

Peripheral position in social theory

Limitations of social research and dissertation writing in Iran

Posição periférica em teoria social

Limitações para fazer pesquisa social e escrever teses no Irã

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Abstract: Two groups of factors have contributed to the formation of Iranian associations and academic individuals' status as peripheral in the international social science academic arena. First group consists of external factors such as prevailing euro centrism, English language hegemony and inevitable political-economic problems. Second group of factors are internal factors. Iranian academics' and academic organizations' attitudes towards researchers' choices of their research topics, preferred methodologies and applied theories, has resulted in aridity and stagnation of social research in Iran. Excessive emphasis on positivist paradigm, quantitative research, arbitrary interpretation of indigenization of social science and lack of problem oriented research, have led to the contemporary ambiguous status of social sciences in Iran.

Keywords: Generalization. Indigenization. Local theory. Periphery. Problem-oriented. Qualitative research. Iran.

Resumo: Dois grupos de fatores contribuem para a formação do status de associações científicas e de acadêmicos iranianos individualmente como periféricos na arena acadêmica internacional das ciências sociais. O primeiro grupo consiste em fatores externos, tais como o persistente eurocentrismo, a hegemonia do idioma inglês e os inevitáveis problemas político-econômicos. O segundo grupo de fatores é de ordem interna. A atitude dos acadêmicos e das organizações acadêmicas iranianas em relação às escolhas dos pesquisadores relativas a seus temas de pesquisa, suas metodologias preferidas e às teorias que preferem têm resultado em aridez e estagnação da pesquisa social no Irã. Uma ênfase excessiva no paradigma positivista, na pesquisa quantitativa, interpretação arbitrária da indigenização da ciência social e a carência de pesquisa orientada por problemas levaram ao status atual ambíguo das ciências sociais no Irã.

Palavras-chave: Generalização. Indigenização. Teoria local. Periferia. Pesquisa qualitativa. Irã.

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Introduction

Iranian sociological streams and trends are, as in some other eastern countries, deeply affected and dominated by western scholars' thoughts and theories. The centres, which are variable relative to the peripheral contexts, export theories and approaches, in the case of Iran, mostly through translation of American and British books and articles, for which we provide empirical data over and over. The Iranian social inquiry seems to have very small contribution to the international literature of social science in terms of theorizing ability. What we call Iranian social science, more than a specific locally recognizable current, is the empirical body of literature produced to test imported theories inside the borders of a political entity named Iran.

This paper is inspired by the discussions which took place at the the 12th international laboratory of sociology for doctorate candidates. The laboratory was held by the International Sociological Association at the University of Sydney in July 2013. The laboratory, themed 'towards a global sociology', focused on issues such as the relationship between centers and peripheries (or alternatively the global south and the global north) and the possibility of building a global sociology. My position as one of the chosen doctorate candidates to participate/present at the laboratory and as an observant, enabled me to compare the current trends of inquiry in Iran and other central/peripheral contexts.

In this paper I will try to articulate some of the differences of the academic inquiry trends in sociology between Iran and other countries especially the dominant centres which have constructed most of the prominent sociological discourses. By assuming that social sciences' status in Iran is ambiguous and they have rare obvious implications (Iranian Sociological Association Report, 2010; Mehdizade, 2013), and by addressing prevalent methodological and paradigm choices in Iranian higher education institutions, I will try to illustrate some of the factors contributing to the underdevelopment of social sciences in Iran. I will especially focus on important factors that are taken in to consideration in writing a master's or doctorate degree level dissertation in Iran and will try to illustrate what the sources of the problems of the currently dominant trends in Iranian academia are.

My observations about trends of Iranian dissertation writing are based on my being educated in Iran and my observations about dissertation writing in other countries are shaped through my participation at the 12th ISA laboratory for doctorate candidates of sociology as well as my studies, and participation in other international events and conferences and in which I have informally

interviewed several master degree or doctorate candidates of social science fields working on their dissertations.

I will adopt a critical point of view in discussing Iranian academics' and academic organizations' attitudes towards researchers' and higher education students' choices of their research topics, preferred methodologies and applied theories. I will explain how putting limitations on young researchers' choices in these three important parts of research, namely topic selection, theory and methodology has resulted in aridity and stagnation of social research in Iran.

