

The Reality of Sociology and the Problems of Sociological Practice in Algerian Universities

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Abstract

This study attempts to present the reality of sociology in Algerian universities, especially in light of the economic, political, and social changes that Algeria has witnessed. We have focused on a set of theoretical and methodological issues related to the sociological practice of researchers and students in the Algerian university field, which do not respond to the social problems, generated by the Algerian social reality on the one hand and are considered obstacles to achieving a realistic developmental project on the other hand.

Keywords: Sociology, problems of sociological practice, social reality, Algerian universities.

Introduction

The emergence of sociology has passed through multiple stages despite its recent academic status in universities. It originated in Europe and spread globally, with roots dating back to ancient civilizations. Ancient Egyptian civilization formulated primitive social theories to organize society, while ancient Eastern civilizations in India and China introduced social stratification systems. In Greece, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle developed various social theories¹. Islamic civilization contributed in exploring the universe mysteries, human relationships, and societal principles². These lead to Ibn Khaldoun who was the pioneer of urban sociology in the 14th century.

¹ Article published on "Mawdoo3" titled the Emergence and Development of Sociology, accessed on 08/03/2021 at 14:00. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/mtc686sf>.

² Ahmed Raafat Abdel Djawad, Principles of Sociology, Egypt, Nahdat Al-Sharq Library, Cairo University, 1st edition, 1982, p.6.

Modern sociology appeared alongside other humanities disciplines within philosophy. It was an interesting topic among philosophers until it had evolved into an independent science with specific fields, precise laws, and valid research methodology³. Thus, sociology emerged from modern philosophy in the 19th century. Auguste Comte coined the term “sociology” in 1830 and quickly gained academic recognition. Herbert Spencer authored the first dedicated work on sociology in the United States, followed by prominent founders such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. Universities in Europe and America established dedicated sociology departments within the faculties of human science, and global sociology associations formed in the 19th and 20th centuries⁴.

In Algeria, sociology arrived during French colonization and introduced by numerous colonial sociologists who studied Algerian society’s social, cultural, and economic structures. While some studies served colonial ideologies, others were rigorous academic endeavours. Scholars like Jacques Berque (1910-1995) and Masqueray (1883-1994) contributed significantly to Algerian sociology, studying various Algerian tribes and cultures. Colonel Cornell Trimble played a pivotal role as a historian of colonial sociology in Algeria and Africa as a whole⁵.

Statement of the Problem

Since its independence in 1962, sociology has been taught in all Algerian universities and university centres. The number of students and teachers involved in this field has multiplied, and hundreds of sociological studies have been conducted within the Algerian academic field. Despite this vast amount of sociological studies since independence to the present day, they have not reached the desired level of diagnosing the social problems faced by Algerian society.

We will shed light on the issues that have made the sociological practice of university researchers unable to express and respond to the social problems produced by the Algerian social reality. Instead, they often provide explanations in pre-made and imported templates

³ Ibid, p.6.

⁴ Article published on “Mawdoo3” titled the Emergence and Development of Sociology, accessed on 08/03/2021 at 15:00. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/mtc686sf>.

⁵ Derdiche Ahmed, the Reality and Position of Sociology in Algeria, Afak Journal of Sociology , V 7, No1, 2017, pp.81-82.

that interpret social realities and problems of other societies. This results in a confused discourse without any scientific, epistemological, or foundational merits, failing to establish a productive change-inducing foundation which is to produce a sociology that establishes our cognitive space and social context. Therefore, we ask the following central question:

- What is the reality of sociology and sociological practice in Algerian universities?
- What are the most significant theoretical and methodological issues in the production and practice of sociology in Algerian universities?
- Does this sociological practice respond to the social problems produced by Algerian social reality?

To answer these questions, the present work will showcase the reality of sociology in Algerian universities on one hand, and present the most significant problems in the sociological practice of researchers on the other hand. It will also deal with the following topics:

1-Definition of Study Concepts

1-1 Sociology

Sociology is a branch of social sciences at Algerian universities. It is a liberating science aims to break the dependency and domination imposed on society and serve the concerns of the citizen by offering suggestions for solving social problems. Sociology also works to liberate minds from alien concepts, provide critical ideas about the observed conditions and clarify what is happening in society⁶.

1-2 Theory in Sociology

Social theory has been defined differently within the realm of sociology. It is a general declarative judgement of social phenomena. A sociologist seeks to reach a deeper analytical level than merely describing some limited and isolated facts. To achieve a different level of analysis, the theory covers a number of similar phenomena and tries to crystallize the

⁶ Belaiour Tahar, the Reality of Sociology in Algeria, Journal of Social Studies, V5, No1, 2013, p.19.
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similarities and explain the differences between them. Hence, the theory aims to explain social phenomena⁷.

