

the forms of historical development of nation-states and from the way power is organized within them.

### 3. History meets the social sciences

The critical sociology of Antonio Gramsci takes shape in the rejection not only of positivist Marxism but also of Benedetto Croce's idealist philosophy. As a theorist of bourgeois liberalism, Croce played in Italy the same role Hegel played in Germany (Salamini 1981, 27). The human and historicist components of Croce's philosophy become a useful conceptual tool for Gramsci in his criticism of the Marxist mechanicism of the Second International. Although fascinated with Croce's statement on the historical importance of human values, Gramsci clearly distances himself from the Italian philosopher on the question of the role actually played by the masses in the process of historical determination. Croce's idealism is in fact unable to resolve the conflicting relationship between theory and praxis. According to Gramsci, by raising the concrete reality of social conflict to the level of ideas, the philosophy of Benedetto Croce becomes an ideological apparatus that justifies the existence of abstract, purely speculative and essentially a-historica values. When meta-historical values are regarded as absolute values, then metaphysics and pure theory take the place of real conflicts happening among men. As Salamini observes (*ibid.*, 28), Gramsci's criticism of Croce's idealism can be summed up in four basic points: the concept (and conception) of historicism, the definition of philosophy, the conception of dialectics, and the relationship between theory and praxis.

Gramsci and Croce seem to agree on the historical and immanent role of ideas as well as on their criticism of theories not grounded in historical facts, but Croce, unlike Gramsci, gives a metaphysical value to history. When Croce says that ideas generate action and that man is the real creator of history, he actually refers to a hypostatized, that is, not historically determined, man (Croce 1907, *en.tr.* 1914; 1915). In Gramsci's opinion, men are the protagonists of concrete struggles, which are structured into real historical processes, by facing the objective reality of social contradictions. If for Croce historical creation is reduced to a history of ideas and concepts, Gramsci, like Marx, see historical processes mainly as praxis, that is, practical activity. Ideas become concrete in objective social conditions, and the history of science is not metaphysics, but a tool for creating historical con-

sciousness (Gramsci 1977a). Historicism is therefore understood by Gramsci as a kind of awareness of the role of history as an instrument for action and mobilization. From this point of view Gramscian Marxism is absolute historicism in its aim to reveal the sociological context of ideological systems (Badaloni, 1967, 101). Even dialectics, in Croce's idealism, is reduced to a dialectic between innovation and conservation and, in this sense, it has an immediate political impact, even if it represents the absolute negation of conflict. According to Gramsci, the conception of dialectics assumes in Croce an ideological value in that it excludes any immediate revolutionary alternative. The reduction of the real historical dialectic to a conceptual dialectic minimizes the role of politics in favor of aesthetics, economics, logic, regarded by Croce as true sciences. Politics, reduced to mere ideological passion and ideology, in Croce's view, is not philosophy. Croce's classification of pure sciences may be valid, according to Gramsci, only in an utopian society, structurally and epistemologically unified, that is, in a classless society without conflicts, which, historically, is a non-sense. In societies characterized by dialectical conflicts between classes, political passion and ideologies become science. The history of philosophy is then, for Gramsci, the history of the conflict between alternative worldviews, and in this sense, philosophy itself becomes politics and the political science becomes the only science capable of resolving social conflicts (Gramsci, 1977a).

Gramsci's rejection of evolutionist bourgeois sociology does not dismiss the possibility of a sociology placed in the perspective of a philosophy of praxis (Gallino 1970; Pizzorno 1970). What Gramsci criticizes is not sociology *tout court* but the ideological function of positivism and Croce's idealism. If sociology would give up the attempt to develop a system of absolute, objective laws, it might give an essential contribution to the understanding of the origins and conditions of socio-cultural systems. In fact, every society has its own rationality that Gramsci does not deny. Thus, critical sociology is called upon to find this rationality and replace it with a system of rationality for the benefit of civil society. This is, therefore, a sociology of political praxis, a science that analyzes the conditions under which subaltern groups are formed, crystallized and work within a given historical bloc. Specifically, it has to analyze the historical process of formation of a given collective will (Buzzi 1969; Piotte 1970), starting from the awareness that the genesis of any social group is always characterized by a certain connection with the means of production, and that the end

point is always the political and cultural conquest of hegemony that is achieved when a given social group becomes a unifying and leading force also for other social groups. In this regard, the acquisition of a historical consciousness, the development of a political and intellectual class, the creation of new political organizations and worldviews, are for Gramsci the most important superstructural elements in a sociological framework.

