

BOOK REVIEW

Blois, J.P. (2018) Medio siglo de sociología en la Argentina. Ciencia, profesión y política (1957-2007)

Lautaro Lazarte

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Juan Pedro Blois's book, *Medio siglo de sociología en la Argentina. Ciencia, profesión y política (1957-2007)* (Half a century of Sociology in Argentina. Science, profession and politics, 1957-2007), shows the consolidation of the history of sociology as a productive research field in that country. Relying on existing studies of the history of social sciences, using a varied set of materials (university syllabus; student publications; institutional documentation on schools, research centres and professional organisations; interviews; etc.), and assembling previous contributions - from the same author as well as other researchers - the author undertakes the complex task of composing a mosaic of the vicissitudes of the discipline over its past fifty years. This catalogue of sources allows readers to understand the eventful local history of the discipline, characterised, at least until the definitive return of democracy (1983), by a series of violent disruptions that included the loss of institutional archives and invaluable voices and testimonies.

Unlike previous works, more limited in their temporal extension, this book offers a reliable account of the various periods and conjunctures of sociology in Argentina since the creation of the first modern academic university department in the late 1950s. The work is structured on a periodisation that balances local political-social milestones with the history of the discipline itself. Organising the institutional trajectory in this way allows the writer to show how across different periods, more weight was either given to the autonomy of the discipline, or to its dependence on local politics or international forces, even though both were present. This produces a periodisation composed of six heterogeneous stages:

- a) 1957-1963 (antecedents and creation of the sociology department);
- b) 1963-1966 (generalisation of internal dissent and failure of the original project);
- c) 1966-1973 (political radicalisation and renewal of theoretical orientations);
- d) 1973-1983 (generalised politicisation and withdrawal during the years of political repression);
- e) 1983-1990 (the long institutional reconstruction in the post-dictatorship);
- f) 1990-2017 (sociology in the neoliberal university and the reorganisation and expansion of the labour market).

The extended time period covered in the book makes it possible to link Argentine sociology not only with changes in its socio-political and cultural context but also with dynamics and events beyond its borders. As such it is a chapter about the history of Social Sciences in Argentina, but at the same time a story about the broader context of sociology - national, regional and global. This adds value to the analysis by ensuring that it is not restricted to the local context, but rather, the work explores sociology in Argentina - in terms of theoretical influences and research problems, establishment of networks of actors, institutions, intellectual influences and resources and the development of the professional practice of sociology - in comparison with sociology in the United States, Europe and other Latin American countries. This comparison serves as a methodological resource that seeks to overcome the views already explored on the singularity of the Argentine case. Thus it is possible to draw a broad portrait that takes readers from the foundation of the department of Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) in 1957, to the growing diversification of the employment situation of the sociology graduates at the beginning of this century.

Although this was not the only university institution that taught sociology in the country, the author suggests it was the one with both the largest enrolment of students and teaching staff and the presence of the most prestigious sociologists visiting its classrooms and engaging in prominent intellectual, local debates and disputes about methodologies and goals. Likewise, Blois points out three main topics that influenced the trajectory of the Sociology department at the UBA during the entire period of analysis: Firstly, the book sets out discussions about the status of the sociology, especially on its disciplinary autonomy and national character. Secondly, the relation between sociology and political agenda. And thirdly, the challenges of professionalisation of sociology.

The establishment of the sociology degree in 1957 within the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the UBA occurred within circumstances that reflect both national and international issues. Among the former, student organisations supported both the academic consolidation of the discipline and the university modernisation since 1955. For the latter, it is possible to link with the expansion of the structural functionalist “orthodox consensus”, the concern for socio-economic development and the search to implement social changes based on planning. The name to be highlighted is that of Gino Germani, an Italian exiled scholar who is generally noted as the pioneer in the introduction of modern sociology in the country. In his vision, this space would serve as an incentive to promote a broad process of modernisation of Argentine society in line with the prevailing developmental ideology at the time; as well as a place for the training of future professionals who will implement this transformation in the state administration and in other institutions of civil society.

