

Does so-called society exist?

Globalization and the updating of the social sciences

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ABSTRACT

Today, as a result of the drive for independence spearheaded by the anti-colonial liberation movements, nation states cover the whole of the earth, and capital is global. The consequent destruction of local communities is revealing itself, in the face of climate change and the need for a new relationship with the environment, as a problem for the entire human race, regarding adaptation to the new conditions.

Does society exist in a form capable of reacting to the present challenges, or is society as it stands merely what remains of the systems for regulating modern life, the market and the state? Is it merely the waste-product of economic development, along with earnings and a precarious right to vote?

This doubt divides the world of social sciences: does the object of its study – society – have a real existence, or is it just a metaphor referring to that which escapes individual control?

Keywords: society, state, market, social sciences

INTRODUCTION

The markets, the nation states, language, hierarchies, mentalities, - these are not separate and autonomous objects. They are analytical models, ideal forms, ready to be dismantled through scientific analysis. But the social sciences have lost the will to become true sciences. These ideal forms and analytical models are treated as if they are a hyper-reality, impervious to all evidence, more real than reality – which is itself accused of being unstable, imperfect and insubordinate.

Society as a concept is split up for functional reasons between economists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, sociologists and others who, together, form the social sciences.

Society would be for them the sum-total of social problems, to be treated by specialists who observe from a distance – as if they were outside it. As if reality were the state and the economy, and the people and society merely its consequences. As if preserving the concept of modernity were more important than preserving the human race.

The definition of modern society as a product of the state-market denies the protective function of the state and the distributive function of the economy, apart from those groups who are specifically protected and supplied by the market-state. While anthropology is the study of societies which have no state, sociology studies the problems of people who live in a state but with insufficient protection or supply. It is the individuals who must respect the law and provide their work, sacrificing themselves to the requirements of the market-state, and not these who should be responsible for securing a good life for all.

The social sciences admit to doubts about the real or unreal status of society, but they do not question the social hierarchy, as if it was a natural and ineluctable phenomenon.

BACKGROUND

Michael Kuhn (2016) confirms the systematic production of tautological discourses on the part of the social sciences – in sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, and political science – all incapable of recognizing and abandoning the cognitive ambush in which they are trapped in the service of nation states (Coser, 1956:27). The author maintains that after 150 years of social studies, it is simply not enough to say that the knowledge developed in the meantime is not in any way responsible for the ecological, financial, economic, political and social disasters which we are now witnessing.

The social sciences reserved for themselves the role of blaming the victims (the natives, the poor, the voters, the excluded) for the problems created by the state-market alliance, as if the oppression and the repression were merely exceptional responses to the violence coming from below (Dores 2014).

The social sciences have taken it for granted that the state and its political power fundamentally fulfil all the functions necessary for people's existence, beginning with the guarantee by the legal system of equality and liberty, but including also the opportunity to create an identity adapted to modern life (through the educational system), and the offer of healthcare to avoid death (through the national health systems). This plan of action works well for the totalitarian states. In the case of democratic states, the totalitarian tendencies of the plan are counter balanced by a self-limiting system of checks and balances. But the conditions for the continued reproduction of elites are maintained intact.

The concept of "society" maintains the current double meaning of 1) articulated group of people integrated through business, social and political relationships on the one hand, and 2) undefined group of people subject to state control, namely in terms of nationality and the administrative and criminal status as residents and workers or poor immigrants or unemployed.

Concerned with an unquestioned maintenance of the social hierarchy as the natural order of things, the social sciences respond to the egalitarian demands of their readers by offering diagnoses of social inequality. They ignore the differences of quality of human life in the modern societies, such as between those with influence on a macro level (the elites) and those who simply live on a micro (daily) level in the hope of being mobilized for work (mezzo level).

What is missing is a social science capable of reconnecting that which the present social sciences have disconnected, and of thus contributing to the search for initiatives leading to new forms of social organization adequate for the new circumstances.

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The rational action of individuals conditioned by the sense of sacrifice has turned modern societies into machines for destruction of the environment – destruction, that is, of the necessary condition for the continued existence of the human species.

The so-called social state (the institutionalized ordering of solidarity, inspired by privatization and nationalization of community initiatives for self-subsistence), meanwhile transformed over the last decades into a security state, continues to be presented as a respecter of human rights – quite separate from the life of other non-social state systems recognizably incapable of protecting their populations, and capable even of attacking them.

