

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance of Pareto's Work Today

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Abstract

Over the past few years, in terms of a theoretical approach to reality, sociology seems to be lagging behind in disclosing the meanings and dynamics of social *issues* in connection with individuals' *problems* (Wright Mills, 1965). Society has changed dramatically, and the classic sociological tools appear wholly inadequate for the new social reality. And we can also thank postmodernist theories for this, since they managed to deconstruct a number of sociological tools without providing satisfactory alternatives. In the case of Vilfredo Pareto, by the beginning of the 19th century he had already realized that economics was not enough to explain social issues but despite this was becoming the dominant discipline used to tackle social demands. The purpose of this article is to examine those aspects of the work of Pareto that are still relevant for thinking about the current social reality and, in particular, about the potential tools that this work can still offer us today, if properly explored.

Keywords: facts and theories, experimental knowledge, non-logical actions.

1. Introduction

A singular scholar, an exceptional polemicist, with an intellectual and working approach that was exceptional and remarkably sanguine in all of its manifestations, by 1901 Pareto was already strongly devoted to the cause of sociology. He felt that this discipline must be defended from the intellectual impostures of non-experimental approaches, that is, those that did not account for the wealth of means and methods available to the science he considered a “queen” among the social sciences. To understand the ferment of knowledge

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combined with the processing of contemporary events which swept across Europe in the last century, in which Pareto was acting, it is necessary to bear in mind certain fundamental dates: in 1900 Charles Péguy founded the literary Journal *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, which brought together socialism, Christianity and nationalism; in 1907 Henri Bergson wrote *Creative Evolution*, bringing issues such as the importance of intuition and *élan vital* into the cultural debate; Georges Sorel published *Reflections on Violence* in 1906; while Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams and Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* appeared in 1899 and 1911 respectively.

The subjective dimension of reality had made its entry into history and, to some extent, coincided with the need for clarity felt by Pareto in distinguishing between logical and non-logical actions (Riccioni, 2016; 2003). From this perspective, it became possible to distinguish between subjectively perceived reality and objective reality. Pareto's life experience (1988, vol. I, p. 164), arguably even more than his studies, led him to say that "reasoning, in order to act on humans, needs to be transformed into *feelings*", where feelings were understood as subjective interests.

Pareto seems to have wanted to develop, or at least prepare the tools for, a method for understanding the role of reason and feeling in social life, that is, for identifying the constants of non-logical social behavior, as well as the characteristics and role that such behavior takes on in social discourse and collective decisions. A component, the emotional one, that seems today to be almost more relevant than the rational one in understanding contemporary collective trends. A further analysis which pointed to this reality (according to Pareto at the root of all human behavior), was the focus on the *élite* as power groups. For Gaetano Mosca the *ruling class* and for Pareto the *élite*, these groups showed how much even, and especially, the seemingly rational social organizations of modernity, did nothing but obey the needs or vices of individuals, power, force, cunning, forms of subjectivity lent to the cause of domination over others and membership of a power group, whatever the political or ideological affiliation. With this in mind, the observation of non-logical actions was the way indicated to study real social conditions which were not those dictated by the ruling classes, i.e., the *élite*, but those realities which fell outside the repetitiveness of the behavioral patterns of a certain label, simply because they did not correspond to the "logical" patterns of the class that determined them, but were guided by a different logic, one which pertained to the subjective, non-predictable states of common living and affectivity.

"We must not confuse the residues (...) with the feelings or with the instincts to which they correspond (...) Let us not forget that, in social phenomena, in addition to the feelings manifested by residues, there are also appetites, inclinations, etc., and that we are only dealing here with the part

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
of Pareto's Work Today
Ilaria Riccioni

corresponding to residues. In it, one often finds many, and sometimes very many, simple residues, which, by chemical analysis, are separated. There are concrete phenomena in which one residue prevails over the others, and which can therefore roughly represent this 'residue.'" (Pareto, 1988, vol. II, p. 720)

Pareto observed a splitting of the social context and divided the two realities which had emerged: that of the *élite*, which emptied itself of meaning despite being in power, and that of the masses, who had no power in the institutional sense but seemed to determine the real course of social life, in that they directed its change (Riccioni, 2016, pp. 44-45).

