TRUTH, SYMBOL, AND POST-COLONIALITY: SOCIAL SCIENCES BEFORE AND AFTER POST-STRUCTURALISM

VERDADE, SÍMBOLO E PÓS-COLONIALIDADE: AS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS ANTES E DEPOIS DO PÓS-ESTRUTURALISMO

VERDAD, SÍMBOLO Y POST-COLONIALIDAD: CIENCIAS SOCIALES ANTES Y DESPUÉS DEL POST-ESTRUCTURALISMO

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ABSTRACT: Postcolonial studies have played a significant role in social sciences by introducing an innovative perspective on cultural development and interactions. The primary objective of this research is to present the particularities of these studies, highlighting their purposes and the academic influences stemming from the so-called post-structuralism. To this end, the theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu will be discussed in relation to the development of human sciences within the context of modernity, as well as how their ideas fostered the emergence of postcolonial studies.

KEYWORDS: True. Will for truth. Postcolonial studies. Power.

RESUMO: Os estudos denominados pós-coloniais desempenharam um papel significativo nas ciências sociais ao introduzirem uma perspectiva inovadora sobre o desenvolvimento e as interações entre culturas. A presente pesquisa tem como objetivo principal apresentar as particularidades desses estudos, destacando seus propósitos e as influências acadêmicas oriundas do chamado pós-estruturalismo. Para isso, serão discutidas as contribuições teóricas de Michel Foucault e Pierre Bourdieu no que diz respeito ao desenvolvimento das ciências humanas no contexto da modernidade, bem como a forma como suas ideias fomentaram o surgimento dos estudos pós-coloniais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Verdade. Vontade de verdade. Estudos pós-coloniais. Poder.

RESUMEN: Los estudios denominados poscoloniales han desempeñado un papel significativo en las ciencias sociales al introducir una perspectiva innovadora sobre el desarrollo y las interacciones entre culturas. La presente investigación tiene como objetivo principal presentar las particularidades de estos estudios, destacando sus propósitos y las influencias académicas provenientes del llamado posestructuralismo. Para ello, se discutirán las contribuciones teóricas de Michel Foucault y Pierre Bourdieu en lo que respecta al desarrollo de las ciencias humanas en el contexto de la modernidad, así como la manera en que sus ideas fomentaron el surgimiento de los estudios poscoloniales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Verdad. Voluntad de verdade. Estudios poscoloniales. Fuerza.

Introduction

A series of authors emerged from what became known as structuralist studies, with Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault being two prominent figures in this field. Both authors share the understanding that all human society is based on symbolic exchanges. They were fundamental in bringing attention to the issue of objectivity in social sciences, highlighting how this objectivity not only neglected science as a discourse but also its condition as a product of its time and the symbolic relations that underpin research (Bourdieu, 2003; Foucault, 1996).

In other words, the authors challenge the timelessness and the absolute truth attributed to the sciences. These benefits ascribed to modern sciences arise from the development of these disciplines, as it was initially assumed that sciences were instruments of excellence to reveal the unknown truths of the world, truths that were ready to be discovered by societies as science progressed appropriately. Social sciences were not exempt from this conception of science. Durkheim, for example, in his concern to formulate methodological rules for sociology, encountered the need to seek objectivity in social studies to fulfill his objective (Durkheim, Nasseti Nasseti, 2008)[2].

Science, therefore, is the mechanism by which progress is achieved, through its potential to uncover truths. Throughout this work, the intention is to expose the critique of this notion of science, which was central during the Modern Age, by analyzing how this critique manifests and what perspectives it raises for the human sciences based on these approaches. To fulfill these objectives, we will present the thoughts of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, whose ideas, although converging in some points and diverging in others, are central to the formulation of this critique. At first, Bourdieu's critique of the conception of human practice as something mechanical or automated will be presented, demonstrating how the author formulates a theory of practice as a symbolic act. Next, we will analyze how Foucault understands every scientific assertion as discursive and historical, and what this implies. Finally, we will present how the thoughts of both authors influenced the development of what became known as postcolonial studies, and what the goals of these studies are.

