

## Teaching Sociology in Brazil: an interview with Carlos Benedito Martins

### Abstract

This interview was conducted with Carlos Benedito Martins, a full professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Brasilia. The aim was to highlight the author's educational and professional background, as well as to understand the writing of the book *O que é Sociologia*, published by Brasiliense in the 1980s. This book has more than 60 editions and approximately 750,000 printings, which represents a notable editorial success for an introductory book on sociology for Brazilian readers. In the interview, the author presents some aspects that help us to understand the social relations involved in writing the book, as well as his vision of the teaching of sociology in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Sociology teaching, books, Sociology, Brazil.

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### Introductory notes on the interviewee

Professor Carlos Benedito de Campos Martins graduated in Social Sciences from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (1971), continued his career with a master's degree in Social Sciences from the same institution in 1979, and completed the first part of his training with a doctorate in Sociology from the University of Paris V - René Descartes (1986), with a scholarship from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). His professional career includes post-doctoral internships in Sociology at Columbia University (2006-2007) and Oxford University (2011-2012). He has also been a visiting professor at Columbia University (2008 and 2010), the University of Oxford (2011-2012), the University of

Lisbon (2009, 2010 and 2012), the Free University of Berlin (2014), the University of Hong Kong (2016), the National University of Singapore (2017), the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (2018) and University College London (2022).

He joined the Department of Sociology at the University of Brasilia (UnB) in 1987 and retired in 2023. He is recognized as a leading figure in strengthening the research fields of Higher Education and Contemporary Sociological Theory in Brazil, having participated in the management of the most prestigious academic and scientific associations in the area of Social Sciences and Sociology. He has served as Director of the National Association for Graduate Studies and Research in the Social Sciences (ANPOCS), as well as President of the Brazilian Society of Sociology (SBS) for two consecutive terms. In both organizations, he held various management positions and coordinated working groups that were essential in shaping and consolidating these areas of research in Brazil.

These leading positions in the field of Brazilian Social Sciences were achieved due to the recognition of his peers for his research work, which has become a reference for understanding the characteristics and configurations of higher education models in Brazil and, in recent decades, in a comparative analysis with other countries, from a global perspective. His books, such as *Ensino Pago: Um Retrato Sem Retoques* (published by Autores Associados), *Educação Superior e desafios no novo século: contextos e diálogos Brasil-Portugal* (published by Editora UnB), *Olhares Cruzados: Brasil-França* (published by Editora Pontes) and *Diálogos entre o Brasil e a França: formação e cooperação acadêmica* (published by Editora Massangana), reflect his decades-long dedication to the subject and make him a leading researcher in the country.

In addition to the field of higher education research, Professor Carlos Benedito Martins has been concerned with updating the theoretical debate in the Social Sciences in Brazil, having coordinated the publication *Horizontes das Ciências Sociais*, comprising three volumes in the areas of Sociology, Politics and Anthropology (2010), the collection *Teoria sociológica contemporânea: autores e perspectivas* (published by Vozes in ), and *As Ciências Sociais no mundo contemporâneo: revisões e prospecções* (published by UnB), bringing together various researchers linked to the most prestigious teaching and research centers. He was also responsible for writing the book *O que é Sociologia (Brasiliense)*, which for more than four decades has

remained a reference for teachers, researchers and students in the field of Social Sciences in Brazil, both in higher education and in the teaching of sociology in basic education, with around seven hundred and fifty thousand copies in print.

Her career has also been marked by efforts to build international collaborations between various reference centers and leading researchers in the field of social science research. He was Brazil's representative on the Institute for Research on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean IESALC/UNESCO. He is also currently coordinator of the Capes-Cofecub Project (2020/2023), entitled Globalization of French and Brazilian sociologies: agents, institutions, themes, in partnership with the École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay.

In this interview we tried to find out more about the writing and dissemination of the book *O que é Sociologia*, published in the collection *Primeiros Passos* by Editora Brasiliense. *O que é Sociologia* was published in the 1980s, a time of re-democratization in Brazil, which had lived under military rule between 1964 and 1985. It is important to note that the book's publication was also concomitant with the expansion of enrollment in higher education, which may partly explain the book's editorial success, which currently has more than 60 editions and around 750,000 copies in print, which shows the editorial success of a book aimed at introducing Brazilian readers to sociology.

