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Exploring an Emerging Subject Through Contemporary Social
Theory

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ABSTRACT

Considering the elusive conceptual limits of expressions like 'world opinion' and 'international public opinion', this paper enquires into the meaning of such notions by mapping their connections to more general understandings of social matters. The perspectives offered by four highly influential theorists are first explored with this purpose. As a result, we argue that the subject can be understood as processes of dialogue in a post-national constellation (Jürgen Habermas), political thematization in a system that has no geographical borders (Niklas Luhmann), communication in a world of global 'disembedded' relationships (Anthony Giddens), and mobilized opinions in transnational fields (Pierre Bourdieu). On the other hand, voices that challenge the generalisation claims of such social theories are also analysed through the works of postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, who help us understand that a genuine 'world' opinion cannot be expected to emerge within the conceptual limits of modern European categories.

INTRODUCTION

Expressions like 'world opinion' and 'international public opinion' have become frequent in media and political discourses. A search for 'world opinion' on *Google News*, for example, currently retrieves more than 900,000 results—such as an accusation that India is 'misleading world opinion' against Pakistan (Latif, 2021), a claim by the United Nations (2021) to have gauged world opinion through 'conversations and surveys, innovative methodologies and artificial intelligence analysis', and an op-ed piece pointing out how Woodrow Wilson 'electrified world opinion' a hundred years ago by speaking over the heads of governments, directly to populations around the globe (Atkinson, 2021). In none of these cases the authors needed to explain what is meant by world opinion—the definition is assumed to be self-evident.

Apart from being used by journalists, politicians and activists, the notion of world opinion and similar ideas have received some academic consideration (Goldman, 1993; Hill, 1996; Jaeger, 2008; Rusciano and Fiske Rusciano, 1998; Stearns, 2005). However, different works use varying starting points and assumptions, and no community of scholars has yet emerged to reflect on and discuss the nature, problems or relevance of this topic. In a memorial lecture published in 1996, Christopher Hill argued that 'the force of attitudes and expressed opinions beyond the confines of a single state' is the underlying idea behind this subject (p. 115) and suggested that a distinction should be made between 'international opinion' (of states) and 'world opinion' (of people), a distinction that has not taken root inside or outside academia thus far. On the other hand, a group of researchers led by Frank Rusciano understands world opinion in much more specific terms—as 'the moral judgements of observers which actors must heed in the international arena, or risk isolation as a nation' (Rusciano and Fiske-Rusciano, 1998: 27), thus seeking to apply Noelle-Neumann's (1980) theorisations about fear of isolation to the behaviour of national governments on the global scene.

These conceptual efforts are recognized by historian Peter Stearns (2005), but in order to track movements in world opinion over the last two centuries, he takes other elements as its defining features—firstly, 'some sense of impassioned outrage'; secondly, 'a belief that there are or should be some common standards for humanity'; and finally, a recognition that this outrage needs to be somehow 'accommodated' (p. 7). According to Stearns, the anti-slavery movement of the 18th and 19th centuries is the first historical phenomenon to meet these requirements, whereas current environmentalist mobilizations would be contemporary examples. A previous study of massive protests in different countries against nuclear proliferation in the

late 1980 seems connected to this theoretical view (Goldman, 1993). On the other hand, Jaeger (2008: 595) has chosen not to approach world opinion as any discernible aggregate or intersubjective phenomenon, but as 'a functional and semantic device', used within discourse to produce certain effects, such as new forms of international governance. More specifically, he studied how the use of this 'device' by political leaders after the Second World War influenced the shaping of the United Nations governance system.

Meanwhile, multinational opinion polls are regularly conducted throughout the world, seeking to simultaneously measure the attitudes of populations in different cultural settings on specific issues. The proliferation of multi-country surveys on the COVID-19 pandemic reported by the World Association of Public Opinion Research is a relevant example of this (WAPOR, 2021), as well as the Pew Global Attitudes Survey (European Commission, 2021) and the Gallup World Poll (Gallup, 2021). The pursue of constant methodological improvements carried out under '3M survey research' (multi-national/multi-cultural/multi-lingual survey research) seek to provide increasing rigor to this type of works (Harkness, et al., 2010).

As puzzling as the differences among the various academic approaches may be, not less disconcerting is the intuitive impression that they are all connected, that they seem to refer to an important and empirically observable aspect of the contemporary world. However, in the plurality of approaches we have described, each one finds meaning in its own specific theoretical context, without contributing to (or interacting with) a wider conceptual framework. As a result, the boundaries of world opinion as a subject are particularly controversial and diffuse. Different fields—such as international relations, public opinion research, history and others—have hosted reflections on this notion, which in turn can be presented both as an empirical phenomenon anchored in the attitudes of millions of people, and as an essentially discursive device used in the game of international politics. At the same time, power asymmetries and communication flows can play different roles in the interpretations of this topic and its key actors can be governments, nations, different types of organisations and even 'humanity', while specific social differences—such as national-state borders—can have greater or lesser importance in different approaches.