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[2] The distinction between normal and pathological is based on the distinction between regular and irregular, and the definition of social fact as a "thing", that is, an object of analysis, demonstrates the objectivist character of Durkheim's research.

Truth as the Result of Symbolic Relation

As previously mentioned, the great goal of the development of sciences, in general, was to establish for the human species the power to determine what truth is and the most appropriate way to attain it. Truth, in general, was conceived as the exposition of reality, the objective apprehension of the world by human beings, as an unquestionable fact. In this sense, truth would be independent of discourse; it would be present in the world and could not be contested without incurring error. It was from this logic that various sciences developed during the Modern Age, and social sciences were no less influenced by this conception. This perspective supported a notion of history that assumed the continuity of events in succession, conditioned by linearity (Foucault, 1996). This linear view of history, combined with scientific precision, underpinned positivist thought, which was central to the consolidation and development of social sciences, but which later faced criticism from various authors.

Foucault and Bourdieu, drawing from a symbolic perspective of society previously developed by structuralists, recognized the need for a profound critique of the prevailing scientific conception of truth. As presented earlier, the notion of truth in this perspective was considered independent of symbols or discourses, that is, external to humanity, which should merely apprehend it. However, societies are structured around symbolic relations that maintain or reformulate power and domination dynamics, which, in turn, determine what is considered truth and what is not.

Bourdieu addressed the issue of assuming the objectivity and neutrality of truth in his studies on language. For him, a researcher who aims to study language, regardless of its form, cannot limit themselves to analyzing its structure objectively, ignoring the power uses that are concealed within these rigid and seemingly neutral structures.

> In brief, by not constructing practice except in a negative manner, that is, in the form of execution, objectivism is condemned either to leave unaddressed the issue of the principle of production of the regularities that it merely registers or to reify abstractions, through a paralogism that consists of treating the objects constructed by science – "culture," "structures," "social classes," "modes of production," etc. – as autonomous realities (...) (Bourdieu, 2003, p.47, our translation).

Bourdieu observes that objectivism in social sciences fails to establish a coherent understanding of social reality, limiting itself to the mere recording of visible material. In other words, by ignoring the symbolic relations that permeate society, the work of the social scientist

reduces itself to the mere documentation of the apparent, losing sight of the power dynamics and their operations. Both Bourdieu and Foucault agree that, to understand the exercise of power in social terms, it is essential to interpret the meaning attributed to the agents who exercise it and to those who are subordinated to it, analyzing the relations between symbols and the meanings they assume for individuals interacting with them.

For Bourdieu, language structure inherently carries a society's power structure. Ignoring the power dynamics present in language prevents any successful analysis, as language is not a neutral object and, therefore, cannot be treated as such. Recognizing the power that permeates it requires understanding the transfigurations and transformations of language as expressions of the mutations of symbolic power, not mere structural alterations. Bourdieu argues: "Indeed, this invisible power, which can only be exercised with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they exercise it" (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 7-8, our translation). In this sense, language is not merely a mechanical tool for communication but, above all, a vehicle through which power is manifested and reproduced.

Thus, it can be said that truth, in the study of language, lies in the way it presents itself when analyzed. Language is neither static nor external to human beings; on the contrary, truth is fundamentally defined by humans and their relationship with language. For this reason, Bourdieu concludes: "All propositions of sociological discourse should be preceded by a sign that would read 'everything happens as if...'" (Bourdieu, 2003, p.52, our translation). The neglect to recognize the mutability of symbolic phenomena leads many researchers to err by considering the human being as an agent of objective rationality whose actions would be guided exclusively by well-defined goals. This mistake is associated with the reductionist view of the human as a "*homo economicus*." From these reflections, Bourdieu asserts:

> It is necessary to abandon all theories that explicitly or implicitly take practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established schemes, "models," "norms," or "roles," which we should, by the way, assume to be infinite in number, just as are the fortuitous configurations of stimuli capable of triggering them (Bourdieu, 2003, p.57, our translation).

