

Artigo

Time as a synthesis element: contributions for a sociological dilemma

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Abstract

Different authors systematized the sociological dilemma between agency and structure. In the post-70, there was a theoretical movement aimed at responding alternatively to this dilemma, offering a theory that was able to grasp both the individual and social dimensions of life in society. Different answers have been given, and one neglected element seems to be of fundamental importance in these alternative constructs, namely: time. This article suggests a rereading of some of these answers and argues that the temporal element seems to be of fundamental importance in the construction of these narratives. Therefore, the article has a rereading of some well-known authors and a new approach to the theme of time. As a consequence of the debate, the article introduces the notion of “epistemological time”, arguing that we should think time as an epistemological aspect, central to the construction of sociological knowledge.

Keywords: Time. Social Theory. Agency. Structure.

Tempo como um elemento de síntese: contribuições para um dilema sociológico

Resumo

O dilema sociológico entre agência e estrutura foi sistematizado por diferentes autores. No pós-70, houve um movimento teórico com o objetivo de responder alternativamente a este dilema, oferecendo uma teoria que fosse capaz tanto de apreender a dimensão individual quanto social da vida em sociedade. Diferentes respostas foram dadas, e um elemento negligenciado parece ser de fundamental importância nessas construções alternativas, a saber: o tempo. Este artigo sugere uma releitura de algumas destas respostas e argumenta que o elemento temporal parece ser de fundamental importância na construção dessas narrativas sintéticas. O artigo conta, portanto, com uma releitura de alguns autores conhecidos, e com uma nova aproximação com o tema do tempo. Como consequência do debate, o artigo introduz a noção de “tempo epistemológico”, argumentando que, talvez, devêssemos pensar no tempo como um aspecto epistemológico, central para a construção do conhecimento sociológico.

Palavras-Chave: Tempo. Teoria Social. Agência. Estrutura.

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Sociology as an institutionalised discipline was re-read and reorganised in the middle of the twentieth century through an essential dichotomous key that addressed and classified authors and their works between the ideas of agency and structure. During the most recent sociological theory development (post-70) is possible to see a concern to deal with the complex social reality through a possible synthesis of these elements (Alexander, 1987). Several sociologists dedicated considerable attention to this, thereby helping to produce interesting insights, such as Elias (1939), Bourdieu (1979), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Coleman (1990), and Giddens (1984).

On the one hand of the dilemma author who emphasised the individual, his subject potential, creative capacity autonomy, self-determination, and overlap with a changing society; and on the other hand, authors who understood the society through social normativity, it's coercive, determining and functional capacity overwhelming in relation to a fragile subject.

In the middle of the '70s, some authors arose with the theoretical synthesis movement. They were looking for an intermediate point, sought not to reach the extreme of contingency, nor of normativity, nor too extreme of individual independence and autonomy. Their goals were to account for local specificities, general characteristics, normativity, contingency, random, order, structure, and functions.

They were committed to constructing a sociological theory able to deal with this epistemological challenge in such a way as to offer a safe way out for this dilemma. Their legacies were responsible for what we have today in both disciplinary and theoretical terms and are precisely in this debate that this article proposes to collaborate.

The article starting point is: What are these alternative sociological constructions based? We hypothesise that they are based on the temporal element. That is, they understand time as a fundamental element that –

somehow – can affect the theoretical construction. This article proposes the concept of an *epistemological time*. Time will be seen here as a key element to think about the dilemma presented above.

This formulation implies that time is not an elementary concept, but central for a rethink about theoretical problems in sociology. In order to develop these ideas, this article analyses in new approach contributions which seek to address this theme. The last section situates this *epistemological time* in the discussion, and give conclusions and directions for new reflections about it.

Nature, Society, and Individual

In this section, we will analyse Elias view about time, especially from his classical essay about time published in 1989 (Elias, 1989). Our main goal here is more than arguing that he "struggle against the use of dichotomous categories in the social sciences" (Tabboni, 2001)“, but to say that time in Elias is crucial to put out these dichotomous categories and to offer a start point to another theory.

