



The destruction of the classics of sociology: democratization or homogenization?

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ABSTRACT

The critique of the political-epistemic selectivity represented by the classics of sociology (Marx/Durkheim/Weber) has become a recurring theme in contemporary sociological theory. In response to this new orthodox consensus, the aim of this study is to critically examine aspects of both international and Brazilian discussions that challenge a presumed canon of sociology. After characterizing the main approaches of criticism directed at the classics within Brazilian research, based on the distinction between history and systematics, certain theoretical problems present in the discussion were identified. First, it is noted that the historical parameters employed are unidimensional; second, the epistemological assumptions underlying the critique of the classics tend to lead sociology towards an inadvertent paradigmatic homogenization. Given the collapse of the historical dimension of sociology as a zone for theoretical negotiation, the third part of the study outlines brief suggestions for rethinking the systematic character of sociological theory, either through historically informed research guided by systematics or by returning to general sociology.

Keywords: sociological theory, history of sociology, classics of sociology.

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Introduction

Currently, one of the elements of the disciplinary identity of sociology hitherto deemed as most solid – the “Marx/Durkheim/Weber” triad – faces a wave of criticism. Given the centrality of these references while self-descriptive of this science, their deconstruction has consequences that go beyond the narrative about its history and that affect the way it understands itself: it is, therefore, the very definition of sociology that today is at stake. Given this premise, the objective of this text is to challenge, critically, some aspects of the Brazilian discussion that, following international discussions,¹ question a supposed canon of sociology, while, paradoxically, striving to “canonize” other authors.

But this exercise could well begin by paraphrasing, in reverse, the following sentence: “this is not about defending the classics” (Castro, 2022).² And this is by no means a questioning of historical and theoretical research into new ideas, authors and schools of thought. This is a basic task of normal science, which, by the way, shows signs of profound vitality in Brazil.³ Even so, if the founding narrative of sociology is being challenged, we have to ask not only whether we are facing a phase of anomaly, but, above all, what the contours of the emerging paradigm might be. And, above all, whether the results of such process of creative destruction end up being better than those already achieved. What I am proposing, then, is an exercise in self-criticism that calls attention to the risks of attempting to deconstruct the sociological tradition.

To achieve this aim, the text is divided as follows. The first part establishes the analytical frameworks that guide the discussion and, based on them, systematizes some representative works developed in Brazil that question the value of the classics of sociology. The second part diagnoses theoretical problems in the revisionism of the classics, either due to the absence of

¹ Discussion on this topic is currently quite vast, thus hindering to perform comprehensive bibliographic research. Some important criticisms over the classics include: Connell (1997, 2020), Alatas and Sinha (2017), Steimetz (2013), Go (2016), Bhambra and Holmwood (2021). In defense of the classics, among others, the following take a stance: How (2016), Collins (1997), Turner (2013) and Mouzelis (1997).

² Which, in his book, says the following: “this is not a collection against the traditional canon of social sciences” (Castro, 2022, p.1).

³ excellent effort to disseminate and research Harriet Martineau .

a multidimensional conception of the history of sociology (diachronic dimension), or because the terms of the proposed questioning (systematic dimension) carry the risk of an inadvertent paradigmatic homogenization. In view of such problems, the third part outlines brief clues for rethinking the systematic character of sociological theory, either by means of historical research informed by systematics or by returning to a general sociology.

Before proceeding, however, it is worth noting that such questioning sometimes gets blocked due to the bias for consensus in the scientific community, if not through subtle mechanisms for shielding from criticism. These acquire either psychoanalytic (repression by the oppressed vs. resentment by the oppressors) or political traits that, by merging epistemology with normativity, push any criticism into the conservative field, claiming for themselves the epistemic privilege of representing social movements.⁴ Furthermore, it is necessary to overcome binding the debate to the issue of inclusion/exclusion, restricting the topic to the issue of symbolic representation. What we ultimately should ask ourselves is about the meaning and viability of still working with historical (classical) references as equivalents of a sociological systematics. In Heidegger's terms (2021, p. 99), as we know, "destruction does not only have a negative meaning of burying tradition, but also a positive one that, by traversing history, aims to consider the possibility that an even more original and universal horizon may open up". Such duplicity is here invoked precisely to remind us that whatever revision proposal per se does not represent a negative destruction, what does not mean, nevertheless, that the unveiling of new possibilities is *ipso facto* guaranteed. And, given the path we take here, this does not seem to be the case. This is what we must demonstrate.