With this, Bourdieu does not seek to discourage studies on human and social practice but rather to critique studies that regard practice merely as objectivist and calculative, thus ignoring the powers that relate through symbols and establish order in social relations and, with it, the very social reality. In other words, social reality is imposed through power relations

sustained by symbols, which assume distinct meanings and, therefore, entail distinct power structures. In this sense, it can be said that "the real is relational" (Bourdieu, 2012, p. 28, our translation), and assuming that the real is constituted through symbolic relations, it is incoherent to seek immutable, timeless truths that precede the symbolic. Bourdieu and Foucault recognize in their studies that truth is historical, not anachronistic.

Truth, Will to Truth, and Discourse

Foucault (1996) was also a significant critic of the human sciences as a whole, particularly regarding their approach to the concept of truth. For Foucault, societies are fundamentally discursive, and these discourses exert power over society while simultaneously being controlled by it:

> Here is the hypothesis I would like to propose tonight to situate the place of the work I do: I suppose that in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to master its unpredictable event, and to evade its ponderous and formidable materiality (Foucault, 1996, p.9, our translation).

From the relationship between discourse and society, Foucault identifies that latent *logophilia* (appreciation for discourse) exists behind an apparent *logophobia* (aversion to discourse). This aversion stems from the necessity for discourses to be ordered and presented in a manner coherent with the ideas accepted by a given society. Otherwise, they are deprived of the cohesion required to attain legitimacy and relegated to the category of "mad" or "subversive" discourses. These discourses, by failing to align with parameters of discursive normality, are viewed as mere expressions of the individual desire of their emitters, distanced from societal recognition.

In this context, truth assumes a central role as the legitimizing factor of discourse. For discourses to be accepted and validated, they must align with a "will to truth," which harmonizes them with a relative consensus about what is considered true within a specific historical and cultural framework. However, Foucault contends that truth is not an element external to discourse; rather, it is the discourse itself that constructs and transforms the notion

of truth. Thus, the discursive subject is subjected to the limitations imposed by the concept of truth, and their discourses must conform to these definitions to gain legitimacy.

These limitations have practical implications. Since discourses involve power and constitute actions upon the world, they must be regulated. Institutions, in particular, are required to align their discourses with prevailing notions of truth to solidify their legitimacy. For example, laws and religious texts often base their authority on previously established events or consensuses, thereby making them resistant to challenges. The power conferred by the institution alone is frequently insufficient to ensure the effectiveness of its words.

Hence, the "will to truth" emerges as essentially a will to power. The power of discourse is realized in the interplay between discourse and truth. This notion reveals Nietzsche's influence on Foucault's perspective. As early as the 19th century, Nietzsche identified social struggles over the definition of truth as a means to legitimize certain discourses, rendering them "truer" than others (Nietzsche; Burati Burati, 2005). This dynamic was particularly evident, for example, in the domain of religion, which structured its control over believers by framing its discourses as carriers of truth.

Discourses that contradicted the certainties of religious life were deemed "mad" and, consequently, stripped of the potency of truth. Therefore, it can be asserted that Bourdieu and Foucault offer foundational contributions to the study of power, truth, and discourse by positioning truth as a discursive, symbolic, and historical phenomenon, rather than as an external reality independent of humanity. This conclusion holds significant implications for the development of the sciences, shifting the perception of the scientist from an agent pursuing an objective truth in the world to an agent legitimizing their discourse by elevating it to the status of truth.

The Critique of the Sciences

Scientific productions are also subject to the same limitations imposed by the discursive condition. For Foucault, scientific knowledge constitutes itself as scientific discourse, which implies acknowledging that interpretations of reality developed by science are not absolute. As discourses, they are subject to the constraints imposed by the notion of truth, while simultaneously contributing to its construction. Like religious discourses and other types of statements, just any individual or group cannot issue scientific discourses; specific criteria determine who is authorized to articulate what is accepted as "scientific." These criteria involve

the discourse's characteristics and its emitter's authority. Thus, the authority of a discourse lies not only in its content but also in the recognition of its source as reliable and legitimate.

