

## **Brief guidelines for teaching sociological theory today**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article discusses the relevance of teaching sociological theory and presents in a synthetic mode a set of guidelines for a program of study. The main argument is that the study of sociological theory should consider both classical and contemporary contributions, since Sociology is in a permanent process of critique and elaboration in order to deal with the social problems of our times.

**Keywords:** sociological theory, classical sociological theory, contemporary sociological theory, sociology teaching.

### **Introduction**

It is known that to fully understand a sociological theory it is not only necessary to apprehend its internal structure, but also its interrelations to the social context in which it emerges and prevails. This implies in placing sociological currents of thought (and their authors) in terms of time and space, taking into account the social, political and cultural reasons why, in a given historical moment, diverse, and sometimes conflicting, modes of explanation of the world are proposed and intensively debated. This analysis is the typical task of a sociological analysis of Sociology. However, one has to stress that situating a theory in its time and place does not necessarily mean to leave out of consideration the relative autonomy of intellectual work (Löwy, 1987). It is actually rather important to contemplate the dialectic relation between theoretical interpretation and social reality, and between observer and subject-matter of sociological knowledge. This pattern of analysis can only be achieved through a double hermeneutic approach, according to Giddens. A double hermeneutic means, in one hand, that sociology “studies a world, the social world, which is constituted as meaningful by those who produce and reproduce it in their activities – human subjects” (Giddens, 1982: 7). At the same time, on the other hand, the double hermeneutic implies the task of describing the social world by Sociology in its own technical concepts. Thus, “the concepts, theories and findings generated by Sociology ‘spiral in and out’ of social life” (Giddens, 1987: 32). Or yet, “sociological observers depend upon lay concepts to generate accurate

descriptions of social processes; and agents regularly appropriate theories and concepts of social science within their behavior, thus potentially changing its character” (Giddens, 1987: 30). Hence, the author points out that social

actors, while appropriating knowledge produced by Sociology, attribute new meaning to it, and at the same time challenge Sociology to reach for new advances.

Theories can be classified either as special theories, which focus on specific themes such as work, family, entrepreneurial administration, or as general theories, which deal with more abstract themes, such as social action, social interaction, social structure, modernity, and the permanent tension “coercion vs. cohesion”, which underlines the problematic of social consensus. In sociological theory there are different degrees of abstraction which vary from an empirical descriptive one up to an abstract theoretical-explanatory degree that aims to reach a generalization of the research findings (Alexander, 1995). One can argue that the main challenge faced by sociologists is to establish an equilibrium between two poles of the scientific endeavour: a more descriptive one, where, while maintaining the focus in detailing empirical observations, one risks to miss the ability of generalization, and an abstract pole, where, if emphasis on formalization prevails, one risks to lose thematic specificity.

### **Some references for the analysis of sociological theories**

I. Different theories help to structure thought on reality – they provide meaning and give sense to the data collected on field research. Until recently, theories situated in the scientific tradition, which conjectures about the constitution of society (how should society be defined, how the articulation between individuals and society, as well as the relation between an observer and the subject-matter of knowledge in Sociology should be explained) were expressed through approaches that emphasized either macro-societal levels - wherein one assumes that society affects individuals, although recognizing that individuals do possess the ability to partially alter behavioral patterns – or micro-societal levels, that focus on subjectivity, on the way individuals interpret and create their social world. These questions, if one consider Giddens’ (1989) suggestion, need to be analyzed under a new light, for in Sociology what matters is rather the relation between subject and subject and not, properly, a relation between “subject” (the observer) and “object” (the subject-matter): Sociology needs to construct interpretive schemes through mediated descriptions translated in the social-scientific discourse.

