

SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE: NEW CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

DOI: 10.14515/monitoring.2018.5.06

Правильная ссылка на статью:

Скалон С. За пределами дихотомии «центр-периферия»: социология в глобальную эпоху // Мониторинг общественного мнения: Экономические и социальные перемены. 2018. № 5. С. 44—52. <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2018.5.06>.

For citation:

Scalon C. (2018) Beyond center-periphery dichotomy: sociology in the global era. *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes*. No. 5. P. 44—52. <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2018.5.06>.



C. Scalon

BEYOND CENTER-PERIPHERY DICHOTOMY: SOCIOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL ERA

BEYOND CENTER-PERIPHERY DICHOTOMY:
SOCIOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL ERA

ЗА ПРЕДЕЛАМИ ДИХОТОМИИ «ЦЕНТР-
ПЕРИФЕРИЯ»: СОЦИОЛОГИЯ В ГЛО-
БАЛЬНУЮ ЭПОХУ

Celi SCALON¹ — PhD, Full Professor of
Sociology

E-MAIL: celiscalon@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9477-3156

СКАЛОН Сели — PhD, профессор со-
циологии, Федеральный университет
Рио-де-Жанейро, Рио-де-Жанейро,
Бразилия.

E-MAIL: celiscalon@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9477-3156

¹ Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract. This article presents an overview of the paths of sociology in times of change in a globalized world. Looking at the four-year period from the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology, in Yokohama, to the XIX ISA World Congress of Sociology, in Toronto, it is possible to argue that sociology is going global and

Аннотация. Представлен обзор развития социологии в эпоху перемен глобализирующегося мира. Четыре года, прошедшие с момента XVIII конгресса Международной социологической организации (ISA) в Йокогаме до недавнего XIX конгресса в Торонто, показали, что социология становится все

growing stronger each day. The paper stresses the importance of comparative analysis, the integration of theory and method, and the defense of Sociology as a scientific and academic field. The major question is how to keep on the move during times of profound geopolitical and geo-economic transformations and what is the place of Sociology in the global era. Hereupon we address the debate about sociological research in the 21st century considering the challenges and possibilities open to our academic field. We also analyze the contribution to sociological analysis of Latin-American and the BRICS sociologies who bring in perspectives that can go beyond the theories developed by early industrialized countries or, as they are called here, central countries.

Keywords: social change, globalization, knowledge production, comparative research

Acknowledgment. I want to thank my colleagues Soraya Cortes, Richard Miskolci and Andre Salata for the privilege to have debated this theme, sharing ideas and concepts that were organized in the different article. I am also grateful to Tom Dwyer, who has inspired us to engage in international comparative research, especially with the BRICS countries.

более масштабной и весомой. В статье подчеркивается важность сравнительного анализа, интеграции теории и методологии, а также реабилитации социологии как научного и академического знания. Главным остается вопрос, как «оставаться на плаву» в эпоху глобальных геополитических и геоэкономических трансформаций и какова роль социологии в эту эпоху. В связи с этим мы обращаемся к дискуссиям о социологических исследованиях XXI века, анализируя проблемы и возможности, открывающиеся в нашем научном поле. Мы также анализируем роль латиноамериканских социологов и социологов стран БРИКС в становлении социологического анализа, которые привносят вклад, выходящий за рамки теорий, разработанных их коллегами из промышленно развитых, или, как мы называем их здесь, центральных стран.

Ключевые слова: социальные перемены, глобализация, производство знания, сравнительные исследования

Благодарность. Я хочу выразить благодарность своим коллегам Сорайе Кортес, Ричарду Мискольчи и Андре Салату за возможность обсуждения, обмен идеями и взглядами, представленными в более ранней публикации. Я также хочу поблагодарить Тома Двайера, который вдохновил нас на участие в международных сравнительных исследованиях, особенно в странах БРИКС.