Underlying all social action were inscrutable contingencies moved by affectivity, and in this sense, all rationalization was merely a form of justification, a rationalization that somehow put back in place, according to logic, what was not moved by any logic (*derivations*). In this sense, Pareto's sociology had a twofold aspect: it could be seen as the fruit of an enlightened conservative's reasoning but also that of a mind radically focused on a demystification of political, social, and economic processes. Ferrarotti (1986) discerned in the bitterness of Pareto's last years the realization of an age which saw the promises of the Enlightenment betrayed and illusions about rationality as a guarantee of progress wrecked.

Pareto's topicality points to an unexpected openness to new ways of conceiving social reality as a continuous and dynamic system, far from the unwarranted idea of progress as a chronological fatality. Or even through the fundamental consideration of what Pareto categorized as *Residues and Derivations*, that is, the instinctive motivations and *a posteriori* rationalization of non-rational or non-logical actions which dominated the behavior and decisions of the majority and which, in today's society, are in some way unintelligibly argued as factors of authenticity. But instead remain instinctive forms of behavior that are unpredictable but, above all, capable of generating forms of social insecurity, amplified through the use of the media, since they are not anchored in any deeply meaningful structures. Hence the renewed validity of Pareto's work for sociology which passed via several concepts including logical and non-logical actions, the concept of circulation of *élites*, but also the concept of ophelimity and maximum ophelimity. For example, in observing a community, this concept reveals an extremely contemporary "operational" function in coming to differentiate complex actions by providing a clear "relational and affective" definition which nonetheless distinguishes ophelimity from utility, albeit in its characteristic of subjectivity (Mornati, 2020).

In other words, ophelimity represents a form of "utility" valid only from the point of view of the individual, namely, the subjective advantage and pleasure derived from the possession or enjoyment of a good and not of the community, understood as a category no longer included in the modern

development project. In the same vein, the statistical study of relationships between economic and social phenomena; the management of public debt; socialism; theories of action; social heterogeneity; social equilibrium and elements of the sociology of politics.

2. Pareto's role in the international sociology of his times

In any case, the specific context of the elaboration of Pareto's work, in which the First World War became the first verification of the tools of sociological analysis developed in his treatise *The Mind and Society*, should not be forgotten.

Pareto was busy observing the birth of fascism with “the absolutely objective vision that he used in the study of many other political, economic and social phenomena” (Mornati, 2020, p.168).

Democracy, Pareto wrote in several texts, cannot exist, and the social balance of the domination of the few over the many tends to recover after any overthrow of government. Despite this apparent cynicism, Pareto gradually approached an “understanding of the basic mechanisms that regulate the functioning of the social system and towards the attempt to fix and express them in a rigorous manner, not merely ideological or abstractly doctrinal” (Ferrarotti, 1973, p. 18).

In Pareto's analysis, we can understand an important process at work in the society of the time, which also included the development process of the social sciences in relation to the dominant values of the time: “he is certainly the only one in the history of the socio-historical disciplines to reject, simultaneously and in no uncertain terms, the common heritage of Christian values, positivism that flowed into a humanist morality of progress, such as the application of utilitarianism to the explanation of all social actions. He is also the only one to reject the philosophical dream of an intrinsic ‘objectivity’ of science, or the myth of an inherent ‘rationality’ in the course of the socio-historical world; in short, to place himself ostentatiously in opposition to the founding theoretical options of sociology.” (Barbieri as cited in Busino, 2010, p. 109).

In a nutshell, we can imagine that in the course of democratization of Western European societies, there were three stages of development from a feudal society to a type of society closer to the current democratic model, which can be said to be still developing new forms: a) An initial form of traditional society in which laws do not matter as much as customs. The so-called societies of the “eternal yesterday”, where acceptance dominates, time is marked by

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
of Pareto's Work Today
Ilaria Riccioni

nature and the rhythms of work linked to it, and there is a limited division of labor.

b) Elitist societies belong to the second phase, the societies of the first period of industrialization. These experienced the formation of an unprecedented mass of citizens, also due to the great concentration of production in large cities, which thus invited people to move from the country to the city. In these societies, domination and rule came from privileged groups who conceived of society in terms of a single class. It is possible to imagine Fascism and National Socialism as being mass reactions to these elitist societies, where a minority group ruled, and the rest of the population had no voice. The greatest theorist of this type of society was Gaetano Mosca; Pareto proposed many similar arguments but did not focus solely on the ruling class.

c) A third and emerging type of society is contemporary society, in which the pressure from below becomes unsustainable, and there is a need to broaden the basis of power through widening spheres of participation.

Thus, there is a gradual erosion of social classes in the classic sense by their transformation into a plurality of cross-sectional social classes that include new elements with respect to the concept of class in the classic Marxist sense.

