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*The Challenge of a Global Sociological Imagination*¹

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Abstract

Many sociologists suggested that – due to globalization processes – we must go beyond methodological nationalism in studying societies. But how is this possible? We still miss a convincing answer. In order to find it, we need a “global sociological imagination”. C.W. Mills wrote that sociological imagination is “the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society”. Starting from this, global sociological imagination should be the vivid awareness of the relationships between personal experience, local dynamics, multi-local dynamics, global dynamics and processes. Going further, sociology studies (social) facts but, contrary to popular belief, facts don’t speak for themselves. So, we need sociological imagination, and now global sociological imagination, in order to understand these facts. We also know that sociology is looking for good answers but, before this, sociology needs good questions. So, we need global sociological imagination also to find good questions about our global society.

Keywords: globalization, sociological imagination, Charles Wright-Mills.

1. Introduction

A survey conducted by the International Sociological Association on its members in 1997 identified *The Sociological Imagination* by Charles Wright Mills,

¹ The title of this article refers to the MidTerm Conference of the European Sociological Association RN15 “Global, Transnational and Cosmopolitan Sociology” held in Helsinki on 19-20 April 2018. I am, therefore, particularly grateful to Peter Holley, Chair of the Local Organising Committee.

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first published in 1959, as the second most influential book of the 20th century among sociologists, ranking after *Economy and Society* by Max Weber¹.

Reflections on and, especially, indications for sociological work present in *The Sociological Imagination* have not lost their extraordinary importance sixty years after the study's publication. However, this in no way means that Charles Wright Mills' work has been safe from sometime rather scathing criticisms. Some of these emerged soon after the publication of *The Sociological Imagination*, focusing on the idea that the text itself contradicted the very principles it was proposing (Aptheker, 1960; Cuzzort, 1969). But a great deal more have appeared since the 1980s, adding to the criticisms that had already emerged earlier, which emphasised that Charles Wright Mills' work was strongly rooted in categories that belong to a bygone era - categories which presuppose a largely static view of society that are no longer suitable for helping us to comprehend a society undergoing continuous and radical change such as seen in today's world (Schulenberg, 2003). One truly exemplary instance of these is the parable of Irving L. Horowitz, who in the mid-1960s referred to Charles Wright Mills as "the greatest sociologist the United States has ever produced" (Appelrouth, Edles, 2008: 409), before then criticising his work some twenty years later as being, in his opinion, disconnected from the objective reality of the facts (Horowitz, 1983). Norman K. Denzin, in particular, goes so far as to assert that Charles Wright Mills "fails to follow his own sociological imagination" and even that *The Sociological Imagination* is "a hypocritical text with dubious ethics" (1990: 4)².

As such, despite the fact that Charles Wright Mills' work was by no means free of criticism, this article takes the position, as already mentioned above, that much of the guidance for sociological work contained in *The Sociological Imagination* is highly topical even today, and this fully qualifies the book as a classic of our discipline. Particularly one of these indications invites the sociologist to contextualise his/her reflections and analyses from a historical standpoint (Mills, 1959: 143-164). Placing high value on this indication, the objective of this article is to update Charles Wright Mills' reflection, particularly the idea of sociological imagination, in the light of the contextual changes that have surfaced and been established in recent decades, changes that we can mainly trace to globalization processes.

Given this premise, the article is organised as specified below. We shall first briefly consider the concept of sociological imagination, as outlined by Charles Wright Mills in 1959. The main elements that differentiate the current social

¹ See <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/history-of-isa/books-of-the-xx-century>

² For a critical review of Charles Wright Mills' intellectual legacy, see Frauley (2021).

context, compared to the one in which Charles Wright Mills' work was published, will then be defined. We shall also identify the main challenges to be faced to build what this article calls *Global Sociological Imagination*, and outline certain distinguishing traits. Finally, the conclusions will underscore the fact that, beyond the changes in the sociologist's social working context, some of the pillars of sociological work that have been lucidly identified by Charles Wright Mills remain basically unchanged (and unchangeable).

Overall, this article is more a memo of things to be done to reach the definition of global sociological imagination, rather than a clear and complete description of what it can or must be.