In order to inquire into the meaning and plausibility of this concept against such a problematic backdrop, this paper will search for connections between the notion of world opinion and wider understandings of social matters. The current theoretical systems used to understand the social world as a whole (as their authors have not necessarily made a choice in favour of

world opinion as a relevant topic) seem to make up valuable conceptual environments to inquire into the meaning of world opinion. However, as the capacity of these systems to provide solid generalizations of all social matters cannot be presumed beforehand, we will also consider perspectives that challenge that capacity.

To explore the first set of perspectives, the ideas of four highly influential authors on social theory have been chosen—Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, and different types of works published by these scholars (including strictly theoretical works and some application and dissemination materials) were analysed in complementary ways in order to delve into the topic of world (or global/international) opinion within these perspectives (section 1). On the other hand, some relevant challenging voices were also considered through the works of notable postcolonial and decolonial thinkers (section 2). Some key implications of the findings are finally discussed (section 3).

WORLD OPINION IN 'STANDARD' SOCIAL THEORY

The perspectives about social reality that we present in this section—which have become key components of mainstream social theory since the last few decades of the 20th century—all recognise some sort of world opinion processes as a relevant aspect of the contemporary world, even when—at least in principle—they seem to use different starting points and premises. The problem of whether the core assumptions that underpin these theories come from the same source—namely, the parochial limits of modern European thought—will be left for section 2.

Habermas: Dialogue in the post-national constellation

In Habermas' view, the conceptualisation problems of world opinion we have mentioned in the introductory section can be organized around his notion of 'publicity' (Habermas, 1991) on the one hand, and the possibilities of extending this notion to a 'post-national' setting, on the other (Habermas, 2001/2006/2008). The first of these ideas corresponds to the initial stage of his intellectual production, in the 1960s, whereas the second was mostly addressed around the turn of the century. In his influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, usually considered the main landmark of the first stage, the concept of bourgeois

publicity was presented as 'the sphere of private people come together as a public' (Habermas, 1991: 27), who rationally and critically discuss issues of common interest, thus constituting an arena of politically relevant communication. Public opinion is about this dialogue and the influence it exerts on the political realm. But rather than outlining this concept, the book seeks to understand it as a historical category and explore its 'structural transformation' over time. To reconstruct this transformation, as Calhoun (1992) points out, Habermas analyses two basic dimensions of the public sphere—a qualitative dimension (the issue of rational, critical debate) and a quantitative dimension (the number of participants in the discussion—the degree of 'openness' of the public sphere).

Considering these two dimensions, and assuming the risk of oversimplifying Habermas' view, we will point out two basic moments that represent this transformation. In its constitutive moment, the public sphere (an essentially bourgeois phenomenon) was formed around a discussion where the arguments—and not the identities of those who argued—were crucial. However, the number of participants was small and the interests of those excluded from the dialogue were negatively affected by the discourse held by the 'members' of the public sphere. This happened, according to Habermas, in the 17th and 18th centuries. Today, the number of participants in this sphere is much wider, but the critical quality of discourse has deteriorated, a process that is connected to the development of large-scale organisations as mediators of individual participation in the public sphere. Thus, the sphere reassumes feudal qualities as the mass media is used to confer an aura of prestige on political leaders that was once restricted to royal figures. This process of 're-feudalisation' turns politics into a spectacle where leaders and parties seek plebiscitary acclaim from a depoliticized population.

In turn, these problems, which pose a kind of crisis in the public sphere, can only be overcome through the same fundamental principle through which the sphere was originally constituted—discussion; that is, the meeting of arguments through dialogue. Habermas has explained that the notion of public sphere 'is meant as an analytical tool for ordering certain phenomena' and also accepts that the concept has 'inevitable normative implications' (Habermas, cited in Calhoun, 1992: 462). It is an approach that aims to answer questions about what is and what ought to be.

