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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 (Horkheimer 1972, 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

prominent analytical icons being perhaps class, conflict, elite, alienation, domination, exploitation, racism, sexism, dependency, world system, liberation theology.

All these concepts are still today part and parcel of the work of sociologists and social scientists. However, many of them no longer have the centrality they used to have, or they have been so much reelaborated and nuanced in themselves that they lost much of their critical power. On the other hand, conventional sociology managed to make acceptable, as remedy for the crisis of sociology, the critique of critical sociology. As a consequence, the question that has always been the starting point for critical theory "which side are you on?" became for some illegitimate, for others irrelevant, for others still an unanswerable question. If some, believing that they do not have to take sides, have stopped worrying about the question and criticise those who still do, others, perhaps the youngest generation of social scientists, though they would like to answer the question and take sides, see sometimes with anguish the seemingly increasing difficulty in identifying alternative positions in relation to which it would be imperative to take sides. They are also the ones most affected by the problem that is my starting point here: why, if there is so much, perhaps more than ever, to criticise, is it so difficult to construct a critical theory?

The difficulties today in constructing a critical theory may be formulated like this. Because they were not fulfilled, the promises of modernity (equality, liberty, peace, etc.) have become problems for which there seems to be no solution. In the meantime, the conditions that brought about the crisis of modern critical theory have not yet become the conditions to overcome the crisis. Hence the complexity of our transitional position, which can be thus summed up: we are facing modern problems for which there are no modern solutions. According to one stance, which might be called reassuring postmodernity, the fact that there are no modern solutions indicates that probably there are no modern problems either nor, before them, any promises of modernity. What exists is therefore to be accepted and celebrated. According to another stance, which I designate as disquieting or oppositional postmodernity, the disjunction between the modernity of the problems and the postmodernity of the possible solutions must be entirely assumed and turned into a starting point to face the challenges of constructing a postmodern critical theory. The latter is my stance and I cannot but sum it up here in very broad terms.

Towards a Postmodern Critical Theory

One of the failures of modern critical theory was not to have recognised that the reason that criticises cannot be the same reason that thinks, constructs, and legitimises that which is criticizable. There is no knowledge in general as there

is no ignorance in general. What we ignore is always ignorance of a certain way of knowing, and vice-versa, what we know is always knowledge vis-à-vis a certain form of ignorance. Every act of knowing is a trajectory from a point A that we designate as ignorance to a point B that we designate as knowledge. Within the project of modernity we can distinguish two forms of knowledge: knowledge-as-regulation, whose point of ignorance is called chaos and whose point of knowledge is called order, and knowledge-as-emancipation, whose point of ignorance is called colonialism and whose point of knowledge is called solidarity. (1) Though both forms of knowledge are inscribed in the matrix of Eurocentric modernity, the truth is that knowledge-as-regulation ended up overriding knowledge-as-emancipation. By neglecting the epistemological critique of modern science, modern critical theory, though claiming to be a form of knowledge-as-emancipation, rapidly became a form of knowledge-as-regulation.

On the contrary, in a postmodern critical theory, all critical knowledge must begin by a critique of knowledge itself. In the current phase of paradigmatic transition, postmodern critical theory is constructed on the basis of a marginalized and discredited epistemological tradition of modernity, what I call knowledge-as-emancipation. According to this form of knowledge, to know is to recognise the other, to progress towards bringing the other up from the status of object to that of subject. Such is the way of knowing that I designate as solidarity. We are so used to conceiving of knowledge as a principle of order over things and people that we find it difficult to imagine a form of knowledge that might work as a principle of solidarity. However, such difficulty is a challenge that must be faced. Knowing what happened to the alternatives proposed by modern critical theory, we cannot rest content with merely thinking alternatives. We need an alternative thinking of alternatives.

The adoption of knowledge-as-emancipation has two implications for sociology.

The first one can be formulated as follows: from monoculturalism towards multiculturalism. Since solidarity is a form of knowledge that is acquired by means of the recognition of the other, the other can only be known as a producer of knowledge. Hence, all knowledge-as-emancipation is multicultural. The construction of multicultural knowledge faces two difficulties: silence and difference. The global dominion of modern science as knowledge-as-regulation brought about the destruction of many forms of knowledge. Such destruction provoked silences that rendered unpronounceable the needs and aspirations of the peoples or social groups whose forms of knowledge were subjected to destruction. Thus, the question is: how to engage in a multicultural dialogue when some cultures were reduced to silence and their forms of seeing and knowing the world have become unpronounceable? In other words, how to make silence speak without having it necessarily speak the hegemonic language that would have it speak? These questions constitute a great

challenge for a multicultural dialogue. The unpronounceable silences and needs are graspable only by means of a sociology of absences capable of advancing through a comparison between the available hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses and the empty spaces created by the hierarchies between them.

