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SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY

- THE CASE OF THE ARAB MAGHREB -

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ALYA BAFFOUN and FREDJ STAMBOULI

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The Problem

Action research and scientific analysis is a theme underlying a fundamental problem of contemporary social science. That is, the nature of knowledge and its relationships to history and social practice are at issue here. Accordingly, before reviewing the condition of scientific sociological analysis and its relation to concrete and committed research (in North African societies particularly), it is necessary to pose a problem the solution to which is still difficult to derive - given the present state of social knowledge and praxis: how important is the dominant, contemporary knowledge (which claims to be universal) about the societies of the Middle East, and in what measure does it constitute a valid basis for the instruction of researchers of the Third World who seek to recover their identity and contribute to the transformation of their own societies with reference to greater social justice and fuller development of mankind?

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PREMISES

Knowledge, Universalism and History

Recent epistemological contributions, as those of Michel Foucault, underscore the inevitable parallelism between forms and contents of scientific discourses and historical moments and forms of social practice (Foucault 1966). Contrary to the classical perspective of idealistic liberalism, ideas and theories must be related to their socio-historical and to their mode of genetic structural formation. Therefore, all scientific schools of a given epoch are socially determined.

This is not, of course, a new thesis. Marx vigorously sustained it in his famous dictum: "It is not the conscience of men which determines their existence, but rather their social existence which determines their conscience" (Marx 1859). Similarly: "Even when I carry out a scientific work, I accomplish a social act" (Marx 1844). Frequently, such an approach allows us to determine precisely the historical conditions and the socio-political and economic data and constraints making for the production of intellectual profiles, types of discourse and theoretical models which end up by imposing themselves on us as established knowledge.

If we admit these epistemological premises, we are forced logically to admit the reality of difference of scientific discourses both at the level of time (diachronic) and at the level of intra- or trans-civilization (synchronic) and explain this difference according to the social nature of intellectual production. To distinguish between science and ideology within this perspective is to lapse into academese, since ideology is at the very core of the social processes which produce knowledge. Ideology cannot be separated from science.

Therefore the claim of scientific discourse that its categories, propositions or 'laws' enjoy spatio-temporal universality becomes simple rhetoric, frequently serving as a profound mystification lasting for generations. Socialization of the 'scientist' socio-politically inevitably conditions all scientific and ideological production and negates his claim to universality. Every dominant scientific discourse becomes inseparable from its contemporary historical moment and social forms. The following example from the history of Western ideas and societies illustrates the validity of this statement.

Feudal society in Europe, the manifestation of servile social relationships, became legitimated and was justified through a scientific discourse (an ideology), both dogmatic and absolutist (taking a religious form) which was systematized around idealist and spiritualist philosophies. By contrast, the intellectuals of the emerging bourgeoisie of the capitalist social formation were compelled to construct philosophical systems to reinforce the salient values of materialism, rationalism, and positivism. Although this kind of intellectual orientation did not become exclusive (other philosophers at the same time wanted to revert to the Age of Gold) it did become dominant.

With the culmination of the classical theory of knowledge, and as a consequence of the critiques against it, the claim of Western scientific knowledge about society and history lost its original meaning. This kind of knowledge, developed also within the Western perspective, stood opposed to the thesis of the universality of scientific knowledge, the latter itself being a most fragile thesis. It betrayed itself, however, by setting up the Western world as subject and all other worlds as objects. As Anouar Abdel-Malek writes: "The preconceptual system centered around the West is sectorial. It has managed to integrate at certain times the materials of dependent peoples and countries, but always as objects, never as subjects" (Abdel-Malek 1972:49).

Again, Claude Levi-Strauss, who is not exactly a Marxist anthropologist, admits, (albeit belatedly) this same reality: "There would not have been an anthropology in the sense attributed to this term, if, objectively, a vast portion of mankind had not been subjugated by some men; nor if during decades, perhaps centuries, the latter had not massacred or reduced to slavery peoples whose natural resources were ravaged, or who themselves were exterminated The effort of anthropology, at an epistemological level, to study man more objectively reflects, willingly or not, a state of affairs in which one part of mankind was left to the discretion of the other" (Levi-Strauss 1975:27).

