

Challenges of a Global Sociology: Centers and Peripheries in Geopolitics of Sociological Theory

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ABSTRACT--- *Debate about the possibility of building a global sociology has gained increasing importance in recent years. In dialogue with works that argue in favor of post-national sociologies as well as literature that criticizes the hegemony of the theories formulated in the so-called centers, this article aims at reflecting the idea of global sociology. The main sustained theoretical hypothesis is that the national experiences must be understood as bearing the potential of making important contributions to stimulate the theoretical discussion about sociological theories and concepts formulated in the centers. By mobilizing some sociological concepts such as public sphere and right to the city, originally formulated in centers, we suggest that peripheral sociologies could contribute to broaden theoretical formulations. In this sense, the theoretical construction of sociological theory must involve an equal dialogue between sociologists from the center and the periphery in order to construct a global sociology.*

Keywords---- center, global sociology, periphery, post-national, theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Debate about the possibility of building a global sociology has gained increasing importance in the last few years. The debate seems to have been risen from the incentive of moving toward a more egalitarian scientific community around the world. This newly emerging urge to found an equally appropriated structure of knowledge production, distribution and consumption that recognizes the right to participation of all global scholars, has echoed itself in sociological concepts such as global sociology. Either by the defense of a decolonization of knowledge, in the classic formulation of Fanon (1961), or through the critique of the Euro-centrism that prevails in the social sciences (Wallerstein, 1996; cited in Alatas 2003), or the questioning of the academic imperialism from Northern countries in relation to the South (Alatas, 2000), the sociological imagination has sought over the past few years to recognize the existence of processes that produce and reproduce inequalities in the formulation and dissemination of knowledge, especially of social theory. One of the most important formulations of this discussion was articulated by Connell (2007). In her provocative work, and in later articles, Connell discusses about the imitation of theories from Europe and the United States by peripheral countries to the extent that the discussions of social theory involve reification of the experience of the North. The author draws special attention to the enormous ignorance that exists in academia in the central countries in relation to peripheral thinkers, whose formulations on various issues and problems have the same level of complexity and density of the authors considered the classics of sociology. She discusses that sociologists from central countries have much to learn from those of the peripheries, as many of the themes focused by analysts from periphery are almost ignored by the authors of the central countries. In this sense, for Connell, it would be important for central and peripheral sociologists to accept and understand that the 'development of social science involves a collective learning process on a world scale (...) which will take different shapes in different parts of world society' (2010: 49).

It has been suggested that there is a global division of labor dividing the global academia hierarchically into central, peripheral and semi-peripheral abstract regions (Alatas, 2003). The so-called center has been mostly in charge of constructing theories and providing conceptual materials for the laborers of the other two regions to put them in to test and provide substantial empirical data to evaluate or validate them (Alatas, 2003; Sinha, 2000; Mignolo, 2000). As highlighted by Alatas (2003), the dependence of the peripheral sociologies in relation to central sociologies can be demonstrated in different ways: in the process of production and circulation of theories; in the unequal distribution of research results in journals, books and conferences; in the resources, inequalities to support the development of research activities in the North and the South; in the investments allocated to higher education institutions, and, finally, in the expansion of research opportunities in the central countries that attract sociologists of the peripheral countries. The center-periphery terminology has been substituted by others suggesting a new terminology calling the top of hierarchy the

global north and the bottom of the hierarchy the global south. We have consciously adopted the center versus periphery binary for the reason that central scientific regions are the same as the globally central economic and political powers; there is also the fact that the alternatively proposed terminology bears also a geographical meaning which can lead to unconsciously produce a hierarchal understanding about these concepts; while the center-periphery terminology is always relatively recognizable, the geographical division of labor is not always applicable to the south – north duality.

The irony here is that the debates over the theorization and introduction of the problematic of global sociology from a universalistic point of view have also started in rich central countries and by scholars coming from the center (Burawoy, 2008: 436); it is only after, that some peripheral or semi-peripheral scholars start addressing the issue, sometimes empirically, in their local contexts. Hence, the idea of formation of a global sociology is another construct of the center spreading itself through the same pre-existing hierarchical channels. It is being heard, debated and put in to test by the same scholars who have been following the lead of the central theorists in the peripheries. This fact certainly does not put in to question the validity and significance of the concept or its relative literature but barely avoids the inevitable settings.

