REFERENCE

Citation

Della Faille, Dimitri (2014) "The Problems of Mexico: An Analysis of a Sociological Discourse", *Bulletin of Latin American Research,* vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 60-75.

RIS (EndNote)

TY - JOUR
AU - Della Faille, Dimitri
PY - 2014
TI - The Problems of Mexico: An Analysis of a Sociological Discourse
JO - Bulletin of Latin American Research
SP - 60
EP - 75
VL - 33
IS - 1
ER -

The Problems of Mexico: An Analysis of a Sociological Discourse

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Based on an empirical analysis of articles published between 1987 and 2006 in three major Mexican sociological journals, my research traces the continuities and discontinuities in the study of the alleged malfunctioning of Mexican society. The study of how sociologists represented Mexican society has revealed several discursive dynamics. The traditional economic and political perspectives blaming social problems on elites predominate. Studies of electoral system flaws, political contention, lacklustre democracy in unions, and union collusion with industrial capitalism abound. More recently, however, the introduction of the study of globalisation has transformed the examination of these issues.

Keywords: discourse analysis, journals, Mexico, social problems, sociology.

For social scientists, portraying society as an almost infinite set of problems is thought to both meet methodological ideals and satisfy considerations of social legitimacy. On the one hand, social scientists divide society into a hierarchical set of problems and their related questions in order to facilitate the process of investigation. On the other, approaching society through social problems and connecting it to potentially high-profile issues enhances the perceived legitimacy of social research. But, beyond considerations of methodology and the social legitimacy of research, the link between social science and problems has a number of additional dimensions.

This article considers contemporary problematisation of Mexican society as it is practised by sociologists. My study focuses on continuities and discontinuities in discursive strategies dealing with social problems, based on a systematic exploration of a corpus of articles from three major Mexican sociological journals published between 1987 and 2006. Social problems are a key focal point for methodological, ethical and epistemological perspectives on worldviews, as well as their associated debates and conflicts. As sociological literature finds its place in public debates, policy-making, and the general landscape of a society, an analysis of the portrayal of problems is an attempt to better understand how we, as sociologists, make choices about the social problems that merit detailed examination. These analyses are also attempts to critically assess how we suggest and justify social change.

A Political Economy and Discourse Analysis of Social Problems

A programme for critically understanding the relationship between social science and problems should have a two-pronged approach. I think that this relationship can best be understood from the two complementary perspectives of political economy and discourse analysis. The first perspective would mainly focus on explaining 'why' social phenomena become problems while the second would be concerned with the examination of 'how' these phenomena are problematised.

In a famous article, US sociologist Herbert Blumer proposes that social problems emerge from a collective definition and not the intrinsic malfunctioning of a social group (Blumer, 1971: 301). This collective definition outlines the nature of problems, lays out how they are to be approached and shapes what ought to be done about them. Indeed, US sociologists Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse define social problems as 'the activities of individuals or groups making assertions about perceived social conditions which they consider unwanted, unjust, immoral, and thus about which something should to be done' (Spector and Kitsuse, 2001: xi). Social problems must therefore be understood in the light of normative activities that identify social phenomena, make assertions about them and adopt the necessary strategies to elicit social change. French philosopher Michel Foucault has called 'problematisation' the process by which practices, rules, institutions and habits that had previously been conventionalised via multiple layers of social interaction and power relations are suddenly said to be doubtful and problematic (Foucault, 2001: 1507).

Given that the study of problematisation addresses normative activities, claims-making and social change, it is a major entry point into the critical examination of social dynamics. Social problems are nearly unlimited in number, but only a few are actually brought to light and generate concern. And, as US sociologist Joel Best has stated, social problems compete for attention (Best, 2001, 2008). The fact that a problem is successfully brought forward for public discussion is the result of persuasion in strategies, power dynamics, and even circumstantial chance. Within this competition, social scientists and sociologists act as 'problems advocates' as much as do politicians, social workers, journalists and mass-media pundits. To borrow the idea from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's field analysis, it could be said that social problems share the characteristics of the field in which they are debated (Bourdieu, 1993). The outlines of social problems may not have been directly shaped by the interests of a social group, but problems that have succeeded in attracting public attention are those advocated by groups of social scientists who signify their control over resources by claiming the most attention and monopolising the space in which problems are being debated. The resources in question include not only access to the best universities, journals, research assistants and funds, but also appropriate language and style. By attempting to raise the profile of problems inside and outside the field of science, and by bringing new discourses into public and scientific discussions, 'problems advocates' are in fact participating in a very dynamic competition. The problematisation of society is a major scientific field where the competition for resources and conflicts plays out.