II. The internal analysis of a given sociological theory requires the identification of the main points that form the core of its argumentation, for which purpose five aspects may be identified: (1) cultural values, principles – individual or group conduct (note, in Parsons, for example, the relevance of the five pairs of standard variables to evaluate the degree of modernization in a determined social system and, in Merton, the relevance of standards of adaptation of individual or group behavior –varying from conformism to rebellion – which prevail in a given organization, such as a school or a company); (2) variables of psychosocial nature – intentionality of action involving individuals and also collective agents facing the impossibility of control of all the consequences of their action, as noted by Giddens; the problems of construction of an identity of the “I” in the relationship between ego and alter (and of the “us” as opposed to “them”), according to the connotations of Schutz , and Strauss, among others; (3) variables of psychoanalytical order – constitution of psychological structures based on the relations amongst ego, id and superego; between conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious, in the processes of development of the individual and in the possible construction of homologies between the civilization process (as suggested by the studies on authoritarian personality, conducted by Adorno and his colleagues – problems such as feelings repression, the emergency of aggressive behavior associated to fear and the transference of anxiety to “scapegoats”). In Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action, it is possible to identify, echoing the Piagetian approach, a correlation between ontogenetic and phylogenetic models of developmental processes (although not in a non problematic manner, as many authors have called attention, and also recognized by himself). According to this theory, the problems related to the distortions of communicative competence on the individual level become of great significance when applied on the analysis of the civilization stage at a given time and place; (4) economical and political variables – states, production and markets (Theda Skocpol’s structural-historical approach on the relations among states, social classes and the agrarian question in the study of revolutionary movements illustrates this case); (5) power relations – ways of exerting domination; practices of political pressure and the use of means of physical or symbolic violence (as for instance the approach of Bourdieu, centered on the problems relative to the dispute of power in the social space, as well as the approaches inspired by the work of Foucault, especially with respect to on the relations between knowledge and power.

III. Following this line of construction of references for the analysis of a theoretical approach, it is important to point out that, in addition to the description of the aspects previously referred, it is necessary an apprehension of the way whereby its problematic and also its social, cultural and political horizons are formulated. This is a dimension which allows to take into account the advances of knowledge that a given sociological narrative might bring about. The three following general lines can help this task to be achieved.

1. One first line of analysis refers to the political ideological dimension, as suggested by Alexander (1987). Sociological narratives, if one recalls Gouldner (1979) may be classified as conservative, liberal (focused on inter individual relations) or radical (revolutionary, prophetic, romantic or critical). This last style of narrative, which usually refer to subordinated lines of thought, may assume, not exceptionally, increasingly conservative or liberal trends, when a position of command and direction is reached by its followers (Mannheim, 1950).

Elements of liberal currents of thought can also be appropriated by the conservative thought. This in turn, can originate questions that may be appropriated by radical thought, while attaining new meanings. An example refers to the bourgeois liberal ideas of democratic freedom, long rejected by currents of the left as a conservative flag and recently re-appraised given the general acknowledgement of the destructive effects of all kinds of totalitarianism.

2. A second general line of analysis concerns the construction of interpretive models – the identification of lines of argumentation of a given theoretical approach, its connections of meaning. Examples of this line of analysis are: the systemic-functional model based on the concept of autopoiesis proposed by Luhmann; the structural historical comparative theory of Barrington Moore Jr., Tilly and Skocpol among other; the post-modernity theories adopted by Jameson, Harvey, Boaventura de Sousa Santos; the informational society theory proposed by Castells; the theory of structuration proposed by Giddens, in which agency and structure are dialectically counterpoised; Habermas' theory of communicative action, centered on the concepts of system and lifeworld; the theory of symbolic forms of power, elaborated by Bourdieu, based on concepts such as capital, power and symbolic violence. Amidst many other narratives, it is nonetheless important to refer to gender studies, which contribution toward several approaches in sociological theory encircles the intercultural issues investigated from the perspective of the relations between sexuality, subjectivity and social identity. These questions have been largely neglected until not long ago and are still rejected today by andocentric discourses (Prá, 1999).