## **Interview**

*Could you tell us about your research career in the social sciences? What did you research for your master's and doctorate?*

I started my training in Goiânia, which was very bad at the time, in 1968. In 1969, I went to São Paulo, which was a very impactful thing for me. The city of Goiânia had 150,000 inhabitants at the time and the city of São Paulo had almost 6 million. I did my master's degree at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and later became a professor there. I did my undergraduate degree at PUC and I was very lucky, because the year I graduated the basic cycle was created and, as a result, the institution hired many teachers from my generation. I had a very strong training to be a teacher, inspired by Paulo Freire and behaviorism. I was on a behaviorist team, so I was very much trained to be a teacher.

During my master's degree, I began to see the difference I was making at PUC, which was creating private education in São Paulo. A very important person in this process was Maurício Tragtenberg, a famous professor in the city, a Weberian and an anarchist. He was very impressed with my research project and I talked to him a lot. At that time, Florestan Fernandes and Octávio Ianni arrived at PUC to become professors.

I was head of the Sociology Department at the time, so I was in contact with Florestan and discussed my project with him, Octávio Ianni and Maurício Tragtenberg. I had the idea of doing research on higher education, first analyzing a school in São Paulo - which at that time was being formed, and had a very curious fact: all the participants, directors, founders and so on endorsed the 1964 military coup. At the same time, many of the students studying there were from the security agencies. When Maurício Tragtenberg wrote the preface to the book [A empresa cultural no Brasil], he called it a "regime school". In my analysis, I used Foucault's concept of the panopticon a lot, because there was a very large surveillance system.

I remember that my advisor, Maria Andréa Loyola, had just arrived from France and was Alain Touraine's advisor, but she was very involved with Pierre Bourdieu. I remember the day I finished my master's defense and she said: - Carlos, now you're going to France. I had no idea. She said: - Go, go to France. She wrote to Pierre Bourdieu to ask him to accept me, but he said that he wasn't accepting anyone else at that point. Bourdieu appointed someone else to advise me on my doctorate, Viviane Isambert-Jamati.

I went to France and did my doctorate on the expansion not only of private education but also of business schools in São Paulo. I researched some schools and their students too, "what did you come here to do?", what kind of student they were, the expectations they had and, at the same time, I built up a bit about the question of administration in Brazil, the importance of training staff for this and what kind of institution was training those students who were quite lower middle class and wanted to rise, I discuss a lot the question of higher education as a mechanism of ascension, also of reproduction.

That done, I stayed in France for five years. I attended Pierre Bourdieu's seminar for the whole period, a closed seminar for fifteen students. I attended his

classes at the College de France and became very close to Monique Saint Martin, the second person in his hierarchy, who discussed my thesis with him a lot.

When I wanted to go back to São Paulo, PUC did me a great disservice, because I was the first PUC professor in São Paulo to leave to do a doctorate abroad, with a scholarship from CAPES [Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel]. Until then, everyone did a PhD at USP [University of São Paulo], and there were very few PhDs in the Sociology department. The few who did were graduates of USP. When I came to Brazil to do field research, I told PUC that I wanted to go back. I had a 40-hour contract. And the dean of the PUC - who was a friend of mine, from my department, left-wing and all that - said that it was impossible to take me on because there was no more room for 40 hours. Only twenty hours. I said: look, I'm sorry because you're going to lose a doctor who is arriving with great enthusiasm.

When I returned to France, I sent a letter to the Sociology Department at UnB, and João Gabriel, the head of the department at the time, said: - we have every interest in you coming here. I arrived here as a CNPq [National Council for Scientific and Technological Development] scholarship holder. Then I took the public exam to become a permanent professor.

From then on, I started writing a lot about higher education in Brazil. I did some research here on private education in the Federal District [the capital of Brazil]. I had a very interesting experience at CAPES because Clarissa Baeta Neves, president of the institution at the time, asked me to advise her. As she was leaving, I bumped into Abílio Neves, Clarissa's husband, and he asked: "What are you doing here?". I said: "I'm leaving". He said: "No, you're staying here with me". I spent almost ten years at Capes as an advisor to the President and it was a very incredible experience because... I continued here at UnB, teaching, doing everything, but I began to understand the postgraduate system in general. So it was a time when I wrote a lot about postgraduate studies. Afterwards, I took part in the 2010-2020 national postgraduate plan and produced a lot about postgraduate studies.

