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THEMATIC CLUSTER: A NEW HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY?  OPEN ACCESS



INTRODUCTION

A new history of sociology? Southern perspectives

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Writing the history of sociology has predominantly been a Western endeavor that would hide its name. Produced in such countries as the United States, France, Germany, or Great Britain for the greatest part of it, it offered a synecdochical disciplinary narrative that would – and most often still does – assimilate the authors, concepts, theories, journals, and institutions from these countries with the whole past and present of sociology (Collyer and Dufoix 2022; Dufoix 2022a).

A historical, reflexive account of sociology has been crucial not only to reorient disciplinary development in the West but also to inform more recent efforts to decenter, decolonize, and globalize sociology. Reflections about the content of the canon and how to revise it in order to abandon, extend or replace it have been instrumental in “situating” not only the canon but also the very issue of the “founders” and “classics” of the disciplines, thus shedding new light on how the practice of writing the history of sociology and its very outcome – the so-called “history of sociology” – have played a major role in the lingering exclusion of sociologists, books, concepts, theories, and institutions coming from most parts of the world (Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Arab World, Africa South of the Sahara, but also other European or Western countries like Australia, Russia, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal). The “captive mind” mentality put forward by Syed Hussein Alatas (1972; 1974), an imitative and uncritical way of thinking usually dominated by Western thought, is actually not confined to non-Western countries. It also affects Western sociologists who have been trained in that narrative even though it represented an advantageous position for them because that narrative did not include counter-hegemonic voices challenging the historical doxa (Dufoix 2023; Keim 2022; Celarent 2017).

Changing the gaze on the very sub-discipline of the History of sociology does not only imply being able to understand it as “a corrective to the leading discourses within the discipline” (Dayé 2018, 532). It also entails reflecting on how the classical History of sociology has taken sociologists away from a more genuine knowledge of sociology as a movement of ideas – except for the United States, Germany, Japan, China, and India, where it acquired a disciplinary identity early on, it wasn’t until the late 1940s that different ideas were encompassed within sociology as a discipline and became more widespread. Yet sociology was not

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merely “transferred” from North to South after WWII. The circulation of sociological ideas in the late nineteenth century was not constrained by national boundaries, and it encompassed regions such as Latin America, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia. The relative ignorance of this fact is evident in the methodological nationalism of the history of sociology. Even the most recent accounts of non-Western sociology mostly remain national-oriented (see for instance Cedeño 2022; Altmann 2022; Martin, Gómez de, and Benito 2022;¹ also Collyer and Manning 2022) and disregard the importance of knowledge circulation (on this, see Keim et al. 2023; Rodríguez Medina 2014). Moreover, the idea that “scientific sociology” was born after the late 1940s – especially in the Global South – delegitimizes the account that sociology was also locally appropriated and “invented,” and instead accommodates the appreciation that the growing scientific dimension of the discipline in the main Western countries (especially the United States) was then “internationalized” into the rest of the world. It is striking that this now classical view was also present in Latin America when some Latin American sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s (like the Argentinian Gino Germani, the Colombian Orlando Fals Borda, the Brazilian Florestan Fernandes, and the Chilean Guillermo Briones) constructed their own legitimate academic positions by breaking away from the ideas and methods espoused by the former sociologists in their countries.² Writing the history of sociology is not only a historiographical task: it also constitutes a weapon in controversies and a means to transform the winners’ vision into the only true narrative.

If addressing the issue of the canon is one way to rewrite the history of sociology (for different positions about the canon, see Burawoy 2021; Alatas and Sinha 2017; Connell 2007), rewriting this history from the “periphery” brings about new avenues and sheds new light on the specific appropriations of Western sociologists in these places, thus unraveling some transnational entanglements (Chen 2021 and 2022). This defines the common aim of the four papers in this Thematic Cluster, all of which address the local constitution of sociological “classics” in the social science periphery. Envisioning a new history of sociology (Dufoux 2021; Dufoux 2022b) does not mean refusing the coinage of the very word *sociologie* in Europe nor its diffusion to other parts of the world. It actually implies considering the transnational and local mechanisms of its circulations, receptions, and appropriations.

Contributions to this Cluster

Charting the history of professional sociology in Ecuador, Philipp Altmann argues that the problem of classicality loomed large as it entailed the creation of an alternative canon

¹In this respect, the “Sociology Transformed” series at Palgrave Macmillan, edited by John Holmwood and Stephen Turner, plays an ambiguous role. The 26 volumes published between 2014 and 2022 are all national monographs. If this editorial initiative included non-Western countries (like South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, or China) into the history of sociology, it confined that history to the national boundaries at the same time.

