**Limites e possibilidades das Ciências Sociais**

**Diálogos possíveis**

**1.** DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCE – UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO – ITALY.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7231-5819
enzo.colombo@unimi.it

**2.** DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH – UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA – ITALY.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3571-480X
gianmarco.navarini@unimib.it.

# Steps to Global Social Sciences? The field, the stakes, and practices

HÁ PASSOS A TORNAR AS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS GLOBAIS? O CAMPO, AS PROPOSTAS E AS PRÁTICAS

*Enzo Colombo*[1]
*Gianmarco Navarini*[2]

## ABSTRACT

While transforming the world, globalization processes have put social sciences under stress. Several voices, notably from the so-called 'Global South', claim a radical revision – if not total rejection – of the (Western) social sciences. It has become evident that the tool-kit of concepts and methods inherited from modernity seems incapable of grasping the complexity and variability of both current social experience and ways of getting to know the world, actually shaped by a plurality of voices, interest, historical traditions. The awareness of a plurality of different perspectives that characterize the social sciences well beyond their classical-western formulation is creating a field that seems to push social sciences themselves towards two opposed directions. The paper offers a way to navigate through this field. On the one hand, part of this field tries to regain the solid ground of one shared scientific knowledge, overcoming diversity and particularity, running after a rigorous definition of methodological and conceptual tools that can help to found 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. The field created by these two parts raises the question of whether the distance between them is really unbridgeable, and yet the question is becoming the subject of considerable, often conflicting, scholarship. Besides illustrating the rationale of the different positions, we argue that integrating the current scholarships about the 'theoretical and methodological' content of social sciences may be possible only with a critical reflection about the actual 'practices' of doing social sciences.

**Keywords:** Social theory. Globalization. Complexity. Postcolonialism. Universalism. Relativism.

## RESUMO

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Ao transformar o mundo, os processos de globalização colocaram as ciências sociais sob stress. Várias vozes, principalmente do chamado 'Sul', reivindicam uma revisão radical – quando não uma rejeição total - das ciências sociais (ocidentais). Tornou-se evidente que o conjunto de ferramentas, de conceitos e métodos herdados da modernidade parece incapaz de compreender a complexidade e a variedade das experiências sociais atuais e das formas de conhecer o mundo, moldadas por uma pluralidade de vozes, interesses e tradições históricas. A tomada de consciência da pluralidade de perspetivas diferentes que caracterizam as ciências sociais para lá da sua formulação clássico-ocidental está a criar um campo que parece dividir as próprias ciências sociais em duas direções opostas. Este capítulo propõe uma forma de navegar por esse campo. Por um lado, parte desse campo tenta recuperar a base sólida de um conhecimento científico compartilhado, superando a diversidade e a particularidade, seguindo uma definição rigorosa de ferramentas metodológicas e conceituais que podem ajudar a fundar uma compreensão universalista renovada da complexidade das sociedades atuais. Por outro lado, outra parte relevante das ciências sociais parece render-se à inevitabilidade do conhecimento parcial, instável e tendencioso. O campo criado por essas duas partes levanta a questão de saber se a diferença entre elas é realmente intransponível. A questão está a tornar-se alvo de um campo de estudos considerável e frequentemente conflituantes. Além de ilustrar a lógica das diferentes posições, argumentamos que a integração dos atuais estudos académicos sobre o conteúdo "teórico e metodológico" das ciências sociais só pode ser possível através de uma reflexão crítica sobre as "práticas" reais de fazer ciências sociais.

**Palavras-chave**: Teoria social. Globalização. Complexidade. Pós-colonialismo. Universalismo. Relativismo.

## GLOBALIZATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES: PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Since the end of the last century, several specific transformations – often summarized under the heading 'globalization' – have deeply changed several features of our social experience. Among these aspects, one of the most important, as regards the scientific mission of the social scholarships, lies in the fact that together with the experiences the

social ways of getting to know the world(s) have also changed. 'Complexity' and 'variability' seem to be the two main keywords with which, in the more general discursive field of social sciences, the issues raised by these changes are changing or reshaping the field itself.

On the one hand, while it is still hotly debated whether 'globalization' is an old process that has always run parallel to human history or whether it is a unique outcome of recent technological improvements in electronics and transport, there is greater consensus regarding the fact that a large part of the words and concepts we inherited from modernity is now under strain (FEATHERSTONE *et al*. 1995; TOMLINSON 1999; URRY 2003; GUNARATNE 2010; MIGNOLO 2014). On the other hand, this kind of acknowledgement seems to grow in parallel with the common observation that the well-known *disjuncture* between 'globalization of knowledge' and 'knowledge of globalization' – a topic whose discussion began over twenty years ago (APPADURAI, 1999) – it is still quite alive. The double question that emerges hence, concerning a certain obsolete nature of the categories in hand and the persistence of the disjuncture, produced a first result that is problematic too. In particular, the tool-kit of words and concepts that characterized social sciences seems no longer useful to understand how societies are changing under the effects of the processes of globalization. Are class, capitalism, modernity, citizenship, culture, identity, public sphere, democracy, and the nation-state, just to name a few, still able to catch the diversity and complexity of the current social experiences? When and how did this tool-kit become out-dated? Is this incapacity to apply old vocabularies to the current experience the sign of an unavoidable end of the social sciences, at least in the way we have known them so far?

Questions of this kind constitute the ground of this essay, which is interested in proposing some points of discussion to reflect on the present and the future of the social sciences. The paper aims to reconstruct, albeit briefly, the criticisms of the alleged universalism and objectivism of the social sciences, without renouncing the hypothesis that there is a shared field of reflection around the social experience that transcends Western historical experience and a stifling methodological nationalism.