Having delineated this framework, we can ask ourselves about the possibilities of applying it to the international context. It is clear that Habermas initially developed his concept of public sphere bearing in mind, above all, the internal limits of the national political community. However, as early as in the Structural Transformation, he made some references to the global

arena. According to Habermas (1991: 106), the idea of addressing the public as a way of addressing the world was already raised in Kant's work: 'Each person was called to be a "publicist," a scholar "whose writings speak to his public, the "world"'. Habermas highlights that the 'world' that Kant refers to is not 'the quintessential concept of all phenomena'—what we might call nature—but rather 'humanity as species' (ibid). On the other hand, while Habermas does not deny the state of anarchy in international relations, he claimed that the growing dangers posed by this very situation are leading towards the formation of a general interest:

a potential for self-annihilation on a global scale has called forth risks so total that in relation to them divergent interests can be relativized without difficulty. The as yet unconquered state of nature in international relations has become so threatening for everybody that its specific negation articulates the universal interest with great precision. (Habermas, 1991: 235)

In fact, in a note at the end of the book the author writes explicitly about international public opinion as a force connected in a relevant way to the problem of peace:

Ever since Wilson attached high hopes to international public opinion as a sanction at the disposal of the League of Nations, governments have actually been increasingly forced to have at least a propagandist regard for the world public. "Peace," however defined, seems to have become a central topic of an international public opinion in the same manner as the slogans of the French Revolution did on the national level [...] Publicity has become relevant as a principle in international relations in another respect: in relation to the question of effective arms control [...] Today as then, the idea of peace is connected to the principle of publicity—formerly in the expectation of a morally responsible legalization, today with that of a strategically imposed reduction of international tension. The goal however has remained the same—the liquidation of the state of nature between nations that has become ever more precarious. (Habermas, 1991: 296)

These references to the international arena are secondary in relation to a concept of public sphere that, as already mentioned, was originally conceived to understand the internal environment of countries. However, from these same references we can infer that the restriction to the national sphere corresponds to a historical circumstance: the idea was thought for the domestic level of countries because that is where public discussion was strongly concentrated. But 'humanity' and international relations are in no way excluded from the possibility of 'publicness'.

Reflections on this topic have gained prominence in later—and more circumstantial—interventions by Habermas, particularly with respect to the idea of a 'post-national constellation' (Habermas, 2001). Threats to international security and political crimes that require international interventions and regulations are expressions of this new scenario. As the state loses resources for its own legitimation, and economic, technological and communication flows go beyond 'sovereign' borders, public discussions on the international level gain relevance and critical potentiality.

It should be clarified that Habermas' central interest does not reside in these discussions, but in their possibilities of crystallizing into norms of international law, which in turn might expand the opportunities for dialogue in the world. In fact, he considers that the international scene has experimented some movements towards 'constitutionalisation', a process that is advancing precisely in the same direction to which Kant pointed with his idea of a cosmopolitan constitution (Habermas, 2008). Furthermore, according to this perspective, the post-national constellation already has a system that can be used as a model—Europe, the continent that today has a government beyond the national state, a government that is correlated to a space that is open to the forming and circulating of citizens' opinions. According to this author, the simultaneous protests in the capitals of Europe against the Iraq War (on 15 February 2003), could enter history books as a sign of the birth of a new European public opinion (Habermas, 2008).

Apart from describing the concept of the public sphere and mentioning Habermas' ideas on publicity in today's international context, it is also important to note that the notion of public sphere, as an analytical category, is not simply 'extrapolated' to the international arena—the emphasis on the word 'constellation' itself conveys a different image than that of a 'sphere', because it highlights the relative autonomy of countries in certain areas and aspects. Even in the image of a unified Europe, where Habermas (2008: 47) sees a model of a cosmopolitan state, he considers that the vision of the future 'can only be born from the disturbing sensation of disorientation', a vision that is articulated 'in the wild cacophony of a polyphonic public opinion'.

To complete this section, two additional considerations might prove valuable. Firstly, and considering the various arguments about the emergence of a public global sphere (e.g., Castells, 2008)—it is important to mention that the Habermasian concept of publicity was not conceived simply to analyse communication flows, but rather to be understood in relation to a sovereign power. According to Fraser (2007: 7), this is the source of 'normative legitimacy

and political efficacy of public opinion' in his theoretical framework. Therefore, any Habermasian reflection on the international sphere must consider the specific value-laden nature of this notion and the potentialities of political transformation claimed by the concept of public sphere. Secondly, to place the ideas expressed in this section in context, it should be mentioned that in Habermas' view, communication is not only an essential element in characterising the public sphere, but it also becomes the key factor in articulating an entire vision of society. In his theory of communicative action, the author uses the idea of communication to understand and critique what society is 'made of' (Habermas, 1992a/1992b).

Luhmann: Political thematization in a system without geographical borders

Considering that social theory is far from being a cohesive set of ideas, and the four perspectives we are reviewing are representative of the characteristic diversity of the field, a significant shift in the theoretical standpoint will be evident each time we consider a new author. Like Habermas, Luhmann argues for communication as the basic element of social phenomena, but he does so on very different terms. In the following paragraphs some of his ideas are outlined, always trying to find some notion of world opinion in his theory.

