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Conference report: The Public Vocation of the Social Studies of the Economy - La Vocación Pública de los Estudios Sociales de la Economía

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Conference report

The Public Vocation of the Social Studies of the Economy – La Vocación Pública de los Estudios Sociales de la Economía

At the end of May 2019, Gustavo Onto, Fernando Rabossi, José Ossandón, and Federico Neiburg organized a conference at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences (Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais) of the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Its purpose was to gather together Latin American economic sociologists/anthropologists to discuss a particular question: What is the public vocation of economic sociology/anthropology in Latin America? As a scholarly community, we have been meeting for around 15 years at workshops and conferences, such as LASA or SASE, as well as through other forums, such as the “estudiosdelaeconomía” blog, special issues, or edited books. This time, however, it was different. We were not asked to present research reports or discuss methods, approaches, and findings. We were asked to share our experience as “public intellectuals,” producers of cultural goods, social movement activists, critical commentators, or policy advisors, to name a few. In the words of the organizers: “How do we relate to those outside academia who share our interest in the economy? How do we talk to journalists, students, economists,

experts, regulators, entrepreneurs, workers, traders, or activists?”

Three ideas inspired the conference.¹ Firstly, even though we came from different countries, universities, and academic traditions, through the years we came to share a common way of approaching economic phenomena that is best captured by the notion of “social studies of the economy.” Such a label, as Ossandón put it, emphasizes – among other things – a marked ethnographical approach that gives symmetrical attention to experts (economists, regulators, economic journalists, traders, etc.) and non-experts (households, the poor, consumers, etc.). Secondly, as the community grows and occupies different institutional positions, it is worth asking whether the social studies of the economy network produces a particular type of “public intellectual.” Finally, this is an empirical question, which is the reason that brought us together in the first place.

Eighteen scholars presented and discussed, in Spanish and Portuguese, with students and other attendees for two full days. The initial questions turned into new ones, produced new angles, and triggered an ongoing attempt to

come to grips with the identity of the group. In the remainder of this brief report, I would like to sketch some of the main questions and discussions during the encounter. Although it would be impossible to do justice to the multiple perspectives, tensions, and concerns expressed by the group, I think there are a few key issues that are worth stressing.

Becoming public. A first dividing question related to the way we present ourselves in the public arena and to what extent this implies some type of political engagement. As Heredia pointed out, “becoming public” had something to do with being tangible, visible, related to the “common good,” or all of them at once. The answer to this question unraveled through the presentations: there are as many ways of becoming public as there are publics to engage with. Working with regulators (Onto and Fernandes), NGOs (Breton), economists (Loureiro), trade unions (Monteiro), entrepreneurs (Santos), editors (Luzzi and Wilkis), journalists (Undurraga; Fridman), students or activists (González), to mention some, all implied a way of “going out” of academia. But the means to do so, the challenges, and the implications for our scholarly work change with the interlocutors. Publics differ according to their languages, ways of political engagement, goals, demands, and expectations. Some of them, such as experts or regulators, may be reluctant about working with social scientists or suspicious about the potential contribution of alternative views. Others, such as trade unions, editors, or social movements, may be eager to receive technical advice or demand the translation of research outputs to broader publics. Interestingly, the public role of the social studies of the economy may switch across two sides of the same coin. One

may be public by contributing to the public agenda, especially by working alongside other experts to design, modify, or implement public policies. But one may also work alongside activists to protect people from the consequences of such policies, or debate alternative interpretations of public numbers with technocrats. Finally, it is important to take into account that our trajectories may also differ, as some of us moved from academia to public spaces, while others moved from intensive work in the field to academia.

As some pointed out, the metaphors we use to refer to the public role of the social studies of the economy provide an indirect answer to the issue of political engagement. Those conceiving the public sphere as a space for the exercise of power would frame the notion of public vocation as a “struggle” deploying intellectual “arms” in the service of the common good or certain communities. This, of course, makes much more sense to those working or dialoguing with publics that need to have their voice and demands heard in the public sphere, such as social movement organizations or trade unions that require the mobilization of collective action frames. But as a metaphor it is less illuminating for scholars trying to “represent” or “inform” the way actors conduct their everyday economic lives. Such a way of making our voice public, for example, was described as a sort of “diplomacy” that mediates between the life-worlds of ordinary people and experts, as a way of informing about specific publics and keeping open the boundaries of these separate worlds.