As a starting point, it is suggested to accept the hypothesis that – albeit from a Western perspective – globalization is indeed radically transforming social landscapes and, above all, the ways in which we can interpret and know them (BECK, 2006; MUNCK, 2016; BHAMBRA AND SANTOS, 2017). The growing global interconnection makes evident the diversity of points of view and the variety of assumptions that underpin our interpretation of reality; the tools of the

social sciences, considered universally and eternally valid, are challenged and relativized by new voices and new questions (CHAKRABARTY, 2000; CONNELL, 2007a). Globalization has enlarged and differentiated the community of social scientists, that is, the specialised people who reflect on social processes for the sake of their profession. The demographic diversity of the university faculty and students played a central role in making evident the partiality and the situatedness of western social thought. Although this criticism had been circulating well before the emergence of the current financial and technological globalization, it is with the multiplication of the difference *within* the canonical discursive field of the social sciences – what we could call, following Appadurai (1996), ideoscape – that these criticisms are legitimized and validated within a wider public debate. The multiplication of the points of view and the voices within the social sciences' field have also promoted an internal push to change. Postcolonialism, feminist theory, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, and interpretive turn, all drive in the same direction: to problematize the alleged universality of social knowledge, underlining the socio-historical conditions that inform our possibility to know and talk about social reality (YOUNG, 1990; BHAMBRA, 2007; CONNELL, 2007b;

ELLIOTT AND LEMERT, 2014; ALATAS AND SINHA, 2017).

The awareness of a plurality of different perspectives that characterize the social sciences well beyond their classical (western) formulation seems to push social sciences towards opposed directions. On the one hand, part of social sciences tries to regain the solid ground of shared knowledge, overcoming diversity and particularity, running after a rigorous definition of methodological and conceptual tools that can help to found 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 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 of social reality; the supporters of the second blame their opponents to pursue an old-fashion, imperialistic and ethnocentric project.

Is it possible to find a way out of this conundrum? Is it possible to take these criticisms seriously to strengthen the social sciences? To deal with these issues, we think it is important to clarify the premises

that are involved in them, namely the questions: Can a global social science exist? If so, does it really improve our understanding of social processes? How? What are the ideas of society that underpin the different positions? How are the role and the work of social scholars perceived? The following pages first present the positions of those who claim the necessary unity and universality (at least as a persistent aspiration) of social sciences. Then, a couple of paragraphs illustrate the different ways in which the need for a multiplicity of social sciences is claimed. Starting from the most radical positions that consider the various social sciences as radically incommensurable, we move to discuss perspectives that consider plurality and complexity as a fundamental trait of every social understanding. In the final section, although renouncing a unitary synthesis, some lines of discussion and debate that help to imagine a development of the social sciences – in the direction of a better understanding of the current experience of global interconnection – will be highlighted.

## THE ONLY-ONE-SOCIAL-SCIENCE CLAIM SUB-FIELDS

A way of conceiving contemporary social sciences consists in reaffirming their unity, independently of – or beyond – the variability of contexts and historical contingencies. Scholars who support this position, usually state that every knowledge of the social world, to be useful and well-founded, must be objective. In this realm, 'objectivity' means that the conclusions reached after a serious empirical investigation are independent of the researcher. If the investigators are truly objective, their findings are independent of any subjective element and, therefore, universally valid. Every scholar, theoretically and methodologically informed, in the same situation can only and ever reach the same conclusion.

A relevant feature of this position is that it fully contrasts ontological and epistemological relativism in social sciences (see below) and states that do not exist a 'local', 'alternative' or 'indigenous' social science (SZTOMPKA, 2011). Inasmuch there is, and there can be, only one social science studying many different social worlds (ARCHER, 1991). Scholars supporting this perspective usually accept pluralism inside social sciences but denounce relativism as a renunciation of a rigorous knowledge of social reality. Here the problem, in many cases, lies in the fact that this denunciation, more or less implicitly, soon ends up bouncing on the same idea of acceptance of pluralism. In other words, if there is not one and only one science then what we call 'science' cannot exist. Consequently, scientific pluralism risks being nothing but a form of relativism that threatens the very status of science.

Scholars who advocate this position stress the 'universal' and 'rational' procedures of scientific thinking. They share the idea of the existence of a unique ontological base that characterises all societies and social experiences. Rational enquiry allows scholars to find and understand the regularities, mechanisms, modes of operation and change in social life, notwithstanding the apparent variability and difference that characterizes their empirical manifestation. Moreover, the scientific capacity to understand these universal regularities does not depend – and, to be scientific, it must absolutely not depend – on the particularities of the researcher, or his/her biographical, ideological or geographical location. As Sztompka (2011: 390) rhetorically asks, "Wise with the lessons of the anti-positivist turn, we still cannot deny that in some measure, at some level sociology is similar to natural sciences. Is anybody offended in Ecuador, Bangladesh or Taiwan by the fact that quantum physics was born in Copenhagen, Heidelberg or Berkeley, or that our human genome was reconstructed in California? Is anybody doubting that gravitation works in Africa in spite of the fact that it was discovered in Britain? Why should the universalism of science be replaced by extreme relativism in sociology?".

In brief, method and logical thinking unify social sciences beyond the complexity and variability of the social phenomena studied; a truly global social science can only be based on a common, rational and not biased method. These two assumptions derive from and develop further in two main directions, which invoke unity by demanding uniqueness. To these can be added a third way, in stark contrast to the first two and yet with claims, narrowing the discourse to its minimum terms, rather similar.

One way to assert the unity of social science consists in taking as a model the methods and the analytical categories provided by the (supposed) most rigorous among the social sciences: economics. In the words of an economist (HIRSCHLEIFER, 1985: 53), "There is only one social science. What gives economics its imperialist invasive power is that our analytical categories—scarcity, cost, preferences, opportunities, etc. – are truly universal in applicability […] Thus economics really does constitute the universal grammar of social science". In this perspective, an effort should be made towards a more rigorous formalization of social sciences' concepts, data, and methods. Social sciences should be conceived as a specific subfield of scientific analysis, sharing the same method with other sciences. This method has mathematics as a model with which it is possible to evaluate the degree of accuracy of each scientific investigation. This leads to a greater formalization of

methods, favouring quantitative analyses and the use of statistical techniques.