Each society encounters its own specific challenges which show its weaknesses, and, as Pareto put it, sociological observation can only seek to grasp the *how* of the processes at work, not the *why*. The *why* is an existential question, the *how* is a "scientific" question; the former seeking the ontological basis of the phenomenon, the latter satisfied with recording processes and relationships, accounting for them through empirical verification and theorizing. There remains the central question which Pareto, perhaps because of the conservative cynicism of his later years, never seemed to ask himself, so much did he take for granted that society, in spite of everything, could not change except in a turnover of the élite.

According to Ferrarotti, there is in Pareto a disenchanting realism as the final trait of a scholar who had lived through the most difficult period in the history of the 20th century with extreme freedom of thought:

"Behind the disenchanting expressions of Pareto's realism, one clearly sees the basic pessimism of the second half of the Century in which the faith in the automatic progress of the human species and the enlightenment promises of a triumphant, universal rationality seemed wholly shipwrecked and betrayed. In Pareto, this pessimism is openly transformed into a bitter mockery of democratic and humanitarian ideas, seen as an illusion, whilst in Durkheim and Weber, his two great contemporaries, this emerges with the deep, provocative pathos which accompanied the proletarianization of the spirit and the painful nostalgia for an organically structured humanity" (Ferrarotti, 1986, p. 53).

In the history of Italian sociology there had already been a first attempt by Gramsci to carry out an analysis that would highlight the complementarity of the history of culture with the history of social analysis in Italy. In this sense, this reconstruction overestimated philosophical analysis with respect to social analysis, and Pareto himself found much to argue about against Croce. This was assuredly a response to both political needs and disciplinary constraints.

According to Lentini, “before the two world wars, Italian sociology could be divided into two approaches with different aims: a sociology of nation-building and a sociology of the dynamics of modernization. Academic culture was wholeheartedly involved in exalting the Risorgimento and had committed itself to a work of nation-building in order to create Italians” (Lentini, 1974, p. 10). Industrialization compelled the country to modernize itself in its social and political relations, but at the same time questions of economic inequalities arose; the sociology of that time leaned towards developing plans for modernization, but the positivist sociologists of a radical matrix interpreted and theorized modernization from the point of view of an enlightened bourgeoisie, leaving the industrial proletariat, who were the real protagonists of the national revolution, in the shade. As a result, modernization was not conceived as a development of political and social participation within an anti-capitalist function but more as a sectoral reformist intervention for enlargement of suffrage and compulsory education. As Lentini wrote: “the great organic-evolutionary theory and such individual disciplines as criminal sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology, etc., had functions of social control, of justifying the power of the few, of taking a measure of the workforce, and so forth.” (Lentini, 1974, p. 11).

The intention to maintain the state of unconditional subordination of the masses arose at the same time that the development of industrial capitalism made it legitimate for them to take part in participatory forums (Lentini, 1974, p. 11).

It was in this period that social analysis became more mature and the official practice of both public and private bodies. In the Giolitti era (1900-1914), there was a first socialization of social science thanks to the efforts of the bourgeois reformists but above all the impulse of socialism and the objective strengthening of the workers’ movement, which imposed its problems on every section of the nascent academic sociology, in addition to a survey of the condition of workers. In this sense, the historical reconstruction of Lentini is very precious, showing as it does that in Italy, sociology was already present. There was the journal *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*, and the point of view of Pareto prevailed; the only one who had worked for many years on a treatise of sociology, together with a vision of moral statistics, the journal’s foundations. In consequence, social analysis in the Fascist period became a key element of

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
of Pareto's Work Today
Ilaria Riccioni

the repressive anti-polar system, providing the traits of a real reactionary state sociology. In the period between 1920 and 1940, there were many similarities in the directions of Italian and American sociology. In fact, in this same period, many social scientists emigrated to the USA. The Russian, Sorokin, for example, was recognized as the most authoritative systematizer of international sociology. At that time, the US was already home to the work of Park and Burgess.

Once again, Lentini informs us that among the authors cited by Sorokin in his *Contemporary Sociological Theories* we can find Pareto, Niceforo, and Gini, who represented the particular interests of social analysis in Italy. Pareto owed much of his effortless reception abroad thanks to his publications in French, easily appreciated internationally. His theories were read and discussed as early as the 1920s at the University of Chicago, while in the early 1930s, a seminar on Pareto was held at Harvard which was also attended by Talcott Parsons. What facilitated the spread of Pareto's theories was precisely his "anti-communist boldness" (Lentini, 1974, p. 18) which placed him among the restorers of the capitalist vision of life attacked by the Bolshevik Revolution. However, the democratic structure of the American system, and the consequent freedom and openness of social research, was in stark contrast with the authoritarian censorship imposed by the Fascist regime in Italy, which impelled individual scholars to align themselves with State policy.

