

Social Theory

Subjects: Sociology

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Definition

Sciences and societies are increasing their demands of contributions from social theorists. International programs of research strengthen now the priorities of social impact and co-creation. Social impact means the presentation of evidence that scientific studies are contributing to social improvements, for instance, oriented to the UN Sustainable Development Goals; in order to develop and evaluate social impact, all sciences need the dialogue and collaboration of social theories. Co-creation means to create knowledge through dialogue between scientists and citizens, what also needs social theories. This demand is generating an increasing relevance of those social theories able to make these contributions, most of them, elaborated by networks and teams of different individuals from diverse disciplines. Traditional social theories created in the 19th and 20th centuries, mostly developed by individuals, provided important elements that are now included in the new theoretical process.

1. Introduction

The priority of social impact in the Programs of Research of all sciences is increasingly making aware all scientists about the importance of social theory. Simultaneously, social theorists are increasingly being aware of their need to transform the traditional way they use to develop theories. The dialogue among diverse natural and social scientists is being very fruitful for both and their co-creation of knowledge with citizens is making their contributions more democratic and excellent.

2. History

Although there are precedents from centuries and millenniums ago, social sciences were created by the democratic revolutions. Citizens decided that sovereignty belonged to people and not to the King. They decided to govern themselves and to have scientific knowledge about them to make more informed decisions. The social sciences were created throughout the 19th Century in order to provide this scientific knowledge. Social theories were elaborated as the basis and orientation of those social sciences. During the 19th and 20th centuries, most social theories were identified with individual authors, some of them with the aspiration not only to analyze the society and individuals, but also to define their objectives.

3. New discoveries or concepts

The new concepts based on dialogue and on its transformation capacity guide the discoveries that are contributing the most to the improvement of society and to the development of the most diverse sciences. The concept of deliberative democracy has presented evidences that dialogue is not only a negotiation of previous preferences of the individuals and groups who participate in it, but it also transforms those preferences, allowing frequently to reach a consensus, even unanimous, without voting. The concept of dialogic societies has produced, as a fruit, the prioritization of social impact and of co-creation in international programs of research for all sciences; for instance, in the European scientific program Horizon Europe, co-creation means the creation of knowledge through the dialogue between scientists and citizens. The move from the analysis of the speech acts to the communicative acts has made possible to interpret macro and micro human relationships like consent in sexual and affective relationships.

4. Milestones

The specification of the concepts of deliberative democracy and dialogic societies in the programs of open science has been accelerated intensively with the debates around the COVID-19 pandemic. Never before have been such massive debate among citizens about scientific evidences and hoaxes. The Western

center in the elaboration of social theories is quickly being removed by Asian and other contributions; Asian social networks like Weibo have disseminated less hoaxes about COVID-19 than Twitter. One new and key milestone is being the social media analytics carried on with the implication of different social theories. The move from evidence-based policy to dialogic evidence-based policy is being decisive to achieve the political impact on which today emphasis is placed as one of the requirements of social impact.

5. Leading figures

Max Weber wrote the book that in the surveys among sociologists always appears as the most influential in social theory: "Economy and society ^[1]" and it is still key in the analysis of bureaucratization, of social action and of loss of meaning. Durkheim ^[2] was precursor of quantitative social studies that today are increasingly using the resources of big data. Freud ^[3] and Skinner ^[4] are two key authors of psychoanalysis and behaviorism that still today inform social theories and practices from two very different views, considered by some as contrary and by others as complementary. Jane Addams ^[5] was an excellent precursor of the current state of social sciences, developing social theory with great social impact. Malinowski ^[6] is considered as the central author of functionalism that then had key figures such as Parsons ^[7] or Merton ^[8] and who also influenced Levi Strauss' structuralism. The contributions from Marx and Freud were present in the Frankfurt School's theorists, and now Habermas ^{[9][10]}' theory of communicative action is the most quoted book of contemporary social theory. Nevertheless, the most relevant contribution from social theory to the natural and social sciences and for society is interactionism, created by authors like Herbert Mead ^[11].

6. Influences

The first current influence of social theories is the dialogue with all sciences and with citizens. In other prior times, relevant authors tried to develop social theories based on natural sciences, but without dialogue with them, for instance, Comte tried to create a physics of society, and Spencer a social theory based on biology. Now, the novelty is that, for the first time in history, current social theories are being elaborated in bidirectional dialogue with other sciences, being neuroscience the most influential. Prominent neuroscientists, like Kandel ^[12], explicitly say that in the brain, the genes are servants of the environment, they are guided by events in the outside world. In order to make new steps, neuroscience needs social theories to understand the outside world and its relationship with the brain. Any interaction of the human being with the world (for instance, reading a book) or with other human beings transforms the brain and it is not possible to understand properly these transformations without social theories. In the other way around, the founder of neuroscience, Ramón y Cajal ^[13], said that every person can be architect of her brain. Social theories have been for a century apart from scientific discoveries, but in the 21st century have already started to include them in its developments.

7. Applications

The three main areas of the applications of social theories are: societies, individuals, and sciences. Societies define their own objectives, for instance, the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Traditionally, some social theories have tried to define the objectives of societies, but this corresponds to all citizens and the representatives that they elect. The role of social theories is not to define these objectives, but to provide societies with scientific knowledge about them so that they could make more informed decisions. This is what now are doing current social theories. A similar process happens with the application to individuals: each person has the right to make decisions about her life, no one social theory should constrain this freedom. The role of social theories is to contribute with scientific knowledge in order to be used by the individuals for making more informed decisions. Now, all sciences need to present evidence to citizens about the social impact, improvements generated by the public resources invested in them. In order to develop and evaluate this social impact, they need social theories.

8. Current status

Social theories are currently experimenting the fastest and most profound revolution of their history. Amartya Sen ^[14] asks himself why most quotations about Smith's "Wealth of Nations ^[15]" are from its first

pages, and we can ask the same about Weber's "Economy and Society". Even the best documented contemporary theories, like the Theory of Communicative Action, has elementary errors, for instance, about Searle's contributions to the Speech Acts theory or Parson's theory of societal community. One key present change is the acknowledgement that the best social theories can only be elaborated in collaboration between different individuals from diverse disciplines. Life is very short to have enough time to read individually what is necessary for elaborating a social theory with enough quality to interpret society and for collaborating in its improvement. The Nobel laureates Stanley Cohen and Rita Levi-Montalcini ^[16] used to say: "you and me are good, but together we are wonderful". This sentence reflects also what are doing the authors that are currently creating the best social theories.

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Keywords

social theory;social impact;co-creation;social sciences;dialogic societies
