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Sociology Between Science and Knowledge

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Abstract

Since scientists have a difficult task – studying something that everyone already knows or thinks they know – they must laboriously earn (with rigorous research methods) the respect of those intellectuals belonging to different fields, and that of others in general.

A respect constrained to the filling of some serious gaps in sociology itself: for example, think of the many investigations that – excessively unbalanced on the theoretical side – show a marked philosophical imprint (and so they create a certain conceptual confusion between different sectors, even if they are connected), or to the sterile methodological disputes between *standard* and *non-standard* researchers, or to those studies that hide their shortcomings, their clichés and obvious statements behind rather imaginative words of wisdom or catchy slogans.

It is therefore up to sociologists 2.0 to take matters into their own hands and above all their profession, in order to restore the dignity it deserves. They are the ones who will have to become aware of society, without waiting (perhaps in vain) for society to finally become aware of them. And it is still them – above all in Italy where culture remains largely a-sociological – who will have to orient themselves by seeking ever new (innovative) forms of participation and cooperation.

Keywords: social sciences, research, authoritativeness.

1. Introduction

Although it is now two centuries old, the sociological discipline still has to pursue – along a tortuous path, full of obstacles – the much-coveted scientific authority.

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We are back to the usual: sociologists have a difficult task, that is, to study something that everyone already knows or thinks they know. The physicist and chemist deal with mysterious objects such as molecules, elementary particles, and common people show a sense of respectful awe. The sociologist, on the other hand, does not benefit from this “advantage” but he must laboriously earn (through rigorous research methods) the respect of intellectuals that belong to different fields and that of others in general (Albano, Paccagnella, 2006).

This situation (which has been going on since the end of the XIX century¹), to be honest, also emerges from the faults of sociology itself: for example, think of the many surveys that – unbalancing excessively on the theoretical side- show a marked philosophical imprint (and so they foster a certain conceptual confusion among different sectors, albeit connected), or of the sterile methodological diatribes between *standard* and *non-standard* researchers, or of those that hide their shortcomings and obvious statements, behind rather imaginative words of wisdom and catchy slogans.

In short, we are in the riverbed of a discipline that- still too often - is content to carry on swimming with difficulty in the *mare magnum* (perpetually a stormy sea) of the so-called *soft sciences*, of the social sciences (and/or human sciences). But sociology can no longer afford to just get by: the liquid (Bauman, 2000) and changing complexity of the (post) modern era, in fact, is a continuous challenge, recomposing time after time, both at the *macro* level in the great phenomena and processes of social transformation and in the *microcosm* of the habits and customs that characterize our world of daily life². A world in which, “if it is true that experience often confirms our social competence, it is also true that it refutes it: for example, during an emergency, or when we get the sensation

¹ Above all Benedetto Croce denied the legitimacy of sociology as an empirical science. In this drastic refusal (along with the consideration of historiography as the only form of the knowledge of reality) a tradition of thought– privileging the state over society, as it was a place for the settlement of its conflicts – ended up making political science the only qualified discipline to deal with social phenomena alongside law and economics. This attitude had a great impact on stifling a sociological tradition that was not yet consolidated (Rossi, 2003).

² As Collins (2006[1988]), states, among the phenomena that occur at a macro-sociological level, we find the way in which societies change over extremely long periods of time and the degree to which these models of change have something in common with the rest of life throughout the history of our planet. Microsociology, on the other hand, deals with small segments of space and time, with small numbers of people; the individual and interaction, behaviour and consciousness. However, there are also more recent *meso* theories (for example those concerning social network analysis) that have been proposed in order to connect the two levels previously exposed.

that things are getting out of hand, or when the result obtained is not what we expected. It is at this moment that the need to understand what happened arises: when the routines of our lives are disrupted, when our actions produce unexpected consequences, when the social reality that we thought we understood becomes opaque, resistant to comprehension” (Besozzi, Colombo, 2019: 20).

On the other hand, since the end of the nineteenth century, Georg Simmel (1894) considered sociology a field of *open, formal* studies as it explores forms assumed over time by the relationship among men. From here – from this openness towards the unknown, from looking beyond the horizon, from this constant epistemological tension, arise the multiple and heterogeneous contradictions that make a science *sui generis*, particularly fascinating.

