

# On the strained relationship between philosophy and sociology

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## Abstract

The main contention of this article is the following: sociology, like all the modern sciences, was born out of philosophy. But, ungratefully enough and perhaps because of a deepseated inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* the older well established sciences, sociology tends to forget or at least to blurr its philosophical foundation. Thus it turns out to be “social engineering”. The sociologist becomes a technical expert, rather indifferent to a synoptic or global view of society, and ready to offer his or her services to the best offer in the open market. Social theory is reduced to “model building” according to the changing needs of the economic agencies, from government bodies to private entrepreneurs. Contrary to social theory, a model is a purely intellectual arbitrary construct and, although conditioned by a basic congruity among its different parts, it is not historically rooted but essentially a “fictio mentis”. In this way sociology loses inevitably its problem awareness and it runs the risk of “quantifying the qualitative”, that is to say to accumulate bits of knowledge without knowing for what purpose.

**Keywords:** Philosophical foundation; Problem awareness; A-historical Model; Social Engineering

Needless to say, sociology was born out of philosophy in the same way as most present day sciences. This could explain up to a point the ongoing love-hatred relationship between sociology and philosophy. Personally, in this respect I was extremely lucky. Sociology does not exist in the Italian University system at the time I was a university student. Sociology came to me through direct existential experiences during the war years: I was longing for someone something less abstract and stultifying than the prevailing neo-idealistic philosophy and at the same time for something less arid and soulless than the political economy taught at the time. Moreover, a thrust toward sociology came to me from outside the university. Cesare Pavese had given me *The Theory of the Leisure Class* by Thorstein Veblen to translate into Italian for the Einaudi publishing house. Naturally, I chose Veblen as the subject of my “Laurea” dissertation, “The sociology of the Veblen” which Augusto Guzzo, obviously did not want to undersign and present to the University Committer orthodox croc fan as he was, pushing me into the friendly arms of Nicola Abbagnano. The translation of the Theory of the Leisure Class came out on January 3rd, 1949; on January 15th in the *Corriere della Sera* the ferocious critique of Benedetto Croce as was published.

Croce maintained that Veblen “had given the final proof of a total abusiveness in understanding historical phenomena”. I graduated in the same year with Nicola Abbagnano and, as I was about to leave for the United States, in search of the “true sociology”, I started as general editor the publication of the “Quaderni di Sociologia” in Turin; it was the Spring of 1951. Why did I go to the United States? I was moved by the “Somnium Scipionis”. In this admirable fragment, Cicero writes about a dream of a young Scipio being told by his uncle, the great winner of Carthago, about the perfect “good life”, essentially consisting in combining Theoretikos Bios, or contemplation coming from Greece, with the pragmatic activism of the Romans. Personally, I planned to couple the European systematic tradition of social thought with the American empirical research techniques. After three years of study and experiments, I returned to Europe with the advantage of a splendid failure. I had understood that in the very heart of the empirical research techniques a set of theoretical options was already at work and could not be easily dismissed as it laid at the core of American thought, from John Dewey to William James, deprived of any sense of history. Even the most critical and Europe-oriented American Sociologists, such as C. Wright Mills, were basically pragmatists and naturally driven to understand history only as a blind sequence of self-enclosed facts to be established and analyzed in themselves without any special need to transcend them. This would account for the most misunderstanding of European social thinkers by the American sociologists especially after the Second World War, (for a notable example, see Talcott Parsons on Max Weber). The outcome of such impasse is twofold:

- social theory is confused and reduced to an arbitrary “model building” as an intellectual exercise detached from any specific historical context, betraying in this way the original meaning of “theory”, as therein or “throwing a glance” on a given reality to be observed and interpreted within a definite “historical horizon”; in this respect the “social system” of Talcott Parsons is a revealing example of how to reduce social research to a meaningless game of Chinese boxes;
- the naïve idea that facts are by themselves and as such self evident; the inevitable consequence is that social research is conceived and amounts to accumulation of empirical items which is not guided by any explicit the oriental framework. Unfortunately, in this way the two basic phases of a social research that is, the “context of discovery” and the “context of validation” - are blurred to the point of being lamentably confused and finally forgotten in favor of the illusory self-evidence of gross factualism.

