



Sociological theory in Brazil today: challenges and possible directions

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to briefly assess the state of sociological theory today, also specifically referring to Brazil. This is instrumental especially in identifying problems as well as paths and solutions that can be followed and developed in order to strengthen a fundamental area of research that, in recent decades, has declined or become paralyzed, also in Brazil, here even before having been consolidated. Structure and action, modernity, history and evolution, 'nature,' environment and climate change, against the backdrop of an epistemological conception that discards the idea of metatheory in favor of the concept of general theory: these are the topics around which it develops. At the end, the either given or possible critical character of sociological theory is discussed, as well as the reasons for its contemporary decline or paralysis.

Keywords: sociological theory, Brazil, structure and action, modernity, evolution and history, nature and climate change

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Introduction

It is worth starting by asking: what can we say today about sociological theory, a research area that has largely slid into recession in recent decades and in which we at best now find epigones or rather vague works? The production of sociological theory once constituted a field of enormous prestige, despite disbelief or antipathy toward it by many sociologists rather or exclusively inclined to empirical research. Great respect surrounded sociological theory, whether in the universe of the formally established sociological discipline, in which Talcott Parsons shined as the greater figure, though accompanied by many other authors, from Robert K. Merton to symbolic interactionism; or in the parallel but somehow interconnected universe of Marxism, with its various strands, from Hegelianism to structuralism. Some have once supposed – following in the footsteps of Jeffrey Alexander (1982) – that sociological theory would indeed be a kind of queen within sociology. Cybernetics, culturalism, and metaphysics – with their ‘metatheory,’ a neo-Kantian perspective in which concepts move on their own – thus appeared as disconnected from empirical research and from what Merton called ‘middle-range theories,’ an understanding never embraced by Parsons, a theorist always extremely concerned with the interaction between theory and the various fields of sociological research, who even had in-depth epistemological investigations on the subject in his first great work (Parsons, 1937/1966). What he elaborated and we must keep seeking – and what, in their turn, several Marxists have also pursued – was a general sociological theory whose generality does not neglect empirical research, neither as to its inputs nor regarding how it reacts to that.

The development of what has come to be called social theory – as such interdisciplinary –, and the legacy of critical theory – generally formulated by philosophers, albeit concerned with sociology, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, all of them somehow drawing on Karl Marx –, combined also with sociological theory, have partly accentuated this tendency that, nevertheless, was not exclusive. Even the movement that Alexander defined as the ‘theoretical syntheses’ of the 1970s and 1980s was not necessarily detached from concerns for and linkage with empirical research, whether in the curious and fruitless discussion about the connection between the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ spheres (a problematic

legacy from Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism – though not from Georg H. Mead –, from the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, Erving Goffman's research and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology), or in Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and Pierre Bourdieu's 'structurism' (them both sociologists who were strongly rooted in the discipline, despite their forays, especially of the former, into social theory), and even in the work of Habermas, who however has partly emphasized the notion of interaction, later borrowed by his student Axel Honneth (in the 'struggle for recognition,' important in the work of Georg W. F. Hegel and Marx).

The movement of synthesis, however, has come to its end with questionable results (as I will try to show later) for reiterating discussions that reached understandable though unnecessary impasses. Some attempted a 'relational sociology' (as if it were something new, which was by no means the case – not to mention their appropriation of discussions taking place in the discipline as its adventitious proponents developed their basic theses), or a 'critical realism' that reproduced the ills of both individualism and so-called 'collectivism,' with a weak dialectics connecting them, and mixing what can be called the ontic and ontological domains of social life (that is, the obvious dynamics of the constitution of social life through its succession in a fixed time and the understanding of its relational and interactive constitution as such). More recently, in France, a neopragmatist trend – sometimes rather theoretical although confused in its methods, sometimes conceptually meager – presents itself as a substitute for sociological theory, though hardly succeeding in this aim, since it restricts its field of inquiry, research strategies and conceptual results. Niklas Luhmann's theory has its adherents, given its strong autopoietic closure, but it is difficult to know how much it can be advanced, since the master seems to have taken it so completely and unilaterally far, or how it could, while maintaining its strong premises, dialogue with other sociological currents. In turn, the theory of rational choice, despite advances with Gary Becker and James Coleman, has never taken strong roots in sociological theory because, although it is true that strategic behavior permeates the entirety of social life, it is in the economic and political dimensions of modernity that it becomes stronger, partly justifying the interest of the disciplines that specifically study them in adopting this approach, even though, in the wave of neoliberalism, economists are increasingly dominating the study of public policies.

In short, the theoretical field heralds no promising outlook, which is compounded by problems of a more general nature, as I will point out later. That said, what to do? In Brazil, some of these currents are reproduced, with few results – and generally without referring to the production of those who have made and are making theory in Brazil, from Florestan Fernandes to Gabriel Cohn and Renato Ortiz, among others, although Alberto Guerreiro Ramos has sometimes received some attention. Latin American dialogues are even less mobilized.¹ Marxists insist on analyzing Marx in detail, Weberians and Durkheimians are fewer, but they do not stray from this strategy regarding their own favorite authors, while, except for certain works in the wake of French neopragmatism, what is generally found are commentaries on foreign authors. Perhaps more interesting are some efforts to combine empirical research and theory, although these have lacked a methodologically systematic approach. Undoubtedly, here and there we see discussions that attempt to introduce postcolonial and decolonial theories in Brazil (even the use ‘decolonial’ in Portuguese, instead of the vernacular ‘descolonial’ expresses certain affectation of the import), without generally paying attention to Latin American sociology from the 1950s to 1970s, except in part for the dependency theory of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Rui Mauro Marini, Theotonio dos Santos, Orlando Caputo and Vania Bambira (the theories of ‘marginality’ and ‘internal colonialism’ were less successful). But just as theory with these perspectives has not been actually produced anywhere, neither here, at least until now, has this been the case. Decline and paralysis characterize research in sociological theory today; among us, further reiterating a chronic lack of intellectual autonomy.

