relationship between North and South, and South to South sociologies, which is at the center of the sociological debate today, is not a random phenomenon. The world is experiencing a shift in power, as well as changes in its geopolitical organization and in the balance of power among countries in the economic, political and social realms.

In the last third of the 20th Century, sociological production entered a new historical moment characterized by two main features. Firstly, an expressive growth in social research in various regions of the world². Secondly, new theoretical streams of thought that emerged within or in dialogue with the discipline, such as, for instance, feminist theory, post and decolonial studies, critical race studies and Queer Theory. In this

¹ A rich and important sociological production was carried out mainly by autodidactic scholars, but there was no professional field, such as is found in countries like the United States. This initial Brazilian sociological production has been intensely researched by the *Pensamento Social Brasileiro*. Similar pre-professional sociological production might exist in different national realities with a more or less similar recognition of its historical contribution for the later development of an organized academic field. In this paper we opted to understand sociology as the academic discipline and scientific production created and disseminated within an institutionalized university system, but we recognize the importance and the legacy of the works of pioneers that created social thought under different conditions.

² Connell shows this change beginning with the work of Cardoso and Faletto on the theory of dependence in the 1960's, a sociological analysis that she considers, to an extent, a pioneer of globalization theories that would appear in the following decades.

new global scenario, the hegemony of the sociology of modernization was strongly criticized, since the view that there are multiple modernities gradually became a paradigmatic idea for most sociologists.

We live in a new world scenario in which several streams of sociological thought do not consensually accept the ideas of progress and modernization as the desirable destiny of societies. In this sense, emerging centers of sociological production can bring about more pluralistic features to our discipline. It must be made clear, however, that this does not guarantee equitable conditions for the circulation of knowledge produced in these centers in comparison with sociological studies from the US and Europe. The established historical hegemony of the creation and circulation of science gives momentum to a confirmed tendency of conversion to a single model of sociological thought, research and its dissemination, instead of the recognition of multiple models.

Globalization not only normatizes life styles, but also affects the way knowledge is created and circulates. Individuals are all connected to a market that promotes global consumption which applies also to ideas, since we find many people all over the world wishing for global 'objects of desire'. Thus, the speed and intensity in the exchange of ideas can lead to greater homogeneity and less diversity, a tendency that has been challenged in the academic world of social sciences. International events and publications have shown divergence and difference as major features of the current intellectual transnational debate.

According to Renato Ortiz (2004), the sociological debate on modernity or post-modernity has obscured the discussion on globalization in its various aspects. Ortiz has made a fundamental contribution to the understanding that, while globalization refers to a unified process of dissemination of an economic and technological paradigm, what he calls "mundialization" can be understood as the new social scenario in which different and, sometimes, conflicting ways of thinking cohabit.

To Ortiz, the “mundialization” process denotes the cultural and political feature of our era that allows us to picture the existence of a global sociology. While deconstructing sociology conceived as a unified discipline, the ‘mundial’ perspective favors the recognition of sociological production that has not yet been put into a symmetrical and democratic dialogue. The current shift of power relations in the world scenario raises the possibility of building this more symmetrical exchange.

This dialogue does not imply necessarily the deconstruction of the classical basis on which our discipline has flourished. Western knowledge has shaped sociology as an organized body of knowledge, while sociology is a science that is shaped to analyze and understand the transformations brought about by the 20th century. Despite relevant critiques that propose the reevaluation of the history of the discipline, opening it to new interpretations, sociology can be regarded as ‘a’ science due to the theoretical tradition that has unified it. Hence, sociologists can interact because they share concepts, repertoires and identify ‘positions’ in the sociological field, though this interaction is certainly not symmetrical. To reduce the asymmetry, Western sociologists must acknowledge the existence of a thriving sociological practice elsewhere.

Creating dialogues among Sociologies

Just as important as the central nations’ political and economic power is their almost monopoly over the definition and circulation of authorized and recognized forms of science and technology. Connell emphasizes the wedge that is driven between the global North and South in this unequal division, in which the northern nations are associated with the Euro-North-American production poles of “science” and the South (Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania) relegated to the consumption or application of theoretical models developed by northern scholars.

This is an understandable geopolitical division whose simplicity tends to neutralize its colonial and imperial origins. In the geopolitics of knowledge, the North is not just geographical, and therefore cannot

erase its historical and political condition as the “West”, a geopolitical definition that commands the abovementioned near monopoly over authority and knowledge, to the detriment of the knowledge produced everywhere else. History – briefly sketched in this paper – has not reshaped this power configuration in a radical manner, nor altered the flow between areas that are considered to be producers and consumers of knowledge.