At this point, Gramscian sociology coincides with Charles Tilly's historical sociology. According to Tilly, the approaches of sociologists and historians to the analysis of social events are different, but there are good reasons to try to identify the parameters for a practical synthesis of the two approaches based on the need to develop historically grounded social theories. Such an effort necessitates our careful reflection on the merits of historical research. First, we should restore some conceptual order by affirming the importance of the work of historians. There have been, especially in sociology, scholars who expressed their conviction of being able to analytically capture social cases without knowing their historical origins, namely the specific contexts from which these cases emerged. This sociological effect is clear in the following words by Lipset:

From an ideal-typical point of view, the task of the sociologist is to formulate general hypotheses, hopefully set within a larger theoretical framework, and to test them. His interest in the way in which a nation such as the United States formulated a national identity is to specify propositions about the general processes involved in the creation of national identities in new nations. Similarly, his concern with changes in the patterns of American religious participation is to formulate and test hypotheses about the function of religion for other institutions and the social system as a whole. The sociologist of religion seeks to locate the conditions under which the chiliastic religion occurs, what kinds of people are attracted to it, what happens to the sects and their adherents under various conditions, and so on. There are clearly no problems of the historian. History must be concerned with the analysis of the particular set of events and processes. Where the sociologist looks for concepts which subsume a variety of particular descriptive categories, the historian must remain close to the actual happenings and avoid statements which, though linking behavior at one time and place to that elsewhere, lead to a distortion in the description of what occurred in the set of circumstances being analyzed (Lipset 1968, 22-23).

As Tilly (1981, 5) observes, the question of the division of labor between sociologists and historians, as placed by scholars such as Lipset, is essentially similar to that «between the mycologist and the mushroom collector, between the critic and the translator, between the political analyst and the city hall reporter, between brains and brawn. History does the transcription, sociology the analysis». This is a clear mystification to which, it should be

said, historians have often contributed, as we can see from these words by Gareth Stedman Jones:

Attitudes toward sociological theory among sociologically inclined historians have often verged on the credulous, and although more critical sociologists might have rejected as naively positivist any distinction between history and sociology which sees the one as “idiographic” and the other as “nomothetic”, many of these historians have behaved in practice as if they considered such a division of labour to be legitimate. Defensive about their own subject and repelled by an inadequately understood Marxism which appeared to be the only other contender, they have looked uncritically to sociology as a theoretical storehouse from which they could simply select concepts most serviceable for their individual needs (Stedman Jones 1976, 300).

History cannot be seen as a kind of failed sociology, as well as historical materials cannot be treated as raw evidence waiting to be sociologically analyzed. In this regard, Charles Tilly offers a double argument through a distinction between «matters of fact» and «matters of principle» (Tilly 1981, 6). On a strictly factual ground, historians conduct their investigations following some rules that differ significantly from those governing social science research, as well as historical materials generally differ from those used in sociology. In terms of principle, it should also be said that any analysis of social processes is equally historical. In fact, an analysis is historical only when it takes into consideration the time and the place of the action in his explanations. From this point of view, the classic distinction between “generalizing” (or nomothetic) and “particularizing”(or idiographic) disciplines is not adequate. Historical analysis must be characterized by the integration of time and space. It is mainly the sociological analysis of change on a large scale to have an insufficient historical awareness. Therefore, sociological theory needs to be grounded in history, that is, embedded in time.