As part of this competition, social science literature features both processes of advocating and claims-making about social problems accompanied by various strategies for producing and imposing definitions, censorship or criticism of other viewpoints, and attempts to circulate ideas. The materialisation of these strategies, conflicts, struggles, blind spots and censorships in language shaped by the characteristics of the field in which they are produced is called discourse (Foucault, 1971). The discourse

analysis perspective carefully studies how a social phenomenon is being transformed into an object for thought. Such a perspective will investigate the relationship between social science and problems by examining how conflicts materialise in language and not by focusing on the characteristics of the claims-makers. Foucault showed how discourses have articulated, reorganised and fragmented certain aspects of sexuality into problems. Social scientists, like any other 'problem advocates', must choose persuasive strategies to have 'their' problems heard. The discourse analysis perspective on the problematisation of society will therefore unearth the very dynamic processes by which social scientists choose various language strategies in an attempt to bring into focus a social phenomenon of their choice.

From the standpoint of discourse analysis we have to acknowledge that the language dimensions of the analysis of conflicts is not unanimously accepted. In fact, more often than not, political economists and orthodox Marxists have discarded discourse analysis and the linguistic turn as merely a study of words or text, distinct from real social issues, or 'a decay from well-grounded, material reality into the idealistic and problematic realm of language and discourse' (Ives, 2005: 456). For instance, political economists such as Hewitt contend that discourse analysis, as part of a postmodern destruction of reason, undermines human liberation by dissolving into mere webs of 'fictive meaning' (Hewitt, 1993: 80). Shrestha argues that the tendency to deny 'historical integrity and social reality', as performed by discourse analysts, does not help 'wage a concerted battle against the class forces of poverty' (Shrestha, 1997: 715). Veltmeyer totally rejects discourse analysis, which has 'infected' and 'plagued' the study of underdevelopment (Veltmeyer, 2001: 597). He supports the idea that discourse analysis is 'unable to grasp reality in its various dimensions as a totality' (Veltmeyer, 2000: 513). For him, discourse analysis is an idealist attack on the critical study of the 'structures of real life', which are 'serious constraints on [people's] real opportunities, the sustainability of their livelihoods, and the capacity to meet their basic needs' (Veltmeyer, 2001: 616). Discourse analysts might respond that political economists are very deterministic in their approach to text. De Goede contends that many authors in international political economy are still 'wedded to a profound separation between the realm of the ideal and the realm of the real, whereby the politics of representation are seen to have a bearing only on the former domain leaving the latter intact as an incontestable reality' (De Goede, 2003: 80). Ives asserts that something must be done about this 'perpetuation of the dualism between economic analysis and linguistics, between "material" and language' (Ives, 2005: 466). However, it can be argued, that this is the project has already been undertaken by some discourse analysts who have integrated elements of political economy and the Marxist critical study of social conditions. This is the case, for instance, of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe or Norman Fairclough whose work in discourse analysis is in part grounded in Marx and political economy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 2001). In order to reconcile the realms of idealism and materialism or to acknowledge the reciprocity between discourse, ideas and material social conditions (Bieler and Morton, 2008), in this article I view text as a reality in and of itself. Discourse as it materialises in text has its own logic and is not mechanically determined by economic, political and social events. Choices of words, topics and ultimately social problems are at least as shaped by the changing context, or by political, economic and social events and the author's socio-economic characteristics as they are by the history of the discipline and the limitations and internal logics of the literary genre.

It is reasonable to believe that certain thematic shifts could be attributable to changes in the balance of social characteristics of the corpus authors or by the struggles

between Mexico's two major political parties. A study of the authors' academic affiliation could very well reveal noteworthy dynamics. A study of institutional and political background would no doubt reveal fascinating conflicts of interest among the fields of science, education, economics and politics. These dimensions and others would certainly contribute to a further understanding of social problems in Mexican sociological literature. I have not explored dimensions such as characteristics of class, gender, generation, geographical distribution, and academic and political affiliations that could very well shed additional light on my corpus. That would be another project, as the main objective of this article is to examine the internal dimensions of the discourse, that is, 'how' Mexican society has been problematised. Although the research presented in this article focuses primarily on lexical analysis, the reader should not conclude that the study of other dimensions is without interest and that I have overlooked the political economy of the problematisation of Mexican society. The understanding of 'how' is complementary to the study of 'why', but the task of examining the discursive strategies utilised in the problematisation of Mexican society by social scientists is in itself sufficiently arduous and dense. Additionally, the goal of my research is neither to verify nor to assess the validity of claims made by Mexican sociologists. I do not seek to evaluate levels of fabrication, exaggeration, underestimation or even silence about problems. It is not the sociologist's task to filter claims on the grounds of their factual accuracy.

