Paving the paths towards reflexive social research: a symposium

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Introduction

In late 2009 thirty researchers from fifteen different countries gathered in Porto, Portugal, for a discussion-oriented workshop entitled "Paths towards reflexive sociology: Ethnography matters". Although with very different social, academic and theoretical backgrounds, and with quite distinct research focuses and approaches, all participants shared an obvious interest in questioning their own practice, its social and political implications, the constraints set down by rigidly structured academic and professional universes, the social effects of their presence amoung the groups under study, and the theoretical, methodological and practical challenges brought on by a constantly changing social world. The aim was not so much to promote a scholarly debate on the "epistemology of social sciences" or on the "differences" between "positive" and "reflexive" science (Burawoy, 1998), than it was to create an opportunity for the sharing of the practical and many times unheeded ways trough which social researchers produce and perfect their "craft".

Although more than three years have passed, several participants of the late 2009 forum have continued to dialogue, wiling to further pave the paths towards reflexive social research, by refusing the usually taken for granted "state of grace" of the academia, by reflecting upon their work and their place inside and outside the scientific sphere, by questioning concepts and intellectual routines, and especially by continuously submitting to the trials of fieldwork. The articles in this symposium are an echo of such dialogue. Despite being very different in their approach and tone, all papers seem to make a reflexive use of the debates and findings of the social sciences in order to question the research experiences they refer to, and by doing so they end up exposing that "reflex reflexivity" that's intrinsic to a real craft (Bourdieu, 1999).

1. Questioning intellectual routines, advancing the craft

Drawing his inspiration from Arthur Stinchcombe's revision of Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy, Burawoy (1998, p. 12) divides sociological work into *bureaucratic* and *craft* forms: "Bureaucratic sociology works with a detailed, planned division of labor, governed by procedures that insulate scientists from their objects of investigation. Craft sociology is guided by a cognitive map, or theory, which shapes even as it is reshaped by interaction of participant and observer".

A common feature of all articles included in this symposium is clearly their critique – if not explicit, at least implicit – of what Burawoy calls the "bureaucratic form" of social research. The text by Wiebke Keim, which tries to recover and articulate the main themes present in each of the other articles that compose the symposium, highlights in adequate terms what is perhaps their most relevant common concern – the questioning, through the exploration of concrete research experiences, of the social relations that are inevitably established between researchers and other actors – may them be members of the "researched" groups, other researchers and research teams, representatives from the academia or other institutions, or participants in research results dissemination forums.

We leave to the reading of Keim's text further specifications on this matter. Notwithstanding, there's something else on these articles that deserves additional reference, since it represents a challenge to the very frequently unquestioned conceptual dichotomies and routines of thought that structure – and limit – our visions of the social world and the ways we believe are "appropriate" to its study. In fact, as we suggest below, all texts in this symposium question one or more of the "canonic" epistemological or conceptual oppositions that have framed theoretical and methodological debates in the social sciences throughout time – and by doing so we believe they help to increase the opportunities for creativity, originality and innovation in social research.

It was Simmel (2001, p. 239) that first highlighted the "tendency to symmetry" as a relevant feature of the "sociological aesthetics", that is, that tendency shown by the writing and reading protocols of social sciences to organize arguments and concepts in opposing pairs. Deriving from an "economy of thought" mechanism (Simmel, 1999), these symmetric images, which give us an impression of simplicity and harmony – two features commonly associated with "heuristic" scientific reasoning – are, in fact, many times, the result of the inadvertent application of purely conventional means. What has to be done – what the articles in this symposium do – is to search, through the methodical questioning of the uses of concepts, formulas and criteria, an explicit conscience over the limits and implications of the reiterated unreflective use of these dichotomies. Actually, what the study of the intellectual circumstances that lead, in a apparently irresistible manner, to a systematic use of the well-known oppositions between "subjective" and "objective", "idealism" and "realism", "immanence" and "transcendence", "agency" and "structure", "psychologism" and "materialism" tends to suggest is that these dichotomized models of perception and appreciation of social reality simply translate denominations, divisions and hierarchies that are *arbitrary* because they aren't *necessary* but from a scholarly point of view. A work of *sociological objectivation* pointed at the historically constituted structures of thought and action that prevail within the intellectual community – part of a "science of the academic unconscious", as Bourdieu (2000) would call it – would probably reveal how the prolonged immersion in the universe of solicitations and constraints typical of the academic field forges a series of habits and intellectual routines that are inevitably adjusted to those solicitations and constraints. It's difficult for scientists to become aware of the implications and even of the actual presence and incidence of these habits and routines; their *obviousness* makes them imperceptible, especially because they appear diluted in forms of attention and work protocols that are taken for granted. Unless mutual assessment mechanisms and practices of epistemological self-analysis are systematically put forward, these habits and routines will probably remain unquestioned.

Among other significant elements, what the articles in this symposium offer us is a set of examples of this decisive questioning process. Through the exploration of very different research paths, all three articles at the core of this symposium contribute to the reconsideration of some of the most crystalized epistemological and conceptual dichotomies in the social sciences.

By posing the problem of the role those "under research" represent in actual research processes, the article by Raúl Cabrera e Ana Meckesheimer aims at deconstructing the traditional divide between the "subject" and the "object" of research, or between "observer" and "participant", allowing for a progressively more horizontal relation between the two elements of the process to be conceived and eventually attained. The idea of transforming the "instability" researchers experience when they face dynamic and challenging social sets located outside the protected environment of the academia in an "epistemological window" for constructing a "shared experience" of social research and social practice is a call for a revision of the conceptual and practical opposition and hierarchies between the "*R*esearcher" and those who are "*r*esearched" and for the questioning of other inevitably interrelated pairs such as "objectivity" and "subjectivity" or "neutrality" and "compromise".

This is a debate which is also present, although in a different perspective, in the article by Paula Mota Santos e Roberto Alzetta. Here, the questioning of the impacts of the use of film in social research highlights the process of knowledge construction as a *social* process, a shared and negotiated process depending on the will of every group involved to believe and participate in the "game" – and not only on the mobilization of "adequate" and "rigorous" technical protocols –, and by doing so it challenges both the positivist trust in the "truth" potential supposedly contained in the use of scientific "method" against the "mystifications" of common knowledge and also the postmodernist believe in the "spontaneity" and "truthfulness" of everyday life, which would contrast with the "artificiality" of science and scientific protocols.

The questioning of the nature of scientific knowledge is also at the center of the paper by Emmanuelle Savignac. The participation of social scientists in the mass media is the pretext for a debate around the opposition between "science" and "opinion", "objectivity" and "subjectivity", and the role and public relevance of scientists.

Although very different in the questions they raise and the approach they propose, the three articles – and the symposium here presented –, seem to show, by reconstructing and reflexively discussing the vicissitudes of actual *practices*, that the "craft" of social research transcends the philosophical antinomies and disputes the scholarly point of view, by its own logic of production and reproduction, creates.

References

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