1. The review of classics in Brazilian research

Why, unlike the natural sciences, do human sciences place such high value on their previous history, that of their authors and lines of thought? Seeking to answer this question, Jeffrey Alexander (1987) locates its

⁴ See the statements (from minute 56 to 59) given at the round table "Perspectivas da teoria social para um planeta em mutação" at the Seminário Nacional Crise e Metamorfoses da Sociologia (Ateliê de Humanidades, 2024).

theoretical function in sociology's discursive economics. To that end, he revisits the famous distinction between history and systematics formulated by Robert Merton who, in the name of a cumulative conception of science, deemed attachment to history as an obstacle to the progress of the discipline. Countering this view, Alexander (1990) demonstrates that, in the human sciences, it is precisely their history (classics) that fulfills, as equivalent, the role of theoretical systematics. This occurs because in the field of humanities there is an endemic disagreement regarding its fundamental assumptions, which implies the need for a more explicit and recurrent theoretical discussion. The discipline's reference authors (classics) fulfill a basic function of establishing the grounds and a reference for theoretical discussion, as they 1) simplify the discussion, 2) are an instrument for seeking consensus, 3) preserve theoretical plurality and 4) legitimize the discipline.

The distinction between history and systematics will be the guiding thread of this paper's argument and will serve as a tool in this section to present the Brazilian discussion on the classics' status in sociological theory. It worth noting, however, that this is not a literature review intended to be comprehensive in descriptive terms, but merely an exercise in typifying some trends, carried out on the basis of exemplary selected works. Drawing on the difference between history and systematics, we can obtain an analytical framework according to the preference given by Brazilian revisionist discussion on the classics to one or the other element of this dyad. Thus, three basic approaches emerge from the ongoing debate.

1.1 Systematics without history

The first of these approaches is exclusively *systematic* and can be illustrated by the research by Frédéric Vandenberghe and Alain Caillé (2021), who propose a "neoclassical sociology" as an instrument for reconstructing sociology and, through it, society. The approach stem from a radically pessimistic view of sociology's current state (Vandenberghe & Fuchs, 2019), which is manifest in the split between teaching/research, theoretical fragmentation and its isolation regarding the *Studies* and philosophy. To this epistemological framework Vandenberghe also includes in the scenario the

multiple social crises that plague our present. Faced with such a dramatic situation, he then presents a *neoclassical sociology*, which draws on the work of Marcel Mauss. Following Alain Caillé's proposal, the anti-utilitarianism of gift theory is presented as a negotiation zone, that is, as a "common platform for the coordination between sociology, *Studies* and social, moral and political philosophy" (Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2021, p. 31).

To restore sociology to its status as a unified social science, Mauss's paradigm could offer the principle of anti-utilitarianism. This minimum requirement, while eluding the trap of homogenization, keeping a reasonable pluralism, paves the way for a "philosophically informed and historically sensitive general analytical framework that is conceptually insightful and oriented by and toward the present" (Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2021, p. 37). This new sociology would also be "cosmopolitan and critical, analytical and diagnostic, propaedeutic and reconstructive" (p. 39), and "its basic imperatives consist of describing, explaining, interpreting, and judging" (p. 43). Although without elaborating on how to achieve such a synthesis, the proposal for a neoclassical sociology based on Mauss offers, at least, a practical start for such a task, namely, curricular reform. Abandoning a training centered on authors (classical/contemporary), it suggests training methods that combine sociology with history, economics, anthropology, art, psychology, philosophy, and so on.

Vandenberghe's research follows the integrative theoretical pattern that emerged from the micro/macro model's synthesizing efforts in the 1990s. This model is characterized by the search for an analytical framework capable of aggregating diverse theoretical currents to preserve their contributions (Kneer & Schroer, 2009). In the present case, Marcel Mauss's thought ends up, after all, playing the role of a superclassic capable of absorbing the contributions of other reference authors, since "the gift theory offers, *in fine*, the best alternative to utilitarianism" (Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2021, p. 53). The other authors, including "similar positions in Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons or Bourdieu" (p. 37) must fit into this proposal. Although innovative, since it is one of the rare works proposing resumption of the systematic dimension of sociology, this approach ends up completely suppressing history, entirely ignoring it in systematics.

