



## Research Article

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# Sociology: Tension between Science and Militant Activism?

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### Abstract

*This position paper is based on the assumption that there is an appreciation of Sociology as a justification for certain representations and practices of social and political intervention. In *Sociology: Tension between science and militant activism?*, the authors aim at justifying, on a reasoned basis, the relevance of Sociology as a specific form of scientific knowledge in current times, without, however, confusing the role of Sociology with the direct resolution of inequalities and injustices. At the methodological level, a bibliographic search on this subject has been carried out in scientific literature databases, such as Scopus, Web of Knowledge, SCILIT and institutional repositories, supplemented by the experience of the authors as sociologists, both in the teaching and research dimensions. Sociology focuses on sociological problems and not directly on social problems, and, as a science, it can contribute greatly to the understanding of the social world. Furthermore, the results from sociological research can potentially be applied in society in the most diverse political senses (in the broadest sense of this term). In conclusion, and as an implication, if this militant activist tendency is accentuated, Sociology may paradoxically lose recognition and scientific, academic and social legitimacy, contributing to its des-institutionalisation and consequent difficulty in having its knowledge applied to the resolution of social problems.*

**Keywords:** *Sociology, sociological knowledge, legitimacy of Sociology, contemporary Sociology, sociologist's activism, de-institutionalisation of Sociology*

## 1. Introduction

Scientific knowledge is always a provisional way of explaining the world (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017; Michalski, 2020; Serpa & Ferreira, 2018). Following the positioning adopted by Serpa and Ferreira (2018) and in summary for the present argument,

*Scientific knowledge may be considered as a set of verified and verifiable knowledge, obtained through a systematic process and demonstrated in a rigorous and controlled way. This rigour and control must be present both in the process (in the execution of a research) and in the product of a research (in its final result, such as, for instance, an article, a book, a report or a presentation, among others) (p. 840).*

Specifically, what is Sociology? This scientific field may be viewed as a science that explains the

social through another social phenomenon, as Ferreira and Serpa (2017) indicate when they argue that Sociology is “a scientific discipline that perceives in its specific way the social reality, producing plural theoretical topics, formulating research problems within the context of these topics, and developing methodical strategies that guide empirical research” (p. 1). Sociology is a multi-paradigmatic science with a diverse framework of its subject (Barašin, 2020; Ferreira & Serpa, 2017; Genov, 2020). According to Scott (2020), “sociology has remained a broad church. Attempts to impose theoretical and methodological order on the discipline have met with resistance, and eventually failed. Moreover, sociology has never really reached consensus on what its object is” (p. 443).

There has always been tension since Sociology was established over the basic function of this scientific field (Aron, 1994; Cruz, 1995; Javeau, 1998; Mills, 1959; Weber, 1982; Paiva, 2014; Turner, 2019; Serpa & Ferreira, 2019a; Serpa, Ferreira, & Diogo, 2020; Daniels, 2018), exemplarily marked by Turner (2019) as follows: “Should it be an activist discipline devoted to the direct engagement of social problems or a scientific discipline committed to producing verified knowledge?” (p. 457).

Today, the process of digitalisation of everyday life, in which many of us are permanently connected (Nadolu & Nadolu, 2020; Centeno et al., 2020), is unavoidable and has profound implications for the way science is also sociological. This insight is in line with that of Fussey and Roth (2020) when the authors argue that the

*Digital forms of interaction are embedded in everyday life and every sector of society. Whereas early analyses separated ‘cyberspace’ from ‘real’ life, it is now recognized that the ubiquity of digital technology and the growing inseparability of online and offline interactions renders this bifurcation obsolete (if ever adequate) (p. 2).*

This situation has specific implications for the very legitimacy of Sociology as a science, one of which, according to Genov (2020), is the “[...] obstacles in the way of the cumulative development of sociological knowledge. Studies consequently guided by diverging paradigms have a tendency to bring about results which are either too difficult to integrate or simply incompatible with one another” (p. 1).

Also, Barašin (2020) is critical in this respect, stating that

*[...] many, outside this discipline, do not understand sociology seriously and do not attribute a merited significance to it. This problem becomes even more dramatic when one takes into account the fact that these doubts have snuck into the order of sociologists themselves. Ever growing disbelief in itself harms sociology much more than the disbelief of those who are not in this profession (p. 9).*

This position paper is based on the assumption that Sociology is valued as the justification for certain representations and practices of social and political intervention (for further details, see, for example, Blau, 2018; Catone, 2018; Daniels, 2018; Jorgenson, 2018; Lamont, 2018; Scheitle, 2018; James, 2020).

