

## Dialogues between *Sociology* and *History*

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### Abstract

Sociology and History, as consolidated scientific and academic projects, have maintained an unusual and paradoxical relationship. The growing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary specialisation of these two sciences poses relevant epistemological and methodological challenges in addressing potential situations of isolation, fragmentation, and in enabling the defence of an interdisciplinary perspective characterised by the historicity of social structures, actions and meanings.

Several kinds of reasons shape this diffuse process of approximation/detachment between Sociology and History, namely epistemological and methodological, disciplinary closure, academic and professional reasons, forming what may be called contained dialogues. This paper, starting from the sociological stance of the authors, seeks to add to the reflection on the relevance of a scientific project that aims to affirm an interdisciplinary perspective that may foster the heuristic potentialities of both Sociology and History in the analysis of the complexity of social reality and human action.

**Keywords:** sociology, history, scientific dialogue

### 1. Introduction

In several discourses produced, by the end of last century, by authors who are positioned in different disciplinary spaces of the social sciences, namely Silva and Pinto (1986), one position advocates that all social sciences should also be historical because they are “aware that societies are *installed* in change, of the multiplicity of social times, aware of the irreversibility and uniqueness of the facts and the historical thickness of social structures” (p. 24). This is the starting point of this essay, an old challenge that has not (yet) been accomplished, as we will see (Baechler, 1990; Charry Joya, 2017; Steinmetz, 2017).

The relationship between Sociology and History, as full-fledged scientific disciplines (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017), has been a very present subject, at least since the establishment of Sociology, and has experienced various expressions over time (Do Valle, 2014; Charry Joya, 2017; Gould, 2019; Torres, 2012; Steinmetz, 2017). According to Zubir á (2015), these different expressions show different paths that can be crossed and analysed as parallel or juxtaposed paths. However, Zubir á (2015) maintains that the approach that seems most appropriate and faithful to the truth is its analysis based on a dialectical perspective, which allows the simultaneous presence of convergent and divergent. Sociology and History – allied sister and simultaneously rival (Javeau, 1998). Already in 2019, Malczewski sustains that

Contemporary sociology’s aloof posture towards general theory is compounded by the discipline’s growing tendency to produce studies of micro- and meso-level phenomena with a presentist or short-term orientation. The presumption of such studies appears to be that the effective forces of human society or the constitutive qualities of historical phenomena can be grasped in data that take the standpoint of the present or that concern short time horizons [...] Without keeping one eye on what is constant and regular sociology cannot clearly identify what is contingent and fluid (p. 12).

The assertion of Sociology as a science has favoured the affirmation of its theoretical plurality that seeks to articulate

macro-social dynamics with local processes, allowing the link between subjective meanings and practices, and that focus on the articulations between systems and actors, between structures and practices, between the reality of social conditions of existence and the social construction of reality (Dubar, 2006; Sethuraju, Prew, Abdi, & Pipkins, 2013; Morrison, 2017; Ferguson, 2016).

History may be defined as the study of human societies, with emphasis on the differences between them and on the changes over time that take place in each one (Burke, 1980). However, as Braudel reiterates, History favours, in the analysis of social reality, a perspective that emphasises social duration, “those multiple and contradictory times of people’s lives that are not only the substance of the past but also the matter of present social life” (Braudel, 1958a, p. 9).

As a way of overcoming some of the limitations of the growing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary specialisation, the fragmentation and isolation of these sciences, a strategy of approximation between these and other scientific disciplines may be favoured: multi-inter-transdisciplinarity, concepts that sometimes come into use interchangeably (Barthel & Seidl, 2017; Serpa, Ferreira & Santos, 2017), although they have subtle differences even within the concept of interdisciplinarity itself. In summary, there is a difference in the degree of depth, but not only, in the practical implementation of these three concepts. Multidisciplinarity has “a clear purpose of joint problem solving by involving different disciplines. However, individual disciplines can work on different aspects of a problem in parallel. Multidisciplinary research is more often temporary, limited to a specific project or problem than interdisciplinary research”; interdisciplinarity “entails the most intense collaboration, involving the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, from the problem definition to the methodology”, developing synergies; transdisciplinarity involves “the cooperation between scientists in academia, on one hand, and practitioners, decision makers or the public at large, on the other hand” (Barthel & Seidl, 2017, p. 4).

## 2. Methods

This paper, starting from the authors’ sociological stance, seeks to add to the reflection on the relevance of a scientific project that aims to affirm an interdisciplinary perspective that may foster the heuristic potentialities of both Sociology and History in the analysis of the complexity of social reality and human action.