Mexican Sociology as Empirical Material

One of the strongest economies in Latin America, Mexico has a thriving industrial sector and is a major agricultural producer (Moreno-Brid and Ros, 2009; Recondo, 2009). Nationalistic and fiercely independent, it is a geographically diverse country with a complex history and social fabric (Morris, 1999; De La Peña, 2006). Against this backdrop, a specific sociological tradition has developed through active debates, interactions, and, to some extent, rifts with North America, Europe and the rest of Latin America. Sociology in Mexico is supported by a large institutional structure that is almost unmatched in the 'developing world' (Trindade, 2007). The reputation of its institutions goes far beyond national borders. For instance, the three journals studied in this article, *Estudios Sociológicos*, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, and *Sociológica* have a global circulation, and respect for them is not limited to Spanish-speaking scholars.

I have chosen to investigate the problematisation of Mexican society between 1987 and 2006 for scientific, social, political and economic reasons. By the end of the 1980s, the various debates opposing dependency and modernisation theoreticians had cooled in Mexico (Davis, 1992). The era beginning in the late 1980s saw the global reorganisation of literature on problems in underdeveloped areas. Here, Mexico is no exception. Beyond the specific debates on the failures of economic and social development, Mexican sociology featured growing theoretical pluralism during that period (Sefchovich, 1989). Not only were new theoretical concepts and sources utilised, but Mexican sociology became more diverse in terms of the objects it investigated. Some authors described this pluralism as a period of crisis (Kozlarek, 2006). They criticised the growing pluralism, contending that sociology had abandoned global theoretical frameworks for theories and objects of a lesser scale. Despite perceptions that it was a field undergoing diversification or in crisis, Mexican sociology reinforced its position as a leader in social science, strengthening existing institutions and developing new ones (Girola and Olvera Serrano, 1994; Brachet-Marquez, 1997). The growth of

sociological institutions is particularly evidenced in the creation of new journals and research centres. This institutionalisation and transformation of sociology occurred against the backdrop of a series of reforms in scientific policies (Abend, 2006).

These institutional changes in sociology paralleled important transformations of Mexican society during the same period, which gives the study of the period particular interest for the understanding of how social scientists represent society. Key changes in Mexican politics illustrate some of these transformations. The period started with the foundation of a new political party. The democratic socialist Partido de la revolución democrática (PRD; Democratic Revolution Party) successfully challenged the official party and long-established bi-partisan politics. Violent political repression, major electoral corruption and structural reforms ensued. Beginning in 1994, the armed Zapatista movement, emerging from the southern state of Chiapas and allegedly led by intellectual teaching at a federal capital university, indelibly marked Mexican society. Later, in 2000, the conservative right Partido acción nacional (PAN; National Action Party) reversed a more than 70-year period of control over Mexican politics, economy and society exercised by the Partido revolucionario institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party). Against this political backdrop, during the rule of the PAN (2000–2012), social, political and economic institutions witnessed changes in policies and the application of a rather well organised programme aimed at transforming Mexico. The PAN's policies imposed on Mexican society radical transformations that concur with neoliberalism, a market-driven social model, fiscally conservative, suspicious of government and eager to please to the forces of global capitalism (Morton, 2003).

These political, economic and social changes may partially explain the reasons 'why' sociologists chose to focus on certain problems in Mexican society between 1987 and 2006. But, as my research shows, to say that these events determined 'how' these choices were made and 'how' sociologists interpreted social change is to view sociology as a mere reflection of social events. By looking at discursive strategies over such a long period characterised by different political, economic and social changes, my research has attempted to understand how sociologists have filtered social issues, commented on and problematised Mexican society. Given that my research is interested in general patterns and trends, we have not emphasised the individual identity of the authors. My intent is not to ignore or obscure authorship, but rather to emphasise collective aspects of publishing in peer-reviewed journals and general trends in sociological literature. As articles published in peer-reviewed journals result from a collective process involving editors, reviewers and proofreaders, whose work is neither fully understood by nor within the control of sociologists, I will refer to the articles as the 'work of sociologists' rather than breaking them down by individual author.

