



# Public Sociology and Social Engagement

## *Considerations on Brazil*

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**abstract:** The debate on public sociology is spreading in Brazil, a country potentially responsive to Burawoy's proposals for two reasons: as one of the most unequal countries on the planet, Brazil offers much historical material for reflexive and socially engaged sociology to bring to the non-academic public; and Brazil has a critical and militant sociology that strongly interacts with public sociology. This article provides a 'different' reading, through the lens of public sociology of the intellectual and political course of two representatives of this critical and militant sociology: Florestan Fernandes and Francisco de Oliveira.

**keywords:** Brazil ♦ critical sociology ♦ Florestan Fernandes ♦ Francisco de Oliveira ♦ inequality

## Introduction

Although still at a germinal stage, the debate on public sociology has begun to spread in Brazil. Is it difficult to imagine a country in the world where a proposal such as Burawoy's (2005a) makes more sense. Why, you may ask? There are two main reasons. First, there is the Brazilian social structure: it is no secret that Brazil is one of the most unequal countries on the planet, therefore offering a huge amount of historical material for reflexive sociology that is socially engaged with the non-academic public. Second, we have the presence of a critical and militant sociology that strongly interacts with public sociology.

In light of Michael Burawoy's promising proposal, our objective in this article consists of a 'different' reading, through the lenses of public sociology

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and some of the central aspects concerning the intellectual and political course of two of the most authentic representatives of Brazilian critical and militant sociology: Florestan Fernandes and Francisco de Oliveira. Naturally, this is not an arbitrary choice. Florestan Fernandes was undoubtedly our most important sociologist and Francisco de Oliveira is the most important Brazilian sociologist alive.<sup>1</sup>

When Burawoy was among us in June 2007 debating his proposal at several Brazilian universities, two types of issues were often raised in connection with public sociology: some questioned the proposal methodologically, saying that it was a narrow proposal because it limited sociology to the knowledge of subordinate groups.<sup>2</sup> However, it is the second issue that we wish to question: after all, some said, would not public sociology be almost identical to 'our' critical and militant sociology? We should acknowledge that this issue, particularly when coming from colleagues who were most receptive to the proposal of a public sociology, makes sense. Let us examine if this is not the case.

The professionalization of sociology in Brazil dates from the 1960s, growing after the regulation and institutionalization of the master's degree in the Brazilian school system, implemented by the military dictatorship in the early 1970s. However, with the crisis of the military regime and subsequent re-democratization of Brazilian society during the 1980s, our sociology assumed a marked public bias that followed, to a certain extent, the resumption of social struggles and the revitalization of social movements, and above all the creation of the Workers' Party (PT) and of the Unique Workers' Centre (CUT). This is the period marked by the figure of the 'sociologist as partisan' in social movements.

The 1990s witnessed intense change in the sociologists' profile, as they started to seek out NGOs and the social entrepreneurship of so-called 'solidary nets'. In the universities, studies of public policies multiplied and a new wave of professionalization compartmentalized even more the local ways of practising sociology, quickly moving sociology towards being an instrumental knowledge placed at the service of goals established by powerful customers, such as the state or the big companies. The critical and reflexive profile that had prevailed during the 1980s was altered, progressively displacing the sociologist, previously seen as a 'social movement partisan', by professionals committed to the 'management of social issues' and deeply involved with public policies and NGOs.

In short, Brazilian sociology underwent multiple cycles, from the professionalization of knowledge, to social and political criticism with an outstanding public presence, and then on to the use of sociological knowledge by both the state and the market. In fact, as should be expected, those cycles are not mutually exclusive. Different stages overlap with one another, and in some cases the same individuals migrated from one form

of practice to another. We must also point out the existence of dissonant strands within the different cycles, beyond the strong elements that ensured temporary continuity despite the complexity inherent to each period. Let us examine this complexity in two paradigmatic life courses.

## **A Public Sociology in Search of a Historical Reason**

Florestan Fernandes was a member of the first generation of academic intellectuals who graduated under the influence of French teachers at the University of São Paulo (USP), a college designed by São Paulo's liberal elites to be South America's major scientific centre, with a major philosophy course and European teachers. During the 1940s, a few members of this new intellectual movement affirmed their intellectual *autonomy* against the amateurism and irreverence of the previous generation; the false erudition of individualistic elites; and widespread social conservatism. They placed rigorous formation in specialized competences in opposition to the superfluosity and weakness of the national culture, and the progressive and emancipationist nature of rational analysis to the conformism of Brazilian society. Florestan Fernandes' sociology aligns itself with this radical formulation of the intellectual's role, where valuing the independence of methodical thought was a requirement for the rational analysis of social change.