Writing about sociological theory and proposing paths forward, however, feels a bit strange for someone who has been doing this – in practice – for 40 years, in various areas. My own published works bear witness to this. I will inevitably refer to them in what follows, though trying not to do so too

¹ As it is known, the unavoidable debate on theoretical production in Latin America took place between Alberto Guerreiro Ramos (1958/2024), Florestan Fernandes (1958) and Gino Germani (1964). The first firmly trusted the immersion in our empirical reality, via cognitively purifying phenomenological epoché; the second, while producing highly sophisticated works in this area, confident in the maturation of Latin American sociology and producing high-level theory, contradictorily left theory to future generations (Fernandes, 1967/1980); the third, in turn, bet on the maturation of Latin American sociology so that it could adequately produce theory.

intensely.² The ideas will indeed be present as the various traditional – and non-traditional – fields of sociological theory are addressed. Problems and impasses, solutions and innovative paths will be discussed in order to dispel false questions and old, repetitive solutions. In this sense, this article takes the form of an essay, basically ‘reflective’ (a buzzword for a few decades) rather than a systematic literature review, which is otherwise very limited these days. It does not aim to confront what exists in national production, but rather to raise issues seen as theoretically most relevant. The challenges and promising research areas will be presented following each line of argument that is critically developed throughout the text.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that I believe that sociological theory – like sociology in general and, even more so, the social sciences as a whole – must be conceived from the perspective of an ‘epistemological break’ with common sense (Bachelard, 1938/ 1993). In this respect, it should be distinguished from pre-scientific works that deal with social issues, however interesting they may be (when they are), contrary to what is implied today. Thus, letters, travel accounts and observations, or newspaper articles may be of interest. Nor should one dismiss the concern with ‘social problems’ and critical efforts within sociological theory as it relates to modernity. First and foremost, however, it should be borne in mind that what concerns us is – or should be – a *scientific endeavor*, wherever it is carried out and regardless of the subject or agent that carries it out. We must reject condescension of any kind, what does not imply disregarding the fact that scientific standpoints are also, in a complex way, socially rooted. Any other consideration must, in this regard, be discarded when dealing with this topic or carrying out our investigations.

Structure and action

A theme that became established in sociological theory is one that has been problematically defined as referring to the relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘action,’ or, in other words, between the chicken and the egg. What comes first, society or the individual, or more technically, the social system/structure or

² More directly related to sociological theory, I would like to highlight the following publications: Domingues, 1995, 1999/2000, 2001, 2002/2006, 2008, 2012, 2018, 2022, 2024 and 2025a. Anyway, discussions of social theory are present in all my articles, chapters and books. Many of the themes and authors discussed in this article are also treated in detail in this bibliography.

the actor? Countless pages have been written to answer this at once central and puerile question. Central because in the ‘presuppositional’ universe of modernity since the 17th century, the opposition or complementarity between these two poles – the individual and the society or the state – has populated the social imaginary, as we can see in intellectually elaborated works by authors such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Johann Gottfried Herder. Prior to and beyond philosophy and the nascent social sciences, the modern imaginary had them implanted in its heart, with bourgeois ideologies – especially the subjective natural law and the idea of a social pact to create and control the state, as well as a proto-organicist conception of society – spreading throughout social life and impregnating its systematic intellectual expressions, which in turn fed back into them. Sociology was born with this polarity at its core, a question whose exponents were supposedly Herbert Spencer (and then Max Weber) and Émile Durkheim, inaugurating a reiterated inquiry that provides answers with variations, generally limited. It is true that a tradition of communitarian Protestantism – very strong in the emerging United States, with Charles Colley and Mead – placed interaction at the center of social theory. Following Hegel’s lead, Karl Marx and Georg Simmel also emphasized it, suggesting a dialectic between individual and society, as well as a conception of collective agents, especially in Marx, not quite specified in a general theoretical perspective. Such dialectic is what Marxists generally retained, emphasizing one pole or the other and leaving in the shadows his most original solutions – interaction, which appears reified in *Capital* via the commodity, and collective agents, classes, generally treated only substantively, as Marx himself did.

Obviously, the chicken and the egg are produced in succession (in the very short as well as in the very long duration of social life). But, if such an intuition was relevant when Marx proposed it, today it is a mere truism (as in Archer, 1995). One does not precede the other. More importantly, if we recall György Lukács’s (1984) ontology of social being, Marx’s crucial original innovation was going beyond the individual in theorizing about social life (absorbed by Simmel and others who followed him in the United States) and, above all a notion of ‘substance’ originating from metaphysics. The latter being clearly visible in Durkheim’s concept of ‘social fact,’ which spread throughout structuralism and functionalism, with many not even

realizing how they reproduce the ontologically metaphysical notion, what, furthermore, is reproduced in the conception of an essentialized individual (as if he or she were a monadological substance). It is the interactively constituted social relations that weave social life, as Mead and symbolic interactionism, even though the latter has exaggeratingly radicalized its fluidity, perceived and made explicit (in which they were implicitly followed, finally, by Parsons). At this point, it is therefore necessary to abandon the truism of the chicken and the egg and move forward – in fact, beyond what the theoretical syntheses have reached, since they largely reproduced that old polarization, which has once again proven its presuppositional strength. It is a matter of embracing the notion of *process*, which unfolds, constitutes interactions and social relations and is constituted in and by them.³ This is true as regards the individual as an agent, but also with regard to what I have called *collective subjectivities*, which should not, however, be treated as large individuals, since their levels of (de)centralization are variable (depending on the firmness of their decision-making centers and on their self-identity, as well as their delimitation in relation to other collectivities). We should note that, once again referring to Marx, Lukács (1967) also observed novelty in the theorization of these collectivities, for this purpose evoking the syllogism of the singular, the particular and the general. All collective subjectivities present a collective causality that, ontologically, is neither more nor less than the joint force of the individuals who relationally weave them.