References to the social, including those involving the social states, are disqualified as being feminine, emotional, charitable, inferior, voluntary, submissive, discrete practices lacking in initiative or political or strategic relevance. Or, better, the strategic importance of the social lies in the state's treating as natural its coordinated political efforts to downgrade a large section of society, in residential zones, in schools and in healthcare.

There are two societies: one above and another below. In the middle exists a non-society, a space of cooperation, a market, frequented by people allegedly free and equal, stimulated by financial incentives, the volume of whose spoils should determine their social status.

Environment, politics and perversity

In Portugal the president and the government hastened to declare that the state had failed, in respect to the deadly fires of the summer of 2017. They did not say that it was the state which had caused the disaster in the first place.

Global warming and extreme climactic phenomena caught by surprise the civil protection services, dominated by corruption. This time it was not just a few poor people who died burnt but many people who imagined themselves to be protected by the state. Their families and friends organized associations, in order to defend both their rights to compensation and the memory of those who died (something beyond the reach or imagination of those who live in the lower level of society). In the end-of-year analyses, despite unexpected economic and financial successes announced in Portugal, it was the "fires" (the generalised form of reference to the unprotected dead and wounded) which were chosen by many as the event of the year.

The societies, ideally unified by national markets, end up multiplying into new social orders (of global businessmen at the top, with free movement of clandestine global workers) to respond to global competitiveness which feeds the profits maintained by the market-state alliance. The success of globalization, of the division of all territory into nation states, is overshadowed by the effects in the environment of growing industrialization.

The question - if society exists or not - is a question of whether a) human solidarity in relation to Nature is desirable and necessary; and b) what should be left inside and outside that solidarity: capitalism and exploitation? The sacrificial practices conducted against nature and stigmatized populations?

Social theories

Social theories are not used to demonstrate the existence of the object of their study – i.e. society. They are occupied with developing centralised strategies for dispersing studies in the fields of social dimensions, knowledge, politics, economics, culture, and society. These are studies with no mutual communication between them that accept the possibility that society may only be a feminine metaphor, emotional, supportive, unrealistic, the idealization of unattainable notions of equality and freedom.

Cartesian analysis, giving attention to the parts and discarding the whole, is the foundation of present scientific thinking, and its prison (Damásio, 1994). Such parts/dimensions are presented and studied as if they were solid realities, and the problems of correspondence with reality are solved systematically, through specialization, creation of subdisciplines, and separation between micro, mezzo and macro levels of analysis.

Is it globalization, a political strategy of the 3 or 4 decades, which has created world society? Or did globalization begin the moment the first humans left the African continent a million years ago? These questions appear in studies on globalization as introductions which serve to define the authors' different opinions, independently of any concerted effort to research whether the answers are right or wrong. Is globalization a phenomenon organized by market-states, or is it a social phenomenon?

Modernity encourages a rejection of tradition. On the personal level there are those who reject their ancestors. On the intellectual level there are those who make a tabula rasa of everything that happened before the Revolutionary period, including its remnants which still exist mixed with the modern. On the political level there are those who think people exist to serve the modern market-state.

From a scientific point of view, it is difficult to maintain that society was created by the state, for the simple reason that there were societies before there were states. But if one speaks of modern society and of individuals, rather than speaking of genetically constituted people, then it becomes possible to imagine that it was the market-state which invented them, free and equal, citizens, just as God made Adam and Eve.

In practice, the social sciences stopped their intellectual path somewhere between social philosophy (the rational prediction of what could be the best social organization) and science. They find themselves in a limbo, unconcerned on the one hand with the discussion of what society may be, and on the other resigned to the failure to become true science.

The frontiers of the social sciences

The social sciences must, of necessity, touch on the practical disrespect for human rights, and at the same time recognize the resilience (whether resigned or not) of the populations (especially those excluded or in risk of exclusion). Society is, these terms, treated above all as a people, a part of nature, a rebellious part which can be domesticated and exploited by the states and the economies through the attribution of formal sovereign rights, in the context of the nation state's ideology. The Nation idealized as homogeneous, as are the individuals, the smallest units of the social sciences. Almost equal between themselves, except for the inequalities and, of course, the nationalities which make of the nations and their sovereignty an internal subject for the state and the respective society, itself practically kidnapped: some give orders and others obey, with more or less marginal results.