Sociology is a historical product of complex and differentiated societies which create specific opportunities to observe, describe, interpret and understand themselves. One of these opportunities is self-reflexive sociology, which developed specifically as a discipline specialized in this reflexivity. That is its specificity, its vocation and its

challenge. And that is why sociology is often confused with the diagnosis of the present. From this comes its interest in the debate on contemporary issues, particularly those that refer to political, cultural, economic, scientific, artistic, educational, technological, and social change.

The 21st century brought a lot of novelties and, with them, a huge challenge to sociology. It is not like we woke up one day and the world was completely transformed. From my perspective the so called “post-modernity” was not exactly a rupture that gave origin to an entire new era, but the result of the ongoing processes and social dynamics. Nevertheless, there is no doubt the world experienced a clear and profound shift in social, economic and political power, bringing innovation to our traditional understanding about societies and demanding from the world a political compromise in order to build a new balance among nations.

Many factors contributed to this change. Emerging countries came to the international scenario as influential players; mobility around the world became more frequent, in such intensity that borders seem to be blurring, improving diversity and increasing cultural contact; new media and technologies intensified and accelerated communication and information exchange; the global consumption market created standardized products, engendering tastes and converging styles.

We became more connected and aware about the differences as well as the similarities among our societies. But, unfortunately, not all effects of this connection are positive. In many cases, the outcome was less tolerance, more discrimination and growing segregation. Cultural contact often turned into cultural clash, followed by escalating xenophobia when many believe we can still trust the nation-state limits to keep away the strange, the unknown, the other. Recent events showed people are skeptical and seem not ready to adopt supra-national models of organizing economics, politics, and social life. However, it is quite clear no country is isolated, and changes in the environment, economic models or political ambience in one country can have global consequences, reflecting on and involving many other regions far beyond its borders. This unavoidable connection among diverse societies puts a lot of pressure on global strategy and keeps pushing the countries to redesign their frontiers in new regional blocks and free trade zones.

These are challenges for sociology today and I trust it can only be addressed by a comprehensive agenda of transnational research. It does not mean there is no room for studies based on specificities, localities or national states. Yet, it is important to emphasize the idea that analysis at the local or national level becomes more complex and complete when we can see the local through the lens of the global.

The experiences of international comparative analyses, diffusion of open access publications and data, as well as, international meetings are ways for establishing and strengthening the transnational connections among sociologists. As we call for international cooperation in so many spheres — such as environment, human rights, finances, among others — it is our responsibility to promote international cooperation also in knowledge production. Even so, the conditions for that are still to be discussed and analyzed. Redefine the geopolitics of knowledge in the field of sociology, even in the face of deep transformations that have been taking place recently, it is not an easy task. In sociology, as in life, borders still play an important role in keeping asymmetries.

In a very concise way, we could divide sociological production in three phases. First, initiated at the end of the nineteenth century, is characterized by the formation of social science in Europe. The second period can be distinguished by the disciplinary character of sociology, evolved in the United States between the two World Wars. The third can be noted by the emergence of sociology on a global scale by the end of the 20th century.

But despite sociology going global, there still remains a highly asymmetrical structure of the production and circulation of knowledge. Along with the concentration of research in developed countries — or, as some sociologists call it, the Global North — we can also argue that there is an implicit 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 gather data, analyze case studies or carry on applied research.

Many sociologists have been developing studies on this theme and the criticisms of this context were brought about by different currents of thought. Regardless of the diverse perspectives of analysis, there is a common understanding that the production and circulation of sociological knowledge should be placed in a global perspective. There are many ways to think about strategies to reach this goal, mainly by opening new axis of dialogue among sociologists from less developed countries, also called Global South, or by creating more regular and balanced exchanges between sociologies of North and South. In either case, it is quite clear that the production of knowledge should be more symmetrical between center and the periphery. Both developed countries and the less developed countries shall come as equals in sociological debate since we can all contribute to a better understanding of our world and, consequently, have an impact on building a better future for our societies.

As a first step in this direction, it is essential to recognize the existence of a diverse set of sociological traditions and currents of thought. We must acknowledge the existence of a thriving sociological practice not only in the “West”, as we are used to think throughout the history of sociology, but also in the “Rest”.

