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Teaching from the South: New dialogues between the History of Sociology and the Sociological Theory (introduction)

Ensinando a partir do Sul: novos diálogos entre a História da Sociologia e a Teoria Sociológica (introdução)

João Marcelo Ehlert Maia* 

ABSTRACT

This text presents the special issue “Non-Eurocentric perspectives for the teaching of sociology”, pointing out the following questions: a) the relevance of the history of sociology for current social theory, and the shortcomings of Eurocentric forms of history; b) the problems facing the teaching of sociology in undergraduate level, focusing on the Brazilian case; c) the call for a new politics of teaching in the undergraduate level, which allows for overcoming Eurocentrism.

Keywords: teaching of sociology, history of sociology, Eurocentrism.

RESUMO

Este texto apresenta o dossiê “Perspectivas não eurocêntricas para o ensino de sociologia”, destacando as seguintes questões: a) a relevância do campo da história da sociologia para a construção da teoria social contemporânea e os limites da historiografia disciplinar eurocêntrica; b) os problemas do ensino de sociologia em graduações, com destaque para o caso brasileiro; c) a necessidade de uma nova política de ensino para a graduação que contribua para a superação do eurocentrismo.

Palavras-chave: ensino de sociologia, história da sociologia, eurocentrismo.

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The debate on colonialism/coloniality has been flourishing in sociology. While criticism of Eurocentrism is not something new, it is remarkable how many intellectual projects based on different forms of anticolonial social thought have emerged in the last decades. Postcolonial sociology, Southern Theory, Alternative Discourses, and de-colonial sociology have proved to be influential in different areas of research and social theory (Alata, 2006; Connell, 2007; Rodríguez, Boatcă & Costa, 2010; Go, 2016).

However, these debates have not changed classrooms, particularly in the undergraduate level, where social theory is introduced to students in the form of a general history of European sociology. The teaching of the discipline thus remains a highly Eurocentric business, with much focus on presenting the “canon” of the discipline for students (Maia, 2017).

This special issue of “Brazilian Journal of Sociology” aims to outline both theoretical and practical alternatives to this problem, discussing a non-Eurocentric agenda for teaching sociology from different angles and perspectives. While the contributing authors support divergent ideas on how to address specific problems, we all believe in reconstructing the history of the discipline in a more global and democratic fashion. The main idea behind this collective discussion is that a non-Eurocentric history of sociology must be part of any strategy to overcome the shortcomings of teaching undergraduate students.

This general introduction provides a theoretical framework for the debate and describes the main contributions of each paper. I start by explaining why the subfield of history of sociology (HoS onwards) is relevant for social theory in sociology. In the second section, I focus on the problem of teaching history of sociology in the undergraduate level, using examples from the Brazilian case to rethink the problem. I then close by presenting the articles that structure this issue and raising a few suggestions for a new and innovative politics of teaching that could benefit from international collaboration.

The idea for this special issue emerged from the online seminar “History of Sociology: Rethinking Teaching and Research”, organized by Hon-Fai Chen and Stéphane Dufoix in July 2021, which gathered scholars from different regions of the world for a collective discussion on the new perspectives for teaching and researching the history of sociology. In the closing session, some participants agreed that it would be interesting to publish a sample

of contributions in a journal from the Global South – and *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia* seemed to be the perfect venue for this discussion. Brazil is one of the largest countries in the Global South and has a vibrant and diversified sociological community. While the recent push for scientific internationalization opened spaces for collaboration between Brazilian sociologists and their peers in other regions (Miskolci & Scalón, 2018), the Global North remains the main reference for our community of scholars (Ribeiro, 2018). Therefore, this is a unique opportunity for the readership of *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia* to engage with refreshing ideas about a non-Eurocentric sociology.