As generally known among social theory scholars, according to Luhmann society is made up of all possible communications, and this implies that society is not comprised of human beings nor is it established by intersubjective consensus between them, just as two people are not 'parts' of a conversation and consensus between them is not necessary for communication to happen. On the other hand, when we observe society, we are primarily making a differentiation because we are distinguishing the set of communications that we call 'society' from everything else, that is, from everything that is not considered communication, which we identify as the environment. What is known as society, then, is an operation to reduce complexity through meaning. At the same time, the attempt to describe society cannot be made from outside society, because 'it uses communication. It activates social relations. It exposes itself to observation in society. However we define the subject, its definition is itself already one of the latter's functions' (Luhmann, 1997: 1). Therefore, it is an inescapably paradoxical and self-referential operation.

In this theoretical context, the first 'clue' emerges for the study of international public opinion in Luhmann's theory. According to this author, if we recognise communication as the key feature of society, then the only possible society in modernity is a world society: 'If we proceed on the assumption that communication is the elementary operation whose reproduction

constitutes society, world society is clearly implied in every communication, regardless of the specific topic and spatial distance between participants' (Luhmann, 1997: 86). This is due to important changes associated with modernity, among which is 'the full discovery of the globe as a closed sphere of meaningful communication' and the establishment of a uniform world time: 'This means that anywhere on Earth, regardless of local time, we can establish simultaneity with all other places and communicate worldwide without loss of time' (Luhmann, 1997: 85). The previous situation was very different:

Knowledge about distant parts of the world remained sporadic; it was spread by people and obviously amplified and distorted rumor-like by reports of reports. Armed conflicts — and certainly not communicative coordination — appear to have been primarily responsible for the world beyond the borders being described as a plurality of nations. (Luhmann, 1997: 84)

However, the idea of a single world, once irreversibly established as a sort of background where everything happens, does not allow for more than one society to be distinguished. Such a claim, of course, is opposed to all theorisations that take 'national societies' as a reference, approaches that Luhmann criticizes in emphatic terms:

Despite the incontestable worldwide interconnections in modern society, sociology persists in its refusal to recognize this global system as society. Sociologists habitually refer, as in everyday speech, to "Italian society," "Spanish society," and so on, although names such as "Italy" or "Spain" should not be used in a theory, if only for methodological reasons. (Luhmann, 1997: 92)

Although for Luhmann the social world is not something articulated in territorial parts, this fact does not prevent other types of differences from being established within it—'It is rather an incomprehensible unity that can be observed in various ways, and only in various ways' (Luhmann, 1997: 90). This replacement of 'parts' by 'ways' of observation makes the theory conceive various functional systems within world society. By observing itself, society finds meaning in politics, for example, and differentiates this from other communications, forming what the theory calls the political system. The same can be said of economy, culture, law, etc. In other words, the same operation that enables the definition of society as a system also defines each functional system within it. At the same time, if we take the political system in particular, we see that the basic operation is repeated again within it—certain topics are distinguished from others within politics, becoming the focus of general attention, thus allowing the reduction of complexity (and the reproduction of the political system) to continue. For Luhmann, this thematization that takes place in political communication is what

can be referred to as 'public opinion'. Consequently, public opinion is not the result of intersubjective communication, nor is it what 'people think'. On this basis, we could point out that 'international public opinion' is the operation by which certain issues constitute the political agenda within a society whose borders, as we have already mentioned, are neither geographic nor state-defined.

However, an important clarification should be made: In Luhmann's (1997) theory, the modern political system along with the legal system are the only ones that can be 'regionally differentiated in the form of states. All others operate independently of spatial boundaries' (p. 96). Consequently, as a property of the political system, public opinion can be distinguished both on the national and global levels.

Understanding public opinion in terms of its functional role within the political system implies setting aside the critical or normative value that Habermas, for example, had stressed. In 1971, Luhmann stated that 'a glance at intellectual history shows that belief in reason could not be maintained, nor could belief in the potential of public opinion to exercise critical control' (cited in Noelle-Neumann, 1980: 152). Although devoid of this particular power as a necessary attribute, public opinion does embody a key integrating power in Luhmann's social system. The appearance of a few 'simplified' topics towards which attention is directed is a basic operation in a society of increasing complexity and functional diversity. Moreover, the rules governing public opinion have little or nothing to do with decision-making processes—'the political system, insofar as it rests on public opinion, is integrated not by rules governing decision but by rules governing attention' (cited in Noelle-Neumann, 1980: 96). Thus, the processes of public opinion are triggered by 'word formulas' that allow the installation of certain issues as worthy of discussion or negotiation.

With this outline, rather than offering a comprehensive review of the features of public opinion in Luhmann's perspective, our interest has been to emphasise how, within a theoretical framework of universalistic claims about social reality, public opinion has been presented as a property of the political system in a world society.

