

Commentary

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'Open the social sciences: To whom and for what?', by Michael Burawoy

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Abstract

This text tries to demonstrate that Portuguese sociology has been built on a set of virtuous relations between four poles of sociological activity: the theoretical problematisation pole, the observational research pole, the reflexivity pole and the professionalisation pole. It is suggested that this specific dynamic was favoured by a series of political-institutional and organisational conditions (the dominance of a critical/applied rationalism in university training, the active role of the Portuguese Sociological Association in the promotion of a creative interaction between academics and 'field professionals', the political engagement of Portuguese sociologists, the relatively successful opening-up of the labour market to professionally trained sociologists, etc.) The text is, of course, punctuated with comments – largely concordant, but sometimes critical – on Michael Burawoy's theses about the evolution and specificity of Portuguese sociology and the need to re-invent public sociology and reformulate the scientific agenda of the discipline.

I

Portuguese sociology started to take shape as a project of autonomous disciplinary affirmation about 40 years ago. The argument that will be developed here, in close dialogue with the positions taken by Michael Burawoy on the same issue, is that if this project had been achieved with a significant degree of overall success, this was due to a set of circumstances which can be analysed by means of the relations indicated in Figure 1 below.¹

The vertices of the square represent four poles of activity which, interacting with one another in the form of a virtuous tension, have in our view stimulated a qualifying dynamic in the field of Portuguese sociology. They are:

1. the *theoretical problematisation pole* (T), representing the set of efforts which, in the scientific domain in question, seek to encourage theoretical updating and discussion in a systematic way;

Keywords

Portuguese sociology
Portuguese
sociological
association
applied rationalism
public sociology
social intervention
sociological training

* The commentary status of this article meant that its author could not develop more fully some angles of the evolution of Portuguese sociology, which could have better accommodated the positions supported here. For a more thorough study, see (Pinto 2007, Chap. II), which includes the analysis of Michael Burawoy's theses on the need to

formulate the scientific agenda of sociology (Burawoy 2005).

The fact that Michael Burawoy himself frequently makes use of this kind of graphic devices in his texts was an incentive to opt for this solution.

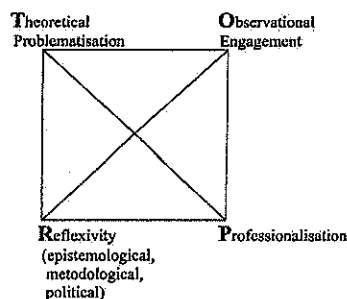


Figure 1: Activity dynamics grid.

4. the *professionalisation pole* (P), over-determined by the demands of social intervention in relatively circumscribed 'practical' contexts and in contact with specific 'lay publics'.

From the standpoint of scientific progress in sociology, we consider that rather than developing each of these poles independently, it is above all important to create conditions prone to exploring on a permanent basis the *connections* they can establish with one another. Such conditions will include, as we shall see, both the dissemination of predispositions and intellectual instruments of a certain kind, and a series of political-institutional and organisational requisites.

II

The TO and OT vectors represent two fundamental components of scientific work and together they correspond to what Michael Burawoy regards as the distinctive outlines of *professional sociology* (academic sociology), taken as the place which guarantees the sustainable affirmation of a specific scientific point of view and the institutional consolidation of a discipline.

The TO relation represents the epistemological principle which in Portuguese sociology has been termed, coherently with its critical perspective on the empiricist model of knowledge, the command function of theory in scientific research. Meanwhile, the reciprocal relation (OT vector) indicates the demand – which is also a genetic mark and persistent ambition of the 'scientific spirit' – to confront interpretative hypotheses raised by the movement of theoretical problematisation with the results of observational research of real social situations.

