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Beyond the Disciplinary Sector: Theories, Methods and Topics of Latin American Sociology over the last 25 Years

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Abstract

This essay is a contribution to the existing debate on the progress of sociological scientific production over the last 25 years (1991-2016). In contemporary society, the exponential developments consolidate or refute the sense of the implementation of theories, methods and topics in the sociological sciences. Besides, Sociology addresses new topics that require an innovative empirical framework, beneficial on understanding the complexity of reality and to respond to any new challenges. Starting from an analytical assessment of the report *25 Años de Sociología*, edited by Alexis Romero Salazar (2017), this article aims to highlight the progression of several disciplinary sectors of Latin American sociological production. Whereas it is difficult to include all the sociological areas in this overview, the choice fell on the following: education, family, religion, economy, political processes, communication, migration and – last but not least – the recognition of the empirical significance of social imaginary.

Keywords: scientific production comparison, Latin American, social imaginary.

1. Introduction

The transformation of contemporary society has changed and permeated the sociological topics and methodologies, to be able to understand the conditions, processes and social structures in continuous and extremely rapid change (Salazar, 2017). Sociology has been valued not only as a purely empirical approach but also in an interdisciplinary perspective, intertwining with multiple subjects and proposing itself as a science capable of seeing the world from a common perspective, so that social processes can be analysed and explained.

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In the Latin America area, the crisis of neo-liberal ideologies, the default of states, and the involvement of international organizations have triggered several social processes. They therefore require an innovative sociological analysis, designed both to be fast enough for the times and to take into account the influences of local context and global transformations. The collection *25 Años de Sociología*¹, edited by Alexis Romero Salazar of the University of Zulia (Venezuela), intends to offer an overview of the topics that were addressed from 1991 to 2016 mainly in Latin America, through a vigorous revision by scholars from different countries and institutions. The aim is to introduce a review of what has been produced in some fields of analysis of Ibero-American sociology, to be able to observe the existing framework and address future research proposals.

This essay intends to detect some of the topics dealt in the Venezuelan collection and highlight a common tendency in Latin American sociological analysis: the implementation of tools and methods that refer to the theory of the social imaginary, which sees overseas recognition in being able to improve the study of social processes and institutions, through ‘immersion’ in local contexts and taking into account still unexplored factors. The time frame examined corresponds to the quarter of a century including the years from 1991 to 2016, a period that encompasses a particular historical moment between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. This span is characterized by profound social, political, economic and technological changes, which have led to the concept of ‘technological singularity’, a notion that outlines a scientific and technological development that is not simply incremental, but exponential (Sandoval, 2017).

As it will be seen, social events and changes serve as a background in the analysis of the various disciplinary areas in Latin America, to highlight the connection that exists between the Iberian-American academic-scientific world and social reality. Quoting Giddens (2001), the broad field of sociology studies is evident, addressing issues ranging from ‘ephemeral’ encounters between individuals to the study of global social processes.

2. Formal and informal socialization agencies. Family, educational institutions and church

The rapid and complex transformation of post-modern society has caused substantial changes in the primary socialization agency of the family. The importance of family is summarized in two basic postulates: ‘there is no

¹ i.e. ‘25 Years of Sociology’.

individual who does not belong to a family² and ‘there is no individual who cannot belong to a family’³ (Cadenas, Urquiza, 2017: 81). A heuristic reason underlies the two hypotheses, which interprets the contemporary family as a functional system, characterized by three elements: the autonomy of communications in stratified social structures; codification of the world in the social systems to which specific problems refer; claims that every social system becomes functional. According to this perspective, the family represents a communication system with the function of including all people with mutual expectations, regardless of blood ties but including other types of relationships (Cadenas, Urquiza, 2017).

Inclusion in the family system is not direct, but it can be of two types: naturalized and contingent. Naturalized inclusion differs in every social system, where the individual’s actions are included in it, with specific closing criteria. Contingent inclusion, instead, provides the possibility for each individual to be able to enter in a social system, thus determining opening criteria (Cadenas, Urquiza, 2017). From the brief theoretical explanation, it is possible to corroborate the two axioms formulated above. ‘Kinship’⁴ represents naturalized inclusion in the family system, asserting that ‘there is no individual who does not belong to a family’ closes the system, because everyone comes from a family. While ‘conjugal’⁵ corresponds to contingent inclusion in the family, affirming that ‘there is no individual who cannot belong to a family’ as everyone can potentially form one (Cadenas, Urquiza, 2017).