2. Sociological imagination

This section will briefly discuss the idea of sociological imagination as defined by Charles Wright Mills, without lingering too long on the topic since the concept is widely known, and is presented in most textbooks of sociology and history of sociological thought³.

The starting point of every analysis of reality is individual experience, precisely the biography, starting from that of the sociologist him/herself. However, the biography of each individual does not develop abstractly but rather within a specific society, and each specific society, in turn, owes its existence to the life of the individuals that populate it. Hence, "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills, 1959: 3), and again, "the life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his biography is enacted" (Mills, 1959: 161). The societies are, in turn, situated in a place of historical becoming that shapes them. This means that there are no societies in an abstract sense but only societies that belong to a certain historical context and which cannot, therefore, be understood without analysing their context. Hence, biography, society and history are the key coordinates of the analysis carried out by social scientists that focuses on fully and adequately understanding reality (Mills, 1959: 143).

Sociological imagination is then what allows the social scientist to respond to the need to formulate a synthesis of these three elements – biography, society and history. Citing Charles Wright Mills (1959: 6-7), "the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society [...]. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal

³ A variety of texts provides a more in-depth look at the life and work of Charles Wright Mills, though Italian readers in particular are recommended to consult the recent volume by Giachetti (2021).

and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being”.

Charles Wright Mills (1959: 31-32) thus summarises the contents of his book: “What are the social sciences all about? They ought to be about man and society and sometimes they are. They are attempts to help us understand biography and history, and the connections of the two in a variety of social structures”.

But the reality the social scientist plans on studying and understanding with sociological imagination is extraordinarily complex, and part of this complexity lies in the fact that it can be observed from several standpoints. A further task for sociological imagination is help us identify the most appropriate “viewpoints” in order to achieve an adequate understanding of the social framework and of the multiple interrelations that characterise it (Mills, 1959: 133).

Sociological imagination distinguishes the social scientist’s view of reality from that of the common person. It allows us to move beyond events and personal problems to identify sociologically important questions. It helps to trace a particular personal experience, such as, for instance, losing a job, to a more general problem – the occupational crisis – which is, in turn, historically determined. It also enables us to question the common sense explanations and stereotypes habitually adopted by people to give their experiences some meaning (Manza et al., 2016). In this regard, Charles Wright Mills (1959: 11-22) shows, in his work, the role of sociology in identifying and highlighting the main problems affecting contemporary society, thereby indicating the direction in which science – both social sciences and other scientific disciplines – and politics should direct their efforts. Sociological imagination, however, does not only relate to one specific discipline, i.e. sociology, but is the necessary prerequisite for bringing about an overall improvement in the quality of life of both individuals and society. It is also a tool for building history and, today, for guiding globalization processes, to which reference will be made in the following paragraphs.

3. What has changed

Under certain significant aspects, the current social context is unlike the one in which Charles Wright Mills’ book was published and, as mentioned in the introduction, we can briefly say that such differences can be traced mainly to the emergence and establishment of globalization processes. However, these

processes were already present, at least in essence, in 1959. Indeed, in *The Sociological Imagination* Charles Wright Mills (1959: 165-166) expresses his awareness of an epoch-making change: “We are at the ending of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call The Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch”.

However, Charles Wright Mills does not discuss the most radical consequences of this transformation. Particularly, his attitude is entirely “modern” when he declares (1959: 135) the substantial superimposition of the concept of society and of nation state: “In our period, social structures are usually organized under a political state. In terms of power, and in many other interesting terms as well, the most inclusive unit of social structures is the nation-state. [...] Within the nation-state, the political and military, cultural and economic means of decision and power are now organized; all the institutions and specific milieux in which most men live their public and private lives are now organized into one or the other of the nation-states”⁴. Moreover, this vision is still widely accepted, if we consider that Diana Kendall, who was one of the first to claim the importance of a *Global Sociological Imagination*, says in the same book that “a society is a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectation, such as the United States, Mexico, or Nigeria” (Kendall, 2008: 4), or if we consider the fact that the major part of our social indicators – even those relative to globalization processes – refer to the nation state or to its territorial and administrative articulations (Scholte, 2005: 86-87).

