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Can Sociology Help Us to Live a Better Life? A Phenomenological Approach to Clinical Sociology

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1. Introduction

This question, although trivial as it could appear, is neither so easy to by-pass, nor so useless: as I hope to show a little later.

Sociology consists, at first, of a lot of concepts (better: "ideal types", according with Weber), statements, theories, all grounded on observations and reasoning. In other words, it consists of knowing something, but also of thinking about the reliability of the way we put together such concepts, statements etc. Exactly the same as other sciences do.

According with a common sense shared by both laymen and most scholars, at the first level all kinds of knowledge are the outcome of some methodical actions aiming to reproduce within human mind some features of "reality". At the second level, they come from a methodical reasoning aiming to "explain" the events observed. And finally, they consist of drawing some conclusions useful to forecast what could arrive in the future, more or less far.

Some basic assumptions taken for granted are connected with such statements. The first one is that there is a "reality" existing behind and before our observations, independently on them; secondly, such reality is (or at least ought to be) rationally arranged to give place to a *Kosmos*, so as the ancient Greeks said. Then, human reason is able to catch such rational arrangements, because of a real similarity between both reasons: human and natural, subjective and objective. Finally, the three levels are "rationally" ordered according with the above hierarchy of priority: observing, explaining, forecasting.

Philosophers have many different opinions about such statements, but anyway they couldn't be demonstrated. Then I think it would be dangerous to build our knowledge on such unsettled grounds. Of course we can let laymen do so: indeed by this way they usually build a common sense knowledge permitting them to manage their everyday life. Moreover the same happened successfully along many centuries, before the modern pattern of science elaborated by Royal Society would be established.

We know very well that such a pattern has been revised several times: during the Enlightenment, by the nineteenth century Positivists and the neo-Kantian philosophers, until the sophisticated discourses of twentieth century epistemologists (see mainly the

sceptical thesis of the post-Popper ones, so as Feyerabend). Nevertheless there are, I think, good reasons to suspect that all these theories involve some metaphysic assumptions, generally not made explicit. The only basic feature we can assume as a solid ground to build our discourses is that both modern science and sociology are someway kinds of critical knowledge: that means, according with the most philosophers, a knowledge involving reflexive thinking about its foundations and methods as well.

In my opinion, we should first of all go back to the starting point of the so called modern science: when scholars decided to put apart from their field of research the *end*, the *aim* of the nature, and to pay attention only to the *causes* of natural phenomena. But refusing *teleology* involves to give no relevance to the *sense* of nature taken as a whole, as well as seen in its particular features. It seems to me that such a refuse should be maintained, in general, for the science, but on the other hand one should also deal with some consequences, that we could resume by speaking about the following three points.

First of all, people can hardly survive without giving sense to their *world of life* (the little section of the universe they live in, then the persons, animals and things they find during their everyday life, as well as the set of ideas, beliefs, information they have at hand for managing their life). People know very well that behind their own world of life there is a big world, the very universe, within which their own one has to make *sense*. Therefore they cannot be satisfied only with a science taking for irrelevant the problem of the sense of the whole: then, facing such a state of things, some ones shut their eyes and carry on their lives in apnoea. Some other ones (particularly within secularized societies) are in quest of satisfaction by living from hand to mouth, enjoying as much as possible every single moment: in other words, by living an *aesthetic life* (according to Kierkegaard). Finally there are some other ones who are in quest of sense by asking for it from religion. Only a few persons indeed are able to make sense by their own for their life, and that happens mostly by making a personal use of religious convictions. Then, generally speaking, we could point out that in the quest for sense religion plays a very important role.

A second question concerns the difference between *nature* and *human world*, as to the relevance of the *sense* for scientific research. Questing for the sense of human world (taken as a whole) means obviously to search for the place of such a whole within the universe: that's exactly the same as to search for the sense of the universe itself (that modern science refused to do). But usually social sciences don't pursue such an aim: they generally pay attention to specific features of human world, namely to human behaviour (individual, collective or institutional). That's namely the same as Weber pointed out by speaking about a sociology concerned with *human behaviour provided with a sense given by the actor himself.*

Then sociologists not only cannot put away the problem of the sense in the same way as physicists or chemists: on the contrary, they have to do namely with the sense, in some way. And moreover (so as philosophers and historians) they usually *speak about* science: in other words they make a *meta-discourse* where science and scientists are the object (and maybe this is the reason why such other members are so suspicious of sociologists: they could feel not so happy for being taken as an object).

Indeed we are just now choosing an approach like that: we are going to *speak about* sociology, as well as about science (then taking the former as it would share the same nature as the latter).

