



Why we need a non-eurocentric history of sociology: A reply to Carlos Sell

João Marcelo Ehlert Maia* 

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author reviews the arguments and proposals presented by Carlos Sell in “The destruction of the classics of Sociology: Democratization or homogenization?” in this volume of RBS, critically analyzing them and offering other perspectives and solutions. The author argues that a non-Eurocentric history of sociology is the best strategy to build a global sociology that recognizes the diversity of the social world.

Keywords: sociological theory, Eurocentrism, classics of sociology, postcolonial sociology, non-Eurocentric history of sociology.

* Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil.

Doctor in Sociology (IUPERJ), associate professor at FGV CPDOC (Escola de Ciências Sociais).

In its 13th volume *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia* published a thought-provoking article by Carlos Sell entitled “The destruction of the classics of Sociology: Democratization or homogenization?” (Sell, 2025). In this work, Sell outlines contemporary critiques of what is understood to be the “canon of sociology,” identifies the main analytical problems of such critiques – which could be summarized in the hypothesis of the formation of a new postcolonial orthodoxy that would produce theoretical homogeneity – and proposes alternatives to the problem, summarized in the idea of a new “sociological systematics.”

The article draws on Merton’s well-known distinction between history and systematics to analyze three critical trends that, in Sell’s view, represent, in the Brazilian case, the attack on the classics mentioned in the article’s title. The first trend is illustrated by the project of a new anti-utilitarian sociology put forward by Alain Caillé and Frédéric Vandenberghe (2021); the second, which would subsume the systematic theoretical debate into a historicist discussion, is illustrated by my work on the history of sociology (Maia, 2017a); finally, the third trend would be summarized in the article by Hamlin, Weiss and Britto (2022), which advocates a “polyphonic sociology” aimed to reconstruct the canon of the discipline by recovering voices that have been erased from history, particularly female voices.

According to Sell, each of these trends would encounter some significant problems in the way they connect the historical dimension of sociology with its systematic orientation. Thus, Caillé and Vandenberghe’s project is seen as excessively systematizing, as it is based on the selection of a paradigmatic “classic” author (in this case, Marcel Mauss) as a common epistemic field for production of contemporary analytical repertoires, which would ultimately disregard the plurality of theories and perspectives informed by classical traditions. My work on the history of sociology, in turn, is taken as symptomatic of an opposite problem, namely, that of reducing the theory to a historical discussion that does not provide bases for a necessary systematization. Finally, the article by Hamlin, Weiss and Britto would represent the most promising of the critical trends analyzed, as it does not eliminate the plurality of the classics, but errs by transforming a historical narrative critical of Eurocentrism and androcentrism into a single political-normative criterion for theoretical construction.

Although the article’s title seems to suggest that Sell will uphold classical tradition, this is not exactly the position of the author, who is more concerned

with the effects produced by critiques on the current theoretical debate. Thus, Sell argues that one of the main consequences of the “attack on the classics” would be the construction of a supposed new theoretical orthodoxy, which rather than being founded on comprehensive criteria, would be based on a kind of homogenizing post-colonial *doxa*. In the author’s words, “[...] 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 [...]” (Sell, 2025, p. 12).

The solution, therefore, would be to locate “[...] a set of fundamental questions and problems, at a theoretical level, around which a theoretical-systematic discussion, from different views, can be organized” (p. 16). This new systematic sociology could even incorporate post-colonial critique, but within a cosmopolitan space of discussion that would avoid paradigmatic homogenization and encompass “[...] the diversity of the social in historical, cultural, geopolitical, epistemological terms, and so on” (p. 18).

It is difficult to disagree with Sell’s conclusion. I would venture to say that “encompassing the diversity of the social” in different dimensions is precisely what motivates, for example, Raewyn Connell (2007) in her classic book on theories of the global South. From the perspective of this author, who has written on several occasions about the risk of a “mosaic” sociology composed of isolated pieces of alternative intellectual traditions, it is precisely Eurocentrism that would prevent the realization of this project of a new systematic sociology.

However, although I share some of Sell’s concerns, including the excessively fragmented nature of theoretical discussion and the difficulty in connecting postcolonial critiques with sociological theory itself, I believe that the path taken by the author to support this project has problems, some of which motivated me to write this reply.

A first issue concerns the diagnosis of the problem, summarized in expressions such as “orthodox consensus,” “theoretical homogenization,” and “one-dimensional history.” Although so-called postcolonial critique and its derivations and resonances currently occupy a prominent place in intellectual debate in different parts of the world, Sell does not present empirical evidence that such projects have become dominant, nor that they have produced the effects he claims exist.

