

Pareto: A Great Classic Author of the Future. Overview and Introduction

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This number of the *Italian Sociological Review* presents a number of papers emerging from the reflections and debate of the seminar organized in September 2023 by Gabriele d’Annunzio University of Chieti-Pescara and Carlo Bo University of Urbino for the centenary of the death of Vilfredo Pareto.

The intention of the organizers and participants in the seminar was not only to commemorate the figure of a classical author on sociology, economy and political science, but also to reflect on the topical nature of his intellectual legacy and on the importance of his teaching for the future.

Pareto (1911, 1978, 2016) had identified the more general problematic issues of the modern society of his day. The validity of his observations and the conclusions of his analyses – for example on democracy, the dynamics of parliamentarianism and human weaknesses – seems confirmed by the empirical verification of today’s world. Pareto enables us to understand both the specific features of Italian society and therefore the deeply entrenched, robust nature of certain national traits (Bobbio, 1964; Busino, 2013; Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

His reflections and analyses offer new generations a term of comparison both regarding the change undergone by societies over a century, and permanent problematic traits, the two elements that are essential to the development of the social sciences.

The works here presented follow two main, effectively intertwined trajectories. The first favours the sociological-political aspect of Pareto’s work. The second concerns Paretian “psychology”. This aspect renders Pareto interesting as an author in that it takes into account his feelings in the political, economic and social spheres (Bach, 2019).

At the first reading, Pareto the author may appear dated – and dated he certainly is. But his scepticism towards democratic institutions, like Mosca’s and Michels’s, makes Pareto’s analysis yet more topical, both for his thinking on the state of health of democracy, and for his analysis of the State as an institution. The idea of the State, in Pareto’s view, rests on a strong institution, able to

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guarantee stability and good government. This is why he believed that only the elite – individuals gifted with above-average abilities – were in a position to carry out such an essential function.

The problems raised by Pareto on the nature of democracy, the role of the elites, the characters of political institutions, are questions that still confront us today (Diamond, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Today too, as in Pareto's time, we see a weakening of state sovereignty, fictitious and transitory representativity of the institutions, the public good entrusted not to competent hands (the hands, in Pareto's opinion, of the elite) but to representatives of 'spurious' parliamentary majorities who favour their own political side. The poor assignment of resources contradicts one of the fundamental principles of the modern state: the connection between political representation and the contribution of the citizens (Lipset, 1960).

As we know, in Pareto's view leadership of society assigned to those who are the best and most capable is the best solution. It is also the most difficult to carry out since people are guided not by reason but by their passions. The tendency of human beings is to think and act on the basis of their own preferences and inclinations; their inability to go forward rigorously and logically is innate. And here is the link with the second trajectory of the works in this collection, the fact that most human actions are consequently dictated by emotional rather than rational elements.

Pareto appears to reveal in advance what is happening these days. Spreading throughout contemporary public debate and politics over the last decade we find regressive opinions and values with respect to the typical standards of western society based on science and competence. With respect to the legacy of the branches of knowledge accumulated by western culture over time, such manifestations testify to a step backwards.

Pareto's criticism of democracy and the malfunction of politics seems in part to point to current sovereigntist and populist tendencies (Crewe & Sanders, 2020; Crouch, 2004; de la Torre, 2019).

The present number opens with an innovative analysis by Adele Bianco who compares Vilfredo Pareto and Norbert Elias in order to explore the crisis of contemporary society. Although Pareto and Elias present significant differences, their theories offer an incisive basis to explain certain social tendencies to be found only in the present day. The complementary perspectives of Pareto and Elias on the crisis of contemporary society are particularly enlightening: while Pareto focuses on the sociogenesis of the crisis and examines socio-political processes and the actors involved, Elias aids us in understanding the psychogenesis, including the psychological roots of regressive processes and the impact of structural transformations on people's

socio-psychological well-being. By comparing the two authors, we can reach a more complete understanding of the current crisis.

Both Pareto and Elias underline the importance of an integrated view of social phenomena to understand the subjects who feature its many facets, enabling an analysis of social reality in its true dimension. Both are opposed to the idea of an individual isolated from the context, a concept that Elias defined as *homo clausus*.