According to the authors, this analysis goes beyond the polarization of the sociological debate that sees the strong supporters of the traditional family at both extremes and those who decline it into new types (homosexual, single-member, domestic workers’ affiliation, etc.). This is especially accurate in a context such as that of Latin American countries, where homosexual families are widely accepted and, in some states such as Brazil, Argentina and Colombia, equated to the ‘traditional’ family. Despite this, there are few countries where this social demand has not yet received an institutional response, such as Venezuela, which does not recognize same-sex marriages or civil unions and adoptions, but provides laws against discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community. One of the most extreme cases is the one of Guyana, a Latin American country which still today has specific laws against homosexuality (exclusively male) and custodial sentences from 2 to 10 years. Hence the sociological analysis must open up to new articulations determined by the

² Translated by the author.

³ Translated by the author.

⁴ Translated by the author.

⁵ Translated by the author.

transformation of the family, boosting the investigation of new meanings triggered by its metamorphosis.

In the last 25 years, the sociology of education has centred around two main axes: the first concerns education and inequalities; the second concerns social relations and the development of the being, even if the border between the two areas is somewhat labile (Sandoval, 2017). In Latin America, a geographical area where social inequalities are deeply rooted and directly affect access to schooling, the topic of education is intertwined with public policies, especially with measures that quantify public spending on education to overcome inequalities. The economic crises of the 1980s and the intervention of international organizations pressed the education sector towards the paradigm of New Public Management, allowing primary schooling through government interventions on one hand and promoting administrative decentralization processes and privatization of school systems on the other (Cobalti, 2009).

Beyond these structural changes, sociology of education has not yet consolidated in Latin America, except for a research pole in Mexico (Brunner, 2009). Ongoing social processes, especially the massification and democratization of education, as well as the growing number of women in the educational system, currently require a diachronic study approach. Thus, it takes into account the various factors involved, both from a macro and a micro perspective and through the use of quantitative-qualitative, such as questionnaires, in-depth interviews and direct observations (Sandoval, 2017).

The sociology of religion represents a particular field of study, which involves understanding the academic debate on the role of worship in society. During the 20th century, secularization confined religion to the 'private' sphere, because its presence in the 'public' one was considered an impediment to the modernization process (Berger, 2011; Esquivel, 2017). Nonetheless, this thought has changed at the end of the 20th century. Religion (and its related elements) persist on multiple levels of human existence and this is why it cannot be excluded in the analysis of society. Berger reverses his ideas, with the concept of de-secularization, to describe the influence of religion in the institutional and political world, in cultural processes and people's lives (Berger, 1999). According to this, the rise of modernity does not implicate a minor religiosity, but a profusion of new beliefs, values and expressions (Berger, 2012).

While some authors follow Berger's line of thought, others assert that this is not a 'return' of religion, but that it is configured as a factor of long presence in human history, generating not a polarization with the process of modernity, but a mutual and reciprocal influence (Esquivel, 2017). Simultaneously with the innovation of the theoretical framework, there is also an important change in the cult of Latin America (Cobalti, 2009). The conquest of these countries was

done in the name of religion, specifically, Catholicism, which then showed two faces during the political events of the last century: a more conservationist one aimed at the survival of the church, supporting the governance regimes in force (more or less dictatorial); another that defied dictatorships and condemned their injustices towards people (González, González, 2008).

Accordingly, while at the beginning of the 20th century almost the entire Latin American population considered themselves Christian-Catholic, today the social context has changed considerably. Latin America has seen what has been called ‘one of the most extraordinary religious transformations in history’ (De Matviuk, 2007: 205), whose most striking feature is diversity (Fleet, 2005: 343). This profusion of cults has attracted scholars, consolidating the sociological study of religion. It can be assumed by three elements (Esquivel, 2017): continuity of studies and diversity of interdisciplinary approaches; growing academic offer of university courses related to the study of religion in a sociological, historical and anthropological perspective; growing number of journals of high scientific value dedicated to theology. The increase in studies within the sociology of religion is evident as it transversally encounters different topics, such as globalization, politics, culture, ethnicity and gender issues.

3. Economic sociology: Latin American countries in the global context

It’s not easy to systematize the production of economic, industrial and work sociology in Latin American, as academic production varies in each country depending on the state of art of the labour law and the types of employment available. In the Venezuelan collection, this area of study is focused on the endogenous context, which, in these 25 years, has witnessed two phases: firstly, from 1991 to 1998, it saw a neoliberal adaptation of the discipline; ii) secondly, from 1999 (rise of Hugo Chávez) to date, which has a double connotation in that it is defined as a socialist regime by its supporters, but at the same time a dictatorship by critics (Iranzo, 2017). The main topics covered in this overview concern: trade unionism, labour relations, labour market, productive organization, gender issue and welfare system (Iranzo, 2017).