While American pluralism allowed reformist social research in contact with the reality of social groups, even if it lacked a Marxist criterion of analysis of social classes and domination, in Italy reformist analyses were prohibited. Social scientists could access the theoretical and methodological terrain, but not the field research which was dominant in the USA between the two world wars.

Any critique of reformism had been banned from the regime by the social sciences and, in fact, in Pareto we find an attempt at a theoretical arrangement; a masterful attempt, which however became stuck, when too radically critical, within the limits of the subjective, almost psychological dimension, and which the attentive work of Mornati has definitely contributed to understanding in its complexity (Mornati, 2020).

3. Present-day aspects of Pareto's work

Pareto's relevance today can be found in the themes, methodology and even the content of the biography of this singular scholar, who was both an intellectual vanguard and a radical spirit; but above all it lies in his critical approach, at once free of all disciplinary biases, which fosters a study unmarred by the disciplinary fetters of his time, but capable of updating itself to the

conditions of a social reality that we might call “universal.” The ease with which Pareto moves from one discipline to another, despite an awareness of the lack of fundamental elements, is striking and visionarily progressive and anticipating not only the opening to interdisciplinarity but also the complexity of social phenomena (Mornati, 2014). As a result, demonstrating a voracity for knowledge beyond academic fences, but even more a perspective which tended to eliminate from many disciplines those elements which closed them in on themselves, that is, those elements which were the result of reasoning on perfect models or theories as rational constructions, but which actually mystified reality instead of understanding it, since they deviated from the facts following the logic of rationalization. For Pareto, reality was a grand fiction moved and formulated on some basic drives: passion, greed, cunning, and force. How we then come to explain these drives, or “residues”, is part of the forms of custom in different eras. After all, science too is a part of this process, which is why it was not only the principles of individual disciplines that were relevant for Pareto but any instrument which proved useful in understanding reality, that could become an effective tool for observing the reality of the facts. Undoubtedly, now as then, his teaching is more widespread and remembered abroad than in Italy: a distinguished Italian abroad who observed Italian affairs with a critical eye, leaving in his writings much criticism of a system which had, in some ways, forced him to leave his country. Although his work has mostly (at least in sociology), been espoused for the study of behavioral models, and mainly by the structural-functionalist, Parsonian, and post-functionalist currents in the United States, Pareto’s work is as far from these models as it could be and is much richer, more multifaceted, and more innovative than has been grasped. In the work of this scholar subsist very strong impulses to a kind of knowledge without disciplinary barriers; Pareto was aware that knowledge of society cannot be the result of a single discipline, except to the detriment of social balance, which is instead orchestrated on an interconnectedness of knowledge and facts. The insistence on social facts, despite the fact that it may seem to be the will of the economist who seeks to reduce the social to the visible is, instead, exactly the opposite: a desire to include the non-visible, the non-predictable and the non-logically definable within the complexity of social customs and repetitiveness. A thought, then, of extraordinary modernity, which in traversing the most complex disciplines that determine the laws of the functioning of collective living, makes no distinction between the knowledge of the exact sciences and the social sciences, recognizing a single path to knowledge. An extraordinary aspiration, albeit not without some naiveté. In a letter to Fritz Karmin in 1901, a period during which he was immersed in the final drafting of *Les Systèmes Socialistes*, Pareto wrote as follows:

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
of Pareto's Work Today
Ilaria Riccioni

“Vous commencez par me dire que vous n’êtes pas de mon avis et que vous avez des causes de croire que mes idées sont réfutables. Ainsi vous tirez vos conclusions avant de connaître les faits. C’est précisément la voie opposée à celle que je suis, et qui est d’ailleurs la seule en usage dans les sciences expérimentales. D’abord j’étudie les faits et ensuite j’en tire les conclusions. Je n’ai aucune idée a priori. Je n’ai nulle théorie, nulle croyance à laquelle je suis attaché. Je suis une théorie tant qu’elle est d’accord avec les faits; je l’abandonne, sans le moindre regret, le jour où je m’aperçois qu’elle n’est plus d’accord avec les faits. Vous voyez que nous sommes fort loin de nous entendre. Vous avez une croyance et vous voulez la défendre. Cela est très respectable, mais j’ai pour principe de ne jamais disputer avec les croyants”¹.