To fulfil this goal, the favoured technique to gather information on the topic under study was document analysis, developed based on different types of document sources, with scientific articles being the main document source. The choice of the article as an empirical field of analysis results from considering that the article is the central formal means of the scientific production and communication process, accounting for the scientific activity of scientists, where argumentative strategies of persuasion are developed and interpretative principles favoured by the authors and legitimised by the peers are put forth.

The document collection was based on the consultation of the B-ON database of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) in Portugal, an electronic library resource that includes electronic scientific databases such as the Web of Knowledge, DOAJ, SCIELO and institutional repositories (Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online, n.d.). A search was conducted between July 20 and 23, searching for the following words concurrently in the title: “History” and “Sociology”. The collection of complementary bibliographic material directly related to the topic under analysis was added to this online literature search.

## 3. Sociology and History

Sociology and History, as consolidated scientific and academic projects, have maintained an unusual and paradoxical relationship (Turner, 2002). The growing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary specialisation of these two sciences poses relevant epistemological and methodological challenges in addressing potential situations of isolation, fragmentation and in enabling the defence of an interdisciplinary perspective characterised by the historicity of social structures, actions and meanings.

However, the codes for reading reality produced from the dominant paradigms in History and Sociology, although different, have often been seen in these two disciplines as non-interchangeable and incommunicable, promoting a «dialogue of the deaf», a «false dialogue», a controversy between a given History and a given Sociology (Braudel, 1958b). This situation expresses crystallised positions in these disciplinary spaces. The sociological analysis would aim, through the verification of the hypotheses, to identify in social phenomena what is uniform and repeatable, to identify the existence of certain correlations between two series of phenomena. In turn, the historical analysis would aim to accrue, by examining sources and document reconstruction, significant data that allows the understanding of a specific, unique and unrepeatable event (Ferrarotti, 1986). These positions enshrine an evident contradiction between sociological analysis and historical research. Sociology would favour a process of generalisation, whereas History

would be based on a process of individualisation of the phenomenon (Ferraroti, 1986).

However, Braudel (1958a) is sceptic about a History that is limited to the exclusive report of events or successes, and also suspects of a Sociology that values an irreplaceable dimension of the present time. The author argues, in the *Treaty of Sociology* edited under the direction of Gurvitch, the need to establish a dialogue and develop greater collaboration between these sciences, which, in a first stage, would involve a lexical unification. Braudel sustains, from the historian's standpoint, the preeminence of historical levels – microhistory, conjunctural history, structural history – over sociological levels, and also the preeminence of history's time – a uniform time, a general measure of phenomena – over multiform social time, a particular measure of each phenomenon, over Gurvitch's temporalities (Braudel, 1958b; Mitrani, 1960).

The relationship between Sociology and History has been balancing between the project, promoted by the exponents of positivism, of reducing the two disciplines to one (Ferrarotti, 1986), the emergence of Social History – a History that would encompass all human activities and would be less associated with the narrative of events and more linked with the analysis of «structures» and would encourage collaboration with other social sciences –, the affirmation of Historical Sociology, focused on macroscopic, long-term, interdisciplinary, historical research and impregnated of a general interest in the formulation theoretical (Turner, 2002, p. 280).

The processes of socialisation, as the attainment of culture that enables the person to become a social being, are critical for the establishment, existence and change of societies (Ferreira & Serpa, 2019). Society is also transformation in time (Rocher, 1989). In this regard, Javeau (1998) argues that

Encompassing the interactions between individuals, the interactions between structures and between cultures weave the historic fabric in which our personal destinies are often very narrowly embroidered. Sociology studies simultaneously the texture of the historic fabric and the tiny embroidery of our particular itineraries (p. 213).

Since its inception, Sociology has also been interested in the historical dimension in the apprehension of social phenomena (Braga da Cruz, 1989; Javeau, 1998; Paiva, 2014; Rocher, 1989) as “studies the (dis)order of the social world, and that deals with interactions, what results from interaction and has implications in this interaction between human beings, such as objects, practices, representations and values, inserting them into their social context” (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018, p. 841). This interest of Sociology in the historical aspect of social phenomena is such that “[...] it can be stated that the early sociologists saw social reality not as the photographer who would apprehend an immobilised moment out of time, but as the filmmaker, who reconstitutes in the film the movement of beings and the course of events” (Rocher, 1989, p. 209).