In Sociology: Tension between science and militant activism?, the authors aim to justify, on a reasoned basis, the relevance of Sociology as a specific form of scientific knowledge in current times, without, however, confusing the role of Sociology with the direct resolution of inequalities and injustices. At the methodological level, a bibliographic search on this subject has been carried out in scientific literature databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, SCILIT and institutional repositories, supplemented by the experience of the authors as sociologists, both in the teaching and research dimensions.

## 2. Sociology as a Science

Despite various definitions, Sociology can be considered as a science (Michalski, 2020) that – in its theoretical specificities as multi-paradigmatic, object of study and methodological – seeks to grasp social reality in a rigorous manner through empirical information and by applying Durkheim’s already

classic general principle of explaining the social through the social (Ferguson, 2016; Ferreira & Serpa, 2017; Serpa & Ferreira, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Serpa et al., 2020). In line with Serpa and Ferreira (2019b),

*Sociology as a science and as a profession (in the diversity of roles and inherent professional cultures) studies the (dis)order of the social world, and deals with interactions, which result from the interaction and have implications in this interaction among human beings, such as objects, practices, representations and values, inserting them in their social context (online).*

Sociology allows, among many other contributions (Almeida, 1994; Giddens, 1997) those explained in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Some contributions from Sociology

Better understanding of social life
Consideration of cultural and social diversity
Justified social criticism
Understanding of different points of view shaped by social conditions of existence
Elucidation of the relationship between micro, meso and macrosocial levels
Giving visibility to certain social realities
Scientifically informed diagnosis and prognosis of interventions and/or social changes
Evaluation of policy effects
Individual and group self-clarification
Greater reflexivity

**Source:** Authors' production

Ultimately, Sociology enables a deeper understanding of ourselves and the social context, as well as a better understanding of the intentional and unintentional consequences of our actions (Giddens, 1997). To achieve the above, Sociology applies, among others, the four principles depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Four principles of Sociology

<b>Sociological imagination</b>	Mobilisation of different perspectives on a given social situation, enabling the understanding of the articulation between the micro, meso and macro social levels.
<b>Multi-paradigmatic</b>	Recognize the existence of various theoretical sociological perspectives and, if pertinent, apply them to what appears to present the greatest heuristic capacity.
<b>Heuristic interdisciplinarity</b>	The social reality is complex and its understanding implies interdependence and interdisciplinarity between the various social sciences.
<b>Reflexivity</b>	The critical analysis both of sociological content and procedures and of their effects on society.

**Source:** Ferreira & Serpa (2017)

This necessarily brief description of Sociology (for further study, see, for example, the final bibliography), given the purposes of this position paper, allows us to base an idea that will be basic in the argumentation: the need to distinguish sociological problem (theoretically based perspective of the definition of an object of study) from social problem (the attempt to solve a social disorder thus considered by some, generally an elite, being guided by its values and ideologies), working Sociology with sociological problems with an empirical dimension (Costa, 1992).

If, on the one hand, "Neo-conservative strategists now intend obliterating, not just criticizing, disciplines and institutions they dislike" (Connell, 2020, p. 5), on the other hand, there is an overvaluation of Sociology as justifying a social/political activism in the sense of a given ideology (Turner, 2019; James, 2020).

### 3. Sociology and Science Legitimation in the Digital

The growing presence and influence of the digital have affected the very way of doing Sociology, as well as its objects of study, potentially creating new conditions for the accomplishment and legitimisation of Sociology (Fussey & Roth, 2020; Pagliaro, 2020; Zwaan, Etz, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2018; Academy of Sociology, 2020; Ozier, 2019; Romero, 2019; Altmejd et al., 2019; Lucas, Morrell, & Posard, 2013; Genov, 2020) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Basic requirements at the conceptual core of general sociological theory