No wonder that, lacking any rigorous and autonomous theoretical preliminary definition, social research falls into the hands of the practical demands of the market and of those political and social groups which have a vested interest in buying up research results to justify with a refined scientific jargon decision already taken.

Thinking about science and wisdom, I would first consider a broader concept of sciences. For over a century and a half, sociologists have been affected by a serious inferiority complex vis-a-vis the natural, or "exact", sciences. At present, we finally know that there is no any such thing as an "exact" science. Any science which thinks of itself as "exact" that is above doubt, is prone to fall into a dogmatic self-conception and therefore to deny itself precisely as science. Sociology is a science in the sense that its results are open to doubt and criticism. The only acceptable definition of science seems to me to be the one that sees science as a public procedure, findings of which can be tested and tried by everybody capable to master its methodological rules. In this respect, what defines essentially science is its "self-correctibility", which is its ability to change or to drop its findings whenever new data are uncovered that need a different theoretical explanation.

In this context, philosophy constitutes an essential ingredient of any science, especially of sociology. It is philosophy that is able to offer to the social scientists the initial hunch, or intuition, or preliminary insight, to be developed in a theoretical working hypothesis, that in a subsequent phase empirical data are called to prove or disprove. Thus from being difficult, if properly understood the relationship between philosophy and sociology could be paradoxically defined as a private, personal problem-awareness (or philosophical problem-consciousness) that has the ambition to become or to achieve an inter-subjective validity, the same validity of substantive scientific finding.

According to this particular stream of thought, I have no difficulty in recognizing a definite priority to philosophy. This does not mean that sociology has a purely instrumental value. It could be maintained, in my opinion, that philosophy has a priority as a question of principle. However, sociology is essential in giving empirical content and specific substance to this priority. A philosophical sensitivity seems to me absolutely necessary to sociologists. I see in the lack of philosophical awareness that seems common among sociologists today a major factor for the impoverishment and scarce originality of their discipline. This is reflected in the reduction of methodology to specific research techniques. This runs against not only philosophy but also against the best tradition of scientific thought. Methodology in the proper sense is not only a mechanical know-how. It is techniques plus concepts. If concepts are absent or as it were, "discounted", methodology is bound to be blind, or at least dimidiated. From a methodological point of view, one might say that there is some sort of division of labor between them. Philosophy can determine critically the use of certain concept and elaborate the general theoretical framework that expresses the object and the relevance of a given research. Empirical techniques can collect and elaborate the data required by the validation of the specific working hypothesis. The question of autonomy is an idle one. It reflects an absolute notion of scientific disciplines. After the fad of inter-disciplinary approach, which has produced only scientific advances

in terms of control and competition among different disciplines, usually unable to overcome their “bureaucratic” boundaries, we are at present entering a new phase of mutual collaboration and cross-fertilization which I would like to term as “post-disciplinary” approach, that is an approach in which far from dreaming about and hoping in an idyllic integrated approach, the different social sciences find their unity of effort in the same single object while focusing on it their various methodological and substantive resources.