This reality is present in numerous sociological studies, although sometimes History also influences Sociology. Some examples of the presence and influence of History in Sociology, from the establishment of Sociology as science, are philosophy of History, human and social evolution and even History as science (Rocher, 1989). The following are just a few exemplary classic instances of authors whose works reflect this influence: Max Weber, who developed studies favouring a comparative historical analysis, of the Middle Ages trading companies, the agricultural history of Rome, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, the religions in the world; Norbert Elias, in the book *The Civilising Process*, sought to understand the process of evolution of civilisational patterns, especially in Europe, intertwined with the formation and individualisation of the European States; Immanuel Wallerstein, in the world-systems theory, analyses the relationships of dependence and reciprocity between modern societies and the Nation-States; Fernand Braudel developed a *histoire globale* in his work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), linking History to other social sciences, articulating structures and events (Turner, 2002; Mandalios, 2002; Zubir á, 2015; Do Valle, 2014; Kirschner, 2014; Torres, 2012).

Zubir á (2015), Javeau (1998), Gould (2019) and Silva (2013), among many others, are some of the authors who maintain that there is a very close relationship between Sociology and History. Javeau (1998) argues that History and Sociology “are but the two institutionalised facets of a single phenomenon (or combination of phenomena), collective life [...] there is no Sociology that is not historical and there is not, undoubtedly, also history that is not sociological” (p. 202). This is added to the fact that both disciplines “ponder the very historical-social conditions of the production of sociological discourse” (p. 207).

The project of a historical Sociology put forward by Philip Abrams emphasises this position of integrating Sociology and History by stating that the only way to do Sociology is the historical one. In terms of fundamental concerns, Sociology and History are similar, as both seek to understand the challenges of human agency and both seek this goal in terms of the process of social structuring (Abrams, 1982). The conceptual emphasis on the process allows to

overcome the static-dynamic, structure-action and diachronic-synchronic dichotomies; the process may be seen as the connection between action and structure. This process is open, sequential and cumulative; at each stage, actions are undertaken based on certain conditions and possibilities produced in the past, which, in turn, transform the circumstances for the future (Table 1). Therefore, society may be understood as a process historically constructed by individuals who are historically constructed by society (Abrams, 1982; Sztompka, 1993).

Table 1. Dimensions and levels of a social process

|               | <i>Potenciality</i> |        | <i>Actuality</i> |
|---------------|---------------------|--------|------------------|
| Totality      | Structures          | -----> | Functioning      |
|               | ↓                   |        |                  |
| Reality       | Agency              | -----> | Praxis           |
|               | ↑                   |        |                  |
| Individuality | Agents              | -----> | Action           |

Source: Sztompka, 1993, p. 244.

Zubir á (2015) advocates that “The dialogue between History and Sociology, as well as with other social sciences, is an inescapable and necessary epistemological, theoretical and methodological need for the advancement of scientific knowledge” (p. 264).

Given that ideologies and practical knowledge are ways of rationalising the world and classifying it, i.e., instruments of social cohesion and tension, all scientific disciplines are subject to the influence of symbolic-ideological elements (Silva, 1990). If ethnocentrism is one of the main obstacles to knowledge production, faced namely by Sociology and Anthropology – which, to develop the epistemological rupture, have favoured the valorisation of context analysis –, anachronism is one of the main epistemological obstacles faced by History. However, invoking the context to overcome anachronism may not suffice, since the analysis of phenomena and actions in their socio-temporal context eventually has to face the difficulties that stem from the existence of different contexts (Rowland, 1987). Historians have developed different strategies to deal with the problem of difference in time, namely: to ascribe the context and difference no specific relevance; to believe that all the epochs analysed by the historian are different and irreducible to each other, and each one should be explained in its terms – absolute respect for the difference would eventually exclude the possibility of any discourse on that same difference and the historian should refrain from any subjective interpretation of the meaning of these events; another strategy is a relativisation of the difference, in which the differences between epochs or societies are viewed as the result of the internal differentiation of something broader, whose specific features allow to relate societies or historical epochs with each other (Rowland, 1987, pp. 53-56).

An attitude of promoting the interdisciplinarity between Sociology and History, of problematising science and the mobilisation of epistemological and methodological principles that guide social research may be a central strategy in overcoming common sense that social sciences struggle with and in enhancing their heuristic abilities: relativisation of human phenomena; valorisation of the socio-historical contexts and the coordinates of time and place; relating social phenomena and inscribing these phenomena in empirically verifiable systems of reciprocal relationships; reflective questioning and problematisation of all acquired knowledge, including common sense, ideologies and science itself (Rowland, 1987; Silva, 1990).