Germani and his group of collaborators managed, between 1957 and 1963, to articulate a successful strategy for the formation of the department and the dissemination of a ‘sociología científica’ [scientific sociology], concerned with empirical research and the resolution of social problems. This initiative was built on the support from the student movement and funds received from a series of international organisations and philanthropic foundations, dynamics shared by other sociology departments and institutes in the region. The success of its institutional project is exemplified with the holding of the ‘Primeras Jornadas Argentina y Latinoamericana de Sociología’ [the first Argentine and Latin American Conference on Sociology] in September 1961, in which the Department of Sociology acted as host. Germani took advantage of the funds available for the organisation of the event, invited international and regional exponents of the discipline and exhibited the activities of the department and the institutional networks in which it was inserted. In this way, the event became a showcase of regional and international peers and advanced a scientifically oriented sociological discipline. However, this abrupt conversion from previous

sociological production demonstrated a particularity of the Argentine experience, for elsewhere, in other countries of the region, there was a more peaceful coexistence with previous forms of social thought. The event reinforced the idea, prevalent both in the stories of the protagonists themselves and in various later histories of local sociology, that the creation of this department is synonymous with the introduction of sociology as a scientific discipline in the country. Blois suggests this confrontation resulted in the exclusion of almost all the animators of the discipline who had had some relevance before 1955 linked to the 'sociología de cátedra' [Chair Sociology], as well as a series of figures related to social essayism. These displaced intellectuals, who to a greater or lesser extent contended with the project articulated by Germani, took refuge both in extra-university settings and in existing sociology chairs and institutes in universities in the interior of the country or in departments that were opened in new private management universities.

As of 1963, the consensus that enabled the opening of the institution began to disarm quickly. Attacks on Germani's leadership came from multiple directions. Some young scholars came back from abroad holding a PhD and openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the prevailing structural-functionalist and quantitative orientation and advocated for the introduction of new perspectives and methodologies, such as Marxism, French structuralism, ethnomethodology and phenomenology. Various sectors of the student movement, politically radicalised by the Cuban Revolution and the decolonisation processes, began to loudly demand a better connection between teaching and social demands. The heterogeneous criticisms ranged from questioning imperialist links and financing from the US to demands for improvement in the teaching standards and a diversification of perspectives in the curriculum. The intensity of conflict was one of the reasons leading to the resignation of Germani from the leadership of the department. This action produced a leadership crisis and deprived the department of new external subsidies.

In parallel, there were milestones which strengthened the local sociological field. On one hand, sociology departments opened in private universities linked to the Catholic Church, such as the Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA 1959) and the Universidad del Salvador (USAL 1962). On the other hand, these new private research centres enabled sociological research to be carried out outside the university and government. On the other hand, some new private research centres were created in Buenos Aires. They clearly divided in two groups. One, institutions devoted to traditional scientific social research, such as the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social (IDES) or the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT). Two, organisations also focused on research but more oriented by ideological orientation and political issues. Marxist-oriented Centro de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales (CICSO) could be included in that category.

All these institutions had to set up various strategies to guarantee income that would allow their operation, from the signing of research agreements with foreign organisations and universities to offering advanced courses for new sociologists. Such organisations, in times of student discontent or political turbulence, have become places of refuge where professors excluded from national universities are able to continue their teaching and research activities. Likewise, some questions about the professional role of local sociologists emerged. It was so clear that sociology labour market could not find a constant demand to absorb totally first cohort of graduates.

The coup d'état of the Argentine Revolution (1966) closes this period and opens a new conjuncture marked by the rearrangement of the local sociological field. The UBA sociology department underwent dramatic academic staff changes. Most professors resigned or were forced into exile. These new vacancies were soon filled. At first, the scholars who arrived were sympathetic to the military regime, but they did not stay for long due to the intense student opposition. Many of the