Methodology

For my research, I selected three leading, yet diverse, sociological peer-reviewed journals in Mexico. The first selected journal, *Estudios sociólogicos* (translated as Sociological Studies), is a well-reputed journal edited at the Colegio de México, Mexico's most prestigious institute of social sciences and humanities research. The College also offers excellent graduate programmes. Since its establishment in 1983, *Estudios sociólogicos* has acquired a good reputation for publishing first-class research and opinion pieces from both Mexican and international scholars. The second journal, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* (Mexican Journal of Sociology), is one of the leading scholarly journals in

sociology in Hispanic America. It is without a doubt the most prestigious sociological journal in Mexico, and publishing an article in its pages confers prestige. The journal is edited at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM; National Autonomous University of Mexico). The UNAM is one of the largest universities in the world and has the reputation of hosting some of the finest research centres in Latin America. Since the journal's inception 70 years ago, it has published pieces by the most important Latin American and international sociologists. During its long history, the journal has changed its orientation several times, but it still specialises in the publishing of long, carefully researched articles. The third journal, Sociológica (Sociological), is edited at the Azcapotzalco campus of the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) in Mexico City. Opened in 1969 in response to demands for reforms in education, UAM is a relatively new public but autonomous university. Since its launch in 1989, the journal has acquired a good reputation amongst sociologists specialising in sociological theory and less conventional research papers. The academic excellence of these three journals is widely acknowledged. Mexico's main scientific funding agency, the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores (SNI; National Research Council), considers these journals leaders in their field. The SNI accords them the highest ranking on their review scale, which means that publishing in one of these journals provides symbolic capital as well as potential for financial rewards in the form of research budgets and salary incentives. These journals were selected for their importance in the life of the sociology community and because they represent mainstream as well as innovative theoretical and methodological approaches.

My corpus consists of all of the analytical, research and debate articles published by these journals between 1987 and 2006, whether or not they contain expected debates about social problems in Mexico (see Table 1). Consequently, the over 1,800 articles in the corpus are not the result of any type of pre-selection other than the functional role they played in each journal. Given my time and technical constraints, I elected to limit my analysis to the introductions. Each of these introductions is two to three pages long and contains the argument regarding the key points to be presented in the article.

Comprising about 3,000 pages, this corpus is relatively large. In order to analyse and manage such an amount of data, I used computer software known as Système d'analyse de texte par ordinateur (SATO; System for Computer-assisted Text Analysis), which is designed to manage large textual corpora, qualitative word-marking, and the identification and basic statistical analysis of lexical fields (Duchastel et al., 2004). SATO allowed me to define my own research process, control every operation and remain open to serendipity, or unexpected discoveries. Unlike other software, it is not programmed to create interpretations, nor is it equipped with sociolinguistic

Table 1. Breakdown of Articles by Period and Journal Title

	Estudios sociológicos	*Revista Mexicana de Sociología*	*Sociológica*	Total
1987–1990	80	193	112	385
1991–1994	106	183	129	418
1995–1998	111	166	109	387
1999–2002	111	123	92	325
2003–2006	115	81	105	300
Total	522	746	547	1815

Source: Author's data.

analytical capability. This transparent methodology was used to avoid any statement or conclusion based on calculations produced by complex algorithms that were not fully controlled and understood.

Once the corpus comprising all articles published by these three journals between 1987 and 2006 was digitalised and formatted for input into SATO, the subsequent filtering of articles was conducted in an iterative way via the identification of lexical markers relevant to the various aspects of my research. Starting with the full corpus, I narrowed my choice to articles pertaining to Mexico using lexical indicators relevant to populations, peoples, places and institutions (Table 2). This approach ensures not only that my study is thoroughly extensive, but also that my research and its results are reproducible by any other research team with access to all articles published by these three journals.

Next, this 'Mexican sub-corpus' was explored from various other angles and segmented into periods. Using a similar approach to that of French linguist Michel Pêcheux, I attempted to pinpoint dialogues, contradictions and similarities in various segments of corpora (Mills, 1997: 10). To understand how Mexican sociologists problematised Mexican society, I alternated between testing hypotheses, discoveries and the formulation of new hypotheses. I examined differences and similarities through the analysis of lexical fields or patterns in word use, and contrasted articles, sections and periods. Since I have chosen to analyse every introduction regardless of the author's nationality, it would be slightly incorrect to state that I have focused on Mexican sociology or Mexican sociologists. Rather, I have studied articles about Mexico published in Mexican journals. The corpus is therefore identified as Mexican sociology strictly as a stylistic shortcut. However, as emphasised earlier in this article, I have attempted to underline general patterns and trends. The generalisations 'sociologists think' and 'sociologists say' should not be interpreted as poor style. They conform to our emphasis on the aggregation of discourses.