3. The third criterion of analysis refers to the methodological approach. This concerns the historical-descriptive or empirical research project, the way the investigation per se is constructed. Habermas, for instance, affirms that, being sociological theory limited in its ability of forecasting new social developments, its role in transforming praxis is uncertain (as seen in the disfiguration of the emancipatory content of Soviet Marxism by Bureaucratic Socialism, as well as the frustrated attempts, in the author's view, of rehabilitation of the anthropological concept of non-alienated labour). From this point of view all statements of sociological theories should be considered as inherently hypothetical (Habermas, 1994) Nonetheless, as opposed to this point of view, the following argumentation can be presented: (a) the task of building a productive link between theory and praxis is still crucial for Sociology. Furthermore, considering that, according to Giddens (1989), it is not possible to fully control the effects of intentional action effectuated by political and social programs (the author alludes to the problems caused by unforeseen consequences of action ), and reflexivity is related to taking responsibility under conditions of risk and uncertainty about the results of science, one may also argument that (b) it is necessary to include in the agenda of the social sciences the problems of decision making on the basis of the mechanisms of democracy, seeking to minimize the social costs of global environmental threats; the end of the Welfare State and the return of the so called State of War (as points Ritzer, 2001). With respect to the latter, it is important to stress that Castells, in a previous article, from 1986, retracing the formulations of Spencer, affirms that we might be facing, in the "wire connected society" - which he later, in the 1990s, named informational society – a step backward from the Industrial State to the State of War.

Turning the focus back to the more strict sense of the design and techniques of investigation, one may consider misleading the subscription to a point of view which endorses in a partisan way the option either for quantitative or for qualitative techniques (or else survey studies versus case studies), as a compromise to be

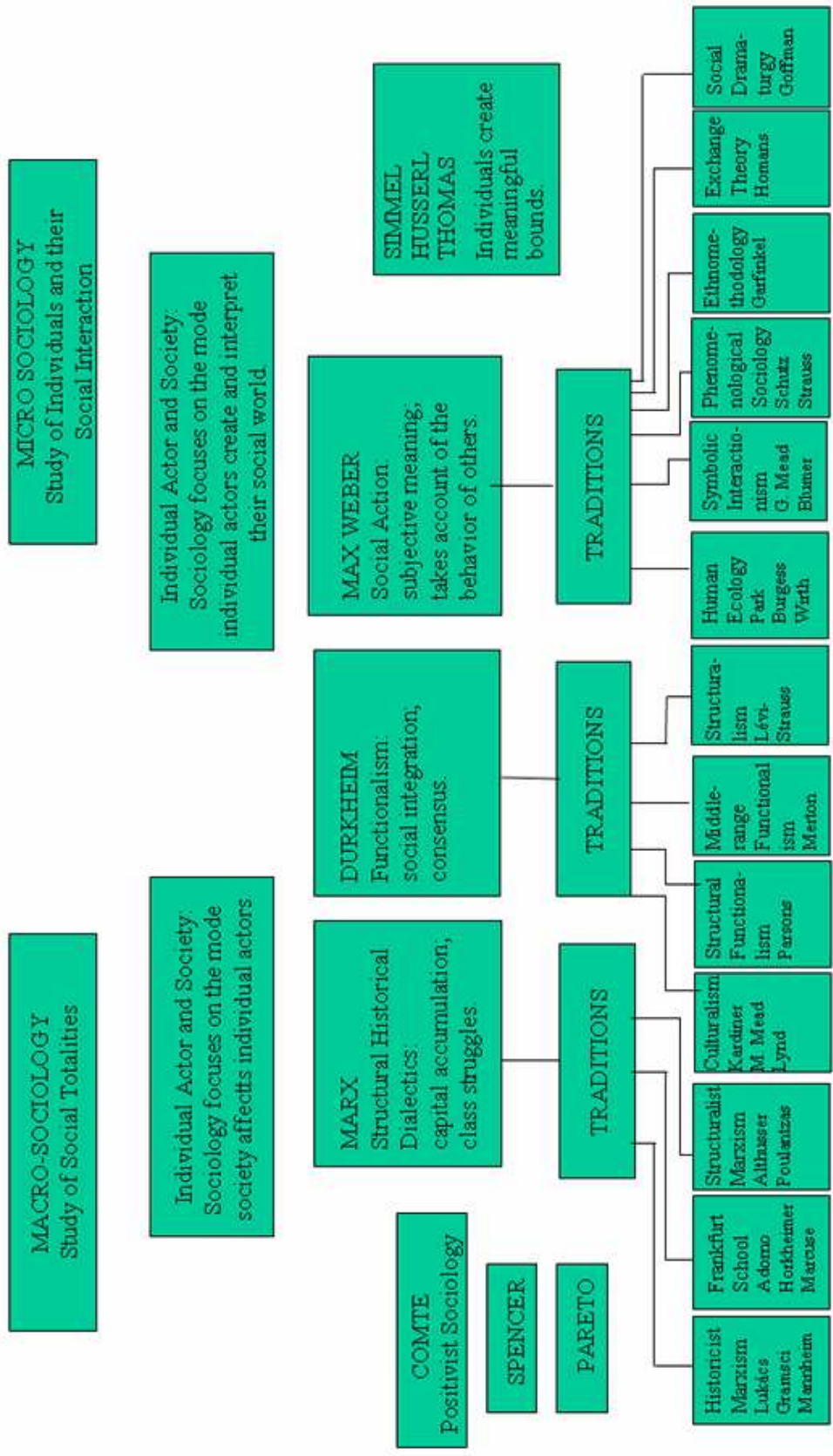
assumed with determined ideologies and analytic models. On the contrary, as Alexander (1987) has called attention, it is the analytic model that settles the matter, favoring here the adoption of quantitative techniques and there the adoption of qualitative techniques, what does not preclude but may even stimulate the simultaneous use of the two empirical investigation techniques