HoS and social theory

Why do we care for the HoS? For many people conducting research, it is perfectly possible to collect and analyse data, and explain social phenomena without having to quote ancient sociologists or social theories produced decades ago. Scholars interested in pure social theory are more inclined than their colleagues from other areas of expertise to delve in old books and texts to build their arguments, for reasons that have been discussed for a long time (Alexander, 1987), but this is not exactly “doing” history of sociology in a systematic fashion, which requires historiographical tools to assess how texts, concepts and scientific practices were produced, circulated, and consumed in different intellectual and cultural contexts.

Christian Dayé (2018) listed four reasons for claiming that HoS is relevant: a) it provides disciplinary cohesion by shaping the collective identity of current social scientists; b) it is a good strategy to teach younger generations of sociologists; c) it could inform current research and theorization; d) it could help us to reflect on the broader impacts of sociology in our culture and life. When it comes to the third factor, Dayé differentiates between the “historicization of epistemology” and the “epistemologization of history”. In the first case, historians shed light on the historical contexts that shaped concepts and theories currently used, increasing the scientific reflexivity and the sophistication of analysis. In the second case, historians could explain how patterns of cultural reproduction and transmission contributed to consecrate certain modes

of knowledge instead of others. In doing so, one could provide a better understanding of how science really operates, improving scientists' self-awareness and generating potential better knowledge.

The "epistemologization of history" function is indeed relevant, but one should broaden its scope. One thing that is missing in Daye's analysis is a geopolitical dimension regarding the global history of sociology. Research on the topic have already demonstrated that there are global structures of power that generated inequalities between centres and peripheries in terms of how knowledge really operates (Keim, 2010; Heilbron, 2014). Wiebke Keim demonstrated how a centre-periphery model could explain how the uneven distribution of material and symbolic resources contributed to a division of intellectual labour in which what count as "theory" depends on the legitimization produced by institutions and journals concentrated in the Metropolises. Heilbron (2014) analysed how a threshold division of centres-semi peripheries-peripheries structured the global flow of social sciences knowledge after World War II, outlining the historical processes that led to the scenario described by Keim. Therefore, including a geopolitical dimension in the HoS is a crucial step for explaining how global structures and patterns shaped the legitimation of current social science knowledge.

Many historians of science have been challenging this centre-periphery framework for decades (Raj, 2013). The main contention is that the circulation of scientific practices and objects between different regions of the world is not a unidirectional process from the Metropolises/centres to the peripheries. Besides, the critics claim that this model reaffirms the substantialist approach that posits science as purely European, as if former colonized areas lacked any relevant role in the process of shaping global science.

Some social theorists also doubt the usefulness of geopolitical variables that reify spatial identities to postcolonial theory that address current global inequalities and modes of domination that go across countries and regions. For instance, Julian Go challenges the essentialist perspective that lies at the heart of many "Southern epistemologies" and proposes a perspectival realism that translates "South" not as a spatial location but as a standpoint generated by relational positions within a global hierarchy (Go, 2016). Such a standpoint is not the same as an epistemic privilege that people from the geographical South might have in relation to people in the Global North.

I believe that both criticisms are correct, but it is possible to recognize the uneven structures of global science while taking into account the creative dimension of science done in the peripheries. It also makes sense to analyse history of sociology in the Global South (or in the so-called Third World) without assuming all sociologists working in that vast location share any kind of epistemic privilege or even collective identity. That is precisely what Fran Collyer and Stéphane Dufoix (2002) have recently proposed when discussing how to integrate the concept of Global South into the new historiography of sociology (Collyer & Dufoix, 2022). I would like to add that current developments in the history and sociology of science in Latin America provide a roadmap for assessing this “peripheral creativity”.