Here it is worth introducing the theme of *social creativity*. Since Durkheim, what has primarily absorbed and incited sociologists to explain is the reproduction of society – ‘order’ –, although, since Marx, conflict and social change have also been present in sociological theory. What is rarely discussed and analyzed is social creativity. Particularly Mead and Parsons were aware of this issue on a general theoretical level, by pointing out – through the ‘I’ and the ‘me,’ in the case of the former, and the ‘double contingency’ in the case of the latter – how novelty permeates interactive processes. Parsons, however, put an end to the issue by stating that society’s reproduction occurs through subsumption of that contingency under social norms, which would thus reduce possibilities of divergence between ego and alter. More recently, Cornelius Castoriadis introduced the issue of the ‘radical imaginary’ (or

³ For an interesting treatment, with an emphasis on ‘contexts,’ see Hoebel and Knöbl, 2019. Abbott (2016) proposes the idea of process as almost a novelty, which is certainly not the case.

‘radical imagination’), by remarking, inspired by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan – but also against the latter – that the ‘id/Es’ incessantly produces new, symbolic meanings, which form a magma that seemingly, although his text is not very clear, crystallizes into social institutions that eventually give way to new significant constructions and institutions. Hans Joas later identified the lack of an adequate theory of creativity in sociological theory and proposed a pragmatist response based on the idea of problem-solving, which is basically cognitive in nature. A robust theory of social creativity that does not neglect sedimented social memories – an issue that Durkheim, despite everything, correctly identified – benefits from the questions and concepts advanced by all these authors, but must still be strongly linked to the concept of collective subjectivity in order to avoid the reification of social institutions (Durkheim’s problem and partly that of Parsons), as well as falling into individualism or a radical systemic vision (the problem with the notions of charismatic leader in Weber and of autopoiesis in Luhmann).

A complete theorization of social processes emerges from all these steps. Following them we can go beyond much of what sociological theory incessantly repeats, still recognizing how power and custom ensure that institutional patterns reproduce social life, but also that collectivities and creativity play a central role. Undoubtedly, much has already been written about interaction and social processes. Even so, this is certainly an approach whose deepening has much to offer sociological theory. The broad notion of social classes received absolute centrality in the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but it expanded to other areas such as gender and race, initially with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and W.E.B Du Bois. A robust conception of collective subjectivity can help to conceptually underpin such concepts, which generally have a more empirical character, as is the case with the idea of social classes and any other collectivities. In this coupling between collectivities, social creativity and processes lies, I believe, one of the most promising areas of sociological theory. Those ideas, however, become diluted if presented through a repeated neostructuralist perspective, which is exactly what must be abandoned. For this very reason, the idea of process, ontologically fundamental, in all its complexity, must be at the core of sociological theory, as Lukács correctly perceived in relation to Marx, despite being inattentive to the question of creativity (except for what concerns the very generic issue of revolution, obviously a highly creative

moment). On the other hand, methodologies that reduce interaction to that which is supposedly confined to the horizon of lay actors in everyday life, however powerful they may be, are reductive and need to be expanded to encompass the broader relations that are produced and reproduced in social life, including what happens between collective subjectivities.

A crucial issue for the so-called ‘theories of action,’ traditionally so important for the approaches discussed here, is that of *rationality* – a more technical way of talking about reason, possibly focused on specific objects or processes, and a decisive theme for the Enlightenment. As briefly noted in the previous section, strategic rationality – instrumental or ‘with respect to ends,’ with its strong systematicity and control by agents, generally linked to varied utilitarian perspectives – dominated theories about society for a long time, although Weber had already introduced rationality (systematic action) with respect to values. Theories about *reflexivity* – which largely, albeit more vaguely, reproduce the idea of systematicity embraced by theories of rationality – have returned to this subject, while in more recent times the critique of rationality (supposedly ‘Western’ or Eurocentric) got established in certain postcolonial and decolonial currents. An important contribution in this sense, alongside that provided by phenomenology, is found in pragmatism – starting with William James, and also with Marx through other post-metaphysical avenues, and with contemporary repercussions such as in the work of Patricia Hill Collins –, in which the *experience* of subjects, individuals and collectivities takes on great importance. Emotions and passions gradually emerge as themes, but still in a rather limited way. Experience, in its concreteness, has always offered a counterpoint to the idea of reason or rationality, which became central since the beginning of modernity, in the field of philosophy at first, faintly accompanied, from a conceptual point of view, by passions and emotions. Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality had already broadened the focus of analysis, further emphasizing interaction. Obviously, much work remains to be done. These scientifically and politically crucial themes must be addressed again, now in a more flexible though incisive manner. This is an original vocation of sociology that we must embrace and continue.

Modernity: theory and historical sociology

It is true that Marx and Engels emphasized capitalism. But this, although decisive, only provided the basis for modern society – which in itself is multidimensional (with its political, legal, ideological, artistic, sexual-reproductive, family, etc. aspects). Since then, although Marxism asserted the decisive role of the economic base, through various interpretations of it, sociological theory, especially since Weber, has insisted on the multidimensionality of social life, again valuing differently each dimension. I do not wish to argue here with ‘historical materialism,’ but, whether from a Marxist point of view or from a multidimensional perspective (which I embrace), the theory of modernity has been and should be at the center of sociological theory.⁴ It has been suggested, sometimes, that anthropology should be reserved for the so-called ‘primitive peoples’ and history for pre-modern civilizations, while sociology should focus on modern societies, including from a theoretical point of view.⁵ Neither Marxism nor evolutionary theories, to which I will return later, adhered to this formalist point of view, which, anyway, is exhausted and has no convincing power (to a large extent due to its evolutionism, and moreover to a certain methodological chaos that the complexity of contemporary sciences imposes). On the other hand, it is true that modernity was, still is, and must remain the focus of interest of sociological theory, especially if we want it to be relevant to these same societies. Here, several problems arise. First, regarding the periodization and origins of modernity.