Both sociologists and historians, while following partially different logics, cannot refrain from seeking more adequate theories to investigate historical and social contexts. To achieve a similar result we should further explore the terrain of history. As Tilly observes (*ibid.*, 12), the word “history” refers, at the same time, to a «phenomenon», to «a body of material» and to a «set of activities».

As a phenomenon, history represents the cumulative effect of past events on present events. Let us think of the phenomenon of industrialization; scholars are divided between those who believe that the processes of capital accumulation, economic growth, exploitation of labor force, recur in a

number of countries, following more or less the same lines, and those who believe that these processes vary depending on the mode of industrialization of the countries that first initiated the dynamics of accumulation. Only the members of the first group can obviously adopt common procedures for synchronic comparison, since they assume the irrelevance of the temporal dimension; the members of the second group will avoid those forms of cross-sectional comparison, paying greater attention to the dynamics of historical development.

Seen as a set of materials, history appears as a persistent and residual body of past behaviors that can be brought to light through old news reports, witnesses' accounts, autobiographies and other narrative materials that may represent a small slice of past experience. Historians have generally focused primarily on written evidence, although any remnant of the past, from working tools to graffiti left on walls, can constitute a small fragment of a past life.

Viewed as a set of activities, history is an attempt by scholars to reconstruct the past. An attempt that, according to Tilly (*ibid.*, 13), is likely to be hopeless for two reasons, which, after a little reflection, will actually appear obvious. First, the availability of information on the past is likely to be almost inexhaustible, exceeding the effective capacity of even the most slavish historian to collect and synthesize them in a comprehensive way. Historians are compelled to make a choice by selecting only a small portion of the material available to them. Second, historians have to pick just a few of the many events occurred in the past, depending on the specific question on which the research design is built. Once the objectives of the survey are clearly defined, other information that is not closely related to them may be deemed irrelevant. In a few words, historical writing is based on the following aspects: those who commit themselves to this work specialize in the reconstruction of past behaviors; they rely mainly on narrative texts that represent the remnants of the past; they emphasize only selected pieces of text taken as the most suitable means to perform the task of reconstruction; they consider "where" and especially "when" some specific events are relevant for their impact on social life, and may therefore constitute essential elements for their own explanation. The fact that the function of historical work is easily identifiable, does not mean it will always proceed according to an ordered pattern:

In reality, the practice of history resembles a zoo more than a herbarium, and a herbarium more than a cyclotron. In a Cyclotron a huge, costly, unified apparatus whirs into motion to produce a single focused result; history does not behave like that. In a herbarium, a classificatory order prevails; each dried plant has its own niche. Historians divide their subject matter and their styles of thought into diplomatic, economic, intellectual, and other sorts of history, but the divisions are shifting, inexact ... and often ignored in practice (ibid., 15-16).

However, stating that historical practice is often methodologically inconsistent and inaccurate, does not mean that historical processes are without meaning for the social sciences. Many social-scientific disciplines that have developed as if the historical origins of social phenomena were of no importance – particularly anthropology, sociology and political science – feel the need of restoring their historical connections. In particular, sociology has long perfected its methods in opposition to history and, Tilly points out (ibid., 37), by placing itself outside the effort – typical of scholars of the nineteenth century – of understanding and controlling the origins and the features of industrial capitalism, an effort somehow shared by authors such as Marx, Tönnies, Durkheim and Weber. Previous sociologists were primarily concerned to place historical experience within macro-sequences, such as Comte's theory of the «three stages of thought» (theological, metaphysical and positive), or Spencer's «evolution theory», according to which humanity is engaged in a long historical march on the path of differentiation from a «military stage» to an «industrial stage». With the development of sociological practice, especially during the twentieth century, the historical content of social processes was gradually dried up in the illusory attempt to create a sort of natural (a-temporal) science of society. Only in the sixties and in particular the seventies of the twentieth century, eminent sociologists would rediscover a taste for historical connections, especially in dealing with important issues such as industrialization, control of forms of rebellion and revolution, and family structure. A taste for historical and comparative analysis of large-scale processes of change began to spread among some social scientists, mainly because of some disappointment over the ineffectiveness shown by classical models of modernization and development.