According to Augusto Santos Silva (2013), there is a need for a “sociologisation of history and a movement of historicisation of sociology” (p. 1) (Table 2).

Table 2. Contribution of History to Sociology

| <i>Argument</i>   | <i>Elucidation</i>  |
|---|---|
| <i>Problematization</i> - <i>Consideration of the times lived in the configuration of social processes:</i>                             | The greatest contribution of History is placing social processes on the axis of temporal duration, which provides sociological problematization with an in-depth perspective that it does not otherwise have. |
| <i>Methodology</i> - <i>Work with the sources that are always socially produced and analysed:</i>                                       | The data are constructed by scientific research and involve deconstructing them and deepening the first impressions.  |
| <i>Modelling</i> - <i>Production of theory(s) that are capable of accounting for the studied objects:</i>                               | Theory, as an explanatory factor, is the point of departure and is the point of arrival and the cement of each scientific community.  |
| <i>Epistemology</i> - <i>Combination between epistemological generality and density:</i>  | Knowledge about the conditions of production and validation of scientific knowledge.  |
| <i>Communication</i> - <i>Overcoming compartmentalisation and engaging in meaningful dialogues with each other and with the public:</i> | Understanding time(s) as a social framework, acknowledging it as a social science that is particularly close to Sociology when dealing with complex societies.  |

Source: Produced by the authors, based on Silva (2013).

However, why is this relationship between Sociology and History not more fruitful? The establishment and institutionalisation of scientific disciplines was, and is, a social process characterised by ambivalence and indeterminacy in the (re)formulation of their identity (Charry Joya, 2017; Day é 2018; Serpa, Ferreira, & Santos, 2017; Hernández Cordero, 2013; Gould, 2019; Steinmetz, 2017). Among the reasons for the separation between these two academic fields, factors such as scientific differences (epistemological and methodological) but also political factors, professional identity, the social space sought, the increase and maintenance of their autonomy, and institutionalisation of the two scientific disciplines were relevant (Kirschner, 2014; Javeau, 1998; Charry Joya, 2017; Torres, 2012; Castillo Alonso, 2018), although an imperialist perspective on one of these disciplines over the other is no longer advocated (Zubir á, 2015). According to Torres (2012), “interdisciplinarity was a discursive practice that developed together with the professionalization of knowledge” (p. 244). However, Steinmetz (2017) reminds us that “Interdisciplinarity is driven by three main sorts of motives, involving (1) questions that push scholars out of their own disciplines, (2) battles within a given discipline, and (3) conformity with internal or external authorities” (p. 481). Furthermore, Malczewski (2019) sustains that

The historical sociologist is practiced at seeing beyond the details of particular events to focus on more general levels of analysis that are ripe for comparison. Historical sociology, in this way, may shepherd general sociology in the direction of general theory, in the direction of science (p. 14).

In summary, it may be stated, in line with Silva (2013), that “what history problematizes is time, the inscription of societies in time, and this is the value that it adds, as a «way of thinking» societies – and thus, as a way of thinking also the other social sciences” (p. 2).

#### 4. Conclusion

There are several scientific (epistemological and methodological) reasons, disciplinary closure and institutional reasons for maintaining a somewhat tight separation, and social reasons, of preservation of professional identity, which explain this fluid movement of approximation/detachment between Sociology and History, in what may be called contained dialogues. Do Valle offers an interesting perspective of this symbiotic relationship between Sociology and History, maintaining that History, without the general concepts produced by Sociology, would be reduced to a descriptive dimension, characterised by a fictional meaning, naive in the relationship with what is

described; on the other hand, Sociology, without the particular phenomena made meaningful by cultural life, that is, without the historical phenomena, would tend to be devoid of content (Do Valle, 2014). This interdisciplinary dialogue would make it possible to interdependently articulate the understanding from the inside with the explanation from the outside: the general with the singular, the heuristic meaning for the sociologist's structure with the heuristic sense of change, of the historian's social duration (Burke, 1980).

This paper, starting from the sociological stance of its authors, sought to add to the analysis of this connection that may potentially foster the heuristic ability of both Sociology and History (Zubir á, 2015; Kirschner, 2014), seeking to demonstrate, based on the studies analysed, that the two scientific disciplines are interconnected and feed each other.

The social structures and the forms of social interaction that shape contemporary societies cannot be understood and explained without the use of a historical perspective, enhancing the historicity, as opposed to naturalization, of certain structures, actions and meanings.

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