CHAPTER 1
A MATTER OF RELEVANCE.
A SET OF PROPOSALS FOR COMPARATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH IN THE PORTUGUESE SPEAKING COMMUNITY

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The Argument

I am certainly not the only one to believe that sociology is at present in some sort of crisis. The reasons for such a crisis are many and varied, and I will not attempt to analyse them now in any detail. I will concentrate only in one aspect: *relevance*. Indeed, I am under the impression that a lot of what we currently do has lost sight of the social relevance that our work should and might have.

I am not saying that social scientists have become, as a community, disinterested in the public agenda (Wilson 1993). What I am trying to suggest in that it looks as if sociologists, like most members of our societies, are at a loss in the face of the turn things have taken, world wide, in the last quarter of the century.

I for one tend to believe that the current 'post-modern fashion' is more a reflection of our present puzzlement than a convincing account of the changes that are taking place in world society.

Be that as it may, one can hardly avoid the feeling that current social research is increasingly split between two trends that both depart from the relationship sociology should maintain with the public agenda.

One trend is the growing tendency of purely academic research to become a belated form of aesthetics, indeed an 'art pour l'art' and a kind of 'fin-de-siècle' rhetoric.

The other trend, which we often take for a genuine response to the demands of society, is money-driven research, i.e., research we would probably not engage in if it were not for the fact that there is money available.

The end result of these two trends seems to me to be an ever increasing specialisation that fails to capture and interrelate those problem-areas that appear most relevant for the foreseeable future of our societies.

Perhaps this is, in fact, another puzzling feature of that puzzling phenomena we have been calling, for lack of a better concept, 'globalization'. Of course, the lack of proper conceptual tools to deal with the social meanings of

'globalization' makes it equally difficult to decide which are the relevant problem-areas we should be studying.

Indeed, the identification of such relevant problem-areas entails already an evaluation, if not a theory, of what 'globalization' is supposed to mean from the viewpoint of our societies. Relevance is therefore the first issue that social scientists are going to dispute about.

Ultimately, any decision about what is relevant is a matter of power. And it is no accident that most of those decisions end up by being taken by the people who have, within and outside the social sciences community, the financial and academic power to make them.

For the sake of today's discussion, I will try nonetheless to offer a few thoughts about a set of problem-areas that strike me as particularly relevant for the Portuguese speaking countries and, indeed, for current sociology. But before that, I need to make two brief comments: one about the notion of a Portuguese speaking community and another about comparative social research.

The Portuguese Speaking Community

'Globalization', which I mentioned earlier, strengthens the case for dealing simultaneously with that set of countries which have Portuguese as their official language, in so far as each of them participates, willy-nilly, in the same global processes of economic, political and cultural change.

There is, however, a lot to say about the extent to which a social scientist is allowed to speak of those seven states as a community. Indeed, the 'Portuguese speaking community', despite the controversial historical links uniting it, remains a prospective political construct, mainly inspired by the Portuguese *elites* faced with their new 'identity' after the final breakdown of Portugal's colonial empire and the country's integration into the European Union.

Though this is too long a story to be told now, I would argue nonetheless that the vast set of material and symbolic issues involved in the notion of a 'Portuguese speaking community' represents a relevant research area for social scientists concerned with the societies at stake. If nothing else, in order to establish, once and for all, whether such a community is just a new rhetorical device reminiscent of *the ideology of luso-tropicalismo* (Freire 1940), or whether it is a plausible area for scientific study and practical co-operation.

Furthermore, any statement one is bound to make about such a 'community' requires as many societal qualifications as the number of countries involved. Indeed more, since some of the newer ones seem far from having completed their 'state building' process, while Portugal is involved in a process of unprecedented incorporation into a 'supra national' political entity, and the smaller countries, such as São Tomé e Príncipe (about which social scientists

seem to know virtually nothing), are said to lack the basic requirements of national viability.

Therefore, if one takes 'globalization' to strengthen a plausible common empirical ground for identifying the most relevant problem-areas in all seven Portuguese speaking countries, one must not take for granted the existence of any 'community' given by History, as it is too often done in the ideological discourse. Not even a community given by language, as we were reminded at the latest Congress of Luso-Afro-Brazilian Social Sciences (Marquilhas 1996).

Instead, one must bear in mind that 'globalization', whatever it will go bringing about, can only be conceptualised in the light of a theoretical framework such as the one provided, for instance, by the modern theory of uneven social differentiation and institutionalisation (Alexander & Colomy 1990).

The Case for Comparative Social Research

From a methodological viewpoint, there is an obvious need, when one is dealing with such a varied set of societal environments, to face the difficulties but also the promises of comparative research. Here again, there is a relevant agenda to be tackled and one can only deplore the scarcity of ongoing comparative research projects.

Here is a domain where funds have been clearly lacking and, if the newly created Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) is to become more than political rhetoric, one of its targets should be the effective encouragement of such endeavours.