In his essay Elias affirms that time can reveal to us things about others and ourselves that we did not previously discern with clarity; and that time can make many accessible problems that concern sociology (Elias, 1989, 1). In order to access these problems and think about time, Elias proposes that explanations on the time concept were usually divided in two ways: objective and subjective time (Elias, 1989, 5).

The intercession between them is that both presuppose time as natural data. The way out of this debate, which Elias qualifies as sterile, is the put away the established paradigms in these theories. The main goal of his essay, according to Elias, is precisely this (Elias, 1989, 5). His starting point is statements that 1. Time is not a concept existing in an objective flux; 2. Time is not a form of shared experience to all people; 3. Time is not

something before any contact with the world. That is, time is not given naturally.

At first look, such statements about time would lead us to think that Elias wants to create a dichotomy between physical and social time. However, that is not what he wants to do. Elias avoids the dichotomy because he looks convinced that the time theme is essential for a synthesis. For Elias, the individual would not be able to elaborate the time concept by himself. Simultaneously, time cannot be natural. The way out is time as habitus, as part of the civilizing process, which is assimilated by the child as it grows in society. Every child is thus becoming familiar with time as a symbol of a social institution whose coercive character it experiences from an early age (Elias, 1989, 14).

Meanwhile, it is not possible to create individual habitus from the social habitus, since individual appropriation would have precise limits. Elias' alternative to this is a kind of synthesis: individualization of a social fact. That is, although people are obliged to become familiar with time, it would be a civilizing process misunderstanding to assume that entails a strengthening of individual constraints.

Elias seems to suggest another way of perceiving man, society, and nature through the example of time. Time would be representative of the synthesis among nature, individuals, and society: "At its present stage of development time, as we can see, is a symbolic synthesis at a very high level, a synthesis by means of which positions in the succession of physical natural events, of the social process and of an individual lifespan can be related together" (Elias, 1989, 16).

This view of synthesis would also offer an alternative to the opposition created between objective and subjective since his goal is to offer a synthetic social theory of vast scope through time. In his synthesis he admits that every man (in some point) is governed by himself, every man (in some point) is subject to coercion generated by conviviality, and every man (in some point) is subject to natural needs. What is the margin of each of these things? This

would vary according to the records of human evolution, and according to the different social strata.

For Elias, time would be a possible point of balance and synthesis, which would even provide a vast theoretical formulation that responds to the sociology and social reality demands. Time would be the very conceptual symbol of this synthesis in the process of being constituted and would be a symbol of a complex relation among different evolutionary processes. Therefore, time would have to coordinate and integrating functions.

According to Elias: "Reflection on time can perhaps help to correct this picture of a world with hermetically sealed compartments. Such reflection can make no progress if one refuses to acknowledge that nature, society, and individuals are embedded in each other and are interdependent" (Elias, 1989, 16).

Through *Time*, Elias develops more conceptually also his ideas of habitus and personality structures, thinking about how it fits in these temporal contexts. He further establishes the relation between habitus and personality structures, between evolution and differentiation, and between increase self-discipline and the civilizing process. According to Elias, this conceptual approach promoted a substitution "from a systematic static or a short-term to a historical long-term developmental approach to the problem of time, equally remote from philosophical absolutism and historical relativism" (Elias, 1989, 87).

Time in this context – besides be thought as a result of a long evolutionary process – is a synthesis object able to systematize a series of Elias theoretical worries. Such theoretical concerns would be focused on the debates between nature and culture, agency and structure, evolution and history.

Space-Time Dimensions and Social Systems

Interested in the same theoretical dilemma, and with remarkable concern to overcome the sociological dichotomy between agency and structure, mainly through the formulation of the collective subjectivity concept and the identification of a specific phase of modern civilization, Domingues published an article on the idea of space-time in sociology, in order to propose a concept of social systems as systems of action, whose interweaving moreover, reciprocal causal influence implies a spacious-temporal dimension (Domingues, 1995).

