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THE ROUND TABLE

SOCIOLOGY IN PORTUGAL

The Portuguese Sociological Association

Introduction

In April 1993, the Portuguese Sociological Association collated a number of contributions by Portuguese sociologists in a debate on the situation, problems and prospects of sociology in Portugal. Questions about the development of sociology, the state of scientific research and the professionalisation of sociologists are reviewed and analysed in this text.

Discussion

As recently as 20 years ago, sociology was almost non-existent in Portugal. Since then it has shown a brisk development. What is the scientific and professional community of Portuguese sociologists like today? What are the reasons for this late start? How has Portuguese sociology developed?

José Madureira Pinto: From the available data, we estimate that there are about 1,000 sociologists in Portugal today. About 40 per cent are involved in teaching and/or research at universities and colleges. The remainder, which has been increasing both overall and relatively, can be found in central, regional and local authorities, companies and their associations, trade unions, consultancies, and so on.

The idea that sociologists' professional status and activities are quite widespread in Portugal is confirmed if we consider that, although the majority of the authors of nearly 200 papers presented at the recent second Portuguese Sociology Congress worked for universities, they represented more than 50 institutions.

This situation has to be related to one of the specific traits of Portuguese sociology today. I mean the ability Portuguese sociology has shown to avoid separating the demands of scientific research, on the one hand, from professional activity, on the other.

João Ferreira de Almeida: Before the dictatorship was established in 1926, sociology had only managed to take its first steps. After that, for too long, it endured the exile that the regime imposed on the social sciences. Even though surrounded and under surveillance, some of them – like history, economics, ethnography, geography – managed to hold out and survive. They did have the time to establish themselves before the first quarter of the century and make their usefulness felt, and therefore managed to consolidate their position, especially at universities. The others, like sociology, lost the thread of continuity and their first tentative efforts towards scientific recognition failed.

Although the dictatorial regime still continued in the 1960s, these were years of change for Portugal, even from the point of view of particular scientific and educational policies. It was possible to introduce social sciences, prohibited until then, in certain university curricula. It was then also possible, very unobtrusively and in small micro-climates, to train researchers, encourage their work and even to publish some of their findings. With the onset of democracy in April 1974, the way was finally cleared for research, although discernible results took some years to appear.

It was after this that the first fully-fledged university courses were set up and the first sociologists graduated in Portugal. Many of those who had obtained doctorates abroad returned to Portugal at that time. Several new research institutions, both private and state-owned, opened their doors and offered places to sociologists. Associations were formed to consolidate the field of sociology and they served as mediators for the younger generation, especially in foreign relations.

António Firmino da Costa: In general terms, I feel we can talk of a pioneer period (up to 1974), of a period of university institutionalisation of teaching and research (up to the mid-1980s) and a period of the constitution of sociologists into a professional group (still developing).

If the first stages served the basic purpose of epistemological and theoretical constitution of the Portuguese scientific field and university institutionalisation, it is also true that, arising from these circumstances in which it was done and the very nature of these stages, there was for a time a certain degree of academic closure in sociology in Portugal.

This phase is now over. The foundation in 1985 of the Portuguese Sociological Association, which was immediately accepted as a member of the International Sociological Association, was an important milestone in the rapid development of Portuguese sociology.

The Portuguese Sociological Association was founded by a few dozen people but today it has about 700 members. The first and second Portuguese Sociological Congresses (in 1988 and 1992) at which hundreds of papers were presented, well attended and having a reasonable public impact, as well as the recent publication of the professional code of the Portuguese Sociological Association, are also symptoms of the considerable degree of maturity in sociologists' scientific work and a clear trend towards the expansion and diversification of sociologists' professional roles.

This obviously does not mean that all the tendencies are favourable: there is, for example, always a shortage of research funding and professional sociologists are also facing difficulty of access to some sectors of activity.

Joaquim Quitério: It was not long ago that industrial firms in Portugal employed neither engineers nor economists, let alone psychologists, lawyers or social workers. Sociology was out of the running. Since then, although the changes – though not radical – have been obvious, there seems to be reason to believe that the process will not only continue but will even speed up. Today sociology is involved in this process, though only partially and irregularly. We can with good reason hope that in years to come it will be even more involved.