This engagement in controlled systematic observational tasks has been one of the most important factors in the development of Portuguese sociology, not just because it involves the 'progressive' reformulation of theoretical frames of reference (countering the 'normalising' tendency of paradigmatic affirmation), but because it is a sort of reserve ready to act against formalist theoreticism. The fact that research on concrete situations has been instituted in Portuguese universities as an essential condition for earning academic degrees and gaining scientific credit has

2. the *observational research pole* (O), relating to the analysis of concrete social situations through theoretically and methodologically informed procedures for gathering and processing empirical information;
3. the *reflexivity pole* (R), embracing critical and self-critical questioning on positions of principle and foundations of the methodological-theoretical options and technical operations required by sociological work;

undoubtedly played a significant role in ensuring that the movement represented by the vector in question has been in effective operation in Portuguese sociology for decades.

III

It is widely agreed by authors engaged in the analysis of the origins of the institutionalisation of Portuguese sociology that its protagonists participated and invested strongly in the epistemological debate (always political, to some extent) which, since the mid-1960s particularly, agitated the field of the social sciences as a whole. It has equally been noted in what measure this 'virtue' actually arose out of 'necessity' (as so often occurs in social life); in this case, in a country without sociology there was a need for the group of candidate sociologists (coming from a wide diversity of disciplinary areas) to promptly and justifiably reconvert their original university training.

Having adopted a highly critical perspective in relation to the principles and procedures of a predominantly empiricist nature (then still very much ingrained in this field of knowledge) and unreservedly accepting that the scientific approach of social phenomena always contains a reference to values and never exempts itself from the effects of partly insurmountable theoretical-ideological conflicts, the heritage of reflections which was being consolidated from this time (RT and RO vectors) found fertile ground for dissemination among apprentices and practitioners of sociology, first at graduate level and afterwards in postgraduate university courses.

Critical rationalism, as an epistemological model and as a practical principle for producing knowledge, managed to assert itself as dominant stream, notwithstanding the influence that 'post-modernist' hypercriticism, and, at the other extreme, some positivist manifestations came to exert in certain sectors of Portuguese sociology. On the other hand, an (epistemologically non-ingenuous) opening-up to theoretical pluralism was being imposed on the domestic scientific community, and this was still anchored in the 'cultural goodwill' of the first apprentices.

The rate at which several works on epistemology and methodology, guided simultaneously by the critique of empiricism and a prudent demarcation *vis-à-vis* hypercriticism, are being republished is in itself a fair indicator of the degree of dissemination of the 'automatisms of reflexivity' (even if there is in this expression a contradiction in terms) in the sociological practice of successive generations of Portuguese sociologists. But to make a deeper assessment of the virtuous effects of these automatisms, it is worthwhile to bear in mind the agility with which extensive and intensive analytical methodologies intersect in Portuguese sociology – the former, particularly prone to characterising the structural conditionings of social practices, and the latter, close to the ethnographic observation pole, more able to highlight relevant details and singularities.

Accepting this view leads us to believe, in light of the distinction proposed by Michael Burawoy in the lecture commented on here, that in Portugal

critical sociology has been somewhat subsumed and embedded in *professional* (academic) *sociology*. It has therefore lost some of its useful meaning as an autonomous arena for sociological production. We could go even further, and say that it is precisely because of its mode of acting *in practice*, that is to say, as an operator of sociologists' professional *habitus*, both in the theoretical discussion and above all in observational research, that the critical perspective in sociology has become really effective. The TR and OR vectors (symmetrical to the previous ones) represent precisely the containment effect of the 'abstract' hypercriticism made possible by (critically embedded) sociological practice. They also indicate why the agenda of the critique of sociology is still essentially marked among us by (tacitly critical . . .) academic sociology.

IV

Another pertinent, and to some extent, original, aspect of Portuguese sociology is undoubtedly the connection and reciprocal interaction, which occur between the academic world and professional practice in (extra-academic) organisations, in which the aims of social intervention tend to surpass those of scientific interpretation/validation.