A fascination that should neither be lost nor trivialized: in short, it is time that sociologists really learn to get around the obvious, finally showing everyone that *the scientific study of societies* is not for all. A responsibility we must face immediately and with no nonsense, before it is too late and the void in the terrain becomes overwhelming.

2. Border and frontier

Compared to other social sciences (for example economics) sociology is a relatively new, young discipline, despite having its origins in Plato’s and Aristotle’s thoughts. By convention, in fact, the birth of this science coincides with the birth of the term used to designate it: it was the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1830-42) who coined the expression *social physics* – which later became sociology – in his *Course of Positive Philosophy*, dating back to the 1830s³.

In almost two centuries, however, this discipline still has not managed to achieve full autonomy, to definitely detach from the umbilical cord that binds it to other sectors, primarily the philosophical sphere. To be honest, “there are numerous points of contact between philosophy and social sciences. Analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language work on concepts, which the social scientist should always do, defining or redefining the concepts he uses, even when they are used in a common way. Epistemology has vast areas of overlapping with empirical social sciences: the criterion of demarcation between science and non-science, the conditions of acceptability of scientific propositions, generally the contributions of Popper, Lakatos, Hempel and many other philosophers of science are essential to the social scientist as well as to

³ In the course of the previous decade, Comte’s works were a reference point to the future sociological discipline.

the natural scientist. In all the aforementioned fields, the interaction between philosophy and social sciences could and should be fruitful and cooperative, given the common interests. There are also cases of completion, as well as cases of incommunicability” (La Spina *et al.*, 2012: 15).

Yes, incommunicability. Paradoxical, considering the fact that we are certainly not talking about ordered sets of practices, but rather about areas that are constantly changing and are immersed – like all of us – in the rhizomatic logic of hyper-textuality typical of the contemporary world. In short, there would be many arguments to speak about, but even scholars in the sectors in question are increasingly choosing to ignore them, preferring to foment useless disputes under the apparent banner of interdisciplinarity.

Yet thinking (philosophically or sociologically does not matter) helps us to understand ourselves and others in a reciprocal way (Bauman, May, 2001), the different dynamics of society and social relations in general. Consequently it is foolish “to declare war” when it would be better to collaborate - *ça va sans dire*, each science with its main characteristics- to be able to read the surrounding world.

In this perspective, I venture a theological parallelism directly from the Book of The Genesis (2, 10-22) “Then the Lord said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable to him”. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man’. That woman was born to complete the man and complete herself with him, developing and maintaining all her own specificities. Sociology should do the same thing to become free of the limiting role as a rib of the *homo philosophicus*. Because – as Pierre Bourdieu (1972), an intellectual capable of exploiting his philosophical heritage to venture into the various aspects of the social – the methodological, empirical elements, instead of weighing down philosophy, help to integrate it.

The philosopher must learn to dirty his hands with social reality, especially if he wants to ward off criticism stemming from the apparent practical inconclusiveness of his discipline⁴. And the sociologist needs philosophical parameters to investigate/interpret reality in the best way possible.⁵ Not because sociological practice requires philosophical theories (and vice versa), but because both channels – together and individually– represent a mixture of conceptual and factual elements. On the other hand, man himself, “made up of a soul that belongs to the intelligible world and of a body linked to the sensible

⁴ It would be enough to recall the anecdote (as funny as it is caustic) according to which Thales, intent on looking up to observe the stars, ended up falling into a hole in the ground.

⁵ Consider, for example, social philosophy, or the philosophical study of issues concerning social behaviour and the relationships between individuals.

world, is placed in a border position between the two worlds and, therefore, has the possibility to incline for one or the other”, (Zanatta, 2012: 8) always with a knowledge-oriented perspective, in spite of those scholastic criteria that are always ready to compartmentalize knowledge.