In my opinion, this depends on two interdependent but different processes: the evolution of society and the evolution of sociology itself. We can say that the former depends on factors over which sociologists have little or no direct influence, while the latter basically depends on them.

Fernando Luis Machado: In the last few years, the professionalisation of sociologists in Portugal has gained substantial momentum. The rise and multiplication of the activities of sociological associations, the generalisation of debates on questions arising from the development of this professionalisation and the progressive recognition of its importance in different university degrees are facts which have contributed towards a significant increase in the number of sociologists on the employment market. One result of this is the greater recognition, by the sociological community itself, of the diversification of sociologists' professional roles, which is just as important as their acknowledgement by society. These changes in the field of sociology in Portugal, however, are still new and there is still a structural divergence between courses offered by the universities and career opportunities, as the former have grown much faster than the latter.

Although it has not had much time to get established in Portugal, sociology seems to show some interesting specificities in comparison to other national contexts. Along what lines can one characterise the sociological research and debate being developed now? What is their potential and what are their most important limitations?

João Ferreira de Almeida: On the subject of sociology, as with everything else today, there is talk of a crisis. The crisis of sociology, the crisis of its paradigms, the decadence of the basic principles passed down to us by its founding fathers. Comparisons with the recent glorious years of sociology – the inevitable sixties – as well as a pessimistic assessment of today's serious difficulties, is bound to produce a certain disenchantment.

We may ask what this has to do with us, since we know how specific our recent paths have been. The truth is that what is happening in Portugal, even in this sphere, depends on the wider arena of Europe and North America where important researchers and writers are working on the main currents which feed scientific development in the sociological field.

I am one of those who does not consider that the effects of our relative distance from these currents are necessarily negative. It is true that the periphery tends to be prone to colonisation and, in the case under discussion, particularly through the indiscriminate import of models which are often unsuited to local work, but the situation also has potentialities which are worth considering. Sociology as it has developed in Portugal is actually receptive to different influences, in fact it actively seeks and selects them, whether they come from the rest of Europe, North America or from other sources and areas.

But can this receptivity be effective in a field which is sometimes labelled pre-paradigmatic? For my part, I cannot agree with this diagnosis. The social sciences have been and will probably continue to be multi-paradigmatic, in the sense that they do not merely have one central body of theories and methods on which they are based and to which all empirical research refers.

I think that sociology has had time to get used to living with multiple references, with more or less coherent bodies of theory, and to propose different instruments and fields of research. There is no reason to make a tragedy out of this. It would only be one if we needed the major closed and totalising models that were once important. What we do need, however, are open and consistent research systems, which will continue to embrace basic contributions from the classical founders of sociology whose theories are far from exhausted in their heuristic potentialities.

José Madureira Pinto: The truth is that, despite the fact that it has not been established for long in Portugal, sociology is able to display considerable 'comparative advantages' in the inevitable comparisons with other national contexts.

The first of these advantages is related to the tendency towards epistemological and methodological reflexivity that has marked research in this field. It is a fortunate by-product of sociology's backwardness here, as it is connected with the fact that one of sociology's basic supports on the threshold of the democratic age consisted of a number of works dealing with the specific foundations and problems of knowledge about social phenomena. It provided a way of getting around the constraints of political censorship and, above all, also corresponded to the need to reconvert the first generation of sociologists whose basic training had to be in the disciplines of law, economics, arts or even engineering.

The second important trait of Portuguese sociology, which still relates to the way the first generation of sociologists was recruited and the long-standing uncertainty in its formative phase, is its multi-disciplinarity and the choice of 'frontier' subjects for study, which was sometimes quite innovative in relation to the patterns of identity and scientific excellence in other intellectual fields. Using methodological and theoretical instruments of different origins, Portuguese sociologists have studied subjects like the state, parties, the armed forces and the administration of justice (crossing the conventional boundaries between political science and law), like rituals and other cultural practices connected with microcosms and well-defined groups (with an approach very close to anthropology), like economic strategies in family agriculture and other informal sectors of Portuguese society (here closely linked with economics), like values, representations and discursive practices (joining forces with social psychology and the sciences of languages), and so on. The effort that has been levelled at an overall theorisation of Portuguese society as a semi-peripheral society in an interim stage of development has also acquired a multi-disciplinary nature.

