

An approach to the evolution of Social Theory in Latin America

Una aproximación a la evolución de la teoría social en América Latina

Uma abordagem para a evolução da Teoria Social na América Latina

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the evolution of social theory in Latin America, which implies a brief approach to the trajectory, the role played and the theoretical orientations of social sciences in Latin America; in the understanding that the evolution of Latin American social theory is involved in the study of human society settled in the South of America continent, grouped in various associations, collectivities and/or institutions. It is

an approximate reflection based on the review of literature, and due to its nature, a condensed exposition is made, whose interest is centered on the 'evolution' of social theory in Latin America and the challenges of it in the contemporary Latin American context.

Keywords: Latin America, social sciences, social theory, sociology



Resumen

El presente ensayo tiene por objetivo analizar la evolución de la teoría social en América Latina, ello implica efectuar una breve aproximación sobre el trayecto, el rol desempeñado y las orientaciones teóricas de las ciencias sociales en América Latina; en el entendido que la evolución de la teoría social latinoamericana está implicada en el estudio de la sociedad humana asentada en el sur del continente americano, agrupadas en diversas asociaciones, colectividades o instituciones. Se trata de una reflexión aproximativa basada en la revisión de literatura, y debido a su naturaleza, se hace una exposición condensada, cuyo interés se centra en la 'evolución' de la teoría social en América Latina y los desafíos de esta en el contexto latinoamericano contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: América Latina, ciencias sociales, sociología, teoría social

Resumo

O objetivo deste ensaio é analisar a evolução da teoria social na América Latina, o que implica uma breve abordagem da trajetória, do papel desempenhado e das orientações teóricas das ciências sociais na América Latina; no entendimento de que a evolução da teoria social latino-americana está envolvida no estudo da sociedade humana no Sul do continente americano, agrupada em várias associações, coletividades e/ou instituições. Esta é uma reflexão aproximada baseada em uma revisão de literatura e, devido a sua natureza, é feita uma exposição condensada, cujo interesse está centrado na "evolução" da teoria social na América Latina e seus desafios no contexto latino-americano contemporâneo.

Palavras chave: América Latina, ciências sociais, sociologia, teoria social

Introduction

The development of social theories in Latin America has frequently been confused with the conception of a Latin American theory, reinforcing an identity bias (Ruiz et al., 2019; Torres & Mascareño, 2019), even among those who carried out the most abstract and sophisticated theoretical systematizations. Therefore, the

interest or perspective of analysis of the present does not follow the path of Latin American identity theory, but rather, from a slightly more open outlook that transcends geographical and epistemological borders in any way (Tantaleán & Aguilar, 2012), pretending more than dualisms or separatisms, to generate a conception that allows advancing in an original way a composition and/or



dialectical process that considers an empirically oriented theory, that observes social problems and dilemmas in a sufficiently vast manner, that is, tries to reveal the general panorama of the development of social theory in the Latin American context.

The review of literature allowed to synthesize that the reflection on social theory from the social sciences in Latin America has an essence with a Eurocentric flavor accompanied by the independence and anti-colonial processes resulting from the practice of subordination, marginality and domination of third world countries before political and economic power (Delfino, 2012; Lezama, 2014; Rivera, Domingues, Escobar, & Leff, 2016). Latin American social theory exhibits a heterogeneous development, with theoretical elements coupled with the culture or visions shared with the North (Tantaleán & Aguilar, 2012).

Within this perspective, the development of the present essay is structured in four fundamental sections, which consists of: the introduction, this being the starting point that exposes the topic in question, the thematic orientation, the way how the work is structured, as well as the importance of the

work's content; next, the work's content is developed, which involves the analysis of the trajectory and legacies of social theory in Latin America, the production of knowledge of Latin American social sciences, the identities of Latin American social scientists, and the perspectives of social theory in Latin America; continuing with the presentation of the conclusions reached as a product of the analysis of the subject matter of the essay; and finally, the bibliographic references are presented, being these the support or means that give objectivity to the present work.