Since his first works (when he was still a graduate student in the 1940s) on São Paulo folklore and on the expressions of 'colour prejudice' in traditional Brazilian culture, the focus of his sociology was the 'problem of social integration' from the perspective of a national society effectively inserted in modern civilization (see Fernandes, 1979). The theme was social change, and his material came from social groups living in the 'metropolis-city' (see Fernandes, 1974), discussing how their relations, representations and practices could (or could not) change the structures of an extremely conservative society.

Florestan Fernandes 'built himself' through his academic career, being recognized as a scholar after his works on Tupinambá,<sup>3</sup> the functionalist method and sociological theory. These works presented a hard-science style for the social sciences, starting from what was clearly an *intellectual* orientation: the defence of strict academic patterns with a remarkably strong public and moral dimension, in a civilizing sense. As a sociology teacher at the São Paulo University, Florestan followed the same idea: the university must promote a *rigorous* foundation as a necessary condition to a *rooted* scientific development, the only development that could completely explore the best potentialities of reason. In his integrated view, he defended the academic training of teachers, researchers and technicians,

the three being equally necessary to a full materialization of the functions of social sciences in modern Brazilian society (see Fernandes, 1978a).

In 1954, as holder of the sociology chair, Florestan Fernandes formulated a research programme on social change in Brazil, to be accomplished with the team of students later to be known as the 'São Paulo School of Sociology'. Studying entrepreneurs, industrial workers, blacks and the state, they examined the ways in which the pro-slavery upper-class social order incorporated the capitalist regime, generating the 'Brazilian social dilemma', the 'sociopathic' attitude of the elites, which resisted integration of the social layers excluded from the market and from citizenship.

At that moment, this diagnosis of the challenges to the development of a class society in Brazil confirmed the idea of the civilizing function of sociological science. According to Florestan, the development of human sciences created conditions for rationalizing the historical dimensions of reality, by examining the non-rational grounds for action (that reproduce exploitation, dominance and alienation among people) and pointing out the possibility of overcoming the gap between technical progress and humanity's moral progress (see Fernandes, 1976a). However, social sciences did not deal with everyday social problems, thus narrowing their limits, while change processes were regarded as taking place outside rational control, compromising the attainment of modern ideals like justice and freedom.

Against this situation he advocated an 'integral theory of science', in which theory, research and application appeared as interdependent stages of a complex process of perception, explanation and transformation of reality, including the 'processes of deliberately-provoked social change' (see Fernandes, 1976b). For Florestan Fernandes, there was no doubt that the emergence of sociology was linked to the social-cultural needs of the class society. But 'how could it satisfy those needs, without at the same time contributing to modifying the conditions of human existence, investigated by it?' (Fernandes, 1976b: 121). Hence, the scientist's social function in the present was to create knowledge within his or her specific work field *and* to openly defend moral and material conditions for the production of rational knowledge, acting as a dynamic agent for institutional innovation.

In fact, in the early 1960s, Florestan was intensely engaged in the Campaign for the Defence of the Public School, giving lectures nationwide on behalf of the republican ideals of universal, public and free education. According to him, as 'intellectual participants' in the social movement, sociologists act as citizens and as scientists, working for the rationalization of the ways in which we conceptualize and organize the world (see Fernandes, 1976a, 1976b). On another front, in the Centre for Industrial Sociology and Labour (Centro de Sociologia Industrial e do

Trabalho – CESIT), founded in 1962 with funding from the state and business associations, he coordinated a research project on underdevelopment and industrialization in São Paulo. From then on, the theory of 'structural dependence of underdeveloped countries' pointed in the direction of a revolution against the established order, unlike the previous period, which had been aligned to revolutionary progress within the competitive social order of the bourgeois class society (Fernandes, 1978b).

In truth, after the political movement for basic reforms in the country came the military dictatorship in 1964, confirming the diagnosis of the São Paulo sociologists and at the same time imposing a brutal blow on the radical aspirations held by USP's generation of critical intellectuals. In opposing authoritarianism, Florestan Fernandes defined a 'critical and militant sociology' as the pattern for intellectual action in underdeveloped countries, starting with an organic articulation of the analysis of objective reality, and including participation in transforming actions (see Fernandes, 1977).