Conversely, it is a common opinion among many authors that the most qualifying traits of globalization processes and of the related epoch-making change are the scaled down or, at least, transformed role of the nation state (Sklair, 1999; Sassen, 2007a; Martell, 2007: 177; Cicchelli, 2019: 31-33; Michalet, 2007; Eisenstadt, 2003). Beck (2000b), in particular, says that this transformation process marks the transition from the first to the second modernity. Broadly speaking, the discussion on the role of the nation state is closely related to at least a partial deterritorialisation of important aspects of social life (Scholte, 2000: 48-49; Giaccardi, Magatti, 2003; Sassen, 2000), and to the so-called disembedding process (Giddens, 1990). Precisely, there is always

⁴ It is precisely its specifically modern perspective, however, that has made Charles Wright Mills work appear to be inadequate in the eyes of many authors at the same time as the emergence of a postmodern approach to the study of social reality. Paradoxically, this holds true despite the fact that Charles Wright Mills himself was actually one of the scholars who introduced the concept of postmodernity (Denzin, 1990: 2, 13).

a higher number of social processes “that are indifferent to national boundaries” (Beck, 2000a: 80), just as there are forms of belonging and of identity – for instance, professional – that do not depend on any type of national affiliation (Sen, 2002: 63). But especially the fact that certain themes and processes either partly or entirely escape the control and intervention capacity of the individual states is widely accepted. We can, for instance, consider pollution, global warming and prevention of economic crises, problems that, as such, require global solutions and interventions (Kennedy, 2010: 5). However, we should also acknowledge that some authors take a sceptical position about the true scale and scope of globalization processes (Holton, 2005: 6-11; Martell, 2007: 173-176). Specifically, such authors highlight how the nation state still retains its central role, unchanged, as a driving force and pillar of economic and political life, and an undeniable landmark for cultural and personal identification processes (Caselli, Gilardoni, 2018: 5). In any case, even rejecting the most sceptical positions, it is well to recognise that the downscaling of the nation state does not mean that it has become unimportant today, quite the reverse. Indeed, the state continues to play an important role even in the field of globalization processes, thus contributing to shape them. For instance, it is still the state that, to a very large extent, provides the infrastructures – particularly for transport and communication – that enable transnational flows, which constitute one of the most typical features of globalization (Axford, 2007: 322-323). We must also add that states are still, to date, key actors in the economic and social frameworks (Ray, 2007: 75), besides being crucial landmarks in the daily life of the inhabitants of the world.

Hence, the downsizing, or at least the transformation, of the role of the nation state and the vanishing of the substantial superimposition of nation state and society is probably the factor that most differentiates the current context from the period during which *The Sociological Imagination* was written. But there are other factors too that we shall mention below with no claim of being exhaustive. Moreover, some of them are closely related – whether as cause or effect, it is hard to say – to the nation state being questioned as the fulcrum of social life.

The first of these factors is that the presence of common risks on a global scale – starting from the risk of a nuclear holocaust – has united all mankind in what Anthony McGrew (2007: 22) calls “a single, global community of fate – a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*”. Actually, this is not an entirely new situation. Indeed, *The Sociological Imagination* already presents the concrete threat of a Third World War (Mills, 1959: 4), a theme that was discussed by the author himself in the book published the previous year (Mills, 1958). However, Charles Wright Mills does not seem to fully perceive the globalizing consequences of this situation, also because – at the time – the key actors of the process that was unfolding were,

