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COCTA News 1989:2

ENDOGENOUS SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS: A Critical Problem in Developing Countries Call for Papers for the COCTA-sponsored INTER-COCTA Panel at the XII World Congress of Sociology, Madrid, 9-13 July 1990

The endogenous development of sociology and the other social sciences in many Third World countries is handicapped by conceptual limitations. These limitations derive from the understandable fact that these disciplines in their modern forms originated in Western countries from which they were exported to the rest of the world. Unavoidably, Western scholars, thinking mainly about the social structures and dynamics found in their own societies, cultivated and used the concepts needed in their own work. When non-Western scholars employ these concepts while doing research on fundamental problems encountered in their own societies, they discover at least two basic kinds of limitations.

First, because many, though not all, of the West's social science concepts presuppose cultural and social dynamics that are not universal, these concepts are often ill-adapted for use in the endogenous development of the social sciences in non-Western environments. Terms like 'class', 'nation', 'the state', 'family', 'bourgeoisie', 'individualism', 'pluralism', 'property', etc. all suggest and derive from experiences and realities that have only approximate counterparts in non-Western societies and even those that seem to fit well often suggest contexts or carry implications that are quite inappropriate. This is not to say that many concepts - those associated with methodology and the logic of inquiry, for example - are not universally applicable, as are most natural science and mathematical concepts.

Second, students of Third World realities easily recognize important phenomena and processes that defy clear explication by means of Western concepts and terms. To some degree this deficiency can be remedied by borrowing terms from regional languages. However, these words are heavily freighted with local connotations and they do not spread well - thus terms taken from Arabic, Chinese, Hausa, Sanskrit or Thai may be very useful in their original contexts, but it is difficult to gain acceptance for their widespread use to characterize realities that, in fact, may be pervasive throughout wide domains outside their original provenance. Such concepts, which are widely needed in Third World research, may originate from the impact of the outside world, from imperialism and industrialization, for example, and from pervasive conflicts between indigenous and foreign values and institutions. To handle these realities adequately, vigorously emerging sociological research needs to introduce and gain acceptance for a great many completely novel concepts, and the terms suitable for naming them.

Admittedly, recognition of this problem has been hampered by the historical constraints of Third World social science research. Much of it was originated by Western scholars who tried to understand and interpret what they found outside their own original domains of competence through the windows on reality that existing Western-based vocabularies provided. As non-Western scholars began to study their own societies systematically, they also were handicapped by a repertoire of concepts and terms borrowed from the West where many of them, or their teachers, had studied. Even when writing in their own national languages, they found themselves constrained by the use of foreign words or equivalent terms whose application often created confusion. This is not an argument for rejecting the development of sociology in non-Western environments - rather it strongly endorses it and suggests that by developing and spreading the use of endogenous concepts, sociology will gain strength and relevance.

The Madrid Panel.

The INTERCOCTA Project, sponsored by the I.S.A. Research Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis (COCTA) in association with the International Social Science Council and UNESCO, has focussed attention on the problem of endogenous concepts and is sponsoring a panel at the Madrid World Congress of Sociology (July 9-13, 1990) on this theme. Those interested in participating as discussant or submitting papers should write promptly to Prof. Fred W. Riggs, Department of Political Science, University of Hawaii, 2424 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA. The final program is due by Oct. 1, 1989.

The paper on the theme of the panel, by Riggs, has been published in UNESCO's International Social Science Journal. It was first presented during the last World Sociology Congress in New Delhi, 1986, at which time the first panel on endogenization of social science concepts was held. It was extremely well attended, generating a lot of interest and it was followed by a three-day workshop in Jaipur, under the auspices of the Indian Social Science Council. Resolutions adopted by that group, composed mainly of Indian scholars, called for a systematic effort to identify and develop endogenous concepts required for the further development of sociology and other social science disciplines in India.

At Madrid an effort will be made to broaden the scope of the endogenization inquiry by paying more attention to other regions in addition to India - especially in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Scholars working in these areas are cordially invited to submit their proposals. Examples of useful endogenous sociological concepts and of difficulties encountered in the use of established vocabulary, accompanied by suitable explanations, are especially welcomed.

The INTERCOCTA Methodology.

After many years of experimentation and false starts, the "Intercocta" approach has been formulated and tested. It recognizes that when scholars seek to write up their findings they confront a problem that is the reverse

of that faced by readers seeking to interpret a text. Instead of asking questions about the possible meanings of a word found in a text, for which dictionaries provide answers, they want to know what to call a notion, idea or concept in order to be clearly understood. The INTERCOCTA approach involves the preparation and distribution among authors working in a given subject field of a new kind of computerized "conceptual glossary" or "nomenclator" which reverses the usual dictionary paradigm: instead of listing words to be defined, it identifies concepts by their definitions, and lists the terms available or proposed for naming them.

Computerization enables revisions and additions to be made so that, as new concepts and terms are proposed by scholars writing in a glossary's subject field, they can be recorded and quickly made available to others. Thereby the normal processes whereby conceptual and terminological innovation occur in the scholarly "market place" can be strengthened and speeded up. Anyone who wants more information about the INTERCOCTA Project and the innovative processes which it sponsors should ask Riggs for a copy of his work, "Help for Social Scientists: A New Kind of Reference Process", which was published by UNESCO in 1986.

The Overall ISA Program of COCTA Sessions, Madrid, 9-13 July 1990

Program Coordinator: Prof. Alberto MARRADI (Viale Duse 32, I-50137 Florence)

Session 1: Rationality. Chair: Stephen Turner (Dept. Sociology, Univ. South Florida, 140 Seventh Ave. South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701, USA)

Session 2: Development. Chair: Jan-Erik Lane (Dept. of Economics, School of Economics and Management, Lund University, P.O. Box 7082, S-220 07 Lund, Sweden)

Session 3: Validity and Reliability. Chair: John Bynner (Open Univ., P.O.B.136, Walton Hill, Milton Keynes MK7 6BP, UK)

Session 4: Everyday constructs in Social Science. Chair: Norman Blaikie (Royal Melbourne Inst. Teaching, GPO 2476, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia)

Session 5: Common Sense and Research Techniques. (Jürgen Kriz, Univ. Osnabrück, POB 4469, D-4500 Osnabrück, FRG)

Session 6: The concept of Globality (Henry Teune, Dept. of political sci., Univ. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 19104-6215). Chair: Walter Schwager (Laurentian Univ., Sudbury, Ont. P2E 2C6, Canada)

Session 7: Limits of conceptional analysis. Chair: Edmund Mokrzycki (Inst. Philosophy and Sociology, PAN, Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland)

Session 8: Endogenous Concepts. Chair: Fred W. Riggs (Univ. Hawaii, Dept. of Political Science, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA)

Session 9: A Project on Meta-Terms and Meta-Concepts. Chair: Alberto Marradi (Viale Duse 32, I-50137 Firenze, Italy)

Session 10: Business Meeting. Chair: Jan-Erik Lane (Dept. of Economics, School of Economics and Management, Lund University, P.O. Box 7082, S-22007 Lund, Sweden)

Joint Sessions with RC 33 Logic and Methodology in Sociology:

- (1) The concept of measurement. Chairs : K. Walter Schwager (address see above)
- (2) Ideal Types and Social Research. Chair: N. W. H. Blaikie (address see above)