Knowledge and Practice

It is time to reorient this pseudo-knowledge and to submit it to the fertile critique of facts which have been forgotten or denied, and to proceed to accumulate a

reconstructed, critical, radical knowledge which obviates the gross limitations sketched above. One must not allege as a pretext the cocoon of Western centeredness of historically produced science. Neither must one take refuge in the facile escape furnished by the notions of 'specificity' and 'the right to be different', especially as these concepts are emphasized by scientists from the liberal West and by their acolytes in Third World universities. And also, when these notions are underlined with the intention of concealing systematic exploitation mechanisms used to subjugate the peoples of the Third World due to the present logic of world markets as dominated by hegemonic imperialism (Zamiti 1974), one must challenge the basic categories of knowledge which have also been imported into the Third World markets.

If Marxism, in the words of Sartre, "Is the insurmountable philosophy of our times", we believe, in effect, that dialectical and historical materialism constitutes a method capable in our time of restoring the differences of concrete historical situations in which diverse peoples find themselves during their past and present history. As there may be a difference between cultural variability and cultural relativism, dialectical methodology (as applied in praxis) also permits exposing simultaneously any general social structures and general laws regarding their functioning and transformation.

In any case, the validity of knowledge is verified in practice, the latter being the foundation of all true knowledge: This is the meaning of Marx's statement: "Correct practice is the condition of a true and positive theory" (Marx 1844). Foucault as well, underscoring the strategic and political dimensions of scientific discourse, wrote: "The problem, the bet, the risk, consists in being able to develop a true and strategically efficient discourse; that is, how the truth of history can politically achieve its effect" (Foucault 1976:72).

The meditation of revolutionary practice may constitute a strategic moment in the process of theoretical production and its regeneration. This is the meaning of Samir Amin's words: "In the absence of revolutionary practice, theory is condemned to degeneration Practice here is more important than theory, since a basically proper practice aids in the correction of partially erroneous theories; whereas the inverse is not true" (Amin 1976 b: 115). Moreover, as theory is guided and made fertile by practical reality, it should have as its final purpose a contribution to the invention of a new social order, viable because less degrading.

The present historical situation seems favorable to a worldwide process of awareness-heightening regarding the necessity of radical change, meaning a reduction of hegemonic relationships between nations and the neutralization of abject forms of exploitation and social injustice. Currently, possibilities of infinite liberation face mankind; a qualitative reversion of the social order is not excluded from the future of mankind society.

Herbert Marcuse shows sensitivity to social change symptoms and their interpretation when he says: "The internal contradictions of capitalism reveal a new intensity in those trends which limit stabilization efforts while at the same time they facilitate liberation possibilities which surpass traditional concepts. It is necessary to prepare a qualitative reversion of the social order . . . at present this has become a new historical demand" (Marcuse 1976:73).

Such a purpose requires an exceptional effort of inventiveness concerning forms of action and organization of the future, from all social forces that are carriers of this future. Anarchy and authoritarianism (so typical today) have endured and been suffered too long and must be transcended. "It is foolish to believe," continues Marcuse, "that the power of capitalism so highly organized and concentrated, may be fought by converting the economy into a counter-organization. But it is also foolish to think that it is possible to recover in a pure and simple manner traditional forms of organization, which are both centralized and bureaucratic; they have become excessively integrated to the state of affairs which must be changed" (Marcuse 1976:83)

Mass struggles, more and more frequent both in 'central' and 'peripheral' societies, have rendered fertile the creative imagination of revolutionary intellect. They have advanced also critical knowledge. Samir Amin noted this progress when he stated: "The last 15 years will be highly acknowledged in the history of development of socialist thought. The extraordinary renovation of Marxism will contrast from now on with the crisis of the dominant ideology. The reason for this renovation must be sought in the development of mass struggles for socialism in parallel to the more profound crisis of capitalism" (Amin 1976:7).