For Pareto, the only antidotes to dogmatism were what is known and the path in search of knowledge, but even more so, experimental knowledge, which seemed to set the relationship between facts as a guiding principle, transcending even disciplinary barriers.

The preservation of the boundaries of a discipline can be the disease of any science, and Pareto was well aware of this: as soon as a discourse became self-referential, dogmatic, or even metaphysical, he abandoned it to seek the thread of knowledge elsewhere. In this sense, Pareto’s work was much broader and less schematic than it has often been presented, and despite the rigor that characterized it and placed it in its time, it remains a source of insights and intellectual paths still to be explored. In reality, Pareto continued, “all economic phenomena are interdependent and, alas, also interdependent with social phenomena; this demands that we undertake studies of an entirely different kind than those with which political economy has hitherto been satisfied. The interdependence of economic phenomena with social phenomena also warns us that a social crisis will most likely overlap an economic crisis” (Pareto, 1929, p. 223).

¹ Letter to Fritz Karmin, 26 June 1901, copy, ref. RIICo85. DOC Fondo Pareto, Archivi della Banca Popolare di Sondrio, Sondrio: “You start by telling me that you do not agree with me and that you have reason to believe that my ideas are refutable. So you draw your conclusions before you know the facts. This is precisely the opposite path to the one I follow, and which is the only one in use in the experimental sciences. First, I study the facts and then I draw conclusions. I have no a priori ideas. I have no theory, no belief to which I am attached. I follow a theory as long as it agrees with the facts; I abandon it, without the slightest regret, the day I realize that it no longer agrees with the facts. You see that we are very far from agreeing. You have a belief, and you want to defend it. That is very respectable, but I have a principle of never arguing with believers.” TdA

In this sense, Pareto's anticipations are manifold, the sense of sociology as a connecting discipline, the conviction that social knowledge must be multidisciplinary or rather, post-disciplinary, and even more so in a specialized society, the idea of an interconnected reality anticipating the concept of society as a set of networks, networked groups that slowly crumble away the old conception of the center, but at the same time also crumble its responsibility, which in today's society seems to be distributed and diluted among the various steps of bureaucracy.

According to Jean-Claude Passeron, Pareto's sociology is a synthesis of specialized social sciences. The peculiarity and originality of Pareto, again according to Passeron, lies in the fact that he stated and argued that economic equilibrium and the methods of calculating it do not contribute to any knowledge of social equilibrium. Passeron continued: "*De là que tant de commentateurs aient vu dans sa sociologie une vision pessimiste, voire irrationaliste, de l'histoire. C'est évidemment méconnaître le projet fondamental de Pareto: fonder une connaissance logico-experimentale de toutes les actions sociales*"². (2000, pp. 36-37)

However, Pareto's sociology is much more than this: not a synthesis of specialized social sciences but an attempt at post-disciplinarity, already fully in place in *The Treatise on Sociology*. Pareto, even more than a multidisciplinary reading of society, aspired to find a logical experimental methodology suitable for recording and interpreting all possible social actions and, of these social actions, he wanted to describe the most reliable recurrences of historical causality. Recurrences would give the possibility, when observing non-logical actions, of defining the behavioral patterns of these actions with a fair degree of acceptability, in order to prevent and anticipate changes in society.

4. Social action as a connection between *facts* and *theories*

For Pareto, all behavior was analyzable on the condition of distinguishing the two forms of rationality, that of action and that of explanation, of admitting the existence of two different forms of logic, that of demonstration and that of argumentation, of recognizing that truth does not coincide with utility, that a non-logical, untrue doctrine may be socially useful while another, logical, true doctrine may be harmful – harmful, that is, to society. Which allowed a description, an explanation, by means of typologies and models, of social facts

² "Hence the fact that so many commentators have seen in his sociology a pessimistic, even irrational, vision of history. This is obviously a misunderstanding of Pareto's fundamental project: to found logical and experimental knowledge of all social actions". Passeron (2000, pp. 36-37)

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
of Pareto's Work Today
Ilaria Riccioni

in their totality and in their observable diversities, but at the same time separated the formal and experimental sciences from the historical sciences, the cognitive sciences from the sciences of expertise and application, theory from practice. The distribution of such residues in all strata of society characterizing social systems and making them heterogeneous, conflicting, and contradictory (Busino, 2010, p. 116).