The adjustment between these two worlds is represented in the square by the OP/PO and TP/PT vectors. It is due, as Michael Burawoy properly notes, to the importance reached early on in shaping the field of sociology, by the characterisation and promotion (mostly through the Portuguese Sociological Association) of a professional culture among sociologists as a culture that associated 'science' and 'practice'. The popularity of postgraduate training among 'professionals' has also operated in favour of the convergence of working interests and environments mentioned earlier.

V

The reflexivity pole (R), in its essentially methodological and meta-theoretical components (reflexive knowledge directed overwhelmingly at academic audiences, that is, *critical knowledge* according to Burawoy), has always been responsible for establishing certain criteria to protect scientific work from coarse bias (here, every adjective is in a sense inadequate, and has to be considered in relation to what the results of scientific practice indicate as provisionally acceptable in the corresponding field of knowledge). But there is nothing to stop it from also playing an active role in the definition – subject to public scrutiny, and not only to the one of experts and peers – of the relevant domains (problems) to be appropriately explored by scientific work (*public knowledge*).

But if the idea can be ventured here that Portuguese sociology exhibits some comparative advantages in relation to other national contexts, then this is because it has, from the very start, 'naturally' incorporated into its normal activity (particularly in mainstream academic sociology) both the *political* dimension of reflexivity and an open-minded nearing to the specificities of *social intervention* (P).

As already suggested, the professionalisation pole of Portuguese sociology is characterised by more than the fact that it has been constituted as an informed repository of academic knowledge (represented by TP and OP vectors). Indeed, it has also contributed positively to the reformulation of the theoretical agenda of the discipline (renewal of the relevant '*sociological problems*') and of the answers to questions on the meaning of sociological knowledge – '*sociology: to whom and for what?*'

All the limitations that social intervention professionals have to cope with are known. These limitations arise largely from the need to find urgent answers, 'on the ground', to extremely complicated situations of social dysfunction, whose structural causes are 'remote' and to some degree 'inevitable'. Even so, it must be stressed that, when it concerns the active involvement of professionals who keep fairly strong links with the centres of sociological academic production and reflexivity, the professional work of sociologists can give important contributions to scientific advancement. Particularly, it can allow the public statement of social problems bereft of any audible spokesperson, and thereby enable the identification of innovative lines of theoretical problematisation (PT), the revision of the accumulated empirical knowledge about societies (PO) and even the critique of the 'abstract' hypercriticism of certain sociological reflexivity exercises (PR).

But the 'entry' of *public knowledge* into the square of Portuguese sociology has not been achieved via the professionalisation pole alone. It has also come about, as has been mentioned in passing already, from the way the political dimension of reflexivity was incorporated early on into the regular activity of producing knowledge aimed basically at peers. Having made its appearance in an intellectual context in which the wish to question, sociologically, the social reality was an almost obvious extension of the wish to put the dictatorship in check, virtually no issue on the embryonic sociological agenda in the early 1970s escaped some form of politicisation.

Marxism, as both an analytical tool and as an instrument of systematic criticism of the explicit or implicit assumptions of the sociological frameworks prevailing at the time, was undeniably the most widely disseminated ingredient of the politicised stance – and consequently open to public discussion on the meaning and ethical-political relevance of its knowledge content – which Portuguese sociology adopted since its birth. And the fact that, contrary to what happened in other national contexts, the presence of Marxism in the university teaching of sociology remained and spread (albeit indirectly, through other theoretical frameworks: critical theory, theory of practice, etc.) has ensured that the discipline still retains a measure of analytical-interpretative non-conformism (in light of the inevitable trends towards paradigmatic standardisation appearing in the field) in how Portuguese society and the proper position of sociology as an instrument of intervention and social change are thought about.

VI

Contrary to what the internalist visions of the history of science suggest, there is no production of scientific knowledge that is led in a social vacuum – that is, completely immune to the logic of restrictions or incentives of a financial-economic nature, to the influence of ideological assumptions, albeit implicit, or to the interplay of relatively dissimulated political interests. In fact, none of the operations in concrete scientific activity is sheltered from the influence of 'external' factors.

