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Scientistic Prejudice and Methodological Pluralism

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Abstract

This paper aims to point out that the publication of the five volumes by Thomas and Znaniecki *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* opened new scenarios, and gave its fundamental contribution in authorising a new way of conducting researches, which voluntarily distances from the ‘scientistic logic’ to recognise the heuristic-interpretative value of narration, though without denying the usefulness of the quantitative approach.

That being stated, the specific purpose of this paper is twofold: focusing on the heuristic-interpretative value of narration while reconstructing, at the same time, the common thread that, starting from *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, connects apparently distant texts and authors stimulating a reflection on the development of empirical research and on its future.

Keywords: scientistic prejudice, methodological pluralism, data, sources.

1. Introduction

If we go back in time, to the origins of what we now call sociological science, we have to acknowledge that what Auguste Comte, the inventor of the term ‘sociology’, had in mind was a social science based on the model of natural science. However, it is also true that, at the same time, Comte distanced himself from the Belgian Adolphe Quételet, who ‘used the term social physics to indicate the statistical studies applied to crime and demography’ (Lallement, 1996, I: 54, my translation).

Therefore, since its origin, sociology has not been, nor aimed at being, a ‘social physics’, even if it is undeniable that it is somehow ‘fascinated’ by exact sciences whose importance is based on the idea that ‘quantification and statistic

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data are the yardstick of truth' (Perrot quoted in Lallement, 1996, I: 62, my translation). Moreover, the 'charm' of exact sciences is at the base of the so-called 'scientistic prejudice'¹ predicted by Znaniecki (Nisbet, 1981: 22), a prejudice that has influenced sociology for long with the predilection for quantitative research, questionnaires, and statistic elaborations².

The publication, between 1918 and 1920, of the five volumes by Thomas and Znaniecki *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* opened new scenarios, and gave its fundamental contribution in authorising a new way of conducting researches, which voluntarily distances from the 'scientistic logic' to recognise the heuristic-interpretative value of narration, though without denying the usefulness of the quantitative approach.

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2. The heuristic-interpretative value of narration

First of all, in order to focus on the heuristic-interpretative value of narration, it is necessary to define it, starting from the idea that narrating means achieving a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' (Ricoeur, 1986: 8, my translation) that allows to give order and meaning to experiences and events that would otherwise be disconnected and meaningless. To this, we can add that narration always implies an interlocutor (real or virtual), that it uses language and, above all, that it is not a mere reflection of reality, but a 'social construction' (Poggio, 2004: 30-31) that produces more or less intentional effects³. In other words, narration does not faithfully record facts; narrating does not mean presenting facts as they actually occurred. The narrator describes reality from his/her personal point of view and however, even if the narration does not comply with reality, it deserves attention (Montesperelli, 1998).

¹ As Robert Nisbet noted, in the early 1960s, 'scientism' considers scientific only what 'proceeds from an unambiguous and precisely delimited problem, drawn from statistically aseptic data, to a carefully tailored hypothesis. [...]. It is hard to think – continues Nisbet – a better way to apotheosize the routine and insignificant' (Nisbet, 1962, p. 70).

² It is no coincidence that someone affirmed that: 'The inferiority complex suffered by many sociologists towards their colleagues experts of exact sciences has led to the development of criteria and categories that seem more a pursuit of naturalistic and mechanistic schemes than the result of a coherent study of human societies' (Cipriani, 1995, p. 9, my translation).

³ Regarding the unintentional effects of narration, please refer to my essay entitled 'Effetti dello storytelling tra intenzionalità e inintenzionalità', in Laudando, 2017, pp. 31-46.

In the case of an autobiography, for example, what matters is not the objective truth of narration since its sociological value is to be found elsewhere: the sociologist's task is to discover the 'definition of the situation' given by the author, his way to perceive reality. Therefore, as Florian Znaniecki made very clear in a work dating back to 1924, the sociologist's perspective is different from that of the psychologist, as well as from that of the historian: 'Unlike psychologists, sociologists see the author of an autobiography exclusively in the background of his social environment as an indissoluble whole; unlike historians, they examine the social environment of the author referring only to him' (Znaniecki, 1995: 35, my translation)⁴.