Assuming that the actor is reflexive, share variable definition boundaries, and are linked to nature, Domingues idea is to analyse the sociology contributions about time and space, and finally to present his conception about the topic. To do this, he visits classical authors such as Newton, Kant, and Hobbes, in order to think about the time homogeneity (Domingues, 1995, 234). From contemporary physic and the Elias inheritance, he concludes that time and space should not be thought as separated since social space is the dimension that demarcates the limits of the social system.

The author's idea is that we replace the traditional view of a social system as fixed and abstract coordinates with an idea of changeable collectivities that produce a fifth space-time dimension. This space-time is not homogeneous but shaped by the collectivities movements, which lend them form and rhythm: "Instead of social systems, regarded as discrete entities, which passively stand-in (the Newtonian-Kantian) fixed and abstract coordinates (within which their constituting units (individuals or similarly conceived collectivities) move, we can discern shifting collectivities which interactively produce the fifth dimension of space-time" (Domingues, 1995, 243).

Domingues goal is to connect time, space and action, complementing his formulation of collective subjectivity, which is presented by the author as an alternative to the theoretical dilemma between agency and structure. In

this sense, the author sought ultimately to overcome the theoretical dilemma, offering a safe way out.

In this way, he thought that should be present a discussion about time because this concept could offer a synthesis, an alternative for the discussion. As we shall see later, Domingues approaches Patrick Baert to some extent in thinking time as an open data, since our individual and collective interpretations of the past are potential influences on the future, time is a theoretical synthesis, is a fundamental part of the response to the sociological dilemma between agency and structure.

Toward a Temporalized Sociology

Patrick Baert, in his doctoral dissertation published in 1992, thinks in terms of a temporalized sociology – through Mead – in order to discuss and systematize the theoretical dilemma announced above. From a discussion of what is a temporalized sociology, and through a critical view about the four main established theoretical approaches (namely, positivism, functionalism, ethnomethodology, and structuralism), Baert suggests that the temporalization of sociology would be a sure way out for sociological dualism (Baert, 1992).

From this, the author argues that there are four visions about time. The first one separates synchronic and diachronic time in historiography; the second bases on the second law of thermodynamics, which predicts that the entropy amount of every thermodynamically isolated system tends to increase with time until it reaches a maximum value. It means that the differences between systems in contact tend to equalize with time, and is what Foucault called *temp evolutif* (Foucault, 1975).

The third view of time sees the present as something susceptible to change, that is, an open time. And the last conception of time thinks time as open, but with the need for an intervention of scientific knowledge. From this typification would be evident the difference between the temporalized

sociology and the sociology working with empirical time. The first focus on time within a conceptual level and the second would concentrate on empirical topics of social life, among them: the time.

Baert also announces the pillars of a temporalized sociology, namely: 1. Time and relativity must go together; 2. The intervention of the actor should be a central point to think the discontinuity with past; 3. Past, present and future must be different in social life in the physical world; 4. Sociology should have as a goal to consider equally different times (Baert, 1992).

In order to think in temporalized sociology, Baert uses Mead work in a less exegetical and more punctual way, analysing from a brief retrospective and criticism about the four theoretical conceptions mentioned above. His goal is not to offer a simple critic about the previous conceptions but to offer a critic about the sociological treatment for polarization, and finally offer a way out: time.

Baert does not believe in positivism, functionalism, ethnomethodology, and structuralism as possible theoretical ways out, since the idea of time in each one is not adequate: Positivism for its excessive determinism, its focus on the cause and consequence idea, its general and invariant laws, and diminish the present actions role and its transformative potential; Functionalism for persisting in the idea that social system balance creates useful things and social function proves it; Ethnomethodology because it is very conservative with regard to social action, always thinking about the reproduction of order through time; And, finally, structuralism for emphasizes the chronology importance and the events sequence.

Therefore, the way out for the dilemma is through a new formulation of time. According to Baert, Mead can help in this. For him, non-determinism of rules would be the most fruitful way, rather than normative tendencies of positivism. So this approach with Mead is made on two levels: 1. the notions related to self, and 2. temporality. His focus is the knowledgeability idea, as well as the ability to produce rules and reproduce structural properties.