Giddens: Communication in a world of 'disembedded' relationships

Among the central features of modernity, as discussed in the previous section, Luhmann points to the emergence of a single sphere of communication that encompasses the entire world. Although Giddens' theoretical framework to understand social reality differs greatly from Luhmann's, the diagnoses of both authors in relation to modernity are relatable to each other. In fact, in Giddens' view, the idea of an international public opinion could be understood as a consequence of a process that characterises modernity, a process this author calls 'disembedding'. This process consists of social relations 'lifting out' from local contexts of interaction and their 'restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space' (Giddens, 1990: 21). In the premodern world, time and space were firmly connected to each other; for example, 'no one could tell the time of day without reference to other socio-spatial markers' (Giddens, 1990: 17). The invention of the mechanical clock and the worldwide standardisation of calendars are milestones that mark the breakdown of this association between time and space, which in turn enabled the release of social relations from local contexts.

In order to place this postulate in a wider perspective, it is important to mention that in Giddens' view (1984), the genuine object of study of social sciences is neither the experience of the individual actor nor the existence of some form of societal totality, but practices ordered in a space and a time. In fact, this author considers that an 'undue reliance' has been placed upon the idea of society as a bounded system (Giddens, 1990: 63). It is from this theoretical approach that Giddens (1990: 64) interprets globalisation, 'that stretching process' where 'the modes of connection between different social contexts or regions become networked across the earth's surface as a whole'. More specifically, he defines globalisation as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (ibid).

This process of transformation, in turn, can be observed in several dimensions –the nation-state system, the capitalist economy, the world military order and the international division of labour. However, there is 'a further and quite a fundamental aspect of globalisation' (Giddens, 1990: 77), which consists of cultural globalisation, a topic that the author associates directly with communication technology:

The globalizing impact of media was noted by numerous authors during the period of the early growth of mass circulation newspapers. Thus one commentator in 1892 wrote that, as a result of modern newspapers, the inhabitant of a local village has a broader understanding of

contemporary events than the prime minister of a hundred years before. The villager who reads a paper interests himself simultaneously in the issue of a revolution in Chile, a bush-war in East Africa, a massacre in North China, a famine in Russia. (Giddens, 1990: 77)

As specified by Giddens in the same text, the intention of his comments is to emphasise that the global extension of modern institutions would not have been possible without the unified social knowledge represented by 'the news.'

Three points can summarise what we have presented so far. Firstly, for this author the spatio-temporal stretching of social relations is a constitutive feature of what we call modernity and, therefore, was present from the beginning of our era. Secondly, globalisation can be understood as the planetary level expression of this 'disembedding', a phenomenon that links causes and consequences beyond national borders. Thirdly, globalisation—despite having various dimensions—has a fundamental substratum, which is the development of communications.

Since the last decades of the 20th century, as argued by the author, these processes have intensified considerably. Modernity has radicalised and space-time disembedding has become an essential part of people's daily experience. At the turn of the century, Giddens (1999: 7) noted that the term globalisation 'has come from nowhere to be almost everywhere'. To explain these trends, the importance given to communications in this author's approach seems to have grown to an even more prominent position than before. We can notice it, for example, in his words during an interview:

The driving force of the new globalization is the communications revolution. And if you want to put a technological fix on it, the turning point would be the late 1960s and early 1970s, the first time when there was an effective communications satellite sent up above the earth that made possible instantaneous communication from one part of the world to another. To me, that changed more or less the whole of late 20th century history. (Giddens, 2001a: np)

Although communications are presented here with respect to their technological infrastructure, this review of Giddens' perspective on the subject would not be complete without stressing the importance that globalised communications have as a form of action on the world. In other words, they are not only a condition that enable interconnections at a distance, but communicative interconnections also infuse certain characteristics on the social and political conditions of the world. More specifically, 'as different areas of the globe are

drawn into interconnection with one another, waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface' (Giddens, 1990: 6). With these ideas, not only is the relevance of 'disembedded' communication being advanced to understand the contemporary world, but also conceptual space is created for public opinion as a force that is capable of producing transformations in the globalised environment. Again, the seeds of the phenomenon were planted in the beginning of modernity, but its radicalisation since the second half of the 20th century is also pointed out.

Some examples illustrate this idea. In Giddens' view, neither the collapse of the Soviet Union, the changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 nor the end of the apartheid in South Africa are possible to understand without considering the communications revolution as a key ingredient. Street protests taking place in one country were watched by audiences in others, large numbers of whom then took to the streets themselves (Giddens, 1999: 14). In fact, Giddens (2001b: 65) considers that in those years a sort of 'global dialogue' took place about democratisation.