Sociology has generally assumed that modernity was established from the mid-eighteenth century onwards – Marx and Engels, for example, offered the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution as its iconic landmarks. Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989) proposed a different perspective that dates it back to the sixteenth century. I believe that the sociological tradition is correct and that Wallerstein’s analyses and theoretical claims

⁴ It is a matter of defining the weight of each dimension according to the characteristics of each civilization or society, theoretically defined, as well as according to what is concretely evidenced through empirical research. Obviously, in modern times, the weight of capitalism is enormous – but not absolute, as evidenced by the political struggles that today clearly oppose plebeian citizens to contemporary political oligarchies – including those of the ‘left’ –, beyond the ‘class struggle.’

⁵ More specific areas would be reserved for political science, economics, linguistics, psychology, etc., although in Latin America a separation of political science from sociology like in the USA only took place from the 1970s onward.

are too weak, especially his vague definition of capitalism. This owes much to Ferdinand Braudel and partly to Weber – trade and profit, simply – but not to Marx or Weber seen from another angle – capital and wage labor and the rationalization of production. On the other hand, although Wallerstein emphasizes the role of the state, an adequate analysis of it is never presented in his work, which would force him to recognize that the modern state was only established in the eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth century (law and rational administration), while an autonomous political sphere also emerged then (beyond institutions in which power crystallizes, as in any civilization). Apart from these two basic questions, discussion is complicated and it would obviously be unfeasible to address it here.

The question of the origins of modernity, beyond its dating, involves even more complex problems. It is true that the world always revolves around many connections between civilizations and regions. It is also true that what has been conventionally called Europe, since modernity established itself with a certain coherence in the region that defines it geographically, was merely a backward corner as compared with the flourishing Islamicate world, the Sinic region (which later became modern China) and even the Indic region (where India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are located today) that showed much greater strength and sophistication. It is true that borrowings and appropriations form an innate and crucial part of any historical evolution and that ‘medieval’ Christianity drew from many sources, just as the ‘Americas,’ conquered in the sixteenth century, supplied gold, silver, and raw materials to the capitalist centers and absolutist states emerging in the Europe that was being established with them. Enslaved African labor and forced labor in the territories located in the far west and overseas of that emerging region were obviously decisive for its formation and wealth. Ultimately, it is true that in these new Americas, but also far beyond, in Europe, Africa and Asia (the latter two, as such, also a creation of modernity), hybrid societies were formed. In this sense, whether modernity dates from the sixteenth or eighteenth century, it is an intertwined global civilization, as many claim today.

However, that is not quite the issue. Undoubtedly, Eurocentrism, which ignores the either spontaneous or forced borrowings and exchanges between civilizations prior to modernity and during its formation, must be definitely discarded. However, this should not lead us to ignore that the fulcrum

of modernity's unfolding lies in what was shaped as Europe – with a new imaginary and new institutions, with new social practices, in the economy and politics, in sociability and family relations, in the arts and literature. If modernity emerged and developed globally, its dynamic and innovative center resided in that region: a conception (based on subjective individual rights) according to which freedom and equality are or should be universal (although many restrictions, in practice, have always been present despite this general vision), capitalism (with widespread commodification and wage labor, differing greatly from slavery in which the worker is himself a *commodity* sold by his captors, most of whom African), a rational-legal state (residually patrimonial), a differentiated political system (part of the political dimension properly, not administrative, unlike what the Weberian tradition suggests), a nuclear patrimonial family (not dynastic or extended), nations (beyond ethnic identities) and racism (always in tension with the idea of subjective individual rights and the idea that all men and – gradually – women are equal).

Since the 17th century, republican liberalism has dominated the construction of this world, with democracy gradually minimizing the oligarchic (controlled by increasingly professional politicians) character of modern political systems, through intense and often violent class, gender, and racial/ethnic political struggles, as well as struggles directly related to political power (currently though with a growing re-oligarchization and even autocratization trend). On the other hand, an international system based on nation-states and, in turn, a certain cosmopolitanism has also been established. None of this existed before Europe gave them life, for better or for worse. In any case, it has been since the expansion of modernity that democracy has become a global theme, present in part in sociological theory and especially in political sociology, although political theory and political science prevail in this regard (something that perhaps sociologists should reflect on).

As is well known, postcolonialism and decolonialism often oppose that conception, which has acquired a systematic theoretical character in sociology and related disciplines.⁶ Thus, its supposedly merely oppressive character is denounced – as if such reproach were to be kept for Europe and modernity alone (apparently, the Aztecs and Incas, Brahmins and Kashtrias, Confucians and Ayatollahs were exempt from this censure, as were men in

⁶ It sometimes even opposes sociology itself, a Western design supposedly to be discarded (Mignolo, 2000).

practically every corner of the world) – and Benjamin’s idea that every work of civilization is a work of barbarism is forgotten. This elaboration, however, often counted on the contribution of authors from the now called Global South. Either emphasizing the positive character of modernity or harshly criticizing it, among them are many Latin Americans, such as José Carlos Mariátegui and Caio Prado Junior, but, beyond that region, also Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov Lenin – unless one sees Russia as ‘Western’ –, Mario Pinto de Andrade, Partha Chatterjee, Ashis Nandy and Dipesh Chakrabarty; or – otherwise, if one includes the ‘South’ of the ‘Global North’ – W.E.B Du Bois.