The hegemony of the historical center of sociological thought involves aspects such as its power to establish the research agenda elsewhere, as well as to maintain itself as the principal axis of the circulation of knowledge. This fact cannot be seen merely as the imposition of theories and concepts upon the rest of the world; it is based on a powerful political and scientific hegemony which highlights and privileges what is created in the United States and Europe, while seeing southern sociological production as sources of data or descriptive case studies. For this reason, the intellectual production of other regions of the world is still scantily disseminated in hegemonic academic circles, remaining largely confined to specialized publications.

It is not enough to simply recognize that this hegemony exists, or to create a discourse that speaks for the South: it is important to analyze how this hegemony is constituted, often with the aid of the subalterns themselves, as well as how it can be altered. The existence of “multiple modernities is bound to challenge not only Western economic prowess and military might, but its hegemonic sociological theories and methods” (Alexander, 2010, p. 4). However, as Alexander points out (2010, p. 4), the sociology from South is not an indigenous species, but the product of centuries of intense intellectual globalizing. Unequal economic and political conditions produce and are reinforced by the way knowledge is produced and circulated.

There are singularities in the Global South that are fully contemplated in Connell’s analysis who, rather unproblematically, situates Australia – whose colonial history is linked to England – therein.

Thus, Australia's colonization – predominantly North European – as well as its particular colonial history, places the country in a privileged place within international academia. A mapping of the relationships between the centers of production and consumption of knowledge of the social shows that the North-South cut is quite imprecise. The post-colonial binary West-Rest is better suited for a discussion that evokes historical and political frames such as colonialism and imperialism, but, perhaps, the best option in order to understand the present structure in the creation and circulation of knowledge would be to comprehend that sociological research has spread far from its initial center. New emerging producers of knowledge have started to appear in the map of exchanges.

Larissa Pelúcio affirms that “the frontiers drawn between the North and South are more porous and penetrable than we would believe. Centers always have their peripheries and peripheries, in turn, their centers” (2012, p.3). If the world has become politically and economically decentered, it should be no surprise that particular countries are the first to integrate or disturb the established academic circuits. Pelúcio's reflection prompts us to think about the role some Latin American countries have begun to play in the world sociological community in the last years.

To participate in the global production of knowledge, a sociologist, or scientist, does not have to be in the North. To be in the ‘periphery’ has allowed sociologists to absorb the theoretical debate from several centers of the North without being restricted to national boundaries. Moreover, they can listen to their colleagues from the South without the social barriers found pervasively in the minds of northern sociologists. This more open and enriched position is, in fact, an advantage in terms of knowledge.

In this changing global scenario, our understanding of flows and hierarchies of knowledge production and circulation may be less dependent of the historical tradition that attributes to ‘the West’ the status of center and regards the ‘non-West’ as periphery. The division

between the West and the Rest, highlighted by post-colonialists, is capable of supplying core elements for our comprehension of the present geopolitics of knowledge, especially since it emphasizes its colonial and imperial historical origin. During the last decades, there has been a visible emergence of new centers of sociological production that are defying this geopolitics. It may be that we are witnessing the creation of a more symmetrical scenario for the production of social science.

In this changing world, whether in Latin America or in many African or Asian countries, sociologists are consistent readers of academic studies produced in Europe and the United States. Nonetheless, even today the scholars from the North rarely read the sociological works produced in the emergent centers of sociological production, since scholars from these emergent centers are perceived merely as a potential audience for northern production. If the exchange of knowledge tends to maintain its old colonial/imperial pattern, journals like *Sociologies in Dialogue* can bolster reflexive analyses regarding how sociologists, whether from established centers or emerging ones, act and create knowledge framed by power relations. Reflecting on this framework of sociological production can help build a more symmetrical dialogue, and, perhaps, reshape the global terms of the exchange of knowledge.

Another keystone in this discussion is the incontestable contemporary hegemony of the English language in the circulation of sociological production. English is not simply a *lingua franca*, a 'neutral' language for academic exchanges. Some say its assimilation and use tend to mold the themes studied, the sources utilized and the means by which the resulting research and discussions circulate. A more attentive look into the subject would necessarily take into account that this power frame is not only connected to the language itself, but also to the fact that most international journals are US and UK based.