Later, I went to the United States and began to read about American higher education and to better understand the process of globalization in higher education.

Then I went to England, to Oxford University, to do a post-doctorate. Since then, I've written very little about Brazil, but I'm working a lot theoretically on the issue of globalization, how it impacts on higher education, who the actors are. In addition to this research agenda, I'm also interested in the sociology of intellectuals. I realized that those who are driving the debate on higher education are not sociologists, they are educators, so I took two teams of academic researchers: those who propose a neoliberal perspective, who have very important people, who drive higher education and, generally, produce in English, produce a lot, important publishers, maintain connections with the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development], with UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization], with the World Bank. Theirs is a normative production with a lot of impact. At the same time, critics generally don't have that much input. For example, the French publish in French, so few people read them. They're completely unknown. There's a guy who's very important in France, Christophe Charle, who researches universities, he published that little book on the history of universities that he wrote with Verger. He's just published a book on the deregulation of higher education, but nobody reads it because it's in French. There are some people there who are critical too, but they don't have the visibility of the neoliberals. I'm working on it now. The question I'm asking now is: what model is emerging in higher education? What is this model? It's a model I'm trying to understand and who is involved in building this model. I'm taking the most important intellectuals involved in building this model. Just to tell you that at the moment I'm not messing with Brazil. However, there's something else: in this whole process I discovered a guy, Hector [Gutierrez], do you know him? Hector [Gutierrez], who founded an association called the Triple Helix, which advocates this participation of government [university], state and business, and who today is the guy who most influences higher education worldwide. The issue of entrepreneurial education, everything comes from him, he even founded an international association called the International Triple Helix Association, which has an impressive global connection. There are people from all over the world. There are more than 120 Brazilians there. So now I'm tracking down who these Brazilians are, how this discussion is reaching Brazil. I'm going back to Brazil, from the international process to Brazil. I'm going to see what comes of it. But at the moment,

I'm seeing who the guys are who are talking about it, where they are, which universities they're at, what they're publishing, how they're publishing it, the networks they're setting up. I've left Brazil for a while and I'm looking at higher education on an international level.

*So your research interests relate to the sociology of education, sociological theory and the sociology of intellectuals?*

Yes, sociological theory because I'm working on globalization. Sociology of Higher Education because I'm focusing my question [the different models] on higher education from a sociological substrate and with globalization. From a sociological point of view, globalization has been studied a lot from the point of view of culture, sport, and very little about the university. It's the educators who have been working on this, and sometimes from a very normative perspective, where concepts such as the knowledge society, the knowledge economy are produced, which are terms that sociology itself has sometimes used without questioning where these terms came from. So I'm doing a sociology of the sociology of higher education production.

*How did you come up with the idea of writing the book *What is Sociology*, published by Brasiliense?*

The idea of writing the book was sketched out in the city of São Paulo. Florestan Fernandes arrived at the Sociology Department of PUC-SP and I became very good friends with him. He wrote the preface to the second edition of my book. He once gave a course on the formation of sociology and he wrote a book called *The Sociological Nature of Sociology* and I was very taken with this book.

At that time, the collection *Primeiros Passos* (First Steps) was coming out, and I had a friend [Vavy Pacheco Borges] who wrote *O que é História* (What is History) in that collection. She was a historian and a close friend of Caio Graco Prado, who owned Brasiliense, one of the most important publishing houses in São Paulo. She said: "Carlos...[me talking to her about it] why don't you write a book about it, go and talk to Caio". I went to talk to him. Caio is a very interesting guy, he only had a high school education, no higher education, but he was attentive to art, music, cinema and politics. We became friends, and from there I started writing this book when my

second child was being born and I was going for my doctorate in France, with my house almost dismantled, a small table and a typewriter.

I sent him the text and he said that he had already sent it to my nephew and that he liked it very much, and he replied [it was all by letter back then] that my nephew was very intelligent but that the text was very complicated. I needed to reduce the text. So I settled in France and spent nights rewriting the book. And this little book, I was looking at it, has already sold around 700,000 copies, it's circulated a lot. Caio died, dramatically, in a motorcycle accident at the age of 60. His sister later took over the publishing house. One day we talked about the possibility of updating the book, I was very Marxist at the time I wrote the book, because of the influence of Florestan Fernandes and Octavio Ianni, at that time [the 70s and 80s] Marxism was a very important thing in the country. I wanted to rewrite the book, but for the price offered by the publisher it wasn't worth the effort. Today, it's a very incomplete book, I think those first two parts on the history of sociology are still relevant, but the final part, which is the development of sociology, is totally out of date.