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1. The content of the central concept or concepts needed for the integrative development of sociological theorizing and empirical research should be semantically rather broad.
2. The selected paradigmatic core concept (or concepts) should guarantee the balance between ontological realism (theoretical reproduction of social structures and processes) and analytical realism (laying stress on the building and application of theoretical constructs which will be able to support the efficient study of different types of social phenomena).
3. The selected basic concept is expected to offer the cognitive space for differentiating and integrating knowledge about the micro, meso and macro levels of social structures and processes.
4. The core concept should enable effective solutions of traditional sociological dilemmas, concerning both relations between individual and collective social actors, and subjective voluntarism and objective constraints.
5. This sought-after concept can be expected to secure enough cognitive space for theorizing and empirical research on the conditions of social integration, social order, spontaneity and the disintegration of social configurations.
6. Options for using a variety of research methods and tools (mixed methods approach) should be inbuilt in the conceptual apparatus intended to enhance the foundations of sociological theorizing and research.
7. The basic integrating concept should have the capacity to efficiently mediate between cognitive developments in sociology and the discipline's scope to support rational decisions, and actions made at the local, national, macro-regional and global structural levels.

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**Source:** Genov (2020)

This interesting proposal from Genov (2020) presents, in our view, sufficient heuristic potential to merit analytical and critical developments. As the author states,

*Universal answers are not possible because of permanent changes in social reality as well as the historical uniqueness of each study on social interactions. Nevertheless, concepts covering major types of determinants of social structures and processes can be developed and applied, so long as the provision is laid that they be carefully operationalized and adjusted to the conditions of each particular case of social interaction (p. 19).*

### 4. Sociology and Militant Activity

The following is an example of a situation in which an essentially academic sociologist felt the need to take a more active role in social life:

*However, in recent years I've ventured outside of my professional comfort zone and become more engaged with policy groups and governmental agencies, the media, and civil society, and trying to bring environmental sociology more to the center of our discipline as well as into the broader sustainability science and environmental science communities. I'm not unique in doing these things. [...] So why did I start doing these things? I can think of at least three reasons. First, I'm worried about the future of the planet and all of its human and nonhuman habitants, and since graduate school I've taken a problems-oriented approach in most of my research, scholarship, and teaching. Second, there is too much emphasis in policy and media venues on technological, behavioral, and market-based solutions to our global sustainability challenges, especially climate change, while downplaying the ways in which structural*

*inequalities and power dynamics from the local to the global contribute to anthropogenic climate change and other environmental problems. Third, I've been encouraged to participate in these sorts of activities, and I've received very helpful guidance from friends and colleagues (Jorgenson, 2018, pp. 1086-1087).*

Furthermore, in Turner's (2019) magnificent analysis on the increase of activism in Sociology, entitled "The more American Sociology seeks to become a politically-relevant discipline, the more irrelevant it becomes to solving societal problems", the author considers that

*The long-standing divide between sociology as an activist discipline vs. sociology as a science is examined in light of the current trend for American sociology focus on a limited set of justice issues resulting from inequalities and discrimination against certain categories of persons. Increasingly, this trend is pushing sociology toward become an activist discipline and, as a result, an ideologically-oriented discipline in its teaching and research activities. The outcome of this trend is the growing marginalization of those committed to sociology as a science in departments and academic meetings, resulting in demoralization of sociology's scientists and their escalating concern over their fate in a discipline increasingly mimicking a social movement organization. Even more damaging to sociology will be a loss of respect inside academia and a loss of relevance among publics not sharing American sociology's political biases (p. 456).*

This situation may call into question the legitimacy and institutionalisation of Sociology in its scientific and professional dimensions (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017; Serpa & Ferreira, 2019a; 2019c; Turner, 2019). Turner (2019), focusing on American Sociology, makes some proposals that seek to boost Sociology's capacity for social intervention (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Turner proposals

1	To view sociology as a science that has the ability to generate and disseminate useful knowledge
2	Begin to read literatures more broadly across a much larger intellectual landscape and to gather more knowledge outside of narrow specialties
3	Teach knowledge about how the social universe operates rather than how it should operate but, at the same time, address the empirical and theoretical question of whether there are alternatives to present conditions
4	Be tolerant within departments of those who do research and teach in areas not related to inequalities, and moreover, learn something of what they know
5	Save activism to one's personal life
6	Encourage students at the graduate level to think about alternatives to tenure-track employment
7	Develop this applied track by encouraging students and fellow faculty members to have an engineering mentality whereby empirical finding and abstract theories are made accessible to all who desire knowledge about human behavior, interaction, and social organization
8	Encourage ASA and other professional associations to develop a social engineering-by another name-as something that sociologists can do and encourage some form of certification that anyone who is part of this engineering "fraternity" is appropriately knowledgeable