In 1969, he was among those expelled from the university by the military government. Outside the academy, disenchanted with the directions taken by professional sociology, he devoted himself to studying socialism, thus starting his 'political period' oriented to a Marxist perspective. As set out in *The Bourgeois Revolution in Brazil*, first published in 1975, the model of autocratic bourgeois countries in a dependent condition under the dominance of international capitalism multiplies exclusion and poverty, inequality and authoritarianism, stimulating the most retrograde development (Fernandes, 2005).

The ideal of rationalizing social life continued to define the perspective of most analyses produced during that period, in books, articles, lectures and speeches. Therefore, Fernandes modelled his political practice after the PT, the National Congress and popular social movements. According to him (Fernandes, 1980), the problem was that monopolist capitalism took hold of scientific and technological knowledge, blocking reason's more dynamic trends. The result was the 'technicality of science', its subordination to the dictates of exploitation and the taming of any radical potential. In such a scenario, therefore, socialism emerges as the only stronghold of emancipating reason, the only perspective that can still project the historical realization of the modern promise of humanity conquering its destiny.

## **A Critical Sociology in Modern Brazil and Beyond**

The intellectual course of Francisco de Oliveira, the most important Brazilian sociologist of present times, follows a professional and institutional path that is very individualist and winding (and therefore very interesting), a path that is closely connected to Brazilian history over the last 40 years. This path begins with SUDENE,<sup>4</sup> in the northeastern area of

the country, in the early 1960s; he soon relocated at the end of the decade to the centre-south to be part of an NGO, CEBRAP,<sup>5</sup> created during the dictatorship period (1964–85), initially to shelter intelligentsia persecuted by the dictatorship's exceptional laws (*atos institucionais de exceção*).

In CEBRAP, legitimation of the professional practice was essential to justify the forcefully imposed restriction of access to academic jobs, the job style most familiar to intellectuals. From this point on, there was an ongoing effort to add to the strictness learned in universities a wider sensitivity to the demands of institutions that could be called, although imperfectly (due to the preponderance of censorship and political authoritarianism of the period), civil society institutions. Although not coming from a university, but from a planning governmental organ, Francisco de Oliveira was soon integrated into the professional side of Brazilian sociology.

It was in this context that, a few years later (mid-1970s), he took part in the reorganization of political-party life, still undergoing imposed bipartisanship, when significant CEBRAP intellectuals provided theoretical and programmatic support to the only permitted opposition party, the MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement) and, a little later, in the creation of the PT in 1980. Francisco de Oliveira took an active part in Lula's first presidential campaign, in 1989, as a militant-intellectual. On the occasion of the second defeat of the same candidate, in 1994, he was part of the PT's shadow cabinet. Finally, after 2000, disenchantment with the political direction of the party drove him to withdraw from direct political support and to opt for public intellectual critique through the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television), in addition to the publishing market identified with the academic world *sensu stricto*.

That particular course broadly followed the ideal-typical pattern of sociological practice that Burawoy called, respectively, policy, professional, critical and public sociology. One should note, however, that this is a somewhat arbitrary stylization for someone like Francisco de Oliveira. For instance, critical sociology was never, in his case, a stage in a chronological sequence (as if it came to light only at the end), but a continuing aspect of his career. In fact, this is also a characteristic that is peculiar to the Brazilian destiny since, due to odd historical circumstances, sociological practices such as policy and professional each had at its own time and for several reasons (SUDENE and CEBRAP) an openly critical attitude (critical of underdevelopment, in the first case; and of the authoritarian regime, in the second), so that it becomes impossible to dissociate them from critical sociology, at least when the sociologist's course was under way.

First of all, policy sociology, in the case of SUDENE, opposed the more scholarly and quite formal style of practising social sciences, since this style was detached from the political issues of national development, and was associated with populism and a damaging subordination to the state

apparatus. Second, in the case of CEBRAP, during the dictatorship period the exercise of sociology was strongly restricted in terms of its themes, besides being associated with 'subversion'. Due to particular characteristics of this kind, Brazilian policy and professional sociology, each at its own time, adopted 'radical' postures in response to these obstacles to their development as a specific format for practising sociology, in the first case by forcing the inclusion of themes of public relevance (development, regional planning, etc.) and in the second by struggling against the closure of horizons and of the possibilities for social research.

The particular course followed by Francisco de Oliveira traversed these two sociological moments, adding to contemporary intellectual discourse the Marxist component brought from his individual formation. We may speak of a public use of Marxism that avoided its appropriation by local leftist parties and associations, whether communist and its 'dissenters', or Trotskyite, Maoist, Luxemburgist, socialist and others, while competing with several versions of the organized parties. In the 1970s, his *Critique of the Dualistic Thought* (*Crítica à razão dualista*) circulated almost like a pamphlet (in spite of the density of the text), among organizations, clandestine supporting groups and the student movement, and was part of the pedagogic formation of political militants (Oliveira, 1981).