In other words, sociologists are not interested in the environment itself, that is, in its faithful and objective reconstruction, instead, they are interested in understanding how individuals perceive the environment because 'the way in which things and people influence our conscious life does not depend on how they are in themselves or for the others, but on how they are for us and on the practical value we attribute to them' (Znaniecki, 1995: 35, my translation). In this work, which is the *Introduction* of the book *Zyciorys wlasny (Autobiography)* by Wladyslaw Berkan, Znaniecki, who gave a fundamental contribution to sociological theory (Gubert, Tomasi, 1993), also specifies that 'the use of autobiography for sociological purposes had just started' affirming that the first indications on the topic can be found in the introduction of the third volume of *Polish Peasant* (Znaniecki, 1995: 35, my translation), a work that, as all innovative works, was seen with considerable distrust.

It is this distrust which I would like to address through the interesting reinterpretation of the *The Polish Peasant* proposed by Consuelo Corradi, who also offers a brilliant comment of the *Appraisal* by Herbert Blumer (1939), reconstructing its origins, which I will briefly recall.

In 1937, the *Social Science Research Council* asked the experts of social sciences to indicate the most significant contributions – from a minimum of three to a maximum of six – that had been published in the United States since World War I. Almost all sociologists chose *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by Thomas and Znaniecki and, once identified the text to be assessed, the task to prepare the report was assigned to Herbert Blumer, who illustrated his criticism in the short volume *An Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's 'The Polish Peasant in Europe and America'*. The *Appraisal* was very much appreciated and obtained the approval of most sociologists, who agreed with it. Whilst he recognised Thomas and Znaniecki's merit of having drawn the attention on the subjective element

⁴ It is no coincidence that in Znaniecki's work there is no reference to psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) began the experimentation of the therapeutic function of narration in the 1920s.

of human experience, Blumer on the other hand criticised the lack of devices able to capture this element of human experience in the normal way, for data usable for the ordinary scientific procedures in other fields (Blumer, 1939: 111). Blumer, in fact, as Consuelo Corradi points out, believes that there is ‘a fundamental difference between the human documents as source of data, as critical data, and the data of biological and physical sciences’ (Blumer quoted in Corradi, 1988: 72, my translation). In other words, what destabilises and causes unceasing distrust⁵ is the use of *sources* instead of producing *data*, which is characteristic of exact sciences. I believe that this *modus operandi* is the main novelty of Thomas and Znaniecki’s work.

It is no coincidence that Luciano Gallino, in the entry ‘Autobiography’ of his sociology dictionary, pointed out that the methodological and theoretical scheme of *The Polish Peasant* ‘is mainly based on the three hundred pages (about half of the original) of the autobiography of a young immigrant in the United States, Wladek Wiszniewski, who was commissioned to write it in three months’ (Gallino, 1988: 48, my translation), and added that Thomas and Znaniecki ‘constructed an entire theory of social action virtually based on only one autobiography’ (Gallino, 1988: 49, my translation). The main criticism and concerns are all connected to these questions: what value can a single autobiography have? How much of Wladek’s autobiography, ‘a book within a book’ (Gallino, 1968, I: XIX)⁶, corresponds to reality, and what derives, rather, from his imagination, considering also that each narration may contain distortions, omissions, and mistakes?

According to Blumer, autobiography ‘does not allow to inductively infer the analyses of the authors, but it is not even a simple illustration of such analyses’ (Corradi, 1988: 64, my translation). Blumer ‘does not reject the biographical approach but, following the reasoning of the prevailing methodological debate, confirms its impracticability’ (Corradi, 1988: 75, my translation). However, with *The Polish Peasant* biographical materials became part of the study of society introducing a ‘contradiction difficult to be solved: the ambition of basing sociological knowledge on the comprehension of subjective meanings’ (Corradi, 1988: 76, my translation) and, despite criticism and concerns, the work caught the attention of the scientific community that, as I will try to explain in the following paragraph, took it into account both explicitly and implicitly, not only in the United States, but also in Europe.