Foucault argues that truth is essentially discursive and does not precede discourse. For this reason, he critiques the traditional conception of history as a continuous linearity of facts. The selection of which events are considered historical, which consequences are emphasized, and which agents are highlighted as part of the discursive formation, not an objective and external truth. For Foucault, history consists of discontinuities and is in a constant process of elaboration. The historical narrative is, therefore, a discourse shaped by specific perspectives, and those who narrate history are part of the same historical process they describe. Similarly, the scientist, in crafting a scientific discourse, is embedded in this historical context. In this sense, Foucault historicizes the sciences, arguing that all scientific discourse is historical. Ignoring this historicity leads to analyzing discourse anachronistically.

Bourdieu (2003) reinforces this perspective by criticizing the production of standardized manuals for scientific practice. According to him, each research project demands specific methods, determined by the object of analysis, the investigation's objectives, the historical moment in which it is situated, and various other contextual factors.

Foucault's conception of truth and history directly contrasts with the Hegelian notion of dialectics. For Hegel, history was driven by the clash of conflicting thoughts, whose interaction resulted in a synthesis that would, in turn, become the target of new contradictions in a continuous process. This approach establishes a structured and unidirectional relationship between ideas, with synthesis as the inevitable outcome. In contrast, Foucault rejects the linearity and universality of Hegelian dialectics, emphasizing that history and scientific discourse are characterized by plurality, contingency, and ruptures.

Foucault posits that history is constituted through the interplay between discourses and the powers associated with them. These discourses, in turn, are intrinsically diverse, rendering the notion of linearity in the progression of history, discourses, or thoughts untenable. It is worth noting that the Hegelian interpretation of the dynamics of thought and history was fundamental to the development of the human sciences. By questioning this conception, Foucault challenges the foundations of a significant portion of production in this field while proposing new guidelines for the analysis of discourse and history: "To understand discourses, it is necessary to: question the will to truth; restore to discourse its character as an event; suspend the sovereignty of the signifier" (Foucault, 1996, p. 51, our translation). Thus, Foucault suggests

that both the production of scientific material and its analysis should be regarded as discursive processes.

Building on the works of Bourdieu and Foucault, numerous studies have revisited the foundations of the human sciences, seeking new approaches to knowledge production within this field. These revisions emphasize the centrality of symbols and discourses in constructing the human and social sciences. This work, in particular, focuses on a group of thinkers known as post-colonial scholars, aiming to understand the concepts they developed regarding the social sciences and some of their central themes.

Post-Colonial Studies: Rethinking the Social Sciences

Stuart Hall (2003) was a prominent figure whose studies addressed, among other topics, the concepts of culture and nation, with the aim of understanding how these notions related to the development of Caribbean nations and their cultures. According to Hall, the European notion of culture was constructed in tandem with the consolidation of nation-states. During the Modern Era, emerging nations established cultures defined by the very concept of the nation. However, through the colonial process, this culture—initially confined to European territories—was coercively imposed on the colonies.

It can be argued that there was a forced exportation of European culture to colonized territories, such that these imposed cultures came to be viewed as "valid" and essential to European nations. Within this context, the colonies were regarded as lacking their own culture, perceived merely as reproductions of the cultures of their colonizers. Hall, however, refutes this essentialist view of culture. For him, cultures are neither inherent nor exclusive to any nation; rather, they are relational constructions, resulting from symbolic interactions between different peoples. Consequently, it is not possible to speak of "original" or "essential" cultures, as all cultures are products of the historical development of symbolic relationships, often transcending national boundaries.

Cultures, as Hall argues, interact and influence one another, even in the face of attempts to impose territorial boundaries. In this way, Hall proposes a dynamic and interconnected view of cultures, contrasting with the essentialist approaches that historically justified colonial domination.