A sectorization that now looks to the past, exploring, for example, “the division between sociologists engaged in research on substantive issues and sociologists dealing with theory, as if each of the two groups had nothing to do with the other. But if we succeed in understanding that both theory and research have to do with knowledge in various thematic areas, then the attempt to mend the (presumed) tear becomes easier” (Collins, 2006[1988]: 13), as well as the attempt to mend the (presumed) tear between sociology and philosophy. An attempt so far in vain because, at the moment, they are both still committing the sin of presumption: philosophy that acts as a mother hen, unable to accept her chick with its peculiarities and above all its desire for independence; sociology, daughter of philosophy, born with the presumption of being philosophy in its broadest result (Durkheim, 1924; Morra, 1976).

Let’s recap. There are those who love to get lost in a thousand theoretical disquisitions, considering them more interesting and engaging than socio-methodological investigations, and those who, on the contrary, prefer field research as it is less ethereal and therefore more useful. Those who concentrate on books, on study and those who learn by doing. Who knows and who knows how to do it. Two factions still too far apart that need a *trait d’union*: that apposite theoretical-practical (or, at this point, practical-theoretical) balance that if, on one hand might seem to be a convenient solution, on the other it is the best way to make sociologists and philosophers reconsider each other’s roles, not only in a comparative perspective but in a relational one, even better, a dialogic one. Because every theoretical hypothesis must be questioned in practice and every empirical investigation needs solid conceptual foundations.

Generally speaking, almost all scientific disciplines generate a sort of division of labour between those dedicated to intellectual activity and those to empirical activity. Social sciences are no exception, but in a different way, depending on the case: in economy, the intellectual who deals with economic theory may have little interest in the concrete problems of real economy; on the contrary to what happens among researchers that study cultural anthropology, where there is a close connection between theoretical processing and interpretation of the data collected on the field. As mentioned, sociology is halfway between abstract theories (difficult to translate in concrete terms) and above all empirical research without a theoretical framework of references. (Cavalli, 2016).

A famous aphorism attributed to Albert Einstein reminds us that theory is when *we know everything and nothing works*, while practice is when *everything works*.

*and no one knows why*⁶. Social scientists (and humanists) are called upon to make their knowledge work. Otherwise philosophers will only continue to speak and sociologists to act, without a real underlying reason.

3. Peace and war

Thanks to historians we know that the first conflict of planetary dimensions ended on November 11th, 1918 when Germany – the last of the Central Powers to lay down their arms – signed the armistice imposed by the Allies, or that the end of the Cold War was conventionally made to coincide with the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9th, 1989) and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union (December 26th, 1991).

On the contrary, sociologists (and social research methodologists) stubbornly propose – both to colleagues and to students – a happy war ending that is not so: that of the so-called *war between paradigms* (Guba and Lincoln, 1985) and its consequences, particularly the quantity/quality dichotomy⁷.

A distinction we know by now, with more or less defined boundaries⁸: if, on one hand, the *standard* approach follows a precise itinerary (operational definition of properties, organization of variables in data matrices, research for associations between variables with statistical analysis mediums) with the aim of adopting the Galilean postulate (the task of science is to deal with the relationships between the properties of the objects) in a situation in which the experimental method is not generally applicable, on the other hand the *non-standard* approach wants to minimize the separation between science and everyday life, showing a strong propensity to abandon the ivory tower of pure science to get direct contact with the subjects while they are carrying out their usual activities, letting them express their visions of the world in their own terms

⁶ The aphorism continues like this: “We have put theory and practice together: nothing works and nobody knows why”.

⁷ The qualitative paradigm is also called Aristotelian tradition, a paradigm comprising, hermeneutic, constructivist, interpretative, post-modern, text-orientated, non-standard approach; as for the quantitative paradigm, on the other hand, we have formulas such as Galilean traditions, positivistic, post-positivistic, matrix-orientated paradigms, an experimental method, of association, standard approach (Niero, 2005).

⁸ However, just consider that even in the medium used the most by “quantitative” researchers in the data collection phase (the standardized questionnaire), many “qualitative” variables are encountered: it is rare to find a questionnaire that limits itself to asking questions about quantifiable aspects of reality. On the contrary, most of the questions encountered in questionnaires relates to non-quantifiable aspects, that is the “qualitative” aspects of reality, such as attitudes and values (Corbetta, 2014; Pitrone et al., 2018; Cardano, Ortalda, 2020, 2020b).

and placing them at the centre of research relationships without bridling them in pre-established models (Ortalda, 2013).