Approaching a global social science seems more practicable in words than in deeds. It should not be so hard; science in general is after all defined as a set of practices and commitments over and above national and local objectives (Turner, 1990: 355), but it is not working that way in the case of most human sciences.

To move towards a global science and, for constructing such an egalitarian framework, we should define the level at which we are starting. If we are to change the whole hierarchal structure of the global social science knowledge production system, as sociologists, we might refer to different levels compatible with the social level we have been working in and yet again we might face the macro-micro duality which still shadows sociological debates; but there also have been a rise to an alternative sociology that goes beyond these levels and explains the social as a dynamic dialectic of levels at a time given. If this alternative sociology can provide us a framework in which we can approach the globalization of social science is not yet known. It is also necessary not to fall in to the simplicity of the dualities such as center-periphery; but the binary proves useful when we see it as a dialectically reinforcing relation between the two poles.

What is the global compared to the local? Can we call global any combination consisting of vast varieties of local capacities? This seems to be the current case. We usually call an association global when it covers several geographical locations on the world map. The question is should the global go beyond sum of several local matters? The third alternative would be to consider the global something beyond the sum but also achievable through the augmentation of the voices. This What Turner recognizes in classic sociological works by social thinkers such as saint Simone, Comte and Fustel de Coulanges which he calls 'simultaneous concern for a science of society and unification of humanity' (Turner, 1990: 346). It might be useful to use the term 'synergy' to address the relationship between peripheral and central scholars. Synergy, a term used in management studies, is defined as the interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects (Taib, Yatin, ahmad and Mansor, 2008: 26). We have no local if not a global and vice versa; to address one is indirectly addressing the other so why not take this in to consideration and instead of focusing on the global or the local or even the glocal, just focus on the realities as they are.

The ideology held by the social scientific elite residing in centers, believing that the peripheries need to be empowered to become able to contribute to the social science disputes is problematic itself; the current studies conducted in peripheries can contribute to the global theoretical debate if the static hierarchal structure would give them the opportunity of an equal status. Although it is not deniable that the educational systems around the world do not have equal quality (NTK, 2010: 21), forming dialogue between sociologists from the central and the peripheral countries would bolster both local and global understanding and bringing in the diversities of the social as well as helping the poor educational systems be updated more often.

There is also the question that is forming a global sociology even compatible with the nature of the discipline? Turner suggests that even though practicing sociology has been developed to explain and understand local or national destinies (Turner, 1990: 343), as Moore had declared, the new development of the world in to a more global system would probably bring about a revival of sociology with a more global perspective (Turner, 1990: 344). If modernization is narrowly defined as the emergence of concepts of internationalism and cosmopolitanism (Turner, 1990: 348), sociology which was a discipline sparked in the modern world cannot be expected to stay limited to addressing local issues instead of global and international ones. But still, Turner believes that there are limits to the idea of 'sociology beyond societies' because some concepts are inherently not mobile, but necessarily fixed and specific (Turner, 2006: 48). He discusses the differences between human rights and social rights. Social rights are entitlements enjoyed by citizens and are enforced by courts within the national framework of a sovereign state (Turner, 2006: 46), so the very concepts of citizenship, does not have the capacity to be addressed globally. So do many cultural concepts. The cultural arena includes many elements which cannot be addressed as global and there is always the fear that global thinking would turn out to be twins with universalistic ethics of the western world.

There are other limitations to the formation of this global entity. Burawoy points to three problems in uniting sociology: a common project, a community and a common language (2008: 435). The common language seems to have been established itself; but problems arise even when we have a common language, such as what Burawoy calls a Linguistic deficiency regarding Russian sociology (2008: 439). This shows as Burawoy notes himself, the importance of the

context. The usage of the word deficiency is also significant. The fact that Russian or Persian language face difficulty translating the ideas produced in centers in to easily absorbable and meaningful concept of their own is a fact. The other fact is that constructing a new global social science is possible by a mutual dialogue between the parties. Translation is of course required but even languages at the top of the hierarchy would have (and have) faced translation problems if they ever had encountered the local knowledge.

