



Metamorphoses of Sociology in Times of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the topic of crises in sociology and presents the dossier “Metamorphoses of Sociology in Times of Crisis.” To this end, it offers a brief literature review on the topic, highlighting the importance of conceptual discussion, the relations between crises in society and in the sphere of knowledge, and themes present in contemporary crisis diagnoses. It discusses the recurrence of some themes that appear in distinct contexts, suggesting more lasting differences in sociologists’ understanding of the discipline itself. At the same time, the article highlights some new developments in contemporary debate, particularly the controversy surrounding the existence and definition of a sociological “canon” and the emergence of ecology as an important theme associated with transformations in the social perception of crises and problems. The articles comprising the dossier are presented throughout the text along with the broader literature.

Keywords: concept of crisis, crisis and sociological practice, crisis in sociology, polycrisis.

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The title of this dossier raises the issue of metamorphoses experienced by Sociology in “times of crisis.” Such formulation leaves open the question of the *temporality* and the *object* of the crisis. We do not define *a priori* whether the expression refers to crises generically or specifically to the present as a “time of crisis.” Likewise, the title leaves open to interpretation whether the crisis refers to society or to Sociology itself.

By leaving open the temporal dimension we intended, first and foremost, to invite discussions involving both a diachronic perspective and other historical periods when crisis stood out. This ambiguity also intended to avoid defining, from the outset, whether we live in “times of crisis;” we rather sought to pose the question: *what is a crisis?* Our interest was, precisely, to draw on this question to gather different positions, so that to refine possibilities for discussion and analysis. Moving towards the dimension of the *object of the crisis*, the debate acquires even greater complexity and divergence: if there is a crisis, what is in crisis? The society? Sociology? Both?¹

The various contributions published here help to delve deeper into these issues from distinct perspectives and analytical objects. They thus add to an expanding bibliography on the topics at hand, which includes numerous important contributions both from Brazil and internationally.² In analyzing books and articles published between 1960 and 2010 and available in the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, Jenny Preunkert (2011) identified a fluctuating trend in discussions about crises – an increase from 200 to 600 texts per

¹ We have been systematically addressing these questions within the “Crisis and Metamorphoses of Sociology” Research Project, which is supported by CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development) and within which this dossier was conceived. Two of the dossier’s organizers – Felipe Maia and Raquel Andrade Weiss – and some of the invited authors – Frédéric Vandenberghe, Lucas Faial Soneghet, Marcos Lacerda, and Thiago Panica Pontes – participate in it. Giuseppe Ricotta, professor at the University of Rome – La Sapienza, also an organizer of this dossier, is part of a collaborative network involving the project, which builds a mediation with the important work performed by the sociological theory section of the *Italian Sociological Association* (AIS) and by the *Seminario Permanente di Teorie Sociologiche* (SPTS) around the sociological canon. We thank the CNPq for its support for this research, all the contributors to the dossier, and especially Elaine Santos, Irene Strazzeri, and Roberto Dutra, whose articles were selected among submissions to RBS’ call for papers to this dossier, and enriched the discussion proposed here.

² Among publications by researchers affiliated with Brazilian institutions, see especially Vandenberghe and Fuchs (2019), Martins (2019), Maia (2021), Freitas (2022), and Sell (2025). See also the dossier “Sociology as an Ontology of the Present” (Lacerda, Magnelli & Garcia, 2021). Two collective initiatives are noteworthy: the research project “Crisis and Metamorphoses of Sociology”, whose produced material consisting of interviews, *podcasts*, and a seminar is available at <https://ateliedehumanidades.com/metamorfoses-da-sociologia/>; and the series “Sociology and the Contemporary,” produced by the Brazilian Society of Sociology and the Virtual Library of Social Thought, available at <https://blogbvps.com/>.

year between 1960 and the late 1980s, dropping to around 400 in the mid-1970s, and then remaining stable between 400 and 600 publications per year until the 2000s. As of 2006, a steep upward trend began, culminating in the publication of around 1,200 texts in 2010, the final date of data collection. Although more recent figures are not available, the above data seem significant enough to indicate that the topic of crisis is vastly present in the social sciences discussions.

In the articles that comprise this dossier, these issues emerge in various forms, what led to their organization into three thematic parts, albeit the themes often overlap, as evident in the way they are mobilized in this introductory article. The first part discusses the *concept of crisis*, with contributions from Lucas Faial Soneghet and Frédéric Vandenberghe. The second part, with texts by Thiago Panica Pontes, Roberto Dutra, and Marcos Lacerda, focuses on the *dimensions of crisis in sociological practice*, combining theoretical discussion with questions about the meaning and direction of sociology as a discipline, and suggesting alternatives for addressing the difficulties they identify. In the third part, we bring together articles that reflect on sociology's contributions and the challenges it faces in confronting contemporary crises. Contributions by Irene Strazzeri and Elaine Santos bring the environmental crisis as the foundational theme around which theoretical and organizational issues of the discipline are problematized. Both authors demonstrate how the recognition and handling of the environmental crisis poses challenges to established understandings and forms of division of disciplinary work.

Besides providing readers with an overview of those texts, this introductory article seeks to highlight relevant elements to contextualize the proposed discussion in terms of its history and some of its more recent developments.

1. Crisis as a sociological concept and theme

The word “crisis” has been ubiquitous in contemporary vocabulary – from the media to table talks – as a way of expressing that things aren't going well. Crisis can be a term for anything from a certain unease in the face of a situation one doesn't fully understand, to fear of transformations in the realm of values, to panic in the context of a pandemic, to more or less accurate diagnoses of chaos in the financial system, climate change, or the dissolution

of democracy (Schumacher, 2025). It can also refer simultaneously to several overlapping or interrelated things, constituting a context termed *polycrisis* by Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern (1993), an expression recovered and disseminated by historian Adam Tooze (2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Since Tooze used it at the 2023 World Economic Forum,³ the concept of polycrisis has rapidly been propagated, as if there were finally an adequate signifier to account for transformations too complex to be explained by the diagnosis of crisis referred to “just” one sphere of social life. This conceptual synthesis, however, seems far from exhausting ambiguities and differences in understanding in the current conceptual debate and analysis.

