Consolidation, 1980s–90s

Abstract: This is the period of consolidation of sociology as an academic discipline, marked by gradual yet salient differentiation. New specialisms emerged, a professional association was created, and various degrees in sociology were offered in universities across Portugal. Research interests generally focused upon Portuguese society, often in comparison with European cases. Two sociology journals were created during this period, one in Lisbon – Sociologia-Problemas e Práticas (1986), the other in Porto – Sociologia (1991). The first doctorates in sociology were awarded in this period. Essentially an era of institutional consolidation, the 1980s and 1990s marked a transition development stage to the present era.

In an essay originally delivered as a talk in September 1980 on the occasion of the award of the Theodor W. Adorno Prize by the city of Frankfurt, the German philosopher and critical theorist Jürgen Habermas introduced the idea of modernity as an ‘unfinished project’. The project of modernity, following Weber, consisted in the separation of the spheres of science, morality, and art and its correspondent question of knowledge (truth), justice, and morality (normative rightness), and taste (authenticity and beauty). However, by the 1970s, the optimism that mobilized Enlightenment thinkers to imagine modernity as a project leading progressively to objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art was shattered (Habermas 1997: 45). Habermas’ identification of the three conservatisms: (young conservatives such as Foucault or Derrida; old conservatives, epitomized by Leo Strauss, and new conservatives, who dispense traditions from any need for rational justification) opens the space for Habermas’ positioning in the debate between modernist and postmodernist approaches. His intellectual intervention came in the form of a staunch defence of the Enlightenment project articulated as a general treatise in social theory – the monumental two-volume The Theory of Communicative Action ([1981] 1984). Apart from drawing upon little-known philosophical traditions such as American pragmatism (Silva 2006, 2007), Habermas’ intellectual intervention in the debate between modernism and postmodernism clarifies the terms of the debate that was taking place in Portugal at the time. Indeed, we find an echo of that intervention in that the Habermasian terminology of modernity as an ‘unfinished project’, arguably with a different scope and meaning, will come to have a prominent role in the debate about the modernization of Portuguese society in the 1980s. In this debate, ‘unfinished modernity’ is a sociological middle-range theory of class aimed at describing the relatively late and convoluted process of socio-economic development of Portuguese society vis-à-vis comparable Western European countries (Costa and Machado 1998). Again, this modernist sociological understanding of Portugal contrasts heavily with the critical approach adopted at Coimbra, which draws upon Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory to depict Portugal as a ‘semi-peripheral society’, within a neo-Marxist account of the Portuguese state as a specific form of state domination (Santos 1985). At this point, Santos is still operating within neo-Marxism. The turn to a more resolute postmodern orientation – Habermas’ first type of conservatism – occurred in the late 1980s.