

Reading sociological theory against its grain

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The special issue “Reading sociological theory against its grain” proposes to shed light on a number of queries that have been impacting sociology, and more specifically the theoretical debate, in different terms. If the keywords of our call for papers echoed an intellectual (Benjamin, 1980) who himself was not a sociologist *stricto sensu*, but whose thought straddles and enriched several conventional disciplines, this is not a coincidence. Our understanding of sociology as echoed in the call is one of a wider scope with a plurality of theoretical, but also epistemic angles and political commitments. As such, the five essays composing our special issue mirror this effort from different perspectives, as embodied by the authors as well as made visible in the various themes they approach. Another two contributions that could not be delivered for a number of reasons, not least of which was the impact of the pandemic context, would ideally have widened the scope of the issue even further. Our endeavour explicitly proposed to gather the work of scholars at different stages of their careers and address the historical marginalisation of women and non-white scholars when it comes to theoretical debates.

This special issue also takes into account different forms of conceiving theory and approaching it. Hence, our essays draw upon a variety of perspectives, as is the case with the social studies of science, history of sociology, and others that consider an immanent critique of the debates, without ignoring the institutional aspects surrounding the production of theory and their subjects. We see a departure from a closed, fixed understanding of what counts as a theoretical debate as an important exercise towards pluralizing theoretical discussions. Therefore we expect each of the texts to open new venues and lead towards further readings and research.

Engaging with the global asymmetries of knowledge production is of course not new. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, Paulin Hountondji (1996) addressed the issue of extraversion, looking at how what was called African philosophy had been conceived

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by European intellectuals in a way that reproduced colonial dynamics. He emphasized an aspect that would be taken up and scrutinized throughout the next decades in ever more detail: how knowledge production, and especially theoretical interpretations, emanated from the center, in a division of intellectual labour that still lasts until today. This kind of epistemological divide amounts to establishing a fixed relation between the scientists' place of origin and the validity of their theories, or, in Walter Mignolo's words, "between knowing about and knowing from" (Mignolo 2000: 309). For a long time, the distribution of scientific and cultural production in First, Second, and Third Worlds mandated that someone from an economically and technologically peripheral country does not have the necessary frame of mind and culture of scholarship to study other civilizations, and thus cannot produce any kind of significant theoretical thinking – because theory is defined according to First World standards. Raewyn Connell (2012) pointed to the global division of labour where countries, authors and institutions in the Global North are recognized for producing theory, while the works of those in the Global South appear as offering the empirical data, constituting only objects – and not subjects – of knowledge. This results in an artificial divide in which the theory-producing metropole, overwhelmingly associated with the Global North, is credited with having the science, the concepts, and the methods, to have produced the literary and social scientific canon, as well as proper historiography. On the other hand, the periphery is reduced to a source of data and a repository of myths, folklore, and indigenous (as opposed to "high") art – from which it can, however, derive neither concepts nor academic canons.

Brazil presents a rather peculiar context. On the one hand, it has a consolidated higher education system with a large network of federal, public universities, characterized by offering tenure and a unified career, granting a nowadays rather rare intellectual autonomy. On the other, the theoretical dependence in regard to central, foremost universities and academic institutions located in the USA and Europe, for a long time produced an array of one-sided intellectual reliance on importing theories. Although the pathbreaking viewpoint of *teoria da dependência* and other relevant contributions were generated locally, there still remained a colonial subordination when it comes to theoretical models. João Maia (2019) illustrates these pressures, also taking into account the neoliberal context, in various ways throughout a number of interviews that express distinct patterns of intellectual work. The relation to the centers in the Global North as a trait of Latin American Social Sciences had already been pointed out by Leandro Rodriguez Medina (2015), who discussed how different centers and peripheries, in the plural, are formed in the context of global knowledge production.

As will be briefly outlined below, these differences also express themselves in the thematic approaches of each essay, meaning that the relationship of theoretical

viewpoints and empirical investigation is paramount to the understanding of theory. To put it briefly: without refraining from metatheoretical considerations, all papers address the entanglements of the discussions they focused on, highlighting specific elements that have to be taken into account when interpreting inequalities and asymmetries that condition the formation of social theory, be they race, gender, material infrastructure, social hierarchies and networks etc.

The article “Cuestionando la modernización en entornos rurales periféricos: revolución verde, mujeres y paradigmas entrelazados bajo la lente pionera de Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara, by Clara Ruvituso” examines the invisibilized contribution of Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara, born in the USA, but who undertook her pioneering work in Mexico, analyzing the green revolution from a double fold peripheral perspective. On the one hand, reconstructing the rural context of modernization in Mexico, on the other, herself a female intellectual, contributing towards a brighter understanding of the vital role exerted by women in that context. Supported by extensive readings and an in-depth biographical interviews, Ruvituso is able to localize this endeavour, also taking into account the practical interventions that stem from her large body of work outside academy. Considering the interest for an audience of Spanish and English-speaking readers, her essay appears in both languages (therefore also published as *Contesting Modernization in Rural Peripheral Settings: Green Revolution, Women and Entangled Paradigms under the Pioneering Lens of Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara*).