Borrowing Hall’s analysis about the cleavage between “the West” and “the Others” helps to understand that, despite the advances in our discipline, there is still a narrative that defines the European and the North-American sociology as reference points for thinking about sociology in general. According to him, this idea survives over time: “So, far from being a “formation” of the past, and of only historical interest, the discourse of “the West and the Rest” is alive and well in the modern world. And one of the surprising places where its effects can still be seen is in the language, theoretical models, and hidden assumptions of modern sociology itself.” [Hall, 1993]

We can all agree that in many ways scholars in the developed countries have better conditions to carry out their work and, of course, Europe and the US are ahead in the process of institutionalizing scientific knowledge. But this cannot prevent us from pursuing the aim of improving dialogues between center-periphery as well as among different kinds of periphery. It is the core issue to promote a more equal exchange among scholars all over the world, and to connect sociological traditions that historically have not been in direct contact. To achieve this goal the circulation of knowledge has to be reorganized, breaking the old and highly unequal pattern of academic distribution of power.

At this point, it is interesting to call attention to the constraints and promises of sociology in Latin America, it is possible to begin making a point in order to differentiate sociology in Latin America and sociology of Latin America.

In this sense, the latter, the sociology of Latin America, is the project that must be pursued and it is probably the most important task for Latin-American researchers. Sociological theory or methodology cannot be restricted to a country or a continent. In fact, theory and methodology in any science is global and knows no borders; it must be universal. But it is clear Latin America shares common social issues, and that Latin American sociology has a lot to contribute to the interpretation of them, especially in regard to such issues as inequality, violence, and poverty among others.

But what we already have is certainly a sociology in Latin America. There is a lot of effort from Latin American sociologists to build a common space for dialogue. One example of this kind of initiative is the creation of UNILA (Federal University of Latin American Integration)¹, which is set in the Triple Border or Tríplice Fronteira (the border of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay), located in the city of Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil).

There is a long history of collaboration among researchers working together on important issues that affect Latin America. There had been many articles and books published by Latin-American sociologists from various countries, analyzing the development process during the 1970s. We can point out FLACSO (founded in 1957)² and CEPAL (1948)³ as institutions that always engaged many Latin-American social scientists.

All things considered, there is not only interest but the need for joint efforts in comprehending social problems that have been afflicting Latin America countries. In addition, it is worth remembering there is a history of work contributions and links among Latin-American sociologists which had been strengthened in recent years.

We can mention as relevant the topics of sociological analysis in the Global South, and consequently, Latin America, the overcoming of problems related to violence, ecological issues (environmental degradation and bio-diverse heritage), poverty, vulnerable populations, urban segregation, metropolitan governance, urban-rural inequalities, as well as analysis and evaluation of public policies.

It is also relevant to consider that Brazilian sociologists are not only connected to Latin America, or even to the US and Europe, which had been so influential to our social science tradition; Brazilian sociologists had played the leading role in building cooperation among BRICS countries. Joined together, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa scholars had been developing comparative studies for more than twelve years. The connection among sociologies in these five countries makes sense as they are emerging economies that appear in the global scenario as new players in economic,

¹ The mission of the University is to train researchers and professionals who think about the present and the future of integrated Latin America in the areas of sciences, engineering, humanities, letters, arts, social sciences and applied sciences.

² Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) is an international, intergovernmental, autonomous body, founded in 1957 by Latin American states, based on a proposal from UNESCO.

³ The Economic Commission for Latin America was established by Economic and Social Council resolution 106 (VI) of 25 February 1948 and began to function that same year. The scope of the Commission's work was later broadened to include the countries of the Caribbean, and by resolution 1984/67 of 27 July 1984, the Economic Council decided to change its name to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); the Spanish acronym, CEPAL, remains unchanged.

political, and social sphere. Apart from having large territories, these five countries cover 40% of the world's population, but that is not the core reason for joining efforts in sociological analysis. BRICS societies face common issues of inequality, poverty, class formation, and labor market structure, all of which are challenges for social stability and development.