Thirdly, for reasons which are also attributable to the history of the institutionalisation of sociology in our country, we are not faced with a fragmentation of the scientific field into schools, which often permit purely institutional interests to take precedence over solid scientific reasons.

I would now like to talk about a fourth beneficial trait, which is the concern for the process of observation of social phenomena. Portuguese sociology has never allowed itself to be mesmerised by empirical and formal illusions which

in other sectors informed the dominant models and practices in sociological research, but neither has it ignored reflection on the limits of theorisation, the need for analysis at different levels, and the specificity of social phenomena measurement. It has thus been able to construct methodologies which I consider progressive. Old dualisms such as those opposing explanation to comprehension, qualitative to quantitative methods, macro to micro-sociology, global to local, and so on, were never given expression here because they were already out of date.

At a time when attention is sometimes obsessively focussed on data-processing techniques, our strong methodological awareness shows that if one wants to perfect the quality of research and professional practice an essential effort must be made in the discrete and humble task of data collection. This has given rise to, for example, numerous suggestions to reformulate the system of conventional socio-economic indicators.

Now I would like to add that, although I believe that our sociology has all these beneficial traits, I do not think that they can easily gain high visibility and make their mark on an international level. We know that the distributional circuits of scientific publications are hardly a model of perfect competition and we would be naive to think that we can ignore the influence which not always entirely judicious lobbies exercise over them. On the other hand, we also know that the progressive scientific movements are unable to operate in the absence of the minimum material conditions, especially as far as public finance for research is concerned. Thus, we are obliged to say that the situation and prospects of Portuguese sociologists have known better days. As everyone knows, the last few years have been particularly difficult for universities, which devote their decisive competence and energies to the scientific field in Portugal, while the finance granted by the authorities to sociological research projects has declined to alarmingly low levels.

What are the problems facing the professionalisation of sociologists in Portugal today? What relationships are established between the three poles of the sociological field: science, teaching and profession?

António Firmino da Costa: In brief, we can perhaps characterise the current process of sociologists' professionalisation as the coexistence of two models of 'professional culture'. In ideal-type terms, it would not be inappropriate to call them 'the culture of dissociation between science and profession' and 'the culture of association between science and profession'. As far as we have been able to ascertain, the 'culture of dissociation' is a cultural model that is on the decline in Portugal. The 'culture of association' is an emerging model and is on the increase.

Initially the idea that those who practise sociology do not have a profession and those who have a profession do not practise sociology was preponderant among sociologists in Portugal. However, a growing number of sociologists defend the idea that at the crossroads of the demands for sociological science with the demands for professional integration there must be mutual compromises. It is not only the other social protagonists that find themselves in the contingency of accepting the conversion of social problems into

sociological problems as a condition for sociologists to be able to apply their specific knowledge. Professional sociologists must also continue to create subjects for analysis in order to face the questions placed before them, and to produce and apply pertinent and effective operative skills.

Facing social demands sociologists are often obliged to base themselves on theories, to formulate subjects for analysis, to favour methodological variables and procedures different from those usually associated with the artificial and traditionalist compartmentalisation of the sociological field. In most cases, sociologists are being asked to work with meso-structures, with processes of change, by direct contact with social participants in local or organisational contexts; they are being asked to try to understand and intervene in relations between structure and action, to pay particular attention to the changeable variables without ignoring the main tendencies and structuring frameworks, to become specialists in the socio-cultural dimension and its relations with power games, with the distribution of resources and with the dynamics of development.

We are not talking about making concessions to science to achieve professionalisation or making concessions to professionalisation to maintain sociological science. 'Science and profession' do not cancel each other out. On the contrary, they are wholly able to enhance mutual potentiation.