The second difficulty facing multicultural knowledge is difference. There is knowledge, hence solidarity, in differences. Now, difference without intelligibility leads to incommensurability and, lastly, to indifference. Hence the need of a theory of translation as an integral part of postmodern critical theory. It is through translation and what I call diatopical hermeneutics (Santos 1995, p.340) that a need, an aspiration, a practice in a given culture can be made comprehensible and intelligible for another culture. Knowledge-as-emancipation does not aim at a grand theory, rather at a theory of translation that may become the epistemological basis of emancipatory practices, all of them finite and incomplete and therefore sustainable only as long as they become networked.

The second challenge can be formulated thus: from conformist action to rebellious action. Modern critical theory, just like conventional sociology, has focused on the dichotomy structure/action and constructed upon it its theoretical and analytical framework. I do not question the usefulness of the dichotomy but note that in time it became more a debate on order than a debate on solidarity. That is to say, it was absorbed by the epistemological field of knowledge-as-regulation.

From the point of view of postmodern critical theory we must focus on another duality: The duality of conformist and rebellious action. Both in the realm of production and in the realm of consumption capitalist society appears increasingly as a fragmentary, plural and multiple society, whose borders seem to be there only to be trespassed. The relative replacement of the provision of goods and services by the market of goods and services creates fields of choice that are easily confused with exercises of autonomy and liberation of desires. All this occurs within the narrow limits of selecting choices and having the means to make them effective. However, such limits are easily constructed symbolically as real opportunities, be they loyalty to choices or credit consumption. Under such conditions, conformist action easily passes for rebellious action. By the same token, the rebellious action appears to be so easy that it readily turns into a form of alternative conformism.

The most important task of postmodern theory is to inquire into the specific forms of socialisation, education, and work that promote rebellious or, on the contrary, conformist subjectivities.

These two challenges have significant implications for the future of sociology or, if you like, for the sociology of the future. How such challenges will be faced and the impact they will have in the current practice of the social sciences, remains to be seen. But it is an unavoidable issue. Indeed, if we want

alternatives, we must also want the society where such alternatives are possible.

The Challenges to Portuguese Speaking Sociology

Let me next refer briefly the ways in which the challenges described above could be faced in the space of Portuguese language social sciences (henceforth, PLSS). The challenges of knowledge-as-emancipation are global challenges that must be faced locally. The space of PLSS is a regional space made up of many local spaces. The first task of social scientists must be to analyse carefully the conditions of this space and its sub-spaces. The analysis must proceed, to my way of thinking, having in mind three factors: the position of the countries that constitute this space in the world system; their different paths into modernity; the dominant cultures in countries and regional spaces.

Concerning the first factor, it is important to note that in this space there is no core country. There are two semiperipheral countries Ñ Portugal and Brazil Ñ and the remaining countries are peripheral. The space is, therefore, a space without a centre, a space, we might say, that is relatively decentered. From the economic viewpoint, it is a very heterogeneous space, since four different economic spaces converge and compete in it: the European Union, Mercosul, Francophone Africa, and Southern Africa, this last space controlled by another semiperipheral country Ñ South Africa. Thus, besides being a decentered space, it is a space that is bound to attract the attention of other spaces and their centres. The lack of a centre creates conditions for the competition between the two semiperipheral countries of the PLSS space.

As to the second factor "paths into modernity" I distinguish four main trajectories: the European path, the New World path, the colonial path, and the path forced by internal *elites* under external pressure (Santos 1995). In this respect, the PLSS space is an intriguing mosaic. In it, all the four trajectories can be identified. The European path was that of Portugal, one of the first hegemonic countries of historical capitalism; the New World path, which entailed the independence not of the indigenous peoples but of the descendants of European colonists, was that of Brazil; the colonial path includes all the African countries where Portuguese is the official language (PALOPs, Pa'ses Africanos de L'ngua Oficial Portuguesa), the tragic situation of Eastern Timor remaining in abeyance. The path forced by internal *elites* under external pressure is usually referred to countries that were never actually under European colonial domination, like Japan, Thailand, Egypt. However, I do submit, though this may be rather shocking, that this trajectory is also applicable to Portugal. This country's path into modernity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a truncated, partial, and reversible trajectory. Its period of consolidation was, therefore, very slow, incomplete, and always under

foreign pressure, first the British pressure of the Methuen Treaty in 1703, recently the European pressure to join the EEC in 1986.

Lastly, as to the third factor, the PLSS space is again a mosaic where European, African, Amerindian, Muslim, Christian cultures, among others, mix together. Of course, historically epistemicide occurred abundantly in this space. But, on the other hand, the colonising centre, because it was a weak centre, never really had the capacity to make this space internally homogeneous. European culture was never imposed as a total hegemony, not even at the heart of the empire, for Portugal was too much alike the *savage* peoples to be *civilised* and too European to be *savage*. In spite of its internal asymmetries, the PLSS space is one of the most hybrid cultural spaces in the contemporary world.