The importance of the essay will allow to strengthen the ability to analyze social theories, since social theory is the primary tool as an inescapable competence of social scientists to contribute to the understanding and explanation of social life in a critical and reflective way, which are useful in the social life of individuals and communities; social theories orient towards the functioning of social structures, adaptation to the dynamics of social processes or their transformation.

Finally, the systematization of the set of information and/or



theoretical experiences that were developed in the space and/or on the Latin American space, is intended to reflect on the ways in which theoretical processes are being produced or how social scientists have been facing the question of theory and social reality.

Trajectory and legacies of social theory in Latin America

After the Second World War, the world and Latin America faced a series of significant or notable changes, such as the process of internationalization and/or transnationalization, together with the industrialization drive and development through the import substitution model. In that context, for Villalobos (2017) one of the peculiarities of Latin American social sciences in the 1950s to the 1990s was to prioritize research on specific issues such as social change, based on the historical analysis of the Latin American society, without much orientation to theoretical abstractions or theoretical studies of the social, leaving free, or rather abandoned, the development of social theory from the perspective of Latin America, leaving fertile ground for the incursion of theoretical constructs developed in other spaces such as Europe and the United States; thus, Latin American social sciences of the last century

were built from the continuities and ruptures established with the currents that were initially positivist and later became functionalist and Marxist.

In the process, the so-called *dependency theory* is developed, whose theoretical approach explains the underdevelopment of Latin America (Valenzuela & Valenzuela, 1978), becoming the paradigm of the social sciences in the South, although it is appropriate to point out that the trajectory of the dependency category has a long history in the Latin American intellectual sphere (dating back to the 19th century), almost alongside the debate on independence; phase in which the South was characterized by opposing positions in relation to social projects, such as promoting outward development, which implied joining capitalism to submerge or absorb “progress”, while others favored an inward development, preserving the latifundist models or pre-independence period (Beigel, 2006).

Context in which many social scientists and universities in Latin America became or declared themselves to be followers of North American social theory, until approximately the 1960s, a position that took a turn after the Cuban revolution and Western European



variants of Marxism, a reorientation that was described as a paradigm shift (Yocelevzky, 2013).

However, soon “this logic of operation was severely curtailed with the dictatorial wave that was unleashed in the seventies and that, almost without exception, diminished the theorizing potential of the social sciences of the continent” (Villalobos, 2017, p. 151). Crises and ruptures occurred in the 1970s, with the emergence of authoritarian positions or military dictatorships in the Latin American context; such a model would imply restrictions on freedom of thought and fundamentally on criticism of the political regimes of the time, being conducive to research on authoritarian systems and the return or emergence of American and European researchers who show influence in the generation of social theories, along with some Latin American intellectuals, and consequently, this influenced the specialization and in the specialists of the social sciences, in particular in the Latin American political scientists; panorama in which the social sciences are displaced from their previous role (Floriani, 2015).

Despite this, the 1960s and 1970s were one of the most prolific

periods for Latin American social theory, because the thematic and research axes were oriented around South American development and underdevelopment and, consequently, Latin America was assumed as the center of attention for its study. Furthermore, with the restoration of democracy in the South and the intensification of the process of economic and cultural globalization in the 1990s, the social sciences of Latin America entered a new historical moment marked by a rupture with the great theories. Sociopolitically, this new era is defined by a tendency to impose a sociopolitical matrix or a neoliberal development model (Villalobos, 2017); where capitalism is associated with the accumulation and advancement of extractive capital in search of resources within the institutional and political framework of political regimes (Veltmeyer, 2020).

Currently, the thesis is that, in a context of globalization, Latin American countries or developing countries have been integrating native social scientists, as well as their scientific production, into circulation in global environments (Gibert, 2017). Within this panorama of social theory in Latin America, the criticism of the mental



colonization of elites has and will have a long trajectory, however, it is an opportunity to question whether it is indeed necessary to speak of a “Latin American social theory” or on the contrary, the contribution of Latin America to social theory should be sought (Puga, 2015).