The ideal society of free and equal individuals is put forward as a norm by law. Society seen and promoted from the top of state organizations corresponds to reality to the same extent as a plan or a map correspond to action or territory. That society, imagined juridically, is taken as a model.

This has consequences – namely that people are obliged to correspond to the roles attributed to them: to be free and equal. If they are not, it is by reason of their own incompetence.

The politicians, the citizens and the jurists think with the predominant ideology and through the fixed separation of disciplines. They think that, in the absence of society, and of acquired habits, rebelling against modernity, the laws, the procedures and rationality itself could come to function correctly, without resistance. The imagination has its known capacity for constructing paradises, celestial societies and utopias: “our” nation state predestined to be eternal and exemplary. As a counterpoint, of course, associated in manicheistic fashion to these ideas, are the margins of society, the punishments for disobedience, the living hell of those who reoffend, and the treachery to which are subjected those who cannot resign themselves to the actual social conditions.

The capacity to abstract from society, separated in practice between normality above and the juridical cases and social problems below, is not limited to law and the normative sciences. The social sciences, despite swearing that they combat ideologies, also format ideal societies and complain of people who do not fulfil their function. Paradoxically, the sharing of the same idealised society, constituting individuals imagined by the market state, makes the interdisciplinary articulation between social sciences and law, and other normative fields, impossible.

The different social status, highly hierarchical, between jurists, economists and other social scientists, as well as the fixed hyper-specialization which characterizes the social sciences (Lahire 2012:319-356) reveals the symbolic and spiritually subordinate place of society, with respect to the state and the economy.

This subordinate role has been developed in a particular way, in the social sciences: giving practically exclusive attention to power relations (Lahire 2012:125; Therborn 2006:3); minimizing the human aspects of production (Bertaux, 1977), the biological production of people and generations, and the caring work necessary for this purpose.

The reproduction of a discriminatory and “natural” conception of human gender and hierarchical positions is made compatible with the ideal-type of society, understood as a collection of free and equal individuals, through the connotation and social prestige which creates a distinction between the social sciences, law and biology – these three being mutually incompatible. That which defines biology as a science excludes the knowledge of social sciences and law. That which is the field of social sciences excludes law and biology.

Theoretical opportunities

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have shown how the greatest inequalities of income are associated with more social problems. Gregory Clark (2014) demonstrated the existence of a social resistance to social mobility, that is, a social propensity to maintain social hierarchies.

Thus, the market-states interfere with their societies by manipulating incomes on the one hand, and the societies, on the other, are preserving the hierarchies which support the market-states. The implication is that rational societies should be using their influence, in the development of hierarchical structures, to reduce the differences in income and thus avoid social problems.

In the era of globalization, the national society continues to be a form of competitive thinking between groups, simultaneously imperial and anti-colonial (Anderson, 1998). The objective of economic growth is more and more obviously absurd in the face of the environmental problems - faced also with the theoretical possibility of rebelling and, thus, helping humanity to understand what it can do to adapt to present circumstances.

The society we need is one which does not conform but distances itself from the normal, the normalization imposed by the market-state force which social theory denominates as social structure. We need a society free of the constraints of nation states compromised by the goal of economic growth, rather than free and equal individuals bound by social controls woven through millennia and now digitally organized.

There are clear grounds on which societies base their creeds of freedom (access to work) and equality (access to markets), developed in the context of subordination to the market-state alliance. The question as to whether society exists could also be the question as to whether, in such a strategic circumstance, it is possible to break out of the straitjacket of economic state forces which so dominates daily life. Or is it possible to do so without provoking a catastrophe (with which revolution, mutiny, and popular action are sometimes associated)? In other words, is there a practical alternative to continued survival under this regime?

Conclusion

The problem of the social sciences is not in the use of the imagination or of arbitrary models to guide scientific activities: this is done successfully by the sciences. The problem is *the treatment of the model as inviolable* and, for this purpose, ignoring the empirical evidence which could inform progress and the gathering of knowledge. The problem is treating modernity as a *pass-partout* notion and ignoring the evidence to the contrary. In the social sciences, the violation of the market laws is felt as a violation of one's own *personal identity*, dependent professionally on the internal wars between the social sciences themselves. Without markets, who would the economists be? Without a state, who would the political scientists be? Without the excluded, who would the anthropologists be? Without the poor, who would the social workers be?

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