A second way of claiming the unity of the social sciences consists in the effort to bring the variability of social experience back to a universal basic determinant. Social sciences find their unity and universality in their capacity to foreground the underlying reason, the basic structure that characterises all societies. One example of this position is represented by some exponents of the Marxist and neo-Marxist perspective (GAMBLE *et al*. 1999; HARVEY, 2017) who claim that it is not possible to understand and explain the most disparate processes and social phenomena in their singularity, without referring to the historical-social formation in which they are inserted, that is to say, to capitalism. In this perspective, true social science is possible only through radical critical thought, able to show the 'real' structure behind the surface of the institutionalised (dominant, normalized, ideological, etc.) current social sciences' discourse (KUHN, 2013). An earnest commitment to true knowledge should aim to denounce the ideological character of current social sciences (the fact that they are in the service of neo-liberalism) – showing the 'real' (universal) determinants that shape social relations. The 'real' processes that shape current globalization (and the whole international relations) are those imposed by capitalist/economic logics – they are universal in their effects.

Social sciences are committed to highlight and denounce the hegemonic and exploitative logic of capitalism; if they do not assume a critical stance towards capitalist dynamics and interests, they are nothing but a pawn in the capitalistic domination game. In this perspective, societies can be understood only "within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme – for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (JAMESON, 1983: 3). The necessary unity of social sciences is due to the necessity to understand and bring to the surface the common structure that determines, in the last instance, the variabilities and complexities of the social experience.

To complete this part of the field of social sciences that calls for unity, a third way should be considered. Its manner to sustain the possibility of only one social science is based on a neo-counter-secularization perspective: there is a unique true social science but it is radically different from that developed in Western countries. The current social science is anything but 'universal' or 'objective' because it is based on assumptions that are the result of a specific world vision, a specific relation of power, a specific and biased parochial history. This position is particularly evident among scholars who sustain the necessity of a 'confessional' social science,

founded on transcendental trust, or, at least, that claim for real integration between secularized and religious/transcendental thought (ZAIDI, 2007; SAID, 2018). For instance, in their advocacy for an 'Islamic social science', based on a true 'universal' science, Ali and Junaid (2018) sustain that: 1) The modern Western sciences have been disastrous in some respects because of their philosophical foundation which is developed based on the incorrect views of life, society, and the world; 2) The basic spirit, nature, aims, characteristics and methodology of Islamic sciences are based on the valid foundations of true, authentic and universal knowledge of the reality of life, society and the world; 3) The Islamic science is urgently needed as it offers the kind of 'science' that is based on the truth and the reality of life, society and the world.

The claim for a unified social science implies the idea that society has a unique ontological consistency that can and must be understood beyond the variability of social experiences. As Sztompka (2011: 395) puts it, "Societies are diversified: social conditions, contexts, environments differ, sometimes radically. But this does not mean that there must be many sociologies, producing knowledge relative to each local, particular context. Regularities and mechanisms of functioning and change in various societies are the same".

Now, it may be useful to briefly summarize the first – and the most well-known – implications connected to the discourse carried out from these perspectives. As we have seen, the scholars who support the existence of a single social science, starting from the alleged ontological unity of society, often draw the idea that there can only exist one way (method, a kit of conceptual tools) to understand it. They accept the multiplicity and variability of social phenomena but reject both ontological and epistemological relativism. They endorse the idea that beyond the variability of empirical manifestations, societies have a common core, a set of common determinant factors that are constant in time and space. It is the task of the social sciences to highlight these common features.

Without going even further into the matter of this perspective, we just point out what has notoriously been declared as its main weakness. A radical call for a universally valid single social science is weak in the light of the reflections developed, within the social sciences themselves, on the constructed character of reality and knowledge and on the unsustainability of a positivist position that abstracts knowledge from its contexts of production, from social relationships in which science is deeply embedded. Post-positivism, phenomenology, post-structuralism, feminist theory, cultural studies, deconstructionism, and postcolonial

theory, with their different languages and specific perspectives, have highlighted the historical contingency of knowledge and its normative bases. They stressed that the claim of universalism corresponds to a parochial vision that does not recognize its parochialism; a historical vision that does not recognize its historicity. A universalistic knowledge is considered impossible as well as the conviction of being able to purify knowledge from any power relations and socio-historical contingencies (GUTIÉRREZ RODRÍGUEZ *et al.* 2010). The enlightenment assumption that all societies can be understood from the same 'objective' standpoint and the search for universal, abstract and a-historical theories "express an imperialistic will to power that fails to acknowledge the socially-situated, embodied incomplete or 'ambivalent' character of all knowledge" (Go 2013, p. 34).

## ONTOLOGY-BASED SUB-FIELDS

Actually, in the field of (global) social sciences, the critique towards the idea of the existence of a unique social science is particularly strong among scholars who embrace a radical stance that supports the idea of the existence of ontologically different social realities, each one characterized by unique and incommensurable features. This option is particularly evident in the so-called 'ontological turn', which aims to contrast, from a radical relativistic point of view, the interpretive perspective. As leader scholars in Science and Technology Sciences (WOOLGAR AND LEZAUN, 2013: 322) put it: "If modern philosophy is characterized by the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions, then the turn to ontology operates as reversal of this trajectory: it short-circuits the tendency to rephrase questions about the reality of multiple worlds as questions about the multiple ways in which a singular world is represented, and in so doing stimulates an alertness towards forms of difference that cannot be reduced to a disparity of 'worldviews'".

Espousing radical constructionism, this position argues that any society, as a historical and social construction, has its unique ontological reality: the result of the singular social processes of its production. Every society is the 'practical' result of its construction process, of the unique mix of contextual factors, actors, material conditions, and 'objects' that have made their existence real. As Latour (2016: 28) observes, "respect of objective knowledge is possible only if it is fully localized – no matter how far it extends".