### **Some suggestions for teaching sociological theory today**

I. Sociological theory encompasses an ample spectrum of narratives. In this article two diagrams are presented which, for didactical purposes, divide the evolution of sociology having the “crisis” of the late 1960’s as reference. The first diagram comprehends the emergence of the classical sociological theories and their increasing differentiation into a number of traditions, in the long period from the 1840’s to 1968. It includes a diversified set of sociological approaches, selectively illustrated in Diagram 1.

Besides the three great classics Marx, Weber and Durkheim, a program of study should include authors such as Spencer, Pareto and Simmel. Complementarily, as shown in Diagram 1, an illustrative set of sociological currents affiliated to these classical approaches includes Structural Functionalism, Historicist Marxism, the so-called Frankfurt School, Structuralist Marxism, so as Phenomenological Sociology and Symbolic Interactionism.

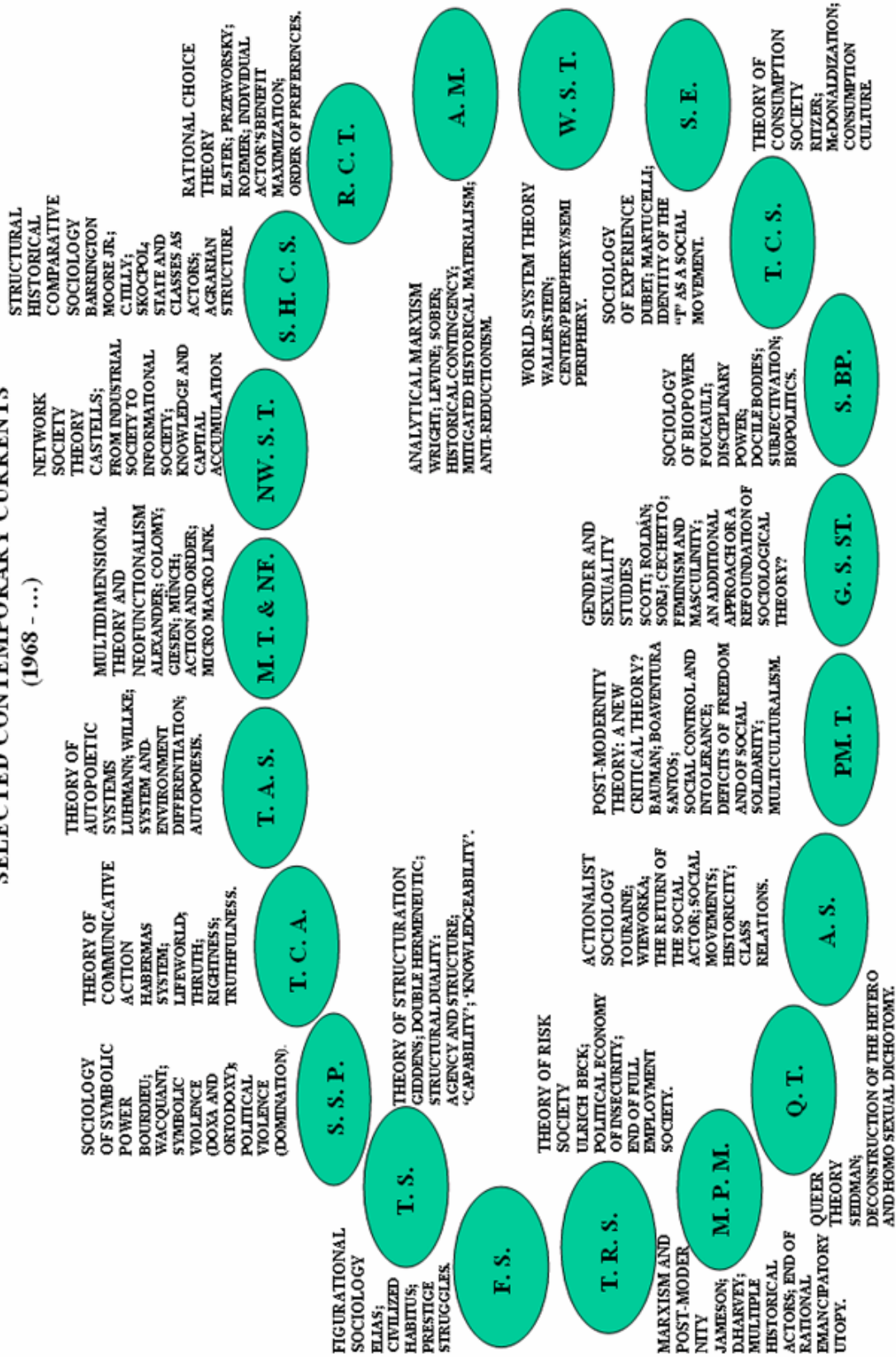
**DIAGRAM 1**  
**FROM CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY TO THE DIFFERENTIATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITIONS**  
 (1840 – 1968)



By the mid-1960's, a growing sense of "crisis" arose in the international sociological community. In the post 1968, the criticism of the until then prevailing paradigms and the emergence of a new set of sociological approaches or narratives are its main development.

As suggested in Diagram 2, some of these new approaches, already above mentioned, that could, or even should be included in a teaching program of Sociology, i. e., in a rich and consistent training of the new generations of sociologists are: the Multidimensional Theory and Neofunctionalism, the Theory of Communicative Action, the Theory of Structuration, the Sociology of Symbolic Power and Studies based on Feminist approaches, on Gender and Masculinity, among others. This set of sociological narratives represent the current search for alternative theoretical answers for the everlasting tensions of the analytical emphasis on the macro vis-à-vis the micro level of analysis, on individual actor vis-à-vis society as a totality, and on subjectivity vis-à-vis objectivity.

**DIAGRAM 2 – SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY  
SELECTED CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS  
(1968 - ...)**



The tensions and dilemmas that constantly emerge among the intellectual, moral and practical-political justifications of each sociological theory imply in a demand of a renewed debate in academic and non-academic forums. Moreover, the importance of these debates for better orientation of students in their theoretical choices, especially with respect to the conduction of the analysis of their social research findings, should not be neglected.