Regarding the first critique, many historians of science in Latin America have focused on how “peripheral science” developed autonomous forms of generating knowledge even within a context of macrostructural dependency (Kreimer & Vessuri, 2018). Recently, Pablo Kreimer (2019) edited a collection of his works that explores the concept of peripheral modernities to unpack how science is produced in non-hegemonic contexts. Kreimer claims that most of the STS’s classic studies are done in the Global North and usually obliterate the geopolitical dimension or even the spatial configurations in which laboratories are situated. By exploring a selection of empirical case studies of knowledge production in Argentina and Latin America, Kreimer outlines how transnational dimensions based on the uneven distribution of power and resources shape knowledge-production in peripheral contexts. However, while he recognizes that science done in such contexts lack the regulatory power science holds in the North, Kreimer also highlights the innovations and creativity that might form peripheral modernities. Leandro Medina follows a similar pattern, integrating an STS approach with a centre-peripheral model that enables him to chart the formation and dissemination of transnational scientific networks that assemble actors and objects from the Metropolises, which gain new meanings in local intellectual fields (Medina, 2013). By exploring the case of political science in Argentina, Medina analyses how even within an uneven global structure, local agendas and disputes may cast new light on social objects.

In the case of the HoS properly speaking, Fernanda Beigel demonstrated how the regional scientific networks established in the 1950s and 1960s in the Southern Cone of Latin America contribute to create peripheral centres

of knowledge production in the continent, which generated relevant social theory, such as dependency theory (Beigel, 2016). Beigel argues that these peripheral intellectual fields emerged in a situation of global structural dependency, but this macrocondition produced different outcomes depending on political institutions and local disputes and controversies. More recently, Clara Ruvituso analysed the reception of Darcy Ribeiro's works in West Germany as case study of the circulation of theory from the global peripheries in the Metropoles (Ruvituso, 2021).

These few examples are the starting point for a new HoS from the South, which avoids both the diffusionist perspective associated to the centre-periphery model and the dangers of essentialism and epistemic privilege raised by Go. This new HoS does not take the 'South' as an enclosed and homogeneous space where intellectuals and scientists shared the same epistemic location. Rather it takes the South as a privileged site to explore the global history of sociology and its interconnections, by changing the usual narrative model that rests on a diffusionist notion of science circulation. For instance, we might discuss modernization theory not as a tale of how North American sociology was exported to Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, but as a complex exchange between social scientists from both regions even if this exchange was marked by inequalities and hierarchies. A nice example of this approach can be found in the works of Antonio Brasil Jr, who compared how post-WWIII Latin American sociologists recreated the main tenets of sociology of development (Brasil Jr., 2013). Similarly, we may analyse anticolonial sociologies not as endogenous creations that stemmed exclusively from isolated subaltern standpoints but as theories that emerged from a vibrant interchange between centres and peripheries. Latin American sociologies were always entangled with Global North trends and reacted to it in an active way, raising new perspectives that eventually contributed to global debates. That is what I called the "peripheral effects", which may take many forms besides the simple opposition between intellectual copy and sheer rejection of foreign ideas (Maia, 2019).

This geopolitical dimension could also help bridge the gaps between postcolonial/decolonial scholarships and mainstream social theory outlined in the introduction. By linking the global history of sociology to the circulation of non-colonial discourses, it shows that sociology and postcolonial thought do not stand isolated from one another, because it is impossible to tell a truly

global history of the discipline without investigating how knowledge from the Global South was produced and circulated.

Finally, this approach could help us to change how we teach sociology both in graduate and undergraduate levels. In the following section, I briefly discuss the relevance of teaching to hegemonic sociology and how one could change Eurocentrism by exploring new pedagogies of teaching.