These reflections lead to sustain that it is necessary to emphasize the importance of contextualizing the historical-social and the theoretical precedents that allow the scientific community to generate knowledge that provokes the continuity, rupture or discontinuity of certain thematic perspectives that open up new and careful interpretations of the social scene in Latin America.

Knowledge production of Latin American social sciences

Regarding the production of knowledge, Latin American social sciences generally stand out for their low impact in the global context, a reality that is attributable to the conditions and expectations that our disciplinary entities reveal about scientific work (Arnold-Cathalifaud, 2012). Although there was a significant increase in the volume of students and researchers, as reported by UNESCO, there is no correspondence with the

scientific-disciplinary contributions; that is to say, the numerical increase of the social sciences in Latin America, coming from the second half of the 20th century, is not proportionally articulated in the generation of disciplinary knowledge, even less in the rate and quality of scientific production at a global level, showing a poor linkage with the increase in the mass of researchers (Arnold-Cathalifaud, 2012), in addition to the low impact factor of the contributions within the international scientific circle.

It has been established that the production of disciplinary knowledge of the social sciences in Latin America is limited, that it goes beyond the development of research and its theoretical/methodological instruments and the historical/structural expressions of the region. This situation is due to the existence of a mode of production of generalist knowledge of the Latin American social sciences; until recently, the academic-scientific production was represented by essays, work and policy documents; while articles, for the most part, showed an orientation of an epistemological, historical, theoretical and political philosophy nature. On the other hand, empirical (or field) works are not oriented to develop theory or focus from a



heterodox perspective in a local key, showing the tendency to “adhere” to a “renowned” author of the European or North American school, failure to do so was inappropriate (Gibert, 2017).

In this sense, the social theory generated and debated by “the social scientists of Latin America, can be generalizable to the extent that we avoid implicitly focusing it on the experiences of a particular region, and we validate it in a variety of spatial-historical contexts” (Brachet-Márquez in Torres & Mascareño, 2019, p. 264); just as Marx’s theory and analysis of English capitalism has served to explain other realities.

In this orientation, philosophical sociology begins with a renewal of the universalistic pretensions that characterize the best of the sociological tradition; from there, the question becomes how Latin American sociology contributes to social theory in general, rather than whether there is a Latin American social theory. Puga proposes to question the idea of modernity, but without insisting on a radically Latin American essentialism (Cortés, 2015, p. 51). The collapse of “real socialism” had consequences in the social sciences of Latin America, to the extent that it questioned the concept of development (Beigel, 2006).

Scientific journals played a central role in this process of generating and disseminating knowledge, as a guarantee of the quality of scientific production; to the extent that publication in these journals is subject to review by peers or by other members of the scientific community, establishing that, if a work were published in a journal with this evaluation procedure, it could constitute a guarantee of quality (Vasen & Vilchis, 2017).

For Varsavsky, the scientist is one who carries out research framed in the dynamics of the science market to which he has adapted and has abandoned concern for the social implications of his activity, distancing himself from political issues and uncritically accepting the norms and values of the main international “agencies” involved in scientific production. Consequently, scientism is a mechanism for reinforcing the hegemony of the central countries both culturally and economically (Naidorf & Perrotta, 2015).

Despite the various theoretical disquisitions and without much force, it is not a defeat but the possibility of identifying and approaching the different problematic lines that have had an impact on the generation and consolidation of knowledge in



relation to Latin American society; this process demands the confluence of social research policies that are consistent and framed in the new requirements of the social sciences, aimed at generating knowledge in the social and in the “ready for action” social. This guide going beyond the “routine” or what is always done, to stay in the dissemination stage or in the realization of basic research, without attempt and possibility of applying the knowledge generated; this being the case, the challenge would be to find the channel, the path to link the generation of social knowledge with its use in solving specific social problems (Naidorf & Perrotta, 2015).

Identities of Latin American social scientists

According to (Gibert, 2017), “rejecting the scientific method and embracing confusing rhetoric does not make us autonomous or free from intellectual colonialism” (p. 36). The methodological procedures do not constitute instruments or mechanisms that facilitate disciplinary identities, exclusive or excluding of spaces, temporalities or determined entities (...); but they are guiding and reflective theoretical implications that go beyond the blind and static application of the theoretical-methodological instrument

(Arnold-Cathalifaud, 2012); the epistemic approach must be flexible and objective.