dismissed and resigned professors from the UBA moved their activities to the private universities or private research centres. In a contrary movement, actors who had been excluded from the department by Germani - particularly those linked to networks of militant Catholics - re-entered the system and together with a new batch of young graduates and teaching assistants, were promoted to higher positions. Due to the lack of more qualified or experienced individuals, this last group comprised the teaching staff of the department. This context, together with political radicalisation and an increasingly active student mobilisation, enabled the emergence of new orientations within the department, with two experiences that set the tone for the new teaching context, in which different professors grouped around the 'Cátedras Marxistas' [Marxists Chairs] and the 'Cátedras Nacionales' [National Chairs]. Besides these groups of sociology teachers and students expressed diverse ideological positions, they sought to link sociology with a revolutionary and anti-authoritarian political praxis. In addition, this context allowed the introduction of new pedagogical practices, including collective evaluation, the diversification of theoretical references, the recovery of social essayism and the emphasis on the links between sociological practice, social work, political commitment and militancy in the poorest neighbourhoods. In other words, it became just as valid to read Marx, Durkheim and Weber, as well as Lenin, Gramsci, Althusser, Mao-Tsé Tung, "Che" Guevara and Juan Domingo Perón. The heightened atmosphere brought into question the degree of autonomy the discipline should have in a time of local, regional and global political and cultural turmoil and its role in achieving social transformation.

The return to the country of General Juan Domingo Perón and his subsequent ascent to the presidency in 1973, accelerated the dissolution of the autonomy of the field within the logic of the political dispute in general and the Peronist movement in particular. This fact allowed many of these professors and activists - especially those linked to the 'Cátedras Nacionales' - to exercise management in the functioning of various chairs, institutes and the department itself. However, these actions caused the breakdown of the militant networks formed in the previous period. That same year, the first reform of the study plan was also carried out, which brought the realisation of professional practices in various departments of the state apparatus, and gave them legitimacy. In the midst of an increasingly violent political climate, the department was separated from the orbit of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in 1974, placed under direct control of the UBA Rector Office, and finally closed in mid-1975.

The 1976 military coup reproduced the previous pattern of dismissals and layoffs at the UBA, but reopened the local sociology department at the end of that year, with scholars linked to the official political line were allocated to head the office, even some of those with military ranks. In that context, the department was rebuilt in the midst of a material and symbolic isolation, in great contrast to the appreciation it had had at its founding moment. From 1977, a fresh sociological curriculum was applied. This was based on technical criteria but its contents were heterogeneous, which made it very difficult to offer a lucid, coherent graduate profile. For their part, the private research centres, largely financed by international organisations, resumed their complementary training role, becoming a refuge for those expelled from the department. In other national universities with sociology departments, this hostile climate forced the general closure of the institutions; private universities, apart from USAL, closed their sociology undergraduate courses and reoriented their teaching towards the postgraduate level. The purge of the teaching staff and the negative evaluation of the discipline forced a new movement, both spatial and professional, of its practitioners. Exile, both internal and external, was a reality that many had to face; and with the management of research projects financed by foreign foundations, there were new professional work dynamics and a general

reorientation of departments into new fields, such as human resource management, marketing, advertising.

The return of democracy in 1983 implied a "re-foundation" of the department, thanks to the alignment of the UBA management with the policy carried out by the administration of President Raúl Alfonsín. Here a series of processes were combined where, on the one hand, there was an experience of plural dialogue and criticism of the past militant regime by many of its protagonists in exile in Mexico, Venezuela and Europe. On the other, the incorporation of new theoretical references linked to the recovery of Weberian and Gramscian thought is observed, which converge with the rise of an international agenda concerned with democratic transitions and their strengthening. All these factors set the tone for proposing a new institutional framework based on a broad inclusion of various actors and it is from here that the regular operation of the department was consolidated. However, this process occurred slowly and chaotically, amid a lack of material resources that wouldn't allow for professorial appointments or sufficient resources for the departments. In 1988 this re-founding was strengthened in institutional terms. At the UBA, a new curriculum plan was approved and the department became part of the new Faculty of Social Sciences. Also, a rule was enacted by the national congress aimed at regulating the professional practices of sociologists in the country.

Although economic hardships were exacerbated by neoliberal reforms throughout the 1990s, there was at this time also a process for the creation and reopening of undergraduate and graduate degrees at various national and private universities in both the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires and the provinces. The appearance of these new academic spaces decreased the centrality of the UBA department on the local sociological map.