From Mead's social psychology, Baert highlights a central fact: personality, self, and mind emerge from a social process. There is centrality to this concept of self. It is not a passive recipient, but something that controls everything. It is not responding, but reflecting and making decisions. The big question is: how does this self-act? How does he know how to act appropriately? Through shared symbols. People have shared symbols, and so they can act. In Mead's analysis has no space for determinism, only for creativity (Mead, 1934).

However, Mead is not entirely satisfactory in order to temporize sociology and respond to Baert theoretical questions. Therefore, the author cites four points that need critical modification in Mead. The first one is the need to distinguish among self-reflection, self-control, and self-monitoring. In other words, the ability to reflect on your social circumstances consciously, the ability to be in control of your behaviour based on reflection, and a kind of self-reflection and self-control toward action (Baert, 1992).

The second point is the distinction between first and second-order self-reflection. The third one is that the kind of knowledgeability that is involved in the first and second-order self-reflection. And the fourth and last point modified by Baert in Mead's work is to emphasize that Mead is not supra-individual and without space for society. To prove this, the author proposes the distinction between individual and collective self-reflection, and between the individual and collective self-monitoring.

Specifically about time, time in Mead has three levels: physical, biological, and social. His focus is the philosophy of the present. It means that the past and future are horizons to the present, are possibilities to transcending the present. The past is revocable and irrevocable simultaneously because what is gone is in the past. At the same time, it can change the future. We can look back and react to change the future. So it is at this point that we can find creativity and unpredictability: a real break with the fixed idea of causality (Mead, 1932).

From a reinterpretations of sociology through time idea, Baert defines new propositions about the idea of action and structure: normative structures imply practical awareness and tacit knowledge; regulatory structures are relatively unknown conditions; regulatory structures are relatively invariant; self-consciousness and normative structures are interdependent; social structures are permissive and restrictive; structures are structured, and restructured; people are relatively well informed (Baert, 1992).

His proposal of a temporalized sociology based on an open view about time and history brings the possibility that people find the new and reflect on past, present, and future, changing it. The author bets on a new time vision, and it is an exit for the balance among history, experience, and action.

In this aspect, Baerts' project seems to be similar to Domingues and Elias, whose idea of time and temporalized sociology also seems to have a synthetic function. However, his most significant similarity is clearly with Giddens design and with his structuration theory, since both share some common ideas, such as: a quick look at society cannot capture the order; time is producing social order; diachronic analysis seems to be crucial to understanding the new and the changing; rejection in relation to linear and teleological interpretation; and coupled with a temporalization of sociology able to transcend agency and structure. Giddens and Baert also have divergences, as we will see in the next section.

Time and Modernity

Giddens, in one of his most famous book, develops an institutional analysis of modernity with a cultural and epistemological emphasis. For this, he defines modernity as style, a custom of life, and social organization that emerged in the seventeenth century in Europe. According to him, we would not live postmodernity, but a period in which the characteristics and consequences of this modernity became radicalized and universalized (Giddens, 1990).

His view of modernity and history is discontinuous and capable of capturing irregularities, ruptures, and discontinuities. Therefore, he does not rely on the new idea, but on the discontinuity idea within what exists. This implies, for example, that in his structuration theory, he considers a radicalization of modernity instead of postmodernity. It helps, in some way, to displace the evolutionary narrative, and to combat a specific conception of time (Giddens, 1990, 4-5).

Giddens points out that all pre-modern cultures had modes of the calculating of time, a time always connected to space. With the advent of modernity, the coincidence of time and space undergoes an increasing rupture, and places become increasingly phantasmagoric. Such a separation, although intense and growing, is not linear, it is a modern development trend (Giddens, 1990, 17-20).

This development trend towards a separation of time and space is central to Giddens work, since it is a condition of the process of disembedding and re-embedding, as well as providing a rational organization. As a consequence of this whole process, we have the displacement of social relations from local contexts of interaction, and the famous symbolic tokens and expert systems (Giddens, 1990, 21-22).