Currently, the main impediments detected in the development of the discipline are the absence of data necessary to analyse the Venezuelan working context, as well as the impossibility of academic dialogue, caused by the polarization of ideologies (neoliberal and socialist) that inexorably divide the theories and makes comparison hard (Iranzo, 2017). Concerning this, a pragmatic approach is necessary to deal with issues related to the sociology of

work, which must open up to a constructive dialogue based on empirical data collected.

The subject of the dependency of Latin American countries in the global context deserves attention because it produces effects not only in international dynamics but also in endogenous elements, such as the relation between centre and suburbs. The groundwork of this analysis starts from the sociological essay 'Dependency and development in Latin America' by Cardoso and Faletto (1979). It is considered a pillar in the scientific panorama, which analyses the development of these areas, through Marxist theories on imperialism and some Weberian theoretical constructs. The main theme of the mentioned essay is the discussion of the concept of dependency within the international organization, with an as pessimistic as creative position (Cortés, 2017). It overturns the traditional optimistic idea of solving the socio-economic asymmetries between centre and suburbs through the implementation of industrial policies that replace imports, concretizing a sort of selective prohibitionism and the creation of a regional market in the South American area (Prebisch, 1949). This *modus operandi* allows a domination that influences the behaviour of social groups, generating a subordination of 'peripheral economies' in the Latin American countries within the international division of labour to the 'great central economies'. Hence, the underdevelopment of Latin American countries is not determined by the absence of capitalism, but by the participation of these states in the global capitalist model. It produces improvement in metropolitan centres and the underdevelopment in the suburbs (Cortés, 2017).

The history of industrial sociology in Latin America is divided into 3 stages of scientific reflection (Martucelli, Svampa, 1993). (1) *Desarrollismo*⁶, defined as the management of social change, a debate already mentioned above, therefore the implementation of industrial policies that replace indigenous economic heritage in order to achieve an adequate level of development; (2) *Dependencia*⁷, a moment of deeper critical reflection interrupted by the wave of *golpes*⁸ in Latin American countries; (3) *Democratizaciones*⁹, a period characterized by new attention on the role of players within institutions. To this, it must be added a further 'D', (4) *Descolonizar*¹⁰, which concerns the debate about the imperialist control exercised by the ex-colonial Western powers (Ballestrin, 2013).

Although social problems usually address the scientific debate, in all four stages highlighted, politics has (almost) always shaped the academic context in

⁶ i.e. 'Development'.

⁷ i.e. 'Dependency'.

⁸ i.e. 'military coups'.

⁹ i.e. 'Democratization'.

¹⁰ i.e. 'Decolonization'.

Latin American countries, giving greater prominence to the political approach and avoiding the autonomous development in the sociological area (Cortés, 2017). The analysis of dependency through a partial perspective has led to the persistence of domination and the becoming of its increasingly complex solution (Cortés, 2017). In this context, a sociological analysis must operate to offer a more exhaustive reconstruction of the theory, taking into account not only the past but also the current situation and problems.

The dependency of the social, political and economic development of Latin American countries in the global context produces disparities not only at international level but also internally, such as the gap reported above between centre and suburbs. These elements reflect in the social processes of inequality, a topic widely addressed in sociological analysis. At first, the sociological debate considers it as ‘a system of hierarchical positions that distributes, in a more or less unequal form, access to available goods and resources’¹¹ (D’Amico, 2017: 198). This kind of hierarchization, culturally legitimizes the acceptance of inequality’s positions in the different eras. The ‘difference’ implies inequality when it is perceived as unfair, and it transforms the meaning of what is unequal according to the social environment (Therborn, 2006). Thus, the recognition of goods and resources is not seen from the viewpoint of the individual but is the result of a process of social construction settled in society.

However, in recent years, this approach to inequality has been widely criticized, generating new suggestions for analysis that can be classified into two macro-visions: liberal and radical (Pérez Sáinz, 2016). The first analyses inequality starting from outcomes produced by this phenomenon. The second looks at the power’s relations, observing those mechanisms from which the distribution of resources arises. Two are the systems to achieve equality in contemporary society: the ‘starting point’ and the ‘position’ (Dubet, 2011). According to the first diagnosis, each individual can build the desired life, focusing attention on psychological elements, such as goal-achievement, aptitude and personal success. However, this system presents critical issues, as it is unable to justify unacceptable inequalities (Dubet, 2011). The second refers to ‘social positions’ and asserts that the only way to ensure equality in society is to reduce the distances between social groups as much as possible.