however, two nation states, precisely the United States and the Soviet Union. Today the picture is, instead, decidedly more complex, first of all due to the multiplication of actors involved and their variety – consider the possibility that nuclear weapons or, anyhow, weapons with a wide destructive potential, fall into the hands of terrorist groups. However, we should also emphasise the emergence of new global risks, such as those linked to climate change and the environmental sustainability of our lifestyle. Humanity started to become aware of these risks at least from the early 1970s, with the United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm (June 1972) and the publication at almost the same time of the book “The Limits to Growth” (Meadows et al., 1972). It is precisely these risks associated with the natural environment and its finite nature that demonstrate, inexorably, how the world, although divided by profound political, economic and cultural differences and counter-positions, is the only physical place that is shared by all humanity. In this respect, we can notice the growing awareness, on the part of social scientists and of at least some sectors of public opinion, of these risks and of their unifying power on a global scale (Beck, 1992: 36), with the subsequent development of a *global consciousness*, which constitutes what Roland Robertson (1992: 9) defined the *subjective dimension* of globalization. A manifestation of this global consciousness was seen in the youth movements against climate change, which recently gained widespread global resonance before being overshadowed by another world emergency, namely the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Holley, 2020). If, as referred to earlier, sociological imagination allows us to identify the main issues towards which to direct the efforts of theory and scientific research, as well as political commitment, the fact that in modern times such problems assume a global connotation calls for the development of an equally global sociological imagination.

A second factor is then given by the emergence of transnationalism, particularly but not limited to the field of migratory phenomena. The term transnationalism signifies “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1992: 1). At least for some, migration is not a moment of a clear break anymore, an irrevocable transition – at least for a certain period of time – from one society to another (Ambrosini, 2007: 43). In fact, the development of means of communication and of transport has enabled an increasing number of migrants to, we could say, simultaneously live in two different territorial contexts, to concurrently belong to two different societies (Itzigsohn, Saucedo, 2002). Despite physically living in and carrying out various activities in the country of destination, they can at the same time continue to feel they belong to their native country, care for friends and relations, participate in social activities, and manage economic activities (Caselli, 2012). The presence

of people who are simultaneously rooted in two different societies also enforces the need to rethink the very concept of society, which cannot be considered, anymore, as an exclusive setting one belongs to.

The third factor is the growing importance of the so-called virtual reality and, particularly, of virtual communities, phenomena that can be interpreted as the extreme consequence of the above-mentioned processes of de-territorialisation and disembedding. All the above further enhances the complexity of themes, such as, defining society, belonging and identity. Indeed, the same subject can possess different identities, status and roles, depending on whether the actual or virtual world is considered (Sele et al., 2018; Pietersen et al., 2018).

The fourth and last factor we shall discuss – but, as mentioned, there are probably many more – is on a different conceptual level than before and is not directly attributable as much to the expansion of globalization processes as to the technological development as such. This factor can be identified in the advent of “Big Data”⁵, that is, something that, unlike the elements mentioned above, invests directly in the purposes, identity and function of social sciences (Agnoli 2016; Sabetta, 2018). If, for instance, the sample survey has long been the main methodological tool at the sociologist’s disposal (Goldthorpe, 2000, Halsey, 2004, Savage, Burrows, 2007), “in the current situation, where data on whole populations are routinely gathered as a by-product of institutional transactions, the sample survey seems a very poor instrument” (Savage, Burrows, 2007: 891). The advent of Big Data is mentioned here, as it constitutes a potential obstacle to the development of any form of sociological imagination. Consequently, it is a challenge that has many implications and risks, but also opportunities, for sociology, which we will address in the following pages.

4. The traits of global sociological imagination

Compared to the above-described changes, there surfaces the need to review the contents of sociological imagination (Solis-Gadea, 2005). In this regard, we also find the voices of those who claim “the need to re-engage the sociological imagination” (Fraser, Hagedorn, 2018: 43) or, more explicitly “the

⁵ If, as mentioned, the advent of Big Data is connected more with technological development than with globalization processes, it still cannot be considered as completely unconnected with the expansion of globalization per se. Big Data effectively constitute a tool that has been made possible by the complexification of the relationships and social processes arising from globalization, and which constitute a central pillar and, in turn, are used in the attempt to manage this very complexity or at least to operate within it.

importance of a Global Sociological Imagination” (Kendall, 2008: 8). However, the traits this global sociological imagination should acquire are anything but clear at present, although there has been no shortage of proposals in this vein. These include, for example, David Harvey’s (2005) one to include geographical and spatial coordinates amongst the fundamental dimensions of the sociological imagination. As anticipated in the introduction, this section does not claim an exhaustive definition of what global sociological imagination can or must be; instead, it outlines some of the traits, issues and challenges to be faced to achieve the construction and, especially, the application of global sociological imagination.

