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SOCIAL SCIENCES TEACHING AS A TOOL FOR RESISTING THE ZEITGEIST

O ENSINO DAS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS COMO FERRAMENTA DE RESISTÊNCIA AO ESPÍRITO DO TEMPO

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Abstract: The relevance of the social sciences is often questioned by both social work students and non-specialist instructors – either in terms of their contribution to professional practice, particularly when compared to other forms of knowledge with more widely accepted practical applications, or by challenging the scientific validity of their findings. Nevertheless, we argue that teaching the social sciences is essential, particularly for upholding the distinct status of scientific discourse on the social world and for resisting the current conservative turn in public debate. This article first examines the challenges of teaching social sciences in social work education, especially in a climate marked by frequent political and media criticism of academic research. We then present findings from a survey of social work students’ perceptions of the social sciences. Finally, drawing on these results, we describe the pedagogical adjustments implemented at the training institute where the three authors are based.

Keywords: Social work students; Social sciences; Conservative zeitgeist; Pedagogy.

Resumo: A relevância das ciências sociais é frequentemente questionada tanto por estudantes de serviço social como por docentes não especialistas – seja em termos do seu contributo para a prática profissional, sobretudo quando comparado com outras formas de conhecimento com aplicações práticas mais amplamente aceites, seja pondo em causa a validade científica dos seus resultados. Não obstante, defendemos que o ensino das ciências sociais é essencial, particularmente para afirmar o estatuto distinto do discurso científico sobre o mundo social e para resistir à atual viragem conservadora no debate público. Este artigo examina, em primeiro lugar, os desafios do ensino das ciências sociais na formação em serviço social, sobretudo num clima marcado por críticas políticas e mediáticas frequentes à investigação académica. Em seguida, apresentamos os resultados

de um inquérito sobre as percepções dos estudantes de serviço social relativamente às ciências sociais. Por fim, com base nestes resultados, descrevemos os ajustamentos pedagógicos implementados no instituto de formação onde trabalham os três autores.

Keywords: Estudantes de serviço social; Ciências sociais; Clima conservador; Pedagogia.

Introduction

In France, apprenticeship time at a training institute and exposure to professional practice during internship periods are both parts of social workers education. Since 2018, the national diploma awarded on completion of training for specialized educators (ES) and social service assistants (ASS) has conferred the degree of Licence (bachelor's degree), after enabling 180 European credits (ECTS) to be obtained in 1999, at the end of the Bologna process. The term "universitarization" is used for level 6 training courses¹. The effects of this "universitarization" process are not limited to changes in the institutional recognition of a diploma level, but also involve partnerships with universities and changes in training programs. As a result, social sciences courses increasingly play an important role in training, and are taught in two different ways: on the one hand, through the study of work in various fields of research deemed relevant to social work (the family, schools, organizations, etc.); and on the other, through an introduction to survey methods. The usefulness of these courses is sometimes questioned by students and lay teachers alike: either in terms of professionalization - especially when they are compared with other knowledge whose relationship with professional practice appears consensual - or by questioning the scientific nature of their results (Cornand, Bettaieb, 2022). Yet, we believe it is essential to assert the need to teach social sciences, and to defend the specific status of scientific discourse on the social world.

In this article, we will first present some of the issues involved in teaching social sciences in social work training courses, particu-

¹ Level 6 courses include diplomas for different kinds of social workers, called specialized educators, social service assistants and early childhood educators.

larly in a context of regular political and media attacks on scientific work; secondly, we will present the results of a survey of social work students' attitudes to the social sciences; finally, using these survey results, we will report on the pedagogical changes that have been implemented in the training institute where the three authors of this article work.

Social sciences to resist reactionary discourse

The scientific approach to social relationships seems all the more fundamental in a socio-historical context where the dominant representations, forged in particular by political and media actors, tend to move radically away from the "rational" or "reasonable" (Fassin, 2024). Need for knowledge is as important as the distance that certain prominent actors maintain from reality. As Donald Trump, then candidate for the White House, accused migrants of eating pets, or as Jair Bolsonaro, the former President of Brazil, claimed to denounce alleged "homosexual proselytism" that penis-shaped baby bottle teats had been provided in nursery schools (Fassin, 2024, p. 60), they showed total contempt for any form of truth. Referred to as "bullshit" by philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005), these examples of discourses illustrate what was called the post-truth era (Fassin, 2024, p. 60) and have encouraged the implementation of reactionary measures, in this case xenophobic and homophobic ones. While the rupture between dominant discourses and observable reality has not always been so strong, political and media have often been distant to social sciences research. Actors in the political arena, for example, have rarely used social science knowledge to structure policies:

"When you want to influence the physical world, you should naturally rely on solid scientific and technical knowledge. You can't build a bridge without knowing the properties of the soil, the materials used, the constraints and forces to which the bridge in question will be subjected, and so on. However, you can engage in politics, i.e. to

act on social reality, without having read a single line of the sciences that study it" (Lahire, 2016, p. 22).