José Madureira Pinto: To corroborate what has already been said about the potentialities of the relationship between research and profession, I have to recommend that people read what has been published in Portugal. In these works, we are far from merely accumulating academic exercises: what can be drawn from them is an overall view of the channels of social change in this country. Is there any knowledge more useful than that which allows social protagonists, including institutional protagonists, to find a lucid position in relation to the changeable circumstances of their existence?

From this point of view, I think it is essential to deny the systematic absence of sociology in applied research projects referring to other fields of knowledge. Indeed, in the strategy of active affirmation of sociology that I proposed there is a place for an even more advanced course of action: it means using the specific competences of the profession to expand and restructure the list of relevant social problems.

In the necessarily slow process of clarifying the social consciousness connected with the effective democratisation of institutional life, the emancipatory exercise of individual liberties will also be promoted – and here I see new scope for an assessment of the usefulness of sociology.

Joaquim Quitério: The three questions that I consider particularly important are the social recognition of the role of sociology, the sociologists' professional attitude and the curricular options in schools of sociology.

One manifestation of concern about the last question can be found in some curricula in the form of a long list of subjects, many of which have no real affinity or relationship with the core of sociological thought, rather they can be detrimental because of the time the student has to spend on them and the fact that they rule out the possibility of a deeper study of theoretical sociology. This seems to show a concern to provide sociology graduates with a body of

knowledge which would give them access to secondary school teaching, to personnel training, personnel management and industrial relations, and even to public services. It also raises the question of whether professionalisation of sociologists (i.e., access to their own profession) is subordinate to employment for those with degrees in sociology.

Without going into the legitimacy of this option, I feel that it tends to cancel out any efforts that sociologists themselves could make to impose their image as professionals with special qualifications essential to society.

Fernando Luis Machado: Epistemological reflection on sociology has focussed mainly on the point of view of the production rather than the transmission of knowledge, in looking more at the contents taught rather than the contexts, objectives or targets of the teaching. It seems clear that the scientific identity of sociology must include its teaching at university. However, teaching cannot be seen as a mere extension of research. The teaching of sociology raises different problems from the practice of sociology as a science. Talking about contexts and, above all, about objectives and targets for the transmission of knowledge makes us think not only of the specificity of teaching in relation to science but also of the connection of these two with the third side of the triangle, namely sociology as a profession. The sides of this triangle are of different lengths. Sociology defined its identity as a science long before it was generalised and institutionalised as a university course and degree, and it was only later that its expression as a profession outside the academic field gained any significance. Sociology in Portugal is going through a phase in which the side of the triangle representing profession extends far beyond the academic field towards, in fact, the overall evolution of professional knowledge. University teaching of sociology must therefore consider an open model which neither overestimates nor underestimates the interaction between science and profession but rather seeks to establish reciprocity.

I must say, however, that between the different forms of sociological activity, which, we can divide into three types for the sake of convenience – university teaching/fundamental research, applied research and sociologically informed intervention – there are many more continuities than discontinuities. A profound knowledge of sociological theories, the mastery of methods and techniques and a familiarity with epistemological reflection are all transversal to the different professional roles of sociologists. It is the demands, circumstances and opportunities for its operationalisation which differ.

A model of teaching, in which tests and masterly lectures predominate without student participation or direct contact with social reality, will hardly provide a balance between cognitive and relational capacities. The recognition of works with an empirical content, implying contact with fields of research and intervention, has a double educational function: not only does it mean the acquisition and training of cognitive capacities, like the theoretical equation of subjects for analysis, the application of theories and concepts, of methods and techniques, but it also confronts the students with the specific relational dynamics of sociological work and produces a second level of learning and training in which practice is irreplaceable.

SOCIOLOGY IN PORTUGAL

Profile of sociologists (N=878) present at the Second Portuguese Congress of Sociology (Lisbon, February 1992)

Gender: male, 33.6 per cent; female, 66.3 per cent.

Age: <19, 9.7 per cent; 20–24, 30.8 per cent; 25–29, 19.1 per cent; 30–39, 23.8 per cent; 40–49, 12.3 per cent; 50 plus, 4.4 per cent.

Occupations: professors and researchers, 38.8 per cent; school teachers, 8.3 per cent; professionals, 34.6 per cent; managers, 3.2 per cent; other jobs, 15.1 per cent.

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