When I went to do my doctorate in France, I was very impressed by Bourdieu's reflections on sociology because he said: "it's not just doing sociology, it's thinking sociologically about sociology". And I've been working a lot with this now, which is to compare the formation of Sociology in France and the formation of Sociology in Brazil, what it has in the current phase, what it has in common and what it doesn't have. I mean, it's thinking again, not about the history of Sociology, but about how they are facing the problem of globalization, the insertion of Brazilian and French Sociology and it's interesting because the French are much better known but there are some spaces where Brazil has more presence, for example, at the ISA [International Sociological Association] the Brazilian delegation is much more important than the French because they invest in other things, they invest in a French-speaking Sociology association.

I think the book was important for me because it made Sociology an object of reflection and now I'm thinking about how globalization impacts higher education and Sociology. It's funny because a lot of the history of sociology people don't take into account the context of university institutions. How can you understand the implementation of Sociology in Brazil if you don't take into account the history of



higher education? And it's the same in France. But many books on the history of sociology leave this issue aside. It's to say that the institutional basis is in the state, in the functioning of the state, but it's also in the composition of the institutions.

*And in which year was it first published?*

In 1981

*So you wrote it at the end of the 1970s?*

It was in 1979, 1980 and 1981.

*You mentioned the influence of Marxism and then also Bourdieu.*

Yes, I stopped at Bourdieu.

*How many editions of the book were there?*

I think the book had about fifty editions. Now the publisher only puts out the reprint. I remember that when I applied to become a full professor in 2011, I asked the publisher to send me the number of books sold so far. At that time there were 500,000 copies. In 2011, I believe it must have sold 700,000 copies. The publisher isn't publishing anything else at the moment. I really enjoyed writing this book. Once I was invited to give a lecture in the interior of the state of Bahia, at a college, and I was very moved because a woman came up to me and said: "Professor, I came from the interior of the state because I knew you were coming here and I had read your book and wanted to meet you". I was so moved by that.

*And you mentioned to the publisher that he asked for a revision to make it more accessible to a wider audience... did you have to think about that, think about an ideal audience for the book?*

Because I think that when I wrote the first version it was in very sociological language. In fact, the First Steps Collection was designed for secondary school students. It wasn't for the university. Understand? Caio Graco thought the language was too difficult, so I had to change the language. I think I had to reduce it from 100 to 70 pages, I reduced it a lot and it was difficult to make that cut because at the time without a computer you had to write everything on a typewriter, it was a hassle.

*You wrote the book presenting a history and development of Sociology, then a process of institutionalization. Did you come up with this structure or did you have any guidance from the publisher?*

I thought it up myself because I was reading a lot about it. This book by Florestan Fernandes, *The Sociological Nature of Sociology*, was a book that really caught my attention. So I covered the impact of the industrial revolution, the French revolution on the formation of sociology, then the development of sociology to talk about Marx, Durkheim, Weber and then the final part of the development of sociology. I think the first part is interesting because I think I've captured the question of how the French and industrial revolutions impacted on the emergence of sociology. Now, the second part is very superficial and the third part I think is completely out of date, because in the 1980s, Bourdieu was the most contemporary author in my reading.

*And what would you add to the book at this point?*

I would say that during a certain period there was a very big war between paradigms. The paradigms were seen as mutually exclusive, either you were a Marxist or a Weberian, and Bourdieu had a huge impact on my education, showing me how these separations were canonical, they had no epistemological foundations, they were much more struggles for positions, for recognition, struggles in the field. I think I would take the notion of the field, not the notion of the field behind it, showing that things were a field in conflict and that today you have gone through a time of great paradigmatic wars, then there was a time of calm and today I think we are entering a very complicated time again, which is also a time of internecine wars in Sociology, which I find very worrying because Sociology today has the economy in front of it, which can explain society much faster than sociologists, and we're fighting amongst ourselves about whether the decolonial or the post-colonial is better and a whole attack on the classical tradition of Sociology.