⁵ The unceasing distrust explains why, in the 1980s, it was observed that: ‘the great importance of this work [*The Polish Peasant*] is still denied; it is rather mentioned that «it was the highest contribution to symbolic interactionism approach» but novelties and originality of biographies is not recognised’ [Cipriani, 1995, p. 16, my translation].

⁶ In fact, Wladek’s autobiography occupies the entire third volume of the original edition, in five volumes, of the *Polish Peasant*.

3. The use of *sources* in sociological analysis and the methodological pluralism

An emblematic case of explicit ‘reception’ of *The Polish Peasant* is that of Robert K. Merton who, in the *Foreword* of the Polish edition (March 1981) of *Social Theory and Social Structure* affirms that *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* was a fundamental text for his professional development:

I think back to the ancient time of my undergraduate studies at Temple University in Philadelphia and realize anew that for me as for many other American student of sociology in the late 1920s and 1930s, the most significant sociological monograph was beyond question *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, first published by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in 1918. When I was a second-year student at Temple, my young, demanding teacher, George E. Simpson, saw to it that I studied *The Polish Peasant* from beginning to end of its 2.250 pages (reprinted just the year before in just two, rather than, the original five volumes) (Merton, 1981: 1).

In this *Foreword*, there is no mention to the criticism and concerns addressed to Thomas and Znaniecki’s work, but only the recognition of a personal intellectual debt specified in two aspects. First of all, Merton observes that: ‘Actually reading those hundreds of pages of letters and case records must have sensitized me to the possibilities of what Harold Lasswell would describe, in the late 1930s, as «content analysis»’ (Merton 1981: 1-2). Then, referring to the ‘Methodological Note’ that opens the first volume of *The Polish Peasant* and describes its theoretical and conceptual scheme, Merton writes: ‘The “Methodological Note” introducing *The Polish Peasant* – a “note” running to a mere 86 pages – must also have left a distinct imprint on my thinking as it explicated strictly sociological formulations centered on “a theory of social organization” and distinguished these from work in social psychology, conceived «as the general science of the subjective side of culture»’ (Merton 1981: 2).

Years later, on 22 May 1989, Merton mentioned *The Polish Peasant* in the *lectio* he held at the Jagiellonian University of Krakow, where he was invited to be granted an ‘honorary doctorate’ (Merton, 1990: 7). Then, in the 1990s, in the essay on *The Thomas Theorem and the Matthew Effect* (Merton, 1995), Merton, in determining that Thomas Theorem was not a case of ‘institutionalised sexism’, used ‘non-conventional *sources*’ – and specifically, a letter by Dorothy Swaine Thomas – thus following explicitly the tradition inaugurated by *The Polish Peasant*: ‘[...] the sociological analysis of verbatim letters was introduced by W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki; though, to be sure, on a rather larger scale running from page 217 to page 1114 of their classic work in five volumes, *The*

Polish Peasant in Europe and America ([1918-20] 1927)' (Merton, 1995: 381, footnote 6).

However, Merton opened to the use of *sources* in sociological analysis long time before, precisely during the second half of the 1960s, with the essay *On the History and Systematic of Sociological Theory* (Merton, 1967)⁷, which demonstrates the existence of a real 'hermeneutic turn' in Merton's sociology, with a clear and motivated openness to the use of 'non-conventional *sources*' such as notebooks, scientific journals, correspondence, and autobiographies⁸, all considered essential to correctly focus on the actual course of scientific development, thus going beyond what emerges from the public documentation of science (Merton, 1992). It is not by coincidence that, years later, the American sociologist reconstructed the origins of sociology of science through fragmentary notes of oral and documented history (Merton, 1980), using biographies, forewords, dedications, and letters, among which some passages from the correspondence with Thomas Kuhn. These materials, though, were not used to obtain quantitative information, for example for content analysis; instead, all these essays have a 'narrative style' that, significantly, emerges also from other essays⁹.