Ontology here – and differently from the use of the term by the supporters of the existence of only one social science – does not refer to a pre-social and a-historical 'substance' that characterises all societies. Instead, it refers to 'relational ontology'

(GO, 2013) which emphasizes the processual and contingent factors that coalesce to produce what is recognised as social reality; it refers to the facticity of society as it is encountered in experience. The facticity of reality, "what is often taken to be the 'material world' is not an autochthone, aboriginal stuff encounter in experience" (GO, 2013: 26), but the product of assemblage of a plurality of agencies – human and not human – that slowly coalesce into what we call – and recognise as – social experience. In this perspective, societies are the unique result of specific processes of assemblage that can only be understood through singular scrutiny of the processes that produced them as 'real objects', as societies (DELANDA, 2006). The insistence on the contingencies of the associational relationships that constitute what we recognise as social experience leads to the claim that social sciences should focus on processes, producing localised descriptions (SAVAGE, 2009). One of the main aims of social science should be "to describe, to be attentive to the concrete state of affairs, to find the uniquely adequate account of a given situation" (LATOUR, 2005: 144). This position, on the whole, defends a radical process ontology and an associated praxeology. In this perspective, social sciences themselves are not 'things', 'objects', 'unified set of interpretive tools' but processes that are constituted in the work of assemblage that constitute both the

reality that social sciences are analysing and the reality of their own existence as disciplines. The social sciences do not constitute, nor could they do it, a unitary set of tools and methods. Rather, they are the result of local assembly practices to build reality and the sense connected to it. Attention to the particular and the contingent – for what, by definition, cannot be conceptualized – while, on the one hand, is an open attempt to construct a form of knowledge that respects the position of the Other without supposing to assimilate it to the Same; on the other hand, it reduces the theorization of the social sciences to a contingent local affair.

Another current of thought, which derives from the postcolonial theory, proposes a different reading of the foundational diversity of the different social experiences. In its most radical formulation, this perspective sustains that social worlds are (ontologically) different, and the social sciences are nothing but the appropriate interpretative tool for understanding the Western experience. Societies are ontologically different because there are no fixed factors that constrain the manner human beings shape their way of living together. Social life is an open possibility, it can take infinite different forms and the way it is built concretely depends only on the socio-historical processes of its construction. Thus, every society is 'unique' and cannot be interpreted or understood 'outside' its

singular constitution process. When the specific set of concepts and ideas developed by western society to interpret their changes and to legitimate their actions are used to interpret other realities and experiences, it becomes evident that they are an ideological weapon used by the West to exert power over the Rest.

In the words of Mignolo (2014: 595), "The social sciences emerged to solve problems in Europe and contributed to make Europe what it is in terms of institutions of knowledge, actors, and categories of thoughts. It contributed to European and US imperialism. It is doubtful the social sciences would be of help to non-Europeans who want to solve their problems, one of them being Western imperialism economic, political, cultural, and epistemic. Thus, de-westernizing and decolonizing knowledge (and knowing) means to delink from the belief that there is one way of knowing and therefore of being".

In this perspective, social sciences, as we know them today and how they are taught in university and PhD training all around the world, are a specialized discourse that was promoted by western elites to explain the western experience of social transformation and global colonization (MIGNOLO, 2009). This means that the specific field of social sciences as an institution, an organized form of producing discourse about the social – constituted by words, practices, rules, specialists,

organizations, specific objects and subjects – was settled by western elites, using their own vocabulary and, in this way, framing in a specific way the regime of truth legitimated to produce consistent and true discourses on the social. Social sciences are the way in which western societies described, and legitimized, their experience of modernity and their project for controlling and managing populations for imperial interest: a specific and unique path of control, exploitation, transformation, and change.

Proponents of this position warn that it is necessary to recognise that there is no single path to change, a unique trajectory that fixes the direction toward which all the societies have inevitably to converge. We have to recognize the existence of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000), so we need different theories, words, and concepts to grasp their specific character (AL-E-AHMAD, 1984).

In this perspective, social sciences should be dismantled as a western monologue, an instrument for the justification of western robbery, exploitation and violent imposition of its rules over the Rest. Social sciences are a fraud, an ideological justification of western domination, they are isomorphic with and contribute to imperialism (GO, 2013: 34). Social sciences are just ideologies, they are more prescriptive than descriptive, they justify what they assume to study and the only solution is their radical deconstruction.

There is no need for global social science because there is no need for social science at all (it is only a pure Western myth); as Mignolo (2014, p. 286) bluntly concludes, "People around the world have been and continue to be good thinkers without recourse to the 'social sciences'".

The very idea of the possible and necessary existence of global social science is a trickery. It is an example of academic dependency (ALATAS, 2003): to be popular and to be accepted as part of the standard curricula in universities, theories in the social sciences must be 'global' (WESTERN). Emerging contextual theories, despite their potential to provide contextual interpretations for indigenous ways of life, are ignored or devalued and find no way of entering the mainstream of disciplines unless they are able to translate their language into the dominant (WESTERN) language of the disciplines (OMOBOWALE AND AKANLE, 2017).

## EPISTEMOLOGY BASED SUB-FIELDS

A different possibility of conceiving social sciences and their intellectual task consists in recognizing the existence of epistemologically different social realities. In this case, the main question becomes how the world is represented in its multiple ways, rather than questioning how the world is beyond its multiplicity. Social sciences are not inevitably the right lexicon for understanding the unique experience of the West (and, of course, of the 'Rest'). Instead, they are just one of the possible ways in which the plurality of possible social experiences is interpreted. They are partial in the sense that they are merely a portion of an unfinished catalogue of possible interpretations of the social experience. In particular, current social sciences are inadequate for the task of understanding (post)colonized non-Western cultures. A possible global social science should stress the importance to understand history and society not as a single totalizing narrative, but as a network of multiple diverse histories and discourses, irreducible to any unique western schema (YOUNG, 1999; GRUZINSKI, 2017).

