

From cultural relativism to critical pluralism. How globalization changes the ideas of universality, diversity and multiculturalism

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The growing global interconnection makes evident the diversity of points of view and the variety of assumptions that underpin our interpretation of reality. A widespread experience of this diversity seems to push social sciences towards two opposed directions. On the one hand, part of social sciences tries to regain the solid ground of a shared knowledge, overcoming diversity and particularity, running after a rigorous definition of methodological and conceptual tools that can help founding a renewed universalistic comprehension of the complexity of current societies. On the other hand, another relevant part of social sciences seems to surrender to the unavoidability of partial, instable and biased knowledge. In so doing, it renounces its claim to a universal knowledge and recognizes the validity of other perspectives, but at the cost of avoiding any form of deep confrontation among different truth assertions. The supporters of the first positions blame the supporter of the second to give up any attempt to gain a clear, unbiased, empirically/logically founded idea or reality; the supporters of the second blame their opponents to pursue an old-fashion, imperialistic and ethnocentric project.

The paper aims to present the historical origin of this (misleading) opposition, and analyses how globalization processes urges for a more precise, fitting and sociologically informed conception of cultural difference, reintroducing a critical stance able to recognize the relevance of difference without excluding the possibility of its radical assessment. Moreover, assuming this opposition as one of the dominant frame or boundary which actually seems to define/constitute the field of globalizing social sciences' discourse, the issues of "theory" and "theorizing" – along the well-known debate the question "what ought 'theory' mean?" and on the principle of ontological and epistemological pluralism – are eventually discussed.