1.2 History as systematics

If history is simply nonexistent in the above proposed approach, in João Marcelo Ehlert Maia's research it occupies the fundamental analytical role. Indeed, his long research trajectory follows a coherent line marked by the constant endeavor to demonstrate the Brazilian social thought contributions to global social theory (Maia, 2013). The Brazilian debate on Iberianism, for example, is summoned to rethink the connection between State and society, and the duality inland/coast is revisited so that to re-examine the relationship between modernity and colonialism (Maia, 2009). This analysis assumed that this production "implied, at least, a critical reception of authors and categories produced in European literature and, ultimately, a questioning of the very foundations of this literature and its discourse standpoint" (Maia, 2009, p. 157). Therefore, works carried out in Brazil are subsequently mobilized as contributions to research on institutional and intellectual circulation in peripheral contexts (Maia, 2015, 2019). The thesis is that Brazilian social thought enables criticism of sociological concepts originated from other discursive standpoints, as well as refutation or even rectification of middle-range theories, exposing their false universalism (Maia, 2012). Maia also seeks to incorporate contributions from the global history of sociology and criticizes the field of Brazilian social thought for its weak incorporation of approaches originating from historical disciplines (Maia, 2017).

More recently, the author's research (Maia, 2023) has focused on questioning the classics in the context of sociology teaching. His starting point is that, despite the strength of debates on colonialism/coloniality, in classroom little has changed and hence it is sought "to outline [...] a non-Eurocentric agenda based on diverse angles and perspectives" (Maia, 2023, p. 6). In this text, the importance of the history of sociology subfield for sociological theory is based on four reasons: a) it provides disciplinary cohesion, as it shapes the collective identity of current social scientists; b) it is a sound strategy for teaching younger generations of sociologists; c) it could inform current research and theorization; d) it might help reflection on the broader impacts of sociology on our culture. Avoiding as much a diffusionist narrative as essentialism and epistemic privilege for the Southern standpoint, the author proposes a teaching policy that "overcomes Eurocentric narratives and explores new learning strategies, avoiding the

fetishization of the ‘canon’” (p. 15-16). This policy would also help to bridge the gaps between postcolonial/ decolonial studies and mainstream social theory, so as to enable the global history of sociology and the circulation of anticolonial discourses to connect and bear fruit.

Among Brazilian researchers of current social theory, Maia is the one who has developed the most extensive and rigorous effort to bring together and incorporate historical research methodologies into the study of social thought. However, by seeking to present the global history of the discipline as the cornerstone of a new social theory, he ends up falling into the same problem identified in the previous approach, though this time in the opposite direction, since, in this case, it is the systematics that ends up being subsumed under history.

1.3 History as a counterpoint to systematics

Hamlin, Weiss and Brito (2022, p. 29) give prominence to systematics, though in their quest to “rewrite the history of sociology and social theory aiming to account for countless voices erased and silenced from official history” the historical dimension is widely mobilized. Therefore, we can consider this as the only approach that, instead of eliminating one of the elements of the systematics/history dyad or subsuming one under the other, seeks some kind of analytical linkage between them. As the authors emphasize, “mobilizing a *historical* perspective within *theoretical* discussion allows us to consider the contingencies and biases of the very concepts, analytical categories and arguments of the theoretical field” (Hamlin *et al.*, 2022, p. 47, authors’ emphasis). From a historical perspective, this entails “understanding the social context that enabled the emergence of certain theoretical paradigms, offering a properly sociological approach to production of theories” (p. 53-54) and, from a systematic point of view, “establishing a dialogue between contrasting voices through which the limits and possibilities of different theories are established” (p. 54).

