

Book Review: *Pensamento Sociológico. Uma Introdução Didática às Teorias Clássicas*

[Sociological Thought. A Didactic Introduction to Classical Theories]

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Abstract

This book review presents a handbook that addresses several classical authors in sociology, and that may be mobilized to be, with interest, clarity and pedagogical quality, a useful instrument in the teaching-learning process of some of the perspectives that contributed most to the institutionalization of sociology as form of specific knowledge. They are, even today, unavoidable for those who wish to deepen contemporary sociological view(s) of a pluri-paradigmatic science.

Keywords: classical sociology, classical sociology authors, sociology teaching, book review, portuguese.

Book review

The book *Sociological Thought. A Didactic Introduction to Classical Theories* has 523 pages, authored by Ana Paiva (Professor of the Open University – Portugal) and written with the collaboration of António Pedro Cipriano and Maria da Luz Ramos and is, admittedly, a teaching handbook (Figure 1). This book intends to be “a handbook that approaches a program of sociological theories, providing indications for in-depth and critical reflection” (Paiva, 2014, p. XXIII), presenting several of the authors considered as Sociology classics.

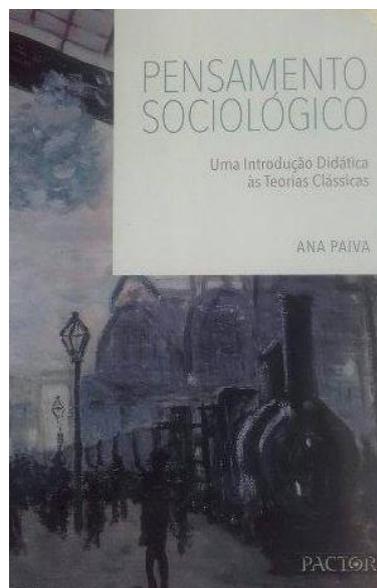


Figure 1. Book cover

In order to answer the purpose of its production, this work presents 18 chapters and is divided into three parts: Part I (“The Thought of the Social and Sociological Thought”, with Chapter 1 “Sociology as Science: definition of a new scientific statute”, and Chapter 2, “Philosophy and Sociology”); Part II (“Precursors”), with an introductory chapter and then focusing, on separate chapters, each of the remaining seven thinkers: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Saint-Simon, Spencer, Le Bon, Tarde and Marx); and, finally, Part III (“Founders”, with an introductory chapter, followed by seven chapters, each of which puts forward the essential of the perspective of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies, Simmel, Pareto and Mosca). The handbook itself is prepared for the possibility of being read in a more summarized and/or selective way, through the selection of the specific topic of interest.

This handbook is produced in a deeply didactic way, presenting some of the aforementioned classical authors and their perspectives, considered as essential mainstays for understanding the process of institutionalization of Sociology as Science and with a profound influence on the development of contemporary sociological perspectives.

The reading of this work proves interesting and appealing, with a particularly successful articulation between the biographical and theoretical exposition (with the relative depth that would be expected in a handbook, even in a well-grounded handbook such as this one), with its insertion in the social, political and scientific context. Other aspects worth highlighting and that enrich the reading are the fact that each chapter presents very good examples of conceptual clarification, as well as an interesting and rich support bibliography for those who wish to deepen the topics addressed.

This is a work of undeniable scientific rigor and didactic quality, but I would like to highlight the interest and the quality of Chapter 1, “Sociology as science: definition of a new scientific statute” (pp. 3-26). This chapter introduces the reader, in a very pertinent and enlightened way, to the remainder content of the book, as well as the chapters devoted to Marx (pp. 219-288), Durkheim (pp. 319-371) and Weber (pp. 373-442). Indeed, these chapters are particularly elucidative and enlightening regarding the perspectives of these authors, with high argumentative quality and richness.

The production of a well-structured and pedagogically ambitious but, simultaneously, accessible handbook may seem a (falsely) easy task. However, as mentioned in the handbook itself, “Conceiving a handbook is a risky task and, most likely, the shortest way to be criticized” (Paiva, 2014, p. XXIII). This difficulty emerges, from the outset, in the selection of the authors considered as the most relevant, as well as in the subsequent extension, informative richness, description and conceptual deepening and discussion to be attributed to each author, which seems to me evident in this work, for example, with Tocqueville (pp. 107-118) and Mosca (pp. 503-510). However, it should not be forgotten that a high depth in the presentation and discussion of all authors and concepts exposed cannot be required from a handbook with these characteristics.

Regarding this generally well-structured and organized handbook, highly informative and well grounded, I would like to point out two aspects that seem to me more debatable. One aspect has to do with the graphical aspect of the handbook, which initially caused noise in my reading of this work; it has several colors and text boxes, which seemed to break the discursive rhythm and the articulation of the text. However, after some adjustment, this strangeness was overcome and the readability of the text emerged. The fragility of this handbook lies, in my opinion, in Chapter 11 “Introduction” of Part III “Founders”, which, in 11 pages (pp. 291-301), proposes to fulfill several extremely ambitious objectives. I highlight, in a selection of the “skills to attain” indicated with this chapter: distinguish deductive from inductive method, explain inductive empiricism, explain scientific reductionism, explain the concept of reflexivity (p. 291). This does not seem fully achieved due to the high complexity of these issues, which would, perhaps, require a less condensed discussion but that would possibly fall outside the scope of this handbook.

As my final assessment, this handbook is a very valid and particularly original contribution that bridges a gap in Portuguese language literature, and especially written by Portuguese researchers. For the reasons explained above, this is a handbook that I recommend. I even use some of its contents in the classes of Introduction to Sociology and General Sociology. The handbook fulfills the proposed aims in an extremely didactic way, but without oversimplification. In this sense, it fulfills its main function with merit, especially in the context of the teaching-learning process of these issues that, even now, are highly interesting and crucial. I really think it would be very pertinent to have an English version of this handbook, justified by the high potential of using this work in the context of Higher Education.

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