Until the Western discourse/representation remains the core reference framework, the benchmark for our interpretation of human experience and social world, different voices and perspectives cannot but remain subaltern, unheard or silenced because they are compelled to speak with the voice of the dominant (BHABHA, 1994; SPIVAK, 1999). Canonical, mainstream – that is, Western – social thought can produce interpretations of the world ignoring the experience of Others' – non-Western – history and experience, and this seems not to affect the quality of its work. The reverse is not true; any non-canonical voices cannot but start from considering the dominant one. Minority voices are

subject to what Chakrabarty (2000: 28) calls 'inequality in ignorance'. Until western social sciences – as a historically constructed field of knowledge and power – remain the only possible reference for assessing the truth and the plausibility of a statement about the reality of the world, other non-canonical voices cannot but be interpreted in terms of lack, absence or incompleteness that one translates into inadequacy (CHAKRABARTY, 2000: 32). Nevertheless, within this reproduction – inevitably marked by lacks and incompleteness – of the words of the dominants, it is always possible to introduce forms of resistance, considering the lacks above as the needed raw materials for constructing a different point of view, a different history, a different form of belonging. In this case, the 'difference' becomes the starting point for a counter-narration, that is, a political tool for a different understanding of the world (BELL HOOKS, 1991).

Promoting a global social sciences means 'historicising' its lexicon, bringing its universalistic claims back to the singular context of its production. The project of provincializing social sciences cannot be a nationalist, nativist, or atavistic project. It is a critical project: in criticizing Europe, it also criticizes any old tradition. As Chakrabarty (2000: 43) observes, "The project of provincializing 'Europe' therefore cannot be a project of cultural relativism. It cannot originate from the stance that the reason/science/universals that help define Europe as the modern are simply 'culture-specific' and therefore only belong to European cultures. For the point is not that Enlightenment rationalism is always unreasonable in itself, but rather a matter of documenting how – through what historical process – its 'reason', which was not always self-evident to everyone, has been made to look obvious far beyond the ground where it originated". In this perspective, social sciences should be dismantled as partial. They might be true, but they only represent the incomplete and historically specific perspective of western experience and history. Different historical traditions have produced and actually produce different ways to look and interpret the social. The possible solution is to integrate them with other perspectives, and other voices. This can be done in at least two different ways. The first one consists in challenging social sciences 'from inside' (BHAMBRA AND SANTOS, 2017), showing how the current – hegemonic western – social sciences are partial and inadequate to account for the diversity of the global world. In order to construct a different sociological imagination – capable of grasping the complexity of current societies and of welcoming other traditions and experiences – it is necessary to use the Eurocentric concepts and methods in a selective way, modifying and adapting them to other contexts (BHAMBRA, 2007;

GAMAGE, 2018). Criticising social sciences' concepts and methods, it becomes possible to highlight how western societies and social sciences are inevitably and from their beginning, the result of the effort to construct their own existence by exploiting and subjugating other perspectives and other voices. It shows that it is not possible to understand social sciences and western societies without taking into account colonialism, racism, imperialism and exploitation. Only reworking the western perspective including the historical experiences of such imperialistic design can promote "the reconstruction of sociology that works backwards, to bring to the surface other historical understandings, and then forwards, to think about how we might configure sociology differently" (BHAMBRA, 2014: 1). The issue is not to remove the scoria of colonial thought within the social sciences to purify them from distorting incrustations but to grasp the reciprocal constitutive interconnection between the creation of social thought and colonial history. In all these cases, the goal of developing a global social science goes mainly through a historicization of the social sciences.

A second possibility consists in transforming current social sciences from outside, from below (SANTOS, 2002; 2017; GO, 2016). In this perspective, a truly global social science can only come about by taking into account the non-

scientific, popular, vernacular knowledge that has been ignored by 'institutionalised disciplines' and oppressed by dominant political power. In order to construct a reflexive understanding of the current global world, social sciences have to be integrated by the 'epistemologies of the South' (SANTOS, 2014), forms of knowledge born in struggles against the imperialistic and Eurocentric thought. The epistemologies of the South are forms of knowledge that know by creating solidarity both in nature and in society (GAMAGE, 2018), while the dominant western epistemology is a form of knowledge that creates order, dependence, inferiority and imperialism (ALATAS, 1974). As Burawoy (2008) puts it, we should develop a 'global sociology'. A project of indigenization of social sciences based upon "a call for learning from the traditions of various cultures in order to develop, through a process of investigation and argumentation, universal propositions and frameworks that would be adequate for the task in a variety of locations" (BHAMBRA, 2014: 83). A global sociology implies the effort to let room for the excluded, for alternative voices (ALATAS, 2014).

The demand for differentiated social sciences to grasp the differentiation of socio-historical experiences does not reject the Western social sciences. It affirms the need to include different perspectives and different voices in the canon, whether they

come from the past, from the revision of historical processes, or from experiences of resistance and marginalization. The different standpoints that support the need for differentiated social sciences do not propose a total discard of Western thought. They recognise that the current canon in the social sciences is both a cause of hegemony and oppression and a place of resistance and alternative thinking.

## CROSSING THE SUB-FIELDS: THE NEED OF A RICHER TOOL-KIT

A different perspective – usually coming from 'inside' western social sciences – calls for the creation of a new synthesis, capable of unifying the social sciences recognizing the plurality of its methods and its analytical tools, but reaffirming the unity of its research questions and its fields of application. For instance, Ulrich Beck's (2006) proposal for a cosmopolitan social science is moving in this direction: the necessity to push the social sciences towards a radical transformation to better adapt to the changes brought about by globalization. A social science that not only includes the other's experiences of and perspectives on modernization but corrects and redefines the self-understanding of European modernity (BECK, 2016). For Beck (2006), social sciences are historical-social phenomena; they stem from the specific experience of the nation-state and must be renewed in

light of the new global experience. The problem is how to avoid the relativism of local knowledge, including that of Western sociology, rather than how to learn from local knowledge elsewhere. In order to promote a cosmopolitan social science, it is necessary to go beyond the state-centred disciplinary approach. In a historical moment in which it becomes evident that a significant number of relevant social phenomena (i.e. immigration, pollution, global economy, criminality and culture, circulation of people and ideas) are indifferent to national boundaries, it is necessary to recognize that the concepts that had been developed during the first modernity are now no longer adequate to the task of understanding the current second, global, modernity. What is needed is a new set of categories and concepts that would emerge from reflection upon the experience of living in a globalizing world. In line with the 'complexity turn' (URRY, 2005), global social science should recognise that the globalised world is so complex that it is simply not 'knowable' through any single existing sociological category or from a single standpoint (MUNCK, 2016; GO, 2016).