However, before proceeding in this direction, we must consider a preliminary issue. If sociological imagination, as defined by Charles Wright Mills, met the need to synthesise the complexity of reality and of interconnections present therein, global sociological imagination must consider a social context and interconnections that are more complex and articulated than they were sixty years ago. We should then ask ourselves if we still deem this synthesis necessary, and if we consider the effort required to achieve it appropriate or if, instead, the extreme complexity of contemporary reality leads us to consider this objective too ambitious and outside our reach and, therefore, to surrender. In this regard, the author’s opinion is that, without denying the difficulties of the task, it is, anyhow, worth attempting to, at least, take some steps towards building the tools required to face this complexity. This is what we shall attempt to do in the rest of this article.

If, as mentioned above, when outlining sociological imagination, Charles Wright Mills identified three basic points in biography, society and history, Fraser and Hagedorn (2018: 56) propose the idea of global sociological imagination by suggesting the addition, to the above three points, of a fourth landmark, the global one. We can doubtless agree with this statement by observing that one of the typical traits of contemporaneity is the interrelation between global dynamics and individual lives (Axford, 2013). However, we must ask ourselves what this addition entails in practice.

In the first place, considering the vanishing of the perfect superimposition of society and nation state, we must seriously consider the need, mentioned by many, to look beyond what has been miscellaneously labelled as methodological nationalism (Beck, 2004), embedded statism (Sassen, 2000) and methodological territorialism (Scholte, 2000), aware that this entails rethinking not only the method but also the sociological theory (Fraser, Hagedorn, 2018; Wimmer, Glick Schiller, 2002). But what lies beyond methodological nationalism? Once again, we cannot provide a complete answer in this article. However, we can say that this “looking beyond” especially entails asking the question of what is the most adequate unit of analysis to study social phenomena (Martens et al., 2015:

223-225). To date, the units of analysis preferred by social research have doubtless been the nation state and its territorial and administrative articulations. This especially occurred because the data and administrative information sociologists and other social scientists need to conduct their analyses and to extract their samples are available at these levels. After all, statistics, as indicated by the etymology of the term, was conceived as a functional tool for state administration (Parra Saiani, 2009: 9-10). Furthermore, we must not neglect the fact that, since public administrations rank among the main funders of social research activities at least at an academic level, it seems natural for the research funded to concern the reference territories of these administrations. But what are the possible alternative units of analysis? There are many answers, which include both territorial and deterritorialised frameworks. With no claim at being exhaustive, besides cities and regions that, anyhow, constitute the territorial articulations of states, we can specifically mention the person, global network hubs, virtual or actual communities (for example, on a cultural, political or professional basis), diasporas, economic districts (that could also be cross-border), processes, up to the world in its entirety (Caselli, 2013; Taylor, 2004). What we must underscore is that the choice of a particular unit of analysis, in the current context, does not rule out others. In fact, a characteristic of globalization processes, along with their multidimensional feature, is doubtless also their multi-scalar nature (Sassen, 2007b), which justifies the reference – even simultaneous – to differentiated units of analysis. In this regard, we must mention that Beck (2004) underscores the need to follow a rationale of “both... and” rather than of “either... or” when studying a society permeated by globalization processes. However, accepting the multi-scalar nature of contemporary social processes does not only mean conducting research and studies that, from time to time, focus on different territorial planes. It also and especially means perceiving the relationships present between these different territorial planes. In this sense, it may also be useful, although not exhaustive, to consider, the concept of glocalization, viewed as the synthesis of the interrelation between local dimension and global dimension (Robertson, 1992; Roudometof, 2016; Caselli, Gilardoni, 2018: 16-18), whose emergence is perhaps a good example of what it means, in practice, to exercise global sociological imagination.