To the extent that we define the social studies of the economy as a symmetrical way of describing the worlds of experts and ordinary citizens in the making of the economy, it was worth asking what type of “publicity” this encourages. One

way the conference participants collectively tackled this question was by asking about the kind of “product” that the social studies of the economy can offer to different publics. These ranged from technical knowledge to the “stories” or “dramas” that other people may not be able to tell. The latter may be understood as a particular type of expertise that, for instance, accounts for the actions of those who do not control the conditions under which they live. This type of intellectual product is different from both common sense and the expert knowledge of technocrats.

An underlying topic this discussion touched upon was the way the community opens new avenues to conceive its public role. If political engagement through critical thought, advocacy, and militancy was the main way of conceiving the public role of intellectuals among previous generations, the social studies of the economy adds new ways to establish dialogues with its publics. This issue brings us to a second critical point, which is the role of the historical context in mediating the public voice of scholars.

Public vocation and historical context.

The historical context is crucial to make sense of the way scholars become public. Political context is the first factor recalled by scholars. In Brazil, for instance, the post-neoliberal turn gave fresh impetus to public intellectuals that were motivated by the desire to overcome neoliberalism (Monteiro). This is now over, as the continent turned to the right and the conference host country Brazil was itself in the middle of a direct attack on the social sciences that will cut funding to public universities outright. This of course threatens – and at the same time encourages – the attempt to gather and discuss the public role of economic sociology/anthropology. In such a context, it is not even clear whether

some “publics” such as students or the free press will still exist in the coming years.

A second factor is the shape of the public sphere. Parallel to historical trends, the shape of public forums and the way scholars come to participate in the public sphere vary across national settings. For instance, while Argentinians have had a strong tradition of public intellectuals, universities in Chile encourage scholars to appear in media as a way of complying with standards set by regulatory agencies. This issue was not treated in a systematic way, although it was to me – and others – very clear that we were speaking from different settings, marked by distinctive relationships with journalists, experts, and civil society, as well as of different ways of making academic careers.

A third factor relates to the socialization of scholars in a changing academic field. As several attendees commented, there seem to be new ways of intervening in the public space in Latin America, which relate to the professionalization of the field and growing demand for cultural products among a broader public. In this way, for instance, as more publishing houses are willing to publish research output, public intellectuals may be also understood as producers of “cultural goods.” This would contrast with the interventions of the old developmentalists in public discussions, which took on two dominant forms: participation in policy design, and party affiliation (Luzzi and Wilkis). The production of cultural goods such as books, magazines, or blogs for a general public, for instance, is not policy or advocacy, though it is no less “public.” This comes down to the images that we have when we think of what public intellectuals are. On the one hand, there was a shared understanding of intellectuals as having a critical component, in search of

truth with autonomy and commitment to universal values. On the other, in contrast to the universalistic type of intellectual, others put forward the idea that interventions from the social studies of the economy come from more particularistic places and subjects, such as the study of money, credit, insurances, traders, regulators, or any other economic subject. Whether these two modes of intervening in public discourse are substantially different, desirable, and exclusive remained a disputed issue during the conference.

Finally, another way of participating in the public sphere related to both conventional and new means of reaching broader audiences. Writing to newspapers, for example, counted as a way of providing alternative perspectives, especially when economic journalists seem to be predilect translators of both neoclassical economics and market ideology. By the same token, social media emerged as a new way of becoming public intellectuals and reaching broader audiences. For many, this was an opaque way of becoming public, though no less important. Considering that both blogging and micro-blogging (Twitter) have become critical ways for economists to engage in public discussions, exploring this means of participating in public forums is still pending among those dedicated to the social studies of the economy.

Common challenges. A third issue that emerged concerned the challenges posed to the exercise of public vocation. Relating to different types of public implied a significant effort to “translate” our concepts, strategies, and findings to other audiences. The most important challenge for most of the attendees, I would maintain, was the issue of communicating knowledge, discourses, concepts, and findings to others outside academia. What language should

we use with them? And what is it about our way of doing economic sociology that may interest or be useful to other audiences?