The development of a global social science is necessary and urgent because it is globalization itself that makes contemporary societies 'global', that is, inextricably linked by a growing network of global interconnections. Despite their different stories and different

'vocabularies' they now find themselves sharing common dimensions, which have become structural. To understand the contemporary social reality it is necessary to understand this network of growing interconnections, developing a varied, adequate and up-to-date toolbox.

This can be made not only enriching social sciences' vocabulary including the voices previously excluded, but also shifting from a focus on 'facts' to 'processes, relations and interconnections'. In order to develop a global social science able to catch the complexity of current social experience, it is necessary to shift from 'substantialism' to 'relationalism' (GO, 2013: 41). This means dismissing the idea that the basic units of sociological inquiry are substances or essences and focusing instead on relations that give social facts their locally independent existence. Social sciences theorising should break down the supposed single standpoint of the (Western) modernity and recognise the existence of multiple, different standpoints that affect the way in which we perceive and understand social relations.

Global social sciences are post-western social sciences and require a 'rescaling' of classical social thought. They should go beyond the local (national) study and substitute a narrowing 'methodological nationalism' with a more articulated and flexible 'methodological cosmopolitanism' (BECK AND GRANDE, 2010). As Go (2016: 41) observes, "rather than focusing

narrowly upon processes within societies (western, colonized, or non-Western) or even just between them (as in inter-national studies), it would track the processes and relations between diverse but connected spaces in the making and remaking of modernity". The main focus becomes the study of global processes and interconnections: how to read/translate/analyse the relationship between structural dimensions and individual experience. Structural dimensions that reveal their capacity for conditioning social action beyond the spatial dimension to spread over spatial-temporal dimensions defined more by connections than by physical proximity. Dimensions of personal experience that continuously form new languages and new meanings through constant localization and domestication of the raw materials circulating in the global networks.

The reflections that avoid both the Scylla of objectivism and universalism and the Charybdis of radical relativism (ontological or epistemological) of social relations have the advantage of keeping open the debate within the social sciences and of pushing reflection in the direction of a greater complexity of the tools useful for understanding the variability of human social experience.

Although important, the positions that support a more complex and varied tool-kit for the social sciences usually place the discussion mainly – if not only – on the

terrain of theory and rhetoric. In this way, they do not take into account the relevance of 'practices'.

## RE-IMAGINING THE WHOLE FIELD: SOCIAL SCIENCES AS A FIELD OF PRACTICES

Approaching the conclusion of this essay, and without closing but further opening the question, we point out some elements of this last matter, that is the relevance of practice. Getting into this matter may be useful, in our view, to further contribute to keeping open the debate within the global field of social sciences. In other words, we would like to interpret this side of the debate, not as an alternative to positions that claim the need for a more varied and complex social theorisation, but as an important integration for the development of a social science capable of grasping the complexities of current social experiences. To this end, we think it would be useful to consider the social sciences as a way of producing knowledge through the production of discourse (FOUCAULT, 1969; 1980); as a discourse that aims to become hegemonic (GRAMSCI, 1975); as a field of comparison and distinction (BOURDIEU, 1979; BOURDIEU AND WACQUANT, 1992).

Certainly, attention to practices involves a marked change of our gaze and, to some extent, an overall revision of the idea of the 'field' of social sciences as we have used it so far. The field here is no longer just a descriptive tool that can serve to bring conceptual order and eventually place the different perspectives, with their specific characteristics, claims and relationships. Otherwise, the field here is the ground on which any social science comes into being as such, that is to say, the field that social scientists constitute by means of their concrete practices. Integrating this clear change of gaze with the above purpose – which we hope for: not the retreat, but an advancement of social sciences in the effective understanding of the complexity of social experiences – it constitutes, if we really want, the challenge that would be a good thing face up to.

The starting point of this perspective primarily based on attention to practices was – and actually is – to recognise that social sciences aspire to produce forms of discourse (knowledge) about the human existence which are based on forms of immanent explanation of human condition; immanent because they renounce to explain social experience using 'nature', 'reality', 'truth' and other essentialized transcendental concepts. Social sciences are conceived as a way, among many, to answer general questions about the human condition; an auto-poietic discipline that is continuously transformed by 'new' entry (as happened with the inclusion of the voices of women and other cultural diversities) in an open process of progressive democratization. A decisive

step in this direction is to recognise the partiality of the social sciences. They aim to tell 'part of the story' among the many stories that can be told about the human social experience. A story that is neither better nor worse than others, but that nevertheless constitutes a way of looking at (constructing) the world that increases our capacity to make sense of our social experience. Social sciences are a partial, socio-historically narrative, a specialized production that has its own canon of 'telling the truth', its own 'order of the discourse' (FOUCAULT, 1971). They constitute a provisional discourse that highlights the difference and the interconnections; a discourse that aspires to connect individual experience with the structural dimensions, favouring a particular 'imagination' that simultaneously recognizes the uniqueness and communality of human experience (MILLS, 1959; APPADURAI, 1999; MAGUBANE, 2005). A discourse that continually warns against any claim of natural and universal foundation about the narrations on the world. A discourse that fulfils these tasks using empirical research, logical argumentation, refutation, and critical thinking in the awareness that these are methods and tools that are not better than others but particular, that do not lead to saying the 'true' but that contribute to expanding our vocabulary.