Over the past 30 years, in Latin America, governments have spent economic resources to tackle poverty and to reduce severe social disparities. From 1992 to 2003, Latin American people that lived on less than \$2.5 per day, decreased of 24.9% (Cruces, Gasparini, 2013). This transformation was carried out by three policies: monetary, pension and labour-market. This policy-mix have certainly reduced some poverty, although its impact in reducing social

¹¹ Translated by the author.

inequalities has been weak (D'Amico, 2017). For this reason, Reygadas (2008) analyses inequality by proposing a multidimensional approach that not only looks at the economic feature but also at other characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, context, etc. By this perspective, inequality is perceived as 'an asymmetrical distribution of power' and its study also focuses on the political phenomena that determine the production, reproduction and reduction of this inequality (Reygadas, 2008). Hence, the importance of this multidimensional approach is affirmed, in order to renew sociological studies and to provide a more comprehensive response to questions and critical issues triggered by social inequality (D'Amico, 2017).

4. Political sociology

4.1 The Cuban Revolution and its impact on the political and social sciences

As far as political sociology is concerned, the attention of the Venezuelan collection looks at the state of art of this topic in the Cuban context. Thus, in this specific environment, a socio-political analysis was characterized by being integralist, mono-disciplinary and, due to these reasons, not dedicated to a deep understanding of the complexity that characterizes social dynamics within political issues (Martínez, 2017). What happened in the Cuban academics comes from two factors: the first is the start of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, when Fidel Castro gained control of Cuba, determining one of the first socialist experience in the American continent; the second is the support of the Soviet Union which led to firm opposition by the United States, whose output is the embargo. During this time, more precisely in 1976, the sociology class was closed after only 7 years of activity, moving the socio-political professors to chairs of philosophy or scientific activities for the government (Martínez, 2017). It is only since 1990, after the Soviet Union collapse and the crisis of socialism, that we have witnessed the reopening of the socio-political class and the restoration of the investigation by the social sciences. This generated important changes in the disciplinary sector, dictated by a growing interest in political issues.

To these reasons, the studies produced in this area over the last 25 years reveal a common trend in sharing and implementing theoretical and methodological perspectives from sociology, political science and political psychology. This transdisciplinary scientific approach aims at a more complete analysis of social reality and that is why, on political issues, it is not only frequent and inevitable but above all advisable. In this way, political sociology and

political science 'are not opposed but complement each other'¹² (Martínez, 2017: 146), to be able to offer adequate process and meaning responses.

4.2 Terrorism

Among the socio-political issues is that of terrorism, whose studies have increased in the last half of the 20th century. In the attempt to find their independent dimension in the scientific panorama, González Calleja (2017) highlights four stages: in the 1960s the production of the first publications started, illustrating the specificity of these works in the sociological sector; in the Seventies, such studies increased visibly, due to the wave of international terrorist episodes that generated a focusing event on the subject; in the 1980s these works declined, because of the decrease of attacks which led to a progressive lack of funds for this area of research, that presented methodological difficulties; the attack at the Twin Towers rekindled attention to the issue in the 21st century (González Calleja, 2017). Studies currently focus on understanding the reason behind such destructive and suicidal terrorist strikes, taking into account the role of religious extremism and increasing the scale of the problem to the threat as a strategic means of the political clash (Ranstorp, 2007).

Concerning the methodologies implemented, the scientific debate shows some divergences. According to Davide Leheny (2002), symbolism and social movements are elements that can assist studies on terrorism, analysing factors such as the psychology of the attackers, mobilization and recruitment through social networks. Marta Crenshaw (2000) instead, criticizes the reliability of these studies, denouncing the absence of fundamental axioms in the empirical research, such as the lack of a univocal definition and the inability to define an integrated theoretical and methodological literature on the topic (Crenshaw, 2000).

The studies do not present a shared definitional formulation, but through the careful bibliographic work carried out by Schmid (1984), it is possible to trace six shared elements: extreme fear caused by the execution of an act or its attempt; brutality within a state and against it; political violence used as a strategic goal; indiscriminate and/or casual use of brutality; violent nature of any means; secretness of terrorist acts (Schmid, 1984).

Consequently, this definitional orientation has addressed the research on the purposes and effects of terrorism. Terrorism could be considered as either a form of war and therefore to be inserted in the political-military context, or a crime with aspects to be included in the juridical-criminal context (Fossati,

¹² Translated by the author.

2003). Starting from these issues, the multidisciplinary treatment emerges on the theme of terrorism.