Based on the features highlighted so far, the study of climate change and the actions necessary to combat it could be identified as an example of an area of study for which the application of a global sociological imagination would seem indispensable. Climate change, i.e. one of the emerging elements which, as noted above, differentiate the current social context from that of Charles Wright Mills’ work, is an issue that cannot be tackled individually by a single nation state or, consequently, be comprehensively studied using the state as a

unit of analysis. Climate change is effectively an issue that is on a higher scale than that of the state. But, at the same time, the state itself is an essential player in any policy that seeks to tackle the issue, since the state is the main player that issues and ensures compliance with laws, including those necessary to combat climate change. However, below state level, the involvement of local players and individual citizens is also necessary to ensure that laws are translated into the required behaviour to support and substantiate, if not stimulate or even anticipate, any climate change policy that might be designed. Citizens, in turn, may develop forms of activism that arise at various geographical levels, including beyond national borders. Speaking about climate change and the actions necessary to tackle it requires the simultaneous and coordinated analysis of processes undertaken at state level, but also, at the same time, above and below this level; these processes must be kept together precisely via the use of a global sociological imagination.

Global sociological imagination should then face the theme of ethnocentrism and pose the problem of overcoming it, both theoretically and methodologically (Ryen, Gobo, 2011). Giampietro Gobo discussed the issue in depth, first underscoring how most of our methodological knowledge, to which we are inclined to attribute an objective and universal value, was actually invented by Western academic culture, and then colonised other regions of the world. However, in a situation in which contacts, relations, interdependences and superimpositions between different societies are now continuous, and in which, following migratory flows, Western countries themselves are not culturally homogeneous anymore, “it is not still sustainable to continue to use monocultural research methods to inquire into multicultural or non-Western societies” (Gobo, 2011: 428). The course to be followed could then be a “*glocalistic* methodology which takes into account the characteristics of local cultures” (Gobo, 2011: 428). The task of global sociological imagination is then to translate this general indication into practice, since the current reflection “gives a lot of space to epistemological assumptions, but not very much to technical proposals” (Gobo, 2011: 433). From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, a contribution to overcome ethnocentrism could be given by the cosmopolitan approach, since one of the founding traits of cosmopolitanism is that individuals are “able to go beyond their own culture, local allegiances and national affiliations” (Cicchelli, 2019: 3). This cosmopolitan approach could, first of all, take the form of a greater focus by Western sociologists on the scientific production of sociologists from the Southern hemisphere, which is often poorly represented or completely absent from the bibliographies of volumes and articles or academic teachings: a global sociologist could not, in any event, consider only a part of the world’s sociological production. However,

in this regard, we must not neglect the fact that, paradoxically, cosmopolitanism itself has long been Eurocentric (Delanty, 2006: 27).

If then sociological imagination also consists in the capacity to find adequate “viewpoints” on reality and to ask the most appropriate questions to understand it, an additional sector in which global sociological imagination should be applied is assuredly mutual relations and superimpositions, both social and biographical, between material reality and virtual reality. In this case, the questions to be asked concern how the real world is modified by virtual reality (Elliker, 2019) but also if, how and to what extent the real world maintains the capacity to place bonds and shape the virtual world. They also concern how the virtual experiences of individuals influence their conduct and identity in the real world, and the reverse.

5. Risks connected with the advent of Big Data

A specific task of global sociological imagination should also be to counteract some of the possible deviations generated by the advent of the so-called Big Data, a theme already mentioned in the previous pages, making it possible to re(state) the role of the sociologist and his/her superiority, compared to data analysis techniques.

The risk that the massive use of Big Data in studying social phenomena will lead to the atrophying of sociological imagination, and with it, the substantial irrelevance of sociologists, is not by any means remote. In the presence of a “data deluge”, the role of the empiric sociologist is indeed widely scaled down. We do not need to collect data in the actual contexts anymore because a specific reality can be processed in its entire extension (Anderson, 2008). However, specific techniques are necessary to manage Big Data that risk weakening the sociologist, whose role becomes secondary, compared to the algorithm required to manage an impressive amount of data (Agnoli, 2016, Gillespie, 2014, Burrell, 2016). The emphasis on the technical competence required to manage data however also questions the role of the sociologist as the subject who is entrusted the task of interpreting data and, particularly, of perceiving the meaning of the phenomena and of the realities studied; a task for which, once again, sociological imagination seems to be essential. The advent of Big Data, then, threatens not only the work of the empirical sociologist, but also the theoretical considerations of sociology, which are essential for directing research and interpreting its results (Merton, 1968: 139). As reported by Savage and Burrows (2007: 891)

To give a simple example of the merits of routine transactional data over survey data, Amazon.com does not need to market its books by predicting, on the basis of inference from sample surveys, the social position of someone who buys any given book and then offering them other books to buy which they know on the basis of inference similar people also tend to buy. They have a much more powerful tool. They know exactly what other books are bought by people making any particular purchase, and hence they can immediately offer such books directly to other consumers when they make the same purchase. Hence the (irritating, though often tellingly useful) screens offering ‘Other people who have bought x have also bought y’ that confront the Amazon customer.