Proposing a polyphonic sociology that introduces female voices into the circle of classical sociology, though without imploding disciplinary boundaries, they begin by illustrating the erasure of female voices based on the example of the Chicago’s Hull-House sociologists forgotten in the history

of North American sociology. After delving into the historical aspect, aiming to demonstrate the androcentric and Eurocentric character of sociology, they move on to the systematic aspect of the matter. They then review the debate on the place of classics in current sociology, beautifully categorizing it into five typical-ideal positions: 1) the positivist rejection of the classics, 2) the structuralist rejection of the classics, 3) the political rejection of the classics and/or the canon, 4) the defense of the classics in a limited canon, and 5) the defense of the classics in an expanded canon. Finally, based on the musical/literary metaphor of polyphony, “a more plural and less biased sociology” is proposed. Taking as examples the works of Flora Tristán and Marianne Weber, they then ask: What “adding voices to or subtracting voices from the classical sociological canon can change in its general configuration?” (Hamlin *et al.*, 2022, p. 51). The assumption is that “the counterpoint between erased female voices and canonized male voices can reveal alternative and contrasting perspectives on the same phenomenon” (p. 51).

As compared with Vandenberghe’s broad systematic proposal, which in fact suppresses the classics in the Maussian synthesis, the reading of Hamlin, Weiss and Brito, insofar as it adheres to an expanded canon, is much more balanced, since its reference authors are not eliminated, but rather complemented (with other counterpoints). However, the proposal remains hampered by a still insufficient linkage between systematics and history. The problem is that the mobilization of history remains ambivalent. On the one hand, it is mobilized as an amendment to the prevailing theoretical narrative: in this case, it seems to play a merely complementary function for theory. On the other hand, the historical narrative of exclusion provides the standard for theoretical-normative evaluation (Eurocentrism and androcentrism) of the classics: in this case, history ends up taking the place of theory. Such ambivalence entails that the list of those forgotten/erased from history takes an ambiguous position that oscillates between the subordinate analytical function of a theoretical complement and the position of a superior normative instance, whose function is to demonstrate the partiality of classical interpretations. Either way, a dualistic framework is obtained that ends up juxtaposing classics/erased, without achieving a synthesis that overcome the dominant/dominated dichotomy that underlies the approach.

2. Historical and systematic reductionism

The previous topic aimed to characterize, in analytical-descriptive terms, the currently most important revisionist approaches to sociological classics in Brazilian research. The present topic, once again using the difference between history and systematics, seeks to take a step further and highlight some of the main theoretical problems underlying the efforts (national and international) to deconstruct the classical references in sociological theory.

2.1 Historical one-dimensionality

Starting with the calculated ambiguity in the use of the concepts of “classic” and “canon”, which allows for a political-ideological instrumentalization of the second term, as Silver, Guzman, Parker and Döpking (2022) rightly observed, supporters of the classics in sociology use different rhetorical strategies to defend their maintenance, whether appealing to functionalist, historical, or humanist legitimizations. But the study seems to forget that revisionist literature also makes use of rhetorical strategies. In fact, this same text reveals that, despite the quite frequent use of the terms ‘classic/classics’ and ‘canon’ in academic production, the former has always been predominant (Silver *et al.*, 2022, p. 292). Now, the recent inversion of this frequency in favor of the term ‘canon’, which accompanies the revisionist wave, already shows that its objective is to stigmatize the list of classics as a dogmatic imposition and as an epistemic-political oppression. Thus, unlike Baehr’s (2017) suggestion – for whom the terms ‘founder’ (whose meaning is more mythical than historical) and ‘canon’ (with a theological meaning stemming from sacred books) are misleading, leaving only the term ‘classic’ as useful –, the instrumentalization of the negative meaning of ‘canon’ is privileged for the purpose of delegitimization. In this process, the meanings of ‘classic/canon/dogma’ end up evened out, although, paradoxically, there is no shortage of voices that, in the name of criticism of a supposed canon, see no problem in simply proposing new canonized lists.