In Francisco de Oliveira's development, however, it is essential to underline the modality of critical sociology as compared to other types of sociology, such as policy, professional and public. This is a rare case of public sociology being an *opinion* that is not pragmatically linked to any party, NGO or collective non-confessional association, although it was able to supply argumentative ammunition to any of them. The designation for this sort of person is certainly *an intellectual*; as distinct from a teacher (academic), a researcher (professional) or an employee (policy). In contemporary times, the exercise of this type of public sociology is represented by the essay 'The Duckbilled Platypus' (*O ornitorrinco*) (Oliveira, 2003).

Let us examine some topical aspects of Oliveira's intellectual course. His participation as a high-level SUDENE executive on the eve of the 1964 coup illustrates the connection between policy and critical sociology. SUDENE intended to intervene in a rational way, that is through planning, in the area that presented (and still presents) the more unfavourable social indicators of the country. The northeast is the Mezzogiorno of Brazilians. And CEPAL (the Economic Commission for Latin America) is the institution that would provide the key to understanding the performance of SUDENE during the period. CEPAL's theory on the development of Latin American economies is the local version of modernization theory. It is unique in the abstract formulation of a process of social modernization that conforms to sociological tradition because it begins with the internal situation of countries that were, until the beginning of the Second

World War, in an adverse position in the international division of labour. This was the central problem from which CEPAL started and the one that, later radicalized, led to the appearance of theories of dependence (see Oliveira, 1977, 1989).

We would also like to point out another aspect of the process just described, occurring between the 1980s and 1990s: the frequent collaboration with NGOs in Rio de Janeiro (FASE,<sup>6</sup> IBASE<sup>7</sup>) and São Paulo (Institute Polis), all dedicated to the study, follow-up and advising of social movements in major urban centres, including the union movement (the Unique Workers' Centre). A significant piece of research carried out in the early 1990s on the tripartite agreement between the ABC Metallurgists' Union, the Union of Builders of Self-Propelled Vehicles and the state, known as the 'Tripartite Committee', represented a milestone in the study of industrial relations at the time, since it theorized the possibility of social consultation and cooperation during crises as well as productive restructuring of the manufacturing industry (see Oliveira, 1998).

The recent hypertrophy of public sociology in the case of Francisco de Oliveira is undoubtedly related to the settling down of the intellectual field after the victory of the PT in 2002 and the consequent convergence of its economic policies with those established by its predecessor and rival, the Brazilian Social Democrat Party (PSDB). Once again, it is impossible to separate public from critical sociology, the latter being very distant from a strictly academic approach (see Oliveira, 2005).

## Conclusion

This report is too brief to develop Francisco de Oliveira's strictly theoretical topics. We have attempted to show that the sociologist's particular course can be found, although in a problematic and rebellious way, in the ideal-typical terms of the modalities of sociological practice that the field offers its practitioners. In the same way, we cannot fully outline Florestan Fernandes' theoretical theses. However, it is nothing but remarkable how sociological practice in both trajectories was able to permeate the four sociology modalities defined by Burawoy, all converging towards public sociology.

Perhaps this illustrates the measure in which Burawoy's classification may contribute to understanding the history of the discipline, and the history of the discipline may help us to appreciate the ingenuity of the classification proposed by Burawoy *for our time*. This is because of the way it shines a light on the possibilities of sociological imagination that certain strong trends in contemporary professionalization risk rendering invisible or even partially forgotten. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, in spite of its rudimentary stage, the debate concerning public sociology has the right conditions to prosper in Brazil.

## Notes

1. Many people might argue that, in fact, the most important living Brazilian sociologist is Fernando Henrique Cardoso. However, we are referring to sociologists *who act as sociologists* and not professional politicians.
2. We will not develop this topic, since it seems to us that Burawoy himself has offered sufficiently convincing arguments to rebut the essential part of that criticism (see, for instance, Burawoy, 2005b).
3. The Tupi ethnic groups that lived in the Brazilian coast at the time of colonization.
4. The Bureau for Northeastern Development, a regional planning organ created by law on 15 December 1959.
5. The Brazilian Analysis and Planning Centre, which was founded in 1969, in São Paulo, by a group of intellectuals expelled from their positions at the university.
6. Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional (Federation of Organizations for Social and Educational Assistance).
7. Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis).

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