It is necessary to re-theorize this process that today suffers badly from the weight of the rhetoric that characterizes those currents. Undoubtedly, modern racism has its origins in what historians commonly call ‘early modernity.’⁷ However, much has changed and it is not possible to lay all blame at an immutable coloniality; nor, at any rate, despite denouncing only the oppressive character of modernity, seeking to surreptitiously embrace its emancipatory side (affirming the absolute character of the binomial ‘modernity-coloniality,’ while, for example, celebrating the expansion of ‘citizenship,’ an evidently modern concept, as Aníbal Quijano, 2003, does – a step consciously avoided by Chakrabarty, 2000, who claims the values of the Enlightenment). If there is continuity, it is necessary to demonstrate it systematically, also pointing out the discontinuities in the evolution of modernity. Even that which seems to be continuous may only appear to be so, with the underlying processes hidden under a false similarity, which can lead to a weakening of criticism by neglecting what actually, today, forms systems of domination, exploitation and oppression. In any case, if modern civilization emerged, as I have argued, in Europe and the ‘West’ that were then being constituted, its scope today is much broader, since it has expanded and hybridized with elements of other civilizations, keeping its preeminence over them, by becoming the main vector of the development of today’s heterogeneous global modernity (rather than composing a fragmented universe of ‘multiple modernities,’ as Shmuel Eisenstadt suggested).⁸

⁷ Interesting suggestions are made by Martuccelli, 2004. He seems to me, however, to criticize ideas that have long since been abandoned by the social sciences.

⁸ In this regard, despite its shortcomings, such as the definition of a general ‘tributary mode of production’ and other problems related to the Enlightenment and Marxism, Amin’s (1988) view of ‘Eurocentrism,’ which I largely adopted shortly after its publication, is in many aspects superior to postcolonial and decolonial thought.

Finally, it is necessary to introduce another topic: the relationship between the evolution of modernity as a civilization, with its imaginary and institutional parameters – that is, reiterated ones – and historical contingency. If it is true that a civilization is defined as such precisely by whether it sustains itself, in the long or at least medium duration of history, by the reiteration of these parameters, this process is neither mechanical nor simply repetitive. It occurs through what we can call *moves* – social flows produced by individual agents and collective subjectivities, in a contingent manner, with varied directionality (although often rigid, as we will see later). These moves are themselves processes that originate, reproduce or lead to exhaustion and even to the end of, with or without intentionality on the part of the agents and with some degree of variation, the imaginary and institutional parameters of a given civilization. In the case of modernity, these are *modernizing moves*. They gave rise to, reproduce and will one day lead to the end of modernity. In fact, the evolution of the social sciences themselves – as part of modernity – takes place through such moves, which maintains their identity as such amidst largely contingent variations.

It is not, therefore, a matter of celebrating modernity pure and simple, but of accounting for its complexity and profound contradictions – including its emancipatory side, to which I will return in the last part of this text. In Brazil, these problems are still incipient and have not caused major harm to sociology, although they may be masked by an enormous empiricism. Brazil has a weighty historical sociology, which ranges from Celso Furtado and Caio Prado Junior, through Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (at least attentive to Latin America) and Gilberto Freire – however questionable their theses may seem today, for intellectual and political reasons – to Florestan Fernandes, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luiz Werneck Vianna, among many others. It is, however, very self-absorbed, a typical problem of extroverted peripheries, accepting comparisons, drawing on the established European and American bibliography, with those same countries and regions (something that even the theories of dependency and theories of marginality, all of which have strong political weight and reach in Latin America, have largely reproduced). It is necessary to recover and remake it in connection with the historical sociology of modernity and the sociological theory of modernity – which by and large can and should go hand in hand –, taking into account the problems and questions raised above and now putting it in connection with the reality of other Latin American countries and countries in other regions of the world.

This could be, indeed, beyond rhetoric, an enormous contribution of Brazilian sociology and sociological theory to global sociology and sociological theory, past the Eurocentrism that still pervades the discipline, largely due to self-inflicted timidity rather than to designs from the ‘North.’ Brazil has its tradition and, at the same time, a relatively consolidated university, which could allow for long-term projects of systematic analysis, what unfortunately clashes with the increasing narrowness and immediacy of national funding agencies. On the other hand, there is no longer room for the grand ‘interpretations’ of Brazil, which treat it as a *jabuticaba* – a fruit typical and even perhaps exclusive to the country, as an extreme case of methodological nationalism. Ultimately, all the resources provided by sociological theory, discussed above, should be mobilized to lend robustness to these endeavors. In particular, the notion of process, as presented in the previous section, is obviously crucial, and should include, systematically, beyond an *ad hoc* and residual use, the concept of collective subjectivity.

In short, although modernity has considerably stable features that define it as a civilization, it shows distinct phases. The first was liberal-colonial (Brazil, despite maintaining slavery, got rid of the second element and performed throughout the nineteenth century what Fernandes called a ‘hooded revolution’); the second had the state at its center (of which developmentalism is the greatest expression), and the third has involved much complexity, with neoliberalism and expanded social networks. Today we face the beginnings of a still undefined fourth phase, which has been rapidly taking shape in this post-pandemic period. Sociology must investigate what this means for Brazilian modernity, how it will unfold among us, multidimensionally, and how the incorporation of Brazil – and its neighbors – into this new global configuration will take place. Here, I merely point out this fourth phase, which is, however, underway. It is worth keeping it on the radar (Domingues, 2025b).