This terminological instrumentalization is accompanied by a still deficient and incomplete historical research on how the Marx/Durkheim/Weber triad became a global reference in sociological theory. The list presented

by Parsons (2010) in 1937 (Pareto/Marschall/Durkheim and Weber) and the classical triad proposed by Giddens (1971) are taken axiomatically as key moments in this process, but without a rigorous and empirically based demonstration to confirm this narrative and without effectively clarifying what determinants have led to its spread. This mythologized history ignores, for example, that Pitirim Sorokin (1928), in the United States, was far from reducing the classical period to the current triad, while, in France, Raymond Aron (1967) proposed a much larger list of classical authors. And, even in Brazil, in 1959, therefore long before Giddens, Florestan Fernandes already presented this consecrated triad as the main modes of empirical induction in sociology. What these here listed few examples already show is that the social history of the consecration of authors in sociology is much more complex than the diffusionist version that has been presented to us. And, although our knowledge about when and how the institutional isomorphism gradually imposed itself is still scarce, existing research (such as Schneickert *et al.*, 2019) demonstrates that this process is not so homogeneous, carrying nuances and national differences that cannot be ignored (Guzman, 2023). One way or another, the history of classic authors in sociology is much more plural and complex than it may seem.

Ultimately, at the root of these problems lies the hegemony of a one-dimensional perspective on the history of sociology that, despite the correct search for a global perspective to understand the future of this science, remains stuck to the center/periphery dichotomy and to restrictive criteria of analysis (Eurocentrism, gender, and race). In this regard, by the way, closely reflecting the rise of a new political imaginary focused on identity and recognition issues (Neiman, 2023). This moralistic and hypercontextualist approach, which entirely sacrifices the distinction between epistemic place and social place, episteme and normativity, reducing the first aspect of each pair to the second, can be contrasted with a multidimensional perspective on the history of sociology, as I will illustrate below. In this case, I will use the distinction proposed by Peter (2015) that differentiates between a *cognitive approach* to the history of sociology, which theoretically and abstractly systematizes concepts, paradigms, and models; a *social approach*, which privileges the social actors and institutional processes involved in the theoretical discussion; and a third approach that seeks to integrate

discourse analysis (discursive and non-discursive practices of the theoretical development of sociology) into the *history of effects*, that is, seeking to understand the incidence of theories both in the social field (in a broad sense) and in the scientific-sociological field (in a strict sense).

This typology is not without its flaws, nor is it my aim to present it as a theoretical framework for social-historical research. Its presentation, however, suffices to demonstrate, by contrast, that revisionism of the classics is based on a reductionist historical perspective that unilaterally elects certain social markers as determinants of thought: for explaining the new social dopes (classics), class is removed, replaced by colonialism/imperialism, race, and gender. In the name of criticizing a textualist and disembodied reading, one goes to the opposite extreme of a contextualist reading of a socio-determinist type. Therefore, one loses sight of a multidimensional perspective of historical research, one that both take into account the balance between internal (textual) and external (contextual) elements and operate with plural and diversified methodologies capable of better translating the complexity of the forms of social-scientific production.

2.2 Paradigmatic homogenization

Once finished the historical discussion, let us now move on to the systematic dimension of the problem, that is, the one that concerns the role of the classics in the theoretical scope of sociology. In this case, it is worth, at first, asking whether the failure of the classical triad to fulfill the function of equivalent to theoretical systematics, more than an outcome of political-normative criticism (Eurocentrism, androcentrism, etc.), would be, in fact, a reflection of profound theoretical changes undergone by this science since the end of the 1970s.

Indeed, in 1979, the proclamation of a postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1998) already signaled that the consensus around two rival sociological paradigms (functionalism and Marxism), emphasizing either order or change, had lost much of its meaning and relevance. In view of, on the one hand, a functional perspective that, with the notable exception of Niklas Luhmann, has virtually no representatives left, and on the other hand, the erosion of Soviet socialism that mainly accounts for the decline of Marxism,

its two classical pillars (Durkheim/Marx) do not reflect the situation and the fragmented character of contemporary sociological theory.

This may explain why, despite its historical value, the classical triad of sociology has become dysfunctional in performing the correlative of theoretical systematics. The widening of historical distance between classic (past) and contemporary (present) has weakened its capacity to operate as a zone of theoretical understanding and negotiation. Such inadequacy is explained not only by thematic absences, which require minor additional corrections, or by normative limitations (Eurocentrism, etc.), but mainly for no longer reflecting the epistemological and methodological assumptions that guide sociological theory today, not to mention the social changes that separate these two worlds. In short, the main problem is not that the classics are selective, but rather that they have become obsolete.