In this sense, Pareto and Elias have supplied us with premonitory clues to the present tendencies of contemporary societies in observing the rise of regressive phenomena regarding the standards of rationality, traditionally rooted in western history and culture.

In *Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and the Advent of Fascism*, Giovanni Barbieri follows in the tracks of these thinkers and 'the advent of fascism'. Mussolini's evident enthusiasm for Pareto's theories was reciprocated by the attraction fascism had for the members of the classic elites; they wrote works on fascism from the scientific viewpoint. The consonance between fascism and elitist theories arose from the criticism of democracy, antiparlamentarianism, remonstrance against corruption and the inefficiency of the political class that fostered a lack of confidence in the Italian democratic institutions, thus opening the way for Mussolini to seize power.

Often also to be found at the root of the populist phenomenon experienced in the West in recent years, the relevance of such arguments, then as now, is fuelled by political content featuring the fragmentation of the country, transformism, the complexity of governing socially heterogeneous masses, the weakness of parliamentary-democratic institutions and the principle of popular sovereignty.

These are the roots of attraction for fascism, yet they come from different political-ideological traditions: the liberals Mosca and Pareto; and the Marxist Michels. Even before Matteotti's murder, the Right as much as the Left saw in fascism a force capable of restoring order and so avoiding the risk of plunging into anarchy, as well as providing for a strong government. In some ways, this recalls the present topic of the personalized politics and the call from both Left and Right for strong, efficient leadership able to deal firmly and promptly with complex situations.

In *Pareto's Non-logical Actions and the Issue of Humanity*, Fabio D'Andrea underlines the human dimension and focuses on the relevance of the individual and his actions. The hypothesis he proposes is that Pareto's theory of action is to be interpreted as a pioneering study, albeit unintentional, on the complexity of the human being rather than as an attempt to correct irrational behaviour. Through a careful reading of Pareto's language and his implicit convictions, it is shown how he had gone beyond his own initial intentions, revealing a

fundamental dynamic of human interaction and organization, however unacknowledged or stigmatized. His thinking on the importance of non-logical action opens the way towards freedom from the normative obligation of rationality, making it possible to grasp the real complexity of social interaction and cultural creation. This approach requires us to consider heuristic ambits, often excluded from rationalization, yet essential: corporeity, the emotions, symbolic and imaginative thinking.

In *Vilfredo Pareto on Culture and Derivations: Virtuism as a Logicizing Perversion*, Andrea Lombardinilo explores the sociological conditions of the concept of ‘virtuism’ in Pareto, combining sociology, literature and communication. Pareto’s aim was to confront the conservative action of the Catholics to stem the spread of contents and pictures considered immoral. Pareto’s criticism of censorship is connected to the celebration of art and to the condemnation of fanaticism, whether religious or political, that undermines the eternal power of culture. Freedom of speech and thought is for Pareto an essential social keystone to be defended unconditionally in order to maintain the unstable equilibrium that regulates human community living (Lombardinilo, 2016).

From a sociological perspective, Pareto strongly criticizes any attempt to transform culture into a political battleground, holding that such confrontations are based on sterile, misleading opposition. His historical approach casts light on the evolution of cultural principles from an epistemological perspective that weaves together literature and communication to denounce the ideological distortions responsible for legalized censorship.

Pareto points out that the juxtaposition of residues and derivations, together with dialectics between logical and non-logical actions, highlights the argumentative strategies used by social actors for the rational legitimization of actions, gestures and decisions that are often profoundly rooted in prejudices, false beliefs or cultural legacies.

Two contemporary events awaken careful thought on the concept of morality in the public sphere and on the influence of images, texts and symbols on individual and collective sensibility: the covering-up of Roman statues in the Capitoline Museum in Rome during the visit of the Iranian president in 2016, and the removal from a Cambridge university dining hall of a seventeenth-century painting by Franz Sneyder depicting a butcher’s shop. The removal of the painting was due to the protests of vegan students, a perfect example of cancel culture. These are episodes that reflect the interplay of logical and non-logical actions, influenced by cultural beliefs and communicative practices, at a time of new forms of moral and immoral ostentation.

