

# Cicourel in Buenos Aires. Methodological debates in times of political radicalization.

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## ABSTRACT

Aaron Cicourel traveled to Buenos Aires in 1963. During that period, he delivered the seminar "Social Research Methodology: Study of Special Problems." Cicourel's methodological perspective was foreign to the scientific culture of the institution, oriented at that time to neopositivism. Therefore, this paper wants to reconstruct Cicourel's time at the Department of Sociology of the University of Buenos Aires. From this, through different archival sources, personal documents and interviews, the course materials and the repercussions on his work will be analysed. Likewise, some hypotheses will be outlined about the influence of this visit on changes in the teaching of methodology in sociology, along with certain hermeneutic and linguistic turns, and the imposition in the following decades of the importance of qualitative methods in the social investigation.

This work is a humble tribute to Professor Cicourel, whom I met at a research seminar almost 30 years ago. In that occasion, he read and commented on the draft of my master's thesis, for which I am deeply grateful. These ideas are the product of the work within the Project "Sociology in numbers. The development of empirical sociology in Argentina (1940-1973)", funded by UBA, (Code 20020220300125BA). Main arguments were presented in Pereyra and Lazarte (2022) but some hypotheses are deepened here. Another version of this paper will be also read in a sociological meeting in San Juan at the end of October 2024.

## Introduction

Aaron Cicourel (1928-2023) was one of the most innovative sociologists in North American sociology in the last sixty years. He studied experimental psychology at the University of California (Los Angeles) and then received his doctorate at Cornell, where he specialized in sociolinguistics, medical communication, decision making, and primary socialization. Then, he returned to the universities of the Pacific coast to familiarize himself with the epistemological discussions that later led to symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. His work was identified with the legacy of the ideas of Alfred Schutz, Harold Garfinkel, and Erving Goffman. In the mid-1960s, he settled at the University of California at San Diego where he developed empirical research on health, cognitive development, fertility, and juvenile crime (Meccia, 2012).

From an interactionist perspective, Cicourel has made important contributions in sociolinguistics and cognitive sociology, especially in the period when sociology was undergoing a transformation from structural functionalism to a reflexive approach. His work has been valued both for its lucid epistemological and methodological reflections and for its criticism of traditional Parsonianism and methodological holism (Alexander, 1987, p. 163); and in turn for its faithful but enriching recovery of Schutz's phenomenology (Wolf, 1978, p. 595; Ritzer, 1993, p. 308; Schrecker, 2010, p. 14). Recently, his ideas have also been recovered as a contribution to the integration between macro and microsociology (Corcuff, 2007, p. 60).

Six decades ago, in 1963, Cicourel taught at the Schools of Philosophy and Letters and Natural Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires (Pereyra, Lazarte, 2022). Neither the country nor the language was completely foreign to him. He was born into a humble family of Sephardic origin, who had recently arrived to the United States from Greece. His mother tongue was Ladino and his family branches included some relatives in Argentina.

This journey may be interesting to measure the impact of his loud voice in the midst of a heated methodological debate, crossed by the tension and political radicalization of the students. Therefore, this work briefly reconstructs Cicourel's journey through Buenos Aires, based on the information already presented in a previous work (Pereyra, Lazarte, 2022). From this, some hypotheses are proposed about the influence of his ideas on the changes in the teaching of methodology in sociology, together with certain hermeneutic and linguistic turns, and the imposition in the following decades of the importance of qualitative methods in social research.

# Presentation of the argument and the empirical case

In the second semester of 1963, Cicourel delivered the seminar "Methodology of Social Research: Study of Special Problems" at the Department of Sociology at the local university, as part of his duties as Visiting Professor, funded by the Ford Foundation. He was invited by Gino Germani, who was doing at that moment a great effort to modernize the teaching of sociology in the country.

In this context, two analytical issues must be taken into account. First, his visit coincided with the emergence of a strong political debate within the department and student criticism of the way sociological methodology was taught, which even led to a student strike against courses on that subject (Pereyra, Lazarte, 2022). Second, his time at the local university mobilized a series of readings and a corpus of ideas that he poured into his work *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (1982 [1964]). With very few exceptions, the bibliographical material from the course formed part of the book's citations. Therefore, Cicourel's seminal work was tested in front of Buenos Aires students who challenged both the local authorities of the discipline and the main currents of positivist methodology.

Cicourel's curricular proposal mainly reviewed the problems of measuring social action. Unlike the methodological courses taught by Germani, this new training proposal focused on qualitative methods (participant observation and interviews). It also introduced a discussion on the importance of research on topics such as language and meaning in everyday life, which opened the door to a phenomenological discussion, which was the basis of anti-Parsonian criticism.