Not all limitations to the formation of global sociology are ontological or epistemological. At the very concrete level, university academics and scientific laborers must be seen as what Turner (1990) calls 'civil servants' whose research, in most cases is expected to be compatible governmental and predetermined objectives if not results. There are also issues regarding literacy and public knowledge; as Burawoy puts it 'cultivation of public is a luxury that few can literally afford' (Burawoy, 2008: 440). Another step towards establishing a global science passes through simplifying the very physical mobility of the knowledge and the knowledge producers; which with the current global political and socio-economic setting seems quite improbable because the underlying right of a global world, which is the right of mobility (Turner, 2006: 50), is not realized globally.

Our main theoretical hypothesis is that the local perceptions, productions and ways of practicing sociology in the peripheral contexts must not be understood mere illustrations or examples of the general theses formulated in the center, but rather as bearing the potential of making important contributions to stimulate the theoretical discussions on sociological subjects as a whole. To show this, we have focused on literature of two different debates over concepts of 'right to the city' and 'the public sphere' in two different peripheral (Iranian sociology) and semi-peripheral (Brazilian sociology) contexts. We will show how studies in such contexts can add in to the understanding of the problem formulated in center and sometimes take it in to a new level.

2. RIGHT TO THE CITY: DEFICITS OF A GLOBAL CONCEPT IN IRANIAN URBAN CONTEXT

The right to the city is a concept introduced by Henry Lefebvre and further developed by David Harvey. The concept refers to the freedom to construct and reconstruct the city and ourselves (Harvey, 2008). In Lefebvre's theory, the right to the city has two dimensions: a. the right to appropriation of the city: appropriation is referred to having a share of the space, using it, owning it and to value it because it has use value (contrary to exchange value as discussed in the Marxist theory); b. the right to participation in the city: the right to equally participate in decision making, constructing and living in the urban space (DeCerteau, 1984: 117).

Decades after the introduction of the right to the city, the concept is still underdeveloped in the sub-disciplines of urban sociology and urban anthropology. Most relevant literature discuss Lefebvre's concept theoretically (e.g. Purcell, 2002; DeCerteau, 1984). Few existing empirical studies focus on the one or few components of right to the city instead of looking in to the theory as a whole (e.g. Zanjani-zade, 2001; Rahbari, 2012).

In this section three main issues regarding the local and global perceptions of the theory will be discussed.

First, Lefebvre brings in the concept of inhabitancy and uses it versus citizenship. He has suggested to use the word inhabitancy instead of citizenship in the urban studies for two main reasons; first, as Lefebvre suggests, citizenship refers to the materialistic and organic needs of human beings, while inhabitancy (as in Nietzsche and Heidegger) is defined by the unconscious satisfaction people gain by appropriating and participating in an urban space; and second, citizenship is a political concept and it does not refer to people living in an area but to people having the legal right to do so; while inhabitants are not required to be lawfully accepted to live, but they have rights simply because they are inhabiting in a space (Lefebvre, 1991). Right to the city is a human right in Lefebvre's theory instead of a civil right that is enjoyed through citizenship.

The inhabitancy versus citizenship is an important presumption since the right to the city can only be discussed if it is recognized and acknowledged by the inhabitants. Some scholars have suggested that citizenship is contextually and politically relative while human rights are not (Turner, 2006). We suggest that human right is not a fixed concept either but a culturally and historically shaped notion. Despite the spread of universalistic ethics and regardless of whether we approve of them or not, the perceptions of human rights differs according to the cultural context. Citizenship is also still a problematic issue in some socio-political concepts. In Iran, it is a newly formed concept (Enayat, 1982: 127); and has a long way to be recognized and acknowledged by both the state and the citizens. We do not suggest that there is such an obligatory path to start with gaining citizenship rights and then reach out for inhabitancy rights but the route to civil rights seems like a smoother one in the context of Iranian city due to the transparency of the law relative to the highly local and cultural perceptions of the human right. There is also the problematic of relevant organizations; there are not many active NGOs or government organizations addressing human rights, while the city council and parliament whose members are chosen by citizens are in charge of pursuing their urban and legal rights.

So taking a global approach towards the right to the city as a self-evident human right is not effective in all social contexts and the right to the city must either be redefined in each context or be adjusted to the requirements of the socio-cultural setting.