Giddens seems to link all modern social organization to the theme of time, and its separation from space. This idea is explained more directly in his more theoretical and systematic book that has a goal to answer the sociological dilemma posed above. In it, Giddens exposes the main concepts of structuration theory, presenting as a starting point a difference among functionalism, structuralism, hermeneutics, and interpretative sociology (Giddens, 1984, 1-5).

His point is to argue that the problem of all of them – involved and organized within the sociological dilemma between agency and structure – is that none of them thinks of human action within the space-time context. Giddens proposed to think in terms of ordered social practices in space-time.

The structuration theory, in general terms, wishes to think of human action in a *durée*, in a flux (Giddens, 1984, 8). Hence, a space-time ontology becomes not only central, but also essential to the structuration concept, and to Giddens attempt to bring light to the sociological duality as one of the leading exponents of the theoretical synthesis movement.

Giddens makes clear that his interest is not time itself (with all its complexity, discomfort, and banality). His interest is in overcoming the sociological dilemma, through a discussion of an order problem. Moreover, the order problem is to have to explain how the lengthening of social relationships in time and space transcends the limitations of individual presence (Giddens, 1984).

So his primary interest in time is not to think "What is time?" or "What does it mean?" His interest is not to ask about his character but start from a central temporality for the theoretical construction to analytically think the ideas of reflexive monitoring, rationalization, action motivation, agent, agency, power, structure, structuration, the duality of structure, and other concepts.

For Giddens, time is a condition and result of organized practices in the continuity of everyday life, which is the primary substantive form of the duality of structure, and the foundation upon which the routines of everyday life and the institutional forces of the organization are constructed. This is the object of the synthesis, through which one can face the order problem, and the sociological duality (Giddens, 1984).

Time and Order

Like Elias, Domingues, Baert, and Giddens, Barbara Adam – despite her peculiarities – also works with the idea of time as an alternative and synthesis for sociological theory. In her main theoretical book on time, Adam questions the assertion that time is a fact of life, and questions how the social

sciences generally understood time, and how they incorporated it (Adam, 1990, 2).

Adam understands time as implied in all aspects of our lives and therefore imbued with many meanings. She hopes that from this fact, the social science leaves common sense and are not only aware of the influence of time, but also relating this to their studies and theories (Adam, 1990, 3). However, this is not the case. Time is such an undeniable fact of social life that is invisible in most cases.

Her initial interest is to think of the mismatch between social theory and social life. Her focus is to think about the influence of social sciences understanding about time in our ordinary lives. In other words, Adam wants to think about how sociological knowledge influences the social conception of the common: "Our conceptualizations of time and the way we utilize time in our social theories matter with regard to our social construction of the future, our relationship to death, our identity, our daily living, our participation in social life, and our interaction with all that we have created" (Adam, 1990, 5). According to Adam, the way that the sociologists conceptualize time in social theories matters because it influences people and their relationships.

Then, the most important is to create a new theory from a new conception of time (Adam, 1990, 8). If we do this, we can contribute with the sociological dilemma, leave our dual way to think, change the construction about social time, and – ultimately – change the society itself. Given this, she claimed to define time in a new way.

According to her, time is destiny (we live under its inevitability) and is a need (we cannot choose not to grow old, for example). It means that without time order, there is no order at all, because time is destiny and need for all human societies, especially for western industrial societies. Time, for her, is crucial and is deeply implied in our existence.

For Adam, there will only sociological progress if there is a quest to understand and conceptualize not only an aspect of ordinary life but time in its multiple expressions, including time as synthesis element for sociological

theory. For her, there is a need to define the relations among time, temporality, clock, chronology, social time, conscious of time, movement, process, change, continuity, temporal modalities, past, present, future, time as a resource, and as a principle.

