

Increasing positive meanings of politics and science policies as those concepts were expressed in different phases of an important Brazilian publication

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC) during Brazil's democratization process, by analyzing its publication *Ciência Hoje* (*Science Today*) and the values emphasized in its scientific culture. *Ciência Hoje* was created in 1982 by a group of scientists aiming to promote the popularization of science. SBPC's discourse has, since its foundation, promoted the science-democracy axis. However, during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985), this axis was strengthened as an explicit political position, increasingly antagonistic to the government. It is noteworthy that SBPC's role of political resistance during Brazilian dictatorship was carried out by promoting a positive connotation for the meaning of words such as "politics" and "policies" among the scientific community in Brazil. Although very politically active until the mid-60s, SBPC promoted an image of political impartiality, as if it believed that by doing so it would avoid corrupting the scientific *ethos*. However, during the military dictatorship, SBPC began to exercise greater autonomy from the government and was quite critical of its technocracy. Finally, in the 80s SBPC assumes the position that politics are essential to its conception of scientific culture, and it seeks to demonstrate this to the public of *Ciência Hoje*. It did so by emphasizing the importance of science in shaping public policies. Through the means of scientific communication, the

general public was strategically informed and encouraged to discuss problematic national situations, such as environmental and social issues. In this paper, we argue that *Ciência Hoje* had a key role in recording and providing visibility to the contributions of national science and scientists in the reconstruction of Brazilian democracy in the 1980s.

Introduction

This article is based on a doctorate dissertation (FONSECA, 2012), developed within the History Department of UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais). It explores representations of values associated with science and scientific culture in the discourse of the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC) in 40 years, from 1948 to 1988.

Since its inception in 1948, SBPC has had an important function as a forum for scientists and for the institutionalization of the discussion of scientific policies, the defense of science, scientific education, and the popularization of science in Brazilian society. The vision and actions of SBPC members have had repercussions in the transformations of the public image of science in Brazil. The meaning of scientific culture for SBPC has been linked to its representations of politics and the relationship between it and science.

The image of SBPC about the alleged neutrality of science has changed throughout these 40 years. It has moved from a professed desire for political impartiality to valuing the social responsibility of scientists, which is expressed through their engagement in defining scientific policies and communicating science to the population at large. This article focuses on the role of the magazine *Ciência Hoje* as a relevant social practice in the transformation process of the public image of science and scientists in Brazil.

Methodology

The methodology used consisted of analyzing the content discourse in public events of SBPC, especially those in its annual meetings, as well as in editorials, articles and public interviews published in the magazines *Ciência e Cultura (Science and Culture)* and *Ciência Hoje*, both published by SBPC. The analysis was structured

according to sociological and philosophical references: the concepts of norms of Robert Merton (1942), counter-norms proposed by Ziman (2000), and categorizations proposed by Hugh Lacey (1998).

“A magazine is first and foremost a place for intellectual fermentation and affective relations; simultaneously a nursery and space for sociability,” according to Jean-François Sirinelli (apud LUCA, 2008). We worked with the publications of SBPC, trying to understand them according to the definition of Luca (2008), as collective enterprises which gather people around ideas, beliefs, and values that one intends to disseminate through the written word. In these publications values are not only being articulated and stated, but they are also being presented as confessable and defensible; they are made explicit in the arguments in favor of one or another decision, in actions, and in debates of scientific culture.

We identified the relationship among values, actions, and discourse of the main members of SBPC in light of the historical conjunctures of the Brazilian political scenario and the development of science in the country. We sought to highlight imperatives of the scientific *ethos* that stood out and to describe how they were configured.

Even though the actions of SBPC can be analyzed as eminently political (a group seeking to expand their influence since its inception), we were particularly interested in the way the group represented, justifying for itself and the public, the relationship between science and politics through its discursive practices.

Results and Discussion

The actions of SBPC were analyzed in three historical phases. In the first phase, which goes from 1949 to 1964, impartiality and disinterest emerged as the main values associated to science. In the second phase, from 1964 to 1979, the values emphasized were those of autonomy and freedom, and finally in the third phase, between 1979 and 1988, engagement and democracy stood out in SBPC's discourse about scientific culture (FONSECA, 2012).

The launch of the magazine, *Ciência Hoje*, in 1982, directly converged with the institution's objectives in its third phase, mainly that of disseminating science to the

general public. At the scope of SBPC, the social responsibility of the scientist had been built around the figure of the one who disseminates science and participates in the process of defining scientific policies. The magazine not only enabled more direct communication with the general public, but it also gave greater visibility to the actions of SBPC regarding scientific policies.

In the first phase of SBPC (1948-1964) discourse expressing political impartiality did not mean lack of political activity. They consisted of expressions from a group of scientists in the field of natural sciences who proposed a different vision of how to walk the path of progress for Brazil in opposition to national-developmentalism.

The participation of the social sciences in the institution was not very significant until the 1970s, and their ingress happened right after the acute moment of repression in 1969, when many governmental actions restricted the social scientists' freedom of expression in their means of communication.

The discourse of political impartiality that SBPC sustained at the beginning of the military period, already in its second phase, was relevant in maintaining the Society as a public space for debate, which gradually grew with the adherence of students and social scientists, especially after 1974.

At the beginning of the military government, SBPC sought to distant itself and objectively treat the demands of students and other groups. It seemed to prefer to detract itself from the politically engaged aspect with which the student movement had been associated, and it emphasized the value of political impartiality. It did so despite the fact that the profile of a great number of its members could also be associated to leftist movements, as was the profile of many students.