Second, how global are urban movements? Production of space plays a key role in conceptualizing the right to the city. Space is according to Lefebvre a social production. It can reproduce the same characteristics as the mode of production

and can be used as a means to dominate and control inhabitants by using capital. The theory explains that inhabitants, once become conscious about the alienating nature of urban space which is a consequence of the capitalist system, can push away the alienation and claim the space as their own. Production of space by inhabitants is effectuated by participating in the social interaction and spatial practice and its ideal form is the urban movement.

Urban movements have never existed in Iranian urban history. Since the formation of modern Iranian city, a collective practice by the inhabitants to take control over the urban space for a merely spatial scope has not taken place. One can suggest that urban rights are very recently entering the debates over public space.

Few political demonstrations and protests in the last 20 years have appropriated urban space as their field of practice. The most prominent ones were the student movements in July 1999 and June 2002 which occupied University of Tehran's dormitory area and its surrounding streets and residential spaces (Morseli, 2013), and the so-called green movement in May and June 2009 which occupied parks and streets for their gatherings and turned the public places to a collectively build space to claims their political rights (Motamed, 2011). It can be suggested that each urban movement has a political theme too but it also carries some aspirations and schemes that directly address the construction and reconstruction of the urban space. Dams, roads, highways, bridges and towers are built every day in Iranian cities, affecting people's residency; green spaces and parks shrink fast but in the context of Iranian city, very few collective practices are witnessed to claim rights on the built or destroyed space. The low and middle class Iranian citizens are to some extent aware of their rights to appropriate the city and in a less extent participate in the city (Rahbari, 2012); but it takes more than self-consciousness to form a coherent body out of disjointed individuals. There is also a hierarchal perception of rights which brings us to the third issue.

A hierarchy between the two components of right to the city (appropriation and participation) is not discussed in Lefebvre's theory. In the Iranian urban context right to the city does not provide incentives for the inhabitants to collectively act. This is also compatible with the previously discussed argument about the inhabitancy and citizenship. Appropriation of the city is mostly about human right; the right to be safe, own a space of your own, enjoy your time in the urban spaces and have access to urban comfort and health facilities. The right to participate is instead the right to decide about the faith of the city, have a role in making it and consider it as much yours as the state's to be able to freely interact in it.

As discussed in the previous section, the collective actions in Iranian city's history have always bared political claims. The inhabitants, although relatively aware of their right to appropriation of the city, seem to ignore them as long as the right to participation is not realized. If this hierarchal perception is true, as long as the right to participate in the city is not realized, the right to appropriate in the city is not desired or pursued by the inhabitants. Such hierarchal perception can be a cultural consequence of the historical understanding of the human rights.

We cannot approach the right to the city as a global concept in sociological theory as the original theory proves to be inconsistent with the context of Iranian urban setting and society. There are possible contributions that a new conceptualization of the concept can bring about and help expand the primary theory. We suggest that redefining the relationship between the inhabitants and the state and replacing the focus on inhabitancy by the citizenship rights based on the urban socio-political contexts can make the theory work better in various settings. Some components of the right to the city in Lefebvre's original theory are not applicable in all context and it seems like a hierarchal perception of right to the city is possible in some societies, so the perceived right to the city introduced by Lefebvre must not be taken in to granted and required prior exploratory context analysis.

3. PUBLIC SPHERE IN BRAZIL

The concept of 'public sphere' was initially formulated by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1989). Briefly, one can say that the 'public sphere' is understood by Habermas as the third institution of capitalist modernity, differing itself from State and market. The genesis of this sphere was associated, according to Habermas, with the development of capitalism in seventeenth-century Europe, especially in France, Germany and England. This process led to the emergence of a new sphere located between the private sphere and the state, characterized by free discussion, in which opinions were not more legitimized from 'external' social factors – such as power, wealth and prestige – but through rational arguments supported amid the public debate (Habermas, 1989).

This public sphere was expanded in Europe from the growth of cities and the proliferation of cafes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being mainly boosted by the transformation of the role of the press. The newspapers were shaped as a 'forum' separated from the State, allowing the formation of a critical opinion able to publicly criticize the legitimacy of the state discourse. In this sense, the emergence of the public sphere resulted in the creation of a form of mediation between the State and private interests, which was formed as a new source of legitimacy of power. In general, one can say that, for Habermas, the public sphere refers to the world of a rational debate and free discussion about issues of common interest among citizens considered politically and morally equal. It is configured as the arena through which the collective will is processed and where political decisions are justified by the 'communicative rationality'.