SOCIOLOGY, METHODOLOGY AND ACTION RESEARCH

- The Case of the Maghreb -

During the colonial era, both ethnography and sociology were relatively developed. Durkheim's disciples worked with methods of positivism during this time. The ultimate purpose of ethnographic and sociological research (often explicit) was to allow a fuller knowledge of the societies which were to be exploited or subjugated in order to facilitate processes of conquest and domination. Sociology was thus conceived as an integral part of the colonialist strategy. Both research and teaching in the social sciences were conceived and organized in such ways as to further their utility and practice.

An old disciple of professor Le Chatelier of the College de France (Paris), Michaux-Bellaire, thus keynoted a scientific mission to Tangier: "the purpose of this mission is to draw up a catalogue of Morocco, its cities, its brotherhoods; to search for their origin, ramifications, struggles and alliances; to follow their historical process

during the different dynasties, to study their institutions and customs, in a word, to know the land where we may be called upon to operate in the future, and to allow us to act with full knowledge of the situation" (Michaux-Bellaire 1925).

That which was known as science in those days was in effect the expression of the open ideology of the colonial system's interests and of those who would be its allies in the colonies - the declining feudal landlords and monarchical bourgeoisies. The 'scientific' discourse in such historical situations determined by imperialism and colonial rule, assumed thus a pronounced ideological form, which was both ethnocentric and racist. At the same time it became the inevitable carrier and supporter of hegemonic class interests.

Intellectuals of the bourgeoisie in the colonies frequently internalized such kind of discourse and used it as an umbrella to protect their class interests vis-à-vis the masses. The most nationalist among them often became entrapped in a childish idealism and a deeply alienated discourse, and it was a discourse cut off from the socio-economic realities of the majority of the people who were to impose themselves as the true force of the historical future of these societies.

The Post-Colonial Phase

This phase began in the first years of the 1960's. National centers of scientific research in the social sciences were established in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Sociology was taught at all the Universities and institutes of higher learning. It was then that a first generation of young Maghreb researchers began to take control of research and teaching activities. These Maghreb intellectuals set for themselves a twofold task: to start a process of general decolonization in order to recover the historical and cultural identity of their peoples, and to define the most efficient modalities of a balanced social development which alone could give way to progressive technology and modernity in their countries.

Cultural decolonization vis-à-vis the old metropolis appeared as a priority after political independence was won. Only such a process would allow for the "internal reconstruction of the truth of our societies, which was denied and mystified for so long by the colonial system." Realization of this venture meant that cultural decolonization had to begin by turning to Arab culture so that Arabic would again be the language in teaching and research. Cultural independence vis-à-vis the old metropolis needed a scientific and educational policy based on the reality of Arab societies and their history. This separation from foreign cultural hegemony was necessary and healthy, since "it re-incorporates us as subjects after having been objects of European history and research for so long" (Khatibi 1967).

Such a separation was a first step in a long process of multidimensional decolonization. It appeared not only as the beginning of the process of control by

Maghreb researchers of their own realities, but it also constituted a challenge concerning the scientific and political bases of past research carried out by sociologists. These had been mainly interested in "the more stable and even more archaic aspects of Maghreb society" (Karoui and Zghal:1976). We thus became engaged in a rediscovery of our historical and cultural personality. The Arab language and Islam became objects of a feverish and renovated research process. The nation and the family also became research objects. In this regard, the title of one research study carried out by the Department of Sociology at the University of Tunis, is significant, namely, "Seeking Lost Norms" (Boudiba 1967).

The purpose of this kind of research based on empirical findings, and deprived of academese, was to be the reconquest of the authenticity of Maghreb people. For certain researchers this purpose was so important that sociology was invited to become 'militant' in order to pursue it :

"It is time in Tunisia for the social sciences to drop academicism, formalism and juridicism in order to dedicate themselves courageously to the only fruitful outlets: the concrete, the real and the historical. It is necessary for sociology to reclaim and fully assume the responsibility for participating in the great struggle for our country and to gain its legitimate place in the world of constant mutation. Sociology must leave behind the armchair to which some would like to limit it; it is time to promote a militant sociology This militant sociology, while furthering a process of conscious training process, contributes with greater insight and authenticity and allows for the struggle against mysticism, alienation and deformation" (Boudiba 1968).