Our very discourse deals with the *reason why people would like to know something* : because knowing is finally a social action, then it has to make sense (for the actor), which consists first of all (according with Weber) of the reason why they do so. We have already spoken about the common idea of science as something reflecting the world outside within the human mind. And we have pointed out some doubts about the consistency of metaphysical foundations of such a thesis. But now we would like to skip such problem by putting down a new question: *Why indeed people (including scientists) do make an effort like that*? The Italian poet Dante Alighieri during the XIVth century put on the lips of Ulysses the famous speech about "*virtute e conoscenza*": that means "human beings have not been created to live as animals, but to pursue virtue and knowledge". Behind such a sentence we can find a philosophical reasoning as well a theological one, well mixed so as it usually happened during the Middle Ages. The *sense* of mankind, that's the *reason why* it has been created (by God: Who likely had just this intention, and then this waiting from His creature) is to pursue virtue and knowledge. Then for our Middle Ages ancestors the effort to learn always more, to build an ever growing knowledge, depends on a moral obligation.

Nowadays on the contrary, after the scientific revolution of the XVIIth century, we can no longer take into consideration the *sense* of mankind, and namely a sense given it by God. A basic assumption of modern knowledge is not to need the hypothesis of God to explain anything in the world. Then we have to search for another explanation of the *social practice named "knowledge"*.

2. From the wild life until institutions

Knowledge is indeed a social practice, and science (together with sociology) is included within knowledge. But what means to be a *social practice*?

A *practice* indeed is whatever (human) activity aiming to manage the world of life, to satisfy some need by changing something, by solving some problem. Of course, we know that all along the Western philosophical tradition people have distinguished the practical activity from the theoretical one: and knowledge has been considered as pertaining to the latter. But such a view, albeit very influential (have we to remind the two "reasons", the theoretical and the practical one, separately examined by Kant?), implies many metaphysical presuppositions which are not only indemonstrable, but finally contrasting with a phenomenological overview of the process of building human knowledge. That we are going to show here below.

Human life (something namely practical) flows always and overall within a social dimension. Never human beings lived all alone, running prairies and forests so as other wild beasts do: because they need to meet each other and share the efforts to gain what is necessary for collective surviving and to avert dangers coming from natural forces. In other words, they have to share social practices: i.e. making tools, hunting, caring kids and the elders, defending the group from enemies, etc. So as Durkheim pointed out, sharing working practices made societies consistent, that's giving the ground of human solidarity.

At this point we have to take note that no one, individual as well as human group, could survive without interpreting the events arriving all around: that's giving them a meaning as a sign of somewhat likely to arrive in a future, immediate as well as far. Animals too do

something like that: they can interpret signs of a coming tempest, as well as of an earthquake etc. But human beings don't rely only upon their instincts (anyway not so strong as those of animals), but their interpretation of events needs *fitting these ones within their context* : in other words, giving them a *sense*.

Sense is actually, indeed, the *meaning of an event (considered as a message) within its own context*. The same event, when it arrives in different contexts, has indeed different meanings: it could involve different consequences and give rise to different reactions from the part of the interpreter.

The last sentence should be emphasized, because it can really help us to understand the sense of knowledge. Let we explain such a statement as it follows.

- What means "to know something"? It means to be able *to give it a sense* (i.e. a specific meaning: that coming from its relationships with its own context).
- What means then "its own context"? The net of events and phenomena drawing a picture where the object we are interpreting takes a specific role.
- Why do we need to know such a picture? Because, by enabling us to give a meaning to the object, it could help us to understand where it is coming from and what consequences could arrive from it.
- Why is it so important, to forecast such consequences? Because we need to organize just in time our reaction to the object, so that it couldn't overwhelm us, while, at the same time, we could be able to take advantage from it for our strategic behaviour.

Then finally, knowledge has a very big role within our strategy of living: this is its specific, very practical sense. But such a sense could in no way be given individually, that's by each individual independently from the other members of his (her) social context. Otherwise people could whenever disagree about managing what's necessary to collective surviving. And that makes the difference with the usual idea of knowledge as a "mirror of the reality".

Someone could feel a scent of pragmatism in such a statement. Actually, it is not so far from pragmatism: which, from its part, flourished in the same Chicagoan context where American sociology was born. But I think that the following difference from pragmatism ought to be emphasized. Pragmatism was coming directly from an Anglo-Saxon utilitarian outlook, with its materialistic taste, but anyway it was a philosophical theory, stating how to understand what happens in the world, from its point of view. Our statement, on the contrary, comes from a sheer observation of what happens within a specific field of experience, without drawing from it a general theory on the world.