History and evolution

We ended the previous section with a discussion on historical sociology in Brazil and its possible links with sociological theory. On several occasions I have used the concept of civilization – so far without defining it. I was once told that ‘civilization’ is a dangerous concept, due to its possibly evolutionist resonances. It is true that this concept has been used, above all

in archaeology and anthropology, but also in sociology, within the framework of evolutionism, linked to the Neolithic Revolution, the emergence of cities, states, writing and social classes, as well as of the great religions ('world religions,' as Weber would say). But all terms in the social sciences carry some burden, often problematic, and we do not need to attribute to the idea of civilization the sense of 'overcoming' societies without a state, classes and writing, or relatively nomadic societies with religions prior to the Axial Revolutions when this world and another beyond it separate. In other words, I use the concept of civilization neutrally, to designate 'social formations' or 'societies' in general in terms of imaginaries and institutions with historical continuity (even if small and included in the list of those 'without'). Anyway, this topic leads to others, namely, history and evolution.

In the original authors of the discipline, from Spencer and Durkheim to Marx and Weber, history played a crucial role. The crux of the matter always lied in its patterns of development. Usually, there was and continued to be a connection between history and the theory of evolution (Spencer), a less systematic evolutionism (Durkheim) and patterns of development of history (Weber). Historical sociology, since Norbert Elias, has softened these points of view, placing more emphasis on specific themes (such as the control of violence), and making use of the comparative method, which in Weber already drew strongly on the ideas of similarity and difference (between the 'West' and other civilizations or cultures). This seems to be well established. In other words, the harder, unilinear evolutionism that appears in Parsons (and Luhmann), but also in Habermas, despite its sophistication, has few followers today (with the additional counterpoint of a discontinuist view of history in the works of Ernest Gellner, Michael Mann and Giddens). I will return to this later, but first I would like to highlight an issue that has gone unnoticed in the debate.

Undoubtedly, Marx dealt with social evolution – to what extent it was necessary, to what extent it was contingent is not a question that will concern us here – focusing on the relationship between the development of productive forces and the relations of production. Here, however, I am referring to Marx's conceptions that have practically disappeared from the debate and yet have great substantive and methodological significance. The only thing that comes close to his proposals is the more restricted concept of 'path dependence,' according to which the 'cost' of altering a line of development

is often high and therefore social processes can be characterized by a certain degree of directionality. This is a concept with a strong foothold in utilitarianism and rational choice theory. Historical sociology has made a fairly productive use of it to discuss economic and technical developments. In Marx's case, the basis for a vision of directionality is different and the scope of his perspective is much greater. Marx drew our attention, by means of systematic theorizing, ranging from the *Communist Manifesto* with Engels to *Capital*, to a directional process that he finally calls 'law.' In other words, it would be a *developmental trend* – therefore requiring 'trend-concepts' for its apprehension. This encompasses both the tendencies of capitalist accumulation – from its genesis in the so-called 'primitive accumulation' through the concentration and centralization of capital and reaching the abolition of private property – and the 'tendency of the rate of profit to fall.' Furthermore, there would be countertendencies at play – which he only makes explicit for the second of those two tendencies, in volume 3 of *Capital*, unpublished during his lifetime.

It should be noted that such theorizing, disregarded by Wallerstein and even by the neo-Marxists who adopt his premises, disarms these authors because the vision of a capitalist system existing since the sixteenth century proves, if one considers these development processes, to be profoundly ahistorical (capitalism would be the same since it appeared with the great merchants many centuries ago – a problem that, moreover, authors such as Giovanni Arrighi, making extrapolations based on very few cases, and therefore completely forced, or on direct transposition of the concept of primitive accumulation to contemporary capitalism, also incur in). In any case, it does not matter so much here whether Marx correctly identified the developmental trends of capitalism (in particular, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall seems hardly to make sense). What is important, however, is to point out its potential for examining many other processes, revealing the mechanisms – generally based on competition – that these trends contain. This includes the constitution of the nuclear family and its globalization, as well as the constitution and evolution – as well as the possible dissolution – of the political dimension of modernity (steps that I have elaborated in my own way), but countless others can be thus focused on. There is no reason for Brazilian sociological theory to leave aside this type of conceptualization, which even breaks with the unidirectionality

of traditional modernization theories that see modernization processes as equal in their empirical aspect. Trend concepts, elaborated at a higher theoretical level, can account more efficiently for contingency because they escape the direct determination of empiricism, in which case theses derived directly from empirical analyses and not from conceptual formulations are falsely extrapolated (as is the mistaken case of Arrighi or the combination supposed by modernization theories between individualization and the Western family or between the development of capitalism, liberalism and democracy as a necessary combination): this type of concept is capable of locating and analyzing directionalities that include much more fluidity and indeterminacy. Once again, the entire arsenal of general concepts that I discussed above, including those with reference to collective subjectivities and social creativity, must be mobilized to account for these trend-concepts and developmental trends.

Evolutionary theories are, in short, a way of dealing with history, especially in the cognitive and moral (or ethical) spheres, with an emphasis on materiality, power or the imaginary. They can be thought of especially in terms of the stages that are supposedly found – either universally and unilinearly, or with a plurality of evolutionary lines (in Parsons, Habermas, Alexander and Klaus Eder, the latter two placing more emphasis on agents and contingency); they can include the mechanisms that govern their development, thus explaining the passage from one stage to another – what would make them more complete, including contingency (with Eder and Hauke Brunkhorst standing out here) or involving a more strict point of view regarding the passage from one stage to another (Parsons and Habermas in principle positioning themselves in this perspective). Darwinism – with its mechanisms of mutation, that is, a form of creativity in social life, implying intentionality or not, plus selection and stabilization – has exerted considerable influence on sociology, but it is important to note that, although this has often reiterated unilinear perspectives, this is not necessarily the case. Several evolutionary paths can be identified. This usually occurs via what can be defined, drawing again from biology, as ‘homology’ and ‘homoplasy’ – false homology – when similar evolutions result, respectively, from a common previous path or from developmental paths whose origins – necessarily common in the case of social evolution – are very distant from the later moments on which scientific observation focuses.