The reciprocal accusations, on the other hand, are always the same: the supporters of the qualitative reproach those of the quantitative of being too scientific and interpersonal – mimicking a standardization that can never fully accompany human sciences⁹ – while the latter accuse the former of not being scientific enough, convinced of the fact that the choice of the non-standard approach hides, in reality, an escape from mathematics, formulas and numbers with which one is not very familiar to abandon oneself instead to excessive empathy between researcher and interviewee. And even in cases where the two paths try to cross each other (think of the so-called *mixed method* of research), they still fail to agree: it is better to create a qualitative basis (micro) and then build a standard path (macro) on it, beginning with numerical data and then examining the opinions of the interviewees, or still proceed in parallel? It is too easy to get away with a *depends on*, generally the subject or the object of the survey study (and of course on the resources available in terms of collaborators, time¹⁰, budget and technologies) because “every paradigm isn’t neutral from an ethical point of view, nor is it purely functional, but it is always embedded in a broad theoretical perspective that justifies its logic, provides a context, establishes criteria of legitimation” (Tarozzi *et al.*, 2015: 5).

There are still many controversial aspects or aspects in the definition phase that can generate perplexity and suspicion¹¹, especially in a disciplinary area that experiences perennial tension (Cerroni, 2009) between the rigor of method (up to the limit of formalistic virtuosity) and the space granted to expression (up to

⁹ The limits of the experimental method often prevent its significant application in human sciences: “the reason is that one cannot imagine isolating a pair of properties by blocking all the others existing in the human and social world. Furthermore, many proprieties cannot be modified at will by the researcher: either they are fixed – such as sex – or they vary according to a process in which one cannot intervene – such as age. Easily ignoring these serious limitations, some have tried to applicate the experimental method to the problems of human sciences, sometimes introducing sophisticated and ingenious modifications. Alongside some interesting results, gross and ridiculous simplifications abound. In any case, we are very far from the essence of the experimental method in the Galilean conception” (Marradi, 2007: 84).

¹⁰ At times underestimated, time and space variables are instead fundamental in social research (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Caputo *et al.*, 2017).

¹¹ By way of example, the habit of identifying every single research technique with the term ‘methodology’ has spread over time in America and then in Europe, not to mention the discussions on whether this discipline should be considered prescriptive or descriptive.

the limit of extemporaneous narration¹²), but at the same time it should be emphasized how every single methodological path has contributed in promoting social research in different ways, at different times and in different contexts. For example, *survey research* has represented a “scientific manifesto” useful for convincing companies and the political world to invest in surveys, while the non-standard paradigm has often been appreciated for its realism, that is, for avoiding generalizations as there are different realities for different people and communities¹³. Scholars, in fact, are well aware that social sciences cannot provide absolute certainties, but we can at least put our trust in many models (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; Lucchini, 2018) that function as simplified maps of reality, to examine, beginning right from the centrality of the method, an indispensable element both to learn how to conduct empirical research experiences and to consciously approach the research done by others (Amaturo, 2012), evaluating its solidity and correctness.

Consequently, exacerbating this polarization even more doesn't make sense, indeed as any war serves only to sow destruction and death: the destruction of opportunity and of innovative paths of investigation, the death of human sciences suffocated by continuous methodological diatribes. The important thing is to arrive at interesting and valid conclusions (Grønmo, 2019), beyond methods and techniques of analysis. An awareness to develop to be able to orient oneself in the chaotic and restless city (Capecchi, 2013) – of the paradigms and instruments connected to them – where social researchers live. This reminds us of Calvino's invisible cities (2016[1972]): “Even cities believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither one nor the other is enough to keep up their walls. You don't enjoy the seven or seventy-seven wonders of a city but the answer it gives to your question”. Just like the question¹⁴ that constitutes the starting point and the heart of every *research project*.