This dysfunctional situation partly explains the success of colonial/decolonial and feminist critiques, which, in effect, fail to grasp the root of the problem and, above all, offer solutions that entail another kind of trouble. In fact, such discourses are guided by a one-dimensional perspective of the history of sociology that, while a latent systematic, ends up canonizing, in the wake of a Derrida-style deconstruction, *essentialized* normative dichotomies such as Western/non-Western, white people/black people, men/women, and so on. According to this dualistic criterion, a new canon alongside the old one is elected with its respective representatives, thus providing the inversion of those dualities. Therefore, sociological theory finds itself implicitly dragged into an unprecedented theoretical homogenization that destroys the tenuous balance between paradigmatic perspectives, which history (with its classics), while performing as the equivalent to theoretical systematics, tended to represent.

To understand this aspect, it should be clear that it is not about hegemony of a specific theoretical paradigm, something that sociology has never achieved. It is rather about a tacit consensus around a latent and diffuse theoretical-normative imaginary, which is skillfully depicted by Susen (2015) in his characterization of the state of contemporary social theory. According to his study, the current postmodern turn is characterized by predominance of epistemological relativism (denial of correspondence between truth and facts), by methodological interpretivist approach (narratives), by rejection of any determinism and by radical assumption of contingency in the

historical sphere and, finally, by replacement of the principle of equality with the principle of difference in the political-normative sphere (politics of identity). More recently, Susen (2020) updated his diagnosis and, reflecting the hegemony of the postcolonial imaginary, demonstrated how the central themes of current social thought revolve around the questioning of Eurocentrism and the search for a globalized and multicentered vision of modernity. A process that is accompanied by questioning of the sociological canon and denunciation of the processes of silencing other voices, as well as by attempts to break with still evolutionist approaches to understand the present time.

The juxtaposition of an old canon considered Eurocentric (negative valence) and a new democratized canon (positive valence) not only introduces a dualism that is fatal for the value of the classics but, eventually, consecrates as hegemonic a unitary theoretical imaginary that leaves little room for competing worldviews in understanding social theory. In practice, there is no longer that immanent theoretical discussion through which Marxism, functionalism and comprehensive sociology disputed the hegemony of sociological discourse, even if being unable to impose themselves unilaterally. The adoption of postcolonial epistemological parameters as a form of theoretical-political judgment of the classics introduces in the discipline an approach that acts covertly as a unifying paradigm. The superimposition of the new postcolonial canon discourse (second-order discourse), against and over the classical/colonial discourse (first-order discourse), establishes a normative and epistemological asymmetry that completely buries the intellectual history of the discipline as a substitute mechanism for sociological systematics. In simple and direct terms, what happens is that classical sociology has been reduced to post-colonial theory.

3. Ways forward: recovering the role of systematics

What would be the way to overcome these impasses and problems? Notwithstanding this being a complex and extensive undertaking, which demands long and collective work, in this last topic I intend to outline, in quite general and tentative terms, some development lines for the theoretical

discussion in sociology. Despite their differences, the two approaches outlined below advocate the recovery of the role of the specifically theoretical-systematic dimension in sociology.

3.1 History of theory with systematic intent

This approach was developed in Germany by Wolfgang Schluchter (2015), who used it to present a history of sociological theory from its foundational through its current stage. According to this approach, a distinction must be made between *abstract theoretical systematics* [*Theoriekonstruktion*] properly and the *history of theory* [*Theoriegeschichte*]. From an historical perspective, in turn, we can distinguish between the *history of theories in its strictest sense* [*Reine Theoriegeschichtsschreibung*] and the *history of theory with systematic intent* [*Theoriegeschichte in systematischer Absicht*]. In developing this second approach, Schluchter avoids Thomas Kuhn's epistemology, since it presupposes a conception of science theoretically unified around a paradigm. Drawing on Imre Lakatos, he favors the concept of *research programs* to highlight the fact that science is characterized by the coexistence of competing approaches, rather than by paradigmatic unity. Based on this guideline, he describes three competing research programs in sociology, depending on their philosophical bases: 1) sociological Hegelianism (Marx), 2) sociological Kantianism (Durkheim), and 3) Kantian sociology (Weber). While the first two programs pursue the goal of replacing the philosophical programs of Kant and Hegel with sociology, the third one was limited to merely complementing Kant.