Currently it is not admissible to define 'internationality' by merely considering the language of publication; in other words, it is no longer acceptable to state that 'if a journal is produced in English, it is

international'. In this sense, a journal published in English, but whose editorial policy and referees are local (American or British), should not be considered international. In contrast, a journal published in Portuguese or Russian whose objective is to foster comparative international analysis should be regarded as international. However, as English – or the many variations of the English language spread around the globe – is the most disseminated 'tongue' of communication, nowadays, the best way to be international is to combine criteria related to language and editorial policy, even if the substantive criterion of the editorial policy is regarded as the most decisive factor.

The adoption of English as the journal's official language is connected to Renato Ortiz's perception that "in the context of globalization, English is no longer a foreign language, something imposed from abroad, but an internal idiom, autochthonous of a modern world³ (2004, p. 10)" In other words, though our journal chose English as a means for global dialogue, we expect this choice will not condition the terms of our exchange, given that our political-intellectual commitment regards a project that comes from the South or the Rest not as a subaltern localization, but as a possible vantage point in creating a new axis of sociological exchange, one that is more innovative, symmetrical and connected with the changes taking place in our times.

In this context, by adopting English, *Sociologies in Dialogue* intends to create not just a South-North exchange, but also one that is South-South or, in more politicized terms, between what was once called *Rest* with the *West*, as well as 'intra' the Rest. We are well aware that the binary North-South, Center-Periphery, West-Rest dichotomies are oversimplistic since the knowledge produced within the North-Center-West countries and regions cannot be reduced to the institutional thought accepted as legitimate there.

³ Authors' translation.

It is important to take into account that sociological studies produced in the South-Periphery-Non-West often do not maintain a critical dialogue with hegemonic local or international interests. Furthermore, critical or anti-establishment thought predates, in the North as well as in the Rest, the critique we summarize in this paper. We do not assume the view that we are somehow enlightening people here or in the North about the asymmetries of the geopolitics of knowledge. What we wish is to be part of a wave that, hopefully, will make the world more multi-centric and pluralistic, although our action is restricted to the geopolitics of sociological production.

During the last decades some scholars from the North began to recognize that their way of producing and circulating knowledge sustains international hierarchies and inequalities. This is evident in the scarce dialogue North and the Rest sociologists conduct among themselves. Boaventura de Souza Santos (2010) contributed to the debate creating discussions about Southern Epistemologies; Raewyn Connell (2007; 2015) through innovative works that deconstruct the Euro-American canon and bring into light what she calls Southern Theory; while Michael Burawoy (2015) has had the initiative of publishing *Global Dialogue*, International Sociological Association journal, available in 17 languages with an emphasis on mapping contemporary social movements⁴.

Sociologies in Dialogue is an initiative created in the South and edited by The Brazilian Sociological Society, a non-profit professional association that has worked incessantly to promote dialogues open to a pluralistic and multi-centric vision of our discipline. Since the journal aims at focusing on dialogues, the option to publish in English is in no way connected to any intention of hegemony: adopting the English

⁴ In Burawoy's reading, the first three years of *Global Dialogue*, the journal of the International Sociological Association, has mapped the upwelling period of social movements reacting to a recent phase of corporate commodification. The prospect that guides the publication is sociology as a knowledge on civil society that emphasizes social movements. See Burawoy, Michael. *Times of Turmoil. Sociologies in Dialogue*, v. 1, n. 1.

language, at least nowadays, is the most suitable form of allowing these dialogues to take place among the largest number of sociologists.

We live in a context that is increasingly referred to as global. Nevertheless, the production and circulation of knowledge is frequently organized alongside an old and highly unequal worldwide framework of academic distribution of power. We are aware that new hegemonies can emerge from the current changes in contemporary societies. The academic field is not detached from other spheres of life and it is, ultimately, a field of dispute for power and legitimacy.

However, the main objective of the editorial policy of *Sociologies in Dialogue* is the promotion of a more symmetrical geopolitics of sociological production. A tool to achieve this major aim is to stimulate the acceptance of studies, as well as the recruiting of referees, from various regions of the globe.

We consider it is possible to learn together, and to deepen our learning, if we adopt an egalitarian exchange of ideas. Knowledge does not simply circulate: is also produced in circulation (Hanafi, 2016). This possibility implies creating transnational dialogues among diverse sociologies: that is the main mission of *Sociologies in Dialogue*.

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