Considering these factors, which are the difficulties that the PLSS space will have in facing the challenges of postmodern critical theory and which are the opportunities available to it? First, the difficulties. The first one concerns the asymmetries and imbalances regarding the consolidation of the social sciences in this space. Brazil is the country that has had the longer period of scientific maturation from the thirties on, initially under French influence. This period witnessed the emergence of a fine group of social scientists of many different persuasions. All of them, in one way or the other, offered syntheses of a sociological account of Brazil. The newer generation of Brazilian social scientists, however, particularly after the democratic transition, has abandoned this tradition by rejecting the large interpretive paradigms on behalf of rather more sectorial analysis, whether in the light of North-American or French sociology. A void thus emerged that results in a new opacity.

As regards Portugal, the period of consolidation of the social sciences is much shorter, given the forty-eight years of dictatorship. A small yet very well updated community has since emerged but it did not know how to take advantage of starting late and learning from previous mistakes. Disciplinary positivism has been rampant under various guises, often taking advantage of the external modernising impetus provided by EU funding, that great fertiliser for the production of intellectually lazy but well groomed reports. A minefield for critical theory, whether modern or postmodern.

Finally, the PALOPs have had even a shorter period of time for the consolidation of the social sciences, the social conditions of war and dictatorship under which they had to live often making consolidation almost impossible. The postcolonial period is now beginning. In some of the countries the start seems particularly promising in view of the excellent group of young social scientists they have. Surely, nobody will begrudge me a special reference to Mozambique. Its difficulty in having a critical theory develop lies in the potentially distorting role played in the large majority of research projects by the donor countries and international funding agencies. Financing institutions, by forcing ever stricter terms of reference, tend to put the social

scientists in theoretical and analytical straight jackets, which end up being tolerated in view of the discrepancy between the funding granted and the almost non-existent national funding. Under these conditions, critical theory will surely not flourish, even though there is so much to criticise.

Let me now briefly turn to the opportunities offered in the PLSS space for the construction of a postmodern critical theory. First, unlike others, the space of the PLSS was never strongly influenced by the paradigm of modernity. What could be a limitation, can also be an opportunity. The loyalties to the paradigm of modernity being more diluted, the disciplinary traditions less consistent, and the configurations of dominant sociabilities often presenting hybrid forms to which premodern, modern, postmodern elements seem to converge, finite, fragmentary epistemologies become more easily credible. Nonetheless, it must also be born in mind that this situation creates sometimes an intellectual disposition adverse to oppositional postmodern theory, that is to say, the belief that in countries where modernity has not yet fully constituted itself, there is no point in speaking of postmodernity, be it oppositional or not.

Another possible opportunity concerns the strength of the ongoing influence of nonEurocentric cultures in this space as opposed to other spaces. Since the centre was always weak, it never succeeded in cannibalising totally the cultures that were foreign to it. Such a space yields, therefore, enormous potentialities for the progressive multiculturalism that is central to postmodern critical theory.

Finally, the PLSS space, perhaps by virtue of its position in the world system, never allowed for the massive bureaucratic instrumentalization of the social sciences. The relative marginality of the social sciences has allowed some leeway for critical theory. On the other hand, in Brazil an authoritarian political culture is combined in a puzzling way with a vibrant civil society constituted by major grassroots movements and nongovernmental organisations. Brazilian social scientists have often been involved in the construction of the civil society itself, resorting therefore to knowledge in a way that is totally committed to these movements' goals. Portuguese and African social scientists should pay careful attention to their example.

Notes

- (1) For a full development of this epistemological stance see Santos, 1995, pp. 25ff.

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CHAPTER 3 LUSOPHONE SOCIETIES AND SOCIAL FACTS - PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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The Community of Diversity

If we take "lusophony" to mean the group of men and women in the world who speak Portuguese, there is no doubt that it has very real substance. And even from the geopolitical angle lusophone societies and social facts today go to make up a coherent whole which no-one can deny.

The increasing importance of that giant in Latin America - Brazil, Portugal's recent but very significant entry into the European Union, the fact that five Portuguese-speaking African countries have become members of various regional and sub-regional organisations - in particular the Lomé convention, the key position of two of those countries (Angola and Mozambique) in the conflicts which continue to convulse Central and Southern Africa, the existence of large Portuguese communities in various European and American countries, the presence of Portuguese-speaking African emigrants in Europe and the United States, the emergence of joint organisations of lusophone states, all these are elements which help to make it a palpable reality.

As Carlos Marciel said,

"lusophony is the fifth-largest group of speakers at a world level in demographic terms.. the Portuguese language is the third most spoken European language in the world (with some 170 million speakers).. the territory of lusophone countries is the fifth largest... Portuguese is one of only three languages which have a true presence in three continents (together with French and English)... it is the language which is most spoken in Latin America and ... in economic terms, the group of lusophone nations is in seventh place in the world" (Marciel 1992, p.62)

If we add to this the communities in Asia (Macao, Timor, Goa and even the communities in Malacca and Sri Lanka) we can say that it covers four continents.