Before anyone can argue that such a demonstration would be impossible, a historian of sociology or practitioner of sociology of knowledge would identify some basic methodological procedures, such as: a) a comparative analysis of programs and syllabi for introductory sociology courses at different institutions; b) an investigation (even if limited to a sample) of the topics of articles devoted to social theory in the main scientific journals of the discipline; c) a study focused on handbooks and textbooks, dozens of which have been published by prestigious publishers such as Routledge, Springer, etc. But, since Sell does not opt for any of these procedures, the reader of the article is invited to accept the premise of the argument, even if it is not properly demonstrated.

In fact, available evidence points to the opposite scenario. A quantitative study by Philipp Korom (2020) of manuals, textbooks, encyclopedias, and journals showed that the so-called “elite of sociology” throughout the 20th century was overwhelmingly formed by European and North American names. According to Korom, between 1970 and 2010, the main names that emerge as the most cited are Bourdieu, Giddens, Castells, Foucault, Goffman and Tilly, who join other regular presences such as Weber and Durkheim. There are trends pointing in another direction, especially in the North American case, as DuBois seems to have definitively entered the sociological canon in the years following the Black Lives Matter movement (Melcher, 2024), though the data do not allow us to attest to a “new orthodox consensus” in sociology generally.

In my research into the subject, which examined a small sample of introductory sociology courses at Brazilian institutions, I found that the European “classics” remained firmly in place as the organizing axes of the discipline (Maia, 2017b). Studies based on scientometrics reveal that the most central author in Brazilian social sciences is still Pierre Bourdieu (Campos & Szwaco, 2020; Brasil Junior & Carvalho, 2020).

Even if accepting the premise – the so-called postcolonial as the new orthodoxy – we would have to ascertain whether such hegemony produces the alleged effects, among which Sell highlights theoretical homogeneity. Here we have not only another statement that is difficult to demonstrate, but also a hypothesis that collides with the existing significant plurality of the postcolonial field itself regarding the nature of its undertaking.

Take, for example, the case of so-called “sociologies of the global South,” a broad theoretical project that sought to integrate a critique of Eurocentrism

in the social sciences with an active search for new forms of theoretical conceptualization based on the social experiences of the “global South” (Ballestrin, 2013). The main intellectuals initially associated with this endeavor – in addition to Connell, we can mention Boaventura Santos and the Comaroff couple – did not even manage to produce a stable and coherent definition of what a “sociology of the South” would be (Rosa, 2014), although they certainly left clues that have now been followed in studies that seek to discuss a new ontology of the social world (Rosa, 2022).

The very definition of which direction a post-colonial sociology should take is controversial, as can be seen taking a more detailed look at the production of the authors cited by Sell. In one of his best-known texts, Julian Go argues that the best alternative to Eurocentric sociology would not be a program that produces new concepts based on simple translation of social experiences from the global South (a program that he classifies as *indigenizing sociology*), but rather a relational strategy capable of revealing the intertwining that constituted metropolises and colonies together (Go, 2013). It is a perspective similar to that developed by Gurinder Bhambra based on the thesis of “connected histories” (Bhambra, 2014), but not necessarily the same as that defended by Farid Alatas, who more recently argued that critique of Eurocentrism is insufficient, since many of the hegemonic tendencies that stifle autonomous thinking in Southeast Asia precede European colonization of the region and are, in fact, indigenous (Alatas, 2022). Thus, the project of “autonomous knowledge” advocated by Alatas does not have the same implications as the idea of a “postcolonial” sociology as defended by Go, although both are part of a common field of debate.

The problem with diagnosis also extends to Brazil, which is summarized, in a very reductionist way, in three trends. Although I do not intend to put a strong focus on this aspect of the text, as Sell himself acknowledges that he did not undertake an exhaustive bibliographic survey or research that does justice to the diversity of this field, I think it is fundamental to point out that a more precise characterization of the adversary reveals a more diverse and fragmented field than that outlined by Sell, what poses yet another challenge to the thesis of theoretical homogenization.

It would be impossible to do justice to all this diversity, but I would highlight: initiatives that connect decolonial critique to studies on race

and racism (Bernardino-Costa & Grosfoguel, 2016), theorizations that draw on philosophical debates on subject and racialization to challenge the ontologies of modernity (Da Silva, 2018), projects that seek to integrate post-colonial critique into systemic theories (Dutra, 2020, 2021), analyzes on the temporality of modernity that selectively incorporate post-colonial critique (Tavolaro, 2021), ontological debates that seek to analyze the disruptive effect of the global South on the contemporary theoretical repertoire (Rosa, 2022) and analytical frameworks that reflect on how differences and inequalities are only related in a contingent and non-essentialized manner (Costa, 2019). Finally, even interpreters critical of decolonialism in some way question Eurocentrism in their projects of reconstruction of critical theory (Domingues, 2009, 2011). Each of these initiatives deals with the classical repertoire in a certain way, and it seems impossible to argue that they all converge toward a common project of forming an alternative canon.