Logical actions are the world as it should be, non-logical actions are the world as it is, Pareto wrote. In doing so, he apparently sought to come to terms with the laws that govern reality. It appears that he was revealing personal reflections drawn from life experience, which is always distant from any theories about it. For him, sociology was an anchor of salvation, a path which opened up a vision of formal rationality to the multifaceted contemplative and active life, but in a reasonable and documented way. Reality was not what was in the mind of the observer, but was what it was: not logical, not always rationally justifiable, and yet real. In conducting this examination of reality, Pareto seems to have been talking about his own personal battle between the idea of reality, made up of laws, principles and coherence, and reality as it in fact very often presents itself: unpredictable, inconsistent, contradictory, and corrupt.

In his reasoning on these polarities, his work ranged from historical data to philosophical reflections, from schematic scientific reasoning to the creation of potential models and laws of human behavior, hardly ever paying heed to the different parameters which the various disciplines needed for an understanding and appropriate use of their tools. In this, however, there is a weakness: cognitive disciplines have their own logic of knowledge, an epistemology which determines the knowledge perspective of a discipline. For example, Pareto possessed an immense historical erudition but at the same time the historical sense eluded him, so that he piled up historical facts without understanding their historical processuality.

And here we unlock a weak side of Pareto's theoretical construction, which, in fact, becomes a portal to the universality of his work, thus opening up that space for interpretation which makes it relevant today. We have already mentioned Pareto's approach to social reality, but it should also be pointed out how central the relationship between facts and theories is to the discussion he developed on the reliability of the social sciences. As rigorous as he was about the procedure that must necessarily bind theories to facts, he completely obliterated the problematization of the concept of the fact, of empirical data. There is not one single paragraph in which Pareto paused to distinguish between the narrative dimensions of facts and the construction of facts as data. Empirical data, as well as facts or phenomena, are always constructions and, as such, susceptible to interpretation, shortcomings, biases in presentation as much as to the subsequent potential connection with other facts. He assessed

the potential fallacy of human reasoning but did not seem to consider that the facts themselves, as presented, experienced, and subsequently identified, were subject to the same fallacy in interpretation and description which always remains a social or individual constructions of the fact. He mentioned something in Volume 1 of the *Treatise* when confronting the uncertainties of language about its ability to account for a reality. His construction of the fact seems to have admitted only one interpretation of events, exactly as for the natural sciences, in that it ignored the historical dimensionality of social facts while reconstructing their history. The facts of experience are still a constructed datum and never unambiguous, but although Pareto did not directly problematize the datum, he did consider the language used to describe it, transmit it, and socialize it. Pareto wrote (1988, vol. I, p. 442) that, “[t]he adaptation of reasoning to the data of experience” was fundamental. Where the data of experience was, nevertheless, an “ambiguous” datum: the datum, then, was problematized initially with an introduction to the discourse on the use of language, which in its explanations of social facts must be on a par with the use of formulas in the exact sciences. Theorizing on the social dimension could not be produced “when reasoning about concepts and vocabulary” but when reasoning about facts, wrote Pareto (Pareto, 1988, vol. 1, p. 442). If reasoning must adapt to the data of experience, that is, must submit to the reality of experience, then language too will assume a much more delicate function than simply giving an account of the facts: how to narrate the facts that have happened? How to give voice to the experience, which often has subjective and uncommunicable features which nevertheless add quality to the experience itself? It is undeniable that the very narration of facts, a widespread practice in the social sciences, is itself a given: “It is certain that an author’s way of thinking is related to the sentiments existing in the community in which they live, and therefore, one can, within certain limits, deduce from this, which are the elements of social equilibrium. But it is notable that this operation is more fruitful for authors of little genius than for eminent authors of great genius; for these, precisely because of their qualities, emerge, detach themselves from the general public, and therefore reflect less well its thoughts, beliefs, and feelings” (Pareto, 1988, vol. 1, p. 472)

Depending on the qualities of the narrator, therefore, the facts will be more or less given over to either an objective or subjective type of narration, and the language will be more or less precise, but it is always a documentation of a time, a place, a language, and a tradition of thought as well: “An author’s text is valid for a certain period of time and a certain country, not so much for what that author intended it to say, as for what the people of that time and country understand by reading that text” (Pareto, 1988, p. 474). And so, he continued, there is a problematic difference between the narration of the fact and the reality

Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
of Pareto's Work Today
Ilaria Riccioni

of the fact, the distance that can be created between the fact and the explanation of it. Clearly, Pareto observed (Pareto, 1988, p. 92), "the reality of a fact does not depend on the 'explanation' one can give for it", however the understanding of the fact and the interpretation of it may well depend on that. The question becomes delicate at this point: in writing that the reality of a fact does not depend on the explanation of it he was already laying the groundwork for a critical approach to the construction of facts.