At the same time, this type of phenomena can be understood as a manifestation of the reflexivity that—along with the previously mentioned spatio-temporal modifications—characterises modern world dynamics. This reflexivity is the process by which 'social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Giddens, 1990: 38). In other words, international forces of communication can be understood as a way in which 'the world' currently constitutes itself, and also the way it can change. In fact, strong challenges are presented by Giddens when he assumes a prescriptive standpoint. For this author, democracy must 'become transnational. We need to democratise above—as well as below—the level of the nation. A globalizing era demands global responses, and this applies to politics as much as any other area' (Giddens, 1999: 75). Of course, in his view nothing guarantees that this will happen. Rather, the processes associated to globalisation also carry important dangers, since 'ecological risks, fluctuations in the global economy, or global technological change, do not respect the borders of nations' (Giddens, 1999: 79). Furthermore, the media 'tend to destroy the very public space of dialogue they open up, through a relentless trivializing, and personalizing, of political issues' along with 'the growth of giant multinational media corporations' (ibid: 78).

In sum, although Giddens does not place the idea of communication in the centre of his theoretical understanding of the social world, as his ideas moved towards the explanation of contemporary global phenomena, communication processes gained great prominence, to the

point of being presented as the driving force behind globalisation and the precondition of fundamental political changes.

Bourdieu: Opinions mobilised in transnational fields

As stated in the previous section, in Giddens' view international public opinion can be understood as an important aspect of globalisation. In the following paragraphs we will try to approach the topic from a very different standpoint, where public opinion 'does not exist' (Bourdieu, 1972) and, furthermore, globalisation is nothing more than a discursive façade used to impose particular conservative interests (Bourdieu, 1998/2001).

Bourdieu's theoretical universe is based on a specific observation—the dynamics among players who compete to accumulate different types of capital, a struggle correlated to the formation of a scheme of relationships that the author calls social space. Competition for each type of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic, etc.), in turn forms 'fields' that are relatively autonomous from each other (Bourdieu, 1994). As a result of the relative position that each actor occupies within these fields throughout their trajectory, certain dispositions are embodied in them—dispositions that together form what Bourdieu calls habitus. Acting in the world (that is, fighting for the various types of capital), is to a great extent an operation of these dispositions that are present in the subject, a phenomenon that in turn helps to reproduce the structural characteristics of those fields of relations.

This set of theoretical premises has been used by Bourdieu to study a diverse range of topics. In relation to public opinion, a conference where he attacked the predominant concept of public opinion has become well-known (Bourdieu, 1972). In opinion surveys, which is where Bourdieu aims his critique, it is assumed that everyone can have an opinion, that all opinions have equal weight and that there is agreement on the questions worth asking. Such assumptions, according to him, cause a whole series of distortions, regardless of the methodological rigor that can be applied in the collection and analysis of the data. For this reason, public opinion is described by Bourdieu as a mere artefact whose function is to conceal the fact that the state of opinion at any given moment is a system of forces, of tensions. What is interesting about this view (beyond proposing that public opinion 'does not exist') is that Bourdieu does recognize a 'state of opinion' (Bourdieu, 1972: 125). In this state, opinions are always divided and mobilised within the fields. Furthermore, they are connected to a less explicit and more deeply rooted disposition in agents:

there is, on the one hand, mobilized opinion, formulated opinion, pressure groups mobilized around a system of interests; and on the other, certain inclinations, opinions in an implicit state which, by definition are not really opinions, if by opinion we mean a formulated discourse with a pretention to coherence. (Bourdieu, 1972: 129)

This does not imply that the expression 'public opinion' is irrelevant to Bourdieu. Its importance, however, does not lie in its 'real' content as an aggregate of opinions, but rather in the political uses that this expression has. In the search for different types of capital, specific agents invoke the idea of public opinion and use it as a weapon. 'Stated simply, the politician who yesterday said *God is on our side*, today says *Public Opinion is on our side*' (Bourdieu, 1972: 125). Therefore, adding the 'international' attribute to public opinion would simply be to garnish a fictional idea or, in any case, to widen the scope of a discursive device that is used to reproduce power asymmetries in the world. In this sense, any use of the expression 'international public opinion' should put us on alert and arouse suspicion. What Bourdieu does advance is the idea of opinions that are 'mobilised' in a field of relationships, presenting them as 'something real' and able to take on international reach as an attribute.