Let us move now from the United States to Europe, referring to one specific text: the work on Mozart by Norbert Elias, who is an authoritative exponent of historical sociology¹⁰. In this work, patiently reconstructed by Michael Schröter, who ordered and organised the materials dating back to the 1980s (typescripts, tape recordings, and notes), Elias uses many *sources*, in particular letters and biographies, thus highlighting Mozart's existential drama: he wanted to be a free artist in a period when there were no structural conditions to be so. At the same time, the German sociologist, demonstrating that expressions such as 'innate genius' or 'innate ability to compose' are superficial expressions (Elias, 1991: 67), brings back into the social structure what seems escaping from it: genius (Pestelli, 1991).

Hence, Merton and Elias, two very different sociologists, coming from different cultural traditions and exponents of two different approaches to social studies, share not only the interest for some research themes, such as for example the sociological analysis of time, but also that for the type of sociology that is not limited to the quantitative methodology. It is undeniable that many

⁷ The essay was then included in the third edition (1968) of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Italian edition: *Teoria e struttura sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1992, pp. 9-66).

⁸ On the concept of 'sociological autobiography' see: Merton, 1988, pp. 17-21.

⁹ For example: the essay on the oral transmission of knowledge (Merton, 1980b, pp. 1-35), together with many other essays. For additional details, please refer to my volume entitled *Robert K. Merton: un conservatore?* (2016).

¹⁰ For additional details about Norbert Elias, besides the masterly volume by Simonetta Tabboni (1993) also refer to: Cavalli, 2011, pp. 23-30.

important analyses have been realised by means of this approach, but it is also true that other methodologies have led to equally noteworthy results as evidenced, for example, by *The Polish Peasant* and by the works that, even implicitly, share its perspective¹¹. To this we could add that the openness to *sources* has also led to reflect on the possible interaction and contamination between the sociological universe and the literary universe¹².

In the second half of the 1990s, in Italy, Giovanni Gasparini invited to go beyond ‘the coldness of some analyses of social sciences’ (Gasparini, 1998a, my translation), underlining the need of opening to literary *sources* – in particular poetry – in order to revitalise sociological analysis by stimulating both the study of common themes, and the identification of new research topics, such as for example ‘interstitial phenomena’ (Gasparini, 1998b). The alternative – Gasparini wrote – is to ‘adapt to vegetating in a framework of consolidated academic legitimacy and in the institutional crystallisation of its own conceptual system and consolidated research themes’ (Gasparini 1998a: 309, my translation). If we move forward in time, we can find similar considerations in a recent and interesting work by Mariano Longo on the use of literary narrations in social sciences, which ends wishing greater consideration for these *sources*: ‘[...] sociology can use literary works (but also films, theatrical works, etc.) [...] adapting them [...] to its logic’ (Longo, 2019: 74, my translation). It is starting from this conscious use of exogenous *sources* that sociology could enrich its analysis ability and show its ‘vitality as discipline [...] without necessarily referring to standardised research techniques, but identifying sociological meanings in rich and stratified materials’ (Longo, 2019: 74, my translation). A *perspective*, but at the same time a *method*, that brings us back to *The Polish Peasant*¹³ and, more generally, to a tradition of studies partially abandoned, but that should be instead valorised for an actual theoretical-methodological pluralism.

¹¹ Even the scholars who criticise ‘descriptive’ researches are ‘charmed’ by the narrative approach. For example, see the essay on Chicago by Maurice Halbwachs, who mentions *The Polish Peasant* reporting in the notes some passages of a letter by a Polish immigrant (Halbwachs, 2008, pp. 87-88).

¹² It is necessary to point out that autobiography is also a literary genre (Lejeune, 1986).

¹³ Even if *The Polish Peasant* continues to be a fundamental reference text for immigration studies (Sinatti, 2008, pp. 1-21), we must not forget that, as the same authors wrote in the preface to the first edition, this work ‘was not carried out exclusively – nor mainly – on the basis of an interest for the Polish peasant’, but instead ‘it is the example of a *viuipoint* and a *method* explained in the methodological note present in the initial pages of the work’ (Thomas, Znaniiecki, 1968, I, p. 5, my translation and my italics).

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