In the final part of the first volume of *The Treatise on Sociology*, Pareto developed an articulate discourse on the incidence of myths, legendary narratives, which in essence feed the imagination of peoples, strengthen cohesion and belonging, and are able to create traditions of thought. In some ways, his considerations of storytelling and how it acts on the social construction of reality seems to be a kind of *ante litteram* idea of what is now referred to as storytelling, a story that is told about a fact, a narrative that can be elaborated with fewer or more elements "constructed" for the narrative itself. *How* a fact is told, and what it becomes in the act of storytelling, allows a transformation of the fact itself from the subject to the object of a narrative, in which the focus shifts from the event to the telling of it, with all the traditions, fantasies, and collective images that emerge from it.

However, Pareto's realism as an unmasker of deception warned accordingly against the possibility of narratives deviating completely, or even partially, from the facts, and in this brought any narrative license sternly back to order:

"Myths, legendary tales, and the like are historical realities. This is the simplest and also easiest solution to the problem we have posed, of tracing back from a text to the facts that gave rise to it. It can be accepted on account of a living faith that does not reason, that boasts of believing even the absurd, and that, as already stated, we have not here to discuss. Or it may be accepted like any other historical narrative, and thus as the consequence of a pseudo-experience, which would be real and true experience were the narration to be subjected to strict historical criticism and any other necessary experimental verification" (Pareto, 1988, p. 552).

From a methodological point of view, we know from field research that the narrative, the biographical interview, always has validity, either as "true" data, which coincides with the facts, or as constructed data, which coincides only partially, or not at all, with the facts. But we also know that the story itself, something which Pareto also hinted at, is itself a datum about the ways of seeing, perceiving, and reasoning, not only of the person telling it, but also of the environment which constructed the way of seeing and observing the reality of that narrative or of the individual narrator. All data, therefore, have value even when they clearly disagree with the facts, given that the disagreement is

already providing us with new data. For Pareto, however, this was always in relation to the experimental evidence which defined the reliability of the fact.

“The theories given by this solution differ from the theories of category (A) in that in these the narrative is imposed as an article of faith by some power that provides the desired ‘explanation’; whereas in the present case the theories are believed because of their own pseudo-experimental evidence. From a scientific point of view, this distinction is key... Indeed, if a narrative is given to us as an article of faith, this is enough to place it outside the realm of experimental and logical science, which has no more to say on the matter, whether to accept or reject such a narrative. If, on the other hand, it is given to us as carrying within itself its own authority and evidence, it falls entirely into the domain of experimental science, and faith has nothing more to do with it. It should also be added that such a distinction is seldom made by those who accept the narrative, and it is very difficult to know whether they regard it only as a historical narrative, or whether they lend faith to it because of other considerations. Therefore, many concrete cases are a mixture of theories (A) and (B). For instance, the non-experimental authority of the author of the narrative is rarely lacking” (Pareto, 1988, vol. I, pp. 497-498)³.

Therefore, a series of methodological problems arise that can be summarized using four concepts: narration, verisimilitude, the reliability of narration, and interpretation.

A narrative can be as much a description as it is a representation of facts, “[i]f the text we want to interpret were a historical narrative, one could indeed consider it to be at least an approximate representation of the acts it expresses” (Pareto, 1988, p. 553). However, narrative is a human product that is already approximate since it can become a transformed narrative during the course of circulation. Pareto writes:

“For a tale to alter, it need not pass from mouth to mouth; it alters even when it is repeated by the same person. For example, a thing that was meant to be indicated as *big*, will become bigger and bigger in subsequent stories; a small thing, smaller and smaller. One increases the dose, each time yielding to the same temptation” (Pareto, 1988, p. 554).

³ Pareto classified a typology of facts as follows: “(A) Abstract entities that are sought after are known independently of experience. Such knowledge is superior to experimental knowledge... (B) Abstract entities that are sought after do not explicitly have an origin outside experience; or they have an existence of their own that may implicitly be non-experimental.” The further possibility of subfacts springs from the simple facts A and B, and the subfacts are in turn defined with Greek capital letters to mark the variation in action (A, A1) etc. (Pareto, 1988, vol. I, pp. 497-498).