Keeping a constant eye on the positions of Michael Burawoy, we have already pinpointed in this paper a certain number of *political, institutional and organisational conditions* that favoured (or at least did not impede) a sustainable 'virtuous' development of sociology in Portugal. Let us turn them more explicit.

One of those 'exogenous' determinants refers to the nature of sociological training at graduate level, almost always organised around solid learning in the spheres of theory, epistemological reflection and the methodology of observational research. With the replication of such a demanding model at postgraduate level, it has been possible to reproduce a set of research procedures *and* professional routines globally inspired by an 'applied rationalism' adaptable to the specificities and great changeability of Portugal's social reality.

The role of the Portuguese Sociological Association (APS) is another institutional ingredient which may be taken in account when we deal with the specificity of the field of Portuguese sociology. A high proportion of academics and professionals are members of this organisation, which regularly invites them to discuss the various implications and difficulties of sociological work at well-attended conferences or seminars.

Another factor favouring the development of Portuguese sociology concerns the opening-up of the labour market to professionally trained sociologists: hard at first, but afterwards relatively successful. Contrary to the somewhat pessimistic forecasts, employability in this area has in fact remained at acceptable levels from the mid 1980s to the start of the new century. The factors that helped here were access to European funds linked to social intervention programmes, plus, later on, the political option of national and local governments to broaden the spectrum of measures and policies directed towards the building of a welfare state, at the time still highly incipient, and, finally, the creation of a demand for sociological knowledge based on movements and institutions of 'civil society', itself in expansion due to the democratisation process underway in Portugal.

Another of the forces that Portuguese sociology can rely on is the consolidation of its research apparatus, at first closely linked to the university system, but which has subsequently achieved a significant degree of emancipation. Having started early on by seeking spontaneous paths of internationalisation (initially based on a desire for theoretical updating not confined to any of the hegemonic centres of international sociological

production), this apparatus is today organically connected to foreign networks and research centres 'of excellence'.

This aspect is more encouraging the better sociology knows how to use it without losing sight of the requirement to analyse Portuguese society in all its specificity. Once again, both observational engagement and the opening up to reflexivity that have been a feature of Portuguese sociology can interact virtuously – now so as to ensure, as required of sciences that have to face the historically situated character of their objects, the compatibility of analytical instruments of 'universal reach' with others capable of restoring specifically concrete social combinations (that are, to a certain extent, always unique).

VII: a final and very brief comment

Nothing guarantees that the ('exogenous') conditions that have been the creative force behind the TOPR square will remain stable and keep intervening in Portuguese society.

It is not certain, in the first place, that the graduate and postgraduate training model for sociologists adopted by Portuguese universities in the wake of the Bologna Process will ensure such consistent learning as was achieved in the first decades as the discipline developed. Dominated in practice by motives of 'employability' and 'mobility' (terms defined much more in the register of the stereotype than in that of the sociological reflexivity), this model may be at risk of compromising not only the preparation of sociologists for the tasks of developing and renewing the paradigmatic guidelines of the field, as is more obvious, but also the actual fundamental training for a demanding professionalisation.

If we further agree that, with the generalisation of neo-liberal views even within the ideological world of social-democracy, the opportunities for employment and sociologically demanding social intervention in the state apparatus will decline steadily, then it is foreseeable that the Portuguese sociology square will become more and more permeable to disqualifying logics. With greater reason, it is legitimate to expect that the 'breathing space' introduced by the reflexivity pole in this square will be reduced.

In these circumstances, everything suggests that the mediating role of APS in the qualification of the Portuguese sociological field will find itself increasingly under threat. And maybe we will find in the future that the discussions about how to gain and legitimate a certifiable professional status at European level will prevail over the initiatives which encourage the virtues of the culture of association between academics and professional sociologists.

Are we on the path to a new era for Portuguese sociology?

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