Before moving forward along this line, it is important to mention that Bourdieu did not present anything similar to a systematic application of his theoretical framework to the international arena; not for concepts such as field, capital and habitus; much less in relation to a particular topic such as public opinion. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that the categories constructed by Bourdieu are intrinsically linked to the analysis of the internal sphere of countries. In fact, several points of contact between Bourdieu's sociology and the study of international politics have been explored (Adler-Nissen, 2013). Having made this clarification, we can point out that during the latter years of his career, when Bourdieu increasingly assumed the role of a public intellectual fighting neoliberalism, the international dimension of his sociological thinking acquired particular importance. On the one hand, he accused globalisation of being part of a universalistic rhetoric used to hide and justify specific neoliberal policies. But on the other hand—however ironic it might seem—Bourdieu placed a great deal of expectations on transnational fields for the fight against globalisation. The following passage, which aims to foster a 'European social movement', is an interesting example of this standpoint:

Artists, writers, scholars, but also publishers, gallery directors, or critics—in every country must now mobilize at a time when the forces of the economy [...] are being powerfully bolstered by the so-called liberalisation policies that the economically and culturally dominant powers aim to impose universally under cover of "globalisation". (Bourdieu 2001: 75)

In such terms, an intellectual opposed to the idea of public opinion, and a declared anti-globalisation activist, makes his own call to group and mobilise opinions on the global level. Thus, the 'mobilised opinions' that Bourdieu proposed in his 1972 conference as an alternative to the concept of public opinion seem not only empowered to cross the limits of national and cultural spaces, but also called upon to do so.

CHALLENGING VOICES

The four perspectives we have explored in the previous section identify some sort of 'world' or 'international opinion' as a plausible phenomenon of our time; although they do it in different terms: as intersubjective communication processes with normative value (Habermas), as a functional property of the political system (Luhmann), as cause and effect of globalised communications (Giddens) or as competing flows of mobilised opinions (Bourdieu). However, what they primarily do in relation to the subject, is locating it in wider theories of society. The authors state that this 'opinion' happens somewhere, which can be the post-national constellation (Habermas), the international political system (Luhmann), the globalised world (Giddens) or transnational fields (Bourdieu). In turn, each one of these specific scenarios is connected by their proponents to a wider view of social matters 'as a whole', a big picture of what social reality is all about.

In this respect, it should be noted that the generalisability of European social narratives—such as the theories we have used here—has been widely challenged during the last decades, particularly through the work of postcolonial and decolonial thinkers (e.g. Bhabra, 2014; Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2012; Spivak, 1998). Naturally, the mere coexistence of views as different as those presented by Habermas, Luhmann, Giddens and Bourdieu, casts doubts about their potential for providing an ultimate view about all social matters. But the postcolonial and decolonial perspectives try to go much further—they present arguments about the existence of deep epistemic structures in Western thought that tend to create certain narratives that are universal in appearance, but rather parochial in nature.

Although these types of challenges are diverse and constitute a complex network of ideas that we do not intend to summarise in this paper, some consideration of their common themes

seems valuable in order to reflect upon the claim of universality that is implied in an expression such as 'world' opinion.

A good starting point seems to be what Bhambra (2014) considers as the key theoretical contribution of Eduard Said (1995) in his influential book *Orientalism*, around which a great part of the postcolonial tradition took shape: 'the demonstration of how the idea of the universal within European thought is based on a claim to universality at the same time as it elides its own particularity', but also 'how this claim is sustained through the exercise of material power in the world' (Bhambra, 2014: 138-9). The point is that universal claims are always made by someone in particular, someone immersed in a particular social context, someone who actually had the chance to make that universal claim, a chance to speak. But, as Spivak (1998) famously asked in the title her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*.

Postcolonial thinkers argue that the power asymmetries associated to colonialism have been a key factor in determining the particular stance from which narratives of history and knowledge about the world have been built. Since the beginnings of modern Europe, theories emanating from this continent have also been theories emerging at the core of colonial and imperial powers. What decolonial authors stress, on the other hand, is that coloniality has worked as a constitutive—and therefore, persistent—aspect of modernity. This coloniality is not only a matter of economic or political relations, it is also linked to a 'coloniality of knowledge' (or imagination), because it understands knowledge as a relation between an individual and something else that is to be apprehended (Quijano, 2007)—and promotes this view as 'rationality'— without recognising its dimension as a collective construction made by certain subjects for some purpose.

From such a point of view, the sort of cosmopolitanism implied in a concept like 'world opinion' should be analysed in the context of the colonial differences that have characterised modernity. In this respect, Mignolo (2000: 725) points to the cosmopolitan projects that arose 'from within modernity' and traces their origin to the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit in the sixteenth century that 'linked the Spanish Crown with capitalist entrepreneurs from Genoa, with Christian missionaries, with Amerindian elites, and with African slaves'. According to this author, all the most widely known cosmopolitan projects since then, including secular constructions such as Kant's, 'have failed to escape the ideological frame' imposed by 'managerial global designs' (Mignolo, 2000: 724). As an alternative, he proposes a 'critical and dialogic' cosmopolitanism by 'de-linking' its ties to core modern assumptions and

letting it emerge 'from the various spatial and historical locations of the colonial difference' (ibid: 741).