Lexical fields indicative of social problems were identified, marked by a process called 'categorisation', and compared. The categorisation of words related to social problems was made possible thanks to the advanced tools of SATO that allowed me to analyse them according to their meaning and context. For instance, 'crisis' may have various meanings, but only one form appears in the dictionary. My methodology has distinguished the meaning of each instances of the form 'crisis' based on to its specific context. Then, these words, indicators or markers were evaluated and new categories applied in an attempt to generate new hypotheses. This iterative and open-ended methodology allowed me avoid channelling my findings to match anticipated results. These advantages were apparent, for instance, in the segmentation of the corpus into periods. Had I hypothesised that important social events structure the problematisation of Mexican society, I would have focused on presumed pivotal periods, thereby

Table 2. Breakdown of Articles in the 'Mexican Sub-Corpus'

	Estudios sociológicos	*Revista Mexicana de Sociología*	*Sociológica*	Total
Articles in entire corpus	522	746	547	1815
Articles in 'Mexican sub-corpus'	270	414	289	973
Articles from entire corpus pertaining to sub-corpus (%)	51.7	55.5	52.8	53.6

Source: Author's data.

precluding findings about several patterns and diachronic trends that are statistically more relevant to this corpus of contemporary Mexican sociology.

Three Domains of Social Activity and a Myriad of Social Problems

I define a topic as a loose aggregate of discussions and ideas about specific phenomena, actors or institutions and their characteristics. Topic identification was based on lexical fields, concepts and ideas. I identified 61 topics in the corpus composed of articles written between 1987 and 2006. For each of my initial working periods, topics that were covered by several different articles, well spread over a period and discussed by a variety of authors were identified as more salient or major topics. Out of the 61 topics identified, 35 are directly relevant to 3 domains of social activity. In decreasing order of importance, these domains are: the electoral system and contention in politics; democratic practice within unions and industrial capitalism; and smallholder agriculture and the competitive global economy. Table 3 presents the distribution of the major topics identified by a combination of number of occurrences, time distribution and diversity of authors in each period. The other salient topics pertaining to other social domains are not necessarily as well distributed throughout the whole corpus, and are more limited in terms of number of articles covered or number of authors discussing the themes.

The initial exploration of the corpus revealed a surprising abundance of words pertaining to the lexical field of social problems. Here are but a few examples : *alarmante* (alarming), *angustia* (anguish), *conflictos* (conflicts), *crisis* (crisis), *dificultad* (difficulty), *discriminación* (discrimination), *disparidad* (disparity), *incertidumbre* (uncertainty), *malestar* (unease), *peligro* (danger), and, of course, *problema* (problem). In fact, 709 of the 973 articles in the narrowed-down 'sub-corpus' contain a lexical field and feature substantial discussions about social problems in Mexico. The major topics examined in Mexican sociology between 1987 and 2006 are also analysed as problems. This trend is so prevalent that it could be said that the sociology of Mexico during this period is in fact mainly the sociology of the problems of Mexico and that sociology has intensively problematised Mexican society.

Table 3. Breakdown of Major Topics by Period

	Major topics	Topics relevant for the study of the electoral system and contention in politics	Topics relevant for the study of democratic processes within unions and industrial capitalism	Topics relevant for the study of smallholder agriculture and the competitive global economy
1987–1990	9	2/9	2/9	1/9
1991–1994	11	2/11	2/11	2/11
1995–1998	13	1/13	1/13	0/13
1999–2002	13	2/13	2/13	1/13
2003–2006	15	3/15	3/15	2/15

Source: Author's data.

The Electoral System and Contention in Politics

The functioning of the electoral system and the legitimacy of government is the most important and recurring topic in Mexican sociology. Given this central role, it is no surprise that Mexico's main problems identified by the corpus authors pertain to politics. Based on relevant articles, I can summarise the problematisation of this domain of social activity as follows. Elections are said to be the most important component of the democratic redistribution of power. The Mexican republic's many levels and regions are abundantly dealt with, but it is the federal government and its executive and legislative bodies that garner the most attention. Each election generates its specific focus and topics of importance; however, commonalities emerge in the way sociologists view the phenomenon. They contend that candidates belong to a small number of political parties whose influence on Mexican society is critical. The electoral system is portrayed as a technical and administrative field. Nevertheless, important issues regarding the control of territories, constituencies, municipalities or even universities come to light beyond the procedural rhetoric.

Several problems with the electoral and democratic systems are identified in the sociological literature, which blames corruption for unproductive government practices and inefficient distribution of power. Sociologists appear to believe that corruption is rooted in the specific nature of Mexican politics. The two main parties, which operate through exclusive networking and make extensive use of local appropriation of public resources, have limited the diversity of voices heard and shaped public debates. The articles contend that this modus operandi inevitably leads to fraud and corruption and incites conflict and violence. This hotbed for conflicts has consequences for not only the social fabric, but also voter participation. Further, contend the articles, elected governments are held in a continuous crisis of legitimacy by voter cynicism.