To become public demands the acquisition of new skills that in many ways differ from those required by the scientific community. Writing for newspapers demands of us a set of skills such as training our writing, managing the time of events in more contingent ways (news and public concerns die quickly), or learning how to come up with catchy titles. Public discussions reduce complexity in ways that tend to polarize debate. This, in turn, demands from us an effort to frame sociological discourses without turning them into normative perspectives. By the same token, the idea of becoming public entails a sense of “fear” that relates to the over-simplification of our arguments in the public sphere and the potential censorship we may encounter of our critical stands.

How do we make our public interventions more effective? As Fridman added to the discussion, in order to sustain public debate it seems better not to ridicule the opinions of economists, not to assume that we have a monopoly over public interests, and not to focus only on normative discussions. In a similar way, participating in the media is also a demanding task. Prestige among peers is key to our careers, but prestige among broader publics may become equally important and more demanding. In my view, one of the main points of the social studies of the economy is to translate complex economic subjects into intelligible products for broader audiences. This entails learning how to talk to journalists, being strategic about the way we communicate with them, and learning how to “appear in public” in effective ways. All these skills need developing, and they are usually not part of our professional training.

Finally, the issue of negotiations, personal commitment, and our identity as scholars appeared in different forms. In the words of Luzzi, “How can we go beyond academic frontiers without losing our identities as scholars?”. For those working with NGOs and international organizations, for instance, there is the question of the kind of commitments that researchers take on when dealing with a particular demand. For those working with regulators and policy-makers, it is necessary to negotiate and compromise: How is it possible to commit to projects with which one has no affinity at all when investigating experts in the field? (Fernandes). And for those working with social movements and trade unions in a way that is closer to activism, the open question is how such commitment changes the way we do research and how our personal commitment is reflected in the work we conduct within academia. The idea of negotiating – whether identities, book titles, or performances – was a salient feature throughout the discussions of the group.

Finding common ground. Finally, I think that a conversation emerged about our identity as a community, intellectual movement, or group. In terms of the motto of the conference, the question would be something like “To what extent can a clearly defined academic movement now become an intellectual movement?” (Heredia).

This question was posed and tackled in a more disperse way, but it was explicit or implicit in almost every conversation. It prompted us to discuss our identity and take a position “between” or “among” other fields and disciplines. On the one hand, the issue of regional labels produced some discomfort, as talking about a Latin American economic sociology would confine us to the periphery of the international. It also does not do justice to the fact that most of us move in

international circles (see also the interview with Andrew Schrank in this volume). But for others, there is something about the region, historical legacies, and intellectual traditions that shapes the way we approach our subjects and become public. This question, in the end, remained open for most of us.

Finally, when it comes to the disciplinary boundaries, the relationship with economics became a critical issue. Are we meant to dispute its territory or to establish a more fruitful dialogue? If our publics differ, what kind of economist do we want (or not) to engage with? For some, the role of the social studies of the economy is to produce counter-hegemonic discourses and compete for a different interpretation. For others, our role is not to dispute economists' ideas or monopoly of economic ideas. This way of thinking compelled us to pose the question about the kind of "allies" that the social studies of the economy may find inside aca-

demia. Framing the discussion in these terms implied understanding our ideas and findings not only as "weapons" but as "bridges." Such a perspective would leave aside the attempt to confront economists and rather tackle the same problems, formulate them in different ways, and identify what is new about historical phenomena.

The questions and possible answers sketched in this report may not reflect the complexity of the discussions and the insightful viewpoints shared by the attendees. More importantly, however, they remain open to further investigation. They invited us to think collectively and triggered a necessary conversation about the kind of public intellectual/expert/figure that emerges from our research practices in the field. One of the things that I probably appreciated most was the format of the conference, less academic and more testimonial, which worked as a sort of therapeutic session for those who

deal with publics outside academia but do not take the time to reflect on the meaning and consequences this has for our careers and our communities. In my limited experience, this is not a common practice in academia, though it is crucial to reveal the social relevance of our research, especially at a time when the social sciences are undergoing a critical moment. For most of us, the relevance of our work is self-evident. However, the point now is to convince our different publics that this is actually the case.

Endnotes

- 1 Here you will find the inaugural presentation of the conference, by José Ossandón:
<https://tinyurl.com/CR-EconsocNL20-3>.
 I also want to thank both José Ossandón for sharing his notes from the conference and the other participants who made further remarks on the document.