Some of the most renowned histories of the concept of crisis (Koselleck, 2006; Habermas, 1988; Starn, 1971; Ricoeur, 1988; Morin, 1976) reveal a variety of meanings – according to the concept’s use in different disciplines and domains of social life – that are present both in the ancient use of the word in classical Greek and in its modern appropriation. These histories also demonstrate the difficulties of both delimiting periods of crisis in a historical narrative and diagnosing states of crisis in social systems. For many, this does not necessarily mean abandoning the concept, but rather an ongoing effort to elucidate its uses, acknowledging a certain instability and the need to clarify diagnostic criteria.

In dialogue with pragmatist and interactionist sociology, in this dossier, Soneghet develops the concept as a discursive mediator employed by social agents to deal with critical periods and experiences of disarray, disorder, anguish, and suffering. It connects elements of everyday life with others that refer to broader definitions of forms of social and systemic integration, through the emergence of problems and problematizations, not always described as “crisis.” For Soneghet, the concept could thus be embedded in a gradient of problematizations of everyday experience to address practices ranging from habit to catastrophe and trauma, including experiences of ontological insecurity, chronic uncertainty, or “pervasive critical states” that challenge senses of normality within a conceptual framework that conceives of crisis as part of the “fragility of the social.”

³ World Economic Forum. 2023. “This is why ‘polycrisis’ is a useful way of looking at the world right now.” March 7. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/03/polycrisis-adam-tooze-historian-explains/>.

Frédéric Vandenberghe, in his text, explores the concept of crisis from a macrosociological perspective associated with conjunctural analyses, here understood as a crucial field for the study of power relations historically revived in time and space. To this end, he performs a genealogy of the genre, referencing the Marxist tradition and moreover also showing its connections with Karl Mannheim's sociology and with contemporary debate. Here, conjunctural analyses are conceived as an attempt to explain the multiple determinants that cause a crisis in a specific historical moment, combining both the objective dimensions of relationships and the perceptions of the actors who produce the critiques. In their temporality, crises combine events and processes whose generative mechanisms, in the tradition of critical realism, can be found in structuring conflicts and contradictions. They shape situations that demand decision-making by actors, in a way in which conjunctures are "objectively overdetermined" and "subjectively indeterminate." For the author, this conceptualization should help guide social theory towards understanding the crises of the present.

2. Crisis in the histories of Sociology

Difficulties in conceptualizing crises are also related to the variety of objects and domains that can be involved in crises, having specific dynamics and assessment criteria. While it is possible to outline common features, the concept carries variations and characteristics specific to the field of objects and disciplinary traditions in which it was conceived (see Ricoeur, 1988; Koselleck, 2006). The shift from observing crises in the societal realm to that of forms of knowledge and disciplinary traditions raises new elements and constitutes a specific field of debate.

In the field of history of sciences, Thomas Kuhn (2012) based the distinction between periods of "normal" science and its periods of "crisis" on the way scientific practice behaves in relation to its paradigmatic and presuppositional environment. According to his argument, in the first case, the scientific community focuses on solving problems that emerge within a paradigmatic environment, that is, one taken for granted and unquestioned. In periods of crisis, on the contrary, a broad set of assumptions, including basic concepts, norms, and values, become controversial, leading to a

reorientation of research and questioning of the very paradigms, whose validity depends on their integral coordination.

The limitations of Kuhn's model for understanding the dynamics of the social sciences have been widely discussed (see, especially, Martins, 1996, chap. 1). His historical examples were drawn from physics, chemistry, and astronomy, later known, precisely, as the "paradigmatic" sciences. In the humanities and social sciences, distinguishing between these two periods in the terms proposed by Kuhn proves more difficult, due both to the coexistence and competition between alternative paradigms and to the persistent discussion about the presuppositional and theoretical environment, beyond empirical research itself. In this case, the criteria for delimiting a "crisis" are less clear and become the subject of constant problematization, which, however, does not prevent the proliferation of diagnoses. In this sense, more than seeking to define objectifying criteria for defining (or not) crisis "of" or "in" sociology, we seek to bring some landmarks of the sociological debate, which deal explicitly with the topic of crisis, to provide elements that allow one to perceive continuities and differences that emerge over time and in different contexts.

2.1. The constitution of a debate on the crisis of sociology

In works on the history of sociology, some historical periods have been more widely recognized as periods of "crisis" of the discipline. Few would hesitate to describe the first decades of the twentieth century or the late 1960s as such. Even in the literature of the time repeated formulations of an ongoing crisis are found, involving, as we will see, often differing stances regarding its causes and, above all, ways to overcome it.

In the first case, epistemological controversies surrounding the scientific orientation of sociology – between models of the natural sciences, on the one hand, and those of "spiritual," cultural, or humanist traditions, on the other – were particularly relevant. This tension permeated different authors and contexts throughout the 19th century and constituted the core of disputes over the delimitation of sociology as a disciplinary field, its public legitimacy, and its place in university institutions. For Lepenies (1996), sociology emerged as a "third culture" between the two major

models, competing with them for public attention and the interpretation of social change. By the end of that century, sociology had not yet achieved the same prestige as literature or the natural sciences and struggled for a position in European universities. Reform movements in French and German universities ultimately favored the emergence of the new discipline, but in an environment of intense dispute over the method and direction of scientific and intellectual activity.