This distance between media and political discourses and social sciences has become more radical and has been coupled with repeated attacks on social sciences, and sociology in particular. The offensive against sociology has not been limited to indirect attacks consisting in opposing the scientific results: more fundamentally, it has sought to delegitimize the profession of researcher as well as the very principle of examining the social causes of social practices. To do so, the proponents of the anti-science ideology have not been discussing sociological models and methodologies, and thus have not situated the debate within the scientific field and thus accept its rules of operation and proof administration. To the contrary, they have sought to organize the discussion on their own ground: that of ideology. Sociology has thus been "accused of justifying or excusing delinquency, public disorder, crime, terrorism and even, in a completely different register, failures, incivilities or truancy" (Lahire, 2016, p. 18). In France, but also in the United States and Great Britain, attacks on "sociological excuses" have been used from the center-left to the right of the political spectrum in an attempt to prohibit any understanding of the processes determining social practices (idem). The rhetoric of individual responsibility detached from social contexts has justified the implementation of repressive policies. This logic has relied on the idea that however individuals do what they do because they are what they are, and are what they are... because they are what they are. It leads to an intellectual impasse, although we do not know if those who have been using it are aware of it.

Individuals are considered to be intrinsically "good" or "bad", and to behave as they do by "choice" or "will". As a result, any reminder of the social conditions in which individuals are led to act, or of the social determinants of their paths and behaviors, undermines this vision. (...) The rise of security-oriented conceptions of social life, so evident

today, means that we are often content with a summary portrait of the “enemy”. The rhetoric of war tolerates no “explanation” other than that of the existence of an “evil”, internal or external, to be fought (Lahire, 2019a, p. 995).

In this context, we call for an epistemological commitment to the social sciences. A commitment to independent, disinterested social sciences, whose descriptive aim necessarily makes them critical of arbitrary powers and the ideologies on which they are based.

“Asking sociology to serve a purpose is always a way of asking it to serve power. Whereas its scientific function is to understand the social world, starting with the powers that be. An operation which is not socially neutral and which undoubtedly fulfils a social function. Among other reasons, because there is no power that doesn’t owe part - and not the least - of its effectiveness to a lack of knowledge of the mechanisms that underpin it”. (Bourdieu, 1980, p.23-24)

In a social world that has been mainly governed by irrationality, we claim that the scientific approach is a tool of resistance and a potential tool of emancipation. Social sciences have shed light on the construction of social pathways leading to “disaffiliation” (Castel, 1991), on the social conditions of “academic failure” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964 and 1970; Lahire, 2019b), on the foundations of male domination (Bayer, Cardi, Helfter, and Rollin, 2023), xenophobia (Lahire, 2023) and so on. Consequently, they give access to an understanding of social processes rather than giving in to the illusion of “freedom” (Lahire, 2013), to the empowerment and stigmatization of individuals.

From our perspective, this epistemological commitment implies a pedagogical commitment to disseminating scientific knowledge of the social world to students in social work education. Social workers’ scientific knowledge of the social world is all the more essential as their professional practices involve supporting people who live in dominated positions in one of the different fields of the

social world. That's why we want their approaches to the public to be informed by knowledge about the construction of relationships of domination. In so doing, we want them to build true comprehensive postures: although they are often well-intended, these postures are often claimed in training to be genuinely based on understanding and not on abstract assertions.

Understanding social work students' relationship to the social sciences

We have been applying the principles of the approach we advocate: trying to know, taking stock, and then to acting in order to adapt to diverse social situations. We therefore carried out a survey to find out how students in a social work institute in the south of France relate to social sciences. Using a questionnaire, our study consisted in asking students about their experiences of social science courses prior to and during their social work training, about what they read as well as their representations of these various elements. The questionnaires were sent by training managers via a digital link, and 159 questionnaires were processed. Our sample thus represents just under half of all students enrolled in one of the courses surveyed. It would be risky to consider our sample as representative of the population we wished to study, as several selection biases may have come into play, such as the relationship with the training institute, to trainers, their availabilities, but also their relationship with written materials etc.). We did, however, collect a wealth of materials, as the respondents were widely diversified (regarding their ages, social origins, educational backgrounds, etc.). The questionnaire included 85 questions. As it was quite long, we will only expose the results that were directly related to the subject of the article.

First of all, the majority of students were not new to social science courses when they entered social work training: 58% of them previously attended such courses. However, they arrived unequally armed, depending on how they were enrolled: ES baccalaureate holders were most likely to have attended such courses (83%),

while vocational baccalaureate holders were the least likely (35%). Almost all of them (95%) said they had found these lessons interesting, mainly because of what could be gathered under the terms of “general culture” or the “development of critical thinking skills”:

Because it simply helps us to understand ourselves, others and the world we live in.

Culture, discovery, learning, awareness, public

They helped me to develop my own knowledge of how people work, to develop general culture and to have a basis for understanding the courses in this training.

They gave me a critical view of society and helped me to understand how things work.

I’ve always been attracted to subjects that are linked to current events.