Habermas's formulations about the idea of public sphere, especially those contained in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, produced a lot of criticism in subsequent years, generating debates that led to a reformulation of the conceptual category (Calhoun, 1992, Habermas, 1992; 1998). One of the main disapprovals of the concept of public

sphere was related to the fact that, contrary to what Habermas thought, this public sphere has been configured as a space restricted to a political community of citizens, implying, therefore, the exclusion of various actors in society, such as women and workers (Negt & Kluge, 1993). For Nancy Fraser, for example, the Habermasian public sphere endorses the hierarchical exclusion of much of the population, especially women. In this sense, Habermas would not have noticed the existence of 'subaltern counterpublics', in which subaltern segments create discourses and define their interests (Fraser, 1992).

Another important order of criticism was related with the idealized conception of the public sphere as a space founded on rational public discourse. Many authors criticized the abstraction of Habermasian theory and its emphasis on neutral and rational procedures, disregarding other forms of expressions theoretically not based on rational arguments. In this sense, Habermas would have devoted little attention to other non-rational dimensions of communication, such as humor, irony and parody, idealizing the speech act as a state of purity. If the model of Habermasian deliberative democracy contemplates the demands of rational discourse, it only partially incorporates issues related to the virtues, feelings and emotions (Gardiner, 2004).

It is interesting to mobilize these critics to think the process of building of the public sphere in a semi-peripheral country as Brazil. Since its independence from Portugal in 1822, Brazilian society was characterized by high illiteracy rates and by enormous social and economic inequality. As a result of these features, the public sphere that was built in Brazil throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has had as its main characteristic the selectivity excluding from debate and public deliberation the vast majority of the population. This public sphere proved selective in relation to actors able to participate in the same – only the elite participated effectively in public discussion in newspapers – as the topics to be discussed in its scope – some issues that could put in danger the status quo were avoided (Perlatto, 2012).

It is important to highlight that in conjunction with the existence of a selective public sphere, there was the formation of a subaltern public sphere, in which the popular sectors sought to create expressive forms to press towards democratize the selective public sphere. What is remarkable to note is the fact that seeing denied their participation in the selective public sphere, the subaltern segments created mechanisms to express themselves publicly not necessarily following rational discourse as it thought by Habermas to the European context. Public speeches formulated in the Brazilian subaltern public sphere were often sustained in performances based on irreverence and humor, testing the limits of the order established by the selective public sphere. In this sense, one can say that the construction of the Brazilian public sphere did not follow the model of the European one, favoring more the language of feelings and affections than the language of interests and reason. Therefore, one can say that a semi-peripheral experience like Brazil can contribute to problematize and expand the category of the public sphere, originally formulated in a central country.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We started our discussion with the claim that the peripheral account of sociological work bears the potential of making important contributions to stimulate the theoretical discussions of the sociological theory as a whole. To show this, we focused on two different sociological debates over concepts of 'right to the city' and 'the public sphere' originally introduced in center and now being developed in two different peripheral (Iranian sociology) and semi-peripheral (Brazilian sociology) contexts. We tried to show how studies in such contexts can add in to the understanding of the problem formulated in center, sometimes take it in to a new level or contradict it.

In our discussion about Lefebvre's theory of right to the city we showed that taking a global approach towards the right to the city as a self-evident human right is not effective in Iranian social contexts. The right to the city must either be redefined in each context or be adjusted to the requirements of each socio-cultural setting. There is also the concept of 'production of space' which plays a key role in conceptualizing the right to the city and is irrelevant in Iranian social context as there has been no or little evidence on conscious urban social movements in Iranian history. It has been also noted that the components of right to the city which have been approached with similar weight in Lefebvre's theory, bear different weights and form a hierarchical shape in Iranian social context.

We also discussed that the construction of the Brazilian public sphere does not follow the model of the original concept. The Brazilian public sphere favors more the language of feelings and affections than the language of interests and reason as conceptualized in the Europe-based theory.

A peripheral experience like Iranian account of right to the city, and the experience of public sphere in a semi-peripheral context like Brazil can contribute to problematize and expand our understanding and the theory originally formulated in a central country.

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