The fear of “breaking into another ground” is therefore not well taken. To be autonomous, sociology must be free to express its problems, and on its own terms, independently from the prevailing vested interests - economic, political or ideological and symbolic (religious). Every genuine sociological research, if autonomous is intrinsically critical because of conducting research about a given social phenomenon essentially means calling such phenomenon into questions and subjective it to an unprejudiced examination. In this respect, especially in order to maintain a clear problem – consciousness, sociology needs philosophy, that is an approach that is both global and open. Notions such as the “anomic” or “alienated” society are philosophical in essence. The function of sociology consists in distinguishing analytically their constituent elements in such a way as to make the philosophical globality, which in itself would be empty or generic, filled with empirically validated substance. It would amount to a “*diminutio capitis*” for philosophy to reduce it only to the function of critically determine the proper use of words and propositions as analytical philosophy especially in great Britain, would have it. Philosophical concepts can have substantive value, but to acquire the knowledge of specific elements of given social phenomena, they need to be changed into “operational” concepts, capable to allow a relative measurement of their components through field research work. It is implicit in the act of “comprehending”, or *Verstehen*, a critical element that escaped Max Weber in his confusion between “explaining and clarifying” (*erklären*). It is neither the duty nor the function of sociology to indicate the best course of action in a social and political field. Lasswell’s idea of a “policy science” with a built-in political import was theoretically contradictory and only justified historically, that is accidentally because of Roosevelt’s “new deal”. It was a clear case of “militant” sociology that is of misplaced sense of mission for sociology. The only legitimate “militancy” for sociology is the critical examination of the status quo that calls into question the existing situation and offers at least a glimpse of what I would like to indicate as “the social function of utopia”. Far from showing or suggesting which is the best course of action or the most rational decision, sociology should be satisfied with pointing out to the policy maker and to the men of action what are likely to be unanticipated consequences of certain decision and, even more plausible, what is going to be the “human costs” of social and political decisions. Far from being the servant of power sociology in this connection becomes necessarily the critical conscience of power, endowed with a political reverberation

which cannot exhaust itself into any special service to any special power group. The guiding criterion for social research cannot be seen in any specific ideological platform or definition. It is rather to be seen in an idea of human society which has not yet been historically realized and which remains to be full field as a permanent tension toward the “common humanity of all human beings”.

Although the topic is quite common, I submit that it is a question of “idle curiosity” to think about a crisis in sociology. Sociology was out of a major of social crisis, the “Industrial revolution” in the xviii center. It means that, far from being weakened by crisis, sociology thrives on them. There seems to be a mysterious connection, some sort of strange link between crisis and social creativity. Undoubtedly, a crisis makes people suffer, but it opens up and reveals at the same time. It has an happyphanic function. Laboratory experiments are not allowed to sociology. Only a measure crisis or an epoch-making revolution of social upheaval can help sociological analysis to see what lies usually behind a screen of everyday routine. The present day crisis in philosophy cannot certainly leave sociology undisturbed. But it is plain enough that the philosophical crisis of today is a healthy phenomenon to the extent to which it amounts to a severe prevention for any given “philosophical system” to conceive to itself as a nec plus ultra and therefore to structure itself as a dogmatic construction fur ewig. Substantively speaking, a sociologist could reasonably argue that one aspect of the philosophical crisis of today lies in the fact that is the philosophical discourse has been little by little reduce to a verbal outmaneuvering and that philosophy itself is perhaps threatened to become a mere ars disserendy. In a sense, the empirical bases of sociology as a theoretically guided research is sufficient safeguard against a dissolution of the discipline into a pure and simple verbiage, although some danger of formalism as an end to itself cannot be said to have been fully rejected.

I do not accept the dichotomy between “science and wisdom”. Science cannot be alien to wisdom. True: wisdom is a personal quality, a gift. Science, on the contrary, is a public procedure aiming and findings characterized by an inter-subjective validity, but both science and wisdom are based on the awareness of man’s limited powers. Science knows that it can always be overcome, that no goal is achieved forever. The “sanctity”, if any of the scientists consists in this constant feeling of heaving reached only provisional, temporary results. Unlike the great poet, he knows that he is working within the framework of his given time and that he can hope only in a temporary fraction of truth. Hic scientific work will certainly be superseded by the work of other fellow scientists. Moreover, he knows he has to be more and more of a specialists depending on other specialists for the progress of scientific knowledge. The scientist is forced to be humble. The sociologists, on the other hand is the specialist of “generality”. His research work is vitally interested in social inter-connectedness. However, society change all the time under his eyes. Moreover society cannot be observed by him from

the outside. When he tries to describe, measure, predict and finally to offer a global interpretation, he, as interpreter, is at the same time inevitably interpreted. There is no way for him to escape the “hermeneutic circle”. In describing society, he describes his own cage. If the scientist is made humble by the temporary nature of his results, the sociologist is made wise by the complexity of social phenomena. Pure rationality gives way to human reasonableness. Concepts and techniques, quality and quantity proceed hand in hand in his work. A mature sociologist can be a “true believer” only in the unfinished character of human society.

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