However, it is necessary to take into account that classification systems are increasingly focused on citation-based metrics, at the expense of other indicators and indexing, without adequately discussing the implications for academic journal writing practices and the dynamics of knowledge production (Vasen & Vilchis, 2017). In subjugated spaces, the social scientist is a “frustrated” who, in order to be considered in “scientific circles”, must orient his scientific work to fashionable topics; and as long as fashion is based in the USA or European countries, it will always be left behind in time and will be forced to maintain ties with the “reference” countries of scientific and technological production.

Researchers from peripheral countries assume it as a reality that should not be challenged, so that Eurocentric thought maintains its hegemony, and regularly it is chosen to follow the rule, hoping that at some point some of its legitimacy will be achieved or enjoyed. The difficult question is, how to abandon the dazzle of the long and always “prestigious” trajectory of the central countries, in terms of the development of science



and others, without abandoning the cosmopolitan aspirations of the work of sociology as a science. The probable challenge would be in the gestation and structuring of a new episteme that challenges and overcomes Eurocentrism (Cortés, 2015).

The role of the Latin American social sciences is to start from reality with challenges that will not be possible or difficult to fully carry out the critical role that it must fulfill, without having gotten rid of the path or route marked out by another actor; but neither is a fully autonomous social science recommendable or feasible, furthermore there is also no concrete experience in other regions (Puga, 2015). Of course, there is a need to be daring, yes, but prudent and write for ourselves, showing the maturity or coming of age that Kant demanded, disregarding mental colonialism and making the reflection of social theory our own (Belvedere, in Torres & Mascareño, 2019).

Eurocentric thought has as its main cause the Eurocentric training of Latin American social scientists, where Latin American universities introduce European categories, approaches and theories, along with deficiencies and impertinences in professional training. Reversing this situation merits cultivating our

own thought in the social sciences, incorporating our own categories or at least for the universal traditions of knowledge to be collected and integrated pertinently into Latin American thought. This implies ceasing to teach using manuals and/or texts that are unrelated to reality, research that is not rigorous and lacking in veracity; and instead, strengthen the content of the academic units through the use of active tools and methodologies, such as collaborative workshops, research related to data management, information analysis and knowledge generation, in addition to the interdisciplinary character in the training of social scientists (Gibert, 2017).

Perspectives of social theory in Latin America

Although the theoretical heritage of the social sciences developed in the 20th century has a powerful link with the theoretical propositions of the structural-functionalist and Marxist, reflecting certain imaginaries about the works and trajectories of Nordic societies and ordinarily with previously defined social actors by theoretical models of European or North American origin (Floriani, 2015). However, it is opportune to consider that at



the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the object of study of the social sciences presents transformations of various kinds, becoming a reality of greater complexity and limited knowledge; faced with this metamorphosis, social theory is a challenge and a question in relation to conceptions and interpretations.

This situation requires reformulating concepts and disquisitions, and fundamentally, it forces us to rethink the foundations of theoretical reflection, constituting challenges for deliberation of categories such as: time and space, micro and macro, holism and individualism, synchrony and diachrony, continuity and discontinuity, rupture and transformation, thus forming a challenge in the construction of knowledge (Zemelman, 2021).

Beigel (2006) argued that “Critics of dependency theories not only questioned the oscillation between the classist approach and the national perspective, but also attributed to them a still strong theoretical basis with the problems imposed by developmentalism” (p. 299); the referenced author also notes that Sotelo rigorously highlighted the ambiguities instead of the successes; who exalts the valuation of the

national perspective, to the detriment of class reflection. “The dependency theory seemed to him a repetition of the theory of imperialism. But with an aggravating condition: because it was viewed from the peripheral countries, it lost, in his opinion, the perspective of the whole” (p. 301). This vision is reinforced by those who maintain that the universalist purpose of social science is rejected by well-known currents of opinion and intellectual circles of Latin American nature.