At first sight, Schluchter's proposal seems not to present anything new, as it merely re-proposes the already well-known triad of sociology classics. There are, however, some innovative points in his approach. Firstly, the fact that he does not dispense with historical investigation and, without absolutizing it, places it at the service of theoretical investigation. In his approach, it is theory that commands history and not the other way around, thus avoiding the trap of historicism. Secondly, Schluchter once again values the cognitive dimension of the history of sociology, thus avoiding the trap of hypercontextualism. Finally, by organizing his exposition around the epistemological foundations (Kant/Hegel) underlying sociological programs,

he offers us intrinsically theoretical selection criteria that are not limited to choosing authors or schools of thought based on sociopolitical criteria, such as social markers of difference, symbolic representation or geopolitical contexts. After all, as Nuno Oliveira (2024) rightly argued in a recent work, if we wish to renew classical references in sociology, it is truly theoretical criteria that must guide our choices.

The same criterion above could also be adopted to include in the historical-systematic presentation of sociological theory a research program with a Nietzschean/ Spinozian matrix, with its emphasis on the matter of power – the elementary basis on which, ultimately, rest the epistemological foundations of postmodern and postcolonial/decolonial theories that today compete with Kantian/Hegelian research programs. This is, of course, a more diffuse research program that has more difficulty condensing into a single exemplary author, though it could include many, from Georg Simmel to Gabriel Tarde and even other names as Frantz Fanon or WEB du Bois, among others. Perhaps it would be a good idea to also recognize the greater diversity of research programs in nascent sociology and include in the historical-systematic study the pragmatic-linguistic matrix already implicit in George Herbert Mead, among others. In this direction, perhaps a more faithful and theoretically broader, that is, theoretically more plural portrait of the research programs that inform sociological systematics in its nascent phase can be achieved.

3.2 For the revival of systematic sociology

Despite leaving a door open toward the path of history, the above approach still faces the problem that those nascent sociology's research programs are perhaps too distant from the various turns that currently affect social theory (the problem of obsolescence). Furthermore, a broader and more varied historical portrait of research programs in sociology does not mean that it can still function as an *Ersatz* of sociological systematics. For these reasons, the time has come to ask whether the science of society should not definitively recover the idea of a general sociology or systematic sociology, a concept that was gradually replaced by the expression social theory/sociological theory. In fact, in the early days of sociology, Georg Simmel (1917/ 2006) already

differentiated between general (historical) sociology, formal (or pure) sociology, and philosophical sociology, while Karl Mannheim (1929/ 1971) proposed a distinction between general and systematic sociology and historical sociology (which is subdivided into comparative sociology and social dynamics). Also in Brazil, Florestan Fernandes (1959/ 1970, p. 57-73), in his theoretical phase, differentiated between systematic (or formal) sociology, descriptive sociology, historical sociology and comparative sociology.

Evidently, the revival of general or systematic sociology must avoid the temptation to unilaterally elect a certain approach (with its corresponding nomenclature) as the exclusive possibility of sociological systematics. This is the case of Bourdieu's general sociology (2021), for example, which, despite correctly reviving the term, would end up hegemonizing this author's praxeological theory and would lead to imposing the habitus/field/class triad as the exclusive lexicon of sociologists. A general/systematic sociology open to pluralism does not necessarily need to follow the strategies of integration or complementarity of theories, as it is not about producing paradigmatic uniqueness. Rather, it is about locating a set of fundamental questions and problems, at a theoretical level, around which a theoretical-systematic discussion, from different views, can be organized. This set of problems needs to go far beyond the mere "micro/macro" dichotomy (or agency and structure) or even the simplistic "action/order/change" trilogy, which do not even come close to developing the set of systematic questions that need to be addressed by theoretical reflection in sociology.

A sociological systematics open to plurality should be able to identify a core of central problems in sociology and, based on them, present a diversity of available solutions. The presentation of plural solutions or responses is fundamental. This organization around problems can fundamentally follow two paths. The first concerns levels of analysis. In this case, the organization of the systematics into meta-theoretical problems (ontological, epistemological, methodological, anthropological, ethical), problems of social theory, and problems of sociological theory (of modernity) can be a good starting point (Vandenberghe, 2009). But the scheme could also be simplified around more general and abstract questions (social theory) and historical-empirical questions (theories of society).