In Latin America, this discussion is nearly non-existent. But there is no reason to think that the sociological theory produced in our country could not contribute to this debate. To a certain extent, this is even essential, since discussing modernity inevitably evokes in some way a conception of how we arrived at it. If an interpretation of history can in part answer questions about how modernity emerged, when we deal with the very long duration, the theory of modernity can contribute enormously to an even more complete and systematic understanding of how we arrived at it, including in particular themes related to moral or ethical matters that have always been fundamental to situating ourselves in the world and contemplating the future. This is the case, furthermore, since the concept of progress that has accompanied modernity from its beginnings until today, although undergoing a certain crisis, must almost inevitably be confronted. Even when we apparently step back from it, it returns, then in a hidden and therefore problematic form. This is often the case with positions that seek to discard modernity in favor of civilizations of indigenous peoples of our Americas – as it implies several questions of an evolutionary moral nature – or to remake, against capitalism, our productive systems from a sustainable or more traditional perspective. In both cases, certain elements of improvement or possible perfectibility of the human species – which is at the center of the modern concept of progress – are restored. Which brings us immediately to environmental issues and climate change.

‘Nature,’ environment and climate change

Sociology was born with the self-understanding that its task was to deal with social life. No one emphasized this rupture with the rest of the objects of knowledge more than Durkheim. However, what today seems like a truism has involved a general break with other disciplines – in practice only partially with regard to psychology and psychoanalysis –, above all, loaded with deleterious theoretical effects on what supposedly would be outside of society: the so-called ‘nature.’ In fact, the separation between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ presuppositionally is founding for modernity itself. Furthermore, although they were already insinuated in Christianity, the very ideas of ‘nature’ and ‘society’ exist only for modern thought. If in Marx and Engels the question of ‘nature’ was present as part of the production

processes and implied in the metabolic exchange between nature and human beings – especially while natural beings and due to its importance for the expressiveness of their work –, either intentionally or due to a phenomenological perspective that takes it for granted, it is generally absent from sociology. ‘Nature’ lies before us as a hard limit to social life, at most appearing as a substrate of it, without being thematized except as an object of cognition and manipulation (or domination).

With the development of modernity – and, within it, of capitalism – environmental destruction, largely an unintended consequence of the power and increasing intervention of the human species over ‘nature,’ began to call into question the way we think and, especially, act upon the natural world. However, little thought was given to ‘nature’ as such. Some suggested, in different ways, that nature is a social construction, sometimes even ignoring its materiality (which even became a fad in England in the 1980s and 1990s). Bruno Latour (1984), when speaking of ‘action,’ also went too far in mixing everything up in the notion of ‘actants,’ which provided a problematic reinterpretation of Aristotelian causalities – particularly final causality – as interpreted by modernity. Rather than helping us by distinguishing the different states of matter and subjectivity, he provided an indistinct and therefore not very useful picture of them. Latour (1991) was equally mistaken in assuming that ideas or ‘ideologies’ are ever fully institutionalized and effective in social life, when he stated that ‘we have never been modern.’ This was because modernity has never carried through with the advocated separation between ‘nature’ and ‘society,’ on the contrary, hybrids have multiplied. In these conceptual errors of his, he at least had the merit of raising relevant questions about the rarely questioned concept of ‘nature,’ while that of ‘sociotechnical networks,’ which his colleagues work with, is interesting, provided that it does not underestimate, again wrongly, the role of individual and collective subjectivities in social processes.

The real crisis generated by the worsening of climate change, especially global warming, call – or should call – even more radically into question the theoretical approach to nature.⁹ Does it make any sense to continue cultivating the separation between ‘nature’ and ‘society’? It would be appropriate to overcome it, but, for that purpose, we need a very profound reconceptualization, from a theoretical point of view, of both these notions

⁹ Within theoretically inclined sociology, a relevant work is Wagner (2024).

so deeply rooted in social life,. As I said, Latour tried a path, but it seems false to me, while Adorno suggested, in his negative dialectic, replacing the idea of ‘nature’ with that of ‘matter,’ which should be thought of in a plural way, what sounds quite suggestive. The now common recourse to indigenous cosmologies tends to be sensitizing for modern thought, but it does not provide an adequate solution for the future, in much changed social conditions. Nor does it make sense to suppose that we will now have a completely new discipline with the disappearance of sociology, not least because we cannot change such deep-rooted assumptions of a civilization ‘by decree’ or with insights that have immediate effect, and a direct fusion between science and the mythical thought that forms what Claude Lévi-Strauss defined as ‘savage thought’ (without Eurocentrism and without exoticism, I must emphasize, despite his problematic structuralist method) is implausible and indeed naïve. At the same time, understanding social life continues to be necessary and the primary task of sociology.

The question remains open, however. This theme should undoubtedly be present in the horizon of sociological theory produced in Brazil. Others, such as Artificial Intelligence, will soon demand our theoretical attention – although today it implies less than many suppose due to its own current limitations.

Conclusion

Although I have, to a certain extent and at certain points, inevitably made criticisms and advanced controversial perspectives, in this article I have sought to address sociological theory above all by locating its current problems and impasses, suggesting paths and possible solutions (including, also inevitably, those that I myself have been developing). I have thus outlined a panorama of contemporary issues, with incursions into the discipline’s more remote or recent past. In this effort, I have adopted Giddens’ understanding – partly opposed to that of Parsons – that the ‘founding fathers’ (or ‘three little pigs,’ as Gabriel Cohn would put it) should include Marx (instead of Pareto), Durkheim and Weber, following the developments of the twentieth century and – so far for this area of research – the wispy twenty-first century. I have rejected the metaphysics underlying the idea of metatheory, with its excessive autonomy in relation to other areas of sociology and even to social theory more generally conceived (which encompasses philosophy,

psychoanalysis, linguistics, etc.). This does not mean that we should not treat concepts systematically, with relative autonomy, but rather that the back-and-forth between theory and empirical inputs, methodologically privileging middle-range theories, is crucial for sociological theory – which, otherwise, in my opinion, tends to degenerate into bad philosophy, in its superficiality. A general sociological theory is what we should strive for and develop. It can have an analytical character (as in Hegel and Marx, and partly in Parsons) or an ideal-typical character (as in Weber) or even adopt another epistemological strategy, but it should not shy away from defining its epistemological status (as was generally the case, unfortunately, in the theoretical syntheses of the 1960s and 1970s).