Focusing on Brazilian sociology, it is possible to point out some changes which, I believe, are consequences of the increasing political and social demand for interpretations and solutions for important social issues, such as security, violence, poverty, inequality, population displacements, urbanization, environment, among others.

For that, there has been a significant growth in the number of researchers and post-graduate programs in sociology in Brazil. We also experienced the expansion of the labor market for sociologists, particularly in governmental agencies and NGOs as managers and evaluators of public policies. Additionally, there is a greater exposure to the media. Sociologists had been called to offer their analyses to various topics of debate. We also had sociology included in the High School curriculum, with Brazilian Government requiring that Sociology should be included as a compulsory discipline during three years of High School, in all Brazilian schools.

Nonetheless, I do believe we now have to follow certain steps in order to develop Sociology in non-central countries, such as Brazil. It is important to strengthen the dialogue with public power to inform policies of inclusion and social development that can guarantee a better standard of living for the population and enable a more active participation of the civil society. But above all we must stimulate international impact of our academic production by carrying on international comparative research, increasing the participation in international meetings, and publishing in international journals. Following this concern about internationalization, it is a fundamental task for non-central countries to develop new theories and methods to overcome the mirroring relationship that still prevails in between 'peripheral' and 'central' sociologies; it is more than clear that the analytic models developed in the early-industrialized countries do not apply to the late-industrialized or non-industrialized ones. Sociology is a discipline that has its origin in the very specific conditions: the process of urbanization and industrialization which took place at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century in Europe, and it still carries its birthmarks. A paradigmatic example is the study of class; stratification scholars had been replicating all over the world the studies developed in Europe and the US. The inadequacy of explanatory models developed in the north to better understand the social structure of emerging economies, for example, left us without an accurate analysis of the social structure in societies that do not fit the modernization theory as developed for the central societies. Sociology in the south is still in debt of a model for sustainable social development in non-central countries.

A second set of challenges are related to the relevance and the impact of sociological studies for the society as a whole. In this sense, it is worth evaluating the impact of our field on professional formation and its interaction with other applied fields, such as technical management, administration and evaluation of social programs and policies. Also, the interaction with other fields of knowledge, such as health, urbanism, technology, nature and all other areas of the humanities. Last but not least, the impact

of sociological analysis on the economy, especially if it can have an impact on the improvement of living conditions and work for the entire population, which has direct effects on the strengthening of social inclusion, the identification of mechanisms of production and reproduction of inequality, and the contribution to the design and expansion of policies aimed at reinforcing civic participation and citizenship.

Final Remarks

The title of the Brazilian Sociological Society journal, “Sociologies in Dialogue”, published in English, inspired the theme for the ISA National Association Meeting, in 2017. It is in fact an inspiring title. The journal is an outcome of the efforts made by SBS to engage in international debate. We believe that by stimulating the acceptance of studies from various regions of the globe it is possible to promote more symmetrical geopolitics of sociological production. As Hanafi states, “Knowledge does not simply circulate: is also produced in circulation” [Hanafi, 2016]. This possibility implies creating transnational dialogues among diverse sociologies. We are aware of their limitations, such as the language, just to mention one, but we are also willing to overcome them and open a channel for a more egalitarian and productive cooperation with Global Sociology. Over the years we observed some results, Brazilian Sociology has been strengthening its ties with BRICS Sociologies, as well as, expanding and consolidating its historical relations with Latin America, Europe and the US.

I do believe that sociology can have a major role in building bridges between societies, just by its capacity to improve our understanding about others. Doing comparative analysis and circulating our work we can observe the differences and, especially, the similarities that exist among societies. Considering that, I would claim that sociology can help to show how distinctive we are in our individualities or diverse in our identities; but, above all, sociology can reveal how equal we are in our human condition, our desire to pursue goals and to shape the future.