A first perspective is the psycho-sociological one, which is relevant in understanding the psychological factors that can highlight the elements of victimization of the terrorist and, consequently, his motivations (Horgan, 2007). However, this view is partial as it does not explain the origin of armed groups, the strategies and contexts in which they operate (González Calleja, 2017).

Other theoretical constructs of sociology have tried to answer these questions. The functionalist perspective inserts terrorism among acts marked by illegitimate and anomic violence (Wilkinson, 1974) of subversive groups against the legitimate coercion of the state (Parsons, 1991), attributing the attack against civilization and the illegal aspect (Hoffman, 1999). This tendency to mark the 'dysfunctional and aberrant' nature of these acts undermines the structural study from a political and social point of view, resulting as ineffective at carrying out an overall empirical analysis as it does not take into account interdependent variables, such as the cultural context, socio-political and the symbolic nature of the acts (González Calleja, 2017).

The structuralist perspective, explains how terrorism can be a response to a 'blocked' political system, with focus on the phenomenon of the Italian 'New Left' arose in the late 1960s (Bonanate, 1979; Pasquino, 1984). According to this perspective, the phenomenon can represent the indicator of a possible institutional block that highlights the criticalities of a formal (and not substantial) democracy, such as the stagnation of the authorities in the places of power, in party coalitions and the inexistence of structural reforms. The blockade is not a direct cause of terrorism, which instead presupposes subversion and the ability to organize in an armed force (González Calleja, 2017). The perspective offered by structuralist theorists concerning rational collective action complete this point of view on terrorism. This concept explains the violence and terrorism as a possible strategic response in the development of a conflict.

Latin America also experienced episodes of 'red terrorism' by left-wing anti-US terrorist organizations between the 1960s and 1980s. These radical groups sought a shortcut to revolution and liberation in acts of urban terrorism, which had the advantage of having immediate media coverage but, in the absence of popular uprisings, did not weaken their governments. This situation favoured military coups and the establishment of US-backed dictatorships, crushing already weak democracies (Aubrey, 2004). Some examples of organizations are the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua which contributed in 1979 to the collapse of the Somoza Debayle dictatorship; the *Sendero Luminoso* in Peru, to establish a socialist government through armed struggle; the M-19 in Colombia against the Betancur regime (Aubrey, 2004).

According to Donatella Della Porta (1983), terrorism can arise within conflicts between rational political actors, conditioned by the structural context in which they operate in the choice of the strategical battle (Della Porta, 1983). These context factors are: macro-sociological, about what kind of society foments violence; meso-sociological, over which social groups are more predisposed to the use of cruelty; micro-sociological, about individuals are most likely to use violence as an instrument of social struggle (Della Porta, 1995). The rationalization offered by this theory has the advantage of considering terrorism in its dynamic nature, a possible phase included within a subversive strategy of social groups. However, it excludes some non-rational elements that belong to terrorism (such as anomic suicide) and consequently fails to explain some types of extremely violent crimes (González Calleja, 2017).

In light of that, another perspective worthy of attention is the culturalist, which offers an alternative vision focused on the symbolic and subjective dimension of terrorism, and pay attention to religious and cultural radicalism that arises from the sudden arrival of modernity. Griffin (2012) proposes two variants of terrorism: the ‘zealotry’ who acts to maintain a ‘sacred canopy’; and the ‘modernist’ who act against the dynamics of cultural renewal and in opposition to Western society’s values. Due to the widespread use of social networks to recruit new followers (Cipolla, Siino, 2017) and the power of influence public opinion (Dominici, 2017), such an ancient phenomenon as terrorism seems to be able to adapt to post-modernity. Relevant studies on the latest jihadist attacks of the 21st century propose a different socio-cultural vision, aimed at understanding the aspects of the 2015 terrorist attacks in France (Romania, Tozzo, 2017), and highlighting the consequential stigmatization of foreigners in Europe, even due to mass media, although the perpetrators of such attacks were mainly young radicalized people born in Europe (Federici, 2017; Colella, 2017).

Another deep-rooted debate is the understanding of terrorism as a ‘new’ phenomenon or the result of historical evolution. Rapoport (2004) highlighted a historical correlation between some forms of past violence and the four waves of terrorism that have hit contemporary society. Hence, the diachronic approach allows us to analyse the phenomenon on a medium-long term perspective. However, some critical issues appear in these historical works (including a Eurocentric vision of the phenomenon). New heuristics oriented to aspects of a complex reality, such as the real, the possible and the imagined, should be preferred, in order to provide new keys to the understanding of human actions (D’Andrea, 2017).