Methodology's task is to give order and depth to analysis, integrating this latter without ever bypassing them. In fact, knowledge is more important than rules, even if it is the rules that must lead us towards scientific knowledge, obviously well integrated by the individual abilities (as well as by the limits) of

¹² Horkheimer and Adorno (1956) already spoke of tension between sociology (characterized by a more speculative, theoretical character and by an element of *immanent social criticism*) and empirical research (which arises from the need of a *non-evaluative* sociology), identifying fatal danger in both (on one hand, depth leading to superficiality, on the other the reduction of sociology to a simple technique) and hoping for a unity of theory and practice capable of avoiding both digression in unanchored freedom of thought and the obfuscation of narrow-viewed scientific activism.

¹³ As the following definition of *case study*: the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case in order to reveal its complexity (Elliot *et al.*, 2014).

¹⁴ Secondary questions are generally linked to the main research questions.

the social scientist. If it is right to ask a researcher to decide as accurately as possible what he intends to do before starting his work, it does not necessarily follow that those who do exactly what they had established are the best researchers. The virtues of a good researcher are flexibility and good instincts, the readiness to grasp a new situation and the ability to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities (Madge, 1962; Antiseri, 2012[1996]; Bryman, 2012[2001]; Harreveld *et al.*, 2016). So much so, unlike mathematics and related disciplines (such as geometry and logic) which do not deal with reality, we emphasize again how sciences in general – especially social ones – cannot reach the certainty that their statements (on segments of reality) are true. And this regardless of the methodological choices¹⁵.

This is why, before questioning these choices, a good researcher has the duty – intellectual and moral – to know the principles and the evolutions of his own discipline (a valid *modus operandi*, also for those who choose to rely on the *Grounded Theory Approach*¹⁶). Too many scholars, by now, plunge headlong into work fields without having really studied in depth (but limiting themselves to a simple basic understanding) the many cornerstones of general sociology.

Each research, therefore, constitutes and elaborates the cognitive process, rather than a mere list of steps to be taken mechanically. There are no formulas, scales, grids or even software to consider: *computers don't collect and analyse data, people do*¹⁷.

¹⁵ At the same time, today empirical social research, “more than artificial epistemological stockades, needs a moderate realism that reminds of how, despite having a sound scepticism about the possibilities of true, objective knowledge, must not necessarily involve an anti-scientific posture according to which reality is only interpretation and those who do research always build what they pretend to describe, thus leaving so little space for any rigorous exploration” (Tarozi *et al.*, 2015: 10).

¹⁶ According to this research method – dating back to the 1960s and inspired by the so-called interpretative paradigm- observation and theoretical elaboration proceed hand in hand, in constant interaction and continuous reflection on the entire research process (Glaser, Strauss, 1967).

¹⁷ This does not mean that technologies cannot contribute to the data collection and analysis phases (Di Fraia, 2004); but we must consider, during the last decade, the development of computational social sciences (CSS), created by the contamination between social sciences and computer science but above all characterized by a true “methodological eclecticism” made up of the automatic extraction of information, models of complexity, social simulation, social network analysis and geospatial analysis (Lettieri, 2017).

4. Form and substance

We have little information (or gossip, to use a contemporary term) about the life of Parmenides. Thanks to Plato, however, we know (or at least we are amused to think so) that the philosopher of Elea, in his old age, undertook a journey to Athens where he made the acquaintance of the young Socrates with whom he had a lively discussion. The dialogue – which took place during the *Great Panathenaea*, an important religious festival in honour of the goddess Athena, also involved, among others, Zeno, a pupil and admirer of Parmenides.

Although the non-committal context lent itself to informal discussions, the confrontation appeared, right from the beginning, to be intense, exciting, moving mostly between epistemology and metaphysics. At a certain point, Parmenides startled his interlocutor with a few (but certainly not simple) words, here partially revisited to facilitate understanding: *being is, non-being is not*.

And so, from that moment, we began to reason over the millennia on a dichotomy (to be/not to be) which, passing through other binary philosophical distinctions (form/substance, truth/opinion or appearance), perhaps reached its consecration with Shakespeare's Hamlet *to be or not to be*¹⁸, one of the most famous and represented dramaturgical works in the world.