Peripheral status in geo-politics of social theory

The fact that Iranian associations and academic individuals are peripheral in the vast internationally connected groups of scholars, ideas and approaches, has many roots. I suggest that we can find external factors (affecting the social science discourse in Iran from outside Iranian borders) which contribute to this situation; but internal factors also exist. The possible external factors are:

First, Prevailing euro centrism in the social sciences (Wallerstein, 1996; cited in Alatas 2003), and the academic imperialism of the Northern countries in relation to the South (Alatas, 2000) has been suggested to have contributed to create processes that produce and reproduce inequalities in the formulation and dissemination of knowledge, especially of social theory.

Second, English language hegemony has contributed to the prevalence of researches produced in western and especially English speaking centers (Report on Unesco Conference, 2011), and widespread poor command of English language among Iranian (and I suppose other nationalities) scholars has created an obstacle against developing functional scientific connections outside the borders of the country.

Third, the political-economic situation of the scholars and the country itself plays a key role in the relative isolation of Iranian scholars. Due to the dominant worldwide political restrictions, Iranian scholars have been experiencing difficulty in becoming members of international associations or taking part in academic events which take place outside their country's borders. These structurally applied economic and political restrictions are affecting the careers of many academics including social science researchers. Iranian nationals can travel only to 40 countries either without visa or by getting visa up on arrival to the destination. These countries are mostly located in South Africa or East Asia or are Iran's neighbors in the Middle East, and which are mostly considered peripheral or semi-peripheral in the global geopolitics of sociological theory. The visa grant procedure for other developed countries is usually difficult, time consuming and costly.

Apart from the external factors suggested as above, in what follows I will illustrate some of internal factors which have hindered the development of social sciences in Iran.

Interpretivism or positivism

The problem of generalisation

To start the argument about the first category of the red topics, I will pose a basic questions with answering to which the discussion about utilization of qualitative or quantitative methodologies in Iranian social inquiry might come to a conclusion; the questions which is rarely addressed directly is, ‘is sociology constrained to hold a positivist approach in order to be able to generalize its outcomes?’ or, ‘assuming that generalization is the ultimate scope, is it impossible for interpretive approach to contribute to it?’

There has always been an argument among sociologists about the differences of the positivist and interpretive paradigms or as Williams (2000) suggests quantitative or qualitative inquiry. The nature of this argument is deeply methodological. As Lindlof puts it, quantitative researchers conduct tests of prediction and control, while qualitative researchers try to deeply understand their objects of interest (Lindlof, 1995). The latter has sometimes been considered having limits in generalizing the outcomes (Joniak, not dated) and has been considered by others to be able to generalize (Williams, 2000).

Generalization is an important discussion in sociology; it has been acknowledged to be the basis of scientific reasoning (Payne and Williams, 2005, p. 295). The dominant academic trend in Iranian sociology encourages generalization and therefore conducting positivist research, claiming that it offers the best possibility of generalization. By responding ‘yes’ to the first question I posed at the beginning of this section, this trend believes that the ultimate scope of sociology is to generalize the findings by using a particularistic orientation and by applying quantitative methodology; as a result, all other forms of inquiry which do not produce generalizable outcomes of the expected nature (with quantitative outcomes) fall in to the sphere of other disciplines such as anthropology, if not automatically highlighted in red or considered weak inquiry.

Qualitative/interpretive approach is especially discouraged in higher education dissertation writing. Despite students’ interest in applying qualitative approaches, the discouragement mostly comes from the supervising faculty members who are experienced representatives of the current trends in social sciences.

The opponents of this approach which claims qualitative research outcome is not generalizable, believe that no matter how micro-level a research is, how unique the context and what form of outcome is produced (typology, thick description, discourse analysis, ...), results of a case study are always a reflection of a broader cultural context. Its results, conceptualized to theories or conceptual frameworks, can turn in to potential bedrocks for other sociocultural contexts having similar or opposite elements. So even though interpretivists might not aim generalization as a goal as suggested by Denzin (1983), the extracted or constructed notions from a particular situation can be applied in similar social settings. Williams (2000) has called this ‘moderatum generalization’, which refers to ‘where aspects of [a certain society] can be seen to be instances of a broader recognizable set of features. This is the form of generalization made in interpretive research, either knowingly or unknowingly’.