4.3 The migratory processes

Historically, the sociology of migration is associated with US academic production, generated by the vast phenomenon that occurred in the country from the early 20th century to the 1960s. Despite the decline of the transatlantic migratory flow after the Second World War, interest in the phenomenon in the North American academic world grew and became institutionalized, as evidenced by the development in scientific productions on the subject (Domenech, Araujo, 2017).

In Latin America, the sociological interest in the migratory phenomenon arose together with the development of the territory during the Sixties and Seventies, when these countries were going through an economic transformation triggered by the urbanization and industrialization that increased the internal movements of the population, with massive demographic, economic and sociological effects (Domenech, Araujo, 2017). The attention to the phenomenon, therefore, falls on internal migration through an historical-structural analysis, as shown by the work of Argüello et al. (1974). Only since the 1980s, an innovation in the analysis of the migration phenomenon has started, thanks to new contributions from different disciplinary fields that pay attention to the family group and birth-place, from an international perspective.

In light of the above, the importance of social networks and the *Unidad Doméstica*¹³ is evident, as the group of belonging that jointly provides sustenance to its members (Goody, 1972), highlighted by the studies of Dandler and Medeiros (1991) upon the journeys of men and women from Bolivia to Buenos Aires. The gender issue linked to migratory movements has only recently been introduced. Initially, women were considered merely as ‘escorts’ of migrant men, thus assuming a passive role. The deepening of the connection between migratory flows and women began thanks to a new awareness of the importance of the domestic economy in the European context (Curran et al., 2006), which generated a significant innovation of contents and methods. Finally, the role of the state has acquired greater importance since the 1990s, as these new developments have also led to a transnational perspective of the phenomenon, promoting a new era in the sociological study of the migratory phenomenon (Domenech, Araujo, 2017).

5. Sociology of communication, social networks and smartphones

The communicative experience in social interaction is a factor that distinguishes the human being and that has experienced, in the last 150 years,

¹³ i.e. ‘Domestic Unit’.

an exponential transformation, both in terms of space and time. Sound transmission devices, satellites, the advent of the internet and social networks, have implied that communication acquired relevance in the study of all sciences, including sociology, and generating new communicative spaces and unexplored social phenomena (Tapia, 2017). Hardware, software and communication strategies are considered essential tools for the economic, political and social life in post-modern society. These changes have involved the private, public and commercial spheres, affecting consumption, production, education and the interconnectedness of the world. They influence further the information system and the involvement in the public debate of social players (who did not have access to them before) thanks to mainstream media channels (Castells, 2001).

Precisely on the last aspect, it is possible to recall the case of the Zapatista movement in Mexico which, as a counter-power group, used the networks earlier than the local government, opening its first website in 1994 and before the Presidency of the Republic in Mexico. (Islas, López, Gutiérrez, 2000). In the same geographical context, the Mexican political movement *#YoSoy132* was born from the online university student networks, formed during the Mexican presidential elections of 2012 against the authoritarian attitudes of President Peña Nieto, to demand democratization and transparency of the mass media (Reguillo, 2013).

Indeed, features such as ownership, control, access and ability to use ITC tools are not homogeneous throughout the globe, but vary in different geopolitical contexts (both between developed and undeveloped countries and within developed countries). It generates asymmetries in access to information and outlined in the various declinations of the digital divide (Castells, 2001). Among the most influential authors of the new millennium, Manuel Castells stands out with his work 'Communication and Power' (2009), which addresses the connections between power and communication systems, analysing their effects on masses.

A further step is given by the approach to neuroscience, to set the strategic communication choices based on the interests of the users (micro-targeting). The improvement of social networks consolidated the rise of a new model (economic and otherwise) mindful to consumers and users (Fernández and Tardivo, 2017). This model seems to be able to influence their choices, not only to the demand in the market but also on a cultural, political level and perception of reality. An example comes from the case of the presidential elections in Brazil, where a recent study highlighted the importance of digital platforms and computational systems during election campaigns which contributed to Bolsonaro's victory (Machado, Konopacki, 2018). In this field, the sociology of communication must face new challenges, to give meanings and responses to

the current dynamics, often obscure, that pervade the connected human existence.

Undoubtedly, relationships and human interactions are influenced by this evolution and, in particular, by social networks, producing new peculiarities in interpersonal bonds (Tapia, 2017). Social networks, mainly Facebook, represent not only technological innovation but also a new way of connecting and responding to the human existing needs (Tagliani, 2015). Interpersonal bonds have become virtual, as the individual's part formed by feelings and emotions is transposed from the real to the virtual plane, through technological tools that contribute to the construction of identity (Raad, 2004).