But what is the meaning of Parmenides words? Let's try to simplify them by staying in the field of acting: if an actor carries out his profession for the success that derives from it, to sign autographs for fans or to go to galas, then we could affirm that the actor is interested in all that is the *non-being* of his role, which is a perimeter or a contour of his profession; but, on the other hand, if that actor were sincerely in love with his job, living it as a vocation, it would be the *being* of that role to take over. Similarly, the priest that enjoys his own sermons and anxiously waits to know the economic fruits of the alms – forgetting to put God at the centre of his priestly mission – positions non-being before being.

And the sociologist? He often behaves the same way. The desire to close an investigation by reaching original and interesting conclusions, authoritative and perhaps surprising, often ends up supplanting both the intellectual honesty of who directs that research and the ethical issues and methodological rigor. But the being of sociology is something else: it is understanding the various social phenomena, probing into (if possible with an eye to the future) the transformation processes of communities using suitable and, above all, valid techniques to obtain reliable results.

¹⁸ William Shakespeare (1600-02), *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (act III, scene I).

Perhaps Edward Banfield (1958) didn't know this. Or he pretended not to know. The fact is that his thesis of *amoral familism* – which paradoxically gave him great notoriety, after more than sixty years, is still full of gaps (Tronca, 2013), representing, in an exemplary way, all that sociology (and social sciences in general) is not, namely a jumble – deriving from strong theoretical-methodological neglect – of obviousness and erroneous considerations, beginning with the main assumption: some communities are underdeveloped, from an economic and social point of view, because individuals living there act with the sole objective of maximizing the short-term material benefits for their own family, assuming that others do the same. In other words, everyone thinks selfishly of themselves and of their loved ones, with all due respect to common welfare¹⁹.

Epilogue to which the American political scientist arrived after nine months (in the two-year period 1954-1955) living in Chiaromonte – a small town in Basilicata, in the province of Potenza, which he conventionally called Montegrano- with participant observations, psychological tests with samples of “Montegranians” specifically selected and interviews which, however, weren't and aren't sufficient to valorise an *old style* study when considered from the perspective of cultural anthropology, insufficient in its descriptions, weak in its analysis and full of stereotypes, confusing and simplistic in the investigation of the cause-effect relationships²⁰, difficult to generalize in other areas of Italy and southern Europe (Bertani, 2015). Not surprisingly, “the data from Italian researches show that family relationships, characterized by great trust and mutual help, do not imply any familism and therefore no amoral qualification. On the contrary, the more families make their resources circulate, mediated by reciprocity and trust, the more they are able to generate attitudes of trust towards others and of commitment and support (non-family members). The result is that the so-called internal family social capital, linked to the nucleus, increases as the size of the family increases, as the quantity and quality of time spent together increases and it is related to the ability to give and receive help. Furthermore, it is greater among couples and those who are married. This confirms even further the fragility and limits of the thesis of amoral familism, highlighting how the family cannot only be a generator of social capital for the benefit of its members, but how this can also have positive effects on the social system as a whole, in terms of positive correlation between associations and civic commitment, albeit with appropriate distinctions in terms of the socio-

¹⁹ An interpretation that has, among its most serious consequences, economy blocked to the minimum of survival and an almost total absence of forms of associations.

²⁰ For example, the history of Italy imbued in that relational culture (based on the family) that on many occasions has given rise to associations of various kinds.

economic status of families, the type of family and the geographical area of residence” (Macchioni, 2012: 136).

Nevertheless, from that moment on, Banfield became the father of amoral familism, a professor at *Harvard University*, no longer a representative of US conservatism but an unconventional and anti-conformist intellectual. His book has even turned into a *cult*, to be used as a key to interpret the entire Italian society. All this with a few walks and a chat with the Lucanians of a small village. *Chapeau*.

A success due to various reasons: ‘the essay provides a simple, powerful interpretation of the historical problem of the backwardness of the South. This explanation has sometimes been used as a general model of explanation of *tout court* underdevelopment and in this way it supports a type of ideology or vulgate of a culturalist type; the term “amoral familism”, like others of great success, as for example “the strength of weak ties”, theorized by Granovetter (1973), has the charm of the oxymoron, because it combines two usually opposing concepts. In fact family values are commonly considered an example of specific morality, not of a non-value; the topic discussed deals with a central junction of social sciences, still unresolved, relating to the factors of social development and to the persistence of the elements opposed to it, focusing on the fundamental cell of the social structure: at the same time, the author’s main hypothesis easily lends itself to a double criticism, that has attracted the attention of scholars and fuelled the subsequent debate’ (Chiesi, 2007: 196).