Sociological analysis has often had to undertake the study of history when dealing with two areas: first, large-scale structural change, and second, collective action with particular reference to the analysis of social movements, rebellions and revolutions. The search for general patterns for the processes of industrialization, rationalization or political development brings the scholars to make a double effort: on the one hand, they must identify the

traits of great processes of change in specific historical periods, and on the other, they must connect specific transformations that were taking place in those times to the macro-processes of change previously identified. The attempt to formulate some general laws underlying revolutions or social movements, therefore, involves the need to find some regularities in collective action in specific historical periods. According to Tilly (1981, 44), in our time, the two macro-processes to consider are undoubtedly represented by the expansion of the capitalist system and the development of nation states (as well as by the resulting system of states).

If we agree with this idea, the historical problem we have to face lies in the need to determine how and why processes of capital accumulation occurred with the resulting dynamics of proletarianization; how and why the system of production relations spread, and finally what consequences resulted from this expansion. The temporal element here is essential and historical analysis indispensable. Moreover, there is the question of the nation state, understood as a complex organization in a position to monopolize the means of coercion in a specific territory. The nation state is autonomous, centralized, and its lines of internal division are formally coordinated, making it different from other organizations working in the same area. From this point of view, States are a relatively new phenomenon, since we can detect their traces only in the past few hundred years. Even the international political context, in Renaissance Europe, was largely characterized by formally independent political units, which were far from resembling the system of states typical of our times. Modern states can be historically analyzed both in their internal dimension, by focusing on the dynamics through which some organizations manage to exercise a certain domination over the populations of a given territory, gradually becoming a State, and in the external dimension, by observing how those organizations defend their domination against pressure from outside organizations (other States). In both dimensions the question of War becomes crucial. Internally, war pushes rulers to exert heavy pressure on their people in terms of taxes, conscription and requisitions; externally, it leads them to pursue war efforts through which they can affirm their right to exclusive control over a given territory.

From this context, emerge the classic questions of political sociology that link Gramsci to Tilly: how can the ruling class maintain control over the economic life and the political apparatus in a given area? Under what conditions can the population be active, organized and informed with respect to

national politics? How are riots, rebellions and revolutions enacted? And so on. In this way, we can take the asymmetries of power and participatory processes as a historical problem to be connected to the two macro-processes represented by the development of states (and the systems of States) and the expansion of the capitalist system of production. As Tilly points out (1981, 46), state and capitalism provide the framework for a historically rooted analysis of collective action and of the ways by which individuals act together in pursuit of shared interests. «Instead of the eternal behavior of crowds, we study the particular forms of action that people use to advance claims or register grievances. Instead of laws of social movements, we study the emergence of the social movement as a political phenomenon. Instead of power in general, we study the modalities of power within a certain mode of production» (ibid.). In particular, the two macro-processes influence the direction of change by acting on three fundamental components of collective action: the “interests” for which individuals decide to act collectively, their “capacity” to act in defense of those interests, and the “opportunity” to advance or defend those interests through the development of coordinated collective action.

#### **4. Historical comparison as a sociological instrument**

Antonio Gramsci’s historical sociology cannot disregard the use of comparison as a privileged instrument of knowledge. As above mentioned, he is interested in understanding the reason why, in Italy, a revolution on the Soviet or Jacobin model is impossible. His interpretation, the result of a careful comparative analysis, can be ascribed to the role of intellectuals and to the structure of civil society.

Gramsci distinguishes between organic and traditional intellectuals. The first are those whose origins coincide with those of the social group they wish to represent. They are defined according to the functions conferred on them by the social group from which they originate in economic and political, as well as cultural and ideological spheres. Organic intellectuals represent a function of the interests of a class, but also an instrument of social transformation. Traditional intellectuals, on the other hand, seem to be the expression of an uninterrupted historical continuity. Their *raison d’être* is based on the autonomy of their past and on the need to reproduce their caste-like position in contemporary society. What really defines traditional