A few number of prominent Iranian social science scholars work in the framework of interpretivist paradigm and have questioned the dominant trends of social inquiry in Iranian academia. Abolhasan Tanhaei, one of the few representatives of symbolic interactionism for example, believes that Iranian sociology has fallen in to the trap of methodological reductionism by prioritizing all forms of statistical analysis to all other methodological approaches (Tanhaei, 1993; Mohammad Fazeli, 2007). Nematollah Fazeli (2013a) has also referred to excessive concentration on quantitative and positivist approaches as a weakening factor in Iranian social science researches.

Whether generalization is only possible in the framework of positivist approach or not, the fact stays valid that eliminating interpretivism from legitimate research methods and sometimes even from the curriculum is a damaging attitude for the achievements of social science researches.

The problem of indigenization

What has been called ‘indigenization’ or sometimes ‘islamization of human sciences’ and has been a hot topic in Iranian academic arena started after Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 and is still an ongoing project. Several interpretations have been made over the essence of indigenization. There have been suggestions to integrate the social sciences and Islamic beliefs by lifting the conflict between religion and materialist ideologies of social sciences (Bagheri, 2008; Aghahoseini, 2010). This perception which has its roots in the criticism of orientalist (or more broadly, western) knowledge, questions the validity of theories, concepts and scientific data produced by west, claiming

that the colonialist character of intricate power relations between west and east has contributed to the production of the false and unreliable knowledge which has imposed itself to less powerful contexts through political domination (Mostafavi, 2000).

An alternative interpretation to 'islamization' exists and states that indigenization does not refer to the separationist ideas which believe in the restriction of theories either to west or east (Monadi, 2010, p. 109). This group believe that the thorough negation of the knowledge produced because of orientalist ideological and hegemonic character (or alternatively colonial, corrupt, imposed) should not result in the denial of all modern forms of knowledge with a western background which must be considered as the achievements by all humanity rather than by a demonized west (Serajzade, 2009). In the latter perception of indigenization process, the aim is on building local theories by acknowledging the global frameworks rather than a radical rejection of them.

Lack of local theories has been an important debate among Iranian social scientists. Inability to build social theories consistent with the context of Iranian society is a widely approved fact and is considered problematic for the literature of social science produced in Iran, because it has rare applicability and policy implication in its context.

Apart from the discussion about indigenization and regardless of existing criticism about such a project in Iran, building local theories and concepts compatible with the local context is a global issue. Social science scholars around the world have discussed that centers have been in charge of building social theories and providing conceptual frameworks and materials for researchers working in peripheral countries who put these theories in to test and at best provide empirical data to evaluate, validate or out rule them (Alatas, 2003; Sinha, 2000; Mignolo, 2000).

The discussion over building local theories can be integrated in to the debates on methodological priorities and the prevalence of positivist approach in Iranian social inquiry. It has been suggested that defending positivist approach and emphasizing on utilization of statistical methods which produce second hand data cannot result in a big switch in social theory, while qualitative approaches have a higher potential of building new concepts and theories on the deeply studies social contexts (Monadi, 2009).

Whether we approve of one of the possible interpretations of the so-called 'indigenization process' or the construction of local theories, eliminating some approaches from possible ranges of methodology and theory would reduce analytical ability. Despite being local in some aspects, social theories produced

in west have proved to bear the potential of contributing to development of both social research and practice in peripheral contexts.

Problem oriented inquiry in postgraduate dissertations

Relationship inside academic institutions are based and shaped on the basis of mutual trust. It is a fact that most faculty members have enough experience to recognize an inappropriate research topic in terms of practicality, for a postgraduate dissertation. Despite this fact that many rejected topics might fall between the impractical or inappropriate topics, there are other subjects which are rejected for other reasons which I will articulate in what follows.

Many postgraduate degree students deal with the topic selection complications in Iran. Topics are usually selected based on supervisors' research interests and specialties. While supervisors can expand their knowledge by entering in to new research arenas, they mostly prefer the safety of the theories and methods they are already familiar with. Postgraduate students in Iran face unnecessarily strict rules when they want to submit a dissertation research proposal.