According to Peter Wagner (1994, 2001), emerging sociologists in three prominent European countries – France, Germany, and Italy – challenged the claims of liberal political economy to be “the science of modern society,” questioning its epistemological foundation and basic concepts. To this end, they also benefited from the experience of a period of social crises and conflicts that contradicted the promises and assumptions of a spontaneous social integration based on expansion of individual liberties. Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto were authors who, in this context, offered distinct alternatives for addressing these issues beyond the liberal utilitarian framework which was predominant in the study of economics. Over time, Marxism would also be recognized as a possible alternative in the sociological debate, and utilitarian political economy itself would undergo an internal paradigmatic revolution with the rise of the marginalist Austrian school.

Awareness of the crisis grew stronger in Europe at the beginning of the last century, when sociology gained its first foothold in universities – these latter themselves undergoing major changes. An emblematic case is Germany, where, according to Graf and Föllmer (2012), 370 books were published between 1918 and 1933 with titles containing the word “crisis” in reference to politics, society, or the economy. Sciences and culture could also be deemed as in crisis, indicating a proliferation of such discourse across distinct spheres, its importance in historical narratives, as well as its difficult stabilization. Difficulties in conceptualization should not negate the existence of problems. The “crisis of early modernity” (Wagner, 1994) reflected a growing distrust and questioning of the then-current liberalism, and the intensification of political and social conflicts. In the field of science, it was a period of growing skepticism toward scientific progress, criticism and disenchantment with technological applications and even with rationalism. It was in this context that some sociologists understood the discipline as a “science of crisis” (see especially Steinmetz, 2023). In the United States,

in 1929, John Dewey approached the problem by criticizing “spectator theories” of knowledge that advocated a naive naturalism regarding the interconnections between knowledge, practices, and language, even drawing on, in an original way, the then-recent developments in quantum physics, which produced important metamorphoses in scientific debate throughout the century.

In the post-World War II, conditions were quite different. In Wagner’s (1994) interpretation, responses to the crisis involved a conventionalization of practices and forms of social regulation that gave a certain predictability to forms of action and integration, mitigating the uprooting and disorganization of communal life effects in more industrialized societies. Regulatory policies required production of knowledge about social life, which was enabled by disciplines such as sociology, economics, and statistics. These disciplines helped to map, describe, and coordinate spheres of social interaction, as well as to guide social protection policies and investment in infrastructure and economic development. In countries and regions then considered “underdeveloped,” the social sciences guided strategies for “modernization” of economic activities, political institutions, and even cultural life.

As some observers point out (Outhwaite, 2021; Moebius, 2021), between the “classical” period of emergence of the discipline and the period in which it effectively became institutionalized, there was more rupture than continuity, both in the institutional aspect and in research interests. Although Parsons (1970/1937) formulated his theory by means of a historical-systematic reconstruction of sociological thought, suggesting elements of continuity, the broader conditions of sociological practice had become very different, whether within the scope of university life or in the sociopolitical context (see esp. Calhoun *et al.*, 2002).

In an article dating back to 1956, Georges Gurvitch enumerated a multitude of crisis diagnoses, in a narrative that closely resembles contemporary texts. Then, as now, one of the questions posed was: if sociology is always in crisis, does it make sense to treat this as an issue for debate? His answer – affirmative – points to an attempt to determine more precisely what dimension is truly important in considering the crisis, so that it can be overcome. In a way, this text by Gurvitch condenses the proliferation of discourses and seeks to give them meaning, situating the origin of the crisis in divergences regarding the nature of knowledge

production – that is, the actual possibility of producing explanations. In his view, none of the various attempts produced in the United States to resolve the issue – from Parsons to Merton, through Sorokin and Znaniecki – nor the French alternatives would offer effective paths to escape the “enormous danger in which it currently places sociology”⁴ (Gurvitch, 1956, p. 6).

Although Gurvitch’s stance did not have enough impact to establish hegemony over a new way of doing sociology, his text can be read as a kind of *transition* to the debates on crisis that emerged in the 1970s, in which the relationship between theory and empiricism, for example, gave way to another order of tensions. Discussions about multiple interconnections between sociology and society have started focusing on the ethical and political dimensions of this discipline. The dualities of order and conflict, action and structure, individualism and holism, and critique and neutrality become different ways of thinking about the implications of sociology on society, and vice versa.

The second historical context mentioned above refers precisely to the crisis of post-war forms of stabilization. In it, the connection between diagnoses of sociology’s crisis and broader social crises is more explicit. Alvin Gouldner’s (1971) argument is exemplary in this regard. In *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, the author not only denounces what he deems sociology’s conservative commitment to stabilizing the political order, effectively treating it as an ideology, but also announces alternative engagement and social change, bringing it closer to emerging social movements. In his words, “we theorize today within the sound of guns. The old order has the picks of a hundred rebellions thrust into its hide” (Gouldner, 1971, p. vii)! The crisis announcement follows the criticism of a theory that would have become hegemonic both within the discipline and within society. Therefore, theoretical critique would require examination of underlying, often not explicit, premises that shape values and “ways of seeing,” as well as of experiences and feelings of social scientists, which are inseparable from theoretical vocabulary and logic. Hence, crises and changes in forms of knowledge are strongly linked to those occurring in the sociopolitical realm and in generational transitions. Their theoretical discussion should therefore reflect on its social and value conditions and

⁴ This and all other translations are the responsibility of the authors.

situations, connecting a sociology of knowledge to a sociology of sociology (see, among others, Steinmetz, 2023).