The essay “Lélia Gonzalez, uma teórica crítica do social” (Lélia Gonzalez, a critical theoretician of the social), co-authored by Flavia Rios and Stefan Klein, investigates and reflects upon the theoretical, counter-hegemonic perspective of the Black Brazilian intellectual Lélia Gonzalez. Her work, put forward mostly during the 1970s and 1980s, constitutes an original approach to deal with the theoretical influences of Marxism, dependency theory and psychoanalysis, and shows an intersectional viewpoint *avant la lettre*. Focusing on how race, gender and class intertwine to (re)produce a number of inequalities, Gonzalez puts racism as the center of her analysis, arguing that capitalism, and thus the different social contexts of colonized countries, cannot be critically examined without taking race/colour as a fundamental trait. Rios and Klein disclose the main aspects of this theoretical stance, therefore enabling a wider audience to engage with this intellectual, who has been historically marginalized even in comparison to other Black intellectuals.

In her article “Theorising the Caribbean against the grain. How West Indian social scientists established the Caribbean as a space of knowledge production in the 1950s”, Meta Cramer presents and underlies the invisibilisation suffered by the Ca-

ribbean as a relevant locus of the social sciences. By detailing the central roles exerted by two main authors, Arthur Lewis and Michael G. Smith, and also pointing out the institutional frame that accounted for this development, the reader will be able to deeper understand these dynamics of a context that has generally been left aside even in the Latin American debates. By going farther into forms of intellectual exchange and circulation of knowledge (and people), these are shown to contribute fundamentally towards building such an academic space.

“A larger grain of sense. Making early non-Western sociological thought visible”, the paper written by Stéphane Dufoix, makes a point for looking at Latin American and Asian sociological thought to at least partly reframe our theoretical canon. As such, he reconstructs the various sociological viewpoints that presented themselves in these parts of the globe in order to argue towards the relevance of reorienting the main authors and geopolitical localizations that anchor our reflections. Therefore, as he sustains, moving against the grain depends upon taking into consideration a number of marginalised authors who established critical dialogues with sociological classics, and nevertheless still were ignored by a large part of the sociological debate, such as the works of Shoichi Toyama, Mariano Cornejo, Antonio Dellepiane, Salvador Camacho Roldan and Sun Benwen.

Last but not least, the article “Por uma ética da ontoformatividade: reflexões e proposições sobre a relação ontológica entre teoria e pesquisa na sociologia contemporânea do Sul Global” (For an ethics of ontoformativity: reflections and propositions on the ontological relation between theory and research in the contemporary sociology of the Global South), written by Marcelo Rosa, focuses on reorienting the debate on ontology, taking up its historical presence among a number of authors and mobilizing a *Ioruba* sociological perspective to question presuppositions of the established canon. He not only deals with the theoretical design and perspective itself, but also discusses a number of implications that accompany the necessity of rethinking the way research is conceived and taken through.

We expect these essays to constitute a small, albeit relevant contribution towards raising the awareness for the need to reorient the theoretical look that has been consolidated for over a century. If without a doubt a number of changes in the higher education and knowledge production landscapes has already made the first steps in this direction, such as the advancement of affirmative action in Brazil or the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement in South Africa, we still have a long way to go. It is vital to stress that making space for these counter-hegemonic authors and themes shall not be seen as a mere form of political correctness: rather, they have to be taken seriously, on equal footing with their better known, predominantly white, male and

European counterparts, that certainly presented important but as always limited interpretations on how the social world is structured. The concept of transforming loci of knowledge production – or, as put by Joaze Bernardino-Costa and Antonádia Borges (2021), of *desseñhorizar* the university – has to rely upon broadening the type of theoretical references, and the main themes and debates that compose our day-to-day work in the classrooms.

Like suggested by Wiebke Keim (2010), there are three main dimensions that structure the inequalities of knowledge circulation, producing different centers and peripheries. This is expressed throughout the arguments of each article, while also constituting an aspect of authorship, with people at different institutions, and an author located in the Global North that came from the Global South. As further pointed out by Fabrício Neves (2022), the peripheral context produces its own regime of managing irrelevance: without being able to guarantee its own relevance, this remains a main strategy to deal with the pitfalls of playing a marginalised role in the wider, hierarchical forms of circulation of academic knowledge throughout its different institutions and expressions. These essays have in common an effort to sustain the idea that there are potent theoretical reflections presented in peripheral contexts that have been invisibilized. We wish you a good read!