Overall, social researchers are inspired and guided by the theory in aspects related to their studies. They also use it as a reference for the sociological analysis and the interpretive framework for the studied phenomenon.

1-3 Sociological Practice

It is the practice that carried out by sociological researchers to understand social life in relationship between action and structure. Sociological practice emerges from the particularity of social reality, understand it, and diagnose it to resolve its contradictions. It is the training in sociology, including programs, theses, dissertations, and peer-reviewed publications recognized by the scientific and academic community. This practice may be expressed through the sociological method and relied on the sociological approach⁸.

1-4 Sociological Research

Sociological research is defined similarly to scientific research but with a focus on social life and its phenomena as its study subjects. It follows the same path as other scientific research, beginning with a social phenomenon that is ambiguous or needs explanation. This research requires systematic procedures and well-structured plan and design⁹.

1-5 Social Reality

It is challenging to find a comprehensive definition that includes all elements of social reality as it is invisible; it cannot be physically touched. It is the underlying pattern from which repetitive social relations among people emerge. It allows sociologists to determine the expected behaviour. Sociological practice revolves around this.

⁷ Mil Cherton, Ann Brown, *Sociology : Theory and Method*, Translated by Hana Al-Djawhari , 1st edition, Cairo, National Centre for Translation, 2012, p. 21.

⁸ Danaga Ahmed, the Reality of Sociological Practice in Algerian Universities from the Perspective of Sociology Teachers, *Dirassat Journal*, V 5, No1, 2016, pp. 314-315.

⁹ Faudel Delio, et al. *The Foundations of Methodology in Social Sciences*, University of Constantine Publications, 1999, p.15.

1-6 Epistemological Awareness

It refers to the relationship the researcher creates with his/her subject. It means the awareness of the subject while maintaining objectivity so that sociology becomes the epistemological principle of sociology¹⁰.

1-7 Scientific Method in Sociology

The method is a set of mental processes through which any science aims to reach the desired truths. These are concrete patterns in organizing research steps¹¹. Research methods in sociology are the backbone of social knowledge for sociologists, varying across theoretical and intellectual schools. They are also effective tools that help social researchers in collecting both theoretical and field data¹².

2- Sociology and Sociological Practice in Algerian Universities

Within the relationship between the university system and the social environment it interacts with, the university represents an intellectual structure in light of the radical changes in Algerian society, particularly in its political and ideological aspects. However, it is influenced by the expressive tendency of the broad social base. Since its inception, the Algerian university has undergone profound changes, especially in the field of humanities and social sciences, with a specific focus on sociology.

The teaching of humanities and social sciences has seen numerous fluctuations since 1962. The primary role of universities is to create and share knowledge, but in social sciences, this can conflict with social and political influences. The political system has frequently intervened, hindering the adherence to scientific standards in knowledge production. Initially, the focus was on achieving sacred principles, such as “Algerianization”, Arabization, and democratization of education, without respecting their rules and potential consequences. On this ground, the research activity was no longer a basis for evaluation and recognition of competence, both within and outside the university. This leads to the abandonment of external competence, leaving a noticeable gap in the realization of the national sociology.

¹⁰ Danaga Ahmed, Ibid, p.315.

¹¹ Grawitz Madeleine. *Methods of Social Sciences*, Paris, Dalloz, 1965, p. 285.

¹² Ihsan Mohamed El-Hassan, *Social Research Methods*, 1st edition, Amman, Jordan, Wael Publishing House, 2005, pp.5-6.

In their early stages, higher education institutions were established with inadequate resources to bear the consequences of democratic and free education at the expense of its quality. This impacted sociology through weak student interaction and lack of training for sociology students, not meeting labour market demands. Sociology practice in Algeria reveals superficiality in sociological thinking, where sociology emerged as a distinct discipline. This science became puzzled by new social phenomena resulting from the collapse of socialism and the rise of a new system. Sociological practice returned to the initial question: What is sociology? What does it study? Although new schools were appeared to reconsider the definition of sociology and its subject matter, there were disagreement on its topic and methods. Therefore, it was said that sociology has “many methods but few results.” In Algerian universities, sociological research has become more distorted compared to the global trend. Studies often justify this at the expense of critical thinking, which uncover all the stakes within social systems and their interactions with dominant social groups¹³.