The purpose of this article was to discuss the challenges that contemporary society imposes on sociology, both in terms of its scientific status and its vocation to analyse and to interpret transformations in social reality. In this sense, we believe it is of extreme relevance to address the processes of internationalization, research, innovation, and knowledge production. The deep transformations of societies in the twenty-first century require that sociologists evaluate and validate various dimensions of the process of knowledge production, such as research guidelines, methodological procedures, theoretical traditions, networking, and maybe even the relationship with the public sphere.

It is important to emphasize that the work of the sociologist is ultimately to treat all phenomena with suspicion. For that reason, sociology is dedicated to denaturalize common sense and to denounce that each dimension of social life is marked by relations of power and beliefs which are, until proven otherwise, the result of a system of values and norms socially shared. Facing these issues is to put sociology in its place as a global science that is socially responsible for the production of reflections that do not submit to the agenda or common-sense narratives.

The training of human resources and the production of knowledge today depend essentially on the cooperation between researchers and scientists located at

different levels of academic hierarchy. It is well-known that the intellectual production increasingly depends on interinstitutional, interregional and, most of all, international partnerships. In view of that, I would like to state that without global perspective and cooperation research in Sociology tend to be partial and incomplete; and, precisely for this reason, it will become obsolete in a short period of time.

To follow the frenetic pace of the changes in geo-economics, geo-politics, population movements, environmental balance, among many other issues that have direct impact on social life, it is fundamental to discuss the role, the place and the future of sociology. Therefore, it is important to consider the multiple options we have before us: making changes in the field and in the research spaces to build new strategies of production and work. What does innovation mean in the craft of sociology? What is our capacity to reflect on the present time and the intense dynamics of contemporary society, without letting ourselves being dragged by easy narratives or biased interpretations? How to create in fact an international atmosphere for debate when conditions seem so unfavourable to some compared to others? What is our position and what are our alternatives for securing an interchange with technological, exact and natural sciences, considering that they can, and should, engage in sociological analysis?

Our aim was certainly not to offer answers to such complex questions but to reflect on the paths and possibilities for sociology in the 21st century. Looking at the four-year period from the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology, in Yokohama, to the XIX ISA World Congress of Sociology, in Toronto, it is possible to argue that sociology is going global and growing stronger each day. In the last four years more national associations, especially from Arab and Latin-American countries, joined ISA and more TGs were proposed, bringing in new research themes. But as all research fields that expand, sociology faces the challenge of guaranteeing that the increase in number of professionals goes side by side with its advance in quality and consistency.

As sociology is a reflexive academic field, while it is built as an interpretation of social life and, at the same time, a science that interprets and reshapes this very same social life, there is a complementary relation that allows sociology to change along with social changes. The sociological work has shown a great ability to implement comprehensive perspectives suitable for the understanding of macro-historical phenomena, to adapt to major trends and to establish transnational dialogues in international comparative research. It does not know theoretical or methodological borders, participating in the knowledge production of other fields such as History, Anthropology, Political Science, Demography, Geography, Public Health, Environment, just to mention a few. In the same way, we can argue Sociology is not tied to a unique method of research, making use of statistics, ethnography, document analysis, focus groups, case studies, among others. It is exactly its flexibility and its ability to integrate theory and method that makes Sociology a solid field of research and allows it to keep on the move in times of change.

References

Connell R. (2007) *Southern Theory*. London: Polity Press.

Dwyer T. (2017) Huit ans de travail sur les BRICS. *Hermès La revue*. No. 79. P. 99—106.

Bourdieu P., Chamboredon J.-C., Passeron J.-C. (1991) The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries. 1st edition. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter.

Hall S. (1993) The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power. In Hall S., Gieben B. Formations of Modernity. Cambridge, Polity Press in association with Blackwell and the Open University. P. 275—333.

Hanafi S. (2016) Global knowledge production in the social sciences — a critical assessment. Sociologies. Dialogue. Porto Alegre, Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia. Vol. 2. No.1. P. 16—30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20336/sid.v2i1.29>.

Miskolci R., Cortes S., Scalon C., Salata A. (2016) Sociologies in Dialogue. Porto Alegre, Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia. Vol. 2. No. 1. P. 1-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20336/sid.v2i1.31>.