Then, the question remains as to the “historical one-dimensionality,” an important part of Sell’s argument. Ultimately, this question relates to a larger (and, in fact, more interesting) debate concerning the place that the subfield of history of sociology should occupy in relation to sociology in general and theoretical discussion itself.

According to Sell, criticisms of the classics would converge on a project marked by the subordination of epistemic discussion to moral and political judgments. In other words, Sell argues that, in its eagerness to “provincialize” and “decentralize” the “canon,” the “critical party” would end up constructing a narrative in which concepts, authors, and theories would have their validity assessed according to their greater or lesser adequacy to a binary and essentialized history.

In my view this is an excessively reductionist vision, which is incapable of accounting for the diversity of forms in which the critique of Eurocentrism has produced its effects on the history of the discipline.

Let’s take, for example, the intellectual project of George Steinmetz (author cited by Sell), who seeks to reinterpret the history of sociology in three central countries (France, the United States and Germany) considering their imperial experiences (Steinmetz, 2013). In his most recent study into so-called French colonial sociology, Steinmetz analyzes the professional itineraries and texts of names such as George Balandier, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Aron, among other sociologists, to show how their experiences

in colonial contexts constitute a fundamental variable to unveil the nature of their intellectual productions (Steinmetz, 2023). Judging by the diagnosis drawn up by Sell, one would expect this project to prompt the “denouncement” of these intellectuals and their “discard.” Steinmetz, however, explicitly rejects the hypothesis that the links observed between social science and colonialism in France would authorize the interpreter to deduce any form of theoretical homogeneity, highlighting the diversity of interpretations that these agents produced regarding colonialism. More than an “attack on the classics”, his project can be seen as a reconstruction of the history of European sociology – which continues to be told, valued and discussed – in light of a fundamental historical experience.

Other non-Eurocentric projects on the history of sociology also produce results that are far from any paradigmatic homogeneity. For example, Stéphane Dufoix’s research on non-hegemonic sociologies is based on a historical investigation of the processes of circulation and adaptation of sociological concepts in non-central contexts, such as East Asia (particularly China and Japan) (Dufoix, 2022, 2018). In his texts, Dufoix employs a transnational approach that questions the diffusionism and emphasizes the historical roots of sociology in countries and regions distant from Europe. His goal is not to replace a Eurocentric narrative with a one-dimensional history guided by geopolitical criteria and/or racial/sexual markers, but rather to demonstrate the connections that forged transnational intellectual spaces in which debates on development and autonomy flourished. In his own words:

[...] the main aim of [the research] being the attempt to rewrite the history of the discipline not from its margins – which would make it some form of counter or alternative history – but including what historians nowadays – and for now quite a long time – have seen as its margins. Making them reenter the story does not necessarily imply giving non-Western sociologists¹ a predominance; yet it implies assessing the real importance of sociologies developed outside the Western world in the last century and a half (Dufoix, 2018, p. 50).

In my own texts, I pursue a similar objective, aiming at the reconstruction of broader transnational historical contexts that help us identify common intellectual horizons among sociological traditions that we keep analyzing in isolation, as it can be seen in the debate on development and autonomy that flourished in some regions of the so-called Third World between the

1960 and 1970 decades (Maia, 2024, 2014). Such horizons were based on the global circulation of peripheral theoretical repertoires through institutions such as ECLAC and even UNESCO, constituting an important chapter in the history of sociology that allows us to rethink today the meaning of concepts that are fundamental for the discipline.

In other words, I consider that the investigation of intellectual agents considered peripheral is not intended for the ultimate or exclusive purpose of doing epistemic justice – although I believe that this is an important dimension – but rather of producing a shared historical ground that allows theoretical debate to be strengthened on bases that are both more plural and consistent. This is precisely the project desired by Sell.

These examples, originating specifically from the subfield of the history of sociology, show that the hypothesis of a “one-dimensional history” does not hold up, and that the scenario is more open and controversial than Sell suggests. Finally, I think that my disagreement also relates to how we should conceive the place of history of sociology in relation to general sociology or to theoretical debate itself, which leads me to Sell’s final point regarding his proposal of a systematic sociology.

Sell also defines such a project: “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” (Sell, 2025, p.16). After briefly reviewing the proposals of Jonhatan Turner and Hartmut Esser, Sell argues that “[...] 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” (p.17). Finally, Sell argues that such a system would allow for incorporating the issue of coloniality and racial markers, provided that they are integrated into a relatively cohesive field of common problems and themes.

I do not disagree significantly with these statements, but I believe that the path chosen by Sell to achieve these objectives is limited and stems from a quite simplistic conception of the role played by hypotheses and research carried out in the subfield of the history of sociology. Sell argues that such a project cannot be achieved if a theoretical orientation is subsumed under History. With this, he seems to mean that any successful theoretical systematization project must be guided by the identification of common core

problems based on contemporary critical judgments, which would avoid the subordination of theory to historicism.