Sociologists also express concerns about erratic electoral behaviours. Even regular voters feel helpless to change the system. The future of democracy in Mexico appears to be full of uncertainties. For the sociologists of my corpus, there seems to be only one certainty: the system is flawed. The following statement summarises this perception of the electoral and democratic systems:

> The future of this movement for the vote may be uncertain, but its importance must not be overlooked. The dominant political relations in Mexico have been characterised much more by corporatism and its violent negotiations or confrontations than by parties racing down the electoral path toward political power. (Gómez Tagle, 1989: 239) (My translation, subsequent excerpts also my translation.)

Sociologists' concern with the electoral and democratic systems is clearly normative. In fact, sociologists repeatedly call for changes in what is shown to be a rigged democracy. Corruption is not only a sociological object of interest, but also a platform for their expressions of generalised dissatisfaction. Within my corpus, some sociologists call for changes and reforms in a system that generates fraud and self-enrichment. The following excerpt is representative of the general position towards corruption. It presents an analytical, yet very political statement:

> Giving people the opportunity to make well-informed decisions [will create] the conditions for the development of democracy. In Mexico, these conditions of genuine electoral competition do not exist. The financial

contributions of the wealthy tend to distort the electoral field. They provide additional influence and power to a minority. This leads to more favouritism, influence peddling and corruption. (Salas-Porras, 2000: 54)

Democracy within Unions and Industrial Capitalism

The second domain of social activity whose problematisation lies in the salient topics identified is the life of unions and the rapport between the union movement and industrial capitalism. Not wholly unrelated to the matters of corruption and political legitimacy previously discussed, this problematisation has its own distinctive angle. From relevant articles, I can summarise this problematisation as follows. Representing a large section of Mexico's working class, the unions are organisations that not only struggle for the rights of workers, but are also fertile ground for conflicts over influence and leadership. Sociologists see unions as natural extensions of political parties and players in the distribution of power. Additionally, unions are perceived as powerful organisations shaping industrial capitalism, and sociologists are thus interested in investigating the relationship between unions and the economy.

Sociologists identify the most important issues facing unions as insufficient democratic representation and independence from political parties. The fact that union leadership is not democratically chosen is considered a major issue for the secondary sector of the economy. Consequently, non-democratic unions are not only detrimental to the workers, but damaging to the economy over the long term. That is because they oppose any improvement to industrial production and working conditions. Unions are regarded as acquiescing to capitalist practices. Sociologists also decry their highly centralised power structure and the dearth of critical voices within the union system.

Sociologists see the growth of independent unions as an antidote to many abuses in the Mexican capitalist economy. Independent unions would keep a distance from major political parties, but also from capitalist elites. Independent unions should be more transparent in their structure and should ultimately struggle for workers. The following excerpt illustrates the normative position held by Mexican sociologists about unions:

> In general, official unions have preferred passive tactics of approving corporate restructuring. In a few cases, such as with Telmex [Mexico's telecommunication giant], unions seek to be the effective interface of corporate modernisation, and thus make counterproposals that essentially endorse company policy. These unions avoid confrontation. Conversely, independent unions have opposed corporate restructuring more vigorously. (De la Garza Toledo, 1994: 3)

Smallholder Agriculture and the Competitive Global Economy

While it could be said that the main orientation of Mexican sociology focuses on bourgeois interests manifested in the conflicts of power in government or industrial capitalism, the problematisation of my third domain of social activity nuances this initial impression. Nevertheless, the rather conventional political and economic dimensions discussed earlier have largely provided the theoretical framework for the study of the occupation of territory by sharecroppers, traditional farmers, and smallholder agricultural producers, as well the transformation of their social infrastructure.

In my corpus, it is apparent that Mexican sociologists have adopted a political and economic approach to the transformation of the social infrastructure of small agriculture. On the political stage, sociologists see the farmers as organised in movements or groups struggling against changes in the Mexican economy. Their struggle is not only political, but rooted in economic considerations. In the identified articles, sociologists link the struggles of small local agricultural communities, very often described as indigenous traditional, to the global economy. However, these aspects of smallholder and subsistence agriculture in rural Mexico are usually reduced to political and, most importantly, economic dimensions.

The life conditions of small sharecroppers are considered to be in danger and their preservation is at risk. For sociologists, this risk seems to have come into sharper focus since the introduction of global market competition for local, traditionally produced specialities such as corn. As exemplified in the relevant articles in my corpus, Mexican sociology has adopted a humanistic approach, criticising economic globalisation on the grounds of the disintegration of local communities, which are more often than not indigenous. The distortions in agricultural competition on the global market have created poverty where there was once contention. This poverty has also led some farmers to immigrate to the United States and Canada, where they work as temporary labourers. The globalisation of Mexico generates problems. And, where it offers solutions, they are superficial and detrimental.