In *Sociology as an Experimental Science of Non-logical Actions. The Relevance of Pareto’s Work Today*, Ilaria Riccioni underlines the subjective dimension of reality. She highlights the aspects of Pareto’s work that are still relevant in

meditating upon the reality of contemporary sociality and stresses the potential instruments that this work can still offer us, if thoroughly explored. She sets out from acknowledging the inadequacy of contemporary sociology and current sociological instruments, seemingly insufficient to deal with the complexity of the new social reality, and from the radical transformations and problems of individuals. She therefore focuses on the concept of “non-logical actions” as developed by Pareto.

Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, observes Riccioni, Pareto had realized that economy alone could not explain social dynamics fully. He believed, therefore, that sociology should be protected from the “intellectual deception” of non-experimental approaches, i.e., those that did not use the vast range of means and methods offered by the science that he considered the “queen” of social sciences. In this context, Pareto apparently intended to develop, or at least to prepare, the instruments for a method capable of comprehending the role of reason and feelings of social life. The aim was to identify the constants in non-logical social behaviour.

Pareto suggests that observing non-rational behaviours might lead to deeper comprehension of social conditions, often hidden behind dominant narrations. Such dynamics are influenced by unpredictable subjective states and by affectivity. According to Pareto, every social action is guided by inscrutable contingencies linked to feelings, while every rationalization is nothing but a justification for what, in fact, has no apparent logic.

Today’s interest in Pareto, as Riccioni says, is due to his ability to conceive social reality as a dynamic system undergoing continuous change. Pareto’s work encourages a wider sociological comprehension of non-logical actions, distancing itself from the idea of any linear, predictable progress. In spite of various ideological-political interpretations, his work provides a valuable method for the exploration of the role of rationality and of feelings in today’s social life.

Lastly, in *Pareto and the Ambivalence of Emotions*, Emanuela Susca explores a specific aspect of Pareto’s thinking; she, too, focuses on the role of feelings. Susca underlines the ambivalence of this topic in Pareto’s thought, analysing how his study on the emotive roots of society emerges through two interpretative patterns in the *Trattato di Sociologia Generale*: one pattern returns to pre-existing ideas and another is notable for its originality and focus on residues.

In a thorough analysis of the theoretic framework of residues, Susca highlights the originality and relevance of Pareto’s approach. The conceptual structure of residues enriches understanding of the ambivalence of emotions, revealing nuances, contradictions and complex manifestations. Furthermore, Pareto queries the traditional dichotomy between rationality and irrationality, showing how human action escapes any rigid categorization. His elitist

prospective, however distant from contemporary democracy, acknowledges the importance of the emotions in leadership and in public opinion.

Although significant changes influencing attitudes and mentality have intervened between Pareto's time and our day, human emotions are the same. It is rather our relationship with them that has changed. Today, the idea that people invest energy in evoking feelings and impressions in others is more relevant than ever, a fact demonstrated by the present capitalist economy (Malandrino & Marchionatti, 2000; Mongardini, 1973).

In contemporary culture, the anxiety to appear coldly logical seems less prevalent than in the past. While the intellectuals of Pareto's day (1935, Chapter 305) might fear sacrificing logic for reality, today many sing the praises of subjectivity and irrationality. For example, the typical sensations of youthful logic, the "likes" and the "reactions" on social media, the unrestrained outpourings on line, reflect a different display of the desire for emotions. Furthermore, shame, once a fundamental emotion, seems to be fading away.

Several signs indicate that today people no longer feel obliged to rationalize their actions as they did in the past. In other words, although we live in an age of rationality, this is not necessarily an age of rationalization.

To conclude: revisiting classical authors in sociology enables us to develop an overall, multi-faceted vision of the complex processes of transformation to which we are both spectators and actors at one and the same time. As Ferrarotti (2001) observed, Pareto's last years reflect a time when the promises of the Enlightenment had been betrayed and rationality as the guarantee of progress was under debate. We find something similar in our own time when values once held to be the ineluctable pillars of civilization seem to totter in the face of new uncertainties and global crises. Pareto therefore represents a fundamental interpretative key, offering us a significant contribution to the understanding and analysis of the contemporary phenomena we wish to investigate. In this sense, Pareto is a great classical author who comes to our aid to analyse the present while being projected towards the future (Mornati, 2015).

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