The current dilemmas of teaching sociology

The global structure of knowledge production in the social sciences is based on a set of institutions and practices that shape how we produce, circulate, and consume knowledge. First, there is the role of English as an international scientific language (Ortiz, 2004; Canagarajah, 2002). Second, scholars stress the importance of journals and databases for gathering relevant knowledge and legitimizing it (Beigel & Gallardo, 2021). One could also think of practices such as writing research articles, which follow global norms of writing deemed to be mandatory, for the most prestigious journals in the world (Canagarajah, 2002; Martín, 2013). A fourth factor is the politics of translation, which implies a set of choices and frameworks that provides to wider audiences a selection of what is deemed relevant in the world of social sciences. This politics of translation also conveys the global inequalities that structure the cultural and linguistic markets (Heilbron and Sapiro, 2007). Moreover, among all these factors, teaching remains a core practice for reproducing the global system of knowledge production. As Raewyn Connell (1997) explained, the very existence of the so-called “canon” is directly linked to pedagogical needs in the Global North universities. Nevertheless, teaching remains an underestimated topic, although the Brazilian scholarship on the role of sociology in the basic levels of education is consistent and sophisticated (Handfas & Maçaira, 2012), presenting insightful analyses of how postcolonial theories could change teaching practices and avoid the risks of a single history of the discipline (Oliveira & Eras, 2011).

Teaching is relevant because it is one of the mechanisms that reinforce this global structure by reproducing common knowledge for future social scientists, certifying what is “legitimate” and what is not. Preparing syllabus,

organizing seminars, and giving oral classes are key elements in the activities of all sociologists working in higher education worldwide, and through these activities, they may reach a vast audience that journal articles could never match.

The teaching of social theory usually implies some form of historiographical teaching. In the case of Brazil, for instance, the first contacts of young students with sociology comes in the form of history lessons on XIX century sociology, with classes on Augusto Comte, Karl Marx, and the impacts of modernity in shaping social science knowledge. Simone Meucci (2011) demonstrated that the first sociology textbooks employed in Brazil highlighted sociological theories produced either in France or in the United States, which certainly contributed to how sociology was institutionalized in the country.

Still today, it is common to focus on a group of authors deemed to be “classical” (Maia, 2017) without seriously engaging with this process of canonization, which leads to a diffusionist narrative that places Europe and North America as the original sites from where sociology travels to the rest of the world. This narrative thus depicts the Global North as the original site of sociological knowledge and regards history as the chronological evolution of ideas and concepts within this space through time.

This historiographical narrative is so powerful that even sociologists that challenge Eurocentrism might fall into the same traps. For instance, those who challenge the Eurocentric canon might suggest broadening its scope by including non-white sociologists or female or intellectuals from the South. This is valuable work and should not be discouraged, since the dynamics of racism and sexism shaped the process of canon formation and prevented students to engage with brilliant sociological works. However, this strategy does not solve all the problems of Eurocentrism and has its own shortcomings. First, because it is a strategy that faces obvious limitations. It is impossible to build a syllabus with 40 or 50 sociologists from the South, and we simply cannot throw away European sociologists because many of them provided valuable insights and current theorization still depends on their remarkable contribution. Besides, what should be the criterion for turning someone into a new classic? Second, this strategy does not necessarily make students to question the process of canon formation, because we lead them to ask for more ‘democratization of the canon’ and not to reflect on the mechanisms that explain how certain ideas and people might be celebrated or forgotten

(Baehr, 2002). I believe that opening the canon is relevant but questioning the process of canon-formation is also valuable for future sociologists. Third, this strategy risks generating a historiographical fallacy. In the struggle to decolonize curriculum, we might end up with a “non-hegemonic canon” that replicates many problems of the old Eurocentric canon. For instance, the problem of taking thinkers from different social and cultural contexts and times and placing them together as forming a kind of “community of counter-hegemonic geniuses” that are doing great sociology. We also risk reading them in a non-historiographical fashion, as if they are speaking eternal truths from the past to folks living today. Of course sociology taught for young people must be sometime exciting and new, but it is up to teachers and professors to present alternative traditions avoiding the traps of anachronism and Eurocentric forms of history.

This Eurocentric narrative has other consequences, such as reproducing a form of teaching sociology that places the reading of texts and the making of oral and written comments as central, which leads to a learning track that restricts the teaching of research skills to a few subjects of methodology (Maia & Medeiros, 2019). This it is not just a methodological weakness, but also a wider problem that relates to how narrowly faculty and students envision the possibilities of sociology as a craft.