Perspectives like this try to acknowledge the long 'histories of interconnection that have enabled the world to emerge as a global space' (Bhambra, 2014: 155) and recognize that, as a consequence of these histories, the 'world' is not only made of a number of nation-states but also other types of differences, among which decoloniality thinkers present coloniality as the most basic one. In this context, they point out that many instances of society that are regarded as 'national' were in fact colonial or imperial, a type of relationship that is not free from persisting consequences.

At the same time, as all the various institutions and practices developed under the values of modernity, the disciplinary fields dedicated to theorizing about the world cannot be situated outside of this critique. In other words, the context we have referred to as 'social theory' is also part of modernity, which brings to the forefront the question of how this product of modernity could (or why it cannot) transcend its own matrix. As highlighted by Go (2020: 79), 'due to sociology's initial emergence within the culture of American imperialism, early sociological thought embedded the culture of empire's exclusionary logics'. Consequently, the binary oppositions of universalism, objectivity and rationality versus particularism, subjectivity and irrationality have underpinned the sociological enterprise from the start. 'Anglo-European societies marked the universal and metropolitan, and everywhere else was tagged as particular and provincial' (ibid: 87). Today, he argues, we should recognize that 'scientific knowledge is always partial and incomplete, because it is always perspectival' (ibid: 91) Some key examples of this problem are the great difficulties that sociologists have faced in their quest for a 'global sociology' that truly considers diversity without falling into the 'trap' of cultural relativism (Bhambra, 2014)

CONCLUSION

Choosing one of the standpoints we have presented in this paper and using it as the theoretical focus to understand world opinion would imply sacrificing the great conceptual richness of the other positions. Combining all of them in a single effort would be an attempt to bring together very distant philosophical conceptions, ignoring arduous and complex debates in social theory. Finally, to extract some ideas from each proposal, without respecting the framework where each author has presented them, in order to create some sort of 'world opinion theory', would simply be arbitrary.

As explained in the introductory section, by implementing this plural review of frameworks our aim was to explore whether the notion of world opinion is 'worthy' of contemporary social theory. And the answer is that it is. World opinion is not just an unknowable 'ghost' presented by the speech of some politicians or a series of percentages computed by multinational survey companies. Rather, it is possible to notice the presence of this concept in theoretical systems whose generalisation capacity of current social phenomena is widely recognised. As we have seen, voices that question such capacity also deal with issues closely related to world opinion, although they do it by raising a warning flag. For a concept like world opinion to have actual utility and normative potential, they tell us, it cannot *only* make sense within the value-system of European modernity. Naturally, the same can be said of many other concepts, such as democracy, human rights and others; but it is particularly important when we place the universal qualifier 'world' before a term, especially when this term is 'opinion', which is associated with the voices, judgements and perspectives of different subjects. It implies dealing with both oneness *and* difference. No easy formulas can be found on either side—when speaking of world opinion, it is always *one* world that is being talked about, but the criteria to determine what (and how) differences should be considered to understand that world constitute a key question.

Moreover, under the light of the ideas presented by postcolonial and decolonial thinkers interesting questions emerge about the notion of 'world opinion' in the context of social theory. For example: To what extent are the principles of 'publicity'—which took shape within the limits of European thought around the 16th century—applicable to 'world opinion'? Taken that processes of political communication in 'world society' are not limited by national borders, can we take for granted that these processes are also 'breaking free' from other types of borders or differences? How does the long history of globalization, that goes back to the 15th century, shape current manifestations of collective opinions around the world? What features should a

'global sociology' have in order to study global opinion topics? What meanings associated to this opinion are tied to the core values of European modernity and which ones are capable of 'transcending' its limitations?

Interestingly, in comparison to the consolidated tradition of 'Public Opinion Research', the thematic arena of world opinion seems to present a number of advantages for exploring these difficult questions. Public Opinion Research has taken the full shape of a disciplinary field, it is mostly focused on the methodology of opinion polls and it understands itself as the empirical research inheritor of the normative principles of publicity advocated by the Illustration. Its reliance on the individual citizen and their relationship to national-state politics—with all the characteristic assumptions of modernity that underpin this reliance—has become cemented throughout almost one hundred years of academic and consultancy activities. In contrast, the incipient and diffuse features of world opinion as a topic can be epistemologically advantageous. The fact that the expression 'world opinion' is much more frequent in political discourse than world 'public' opinion, might be an indication of its weaker ties to typically modern categories; or Habermas' choice of words—who instead of presenting the planet as a big 'public sphere' prefers the metaphor of 'constellation' to understand its international structure—is another interesting example. Moreover, as long as world opinion doesn't 'belong' to any specific disciplinary field and its scholars do not 'know' exactly what they are talking about (this is, as long as they do not lock themselves in specific stances) the possibilities of creative exploration and dialogue among different epistemic perspectives might be greater.

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