On the other hand, drawing the picture we spoke about involves a previous conceptual building where the things Aristotle and Kant named *categories* are methodically employed. Such conceptual buildings are systems of meanings, rules, social roles having the function of explaining what happens in the practical experience, at the same time as they are ruling it. In other words, such conceptual buildings are what sociologists usually name *institutions*.

To understand what happens in our world of life, we need to know previously the institutions governing such a world: otherwise, how could we give sense to what happens? But at this point one could ask: how could people build institutions without having previously understood particular events of their world? This question deals with the so

called *reflexivity principle*, which many sociologists (as well as philosophers of science) so as Garfinkel and the ethnomethodologists have very much spoken about.

I propose two ways to get off, phenomenologically, from this paradox: the one philogenetic and the other ontogenetic. Let us begin with the first one.

Primitive men saw the natural phenomena and gave them a sense, aiming to forecast what consequences these ones could involve for them. We don't name this kind of knowing "science", because of its very distance from the rules and the criteria of modern science. But it was something very different from the forecasting attitude of animals: events and phenomena related with the *thing* we are speaking about, and composing the picture giving it a sense, are not specific events and phenomena but abstract models of them, that's *concepts*.

Concepts are actually something not existing in nature: they exist only by a human mental working. But no work would be done having no real function for satisfying a need: otherwise, why should someone accomplish such a heavy task? Indeed what a need could be satisfied by building concepts? That of drawing up one's strategies for living. Human natural instincts are not enough to make such strategies safe, so as it happens with animals; but humans can employ their mind as a tool for gaining the same (or maybe a better) outcome.

Mind is a very particular tool: it makes it possible, to keep as present something that is past, or could be future, or is far from our eyes, but also something abstract, that could never become perceivable by our senses. By keeping present such things, we are enabled to compare different experiences (real or virtual), and then to build *empirical* concepts. On the other hand, by employing *abstract* concepts (categories), we can establish relations between empirical concepts, and by this way we can build theories. The system of theories built by human beings and shared within a human group represents their outlook over the world as a whole. This is true not only for primitive men, but for the overall mankind.

As a matter of fact, such an outlook does in no way represent a *mirror* of the world, but rather an *interpretation* of it, a conceptual structure built within the community. The whole world we think to *know*, or we think *existing* independently on us, is finally no other thing but such system of theories, such outlook, such interpretation: and we can in no way go beyond it. Moreover it does not hold sheer descriptions of its single features, but on the contrary it involves a lot of value judgements, of rules for using better the opportunities offered by that world. In other words, such an outlook represents the *culture* of the group.

Single theories held within a culture are neither true absolutely, nor false: each one comes from repeated experiences compared with each other, and keeps its validity until a new experience could not confirm it. Tarski and Popper (and many other philosophers) speak at this concern of crashing with "facts", but this involves having solved the metaphysical problem of the nature of such *facts* as well as that of our relation with such facts. On the contrary, phenomenologically we can say that single human beings living within groups make only *experiences*, they compare these ones with those of other members, and together with them they try to build socially shared theories over their common world of life. This is finally the *social building of reality*. That can also overcome the paradox of reflexivity, by this coming and going from new and old experiences, from concepts and theories keeping their validity and the necessity of building more suitable ones.

The ontogenetic way to overcome the reflexivity paradox deals, on the other hand, with the steps a single individual moves during his (her) biological and cultural development. Little kids need not only to be fed but also to understand what happens all around them in order to organize their reaction to it, first of all by applying to parents for protection. The most effective protection adults can supply consists of showing them the meaning of their world of life (common to adults and kids), beginning from that of each single object therein. "Meaning" is generally employed to signify the relation between a word and an object; but by that proceeding kids don't learn only their mother-tongue: they learn mainly how to consider those objects (positive or negative, good or bad) and how to refer to them in case of need. So *meaning* becomes something relevant not only from a semantic, but also from a pragmatic point of view: it is closely related with the world of life, by the means of *institutions*.

So as we saw shortly before, institutions are systems of meanings, rules, social roles having the function of explaining theoretically what could happen in the practical experience. Then they are first of all systems of meanings: *politics*, *economy*, *religion*, *market*, *family* are all examples of institutions able to give a specific meaning to behaviours connected with each of them.

Little kids cannot understand immediately such systems, nor the system of these systems. As they go on by learning the meaning of single specific objects (things, events, behaviours etc.) they compare such meanings with each other and then they build concepts. Some years ago I had the occasion to observe a little boy one year old, having had prior experience of dogs named collectively "bau"; such boy, paying attention to a picture representing a bird, stated it was a "bau": so he had built the concept of "animal", by setting together birds and dogs at least.