In its final section, the book focuses on the complexity of graduate employment and career development of sociologists since 1990. The appearance of new fields and labour opportunities led sociology departments to raise novel questions about professionalisation. However, syllabus changes or new postgraduate programs seemed to be insufficient to fill the gap between sociology training and labour market. Here, the emergence of sociological demand differed from classic academic jobs. It was clear that new job offers for sociologist opened in areas such secondary schools teaching, consulting, management in Non-Governmental Organisations and design and evaluation of public policies at the national, provincial and municipal levels. The wealth of this last section lies in the use of testimonies that expose the variety of places for the professional development of sociology and the skills required for a sociologist to find a job.

To close this review, some critical points could be raised. First, the sociological perspective of the author should be recognised. He explained the fate of the UBA sociology department regarding shifts in other factors (e.g., state institutions; private research centres; other sociology departments; the editorial market). Due to the thoroughness and depth of its analysis, this work can serve as a good model for future works investigating the dynamics favouring the institutionalisation or deinstitutionalisation of academic spaces for training sociologists and the consolidation or weakening of the local sociological space. Second, the networking analysis was achieved very well throughout the work. Thus, it covered sufficiently the formation of links among international and regional centres, the assembly of a diverse range of networks that facilitate academic mobility and the provision of funding and prestige. However, the book also analysed the impact of negative elements such as institutional and political instability; the financial uncertainty and the lack of voices in the public debate able to defend and proclaim the importance and usefulness of sociology. Third, this volume clearly showed the complex bonding links between the institutionalisation of sociology

in universities and the diversification of employment for local sociologists, which required the creation of professional institutions and regulating laws on professional practice.

Additionally, without diminishing the merit of the author, some words could be said about the time period chosen in the book. Following a large literature, the volume slightly mentioned some institutional milestones prior to the creation of UBA department of Sociology in 1957. This information blackout made invisible traditions, authors and topics that contributed in many ways to the consolidation of the discipline in the country. The inclusion of that past history could both enrich the narration and offer a more comprehensive evaluation of facts and processes. Another element that is missing as well. Besides this has also been quite neglected by local historians of the discipline, Blois do not show a more detailed narration of teaching experience at both privately managed universities and higher education institutions located in the interior of the country. The inclusion of such elements would enable a better explanation of their role in the production and distribution of sociological knowledge in Argentina. The use of comparison with regional and international experiences appears intermittently throughout the work, but it yet fails to take on a systematic dimension. This means that, to a certain extent, the book remains anchored in the account of the local organisation of the discipline, referring to a vision essayed by the local historical tradition, centred primarily on itself and using the singularities and the evolution of Argentina. As a last point, with the emphasis placed in the final chapter on the impact of the neoliberal reforms, the mutations this brought to the local university in the teaching and research work, and the multiplication and diversification of employment for sociologists, a greater link with other regional cases is missing. In this sense, it would have been of some value to compare what happened in Argentina and at the UBA with other countries and universities in the region, given that most of the region suffered similar political cycles of neoliberal and progressive governments through the 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century.

Delineating these linkages and opting for a long-term perspective then makes it possible to jointly articulate the synthesis of the institutional dynamics experienced by the sociologists at the UBA. It is valuable the mixture of novel sources and the revision of documents already studied. Thus, the book could summarise a varied set of investigations on partial aspects of a broader process. Being able to synthesise all these issues in one work, the volume marks the maturation point of research on the history of local sociology, but this is also an achievement that has been replicated in other countries in the region. Thus, it seems possible to tie together, taking into account the items detailed above, a more interconnected history of the discipline, which allows us to delve into the similarities and differences that bring the trajectory of sociology in Argentina closer or further from what occurred in other countries, whether in Latin America or elsewhere. Indeed, this type of work could serve as a basis for proposing a new comparative analysis of the classic cases where similar development pathways (Argentina, Brazil and Mexico), as well as investigations where there has been recent progress in reconstructing local disciplinary histories (such as Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru or Uruguay). In short, this book expresses, on the one hand, the arrival point for the long work agenda ahead; but on the other hand, a starting point for future discussions about the need for more comparative work, particularly with regard to the history of Argentine sociology in relation to other regional and international cases.