Translated into practices, it is a discourse that speaks not only externally but that addresses itself within the social sciences, for example by proposing the question implicit in Wittgenstein's famous proposition in a reflexive way: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my word" (WITTGENSTEIN, 1923: §5.6). Our vocabulary risks being constantly limited, thus delimiting our knowledge and ability to understand worlds that are not ours (and even what we think are 'our' worlds). Consequently, research can serve primarily to overcome these limits concretely (practically), as well as to transform them into borders on which to work. So that, from borders to interconnections, the step could be short.

Another feature of this discourse (knowledge) could be that it maintains its aspiration to universalism; however, contemporary universalism (the universalism of globalization) should recognize that the reference to the 'universal' has changed: it is no longer the projection of the image of the dominant (of the speaker), but neither is a jagged set of independent (incommensurable) units. It is rather an inevitably common context in which the multiplicity of experiences and interpretations is inscribed in milieus increasingly characterized by interconnections and displacements. The universal should be understood in a topological way: a global network of relationships. The universal could be re-thought by detaching it from a spatial metaphor (that is, the metaphor by which a

single social/cultural/economic space is examined from time to time as if it were a closed space, with clear boundaries and which can be explained by remaining within these boundaries). Universal, in a globalized context, means 'in relation to, potentially many, other points'. It does not concern 'uniformity', 'sameness' or 'equivalence', but relations, connections, potentialities. It maintains all its specificities (it is contextual because the products of knowledge are in some ways quite situated, and always situated are the research's actions) but its peculiar character depends on the network of interconnections in which it is collocated.

In its 'practical' dimension, social sciences should also be seen as a field of power, struggle, and competition (BOURDIEU, 1984). A field where 'practical' is, or naturally becomes, 'political'. Actually, the social sciences constitute a space for debate – characterized by peculiar rules, capitals, powers and hierarchies – in which the stakes are to make one's own voice authoritative and assure the 'distinction' in the sphere of academic recognition. A result that is reached if we observe the field in this light, in addition to exercising a more lucid criticism, is that the common and dominant way of thinking about the status of truth in the social sciences gradually erodes itself. So, in this perspective, the question at the centre of the debate on the parochialism/universalism of the social

sciences does not mainly concern a debate on the 'truth' or the validity of its statements. It cannot primarily refer to this kind of truth because, getting Foucault back, the truth and validity of the statement is decided, *a priori*, by the disciplinary power of the sciences constituted as disciplines: before considering whether a statement tells the truth, it is necessary to verify if it lies in (or if it comes from) *the* true. Instead, the above question concerns the internal order of the discourse of the social sciences (FOUCAULT, 1971): the set of procedures by which the discourse produces forms of control over and in-between ourselves, the principle of exclusion, *partage*, etc. Therefore, what is at stake in social sciences as discourse is its *how*, rather than its *what*; not what it says, but how it says something of something.

Another feature of this perspective is that it recognizes that social sciences are a specific field of knowledge/power where different subjects struggle – using shared rules (although an important part of the struggle can be changing the current rules) – for the hegemony in interpreting the social reality. If we pay attention to practices, it becomes evident that what is at stake in this struggle is prestige, symbolic and material resources, and the possibility to influence political power, through the collection, use, and reproduction of cultural capital. Social sciences also imply a boundary work (GIERYN, 1983), an

attempt to control who is part of the discipline and who is not (through the control of universities, journals, research funding). Then, in order to promote a global social science, it seems important to put attention to the way by which social debates are produced in the discipline (journals, conferences, books), contrasting the closure of the discipline in sub-groups that preside the boundaries of their territory and promoting an effective presence of social science in the public sphere (putting provocative questions rather than promising easy solutions). Apart from the well-known power of the journal groups (Western, European), in which 'Southern' scholars are also called to publish (if they want to make a career in the institutions that matter), there is a twofold problem that should be paid attention to. First, forced to publish – because of the power of academic assessments and rankings – scholars write a lot, but who reads them? Second, is the way we all write, formatted and homologated by a logic (this yes, almost global) that runs through international journals, still good at saying something to someone, perhaps something new about the world we live in?

Recognizing that the truth of social sciences is constructed by participants as a world in common (BAKHTIN, 1981) in a struggle for hegemony (GRAMSCI, 1975) means to put under scrutiny which order of the discourse (its regime of truth) is produced within social sciences (FOUCAULT, 1980), which kind of capital is produced and used (BOURDIEU, 1984), and what is at stake in this specific kind of social practice. Conducting this activity means to use the Foucaultian notion of the "regime of truth" to go beyond the production of a *partage* between true and false, so as to indicate another production, the one relating to the (re)production of a gap between "lives that count" and "lives that do not count" (*scientific lives included*). And maybe it means the re-turn of an "old" order of problems (also in our academic life).

Among the elements of this old-new order of problems, we first may consider one that is related to looking at the academic career as a field of struggle. Here the problem seems to remain the inevitability of a discourse centred on theory *and* method but primarily – if not exclusively – on their *formal aspects* (both in teaching and doing research). At the beginning of the twenty years of globalization-as-a-critical discourse, this problem was ironically stated in this way: "After all, if our work does nothing to ameliorate the human condition, then we might as well remain stuck in internal discourses that focus on formal aspects of theory and keep us disconnected from real world processes, for there are no consequences to our work beyond academic careers" (MARTINEZ, 1998: 608-609). In this view, what seems to be at stake in the academic career (as a

field of struggle) is related to the permanent weakness or subalternity of the discourse-practices (often invoked by the so-called "developing countries", now global) which are explicitly oriented to improve the human condition (a subalternity usually made up by the dominant academic rhetoric about the "not scientific", "too much practical" character of this kind of research). In other terms, what is at stake is the centrality of moral and political concerns and, in some cases, the legitimation of applied and policy-driven research. Among the other issues in the field of academic careers (including the entry process of new scholars) there is that they too are made in a field governed, disciplined, squeezed by and between "regimes of truth" (bio-*-logy, neurosciences), and by "measurement procedures" (in particular academic ranking) that never stop reproducing the growth of the new power of economic-administrative devices (ESPELAND AND SAUDER, 2007). So that, instead of dialoguing on how to interpret the complexity of social experiences, universities all over the world seem to be grappling with the kind of big business that – following *The Economist* (MAY, 2018) – has been called *The global ranking race*. Engaged in this competition, universities and educational institutions seem destined to disappoint a number of wishes about 'globalising social sciences', for instance Appadurai's hope for 'The idea of