Delineating the space of its first publication, *Ciência e Cultura* (*Science and Culture*), as exempt from *political passions* reinforced the image of scientific culture associated to the impersonality of scientific knowledge.

It is possible that SBPC remained a less censored space for debate not promptly suppressed by the military government exactly because of its relatively neutral and apolitical posture (impartial), traits of objectivity and neutrality, were all characteristics that the group tried to impress into its discursive practices.

On their side, the military sought in the image of science traits to justify and legitimize their intentions as a government (FERNANDES, 2000). These interests, together with the characteristics of SBPC's discourse, enabled the annual meetings of the Society to be less censored, probably because the military understood them as neutral or "bearable".

In 1976 the paradox of the relationship between SBPC and the government became explicit and more conflictual. Over nine thousand political refugees left Brazil during the period of the military dictatorship and the scientific community was deeply affected, especially by forfeitures and compulsory retirements that happened in Brazilian universities and research institutions.

The principle of openness of the Society, which from its inception was constituted as an association of not only scientist, but also of those interested in science, enabled vast mobilization around it during the years of the military dictatorship. With the military Coup and more specifically with the Institutional Act number 5 of 1968, which criminalized several groups (the National Student Union, political parties, unions, etc.) and suppressed freedom of expression, SBPC became a privileged space which at times even worked as an "exhaust valve". The discussion of socially relevant themes, which was forbidden in other settings, was possible in the annual meetings of SBPC under the veil of scientific objectivity.

Starting in the 70s, the annual meetings of SBPC gained traits of social mobilization and popular manifestation, but they were "tolerated" by the military, which was interested in supporting the image of a government endorsed by the idea of development based on science.

Precisely because it was constituted as a society open to the participation of all who were interested, and because it welcomed students and scholars silenced in other spheres who were given a voice in its events, SBPC started to have problems with the military government. It was being criticized by the press and government officials for detracting from its objectives.

Starting with the annual meeting of the society in 1977 and the violent repression carried out by the police against part of its participants, which bordered 10,000 people,

the institution gained popular and media coverage which went far beyond what its leaders could have imagined.

With the Amnesty Law of 1979 and the return to Brazil of some scientists, the discourse of SBPC started to emphasize the social responsibility of scientists around two main aspects: the discussion of scientific policies and science communication to the general public.

Thus, during its third phase (1979-1988), SBPC adopts a more pro-active posture towards the domains of political decision.

When the magazine *Ciência Hoje* was introduced, its purpose was to inform the general public about technical details of important Brazilian issues, highlighting that the government ignored suggestions presented by technicians, and by professional and scientific organizations, thus criticizing state technocracy, which was threatening Brazil.

One of the first challenges expressed in the intention of expanding scientific culture to be at the core of culture itself, was specifically to provide the general public with greater capacity to understand and appreciate the potential of scientific enterprises. The potential promised by science would develop, not only through the technical control of natural phenomena, but also and mainly, through the standard of rationality and objectivity useful to collective decisions which were being made in the newly reconstituted Brazilian democracy. If scientists had the intention of more directly influencing political decisions, they also needed to guarantee greater support for their opinions, which they considered legitimately grounded in the universality of scientific knowledge. The use of discursive practices based on commitment values and on the principle of universalization and democratization of scientific culture, is striking during this third phase.

During its second phase (1964-1979) SBPC took on a dimension that was bigger than its own structure, mainly because of the participation of the student movement, who criticized the military regime. In the third phase the democratic characteristic of openness to debate remained, but the intention was to limit the borders of democracy to the borders of science itself, delineating the idea of scientific culture aligned to the democratic debate.

SBPC's new vehicle of communication, *Ciência Hoje*, was introduced with new styles of communication and also as having a dialogue with some intellectuals such as the cartoonist Ziraldo and others, whose images helped to reinforce the authority and legitimacy of the group to discuss the basis for re-establishing democracy.

Ciência Hoje materialized the possibility of a more direct dialogue, although majorly unidirectional, with the expanded audience of SBPC. The themes addressed tried to reach several areas and valued an interdisciplinary approach to look at Brazilian problems, for which the scientific point of view would always have something to add.

Conclusion

The concept of scientific neutrality for SBPC was transformed, from the first phase, when it was linked to the vision of political exemption, to becoming an affirmation of political engagement in the third phase.

In the third phase, neutrality started to be based on the argument of a well informed decision. Participation, whether of the scientific community or of the public, was perceived as being more pertinent and adequate when grounded on the scientific knowledge of problems. In other words, neutrality did not mean not taking a position or not participating politically. Neutrality starts to mean participation in the decisions of a democratic community, based on the scientific knowledge of national problems.

If in the years of its foundation SBPC rejected, in its self-image, any political association, it starts to admit and boast about being a political guild. And it does so exactly by outlining the idea that the politics it would engage in during its third phase would not be in the lesser sense of the term, but with a meaning that the society itself would impress upon it. This does not only mean that SBPC would start to propose scientific policies, but it means that it would delineate scientific culture itself as necessary and intrinsically associated to more democratic politics for Brazil.

SBPC had, and it certainly still has, a relevant role in the representation of the scientific *ethos* in Brazilian culture. The concept of scientific neutrality, as delineated by SBPS changes throughout the four decades investigated in our research. It departs from a reactive perspective in the political domain to constitute itself as a propositional perspective.

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