Most interestingly, as the above excerpt illustrates, the idea of 'efficiency' is used differently here from in the case of the political and economic systems. The problem of political and economic systems is their lack of efficiency, but it is this very pursuit of efficiency that causes problems for small agriculture. This contrast reveals the difference in approach to this series of social problems with that of the two other domains of social activity illustrated earlier. Smallholder agriculture is studied from the perspective of the victims and not the perpetrators. However, surprisingly, sociologists do not clearly establish a way out of the acknowledged situation, which is described as complex and intricate. To understand the logic of this argument, we need to explore changes over time.

Increasing Polarisation and Diversification

While it is true that the topics outlined in the previous section represent most of sociology's problematisation of Mexican society, a close examination of the corpus from a diachronic perspective reveals further dimensions. Beginning in the early 1990s, sociological literature underwent significant transformations that spanned half a decade. Characterised by polarisation and diversification, these transformations had important effects on how social problems were portrayed. In order to demonstrate how these changes have affected the problematisation of Mexican society, let me illustrate the phenomena in detail.

Between 1989 and 1992, as illustrated in my corpus, Mexican sociological literature adopts a new stance characterised by growing polarisation between optimism and pessimism on one side, and past and future on the other. This polarisation is the embodiment of methodological and theoretical divisions. Sociologists do not collectively agree on the expression of hopes or pessimism about the current state of things. Some authors are optimistic about various technological developments in agriculture and health. According to their research, these advances hold the promise of improved life

conditions. But other sociologists do not see any reason to share such optimism about the current situation during the same period. The alleged improvements are criticised or simply ignored in favour of other elements deemed problematic. In a 1992 article, a sociologist warns of 'the possibility of acute biological pollution and chemical residuals in food products for the consumer (Freebairn, 1992: 4). Two years earlier, another observed 'urban marginalisation, a lack of urban housing and services, high levels of environmental contamination, polarisation in the distribution of income and the deterioration of living standards' (Sánchez, 1990: 305).

Sociologists are also divided on how to orient their research. Optimistic and pessimistic sociologists alike feel the need to look back to assess the current situation. This is for instance, the case of a British sociologist who talks about the factories located in tax-free zones on the US–Mexican border – called the *maquilas* – from a global perspective. He claims that 'without a doubt, starting in the 1970s, and increasingly since the 1980s, this situation changed and the scale tipped in favour of industries specifically oriented towards exportation' (Sklair, 1992: 164). While some sociologists look back into history to understand the current situation, others attempt to look at possible scenarios for the future. They use claims about future events to warn Mexicans about forthcoming problems. In 1990, two sociologists studying the US–Mexican border attempt 'to propose scenarios which could describe the possible transformation of the region through forthcoming changes over the next ten years' (González-Aréchiga and Ramírez, 1990: 239).

Between 1994 and 1996, the sociology community investigates a growing number of topics. New topics of importance including the status of women, poverty, violence and health, now complement sociologists' main focus on the hazards of the electoral system, unions and labour movements, and agriculture. A comparison between this period and earlier periods of the corpus reveals a significant increase in new topics. Moreover, not only do articles after 1994–1996 cover more topics, but the increase in variety initiated during that period is also steady. It appears that during that period, the SNI diminished its support for the publication of special journal issues. However, this institutional explanation accounts for only part of the diversity in subject areas. Sociologists could very well have kept working on the same, rather conventional, treatments of politics and the economy. But the growing heterogeneity demonstrates that they did not. For the most part, their choices are the result of micro-decisions made by the authors themselves who, considering the incentives of the SNI for publishing, might want to submit pieces they believe will please to referees and journal editors. Through these decisions, the corpus authors were introducing new ethical, epistemological and theoretical dimensions to sociology's problematisation of Mexican society.

The Consequences of Globalisation

The changes I have outlined reflect an important shift in the comprehension of social problems and in strategies used to attempt to stimulate social change. The new term 'globalisation', virtually unused before 1994, captures the new problems of Mexican society in a single label. The emerging study of the effects of globalisation in Mexico heralds the use of new lexical fields. These new fields evidence a transforming perspective on social problems and signal a growing diversity of topics.