One of the central questions of Cicourel's seminar, which would be replicated in some way in his book, was how to achieve objective procedures and results when the structure of the meaning of common sense is the presupposition of research? To begin an answer, the North American sociologist recovered Weber's theory of social action and proposed a separation between social facts and cultural facts. Both in unit 3 of the course syllabus and in the first chapter of his book, Cicourel sought a solution to the question by carrying out a critical evaluation of the measurement model of Paul Lazarsfeld and Allen Barton. Likewise, both unit 9 of the course and the seventh chapter of his work critically reviewed experimental methods in sociology and

psychology. The reasoning was linked to an analysis that contrasted studies of daily life and life histories with the numerical description of social facts, which Cicourel, both in unit 7 of the seminar and in the fifth chapter of his work, called the demographic method.

However, language appeared as one of the central concepts of the seminar. In unit 10, the arguments of the eighth chapter of *Method and Measurement in Sociology* were anticipated. It reported that the use of language influences the ways in which people interpret and describe the world. It should be taken into account in the body of sociological theory, therefore. In this way, these senses of verbal, non-verbal and paralinguistic communication, deployed during social interactions, must be part of the concepts and research procedures used by sociologists but also of the use of language by bureaucratic agencies and other social organizations (Cicourel, cited in Kornblit, 2012, p. 304-305).

## Some reflective hypotheses

Cicourel's seminar raised an epistemological discussion about the differences between natural and social sciences and problematized the ideas of objectivity and measurement in sociology. His conceptualization of measurement was probably his most relevant contribution to the discipline, considering it as situated, contingent and inevitably practical. Meccia (2012) recognizes this conceptual contribution but favors the approach to reflexively recover the voice of the actors and establish a link between their actions and social structures. According to this logic, all measurement in social sciences, given its non-experimental nature, involves obtaining information from social actors, through interviews or other techniques that can recover their daily experiences. In this sense, sociology must appropriate native concepts and interpretations.

Cicourel's entire work can be summarized in the idea that society consists of a sum of interaction processes carried out by individuals, in a varied series of physical and institutional contexts. Thus, interaction scenarios connect the subjective with the objective, the factual with the normative, and the 'micro' with the 'macro'. Cicourel criticized the belief in the validity of research results based simply on the application of indices, scales or questionnaires that do not take into consideration historical and social contexts.

Following Schutz's legacy, the ethnomethodology proposed by Cicourel argued that social sciences were very different from natural sciences in the sense that they could not access the social world through mere observation (How, 2016, p. 164). In this sense, every sociologist must aspire to understand the symbolically structured meanings of the social. Their ability to access social reality is given by their belonging to the social world and the ability to meaningfully apprehend objects from their own pre-theoretical knowledge of the life world.

The 1963 student strike in Buenos Aires was undoubtedly one of the first and loudest expressions of criticism of scientific sociology with neo-positivist content. This expressed the emergence of an alternative Marxist perspective, from a Latin American perspective. At the same time, the conflict expressed the weaknesses and limits of the Germani's project. Therefore, Cicourel's seminar took place in the middle of a conflictive process of dispute between different actors within sociology in Buenos Aires. Therefore, the invitation was a way of overcoming the crisis and addressing student demands.

Cicourel's methodological perspective was foreign to the scientific culture of local sociology. The visiting professor recognized (cited in Kornblit, 2012, p. 301) certain methodological tensions with Germani, although he appreciated the erudition and theoretical plurality of his readings, which exceeded the framework of positivism and the quantitative perspective. The seminar was undoubtedly innovative. Its content showed a counterpoint to the methodological dogmatism denounced by the students. His work apparently did not encounter many obstacles to discussing and defending his points of view. However, it was not well received by the students. Despite his critical position towards positivism, the students encountered an American professor, financed by a foreign foundation with imperialist purposes, whose classes did not propose a radical break with the scientific method.

Although Cicourel indicated (cited in Kornblit, 2012, p. 303) that his time in Buenos Aires deeply marked his later work, no evidence or quote can be found in his book that refers to the Argentine case or to his experience accumulated in the streets of the that city. Perhaps the language, the times or the potential audience conditioned the edition. However, he did not recover this experience either in the prologue or in the Spanish edition of the book in 1982.

The seminar given by Cicourel was then an untimely experience, since the different institutional actors who taught or learned sociology had not yet internalized the set of orientations towards subjectivism. Cicourel anticipated in some way the denunciations against sociological formalism and the deviations of the numerical interpretation of society. However, the recommendations of his main work were incorporated with a delay of more than five years in the methodological reading lists at sociology courses. The criticisms of Parsons and his local emissaries came from Marxist structuralism, which the course did not recover in any way.

However, his trip was not innocuous. He left very good memories among his local colleagues, sharing research experiences in the hardest Germani's group. He cultivated friendships, especially with Ana Lía Kornblit, who probably became his best disciple in the country. In a long-term historical perspective, Cicourel's experience in Argentina did not find attentive ears, since they were interested in other symphonies. But he planted some seeds that germinated later, when the phenomenological turn was registered that, with some delay, imposed the importance of qualitative methods in social research.

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