Topic selection is an important part of postgraduate thesis project. According to many prominent social science thinkers, such as Weber, the topic selection is a part of a social research in which researchers can let their individual ideas and interests interfere with the project (Weber, 2011). Choosing a topic according to one's own research interests and sometimes personal background, encourages the researcher to perform better and fulfil the relevant tasks with higher degrees of effort and interest.

Today, there are few social science scholars holding the 19th century idea that social sciences can be approached the same way as natural and exact sciences. It is a widely accepted idea among social scholars that the socio-economic and political status of the researcher has an inevitable effect on the research topic, methodology and even the expected results (Fakouhi, 2009: 115). This effect is a necessary and natural part of social research because it makes it genuine and reflective.

Iran is a developing country, facing fast and immense changes especially in terms of culture and social relations. This is a source of many social problems specific to societies which are socially in transition. In such a situation, the social sciences are expected to be attentive to the current issues and be problem oriented. However, it seems that two types of problems have been systematically eliminated from conducted social inquiries: first, some chronic and persistent problems which have not attracted attention due to being taken for granted,

lack of scientific traditions and weakness of social science authority; second, new emerging problems caused by changes of Iranian society in all aspects (Khaniki, 2010, p. 180). Khaniki discusses that Iranian research and literature lack critical and problem oriented thinking because of being dominated by conservative scientific approaches (Khaniki, 2010, p. 181) which interdict researchers entrance to specific spheres. The topic selection process is though manipulated because of the lack of a certain consistent project or focus on new emerging social problems. While most young post graduate candidates, who are mostly independent researchers try to work on newly emerging problems or scrutinize the bases of the stemming social problems, many faculty members and researchers dependant on universities or other public institutions, prefer to hold their ground by offering safe, easily practicable and widely approved topics and statistical methodologies rather than interpretivist approaches to their students.

Public universities are in charge of higher education and under government's direct supervision in a large scale in Iran. Some scholars believe that the formal supervision practiced in universities, especially the public universities which have the biggest share of higher education and the most vigorous departments of social science, is conducted through disciplinary committees and governmental security institutions and prevents the emergence of required incentives for new research (Moradzade, 2013). In such a political ambient in which structural regulations rule, individual agencies are also denied (Fazeli, 2013b), a consequence of which is the reduction of the range of research topic options and referral to subjects which are considered to be neutral rather than problematic issues of the society.

Discussion and conclusion

I started the discussion by the assumption that Iranian social science institutions and academics are peripheral in the global arena of social science due to some external and internal factors. I also suggested that social sciences do not have obvious position, status or policy implications in Iranian society and still struggle to obtain the minimum degree of authority and take role in official policy makings.

External factors such as prevailing euro centrism in the social sciences, English language hegemony and some inevitable global political-economic problems have been suggested to have contributed to the emergence of peripheral countries such as Iran in the geopolitics of social theory.

Apart from external factors, significantly effective internal factors must also be taken in to consideration; among these, the prevalence of

quantitative approach and denial of the same status for qualitative approach in methodology have limited available research tools for social researchers and have also reduced the possibility of making local theories. Extensive emphasis on applying positivist approach and emphasizing on utilization of statistical methods which produce second hand data cannot result in a significant turn over in the social theory. There have been suggestions by Iranian scholars that some chronic and persistent problems have not attracted attention for reasons such as being taken for granted by people or academics as the natural consequences of the current social setting, lack of scientific traditions and weakness of social science authority which does not have the required autonomy.

Ignoring the newly emerging problems caused by recent and fast changes in Iranian society is one of the existing problems in the social inquiry in Iran. Iranian social research and literature lack critical and problem oriented thinking because of being dominated by conservative attitudes and scientific approaches.

Formal ambient of public universities in which structural regulations and government supervision are existent, has limited individual agency. In such a situation, referral to subjects which are considered to be neutral rather than problematic issues of the society is an expected conduct by faculty members whom are employees. For this reason, Iranian academics and academic organizations manipulate students' choices of their research topics, preferred methodologies and applied theories. These issues have created obstacles against the dynamic nature of the social sciences.

Putting such limitations on researchers' choices in the three important stages of research, namely topic selection, theory selection and methodology has resulted in aridity and stagnation of social research.

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