**Source:** Turner (2019)

The relationship between sociological involvement and knowledge transfer is critical (Sá, Ferreira, & Serpa, 2019; Ghimire, 2017), and the authors' perspective does not indicate a withdrawal of Sociology from the public sphere, but rather a clearer separation in this sense applied to the social sciences and specifically to Sociology. Spalter-Roth, Best, and White (2018) argue that

*The social sciences are needed to provide reasoned direction, based on scientific findings for institutional governance, to help temper inflammatory public policy action rooted in fear and uncertainty, and provide a critical check on capricious use of power. Social scientists interested in incorporating their research into public policy to serve the common good should maintain their resolve, even in the face of setbacks. Remember trust networks are key for moving research into the public policy process (p. 445).*

In the above sense, Table 5 offers some suggestions for researchers interested in influencing public policy.

**Table 5.** Suggestions for researchers interested in influencing public policy

1	Repeat findings over and over, early and often in a variety of venues.
2	Identify the gatekeepers to policymakers, but do not expect them to come to you.
3	Examine the quality of research not the politics of the researcher.
4	Seek out and be open to partnering with organizations that can take your work to places you might not be able to access on your own. Share resources with network members to develop trust networks.
5	Understand how your research relates to the mood of the public, and frame and translate findings for the public and the media so that it reflects the mood of the public.
6	Be alert to windows of opportunity for research that can answer timely policy questions. It is often easier to get research accepted at the local and state level than the federal level. It is important to develop relationships there.
7	Social scientists should try not split policy research and academic work or should consider working on Congressional staffs or in federal and state agencies where they have more opportunities to be central to policy networks.
8	Researchers should follow a code of ethics and should be prepared to call out “bad science”.
9	Be aware that politics can trump research and evidence-based research does not always triumph.
10	Social Science research must walk a fine line between promotion and propaganda. While policy can be “value based”, it must also be “evidence based”.

**Source:** Spalter-Roth et al. (2018, pp. 445 and 446)

## 5. Conclusions

In the relationship between science and action, and following Max Weber’s classic proposal (Ferreira & Serpa, 2019; Serpa & Ferreira, 2020a, 2020b; Weber, 1982), there is a need to separate judgments of fact (focused on the empirically found objectivity) from judgments of value (informed by interests and ideologies...), and, in this line of thought, “the neutrality of scientific knowledge implies that science itself does not have the capacity to judge values and point out valuable choices” (Paiva, 2014, p. 380), advocating the maintenance of an “axiological neutrality” in the analysis of how reality is and not how it should be while respecting the professional ethics of being a sociologist.

*The problem is actually quite similar for sociologists who want the discipline to be an agent of progressive change or justice. Sociology’s advantage over overtly political organizations or institutions would seem to be its potential to claim scientific authority. That is, the reason that individuals, organizations, or governments might listen to sociologists more than, say, the representatives of a political party, is that sociologists have the potential to be neutral actors who are simply communicating the results of scientific research (Scheitle, 2018, p. 11).*

Sociology focuses on sociological problems and not directly on social problems. This science can make a very relevant contribution to the understanding of the social world. Moreover, the results from sociological research can potentially be applied in society in the most diverse political senses (in the broadest sense of this term). It is a complex issue, but one that needs to be addressed, especially at this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is generating profound, some new but also old challenges, and at the same time has widened social inequalities. However, there is little influence from Sociology in the discussion surrounding this issue (Connell, 2020; Lupton, 2020; Rudnick, 2020; Ward, 2020).

Sociology, however, is not defenceless in the face of this situation, since it is a privileged space for reflection:

*Sociology, as a privileged scientific space for (self)reflection on its own activity and the resulting product,*

contributes to a specialised knowledge with the limitations that this entails; thus, it is important, on the one hand, to foster a sociological perspective that spurs, in the process of construction and analysis of its objects, the influence of cultural, economic, and political aspects, and, on the other hand, which encourages the dialogue with other disciplinary and scientific spaces (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017, p. 2).

In conclusion, and as an implication, if this militant activist tendency is accentuated, Sociology may lose recognition and scientific, academic and social legitimacy (Scheitle, 2018; Turner, 2019). This will certainly contribute to its de-institutionalisation and consequent difficulty in applying its knowledge in solving social problems.

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