It is committed to the development of local thought, assuming that the theories that reveal society have a strong colonizing influence or tendency from its origin, leading to an interest in regional plurality and singularity, constituting resistance actions in relation to American and European hegemony, which in practice could have undesired effects that lead to the relaxation of the rigor of the inquiries, considering that the criticism of the hegemonic theory is not accompanied by an alternative methodological contribution; and on the other hand, the implicit acceptance of inferiority could lead to scientific inaction or retraction of participation in the work of science (Arnold-Cathalifaud, 2012). Although this view questions developmentalist



scientism, including the position of Soviet Marxism, according to Beigel (2006), which does not imply closing the possibilities at the micro level and resigning oneself only to case studies (Beigel, 2006, p. 320), position that would be biased.

It is not intended to ignore the peculiarities of Latin American reality, it is about contextualizing in the specific history of the actors who are the object of the present; that is to say, instead of developing its own social science or giving rise to a specifically Latin American social theory, it would rather imply the heuristic nature of social theory, theories that reveal the complexity of social structures, the product of a thorough exploration and examination of the daily and extraordinary reality of conjunctures and structures; that is, to use theories that not only incorporate objective elements, but at the same time consider subjectivity itself as another viable element in the scope of analysis of social reality, the challenge of strengthening and contributing to its dynamics of change (Enrique de la Garza Toledo, in (Torres & Mascareño, 2019)).

Within this orientation of comings and goings in relation to the delineation of social theory, there is also the generation of theory, the latter linked

to scientific production, where world academia is defined by the center-periphery dependency relationship and a scaffolding of academic superiority-inferiority, a gap crystallizes in the division between academia that generate theories and concepts and that which develops empirical science, between those who study outside their countries and those who can only study in their own, and a division between, those that can develop comparative research and those that can only analyze particular or unique situations (Martín, 2013).

And as a concluding remark, highlight that according to (Gibert, 2017), despite the low value and historical neglect of social sciences professions, social scientists have enjoyed relative prosperity due to their strong integration with the private markets of Latin American countries, through corporate clients and holding companies, in addition to the already common state and parastatal embeddings that have become somewhat professionalized, especially in Argentina, Chile and Brazil (Gibert, 2017). The production of indexed works has also increased significantly as a result of the participation of researchers in global networks of debate and disciplinary discussion, facilitated by ICTs, and the drive to increase the number of



doctoral graduates both nationally and internationally.

Conclusions

The analysis of social theory in Latin America inevitably leads to the use of the categories: dependency, independence and interdependence; they constitute tools for social analysis; that is, in the elucidation of the social, there were irruptions of these categories, perhaps due to the very nature of a changing society in which a social theory cannot be preserved intact, but according to the modifications of the phenomenon under study, just as they have been archived or suspended, depending on whether they lose their vitality; they are developed in certain social conditions, being permeable to the concepts and theories of social scientists in Latin America, fluctuating from uncritical acceptance and rejection of dominant models, and the subsequent attempts to outline local ideas and theories.

While the hegemony assessment is correct, its impact can be counterproductive, especially when it causes people to ignore current scientific classics; this is especially true when the current form of scientific activity offers the possibility of action in its construction.

In a context of heterogeneous theory, and often conflicting, the configuration of social actors with intellectual and moral capacities that promote viable actions is necessary; situation that demands a social theory that considers or incorporates subjectivity in the study of the social, without pretending to be the only possible one or that reduces social reality to subjectivity, or conversely, assuming that systems control themselves or seek to escape from positivism and fall into relativism; it is rather about confronting or unmasking and, above all, proposing a dialectical analysis of social reality.

In terms of economic, political and cultural valuation of science in general and the social sciences in particular, they have an effective basis, as the distinctions between the fields tend to blur and the dialogue between the natural and social sciences is maintained, so does the general trend towards collaborative work with an interdisciplinary approach, seeking to develop social theory more than Latin American theory, in a dynamic of theory integration.



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