One researcher on sociological practice in Algerian universities began with the following paragraph: “The sociological experience in Algeria is a phenomenon in itself. This appeared in the outcomes of this experience in the form of researches conducted in the sociology department.” This reality reflects a huge knowledge produced annually by the Algerian sociology or social sciences departments. However, the question is the extent to which this contributes to societal development through practical approaches and the quality of knowledge used in various studies. Do these studies truly establish a genuine research practice? This self-research question leads to a deeper inquiry into the reality of sociological practice in Algerian universities. A reality that has been discussed widely in scientific events and studies, painting the prevailing image of weak, detached, and misunderstood sociological research incapable of achieving a realistic development project.

More than two decades ago, an Algerian researcher “Anser Al-Ayashi”, posed a crucial question reflecting a knowledge reality that we still experienced today in states of awareness, alienation, ignorance, and intellectual weakness: Is it crisis or the absence of sociology? Now, it is a matter of political and sociological marginalization through its integration into “social sciences,” which strip its academic and cognitive distinctiveness,

¹³ Danaga Ahmed, *Sociological Practice in Algerian Universities between Epistemological Awareness and Social Reality*, Doctoral Thesis in Organizational Sociology, University of Algiers 2, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2015-2016, pp.150-152.

make it an undesirable follower, relegated to the bottom of the list, with the least demand for enrolment. Many students studied this field are compelled, facing a political and cognitive situation where social sciences remain a passive observer of imbalances due to the increased focus on technology.

In this context, Jamal Maatouq confirmed that sociology in Algeria was distant from the social environment. It failed to respond to unemployment, poverty, development and freedom issues. Sociology was limited to the pedagogical field. It was a cultural orientation existed within the societal religious structure. This is because of the developmental movement in the mid-1980s which focused on industrialization and technology for economic progress and left human and social sciences as passive observers of the resulting imbalances¹⁴.

3- Problems of Sociological Practice in Algerian Universities

In this section, we will present the main issues facing sociological practice in the Algerian universities, including:

3-1 Problems of the Dominance of Foreign Concepts and Ideologies and the Role of Sociology in Algerian Universities

Many sociological researchers confirmed that academic sociology is still dependent on foreign ideologies. As rapid scientific changes impose the need to acquire new knowledge, sociology is in deeper crisis than any other science. This negatively affects sociological practice because it is dependent on Western sociology.

In this vein, Ali El-Kenz explained:” Being positive towards the Western sociological theories made us proficient in education, but it did not offer the necessary tools to address the issues of our reality, which differs in its structure from the Western one. Therefore, most

¹⁴ Noura Guenifa, Sociological Theory between the Intellectual Representation of Sociology Teachers and Real Practice – or the Other Face of the Sociology Crisis in Algerian Society, Journal of Social Studies and Research, Martyr Hamma Lakhder University, El-Oued, Issue 20, December 2016, p.137.

research is fruitless as it at best results in the collection of experimental data that is reassembled into artificial issues that do not align with reality.”¹⁵

Several concepts in the social and human sciences belong to the Western knowledge production machine, such as Asia and Latin America. Concepts related to dependency theories, development, globalization, conflict of civilizations, modernity, post-modernity, and discourse analysis have not been significantly contributed to by Arab universities. This has led to a severe crisis in sociological studies in Arab universities, manifested in theoretical dependence on the Western knowledge. Regarding the role of social and human sciences in Algerian universities, Abderrahmane Moussaoui admitted that, we are far from the intended role of these sciences. He noted that there is a significant gap between us and the genuine social studies that the West had previously achieved; this requires a re-evaluation of our sociological heritage. Besides, he stated, “Sociology was adopted in Algerian universities since the independence because of its virtues, political innocence, and its consideration as an alternative to ethnology. The Algerian sociologists should not only work for the social truth but also assist the state in development projects and national unity building. Thus, Algeria needs sociology to play the same role towards the national state as ethnology did towards the colonial project.”

Algeria adopted a developmental policy to eradicate the crisis. This policy imposed the university as an active participant in the training process. Consequently, sociological research automatically submitted to the same policy and sociological discourse. It was necessary for sociology to engage in the Algerian developmental process that aimed at liberation from all forms of dependency. In this way, sociology became a liberating science to eliminate dependency and achieve social prosperity by finding solutions to problems and paying attention to all social groups¹⁶.

3-2 Problems of Scientific Methodology and Techniques in Sociological Research

Since its inception, methodology has been a major concern for sociology as the quest for methodology equates to the quest for science within the philosophical framework. The

¹⁵Souha Hamzaoui, Samia Kouachi, Issues of Sociology in the Arab World, Journal of Human and Social Sciences, Issue 28, March 2017, p.94.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 97-98.

sociology's methodological crisis represents in using the methods of natural sciences in the study of human and social phenomena with the purpose of achieving the same precision reached out by natural sciences.