The second of these paths involves the capacity of (abstract) social theory to establish a core of problems or issues of the sociological discourse.

An example of this second path is Turner's (2010a, 2010b, 2012) effort to systematize fundamental sociological concepts into three levels that include the following thematic issues: a) microsocial dynamics (face-to-face encounters and their demographic, ecological, *status*, role, culture, motives, emotions, etc. dynamics), b) macrosocial dynamics (institutions, stratification, societies, systems of societies, etc.), and c) mesosocial dynamics (corporations and social groups). In a similar direction, Hartmut Esser (1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d, 2001), in Germany, developed a broad theoretical program in whose six volumes the major themes of sociology are treated: *Logic of the situation* (vol. 1), *The Construction of society* (vol. 2), *Social action* (vol. 3), *Opportunities and constraints* (vol. 4), *Institutions* (vol. 5) and *Meaning and Culture* (vol. 6).

Although these authors' proposals seek the theoretical and terminological unity of sociology – what must be strictly avoided –, they nevertheless illustrate how it may be possible to arrive at a broad set of key themes/problems of a sociological systematics that can be presented in a plural way, that is, based on the presentation of the main existing views, paradigms or theories in sociology about them. It is not, therefore, a question of adopting the two examples above, but merely of illustrating, based on them, what is being proposed here. In this case, sociological systematics could present itself similarly to contemporary philosophy which, without disregarding history, is today organized around areas/problems in which solutions are historically and systematically discussed: ontology, epistemology, logic, ethics, aesthetics and so on. Or even economics, better organized around a microeconomy and a macroeconomy.

Furthermore, this scheme allows for a much better incorporation of the multiple contributions of sociology on a global scale, since not only a list of problems but also the solutions to the problems need to take into account the theorizing and research of a sociology conceived as cosmopolitan. In these terms, sociological systematics should incorporate as one of its central problems, for example, the issue of coloniality and, within the concept of State/public sphere or social change, the theories of Said Arjomand and Ibn Khaldun, for example. In the field of stratification, all current research on racism and intersectionality should be added to the existing sociological arsenal, and in the field of theories on identity, the entire issue of double consciousness (Du Bois) – all become integral part of a broad sociological

systematics. Finally, this systematics should always be attentive to the historical dimension, since each of the problems and concepts of sociological theory is always available for a diachronic presentation, that is, one that takes into account how the problem is constituted and develops over time.

More than a new sociological canon dichotomized in normative terms, a negotiation zone that plays the role of theoretical integration in sociology, though without falling into the trap of paradigmatic homogenization, requires today a transnational system, articulated around central problems and questions of sociology and encompassing the diversity of the social in historical, cultural, geopolitical, epistemological terms, and so on. Although this proposal is not immune to ideological colonization, if carried out in an open, plural and collective way, and done with effort and courage to abandon attachment to an idealized past that, despite its value, no longer fulfills the functions for which it was designed, it may be the best path for the construction of a sociological theory, that is, of a general sociology of social life and society.

Final remarks

Using a strong image, we can say that the function of the classics as equivalent to a sociological systematics while a zone of dialogue has become a veritable zombie. If the classical triad still survives, it is because, besides the strength of institutionalized social factors, it still reflects, at least partially, the development of sociology up to a certain point in its history. Furthermore, trapped in the field of the colonial mentality, the classics do not cease to be politically functional for the legitimization of new approaches in whose rhetoric they are presented as a canon that needs to be overcome, complemented or even replaced. In any case, whether through the overdetermination of systematics or social history, or even through an insufficient linkage between systematics and history (models that we have identified in Brazilian research), the revisionist wave currently underway, by decreeing its inevitable selectivity, buries the validity of the classics as a current (present) theoretical reference. This criticism, however, draws on solely one-dimensional perspectives of historical research and, by raising postcolonialism to the position of a sphere of

analysis that overlaps with the sociological models originating from the classics (Marxism, functionalism and comprehensive sociology), ends up producing a discursive asymmetry that leaves sociology exposed to the loss of theoretical plurality. To escape this inertial situation, contemporary sociology must recover its intrinsically systematic dimension with greater vigor, perhaps the only path left before deconstruction currently underway buries us under the rubble of destruction.

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