In practice, the risk is that causation becomes unimportant, compared to mere correlation: “Big data helps answer what, not why, and often that’s good enough” (Cukier, Mayer-Schoenberger 2013). But this “good enough” can apply to the Top Management of Amazon or of any other company and to many other social actors, but it cannot apply to the sociologist who is, instead, called to perceive the causes and the deep meaning of the phenomena observed. Indeed, a specific task of the sociologist and of sociological imagination is, as mentioned above, to make a synthesis of biography, society and history; and the task of global sociological imagination is to exploit, for this purpose, the opportunities and risks associated with the existence of Big Data (Housley et al., 2014). This task can neither be performed by an algorithm nor by subjects who only possess technical competences. Citing Charles Wright Mills’ words (1959: 211) once again, it is sociological imagination “that sets off the social scientist from the mere technician”. If sociologists do not, therefore, cultivate sociological imagination and, particularly today, a global sociological imagination, they risk making themselves irrelevant, destined to be undermined by Big Data technicians.

6. Conclusion: something has changed, and something has remained the same

A lot has changed since 1959: the social context we live and work in has changed; the techniques and tools we have at our disposal to study reality have changed; the tasks and challenges of the sociologist have changed, at least partly. We discussed this in the previous pages. Instead, these conclusions, once again without any claim at being exhaustive, will underscore some elements that have remained practically unchanged since the age of Charles Wright Mills.

Firstly, the need for the sociologist to centre his/her work on both theoretical and methodological rigour is still topical today, and so is the need,

underscored by Mills, for clear presentation, a feature that sociological texts often lack: “such lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of subject matter, and nothing at all with profundity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status” (Mills, 1959; 218) and, allow me to add, about his/her own ideas.

Moreover, the need for the sociologist to focus on studying socially important phenomena – to identify which s/he has to resort to sociological imagination – and, subsequently, the fact that the investigation method and techniques are exploited to pursue this scope has not changed. Conversely, there is the risk that sociologists will not apply their sociological imagination to identify important subjects for their research and analysis but only choose from the range of topics considered mainstream at any one time to make it easier to obtain funding and advance their career more rapidly. In doing so, however, sociologists abnegate one of the very tasks of intellectuals, that of not following the fashions of the day but rather to indicate directions and highlight issues that many do not yet see, even if this might not bring rewards in terms of academic success in the immediate future. Similarly, Charles Wright Mills feared the risk that methodological convenience would direct the choice of subjects for study, thus excluding more important social issues from analysis (Mills, 1959: 72-73). Today the risk is that social sciences will only study issues for which Big Data are available and not develop innovative techniques for studying important social issues for which Big Data does not exist. One of the tasks of sociological imagination is still, more generally, to identify the method and techniques that are most suitable to study and understand important social phenomena, to prevent the sociologist from seeking the most suitable themes to be studied with the method and techniques at his/her disposal.

Moreover, the three values, explicitly stated by Charles Wright Mills (1959: 178-179), on which social sciences must be based have not changed: “The first of these is simply the value of truth, of fact. [...] The truth of our findings, the accuracy of our investigations – when they are seen in their social setting – may or may not be relevant to human affairs. Whether they are, and how they are, is in itself the second value, which in brief, is the value of the role of reason in human affairs. Along with that goes a third value – human freedom, in all the ambiguity of its meaning”.

Finally, there remains the fact, as underscored in the previous section, that sociological imagination is the qualifying trait of the sociologist, distinguishing him/her from the technician who, despite high standards of competence and expertise, only applies procedures without reaching a deep understanding of the reality studied.

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