At the same time, though in another direction, Raymond Boudon (1971) published in France *La Crise de la Sociologie: questions d'épistémologie sociologique*, whose first chapter was published in English the following year, having wide repercussion (1972).⁵ Referencing a Gurvitch's argument in the aforementioned text, Boudon claims that there are two ideal-typical attitudes for dealing with the relation between social crisis and the crisis of sociology. The first, "embodied" by critical sociology linked to the Frankfurt School, would assume the inevitability of this relation, insofar as the epistemological premise of this model of sociology places it in a relation of mutual dependence with social reality, justified by a certain notion of ethical primacy imposed on science. The second attitude, with which the author identifies, posits that the only way for sociology to achieve stability in confronting the crises that surround it is to strengthen itself as a science by developing three areas designed to refine and, to a certain extent, unify it: sociology of sociology, methodology, and epistemology. This call to deepen its scientific character and disciplinary singularity is an alternative that, as we will see, reappears in the contemporary debate (Goldthorpe, 2006).

Written a few years later, Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo academicus* (2011/1987) more closely resembles Gouldner's diagnosis than that of his French colleague. It can be understood as a denunciation of the university establishment's commitment to legitimizing the social order and its disconnection from transformative social movements. The effervescence of social and sociological theory critical of structural-functionalist hegemony, which confronts the crisis announced by Gouldner and promotes paradigmatic innovations, could be termed a "new theoretical movement," in the words of Jeffrey Alexander (1987). Its emergence cannot be disconnected from the "new social movements" that spread after May 1968 and now go beyond Euro-American territory. The proliferation of writings on crisis during this period⁶ is an indicator not only of a state of consciousness but also of divisions that would persist over time.

In the Latin American context, the dynamics of sociology's crises and metamorphoses have a distinct temporality and unique relations with

⁵ The full translation of the book into English took place in 1980.

⁶ In addition to the texts and authors already cited, see also Eisenstadt (1976), Alexander (1977).

epistemic and sociopolitical problems. In contrast to narratives exclusively focused on Europe and the United States, the history of the discipline in the region reveals an intellectual movement with greater autonomy and creativity, capable of engaging with theories of the “center” and promoting translations, adaptations, and innovations with a critical sense. The then-dominant structural functionalism played an important role in consolidating sociology in the region. However, its reception implied significant changes that pointed to theoretical and interpretive alternatives in authors such as Gino Germani, Florestan Fernandes, Guerreiro Ramos, and Heleith Safiothi. Their works emphasized a specific historical dimension of domestic societies, highlighting contingencies and diverse trajectories in contrast to universalizing and evolutionary categories (Brasil Jr., 2013; Maia, 2015). This intellectual community gained relative autonomy regarding central countries, helped in the formation of a publishing circuit in the region, including relevant publishers and journals, and of research centers and intellectual circulation that fostered regional debates. The emergence of dependency theories lies among the relevant outcomes of this process, challenging both the modernization theories and the prevailing center-periphery relations. Over time, their scope expanded, even leading to a reflexivity on the relations of dependency within the very intellectual sphere and knowledge production (Beiguel, 2016).

A snapshot of the debate at that time would reveal significant controversies regarding conceptions of sociological practice, as in the famous dispute between Florestan Fernandes and Guerreiro Ramos (Bariani, 2006). The meaning of “crisis,” however, carried a more pronounced sociopolitical dimension, due to institutional ruptures and political violence in the region – the military coup in Brazil in 1964 being the first in a series. This has profoundly affected the conditions of sociological research. In Brazil, the eruption of the military dictatorship led to interventions in universities, interrupting careers and research programs of many intellectual leaders in sociology and the social sciences, and to political persecution of students. Research was reorganized under difficult conditions at universities, counting on the work of younger sociologists – some trained at prestigious foreign institutions – and on enhancing quality of emerging graduate programs (Martins, 2013; Werneck Vianna *et al.*, 2004).

Marcos Lacerda's article, in this dossier, shows how the research program that emerged during this period – involving particularly Antonio Cândido, Roberto Schwarz, and Paulo Arantes – can be mobilized to understand both the crises of capitalism and the crises of sociology itself. The author finds therein an original impetus for a critical theory produced from the “periphery of capitalism,” capable of problematizing the history of the system's development as a whole. To this end, those intellectuals initially analyzed aesthetic and conceptual forms, understood as “powerful formalizations” of social and political processes, through which the mediations between structuring relations and forms of consciousness or ideology can be understood. Lacerda sees them as bearers of a postcolonial sensibility able to dialogue with other critical theories of modernization and to renew contemporary sociological thought.

2.2. From the margins to the *epicenter* of a new crisis

While a more explicit debate about the crisis was taking shape in the main sociological publications and societies in Europe and the United States, different intellectual and political movements were shaping up other stances regarding the social world, with arguments that, in many cases, involve a critique of the multiple biases present in the history of the social sciences generally, or of the very project of sociology as a science. The intellectual production of authors who move across different fields, or even the one forged within social struggles, has long remained on the margins of major sociological institutions – such as national and international associations and widely circulated publications. In recent decades, however, such criticisms of Western science and knowledge production took up a prominent place in sociology, destabilizing the legitimacy of the center-periphery divide and, above all, questioning the validity of a “hegemonic sociology.”

While, in the major debates presented in the previous section regarding sociology's crisis and reconstruction, disputes involved renowned Western scholars – positioned in prestigious institutions in the United States, France, England, and Germany – more recent criticisms, produced in different parts of the world and in different intellectual and political contexts, are now felt by this same center. Criticisms formulated from the margins exert pressure to reorganize the structuring relations of sociological practice.

In recent literature on the crisis of sociology, one way to characterize this confrontation is by grouping these multiple political and intellectual movements under the rubric of *studies*, referring to university institutions that harbor this type of intellectual practice, which is often antidisciplinary (Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2021). The type of critique produced by cultural studies, however, does not exhaust the broad range of productions developed in the margins. One of these dissenting voices is that of Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who has reservations about the postcolonial movement and distances herself from cultural studies, since, in her reading, it is a movement uncommitted to popular struggles, and led by figures occupying positions in institutions in the global North, who ended up “creating a small empire within the empire” (Cusicanqui, 2010, p. 58).