Could we consider such a concept, built by this way, as "right" or "true"? I think this is a really misleading question. Actually humans (including the kids) build their concepts each one by himself, and each one tests the "rightness" of his (her) work by making use of it to understand messages coming from the world of life. "Understanding" means giving a meaning to the message, rather a specific meaning connected with the actual circumstances where the message is given out: in other words, "understanding" means giving a *sense* to a message. People consider "right" the sense given to a message when, by relying on it, the outcome of their behaviour is not deceiving. In case of deception, indeed, they have to amend their mental building in order to implement its fitness. And so on: to understand messages (that's all kinds of information coming from outside), people employ reflexively concepts they have at their disposal, but new experiences compel them to amend and implement again and again their conceptual patrimony. That is by no way "true" or "false": it is (considered by the actor) fit or unfit to understand successfully the world of life. But the same road is covered also by scholars, who by this way contribute to make up the complex building of science: we will come back later to this specific concern.

From all this discourse comes, evidently, that concepts are not built only to reproduce the external world inside one's own mind: why indeed should we make such a duplication of the world? This process of building comes, on the contrary, from our need of *organizing* (Weick). Organizing means to single out an aim to reach and to arrange suitable means in order to pursue it. Singling out as well as arranging some means involves a prior typification (Schutz) of single experiences: then building empirical concepts. But organizing is not an accidental behaviour: people (both adults and kids) organize something in order to satisfy some needs; so concepts too depend on needs.

Need is a key concept in behavioural sciences. Usually it is considered a psychological one, as needs are studied as elements making up the structure of human mind. But the concept of need can also be grounded on common sense as a starting point for all behavioural sciences. We know very well indeed how much this makes sense for economics. Then, why couldn't it be the same for sociology?

As a matter of fact, human life as a whole is an acting process: *we are what we do*, also when it seems that we are doing nothing at all. Whatever action is anyway an answer to some need: but needs, as manifold as they appear, can at any rate be assembled in two big categories: those aiming to survival (of the individual as well as of the species), on the one hand, and those aiming to get recognition from the part of other members of society, to gain more and more implementation of his (her) own personal identity, on the other hand. People don't need simply eating, sleeping or making love; they also strongly need to see their *Me* well appreciated by the *Generalized Other* (Mead). A good appreciation from the part of members of our social group can reassure us that our life is going on the right way, and that we could get protection in case of need.

Emphasizing such second category of needs is something of great moment. The most widespread opinion (among laymen, but among scholars too, beginning with Weber) about the dynamic of social action is that it is moved by reason and/or social rules in the better cases, or by passions in the worse ones. On the one hand, maybe laymen are right when they put a rigid opposition between "good action" (that inspired by reason and/or social rules) and "bad action": communities hardly could survive without widely shared convictions about what is right and what is wrong for public welfare.

But, in my opinion, scholars and especially social scientists have to penetrate somewhat more inside the question. Coming back once again to little kids, we have yet stated they learn the meanings concerning their world of life not only from a semantic, but also from a pragmatic point of view. This means that they don't learn only the names of objects (things, events and situations, humans and animals, etc.) but also how to manage them: in other words, the meanings are so closely related with the rules for using objects denoted, that the former ones could also be identified with the latter. All socialization processes finally consist of learning meanings with rules: "this has to be made so and so", "this other in not so good to be done", "It is better to go to sleep and to awake pretty earl", and so on.

By *socialization practices* new generations are informed about the *culture* shared within their community, that's the whole of institutions, meanings and rules in use therein. But at this point I suggest to pay attention to the fact that *information* doesn't mean the same as *interiorization*. According with Parsons, *socialization*, the only social practice assuring social order (in opposition to the Hobbes's Leviathan), consists of *interiorization*, from the part of members, of *all values shared within the community*: otherwise people may be considered at risk of deviance, and society at risk of trouble. "Interiorization of values" indeed means that people not only know their existence, but share them so far as they get ready to inspire their behaviour.

The inconvenience of this theory is that such an hyper-socialized member (Granovetter) doesn't exist at all. While, on the other hand, it would be not so welcome, as it would be only consistent with a "plastered" society. But fortunately it is actually impossible, because of the following reasons.