Sociologists frequently blame economic and political elites for Mexico's problems. This practice has often restricted the question of social conflict or inequality to the

struggles between liberal values and elite misdeeds. However, furthering the trend begun in 1994, the problematisation of Mexican society is partially shifting once again. Sociology is now investigating issues from the standpoint of victims, and is no longer focused on perpetrators. As illustrated previously with the subject of small agriculture, the study of the globalisation of Mexican society has brought victims to the forefront. Although small agriculture is a very important subject, fragile social groups such as indigents, women, children and indigenous peoples are other victims of globalisation who appear in the sociological literature. They are victims of larger processes that affect their daily lives. The fragility of globalised Mexican society becomes a key element in the sociological understanding of social problems. Sociologists feel that these transformational processes – described as transitions – originate in dynamics that go far beyond the influence or control of local actors. The processes induced by globalisation are portrayed as complex. A lexical study reveals that transitions and social problems have much in common. Both phenomena, say sociologists, have important effects on social relations, strategies and social organisation, and both have empirical reality worthy of further examination. However, a major difference lies in the fact that, in the context of globalisation, transitions are phenomena that exceed the grasp of all daily decision-making, local power dynamics and even the understanding of actors. Transitions are the evidence of ongoing forces that are far more complex and intricate than ever before. This interplay has meaningful consequences for sociological analysis. The very definition of a social problem includes a dimension of social action, or a will to modify social dynamics. As French philosopher Daniel Andler states, 'The activity grounded in the notion of problem is complete only with the presence of the concept of solution' (Andler, 1987: 119).

This new fragility in Mexican society confronting globalisation must be understood in its much larger ethical, epistemological and theoretical framework. Once they start to describe society as 'in transition', sociologists seem to leave aspirations of social change behind. Sociologists acknowledge the problems of fragile social groups. They deem the problems undesirable and show clear compassion. However, they recognise that the rectification of the identified issues may not be theirs to suggest or initiate. Accordingly, in my corpus, a transition is a social problem that lies beyond the grasp of straightforward local solutions for which sociologists can do little but watch unfold. Although sociologists collectively introduced the study of social groups being weakened by global processes in about 1994, they conversely abandoned expectations for change. As observed in the corpus, this perspective on the complexity of transition had been earlier foreshadowed by uncertainty regarding the nature of transformation (optimism vs. pessimism), doubts concerning analytical perspective (historical vs. forward-looking) and growing diversity in subjects examined.

Conclusion

The goal of our research was not to characterise Mexican sociology by comparing its features with those of other social sciences in different countries and different traditions. I did not seek to establish a series of essentially distinctive characteristics or 'styles of sociology'. My research has demonstrated the diversity in the problematisation of Mexican society by outlining the variety of orientations and their ongoing transformation over time. I attempted to highlight strategies as they materialise in sociological argumentation. Claims entail an argumentative structure that can be empirically

investigated. This investigation should be conducted on any claim, even those that are total fabrications. In the problematisation of society, claims are statements that attempt to legitimise the gravitas of a condition and shape a response to it (Loseke, 1999). This is exactly what I observed in the corpus. I highlighted strategies as they materialise in the arguments evidenced in lexical patterns.

In my research, one of the argumentative structures I investigated is that of the fragility of Mexican society. The authors maintain that the issues they have identified have serious negative effects on social dynamics. However, the second element of their claim – the response – is not as unequivocal. They describe the situation as complex and with few credible local solutions. The source of the fragility of Mexican society is said to lie in international or global spheres. Overall, responses to claims of the fragility of Mexican society are ambiguously shaped by the sociologists of my corpus. I have shown how this response differs from another argumentative structure investigated. When the claims about the fragility of Mexican society are compared to those regarding the electoral system and contention in politics, a striking difference emerges. In the case of politics, the problems are viewed as serious: they lead to voter cynicism, weakened democracy, loss of legitimacy, collusion of interests and local appropriations of public resources. The consequences could not be described in more serious terms. To name a few: more political parties should compete, corruption should be fought, and broad political reforms are much needed. Examination of the discourse on the fragility of Mexican society revealed the methods used to shape globalisation into an object of study and the differences between these methods and the problematisation of politics. Mexican sociologists have clustered together the problems of small farmers, indigents, women, children and indigenous peoples, who emerged as fragile social groups. I have examined how the very formulation of the descriptions elicits intervention and how desired responses are shaped.

Given that social, political and economic events are narrowed down based on a series of factors, sociological literature appears to be more than a mere alignment of events. Differences in methodological, ethical and epistemological perspectives in addition to diverging worldviews crystallise in the portrayal of social problems. My lexical analysis of sociology's problematisation of Mexican society revealed choices that are not dissociated from conflicting interests in the fields of science, education, economics and politics. My article has attempted to show how conflicts and interactions materialise in the problematisation of Mexican society through variations and continuity in viewpoints. As sociologists, I have attempted to enhance our understanding of how social phenomena are filtered and chosen and how we, through the circulation of our ideas, suggest and justify social change.

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