The question of 'development' became also a fashionable theme, and accordingly transition of socio-economic structures was another focus of attention for Maghreb researchers.

Research focussed on the problem of development came in the wake of economic and political practice (planning). During the decade, 1960-1970, numerous studies related to crucial aspects of the dynamics of development in the Maghreb were published. Examination of the publications of the Economic and Social Research Center at the University of Tunis shows clearly the main interests of social science researchers in that decade. (see Table 1 on the following page).

It is worth noting that sociology was especially interested in studies related to development. Twenty seven out of forty articles published by the Research Center at the University of Tunis, 1964-1974, dealt with the following four subjects:

- Pauperization and decline of rural society
- Hyper-urbanization and urban imbalances
- Mass education and new disparities
- National and economic construction

Table 1. Distribution of Social Science Publications According to Themes and Representative Disciplines at the University of Tunis's Economic and Social Research Center, 1960 - 1970.

THEMES	NUMBER OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES PUBLISHED	DISCIPLINES REPRESENTED
Reform of Agrarian Structures	19	Sociology Economics Geography
Urbanization and Urban / Rural Relations	16	Sociology Economics Geography Demography
Population Studies	14	Demography Geography
Education	13	Sociology Economics Demography Psychology Statistics
Migration	8	Demography Geography Sociology
Industrialization and Employment	6	Sociology Demography Geography Statistics
Tourism	2	Sociology Economics

Phase of Self-Criticism and Critique

After the decade in which university and scientific centers of research were established and the first researches were completed, certain difficulties compelled researchers to work out a balance sheet of the situation and undertake from a distance a critique of the achievements. A process of self-criticism also took place. A more critical research schedule began to develop (Karoui and Zghal 1976). The weaknesses of this decade of research are given as follows:

- a. Research themes during the 1960's were typically too vague and general, dealing as they did with questions of authenticity, specificity, decolonization and development.

One must recognize that the sociology of decolonization has been prolific in the Maghreb. Concepts such as 'cultural specificity', 'national identity', 'authenticity' and 'the right to be different' were frequently used. Nevertheless, recourse to these concepts was surrounded by the halo of specificity acquired in given historical conditions (decline of colonialism, emergence in the West of an ideology of change, emergence of a nationalist petty bourgeoisie in the ex-colonial societies). Emotional and polemical use of these terms frequently pointed to their ideological and mystical components (Zeghidi 1976).

It seems that fundamental issues such as dependency or the emergence of a new and more unequal class structure received but meager attention. Social actors of strategic importance, such as the peasantry and the working class, were insufficiently studied. The dialectics of social life were neglected in these areas. Accordingly, we believe that only through the dialectical and critical approach which integrates economic and social data today with the recent historical evolution of the world economy and of international relationships will serve to renovate and enrich sociological research on development and further the liberation of peoples.

- b. Scientific research was still characterized by sparse theoretical efforts and the absence of methodological precision. The monographic and empirical character of research still endures (Karoui and Zghal 1976).

This tendency towards empirical work may itself become an ideological attitude even if it is justified by 'scientific neutrality'. Empiricism is not necessarily a guarantee of scientific quality. This is the meaning of Bourdieu's statement: "Each time that the sociologist believes he is eluding the task of the construction of facts as a function of a theoretical problem, he is submitting to a construction which is unknown and which he himself ignores" (Bourdieu 1973).

The issue of development has not been sufficiently problem-oriented. 'Underdevelopment' is diagnosed as an inherited 'situation' from the colonial system that must be overcome by 'modernization' processes in national power politics. Modernization policies are viewed as being able to substitute tradition with modern ways of life through the diffusion of progressive techniques and behaviour. This dichotomy - already surpassed - has been candidly used at times by researchers who may not be considered as defenders of functionalist literature.