This does not mean – as already highlighted (par. 3) – that the reverberation of a qualitative research must necessarily be limited, but if that echo contributes to disseminate the results of disorganized and poorly managed investigations, then it ends up damaging entire disciplines, exposing them to the *j’accuse* of those who are waiting for nothing else: because social sciences are not be real sciences, because non-standard investigations are scarcely scientific, because each of us thinks we know social phenomena and mechanisms thanks to our own and therefore limited life experience. It seems we can already hear the usual, redundant provocations.

But substance and form (intended in Aristotelian terms) have the task of merging and confusing. While the sociologist, on the other hand, has the task of ensuring that this *link* materializes in his own professional sphere, carrying out good – great – investigations. With a solid and comprehensive theoretical framework, widely justified methodological choices, flexibility and openness to possible *serendipity* (Merton, Fallocco, 2005), results that are not impromptu but scrupulous and consequently captivating and trustworthy. *To be* and the future

of sociology²¹ (even before the sociology of the future²²) pass, above all, from here.

5. Conclusions

The title of the paragraph is misleading, especially if it is at the end of a text that leaves many questions unanswered. How can we conclude – from the Latin *concludere*, composed of *cūm* (with) and *cludere* (close) - the present essay focused on that field of study that Simmel (par. 1) considers still *open*? Is it possible to indicate the way forward to a discipline that has always made flexibility its main feature? What future awaits sociology, social research, and professional sociologists? These are all questions that are difficult to answer except by trying to risk prophetic considerations.

Let us start with the last one and then proceed backwards. Extra-academic sociologists haven't and probably never will – at least in the short term – an easy life. *Professional* sociology, in fact, still cannot free itself from the burden of *institutional* sociology, lost in a labyrinth of degree courses, departments and faculties. But a discipline cannot expect to analyse society without experiencing it, observing it from the halls and classrooms of a university²³. In fact there is the risk of having a distorted view of it.

In theory, for those who wish to live sociology outside the dynamics and academic hierarchies, there are some possibilities: there are many professional fields – communications, industry and tertiary sector, land and environmental management, third sector, health, social services, etc. (Perino, Savonardo, 2015) – in which it is essential to define research questions and focus on them in various *research projects*, evaluate public politics, critically choose the methods and techniques of investigation. This application development, however, in not

²¹ It is precisely the excess of vision, of pre-established representations, that prevent us from conceiving change starting from concrete experience. Only the systematic questioning of the notions of certainty, truth and totality allow us to break the magic circle that flattens the future on an eternal, hallucinatory present (Augé, 2008; 2012).

²² Reference is made here to the ability – of the sociological discipline – to predict social phenomena far from the present, in order to consciously guide social change (Corbisiero, Ruspini, 2016).

²³ Paradoxically, in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century the sociological discipline – which at the time had a marginal position with the Italian university – became a point of reference for the various mass movements that were born and developed in that period, proposing itself as an important scientific instrument of social criticism and promising more that it was able to give in terms of the knowledge of social reality in Italy (Siza, 2006; Luciano, 2013).

taken for granted: “in Italy, a substantial part of sociology itself believes that this discipline should only be formative, that is, it should limit itself to producing knowledge useful for the critical thinking of students and public opinion, and it must not be involved in practical action, in intervention issues. In this way, not only is knowledge detached from its operative applicability, but the links between epistemology, research methodology and the practical use of methodological knowledge are completely obliterated” (Cavalli *et al.*, 2010: 655). In fact, the numerous analyses (AlmaLaurea, 2021) that investigate the labour market continue to be merciless with sociologists, on the demand side (Italy is an *under-outsourced* country, perennially characterized by a lack of requalification of public institutions) and on the supply side: “when sociology graduates do not carry out activities completely incoherent with their degree, they exercise a wide range of professions that share different skills, for example the knowledge of the main sectors of social sciences – with in-depth studies in one or the other field, depending on the degree course attended – combined with a good command of qualitative and quantitative empirical research methods and techniques, planning and adaptation skills, relationship orientation, conceptual thinking. It is no coincidence that graduates in political sciences, sociology, anthropology, international sciences, etc., find themselves competing for the same positions and that employers make little difference between one and the other specialization, even between three-year and master degree graduates²⁴” (Luciano, 2013: 135).