Among all the approaches, she highlights that time can serve as a form of rejection of dualisms so profoundly rooted in sociology. She goes even further, saying that time can serve as a form of reject also the disciplinary isolation, prevalent today. For Adam, the polarization between synchrony and diachrony, structure and agency, individual and society, quantitative and qualitative, objectivity and subjectivity, order and disorder, among others, could be evidenced as incapable through a look towards time.

Time serves, according to Adam, with a multitude of functions in sociology, and she dedicated her life to show this. This article is pointing just to one: time as a synthesis element for a dilemma that has lasted for at least the last hundred years.

Conclusion

We initiated this article with the presentation of a theoretical problem already known to us in sociology, namely the dilemma between agency and structure. It is due to the difficulty and complexity of understanding the social world in a balanced way, taking into account the different factors, both imposed and coercive, as well as individual and subjective.

What we set out to do in this article was not precisely the sociology of time, or an analysis of time in different groups and cultures, and how it influences them in some way. Instead, our primary goal was to contribute to the above discussion by offering new answers and alternatives to old theoretical problems.

For this, we looked to some authors that proposed themselves to solve the problem, and tried to do this through time. It was possible to see that in some authors there is a certain point that time could be a cooperating factor

for the discussion of these theoretical problems, an element of synthesis, capable of offering a way out for such a dilemma.

In general, the authors said that time should be rethink as a central part of their answers to sociological problems. However, why? This article argues that time is a central element to offer a synthesis to the sociological theoretical dilemma because time is an essential epistemological aspect of sociology. In other words, time is a fundamental category that lays based on sociological theory construction.

When different authors point to time as an element that needs to be systematized or worked through because we could access specific debates and responses, they understand time within sociology as a concept with an epistemological – rather than ontological – character. Ontological and epistemological ideas are embedded in sociologists' thinking and alter the way that they shape their definitions of social phenomena, as well as their area of study and their object. In general, it is possible to say that both – ontology and epistemology – are about philosophical assumptions that become relevant to research (Kienzle, 1970).

The sociologists have made their ontological and epistemological choices. However, it is essential to point out that choosing ontology or epistemology brings with it a significant difference in the kind of question that you will ask for. In a general way, we can define metaphysics as "the inquiry into the nature of final reality" (Castell, 1943), and it involves both a theory of being and a theory of knowledge.

The ontology concern is with reality: what are things made of? What is it? How many different types are there of anything? However, the epistemological concerns with knowledge: What is the nature of knowledge? What is the criterion of knowledge or truth? What is the relationship between cognitive experience and its objects? (Hill, 1951).

To think in time as an epistemological aspect is to give up questions concerning the nature of time, its natural characteristics, and what it is both

natural and social. It means giving up also the interpretations of individual and subjective experiences about time.

Our goal is to argue that when a robust set of authors think of time as an alternative and synthesis to a theoretical dilemma and proposes that we think of time in such directions, because that leads them to such paths and results, they are thinking of time as an epistemological aspect, that is, as an essential part of the construction of sociological knowledge, which can influence the theories and ideas developed from it.

So, this article goal was re-read these authors already known in sociological theory from the sociological dilemma between agency and structure. We argued that these authors, although did not systematize, gave us hints that the idea of time is an epistemological aspect, able to bring with its synthesis. So, they did not dedicate to ask about time nature or its characteristics. They dedicated to thinking about the different constructions of time and how it helps or not to improve their analysis and theories in different approaches.

The exact concept of time able to bring the solution to the problem x or y of sociological theory is not the purpose of this article. Instead, each of the authors presented by us in the previous sections has brought their contributions and constructions of time and their contributions about how time should be thought to serve as a synthesis to the theoretical problem.

As far as we are concerned, we limit ourselves to presenting a new reading and conceptual proposal that can collaborate both for the more general sociological debate and for sociology that is dedicated more exclusively to the theme of time and its unfolding. The consequences of this can be taken in several ways. Perhaps the most direct is: if time is an epistemological aspect for sociological knowledge, if time is able to bring contributions and synthesis, and if an author wishes to think about the theoretical dilemmas concerning sociology (in general), surely he must look for the time and maybe find through time an exciting way out.

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