²In the case of Asia (Japan, China, and India), the situation was a bit different. As a defeated power, Japan had its prewar sociology denigrated and replaced by American-oriented sociology while the number of teachers and researchers increased (Fukutake 1968, 93). In China, the relative well-being of institutional sociology, as it was emphasized by the leading sociologist Sun Benwen in a 1947 report (Chen 2018, 14), was rapidly swept by the Communist takeover in 1949: sociology was suppressed from the university in 1952 until 1979. In India, the independence of the country in 1947 was accompanied by the gradual increase of the number of students, teachers, and sociology departments. Sociology in India was mostly characterized by the prevalence of two figures from the 1920s until the 1970s, G.S. Ghurye and M.N. Srinivas, whose conception of social science was rather close to Orientalist visions of India (see notably Patel 2002). The publication of European anthropologists Louis Dumont and David Pocock’s article about “Sociology in India” (Dumont and Pocock 1957) was followed by multiple reactions over at least three decades about the possibility of an “Indian sociology” (see Hallen 1987–1988).

other than the conventional choices of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. The canonization started with Agustín Cueva Saénz, the first chair of sociology at the Central University of Ecuador in Quito between 1915 and 1931. Herbert Spencer, Franklin Henry Giddings, and René Worms, among others, were invoked to specify the biological and social psychological conditions of “national unity,” and thereby to offer a solution to the problem of *concertaje* or forced labor among the indigenous population. In the same vein, Ángel Modesto Paredes elaborated a theory of social consciousness based on Spencer, Worms, Gabriel Tarde, and Lester Ward. Durkheim was rejected not only because his texts were yet to be translated, but also because his anti-psychologism was deemed impertinent to the central issue of racial and ethnic differences in Ecuadorian society. While the institutionalization of sociology came relatively late, the early formation and closure of the canon bore its stamp on the second generation of Ecuadorian sociologists. Simmel’s influence remained limited despite Víctor Gabriel Garcés’ efforts to bring in formal sociology to complement the biological and psychological sociology of Tarde, Ward, and Giddings in the early 1930s.

Laura Moya’s paper centers upon José Medina Echavarría, a Spanish exile sociologist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Inspired by Weber, Medina Echavarría defined sociology as a circumstantial and historical social science concerning itself with the present and responding to the problems and crises of modernity. By drawing a distinction between analytical sociology or “vertical theories” and historical sociology or “horizontal theories,” Medina Echavarría problematized the gap between old concepts and new reality, for example, the anachronism of “modernization” and the “nation-state” in the post-war era. This approach was applied to the critical analysis of development in Latin America, as Medina Echavarría set out to explain why the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) model failed to produce its expected outcomes. In highlighting the role of historical circumstances against general theory and the technocratic model, Medina Echavarría inquired how politics was underpinned by values, specifically how the economic rationalities and agencies of various social actors were intertwined in the decision-making processes of development. With a creative adaptation of Weber, Medina Echavarría contended that Latin America lacked the cultural substrate of capitalism, which entailed not only work ethics and execution capacity but also a way of life oriented to social change and institutional adaptation, as well as rationalization and planning.

In her case study of the reception of Karl Marx in Brazil, Lidiane Soares Rodrigues focuses on how disputes in the academic and political fields were constitutive of local classics. Better known as the Marx seminar, the first philosophical reading group of *Capital* was founded at the University of São Paulo in 1958. Rodrigues points out that the seminarians contributed to the canonization of Marx by defending their dissertations with a structuralist reading of *Capital*. One prominent example was Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who defended his thesis on the relation between modern slavery and industrial capitalism in Brazil by conceptualizing the world economy as a “colonial system,” using the totalizing perspective of Marx and Marxism. Yet this structuralist reading of Marx was far less political compared to another study group that agglutinated radical youth, the Brasilia group (with André Gunder Frank as one of its members), a militant sub-party organization, and the communist parties in Rio de Janeiro. In this way, the seminar played an important role in establishing Marx’s place in the university system.

As its members produced “the reading capital of *Capital*,” Marx was transformed into a classical thinker. In the process, however, university Marxism was co-opted under the policy of funding agencies such as the Ford Foundation, while partisan Marxism was repressed by the authoritarian government.

The final paper by Po-Fang Tsai expands the scope of discussion beyond Latin America by looking at the reception of Weber in China during the 1980s–90s. In an attempt to overcome the methodological nationalism of most studies of the history of sociology, Po-Fang Tsai aims to situate the reception process in the broader circulation of knowledge between China and the United States. Notwithstanding the asymmetrical knowledge flow between the social science center and the periphery, a “dual gaze” was inaugurated as Chinese interpretations reciprocally informed the debate on Weber in the United States. This process was mediated by three generations of Chinese sociologists, each with their own professional trajectory and political positioning. The reception of Weber took place in the 1980s–90s when Yang Ching-kun and Ambrose King Yeo-chi made explicit interventions in the debate on modernization in China. This generation was capable of addressing a dual audience, one in China and another in the US, by underscoring the distinctiveness of Chinese civilization. It stood in contrast to the earlier generation represented by Fei Xiaotong and Chu Tung-tsu in the 1930s–40s, whose Chinese works were belatedly translated into English but became influential for preparing an alternative reading of Weber in terms of law and social order rather than in terms of religion and economy. Their insights were taken up by their contemporaries Zhao Dingxin and Zhou Xuegang, who were overseas Chinese sociologists heavily embedded in US academia. In their specialized subfields, these scholars were instrumental for moving Weber reception from its earlier Eurocentrism towards indigenous scholarships in China.

Although these articles only represent specific historical sketches of the development of sociology in some countries, they all invite consideration of the transnational and local dimensions of appropriation from the perspective of Southern countries. This does not mean rejecting the importance of Western theories and authors in the history of sociology, but rather displaying a broader vision of how sociology emerged, developed, became institutionalized, or was re-established in Southern countries through and with local specific and contextual appropriations of Western sociology. If it were expanded to other cases and gradually generalized, this new way of approaching the history of sociology would certainly result in a less hegemonic and more transnational perception of the historical paths of the discipline.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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