Hall's interpretation of culture is one of the studies commonly referred to as post-colonial. Sergio Costa (2006) made an effort to synthesize the essence of these studies and the concerns raised by authors such as Hall. Costa highlights that post-colonial studies operate on the principle that all statements are made from a specific social position, which may be more or less privileged. In this context, individuals occupying underprivileged positions frequently face the erasure of their discourses, while dominant discourses persist not only because of their content but also because of the power positions they occupy.

Thus, privileged discourses leverage their status to perpetuate and consolidate their dominance, promoting their assertions as universal truths[3]. Furthermore, Costa observes that nations outside what is traditionally termed the "core countries" are often compelled to interpret reality from their disadvantaged relationship with Western nations of the Global North. This unequal relationship shapes how these nations produce knowledge and position themselves internationally.

> Hall enumerates the primary resources that, throughout the process of colonial expansion, have nurtured and constituted the West/Rest discourse. These include classical knowledge, biblical and religious sources, mythologies (such as El Dorado and sexual legends), and travelers' accounts. From these sources emerge the polarities between the West—civilized, advanced, developed, good—and the Rest—savage, backward, underdeveloped, and bad (Costa, 2006, p.119, our translation).

Post-colonial studies, therefore, aim to reconsider social relations between countries by acknowledging the marginality imposed on non-central nations, thereby exposing the hierarchical structures created among nations. The primary objective of post-colonial authors is to promote a "decolonization of the imagination" (Costa, 2006, p. 121). This entails a critique of coloniality and a transcendence of the essentialisms that sustain the distinction between center and periphery. Decolonizing the imagination involves reconfiguring the symbolic relationships that uphold coloniality. As Foucault and Bourdieu have argued, it is symbols that sustain power relations, and the reordering of these symbols and their meanings consequently reorders the totalizing forces that shape the collective imagination:

> According to Bhabha, this is not about an intervention informed by a competing system of representation, but about a boundary space, somehow

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[3] It is clear that this consideration of discourse goes back to the discussion presented previously by Foucault, in which it is concluded that all truth is discursive.

situated outside totalizing systems of signification, capable of introducing unease and revealing the fragmentary and ambivalent nature of any representational system (Costa, 2006, p. 123, our translation).

Bhabha (1998) was a significant author who brought to post-colonial studies a focus on cultural boundaries, the spaces inhabited by subjects positioned as intercultural, and the existence of a "third space" of discourse. This "third space" refers to a discourse originating from a heterogeneous locus, unbound by a specific system of representation or constrained by cultural borders. Within this third space, the inconsistencies of representational systems, including those underpinning the "*West/Rest*" domination framework, are exposed. Sergio Costa questions the possibility of a space that fully conforms to the notion of the "third space," given that every locus of discourse is inherently tied to systems of representation. Nonetheless, Costa acknowledges the significance of Bhabha's concern in emphasizing the necessity not merely of opposing the "*West/Rest*" system of representation through competition, but of exposing its flaws through cultural intersectionality, diversity, and boundary perspectives.

Although Foucault and Bourdieu did not specifically focus their studies on cultural relations between nations, their analyses of inequality and power have provided a theoretical foundation that enables the understanding and investigation of disparities between the global "center" and other nations. These studies, further developed by subsequent authors, have significantly enhanced the social sciences' ability to address power relations at the discursive level.

Final considerations

It can be concluded that post-structuralists were fundamental not only in formulating critiques of the human sciences but also in developing new interpretations of societies and their social dynamics, including cultural studies. By framing truth as a construct relative to discourse and history, these authors establish the recognition of the historicity of all enunciations as a scientific imperative. This is because every discourse is composed of symbols whose relationship to meanings is never fully exhausted.

For this reason, it becomes possible to rethink relations of domination and propose restructuring the power relations conveyed through discourses, as highlighted by post-colonial studies. The present research achieved its objective of briefly presenting the foundations of post-structuralist thought and its influence on post-colonial studies.

As a suggestion for future research, it would be valuable to explore the convergences and divergences between post-colonial and decolonial studies, both in terms of methodologies and conclusions.

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