From the view that concerns us here, it is important noting that critiques produced by various intellectual and political sources – from the feminist movement to critiques of the racialized nature of knowledge, including the postcolonial and decolonial debates, and various “turns” – are now *part* of sociology (Miglievich-Ribeiro & Brito, 2024). This production has addressed some of the most pressing contemporary issues, from global inequalities to ecological issues, from digitalization processes to post-democracy, from geopolitical crises to conflict and peace processes analysis. Within sociology, their presence is not felt equally in all spaces; such critiques can be deemed more or less relevant, more or less pertinent; or some can even argue that sociology should develop means of shielding itself. But one could hardly argue that criticisms of the distinct relations existing in sociology are present in contemporary debate.

Within the scope of the International Sociological Association, since the 1990s, challenges have been raised such as the recognition of Indigenous sociologies (Rosa, 2019), the construction of a global history of sociology (Dufoix & Macé, 2019), and even the recognition of the multiple histories of sociology and their relation to the production of social theory (Maia, 2023). The effects of this broad movement are still unclear, but in the following section we will highlight one of its specific aspects: the debate over the canon. Our research has shown that this is one of the key points of tension between mainstream sociology and the debates constructed from its margins, with significant impacts on the production of a crisis diagnosis.

3. The debate on canon in crisis interpretations

The canon – or the classics – issue, intertwining topics such as the history of sociology and sociological theory, brings to the fore recurring themes in discussions around crisis – the relationship between theory and empiricism or between normativity and neutrality, for example – but also produces new challenges that permeate sociology’s institutional territory. The relation between sociology’s “canon” and its crisis has been raised in various contexts and from varied perspectives.

In this presentation, we take the topic of the canon as an example of how some critical elements presented by the “margins” reach the core of sociology, provoking responses that mobilize debate. In other words, although these critiques affect numerous aspects of sociology, the discussion surrounding the canon is particularly interesting for illustrating the type of arguments and problems raised. Broadly speaking, we refer here to multiple critical approaches that challenge the *status quo* from different perspectives, from geopolitical positions to issues of identity: feminist, postcolonial, decolonial critiques, queer studies, critical race studies, etc. Although many of these approaches can be grouped under the rubric of “cultural studies,” it is worth noting that not all these critical perspectives fit within this framework. For the sake of conciseness, we refer here, without going into the numerous differences, to critiques that have at their core a denunciation of the biased nature of knowledge originated from the “center” or produced by persons in positions of power in terms of structurally privileged identities.

In this regard, we may cite Raewyn Connell’s (1997) essay, “Why is classical theory classical?,” as an exemplary reference in the field of critical arguments against the disciplinary canon. In this work and in numerous other contributions by the Australian sociologist, the formation of the disciplinary canon is analyzed in light of the global history of colonial imperialism: the global expansion of Western colonization and the tensions between liberalism and empire would have provided sociology with its main conceptual framework and much of its data, questions, and research methods.

The critique of the disciplinary canon, therefore, has as its central argument an accusation that sociology – as well as other Western social sciences – was constituted in the wake of the global economy of knowledge, as a result of imperial dynamics of long-lasting European colonialism. Such

dominance established a division of intellectual labor between the center and the peripheries, which relegated the colonized world to essentially a source of data and information so that the “center” could formulate theories without recognizing its equal dignity in producing knowledge for the analysis of modernizing processes. This epistemic hegemony has produced specific effects: (1) the claim to universality of sociological theories produced in the West (and for the West) (Connell, 2006); (2) an interpretation of social phenomena based entirely on readings developed by the “center”; (3) exclusions and cancellations of voices and productions not directly referable to hegemonic groups (white, Western, male, bourgeois), a consequence of a hegemonic Eurocentric thought that constructed and classified non-Western otherness according to a logic of inferiority (Ricotta & Ruocco, 2025).

Without space to cover a broad, varied, and complex debate here, we can resort to a summary of the most relevant issues that have arisen in the context of postcolonial and decolonial criticism of Eurocentric social knowledge (Pellegrino & Ricotta 2020, pp. 803-804):

(i) the critique of the Eurocentric ideology of modernity; (ii) the close interconnection between the development of a global society, or global capitalism, and colonialism; (iii) an attention to the dynamics that created a hierarchical relationship between human groups and the emphasis on «subaltern» groups; (iv) the persistence of relations of

domination on a global level due to historical colonialism, well beyond the end of formal colonialism; (v) the epistemological critique of Eurocentric thought and the need to look through new lenses (and with new methods) at domination and social exclusion dynamics, as well as at the forms of resistance and struggles for emancipation.

This is the broadest argumentative picture of criticisms of the sociological canon and its “Eurocentric thinking.” Here it acquires far-reaching contours, ranging from the epistemic to the theoretical dimension, from the methodological dimension to research techniques, to the stance of those who conduct research and, more generally, to the role of social researchers and universities and research centers (Ricotta, 2025).

The accusation leveled by the studies at the classical canon – due to its Eurocentric, patriarchal, racist character, among other characterizations – has been interpreted as one of the causes of a crisis of legitimacy of

sociological knowledge in the public sphere and within academic institutions themselves. On the one hand, especially for those who assume defensive, albeit critical, positions regarding the canon and the “classics” of sociological thought, the instances coming from “the margins” can be interpreted as one of the causes of contemporary crisis of the sociological discipline, insofar as they contribute to eroding “that ‘common background,’ useful [...] not only to favor discussion within a common space, but above all to contain the public weakening to which the discipline is currently subject, also as a result of these blows” (Pendenza, 2025, p. 29).