The translation of communication from the physical to the virtual one forms a new dialectic: protected, because users are physically removed from the interaction; exposed, because users can interface in the connected world; visible, because it can be 'visited' by other users; hidden, because it can conceal other identities (Arao Galhardi, 2013). Hence, each user has the opportunity to build their virtual ego through a public profile made up of 'a set of data of a different nature, a collage of words and images that are a malleable, ductile, flexible reflection of themselves'¹⁴ (García, 2010: 102). Bauman (2002) brings a further perspective in his essay 'Liquid Modernity'. He asserts that the replacement of physical relational dynamics with virtual ones has made the possibility of 'access' and 'exit' in/from human relationships easier than before, attributing to this trend not a decrease in risks, but greater exposure to them. The new forms of communication and relationships acquire extraordinary characteristics compared to classical approaches, proposing new questions and challenges in the study approach.

Among the phenomena of interest in the field of sociology of communication, there are studies on the evolution of mobile telephone devices and their social implications. This area of interest sees a change in the different study approaches used. The first stage of analysis in the academic field paid attention to ethnographic work in cultural anthropology. With this in mind, he stands out highlighting the work of Plant (2001) which attempts to understand the different uses and the acquisition of meanings of the mobile phone in different contexts (economic, technological, political, cultural). In the second stage, the focus was placed on the construction of social identity linked to the telephone. Among many works, that of Katz and Aakhus (2002) deals with this process in the Italian context, comparing it with other European realities. The third stage focuses on the device intended as an interpersonal and mass communication tool. In this perspective, the cross-sectional work 'The Mobile Communication Society. A cross-cultural analysis of available evidence on the

¹⁴ Translated by the author.

social uses of wireless communication technology' (Castells et al., 2004) identifies some global trends associated with the use of the device, such as the birth of a 'mobile youth culture', innovative forms of political mobilization, a-spatiality and a-temporality of communications and the change of the lexicon used. The lattermost and latest phase sees a particular focus on how the most recent smartphones are 'modelled' based on people's interests, habits and values.

Social transformation is therefore inherent in technological innovation, which promotes and makes certain activities more accessible. It affects the structure and social practices through mobile devices, and they can be assimilated to extensions of our body.

6. The approach of the social imaginary in understanding contemporary reality

Social imaginary takes place in Europe, precisely in France at the end of the 20th century. It then spread to neighbouring European countries in the Mediterranean and subsequently to the Americas. Three are the pioneering authors: Castoriadis and Durand, who did not intend to shape a new line of thought (or due to a lack of means); Maffesoli, Durand's disciple, founder of the sociological school of the imaginary (Sáez Aliaga, Pasin Carretero, 2017).

Maffesoli was able to produce and inspire an original analysis in social and daily reality, highlighting the decisive role of the social imaginary through a scrupulous qualitative investigation, using tools such as direct observation, discussion group and open interview. So, the implementation of the imaginary becomes crucial in understanding the contemporary dynamics of social aggregation in the European context. According to Maffesoli, these processes revolve around celebratory 'rituals' of consumption, sport, music market industry and through mass communication that runs the (almost) totality of human life. Rituals break free from paradigms of modern Western society, consisting of the individual, the understanding, progress, ideology and politics, formulating the definition of 'neo-tribalism' as a characterizing element of the post-modern Western community (Maffesoli, 1995). Maffesoli also led the foundation of the first study centre on the subject at the Sorbonne University in Paris, the *Center d'Etude sur l'Actuel et le Quotidien - CEAQ*, and of the two dedicated journals, *Sociétés and Cahiers Européens de l'Imaginaire*, as a channel of expression for his collaborators and students, allowing the reception and study of contemporary cultural phenomena with an innovative approach.

However, the acceptance towards this line of studies was not automatic, but strongly criticized for its characterizing elements: the approach to post-

modernism, the absence of the use of quantitative methodologies, and its trans-historical character have acceptance by academics hindered, dividing the French academic world into two currents, that of Bourdieu and Maffesoli (Sáez Aliaga, Pasin Carretero, 2017). Resistance mainly occurs from the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic academic world, as the sociological analysis carried out through the social imaginary appears to go against the trend of the path engaged in recent decades by academics (Sáez Aliaga, Pasin Carretero, 2017).

Despite the criticisms, the new imprint goes beyond the French borders, arriving first in the neighbouring Mediterranean countries thanks to Maffesoli's doctoral students, then in the American continent.