Methodology is regarded as the correct way to reach accurate results in less time and effort. Nevertheless, it has not adapted to the subject matter of sociology, which remains undefined. Consequently, methodologies have multiplied with the subjects, and the cognitive conflict within the sociological framework has intensified. The subject of sociology has become an internal struggle over the best methodology, tool, and technique¹⁷.

The choice of certain topics and methodological approaches in Arab sociological research practices has reflected on the methodological design and implementation of studies. These studies are mostly conducted using quantitative data collection tools like observation and surveys, which have become synonymous with field investigation. However, the problem is not in these tools but in their incorrect use, reliance on them alone or in combination, and their unsuitability to the research objectives. These tools, like theories, are subject to cultural relativity. As Ezzat Hidjazi stated, "It is common that these tools are subject to cultural relativity. It means that their value and usefulness are tied to the cultural context in which they were originally prepared and used. Hence, taking them from one cultural context to another without significant modifications is unacceptable."

Relying on specific tools and using them incorrectly without understanding their complexities leads to numerous shortcomings in information. Meanwhile, there are valuable data in every subject have not uncovered yet. Some tools' potential are unexplored. In light of this, Abdel Basset Abdel Mouti said, "Since the survey design lacks a defined theoretical framework, the researcher creates items and formulates questions that trap the respondent into giving the answers the researcher wants and making the situation artificial. Then, we arrive at results of the same kind, claiming that this is the starting point of sociological research"¹⁸.

3-3 The Problems of Employing Theoretical Approaches in Sociological Research by Sociology Students

¹⁷ Imad AL-Dine Khouani, the Development of Western Sociology from Emergence to Crisis, Journal of Social and Human Sciences, Issue 12, Batna University, 2005, p. 106.

¹⁸ Souha Hamzaoui, Samia Kouachi, Ibid, p.96.

The debate among sociologists about the relationship between theory and sociological research is ongoing. Some argue that theory is important as it outlines the research parameters and helps researchers understand their study topic. Any sociological research has a theoretical background that enables the researcher to understand the topic and progress in the research process. Thus, the relationship between theory and sociological research becomes evident because the research approach serves as a method of research design that encompasses all aspects of the research from selecting the research question to answering it.

Sociological research is not just a set of information gathered by observations or questionnaires; it should have a theoretical background that clarifies the problem and determines the research methodology. Many books on scientific research do not specifically highlight how to employ theoretical backgrounds in scientific research but rather make brief references, if any. These is also the case in the theses of undergraduate, master's, and even some doctoral students in sociology across its various branches and specializations.

The sociological researcher must familiarize with theories related to his/her study and frame it within an appropriate theoretical framework, from the title selection to the study's conclusion. The adopted approach should be evident in the title and clearly appear in the problem statement by incorporating the ideas of the theory's pioneers. The problem should be written based on their assumptions and the variables defined according to the theoretical concepts. Finally, the researcher should base the sociological analysis of the field work on the assumptions and concepts of the theory they adopted in the study¹⁹.

4- Problems in Sociological Treatment or Analysis by Sociology Students

Analysis refers to the process of understanding phenomena by separating their elements and identifying their characteristics and the relationships between them. Sociological Analysis involves breaking down the whole into simpler components, unlike synthesis which involves reconstructing parts into whole units. This is done based on the methodological and

¹⁹ Fakia Azaq, Afaf Baoun, the Problem of Employing Theoretical Approaches in Sociological Research, study published on the Algerian Encyclopaedia of Political and Strategic Studies website, accessed on 10/03/2021 at 15:17 at the link: <https://tinyurl.com/muccajz>

theoretical rules of sociology. Overall, analysis is used when studying social phenomena with the aim of interpreting them and identifying the factors leading to them²⁰.

Addressing the issue of sociological treatment and presentation by sociology students, Naoual Bouhzam, a researcher from the University of Mascara, conducted a study entitled “The Problem of Sociological Research between Self and Other.” It was a field study to identify the framework in which sociology is being treated nowadays. She analyzed 33 master’s theses of sociology at Mascara University (2011). They were 18 theses in educational sociology and 15 in religious sociology. The researcher attained the following conclusions:

- Most of the problems posed in these studies lacked serious sociological treatment as she dealt with phenomena as social data rather than reconstructing reality within a theoretical and logical framework that enables prediction, a distinguishing feature of sociological researchers.
- The study also found that the theoretical usage lacked epistemological caution (preserving societal specificity) which leads to intellectual slips and the separation of theoretical part from the field one.
- These studies focused more on description based on the questionnaire, without interpretation and analysis linking field data to the literature review.
- There was a conceptual and methodological confusion between educational sociology and educational sciences and between religious sociology, philosophy of religion, and anthropology of religion.