One important remark has to be made. It would not be excessive to emphasize, taking into account what has been stated up to this point, the misleading orientations which sometimes arise here and there in the sociological community, arguing on the obsolescence of theory, and even defending the exclusion of sociological theory teaching from undergraduate and graduate programs. The arguments presented by these orientations range from a sort of neo empiricism reductionism, based on utilitarian criteria, to a well defined distinction between Sociology and other social sciences. In this sense, the legacy of the “classics” should be considered as “history”, while debates on a more abstract level, “philosophy”. The negative effects of these orientations have been largely pointed out by different authors, amongst whom Alexander (1988) is included. Should, by any chance, these points of view prevail, not only Sociology students would miss the chance of enhancing their apprenticeship experience, compromising their future research and teaching activities, but also Sociology itself would certainly fail to contribute for a creative and productive apprehension of the problems of our times.

II. As a brief sketch of a pedagogical approach for sociological theory teaching, the following questions are suggested, aiming at the comparative analysis of diverse theoretical narratives in Sociology:

1. is there a social actor who might be considered as the subject of History? If so, one should ask how is/are he/she/they defined and how are his/her/their possibilities of action historically constructed; which is his/her/their degree of autonomy of action? If not, the questions to be formulated relate to in which manner are the problems of social stability (social order) and of social transformation faced?
2. in which manner are the social divisions considered and how are they analyzed in terms of power relations?
3. which vision of the relationship among present, past and future is presented?, and
4. which are the perspectives for the application to social research offered by each of the sociological theoretical narratives included in the program of study?

III. Having as reference the set of approaches presented in diagrams 1 and 2, a program of study on sociological theory today should always consider the importance of:

1. reading the classics (Comte, Marx, Pareto, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber) under the light of current social problems of a globalized society. Working out, as a kind of mirror, the contrasts of their theoretical formulations on the social problems of their time vis-à-vis the challenges faced by Sociology in our times, may not only allow to understand why they are “classics”, as well as the nowadays state of each of the traditions founded by them. Furthermore, this contrast may bring about some new leads for current sociological research;
  2. carrying on the study on the processes of construction and affirmation of social identity, considering the contributions formulated by phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (Mead, Blumer, Becker, Schutz, Geertz, Hughes);
  3. debating the more recently produced theoretical currents intended to answering the problems related to the connection between objectivity and subjectivity, action and system, individual and society (Castells, Bauman, Touraine, Dubet, Martucelli, Giddens, Luhmann, Habermas, Sousa, Bourdieu, Foucault, are some of the authors to be contemplated, alongside many others, by the study programs);
  4. including in these debates the studies and researches carried on by the respective sociological community where the program is being developed. In the Brazilian case, for example, the contributions of intellectuals such as Florestan Fernandes, Ianni, Cardoso, Freitag, Figueiredo, Reis, among others, might be included, so as the studies produced in the realm of the Work Group of Sociological Theory of the Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais (ANPOCS); and
  5. taking into account the contributions of the studies on gender and sexuality which, particularly since the final decades of the twentieth century, radically transformed the narrative perspectives of Sociology (Scott, Tilly, Lamphere, Roldán, Heilborn, Sorj among others).
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Sociological theory aims at generalization, which involves discursive argumentation, interpretation and persuasion (Alexander, 1995). Conflicts among sociological theories express different modes of construction of the subject-matter, as well as of research strategies on a given thematic, or set of thematics. The relationship among these diverse sociological views (and their followers) may range from cooperative and complementary to conflictive or even excludent one, tending most of the times to resemble a sort of Durkheimian segmentary division of labor.

The impossibility, in Sociology, of building a unitary explanatory consensus among the different views of its subject-matter is well known. It is interesting to remind here that Kuhn (1977), changing his initial point of view, came to recognize the intrinsically multi-paradigmatic character of the social sciences. Nevertheless, we argue that, given the dramaticity of the current social problems, a sort of “pacific coexistence” and cooperation among diverse sociological currents should always be sought. This implies in addressing what Habermas calls the basic questions of truth, rightness and truthfulness in the discussion on the principles of what constitutes a good life. In a universalistic manner, this has to be understood as a permanent pursuit to secure the universal and effective recognition and observance of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, as proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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