I think it's always important to review Sociology, its foundations, I really think that its basis is very Eurocentric, European, but I think that today, in this study of globalization, Sociology has also become globalized, it's a world Sociology, it's no longer a European, North American sociology. Sociology is currently in more than 150 countries, a great diversity, but we're still at a time of an internal fight to attack

the classics. So I'm very concerned about the teaching of sociology. This is a concern that I have a very Weberian attitude towards. I think that the teacher should have an exemption from values in order to transmit sociology.

I'm afraid of the teachers who teach sociology in secondary schools, because many of them have no training in sociology. And many of these teachers pass on preconceived ideas to their students. And also at university, many teachers pass on their personal preferences to their students. In almost forty years in the profession, I've never told students that Pierre Bourdieu was the best. I always point out: "Look, he was a guy who was susceptible to success, susceptible to mistakes". I go into a classroom and try to present the advances and limits of each author and theory.

*Could you elaborate on your understanding of the role of teaching sociology at school?*

I think it's very important. I don't know yet, because I'm a little removed from it, how to teach sociology in elementary school. But I think it gives students elements to question the world, question their families, question and rethink the social world. It provides students with a minimum basis for being able to denaturalize social relations. I think the subject plays a very big role in shaping citizenship. At university, you go in one way and come out another, it's much more diverse, much richer, it's a process of constant clashes between different areas. So when students arrive at university, they discover a very rich world. In high school, they are still very tied to their families, very tied to their private world. I think that teaching sociology should problematize this a little for the students: their family, their sexual choices, the political choices they make, inserting these questions to really awaken the spirit of inquiry. I don't think it's a question of teaching Durkheim, Marx and Weber, as is done at university. It's like doing something pleasant, enjoyable, so that he can... newspaper clippings, news reports, and you work out the categories behind them. But, what I think, I could be wrong, the categories appear first as a first point and the information comes in the background. I think that should be reversed. I think one of our problems, one of our challenges, is to train teachers for this. A very serious problem: training good teachers to teach sociology. And it's not just about knowledge... it's also about technique, which I think we need to discuss a lot, you know?

*Do you think the publication of the book was important for your professional career?*

I'd say it was more important for me to reflect on sociology in my professional and intellectual life, you know? I think that, of course, professionally it was nice because it circulated a lot but, for me, the most important thing about this book wasn't it. It gave me a trajectory of thought and, above all, when I wrote this book, I hadn't even had any contact with Bourdieu's work and after I started reading Bourdieu's work... I think Bourdieu's work is always a sociological reflection on sociology. And then I said: "Man, this is something I want to continue", so, thinking about Sociology, I think this book led me to the commitment of always thinking about Sociology. You know? Its historical nature. Its social value. The question of the intellectual's responsibility, but above all to think about the process of building Sociology. The clashes it has. The false clashes it has. Understand? The mystifications. The people who come in defending positions that sometimes seem super universalist but are actually particularist. This book opened up a reflection for me, so much so that I continue to read a lot about sociology, which is an area I've fallen in love with.

When you returned to Brazil at that time, the process of re-democratization was underway. Does this have anything to do with publishing, the dissemination of books and the expansion of the social sciences in Brazil? The development of postgraduate studies? I think that, perhaps, the book circulated in all these spaces: in secondary education, in undergraduate courses, not only in social sciences courses, but also in introductory sociology courses

I hadn't thought of that. I wrote a book during the dictatorship. I think it was later used, so to speak, by students and teachers to think about certain things. But I hadn't thought about it. You know? Those effects that you don't foresee? I never thought about it, but I knew that the dictatorship would end. I've always believed in sociology as an instrument of social criticism, as an instrument for rethinking life. I wrote for that purpose. I wrote almost like a teacher, you know? I gave that course in my introduction. So much so that there are notes from my classes.

*Was the book ever censored?*

No. Caio Graco was a progressive, left-wing figure. And the Brasiliense publishing house, at that time, published many works of literature. This First Steps Collection published *What is Ideology*, by Marilena Chauí, *What is University*, by Luiz Eduardo Wanderley. Caio had the idea that these publications would have a social impact. The aim was to tackle broad themes, and he said: "Let's get these kids thinking"; he had this aim.

*Thank you very much for the interview!*

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