So, what is the alternative?

The contributors to this volume offer interesting perspectives for a non-Eurocentric teaching of sociology, which emerge from a body of research agendas that gained traction in the last decades in the International Sociological Association (ISA) (Patel, 2009).

Stéphane Dufoix discusses how Eurocentrism impairs the teaching of sociology in the so-called West itself. He draws on the thesis of Malayan scholar Syed Hussein Alatas, who employed the concept of “captive mind” in the decade of 1970s to examine how elites in Southeast Asia imported frameworks and theories from Europe and North America without seriously engaging with their own local realities. While Alatas believed that there was no such thing as “captive mind” in the West, Dufoix proposes an interesting provocation and asserts that European sociologists themselves remained “captive” by the Eurocentric canon, which textbooks replicate. This article is closely related to Dufoix’s research agenda, based on a global history of sociology which decentres Europe, explores the regional appropriation

of “sociology” in Asia, and charts the connections between sociological traditions across the so-called Third World (Dufoix, 2021).

The contribution of Vishal Jadhav and Sujata Patel to this issue is a self-reflection on an ambitious project of online learning titled e-PFPathshala, which the regulatory body governing Universities in higher education launched in 2012, aiming at distributing the most recent content of over 70 areas of teaching and research for faculty and students. While many scholars and teachers involved did share a critique of nationalist frameworks and were open to new strategies, the project failed to change curriculum across the country, and the authors use this case to reflect on the resilience of Eurocentrism in the practices of teaching in the Global South. This contribution is just an example of a consistent research agenda focused on exploring the links between colonialism and sociology (Patel, 2021). Patel is a well-known participant in the current debate on how to produce a truly postcolonial sociology that recognizes the different histories shaped by colonialism across the South (Patel, 2022), while Jadhav’s agenda combines political sociology and the sociology of development in India (Moore & Jadhav, 2006; Jadhav, 2019). Their analysis of the Indian case remains highly relevant for readers of the BJS, since it provides a nice example of the potential and shortcomings of a teaching initiative coming from a relevant country from the Global South.

The piece by Amurabi Oliveira is a practical example of how one could explore non-Eurocentric perspectives for teaching classical sociology. Oliveira has been active in the field of sociology of education, which is clear by his scholarly output (Oliveira & Ferreira da Silva, 2016; Oliveira, 2011), and has recently turned to investigate new teaching strategies that could reinvigorate the discipline. In this article, Oliveira analyses the case of the Tunisian thinker Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) as a possible member of an alternative canon, following current debates about the need for identifying alternative founding fathers for a discipline that was never entirely European. Oliveira explores the main concepts of Khaldun, and the possible contributions of the discussion for teaching classical sociology in Brazil.

Finally, Layla Pedreira de Carvalho and Stefan Klein offer an insightful empirical analysis of the syllabus of undergraduate courses of Social Sciences in Brazil. After examining a corpus composed of Sociology’s syllabus extracted from the pedagogical projects of these undergraduate

degrees, the authors conclude that Eurocentrism still shapes the way one teaches the history and the theory of sociology, with an overwhelming majority of white European men in the reference lists. Klein and Carvalho then reflect on how we could overcome this shortcoming, drawing on recent theories that challenge Eurocentrism. Klein has recently edited, alongside Manuela Boatcă, a special issue of the journal “Sociedade e Estado” on non-hegemonic sociological theories (Klein & Boatcă, 2022), while Layla Carvalho has developed an agenda focused on black feminism, intersectionality and public policies (Carvalho, 2021). Carvalho has also co-authored an important study on the place of women in events and academic publishing in the field of Political Science in Brazil (Marques & Carvalho, 2020).