In a recent article, Carlos Sell (2025) raised concerns about a certain reductionism that would ground criticisms of the sociological “canon,” what could lead to an undesirable theoretical homogenization and to the establishment of postcolonialism as a new hegemonic and unifying paradigm. In his view, such criticisms lack consideration of the systematic elements built in the course of the discipline, which are crucial for formulating research programs focused on fundamental categories of problems. He concedes that temporal distancing rendered the “classics” problematic and even “obsolete,” what would compromise their ability to provide foundations for a systematic theory. Therefore, although not incorporating the explicit idea of a “crisis in sociology” into his analysis, Sell brings an underlying diagnosis of problems that render sociology “dysfunctional,” aggravated by inadequate revision of the canon. Endeavoring to devise prophylactic strategies, the author advocates the recovery of sociology’s systematic vocation, once included in efforts gathered under the rubric of general sociology or social theory, renewing it by integrating contemporary demands.

On the other hand, counteracting arguments insist on the learning potential of criticism of the classical canon, which enables identification of specific problems in sociology and opens it to new themes and perspectives. Sociologist Simon Susen recently devoted an essay to current trends in “post-classical” sociology entitled “Sociology in the Twenty-First Century.” In his text, Susen (2020) identifies six major trends that he defines as *intimations*. The first of these concerns postcolonial and decolonial critique. In this regard, the author identifies three essential contributions from this critique to the classical sociological canon: (1) the reconceptualization of (subaltern) agency; (2) the overcoming of counterproductive analytical antinomies; (3) the recognition of sociology’s complicity in adopting an imperial perspective, in favor of Western global hegemony.

The critical review of the sociological canon, according to Susen, can be read as a contribution to the contemporary debate on sociology and its analytical and practical efficacy. In the wake of these arguments, positions regarding the disciplinary canon are diverse and, in some cases, divergent, ranging from radical rejections of the classics and the global conceptual system of a discipline interpreted as functional to colonial and imperialist conquests, to positions that see the arguments arising from cultural studies as an opportunity to expand and reinforce aspects of the sociological discipline already present in its broad sense of engaged, socially committed, “critical,” or “public” sociology (Burawoy, 2005).

Another proposal for accepting criticism of the canon without discarding it is summarized in the idea of polyphony as a form of canon, as proposed by Hamlin, Weiss, and Brito (2022). Considering both the controversies surrounding the historically gendered nature of the canon and the call for including female voices in sociology, the authors argue for the idea of a “polyphonic sociology.” Shifting from a literary metaphor to a musical metaphor for the canon, the authors argue for a sociology capable of highlighting the contrast and counterpoint between different voices and, simultaneously, defining how these latter can be combined in a shared and inclusive tradition that enables dialogue.

The different positions on the canon and its relation to the general meaning of sociological practice, we would venture to say, have been one of the most recurrent ways of taking a stand within sociology. There is, of course, something new in the current debate on the classical canon: in the contemporary context, criticism about who should enter or leave this privileged list considers factors such as geopolitical origin, place of enunciation, and markers such as gender and race. In the case of those who advocate the abolition of any type of canon, a revamped positivist position (Turner, 1993) continues to exist, postulating such suppression by virtue of an empirically oriented conception of sociology, which owes nothing to past theories. But there is also the novelty of a critique of the classical canon based on the argument that the very idea of classics only makes sense in the Western tradition. Therefore, the emergence of a new sociology depends on the implosion of the canon (Connell, 2019) or on a version combining emphasis on research and on contextual experiences as a way of addressing obstacles to gender equality (Grüning & Santoro, 2021). These specificities

of the contemporary debate, however, can be understood as an update of recurring movements within sociology and its relations to critiques, perceptions of crisis, and its metamorphoses.

Parsons' ambitious and disseminated construction of a general theory is, first and foremost, a creative effort into synthesis based on the selection of certain authors as representative of different sociological traditions that offer the necessary "parts" for constructing a theory about the structure of social action. The hegemony of the Parsonian synthesis is challenged precisely through reconsideration of authors deemed classics: in the once-emerging "conflict paradigm," the construction of a new set of sociological themes and theories through reorganizing the Parsonian canon. Classic authors underwent a process of condemnation (in the case of Durkheim), oblivion (in that of Marshall and Pareto), reinterpretation (in the case of Weber), and consecration (in the case of Marx). Considering particularly the French debate, the critique of structure in favor of a sociology of action also makes its own choices, privileging Weber, but also Simmel. Within the so-called "new theoretical movement" (Alexander, 1987), dualities are thought of as forms of crisis that compromise the quality and scope of sociology; once again, the classics are the "instruments" that help to take stances and provide the raw material for new efforts into synthesis, whose outcome are the major theories emerging around the 1980s.

Still within the scope of sociology originated from the "center," some criticisms challenge the effectiveness of classical sociological thought: consider the positions expressed by Ulrich Beck (1997) on the inability of the classics to interpret the processes of a globalized society due to "methodological nationalism"; or those related to Immanuel Wallerstein's (1979) analysis of world-systems, which draw attention to the impossibility of interpreting long-term processes operating in contemporary times, when the focus is not on the systemic relations structured since the long sixteenth century as a modern world-system; issues, by the way, that are at the heart of Latin American perspective on modernity/coloniality, expressed by the concept of "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 1992).