For the sake of brevity, I can but refer you to the epistemological and methodological problems once raised, to the effect of comparative social inquiry, by A. Przeworski & H. Teune (1970). Possibly, the most relevant issue, for the purpose of construing the 'Portuguese speaking community' as a spatio-cultural object of comparative research, is the 'developmental assumption' which is almost inevitably associated with this type of methodology.

Indeed, besides the problems of measurement and comparability of social data in different societal environments, sometimes intractable but ultimately trivial from a theoretical viewpoint, the real difficulty in the way towards general statements about them lies in the extent to which one is prepared to accept to deal with them along some 'developmental scale'.

According to Przeworski & Teune, such an obstacle may be turned around by empirical research and I, for one, welcome any steps we can take in that direction. If anything, 'globalization' seems to me to have provided a new empirical ground for placing all countries in a kind of *continuum* of social costs and benefits, which overrides, to some extent, the distribution of losses and gains within each national social system. The argument is not different from

what has been recently restated for the study of economic inequality (Sen 1997).

Last but not least, it is only fair to admit that, much as I would like to be 'ethnically unbiased', most of what I have to say springs necessarily from my experience as a social scientist who has mainly worked on Portuguese issues. I look forward, therefore, to any comments allowing me to correct such a bias.

The Knowledge Constellation

The first set of issues I retain as crucially relevant for the foreseeable future of the Portuguese speaking societies can be organised around the general problem of knowledge. Including that kind of knowledge, seldom dealt with by sociologists, that our societies have acquired through the arts and literature, that is to say, those experiences and skills that tend to be conveyed in our common tongue and which offer themselves, therefore, to a specific comparative analysis.

In fact, comparative literary studies dealing with some or all the national literatures written in Portuguese are, if anything, the most developed research area as yet undertaken by scholars with an interest in the so-called Portuguese speaking community. There are many ways in which social scientists can take inspiration from the work already achieved by comparative literary and cultural studies.

With 'globalization', knowledge and its constant up-grading have become, if anything, even more socially discriminating than they used to be in the past. However difficult to quantify, knowledge accounts undoubtedly for a whole set of individual and group attitudes and patterns of behaviour from the family to work and politics.

Any single piece of empirical research we conduct in Portugal comes across the overwhelming explanatory influence of formal education and cognitive mobilisation. Indeed, the fast growth of the Portuguese education system in the past two decades does not conceal the fact that 'functional illiteracy' remains extremely widespread (Benavente et al. 1996).

Though this may run against the 'post-modern fashion', I cannot emphasise more the social relevance of this problem-area. This is probably true for any contemporary society, but it is even more so for the Portuguese speaking countries, which share, admittedly in different degrees, a clear knowledge deficit as regards the kind of skills resources that 'globalization', as distinct from the previous 'developmental stage', increasingly mobilises.

I do not have the time to expand on it. I only want to suggest that the subject is best conceived as a constellation of interrelated problem-areas, taking us from *the status of knowledge itself* in current society to *education and training systems*, and from here to *work, labour markets, migrations,* and the usual issues related to them.

Migrations are, of course, an example of a privileged area of research for social scientists of the 'Portuguese persuasion': initially and for centuries from Portugal to Brazil and Africa; then, also for a long period, from Africa to Brazil; and eventually, from Africa and Brazil to Portugal when the latter joined the European Union, the Portuguese speaking people are linked, for better and worse, by all kinds of migratory ties.

I realise that I have suggested little more than a shopping list of research areas wellknown to social scientists. The point in drawing attention to them, besides their obvious practical relevance for people who lack access to such resources and opportunities, lies in the earlier suggestion that knowledge should be conceived, for any kind of research program involving the Portuguese speaking countries, as the 'single most independent variable' of this constellation of huge problems.

From Socio-Demographics to Social Justice

Another set of relevant problem-areas for comparative research in our countries may be construed as a kind of socio-demographic constellation. Admittedly, the demographic patterns prevailing in our societies differ substantially.

Whereas Portugal has achieved in the past two decades a 'demographic transition' similar to most European countries, Brazilian society does not seem to present a homogeneous demographic pattern, and the African countries, while differing amongst themselves, offer a picture which is all the more unclear that it is blurred, in Angola and to some extent in Mozambique, by protracted warfare.

Having said that, the claim for comparative demography still stands in order to establish possible correlations between local patterns of demographic behaviour and a whole set of variables, namely those associated with the cultural background that all seven countries of the Portuguese speaking area partially share.

At any rate, such an inquiry will provide a basis for the study of the remaining segments of the socio-demographic constellation. That is to say, *the class structures; the family and its evolvement;* the status of *the elder and younger generations;* the so-called *'modes de vie',* as well as *the new youth cultures* which 'globalization' seems to bring about, in different manners, irrespective of levels of economic development.