Just over a quarter (28%) said they had read one or more social sciences books before starting their training, and 41% said they had read one or more articles from a scientific journal. Since they started their training, all of them had attended social science courses, and almost all (95%) declared that these courses were of some interest to them. In addition to their interest in social science teaching, which was linked to the development of their cultural background, they were also interested in their future work.

It helps us understand certain facts. And gives us theoretical input for analyzing situations.

Discovery relevant to my profession

They enabled me to link my practices to a social and historical context, so as to better understand the contradictions that run through the people we’ll be working with during our internships and after graduation.

They are essential to our future professional practice. They enable us to understand the mechanisms at play in society. Interesting for my professional practice (especially for survey methods).

Reading practices in the social sciences largely evolved with the training experience: 83% of respondents claimed to have read at least one book in these disciplines, and 92% at least one research article.

The students that were surveyed thus demonstrated a widely shared appetite for knowledge derived from the social sciences, and the vast majority declared that they read works presenting results from these disciplines. In light of these results, it seemed that this context was favorable to the dissemination of social scientific knowledge and that students did not show, or only very marginally, a “fierce desire not to know” (Lahire, 2023, p.261). While they wanted to know more, they could not always know how to. Indeed, our study shows that students were unfamiliar to scientific literature: when asked to cite social sciences journals, only ten of them could answer. The students’ answers highlighted a great deal of confusion between media publications, popularization publications, Internet portals publishing both scientific and non-scientific journals, and scientific journals.

Moreover, students were not - or only to a very limited extent - affected by the spread of ideological attacks on social sciences; they did, however, have great difficulties to identify the sources where this knowledge was published. While our survey showed that they used a wide range of media to access knowledge (72% of our sample claim to have used media such as videos, podcasts or radio broadcasts related to the social sciences), a major challenge for those involved in training arose: teaching must help to better define what research is, to show that science is “all the more essential and relevant for action when it is autonomous - in the sense that problems are determined and dealt with without external interference - and proceeds in transparency and sharing of results, by means of peer-reviewed journals, even if they are provisional and presented as such” (Saint Martin, 2020, p. 16).

The evolution of social sciences teaching

Based on these survey results, we changed training programs so as to include a scientific approach of social phenomena. First of all,

second-year students follow a three-hour course dedicated to better identify scientific journals and articles. This course provides an opportunity to understand the different steps of a scientific approach, such as object construction of the object, building methods of investigation and results. Above all, this course aims at highlighting the different approaches to analyze an object that may at first appear similar: a differentiated and more or less sensationalist treatment depending on the orientation of press articles or audio and video documents, a demonstration based on the empirical administration of proof for research work. Burning issues in public debates (urban violence, gender, discriminations, etc.) are good examples to shed light on the value of a scientific and distanced approach and to teach how to identify the means that provide access to it. Keeping this goal in mind, we stepped up our work with the documentation center to facilitate student access to scientific journals.

In collaboration with two university research centers, we organized a series of seminars to bring together researchers and social workers to discuss topics such as “gender and social work”, “migrant youth”, and so on. They provided an opportunity to show the value of rigorously conducted research and the usefulness of the knowledge produced for social intervention. Organized online around ten times to date, attendance has steadily increased. Although we did not measure it precisely, students have made up a significant proportion of the audience.

Finally, level 6 diplomas, offer students the possibility to pursue a Master’s degree. The methodology courses were therefore re-worked in collaboration with the university departments of the city in which the training institute is located. Several Master’s dissertations were produced by former students, enabling social workers to become social work researchers at the same time.

While these pedagogical developments are by no means intended to minimize the epistemological boundaries between research on the social world and social intervention, they may help students to understand the originality of scientific discourse and its usefulness for action, and encourage them to anchor their practices in these two worlds.

Conclusion

The production of social scientific knowledge implies to apply very strictly the rules of scientific methods, but the results of social scientific disciplines are not neutral. On the contrary, they are powerful tools of resistance to the zeitgeist. Disseminating them is thus all the greater when that zeitgeist becomes unbreathable: the rise of nationalism, masculinism, contempt for the labor classes and so on. Although social sciences do not determine how to on the social world, and even if “ we carefully separate theoretical problems from practical ones ” (Durkheim, 1893, p. 39)), we believe that they must help to build the “perspectives” internalized by future social workers, i.e. “a coordinated set of ideas and actions that a person uses to deal with a problematic situation” (Becker, Geer, Hughes & Strauss, 1961, cited by Darmon, 2023 p. 82). The transmission of social scientific knowledge is not always easy: it is confronted with the representations of students, and this difficulty is reinforced by students’ the social diversity (Cornand, Bettaieb, 2022). Far from nurturing any kind of elitism, the development of ambitious social science teaching for all students is a matter of equality: “Education, teaching, is the very opposite of contempt. Demagoguery, on the other hand, goes very well with maintaining inequalities in access to knowledge” (Lahire, 2025, p. 220). This calls for hard work and reflection on the pedagogical methods, but it’s the price to pay to build social workers and citizens who are aware of and critical of the arbitrariness of power and domination.

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