For a new politics of teaching

We hope that this special issue triggers a lively discussion that could lead to a new politics of teaching. By “politics of teaching”, I mean a coherent set of practices and discourses that provide a new framework for teaching social theory and HoS in higher education, one that overcomes Eurocentric narratives and explores new learning strategies that avoid the fetishization of the “canon”.

This new politics of teaching is linked to recent developments in Brazilian HE promoted by the long struggle of Black and indigenous movements (Gomes, 2012; Pereira, Maia & Lima, 2020; Borges & Bernardino-Costa, 2022), which resulted in the Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008. The call for inclusion of Black and Indigenous histories in curriculum led to broad initiatives, from creating new knowledge practices within the academic system (Roza, 2022), to launching of new degrees that link academia and traditional communities (Oliveira, Parente & Domingues, 2017).

However, sociologists could do more about it, particularly the ones in charge of teaching social theory and the history of the discipline, which remain highly Eurocentric narratives (Maia, 2017). Below I list a few pedagogical tactics to address this problem, inspired by the discussion put forward in this special issue and by these recent developments happening in contemporary Brazil.

A first tactic is to assign texts and promote discussions that decentre the classical canon and stimulate students to think about the historical processes

of canon formation. Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha (2001) provided a very good example of this tactic when analyzing their experience teaching classical sociology for undergraduates in the National University of Singapore. Rather than getting rid of the holy trinity formed by Marx, Weber and Durkheim, they challenged Eurocentric concepts and hypothesis that emerged in their writings, such as the link between Protestantism and economic rationalization. This tactic allows us to keep a core group of thinkers while challenging established readings with alternative perspectives on their ideas.

A second tactic is to work with an entangled history of sociological theories. As we know, the allure of the “national traditions” is powerful and many teachers reproduce the idea that theories and concepts reflect enclosed national realities. In the case of Brazil, Brazilian sociology is usually taught in specific courses that bear a geographical description in their title, and students do not necessarily relate its content to broader discussions of social theory. However, we could do differently. For instance, we could discuss theories of modernization, a hot topic in the 1950s and 1960s, exploring how Latin American sociologists recreated North-American theories through a non-equal but still transnational exchange. We could thus discuss Talcott Parsons alongside Gino Germani and Florestan Fernandes. We could also decentre the history of intersectionality theories by presenting the case of Lélia González, who was experimenting with intersectional arguments before the concept took off in North American academia.

Finally, a third tactic requires us to provide historiographical contextualization while analyzing sociologists and concepts. This contextualization is not restricted to biographical information about authors, but must lead us to ask good questions about the canon and the discipline, such as: a) through what process a collection of writings become a classic? b) Which authors, traditions and concepts were forgotten/abandoned/erased? These questions require teachers to raise a historiographical consciousness in students instead of simply pushing down their throats lots of information about the life and works of great men. Once again, our subfield of HoS has plenty of nice works on these scientific problems (Baehr, 2002; Dayé, 2018).

To accomplish these tasks, one needs to push for deep changes in the editorial market. Translations were key for shaping the field of Brazilian social sciences during authoritarian regime (1954-1985), bringing the most cutting-edge research from post-war critical sociology to a growing audience

(Nóbrega, 2021), and recent editorial initiatives can be crucial for providing faculty and students with new learning tools. For instance, one could mention the translations of Harriet Martineau made by Fernanda Alcântara in her blogpage (<https://fernandahcalcantara.blogspot.com/>), or the edited book by Verônica Daflon and Bila Sorj (2021) about the classical women in social thought, or the recent collection organized by Celso Castro with social scientists “beyond the canon” (Castro, 2022).

Brazilian sociology has much to offer to this new politics of teaching. Our discipline is rooted in most institutions of higher education and has greatly benefited from the democratization of the undergraduate level. Students and faculty have been experiencing with new topics and approaches, and the push for internationalization has opened the space for collaboration with scholars and academic communities in other countries that face similar dilemmas. The prospects for teaching sociology are promising, and we hope this special edition will bring more interest to this emerging trend.

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