It is as if the petty bourgeois Maghreb intelligentsia feared the judicious use of a radical and critical problematic the clarification of which (actual or potential) might help to develop popular possibilities in reform and struggle. The intelligentsia believed that these possibilities could be channelled, controlled or theoretically justified. It is as if contradiction of interests put forward an inexorable limit to scientific objectivity.

- c. The need to analyze the political dimensions of social change has not yet been explicitly established, although research results have had political implications at times. This has led to the suppression of the Morocco Institute of Sociology in 1971.
- d. Social science researchers have been accused at times of behaving like an 'elite of scholars' separated from the masses. Research techniques (the questionnaire, which is essentially a transfer of ideologically determined technology since it is based on the perception of social relations in Western bourgeois society), the methods of publication (still too often in French), the absence of control of uses made of research results, the lack of a tradition of participant research geared to action and transformation of community life - all these weak points have at times led to the consideration of this 'scholarly elite' as a privileged, strange, mandarin group. Its separation (artificial) from the society which it should analyse and transform has led to the formation of a researchers' 'ghetto'.

A different situation has also been observed at times, a type of 'political and ideological tutelage' (Zeghidi 1976) in the social sciences. In this case the sociologist becomes an 'expert' and counselor' of political groups in power. Thus the Weberian antinomy of the scholar and the politician is carelessly resolved and in this case exchanged for a return to Plato's old thesis of the philosopher king.

And when one looks at the internal criticism of the researchers themselves regarding scientific institutions, the diagnosis is as follows: "The situation within the institution has been blocked for several years. Research is condemned to rachitism and somnolence. It lacks a critical mass of full-time researches to be carried out in the field. It lacks contact with different economic and social realities of the country which alone can help to guide and to clear the way for research" (Rouissi 1976).

New Preoccupations

It seems therefore that after a few years researchers have directed their attention principally to the following preoccupations:

- a. Social science research should give priority to social actors who are carriers of radical change (youth, women, poor peasantry, neo-urban masses, working classes) and to political factors which seek to block change (neo-colonialism, dependence, parasitic social classes).
- b. The Maghreb sociologist must be culturally and politically committed. On the cultural level, he must struggle against "theological and theocratic aspects of Islamic ideology in order to liberate Arab sociological knowledge" (Khatibi 1975). On the political level, the sociologist must be constantly involved in the social struggles of his own society. He must be a critic in the most profound sense of this term so that he will never allow himself to be co-opted.

It is well known that sociology cannot be developed unless its critical function is accepted or at least tolerated as a positive factor contributing to the transformation of a previously colonized society - a society that now finds itself curtailed by all kinds of dependency relationships. A servile sociology enters into contradiction with its own scientific project. It cannot become an efficient weapon for the struggle against the consequences of colonialism, dependency and the internal blocking factors in a given society or civilization. Nevertheless, critical sociology cannot be synonymous with a systematic downgrading of that which exists, but rather a contribution of more pertinent knowledge which at the same time is more congruent with social reality.

- c. On the theoretical and methodological level, one must avoid two dangers: academicism out of touch with concrete social realities; and provincialism (the Maghreb analyzed like something closed in a bottle) as reinforced by excessive empiricism which often becomes exclusive

Within this perspective, Abdallah Laroui recommends: "The Marxist historical method seems to be the only one which grasps completely the living reality and in consequence allows for action upon it" (Laroui 1974). On the other hand, the growth of centers of interest related to similar experiences in other Third World countries (in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa) seems to be more and more a necessary condition for by-passing purely descriptive, partial studies. Simultaneously, this is an efficient means for theoretical and methodological renovation or renewal.

It follows from all this that true societal development cannot take place without the sociology of decolonization and that this must pass through a stage of the decolonization of sociology. To this end we need to develop a new sociology, a

sociology at once independent and critical. For this to happen it is necessary for political regimes in our time to learn to be tolerant of the critical viewpoint of the scientific discourse.

This goal demands from social scientists the world over an exceptional creative effort in order to elaborate a new social theory, to be both critical and radical. Such a goal should be especially the concern of those social scientists who have become more politically committed. Such a theory should help to restore to mankind its true humanity and lead society into its future vocation: that of giving scope for infinite human development.

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