In Italy, worthy of mention is Valentina Grassi's essay 'Introduzione alla sociologia dell'immaginario. Per una comprensione della vita quotidiana'¹⁵. Going back to Durand's work, the aim is to understand the 'role of the imaginary and the imagination within the multiple realities experienced in the context of daily life'¹⁶ (Grassi, 2006: 7). This goal is pursued by providing tools for understanding the operational concepts and highlighting the diachronic development (but also of the meaning) of the imaginary construct.

In Portugal, the works carried out by Moisés de Lemos Martins and Jean-Martin Rabot, focused attention on image and communication through the Maffesolian conception of the social imaginary. In Spain, José Ángel Bergua Amores has given impetus to multiple studies on emerging phenomena, highlighting the importance of the approach as capable of grasping the true essence of 'social dynamism' (Sáez Aliaga, Pasin Carretero, 2017).

In Latin America, the imaginary arrives thanks to the *Grupo Compostela de Estudios Sobre Imaginarios Sociales* (GCEIS), an academic network that bridges Spain and Chile and has allowed the theories of the social imaginary to enter the Chilean academic community. Manuel A. Baeza (2000) publishes the first Latin American work on the understanding of the social imaginary in the analysis of identity, religion, technological innovation, stereotype and noise. Other Latin American authors have then made use of the imaginary to analyse the reality, such as the study on urban spaces in Colombia (Silva, 2006), on technology and the role of the imaginary in Argentina (Cabrera, 2006), on gender, violence and social networks in Brazil (Sáez Aliaga, Pasin Carretero 2017).

Hence, the social imaginary represents an effective and dynamic system of analysis, where images, symbols, signs and myths allow individuals to enter their surrounding habitat, giving sense to perceptions and information in human memory (Grassi, 2006). The pervasiveness of images in every area of

¹⁵ i.e. 'Introduction to the sociology of the imaginary. For an understanding of daily life'.

¹⁶ Translated by the author.

contemporary society is undeniable, affecting both the individual and the collective level, and that is why it is necessary to analyse and understand this power. The development of the social imaginary in the empirical world is already mature and vigorous to deal with various social phenomena. Although the approach remains mainly qualitative, mixed empirical applications can already be found, which offer interesting challenges and new future research ideas, including building a real assessment balance of the results produced to date.

7. Conclusions

The progress of sociological science does not only see the changing meanings formulated on the topics of interest but also the transformation and expansion of the methodologies used. However, we are also witnessing the integration of new aspects of contemporary reality, previously not considered (or only marginally screened) by empirical research, which explores emerging sectors and specializes in these.

Regarding the issues relating to socialization agencies, there is a new sociological attention to the meanings generated by the transformation of the family, the process of standardization of education and the revaluation of the role of religion, a factor of long-standing sociological interest in the territory of Latin America. In economic sociology, attention is given to the centre-suburbs relationship that exists in the contexts of the South American states. However, Latin American scientific production is segmented and does not find points of comparison, due to an excessive polarization of economic ideologies, which also involve the academic world. The centre-suburbs binomial is also transposed in the international context, highlighting the peripheral role of Latin America in the global context. In these areas, the issues of inequality are also inserted, on which sociology must offer a multidimensional approach, so as not to look exclusively at poverty as a factor causing inequality, but also other aspects such as ethnicity, gender and socio-cultural context. Political sociology in Cuba has shown a real transformation that follows historical events, at first being integralist and monothematic, and then opening up to theories and methods from other disciplinary sectors, to complete the analysis and offer more comprehensive responses. Studies on terrorism also paid attention to the symbolic and particular dimension of the various attacks, highlighting the religious and cultural differences in these acts of extreme violence. For as much as it concerns the studies on migratory flows, they acquire awareness on the role of women, innovating contents and methods. The sociology of communication interfaces on continuously and rapidly changing features such as online

platforms, social networks and connected devices. Factors that are giving new connotations to interpersonal relationships. Finally, the arrival of the contribution of the social imaginary in Latin American sociology, which does not go unnoticed but asserts itself as an effective analysis tool.

The aim is to always include as many social factors as possible, to be able to respond to new questions posed by contemporary reality and to hypothesize future challenges. To this purpose, the tendency of scholars from different scientific disciplinary sectors to implement or integrate methodologies that place ever-increasing attention on the role of 'beliefs' and 'representations' in the configuration of meanings attributable to social action is appreciable. This inclination stems from the will to valorise submerged features, which have often been marginalized by rationalist hyperplasia. From this perspective, the transcendent operational contribution of the sociology of the imaginary has a fundamental gravity, due to its capacity of interpreting and addressing those processes, which are permanently in motion. An approach, that of the imaginary, 'never given once and for all and in continuous and unstoppable movement'¹⁷ (Marzo, Meo, 2013: 4).

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