Finally, this socio-demographic constellation can be linked to another relevant set of issues, i.e., *the 'welfare state' and its current crisis.* I am aware that conventional sociology tends to conceive the 'welfare state' as something specific to the so-called developed countries. But my point in bringing it up is, precisely, to challenge the conventional view and to place the 'welfare state' in

the wider context of *the reproduction of society*, alongside the 'welfare society' (Santos 1990).

Ultimately, to trace back the actual structures of welfare systems amounts to tackle the crucial issue of the *social fairness or unfairness* prevailing not only within each society, but also between peoples at world level (Rawls 1971). I have myself alluded to it in the Portuguese speaking context (Cabral 1996). In turn, the issue of social justice leads me to my last set of proposals.

Citizenship, Public Opinion and Democracy

Last but not least, there is plenty of room for a comparative research program on *the political systems* of the Portuguese speaking countries, all of which are allegedly engaged in a *process of democratisation* whose relevance can hardly be overstated.

I am certainly not going to enter the details of such an issue. It should suffice to say that, though there is quite a lot of remarkable literature about the 'third wave' of democratic transitions and consolidations (Diamond et al.1988-89, Ethier 1990, Linz, & Stepan 1996), little of it has dealt comparatively with such processes in the Portuguese speaking countries.

From the exchanges I had about the matter during the latest Luso-African-Brazilian Congress of Social Sciences (Rio de Janeiro 1996), it is fair to say that social and political scientists of the 'Portuguese persuasion' have here a lot of common ground to undig. Possibly as much as Africans, Latin Americans and Europeans have amongst themselves.

Citizenship is used here as a shorthand to refer to that vast set of attributes that qualify both the material and immaterial resources than enable one to effectively share in the rights formally opened to all by representative political rule. In turn, it is the diffusion of the resources required by the exercise of citizenship that gives us, alongside the fairness of democratic procedures (from elections down to the courts and the like), the measure of the 'quality of democracy' (Schmitter, 1993), in other words, its substantive legitimacy.

Public opinion surveys, if properly conducted and interpreted, can be a suitable tool to identify many of the relevant issues at stake from the point of view of the relationship between socio-economic fairness and citizenship (Cabral 1997), as well as a technique particularly amenable to comparative research.

To mention just an instance, when I read José Álvaro Moisés' essay on the 'Dilemmas of Brazilian democratic consolidation' (Moisés et al., 1989), I could not help feeling how much added-value we could all derive from a comparative study of democratisation processes in the Portuguese speaking countries.

Of course, when I speak of 'public opinion', I am not unaware of the flow of wellknown criticisms raised against such a notion. However, rather than insisting on a theoretical critique, I would suggest that there is a lot to be done

in order to uncover the social processes currently leading, in our societies, to the formation of 'empirical public opinion' as part and parcel of the rights of citizenship.

Eventually, such an inquiry would take us to my last problem-area, i.e., the *mass media*, whose new global techniques and messages have been altering dramatically the conventional patterns of democratic participation and representation, irrespective again of levels of economic development.

Paradoxically as it may sound, I believe that the greater the knowledge deficit prevailing in our countries, the greater the impact of the new media upon our political systems. This is another feature of 'globalization' that brings us all under similar threats and challenges, both as social scientists and as citizens.

Of course, these proposals are not meant to exclude many other relevant research areas, and I have no other conclusion than to ask for your comments.

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CHAPTER 2
WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO CONSTRUCT A CRITICAL THEORY?

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In this paper I shall concentrate on a problem that sociology shares with the remaining social sciences. I shall first formulate the problem and identify the factors that contributed to its particular importance during the past decade. Next, I shall suggest a few clues for the resolution of this problem. Finally, I shall briefly mention the challenges specifically posed by this problem to the social sciences in spaces where Portuguese is the official language.

The Problem

The most puzzling problem that the social sciences face today can be formulated like this: if at the close of the century we live in a world where there is so much to be criticised, why has it become so difficult to produce a critical theory? By critical theory I mean the theory that does not reduce *reality* to what exists. The critical analysis of what exists lies in the assumption that existence does not exhaust the possibilities of existence, and that there are, therefore, alternatives capable of overcoming what is criticizable in what exists. The discomfort, nonconformism or indignation vis-à-vis what exists inspires the impulse to theorise its overcoming.

Any brief enumeration of the problems that cause us discomfort or indignation suffices to make us question ourselves critically about the nature and moral quality of our society and search for alternatives theoretically grounded on the answers we give to such questions. Such questions and search were always the basis of modern critical theory. Max Horkheimer has defined modern critical theory better than anyone else. According to him, the irrationality of modern society lies in that it (society) is the product of a particular will, that of capitalism, and not of a general will, a united and self-conscious will (Horkheimer1972, p.208).

Marx's influence on Horkheimer's conception of modern critical theory is quite obvious. However, critical sociology has also sources in eighteenth-century romanticism, nineteenth-century utopianism, and twentieth-century American pragmatism. It developed along multiple theoretical orientations, such as structuralism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, its most