research': that is, the globalization as openness and as an extension of the possibility of *new forms of imagination* – in order to share new ideas of research (what it is, *how* it could be made). Again, the problem here is the growing power (transcending the West/Rest) to produce academic careers that are disciplined and motivated by the bureaucratic logic of research. Moreover, all over the world rankings favour research and its administrative logic at the expense of teaching, exactly the opposite of what was proposed by Wright Mills with the concept of "sociological imagination": don't be – don't think like – a bureaucrat! Apart from teaching research methods, the power of formal aspects directly affects theory, the ability to learn how to build theory. The theory mostly merely becomes a set of justifications, used to legitimize a project that risks not producing any other knowledge than what was already contained in the justifications. It is the so-called 'freezer of knowledge', nourished by justifications, which does not allow to think of research that can truly produce a 'discovery' (not the discovery of a 'truer' reality; 'discoveries' here stands for the research activities that generate new perspectives, new forms of imagination, etc.). A problem whose solution, according to Swedberg (2012), could lie in teaching young scholars how to move from freezing to movement, from a "context of justification' to a 'context of discovery': in

short, how to learn theorizing as a practical activity.

Let's go back to the idea of promoting global social science. The perspective that focuses on the practices raises new or old problems to reinforce and share a set of concrete recognition activities. In addition to those pointed out at the beginning of this paragraph, there is the activity that 'promoting a global social science' means to recognize the importance of a specialized space for the production of discourse concerning the social. A global social science is not necessarily a universalistic social theory. As Beck (2016: 258) observes, "A universalistic social theory, whether structuralist, interactionist, Marxist, critical or systems-theory, is now both out of date and provincial. *Out of date* because it excludes a priori what can be observed empirically; *provincial* because it mistakenly absolutized the trajectory, the historical experience and future expectation of Western modernization and thereby also fails to see its own particularity". However, a global social science cannot even be reduced to a fully contingent and transitory understanding of social experience. Its status of 'partial truth' comes from a continuous dialogue among those who are entitled to have a voice within its field. What is at stake in this dialogue is both the possibility to assert some form of understanding (truth) about the social world and 'distinction' (prestige

and power) within the field. The development of a global social science should take into account both processes: the 'content' (the theoretical and methodological basis) of the knowledge produced and the way in which it is produced (control of the field, kind and distribution of the capitals relevant in the field, boundary control).

What the social sciences have in common and makes them potentially global are the questions. It is the sharing of questions that stimulates discussion. Participation in a common dialogue is what gives existence to the social sciences. The more this dialogue becomes global, encompasses other voices, other stories and other perspectives, the more the vocabulary that allows discussion and mutual understanding is extended. But a relevant question remains to reflect on the ways in which we are allowed or excluded from the dialogue, which language can be used, the space that is allowed to intervene and the symbolic and material inequalities that make some voices more authoritative than others. A reflection on both the contents and the processes of the social sciences can contribute to their globalization.

## FINAL REMARKS

Perspectives that take a radical position for either a strong defence (restoration) of the unity and universality of social sciences or for their radical deconstruction in the name

of their ideological character or because of the ontological diversity of societies seem to push the discussion in troublesome territories. Asserting the possibility of a unique and universal way for studying and understand society risks to sound as a neo-positivistic claim, out-of-date with the current theorisation in social sciences that emphasises the relevance of context and contingency and design a more complex relation between reality, representation and knowledge. Positions that embrace radical relativism – either ontological or epistemological – risk dissolving the social sciences in an ephemeral game of local and always precarious processes, and presenting the knowledge produced in these processes as not comparable between one situation and another because of the radical incommensurability of social experiences.

Perspectives that reject the alleged universality of the (Western) social sciences, by promoting their internal pluralism without putting themselves in a contradictory position of radical relativism, seem to be better able to stimulate a debate on how the social sciences can contribute to the understanding of the current globalized societies. As discussed above, they do it in different interesting ways. The first way is to *historicise* the social sciences, highlighting the social contexts of their development and the inevitable partialities, favouring a revision from within. A second way consists of a

development from below that introduces *otherness* into the canon of the social sciences, introducing the voices of the indigenous experiences, of those who have been silenced and excluded. A third way suggests expanding the toolbox of the social sciences, favouring *complexity* with respect to attempts at synthesis or narrow methodological nationalism. Despite their potentialities, they often remain limited to the level of discourses, theories and texts and do not take into account material inequalities and institutional and power factors (KEIM, 2011).

We think it would be important to integrate these positions, recognising the intrinsic theoretical and methodological pluralism that characterises social sciences, by looking at social science as a 'field' and social scientists as a 'community of practices'. In this case, social sciences are identifiable with an array of questions about society and social relationships, to be answered by using 'logical' criteria, immanent to the social organization of life. Certainly, these criteria are logical only because they are expressed by, and based on, argumentation, mutual intelligibility, accountability. And as far as immanence is concerned, it is the matter of conceiving the social reality – the core topic of social sciences – nothing other than what it actually is, a form-of-life related to other forms-of-life; and of conceiving the *forms-of-life* as the reality that we all practice, that is, the reality produced by our

practices. And finally, it is a matter of recognizing that our practices – of all kinds, including scientific ones – are also discursive practices. This does not mean - as illustrated above - a reduction of the issues at stake to a mere linguistic fact. It means considering that discourses are practices in that they are used by someone. Who uses the discourses that we more or less indirectly produce? How and for what are they used? What kind of 'discoveries' does this kind of discourses entail beyond the powerful obsession with formal justification? These are some questions that the social sciences could try to answer globally to stay still and, more than ever, alive.

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