Thus, the sociological approach remains far from the sociological treatment provided in theses, especially in the theoretical part where concepts dominate without any justification for the approach in terms of reality and the obtained results. This is due to the student’s lack of understanding of the importance of adopting such theories. In this case, sociological practice which means understanding the meanings that intellectual frameworks argue with social data is absent. This leads to the alienation of the researcher from their reality. The adoption of the intellectual arsenal without understanding, conducting statistical data,

²⁰ Mahmoud Abu Al-KhairAhmed, Sociological Analysis between Meaning and Purpose, study published online, accessed on 10/3/2021 at 16:00 at the link: <https://tinyurl.com/4pbs8ntj>

explaining the procedural field, and performing sociological analysis have all contributed to the end of sociology²¹.

5- Problems of Social Reality and Epistemological Awareness for Sociological Researchers

The issue of theorizing and employing theories remains central in many academic sociological endeavours. There is a noticeable abundance of theoretical knowledge that has constrained deep thinking and made the research practice of the Algerian researcher (Naoual Bouhzam) more akin to consumption and imitation. This is because she relied on the intellectual framework of the other, with its strong conceptual arsenal, which we may fail to understand its relevance in a particular research context.

The Western sociological heritage inspires many researchers because of its significant contribution to the development of Western sociology in the 20th century. It is a conceptualization that encapsulates Western social reality in a universal static form to build upon, so we should activate it to consider local specificities and provide appropriate interpretations. This prevents social realities from being confined with sociological theoretical moulds and shifts the focus to the alignment between models and social phenomena, rather than contemplating how Western theory can aid in questioning the current reality, which must be central to the sociologist's profession. Abderrezzak Amokrane added, a sociologist at Algerian universities does not write because he does not want to be a man of rupture but an extension of societal expectations that his ambition deny to rise to an image other than the one given by society. By doing so, he breaks away from the epistemology he is supposed to represent²².

Furthermore, sociologists must have epistemological awareness of reality, which means awareness of the subject with the sense of objectivity. To become a sociologist, it implies making the sociology a fundamental principle for the epistemology of the sociology. This forms awareness among sociological practising researchers and establishes a connection between existing sociological practices and how they should be in the future by correcting

²¹ Naoual Bouhzam, the Sociologist's Problem between the Self and the Other, Journal of Social Studies and Research, Martyr Hamma Lakhder University, El-Oued, Issue 16, 2016, pp. 84-85.

²² Noura Guenifa, Ibid, pp.138-139
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errors in the principles, hypotheses, and scientific results. This is to ensure a stronger connection with social problems produced in the same reality that generated the phenomenon. In short, it is the awareness of the current conditions of knowledge production, which are originally Western, and the extent of their applicability to Algerian social reality. The issue is to look for a sociological theory that can explain the social reality problems. Epistemological anxiety, the attempt to find an Arab sociology, and the sociological practice crisis in universities and research institutions has been discussed in various seminars, conferences, and publications. All call for the re-establishment of this science²³.

Conclusion

Sociology is concerned with addressing real problems of society. This is especially true in recent years, following the reforms in Algeria that have impacted the higher education sector to develop scientific research. These reforms have covered all disciplines, including sociology. Sociological research has relatively gained academic freedom which was restricted during the foundational phase. Nowadays, sociology teachers and students are free to investigate facts, conduct scientific research, publish and distribute their work, and even engage in academic endeavours without administrative, political, social, or religious interference. This freedom extends to protecting the university as a producer of knowledge. Now, the ball is in the court of sociology students and teachers to:

- Restore the value of this discipline and address the problems related to sociological practice by publishing sociological studies that meet the required standards. This contributes to the social development of Algerian society through an epistemological awareness of sociological practice that stems from the specificities of the Algerian social reality, necessitating liberation from dependency on foreign concepts and theories. The classical or modern sociological theories were not originally designed to analyze Algerian society but rather to explain the dynamics of Western societies.

- Direct sociology and sociological research to serve Algerian society and its social realities.

- Use appropriate scientific methodologies and approaches in sociological research to solve Algerian societal problems.

²³ Danaga Ahmed, Ibid, Doctoral Thesis in Organizational Sociology, pp. 33-34.

-Conduct serious sociological analysis when dealing with phenomena as social data and attempt to reconstruct social reality within a theoretical and logical framework that enables prediction and foresight in sociology.

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