However, I believe that such a project can only be achieved in an effectively pluralistic manner with the development of a robust historical awareness of the discipline, guided by a contemporary theoretical interest – reflexivity around the conceptual repertoires and forms of writing and research employed in contemporary sociology – and by a specific investigative practice – the identification and analysis of past transnational connections that shaped the circulation of sociological vocabularies.¹

This historical consciousness, I argue, has gained special meaning for researchers engaged in the critique of Eurocentrism because a significant part of the current theoretical debate incorporates, in a naturalized and pre-reflective way, a view on the history of the discipline that reproduces well-documented biases. Such a view presents the successive theoretical innovations drawing on a selective reconstruction of the history of the discipline, which privileges authors and intellectual traditions generally restricted to the Euro-American axis and implies that the concepts and theoretical repertoires that we have today would barely express the “best arguments” that have stood the test of time (*cf.* Maia, 2024 for an example of how this procedure occurs as to the concept of autonomy).

There are some problems with that narrative. First, as the history of sociology subfield shows, the construction of authors as “classics” was far from being a linear and evolutionary process governed solely by scientific logic stripped of “political-normative” criteria, as perfectly exemplified by the complex conversion of Weber into a theorist of scientific neutrality in the United States (Turner & Factor, 2014). The global construction of the *classical identity* of some authors, in turn, was a process that strongly depended on a translation market, a type of intellectual activity conditioned by varied dynamics of linguistic, economic and cultural power (*cf.* Heilbron & Sapiro, 2008; Sorá & Dujovne, 2018). Furthermore, works now read as “classics” were nor even written by their authors, being the result of multiple mediations that allowed for their textual stabilization (*cf.* Huebner, 2019, for the well-known case of George Mead). Intellectuals deemed peripherals were fundamental

¹ I emphasize that there is nothing original or intrinsically post-colonial in the defense of a reflexivity anchored in the practice of historiographical research, an idea shared by important names in the subfield of the history of sociology, all of whom are completely above suspicion of any “attack on the classics” (*cf.* Camic, 2014; Dayé, 2018)).

in constructing disciplinary concepts and traditions considered “national” or “European” (*cf.* Pérez, 2023, for the case of Bourdieu, and Merkel, 2022, for French social sciences in the Post-War). Finally, it is worth noting that thinkers once considered “outdated” eventually become totems in the current disciplinary battle (*cf.* Consolim, 2008, for the case of Gabriel Tarde), while thinkers who were once prestigious (*cf.* McLaughlin, 1998 for the interesting case of Erich Fromm).

Demonstrating that “extra-scientific” factors shaped our “disciplinary memory” does not necessarily entail adopting a one-dimensional history that establishes the endorsement for a supposed post-colonial orthodoxy as the sole criterion, but rather simply applying well-established hypotheses from the sociology of science and knowledge to the way we conceive of the discipline, avoiding reifying its present state. Similarly, adopting a non-Eurocentric historical consciousness does not mean that every author or theory forgotten or erased by power dynamics is endowed with intrinsic value for contemporary theorization, since the work of historical reconstruction does not necessarily culminate in the election of new winners, but rather in a critique of selective, partial, and pre-reflective narratives that still structure our scientific work.

In terms of undergraduate teaching, I argue that a non-Eurocentric history of sociology should also lead us to rethink the way we present the discipline to young students. In a recent work, I propose three possible pedagogical strategies: a) decentering the canon by presenting theoretical hypotheses that allow for questioning Eurocentric knowledge produced by classic authors, along the lines suggested by Alatas and Sinha in discussing their experiences in Singapore (Alatas & Sinha, 2001); b) presenting intertwined narratives of history of the discipline, questioning the stability of “national traditions” (for example, demonstrating the Latin American connections of part of Brazilian sociological production); c) historicizing the formation of the so-called “classic canon,” improving students’ sensitivity to the institutional, political, and intellectual processes that forged the discipline (Maia, 2023, pp.16-17). None of these strategies implies a simple discarding of authors considered classic and their replacement by a new, supposedly postcolonial canon. Regarding strategy “a,” in theory the most radical one, I stated: “This tactic allows us to maintain a core group of thinkers while questioning the hegemonic readings about them by presenting alternative perspectives on their ideas.” (Maia, 2023, p.16).

Ultimately, the practical result of this theoretical and pedagogical operation is not one-dimensionality, but rather the construction of historical evidence that is fundamental to a truly global sociology and a new systematics that “recognizes social diversity.” This project, so dear to Sell, can only be achieved if we are able to deal critically with our disciplinary heritage, this, indeed, in many cases, a product of theoretical homogenization.

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