5. Concluding

Pareto, the intellectual and sociologist, remains one of the few Italian figures known and studied in foreign universities, more as an economist than as a sociologist, joining the great thinkers of the sociological discipline of his time, such as Weber (1958) and Durkheim (1981, 1895). He distanced himself from some of them, believing that they lacked the intellectual versatility to dominate more disciplinary fields.

In a letter of 1901 to Ernest Roguin, Pareto wrote:

“Quant à la sociologie, je vous avouerai que je n'ai pas en grand estime les Durkheim, Worms et C.ie. Ce qui manque précisément à ces messieurs, c'est la connaissance de l'économie politique et des méthodes rigoureusement scientifiques. Je publie maintenant un livre de sociologie, sur les systèmes socialistes. Si vous avez un moment pour y jeter un coup d'oeil, vous verrez que je me place à un tout autre point de vue”⁴ (ref. RIIC367.DOC, Fondo Pareto, Archivi della Banca Popolare di Sondrio, Sondrio).

Pareto's relationship to the sociology of his contemporaries is controversial. One example is his attempt to expose the weaknesses that Durkheim's work sought to hide. For Durkheim, social science was the only means of understanding and observing the collective action of individuals, precisely because it is an action that results from the social imposition of a sui generis reality that is imposed on individuals beyond their psychological actions and that can only be explained in terms of the social tendency that conditions it.

In this sense, Pareto, in contrast, seems to make more of the distinction which Tarde applied in his work *The Laws of Imitation*. Published in 1890, in it there is an attempt to legitimize sociology on foundations other than those of Durkheim, or rather on laws of development, which according to Tarde (but also to Pareto), must have the same value as those used in the fields of the physical and natural sciences.

Furthermore, in the analytical process used by Tarde we can find the concept of imitation as the fundamental process for the diffusion of a common action among social subjects, while at the same time we find that the laws which

⁴ Letter to Ernest Roguin, 12 December 1901, copy, ref. RIIC367.DOC. Fondo Pareto, Archivi della Banca Popolare di Sondrio, Sondrio: “As for sociology, I must confess that I do not have a great deal of respect for Durkheim, Worms and co. What these gentlemen lack precisely is a knowledge of political economy and rigorously scientific methods. I am now publishing a book on sociology, on socialist systems. If you have a moment to look at it, you will see that I take a completely different view”.

govern the fate of all imitations (and which constitute the object of sociology) can be of two kinds: logical or extra-logical. Logical causes act in cases in which an innovation is chosen by a person because he/she considers it more useful or truer than others, that is, more in agreement with the ends or purposes already consolidated in his/her mind (Tarde, 1890, p. 164). In the social field, however, wrote Tarde, *extra-logical* causes of favor or disfavor towards every innovation that lends itself to being adopted are of great importance. Consequently, Tarde defines three extra-logical laws essential to the development of society. A distinction between logical and extra-logical laws which seems very close to Pareto's explanation of social action, which in fact is then defined as probable only by the psychological motivations of the subject.

Thus, while in Durkheim's work (1981-1895) there is a process which clearly aims at distinguishing between sociological methodology with respect to the psychological motivations of collective action, in Pareto there is almost a step backwards, one which tended to relocate social action within its sphere of individual action, founded on substantially psychological motivations and not connected with collective motivations in the slightest, but instead connected to the outcome that such collectivity generates.

However, neither Pareto's complex eclecticism nor his thorny relationship with the sociology of his time prevented his work from being widely read, so that we find so many debts to his work without properly acknowledging this debt. Sociologists and political scientists often cite him, but without seeing his modernity and judging his writings to be outdated and obsolete, often only in appearance. As Busino wrote (2010), while the negation of essential ideas and values has been glimpsed in his work, there have often been thick ideological lenses that did not let the writings speak beyond those same disciplines whose boundaries Pareto expanded.

On the other hand, as is often the case, foreign scholars who have approached his work from different specializations, especially in logic and the epistemology of science (Barabàsi, 2010; West, Scafetta, 2010), have discarded ideological-political interpretations and instead seen in it an attempt to develop a method for understanding the role of reason and emotion in social life. A method that is still waiting to be refined in all its complexity for a sociological reading of non-logical actions. Pareto's relevance, like that of all classics, thus lies in the possibility of approaching his work with contemporary questions.

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Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance
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Ilaria Riccioni

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