In recent decades, as we have seen, criticisms of the European and colonial origins of sociology (Go, 2020; Alatas & Sinha, 2017; Bhabra & Holmwood, 2021) and of persistence of patriarchal and racialized structures (Sydie, 1994; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Madoo, 1998; Moodie, 2023; Marshal

& Witz, 2004; Daflon & Chaguri, 2023; Morris, 2015) find precisely in mobilizing the canon one of the pillars for building their stances. Likewise, criticisms of this model – guided by the logic of inclusion/exclusion – also mobilize, in turn, a specific insight regarding the place of the classics to defend their conceptions of sociology (Wagner, 2012; Sell, 2025). In short, the intermittent debate about the crisis in sociology has one of its core points in the mobilization and questioning of classical authors. By exploring sociology's permanence and transformations, it is possible to perceive that its “identity” remains intertwined with the way its history is told, and its practice remains grounded in theoretical constructs and explanatory categories still subordinate to this classical tradition. It is understandable why, ultimately, the dispute over the maintenance, reform, or dismissal of the canon is a sensitive aspect of interpretations of the crisis.

4. Contemporary intertwining between sociology and crisis

The crisis of sociology and the role of sociology in the face of this crisis have been a recurring topic in the history of the discipline. Despite being difficult to precisely delimit the different phases, we would venture to say that a new debate has been underway since the 1990s, whose contours became more precise since the turn of the century onward, with an intellectual production that extends to the present (see, for example: Coenen-Huther, 1995; Wieviorka, 2009; Das, 1993; Busino, 1990; Calhoun 2022; Eppard *et al.* 2025). To illustrate exemplary positions regarding possible diagnoses of the crisis in sociology, we take some of the main exponents of this debate in the French intellectual context, in which such production has been abundant.

A recent dossier in *Revue du Mauss*, with the suggestive title “Nous l'avons tant aimée... la sociologie. Et maintenant ?”, offers different perspectives on this subject. Some of them diametrically opposed, as that of Nathalie Heinich (2020), who declares her continued love for sociology and defends it as a science independent of the generalizing and normative concerns of philosophy and politics, and that of François Dubet (2020), for whom sociology has lost much of its intellectual and political influence, mainly for having given up “society” as a relevant category from an epistemic and practical point of view. To a certain extent, this dossier develops and expands

debate around issues already raised in a book by Alain Caillé and Frédéric Vandenberghe (2016), which vigorously formulates a diagnosis of the crisis of sociology and puts forth a proposal for a theoretical consensus around the paradigm of the gift. Upon its publication in English the book gave rise to a series of debates within the international sociological community (Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2016, 2020).

Around the same time, Bernard Lahire (2021) published a significant manifesto expressing profound discontent with the current state of the discipline. In the wake of this general diagnosis, the author made significant efforts to re-actualize what he considers sociology's true vocation – its capacity to elaborate general laws and far-reaching explanations based on a unifying theoretical paradigm (Lahire, 2023).

Keeping the same national context, it is also worth mentioning the article by Boltanski, Esquerre, and Lazarus (2024), who recently addressed the crisis of sociology topic, highlighting how internal and external tensions affect the discipline and produce feelings of threat and crisis. For them, the discipline is experiencing a certain structural crisis, as two operating models coexist internally, engaging in intense dispute over the discipline's direction – to follow either criteria of “scientific innovation” drawn from the natural sciences or those of criticism that refer to the artistic and literary avant-garde movements. While the former conceives of and restricts innovations to the internal dynamics of disciplinary practice, the latter associates internal changes with external ones, which occur within society, such as avant-garde movements seeking to capture the “spirit of an age,” what tends to internalize social conflicts and politicize disciplinary controversy. This contrasts with the scientific model that only recognizes crisis when criticism focuses on methods and theories and originates from sociologists themselves. This protection, however, can weaken, and external allies or adversaries may emerge, even due to social interest in the very objects of sociological research, what reduces the autonomy of the debate and produces feelings of attack and threat. For the authors, if internal and social crises tend to coincide, the discipline must seek to safeguard its boundaries, maintaining a distinction that allows social problems to be re-elaborated as sociological problems without, however, losing the ability to reflect on the political consequences of its proposals.

In the introduction to a volume that aims to develop a social science of the social sciences, Fassin and Steinmetz (2023) give a prominent status to the relations between the discipline's internal and external dynamics as sources of crisis and transformation, whose indicator would lie, once again, in the tensions between the scientific community's stances of engagement and distancing from the social space that constitutes its object of study and to which researchers belong. In their view, however, distancing is impossible, implying a critical engagement qualified by epistemological reflexivity, which, as already argued by Gouldner and Bourdieu, constitutes the social sciences as their own object of study, reflexively applying the same strategies to their field of knowledge as they apply to others. Regarding the current situation, the authors emphasize the political elements and the broader dispute within the scientific field. For them, the social sciences are the target of attacks that question their social utility, their critical stance, or their interpretative and qualitative methods, in the name of conservative political programs and/or still highly positivist conceptions of science. They end up overlooking the heterogeneity of the social sciences, their methodological variety, and the richness of knowledge produced in recent decades, which deserves to be critically defended and examined to reveal the relations between political and scientific practices and their relation to social processes.

4.1. Possible ways to reflect on the relationship between criticism, crisis and sociology

The meaning of sociological practice and sociology's relation with social critique as diagnostic elements of the discipline's current problems are directly addressed in the articles by Thiago Panica Pontes and Roberto Dutra. For Pontes, many of the diagnoses of sociology's crisis express important fissures and controversies in our field but lack greater connection with the theoretical and epistemological dimensions of sociological research. This would be due to a still insufficient common effort at self-understanding by the epistemic community itself, a problem that must be addressed to strengthen a shared understanding of the meaning of sociological practice. The author reaffirms the centrality of the relationship between knowledge

production and learning and self-formation processes that constitute a scientific community capable of questioning the sociohistorical world of which it is a part and learning from it. This community can then be conceived as a regulatory ideal of the exchange of sociology with other forms of knowledge, notably social criticism, without confusing it with them.