So, what can be done? The key word is, perhaps, *partnership*. We need connections, alliances, collaboration, that we must create all together (universities, companies, local authorities, citizens, third sector organization, media²⁵), including sociology professionals finally free from that sense of inferiority in the presence of economists, political scientists, jurists. With all due respect to permanent contracts that are giving way, more and more often, to

²⁴ “It should be noted that the distinction between “strong” and “weak” degrees in terms of job opportunities does not necessarily overlap with that between scientific and humanistic degrees. For example, graduates in social working and in nursing perform better in the labour market than those in biology and mathematics on multiple indicators of employment performance (unemployment rates, access to stable jobs, use of skills learned in studies). More than the distinction between scientific and humanistic fields, the distinction between degrees connected or not to well-defined professional paths seem more important” (Barone, 2013: 150).

²⁵ Although he limits his reflection to political-religious affiliation, Maddaloni (2014) hopes for the recovery of “a greater distance between the places of cognitive procession and the theatre of public life”. On the contrary, the revival of sociology and social sciences requires means of communication because it is an echo chamber, today more than ever.

projects shadowed by the unknown of tomorrow. But at least something is starting to change.

Furthermore, universities need to start courses of *the sociology of sociology* (à la Bourdieu), at the same time stripping from the garments of a white elephant to train and invest on sociologists *tout court*, in flesh and blood, to be involved not only in filling in the “gaps” of some conferences, but because they are able to undertake specific working paths and to read/interpret society (of which they are an integral part) in the role of *converts*²⁶ as well as of *Martians*, offering us a different perspective on the world, helping us to look beyond the immediate context and better understand the causes of our actions. At least until public opinion appreciates its importance.

Protagonism that, today, sociologists and social scientists deserve to receive in that global village (getting smaller and smaller and rapidly evolving) still to be deciphered (McLuhan, 1962; Iannaccone, 2020) where everyone is obliged to dialogue, to confront with alterity, with the different, with those who could previously be ignored – perhaps appealing to the usual parental warning of “do not talk to strangers” and to the civil carelessness of Goffman (1963) – or even avoiding changing paths, while now we both have the same path to follow.

At this point let's imagine the perplexities of the reader who will be thinking: “Here is the usual, rhetorical ‘conclusion’ that pretends to trace a path but in reality says nothing”. As highlighted, however, in the last part of the introduction, the obvious limits only who cannot get around it. It is therefore up to sociologists 2.0 to take their life and, in particular, their profession in their own hands, to restore the dignity it deserves. They are the ones who have to become aware of society, without waiting (perhaps in vain) for society to finally notice them. And it is still they – especially in an Italy where culture remains largely *a-sociological* and where sociology itself has been more imported than exported (Ferrarotti, 2006; Cipolla, 2012) – who have to orient themselves by looking for the right compromise between a multidisciplinary soul and the many sectorial specializations and for always new (innovative²⁷) forms of participation and cooperation. Undoubtedly an intricate path, but currently the only possible way if we want to reconstruct *a sociology of status*, that is a critical-interpretative and propositional-transformative sociology that knows how to relocate itself in

²⁶ Unlike the Martian, the convert is totally immersed in the situations observed in order to (try to) have the guarantee of fully understanding them (Marradi, 2007).

²⁷ Consider, among others, the visual methods of social research that over time have aroused extraordinary interest, helping to repair the breach created between those who research on *images* and those who research *with* images (Frisina, 2016; Dawson, 2020; Giorgi et al., 2021).

the international scientific panorama in order to make contradictions emerge when everyone sees normality and elements of regularity when everyone sees contradictions.

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