The extent to which, depending on the specific topic about which theory is produced, a certain degree of theoretical generality can be adopted – such as the paths I took above in the analyses of ‘structure and action’ or the theory of evolution, which are always obviously conditioned by the social and hermeneutical experience of researchers – or more mediation is needed due to its stronger historical roots – such as theories of modernity – is something that must be checked at each step of theoretical research. The Latin American tradition and certain European and American sociological theories have themselves been concerned with this – in addition to more conventional versions of Marxism and theories of modernization. It should be emphasized, however, that this is about producing rigorous science, without diluting it with contributions that have more to do with common sense – even though, as always, this may have good intuitions –, or not even accepting what was once – but cannot be repeated – the great Latin American essayism. On the other hand, we live in an era of unilateral scientification of the social sciences, with a growing obsession with methods and the demand for the immediate usefulness of empirical knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dissemination of discourses that, strictly speaking, have little to do with theory itself, their frequently noble intentions notwithstanding. Given this, cultivating sociological theory today – with its links to the various approaches and transdisciplinarity of social theory – is of the essence.

Before concluding this text, three issues are still worth discussing. The first concerns the role of criticism in the history of sociology. It is sometimes claimed that, as such, the discipline emerged and maintains a critical stance

toward modernity, with its individualist and utilitarian assumptions. But this is an extremely restricted reading of modernity, even with regard to its ontology and its theories of action. There are other important conceptions, often conservative, that strongly include values and traditions, as well as a more organicist vision that privileges the social 'order,' while in sociology even utilitarianism and individualism are present, in varying forms and proportions, with criticism descending in certain cases (such as Weber's, as Cohn demonstrated) into simple resignation. Sociology and sociological theory indeed provide powerful tools for social criticism, which have been adopted by critical theories proper. These latter must be defined in this way, as they seek to at least realize the unrealized values of modernity or, more radically, overcome it.

An immanent critique of modern institutions that points out the impossibility of realizing these values – with the ideas of egalitarian freedom and solidarity at its core – has generally, almost as a rule, animated critical theory. It also discards irrationalism in general, although a different or more modest rationality – communicative or more practical – is presented as an alternative to the more ambitious versions that were presented in the Enlightenment, taking into account the concrete experience of the subjects, without neglecting their more general and human character. This is the path that sociological theory with a properly critical orientation can and should follow, without ignoring the fact that critical theories must be conceived in an ecumenical way, in their plurality. However, when speaking of critical theory, it is important to emphasize yet another issue. Since Marx (in fact, since Rousseau's *The Origins of Inequality*), the idea that it makes sense to produce theory – which is what philosophy used to do – detached from empirical research or scientific inputs derived from it – has been questioned and generally rejected, without necessarily rejecting the idea of theory (which is what various strands of 'positivism' and 'empiricism' generally did). Critical theory must persevere in this perspective – without neglecting the relatively autonomous work of concepts –, which was not always the case in its trajectory in the 20th century when it succumbed to speculation – even though this can sometimes be useful for generating questions and new insights. A disconnection from other areas of research, particularly in sociology and from other social sciences, isolates sociological theory, critical or otherwise, from its natural scientific environment, from which it is nourished, and

delegitimizes it in the face of those other areas and disciplines, casting doubts on what it has to contribute. Such self-isolation has in fact occurred, with negative consequences.

Finally, it is necessary to ask the question – which I have avoided so far so as not to spoil the ‘mood’ of the article – of why sociological theory has declined or become paralyzed, which can only be partially answered by pointing to its partial self-isolation within its more general disciplinary field. Apart from that, I pointed out at the outset that the repetition of the same lines of investigation and especially of repetitive theses that do not make it advance internally has generated a weariness and exhaustion that can only be overcome to the extent that new questions are pursued and new answers offered. But there is a broader problem. With the development of neoliberalism and the decline of thinking about society towards short-term methods and inquiries, focused on immediate and, at best, ameliorative social policies, the space for major inquiries, which also look to the future, has been tremendously reduced. This is true in the academic world, but also in left-wing intellectual circles (which also cling to repetitive readings of Marx and Marxists, fundamental in themselves, but which should not be canonized – creativity is in fact found in feminist and race theories, which, as such, have limits in accounting for the ‘social totality’ so dear to Marxism). The sociological theory, even in its most restricted versions (‘micro,’ as some would say), poses very broad questions about the nature of ‘society’ and its agents, its development, evolution and progress. For this reason, it has lost favor within the discipline itself, in the publishing market, in universities and in the world in general. In other words, the climate of the times does not favor it. But what favors this climate of the times? In fact, the maintenance of a short-term world in which, despite the undeniable improvements in the lives of most people – very serious problems nonetheless –, injustices and inequities, lack of meaning, depression and hatred multiply. Sociological theory cannot and does not have the mission to overcome this. But its destiny is inextricably linked to the directions that modernity will take, to which, on the other hand, it is capable of contributing. It is possible to build a high-quality academic sociological theory that is supposedly neutral. I, for my part, have neither the desire nor the time to waste on this.

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