Roberto Dutra, in turn, mobilizes the categories of Luhmann's systems theory to defend the complementarity of research programs around a sociology of social criticism and a critical sociology of societies. For him, this combination is necessary for sociological criticism to safeguard its specificity in the face of social criticism originating from agents, without, however, relying on claims of moral superiority. For Dutra, this is a decisive issue due to the major transformations that have occurred in the relationship between experts and laypeople in various fields of knowledge production, including sociology, which calls into question the predominantly progressive environment of sociological discourse and its claims to authority and recognition. This would require defending sociology as a second-order evaluation, critical of systemic self-descriptions, including critical ones, so that it can establish itself as an original perspective.

4.2. Concrete challenges for sociology in the face of global crises

We began this presentation by considering the extent to which the diagnosis of a *polycrisis* poses more problems than concrete indications for dealing with the world; the same applies to predictions of crises too acute or complex to be understood or confronted (Schuhmacher, 2025). Among the reasons for this hesitation is a practical one: astonishment always carries the risk of dulling thought and hindering action. The point, however, is not minimizing the scale of the challenges that intertwine in this first quarter of the 21st century, nor removing sociology from the field.

One way to deal with complexity is to seriously consider the obstacles ahead, weighing specific contributions from the discipline and the possibilities for multidisciplinary collective work. In this dossier, we count on two articles that consider sociology in the face of one of the most pressing crises of our time: the climate crisis.

Irene Strazzeri draws on combining two major authors of critical theory to consider the climate crisis as a sociological issue. More specifically, the

author proposes a reinterpretation of Adorno's theory on the domination of nature, combined with Axel Honneth's critique of power, what allows her to show how recent environmental activism – especially performative actions that use works of art as symbolic targets – reveals alternative forms of social integration that escape the logic of domination. In her analysis, such practices shed light on the ethical dimension of intergenerational justice and point to a normative reconfiguration based on the idea of sustainability and the recognition of the Earth as a bearer of rights. Here, sociology is called upon to assume a critical role in the face of the environmental crisis, not only by denouncing the historical alienation between society and nature but also by opening space for practices of disalienation. Strazzeri suggests that, by connecting emotion, critical reason, and collective action, the discipline can help break social paralysis in the face of ecological catastrophe, helping to imagine possible futures and sustainable ways of life.

Elaine Santos's article brings a discussion that is both more concrete and more abstract. A researcher with extensive experience in the field of energy matrices, Santos builds her analysis of emerging challenges to sociology in the form of a *field report* on her work in an interdisciplinary research mission in Jequitinhonha Valley. Among the author's many contributions, we highlight the way she presents the tensions between strictly technical knowledge related to the topic of energy and the set of knowledge and issues typically attributed to the social sciences. Rather than indicating different intentions or positions regarding the topic of energy – for example, between the search for assessing technical feasibility of a given form of energy production and the social impact of this process – Santos asserts that greater or lesser technical knowledge of the subject – in this case, lithium exploration – has implications for the possibility of constructing an accurate sociological diagnosis. This is further compounded by the tendency to establish a tacit hierarchy among researchers in different fields, precisely due to the differences in the depth of technical knowledge. Focusing on this specific case, the author highlights theoretical and methodological challenges that emerge because social problems are permeated by complex relationships between distinct domains of reality, in which the “social” cannot be separated from other aspects. Against the backdrop of energy transition, which also implies elements of social crisis, the report concludes its analysis with a mapping of the main challenges for sociology, which

concern the ability to deepen the relation to the technical dimension of the subject without relinquishing its disciplinary specificity and the way of dealing with the issue of evaluative positioning, thus sustaining a sociology that is critical without falling into what she calls “confirmatory biases.”

Final considerations

The brief overview we’ve outlined in this introductory article indicates, as can be seen, that the debate on the crisis from the perspective of sociology, and on the crisis of sociology itself, is far from being exhausted. The stupor faced with global crises stems not only from their complexity but also from the deleterious effects of their possible prolongations. From newspaper headlines to the pages of scientific journals, warnings, and evidence abound that the planet’s survival is at stake, not to mention the countless other imminent risks of the most varied kinds – geopolitical, financial, ecological, food security, and health. These predictions manifested in the agenda reminds us of the verses of the poet from Minas Gerais:

[...]
 With the key in hand
 he wishes to open the door,
 there is no door;
 he wants to die at sea
 but the sea dried up;
 he wants to go to Minas,
 Minas is gone.
 José, what now?
 [...]
 (Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *José*)

The controversies surrounding the crisis in sociology, in turn, seem like just another layer in a less than encouraging scenario. However, the discussion of the crisis should be taken as an opportunity to refine our understanding of ongoing processes, a task in which sociology undoubtedly has an important role to play. As we have seen, intradisciplinary discussions about the meanings of sociology, its epistemic premises, the boundaries

between knowledge and practice, fragmentation or plurality (depending on how one views the issue), changes in the canon, etc., have been recurrent throughout the discipline's history. In none of these contexts has it ceased to exist; on the contrary, disagreements have often served as a driving force for its transformation, or, as we put it in the title of this dossier, for its metamorphoses. It is difficult to predict what new forms sociology will invent for itself, but we believe that the *world's* crises are, today as in the past, catalysts for sociology to work through its own crises and continue reinventing ways of producing knowledge. In between the belief in a future in which sociology remains relevant and the uncertainties of that path, we once again evoke Drummond's poem:

But you don't die,
you're tough, José!

Alone in the dark
like a wild animal,
no theogony,
no bare wall
to lean against,
no black horse
to gallop away,
you march, José!
José, where to?

The dossier we present here is an invitation to delve deeper into this debate within the context of Brazilian social sciences. We believe this is an issue worthy of our attention, not only because of the peculiarities of the crisis in this national context, but above all because of the plural, vigorous, and creative nature of the research and intellectual debates taking place in Brazil. We hope that the articles gathered here will be taken as indicative of possible paths forward in this discussion, hoping to establish an ever-widening field of national and international dialogue.

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