Coming back once again to the little kids, we said that they learn the *meaning* of objects composing their world of life, in order to become able to manage them conveniently. To this end such meanings have to incorporate rules concerning the management of the related objects. Rules are indeed prescriptions implying value judgements. Parsons and the most sociologists after him have employed the term "value" to mean the good principles inspiring human societies and permitting them to reduce social conflict in order to live in peace. In my opinion, according with the most philosophers, it would be more exact to mean by the term "value" only a particular kind of concepts: those related with "positive/negative" or "better/worse" criterion, instead of that of "true/false"; so that value judgements actually involve a choice concerning a behaviour (actual or virtual), otherwise than factual ones. Then, a meaning involving a value judgement could be better named *cultural pattern*: as a matter of fact, the concept of pattern involves a favour, an attitude fair to choice, while meanings theoretically are indifferent to choice (though practically they are usually embodied within cultural patterns).

Socialization finally consists of conveying the culture of old generations to younger ones, beginning by a lot of cultural patterns: "this behaviour is allowed", "this other one is forbidden", "this can be made this way", "in such situations well educated people do so…", etc. But phenomenologically it would be better to distinguish socialization from the point of view of "teachers" on the one hand, and of "pupils" on the other. The first one consists of giving "pupils" the fittest information about the world of life shared by the both (teachers and pupils): that involves giving rules for managing it "conveniently" (from the point of view of the teachers); and it is supported by the hope that pupils will make a good use of such information. One could suppose that Parsons's theories about the matter started from this point of view.

But in my opinion the more interesting point of view is that of pupils. As far as they get ready to pay attention, they will *keep* information they are receiving; but this doesn't mean that they would like to *interiorize* it. In any case, at first they likely feel troubled by the new things they should memorize, mostly because of the new obligations there involved, but generally by becoming less free. We have not to bypass too quickly such children's reactions, because adults too have just the same reaction when they face some new information. Everyone would like to avoid any complication of his (her) outlook on the world; then as they cannot anyway reject such new information, they get engaged to demonstrate that there is no new matter: they still knew it since a long time, and had always behaved consistently with it (they think).

Actually there is no fault in this defence mechanism: indeed it is very important, in order to diminish the complexity of the world, and to allow an easier management of it. Otherwise we would be overwhelmed by a redundant complexity. Even the basic philosophical principle "*entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*" is grounded on the same logic. Anyway what is important to mind is to keep a good balance between such a disposition to simplification, on the one hand, and the necessity to improve more and more our outlook on the world, in order to better understand it, on the other one.

As a matter of fact, fortunately kids are anyway pretty well balanced between these two attitudes: idleness on the one hand, and curiosity on the other, both stress them to take the right way, that consists of making a selection. In order to get over their first rejecting attitude, they indeed take into consideration the usefulness of the proposals they receive for

solving problems connected with their everyday life. While, at the same time, they keep in mind that the other ones too have some bad consequences in case of infringement. So inside the mind of each single kid (as a paradigm of what happens also within grown-up people) the proposals coming from the "teachers" grow to form two groups. The first one includes the cultural patterns which have not (yet) been considered useful to solve problems interesting the subject. Who hence gets ready to decide case by case whether to enforce the rule there embodied, in order to avoid the bad consequences of non-conforming to it, or on the contrary, to face (the risk of) such bad consequences as a price for pursuing anyway some ends more important for the subject. But in any case we must emphasize that this group of cultural patterns has not been interiorized by the subject, so that they don't become for him (her) a stimulus to act. Conforming to them or not, is the outcome of an opportunistic choice, so that when there are chances enough to escape their bad consequences, infringement would become very likely.

In the second group of cultural patterns everyone sets up those that he (she) has had the chance of testing positively: he (she) has tried that such patterns supply good ways to get ends he (she) was searching for. By repeating the experience, such patterns can become something which the subject refers to as good and dutiful: at first, dutiful as necessary in order to get wanted ends, but in the long run, right dutiful. At this point they have been interiorized.

During the early childhood such patterns are concerned mainly with biological life: eating, sleeping, controlling sphincters, etc. But as the subject grows up he (she) does more and more feel new needs of self-recognition, especially from the part of parents and of close relations. Then enforcing the proposed cultural patterns becomes for him (her) a way to get the favourite kind of recognition.

Transactional analysts, so as Berne, have spoken about two main kinds of childish attitudes (often kept up also by grown people): the one characterizing a type named *adapted kid*, and the other one the type of *rebellious kid*. The both are searching for recognition from the part of members of their reference group (parents and relations, playmates, etc.), but the adapted ones make it by confirming explicitly the rules coming from the grown-up people, while the rebellious ones aim to be recognized as more independent individuals both by grown-up people and by their playmates.

Taking for granted that people are usually inclined to keep their childish choice also when they grow up, we can point out that the choice between the above attitudes depends on a prior attitude pertaining to the subject: indeed somebody prefers getting recognition first of all through an immediate approval from the part of grown-up members of their family and of their milieu as well; whilst somebody else prefers getting it indirectly, by imposing on the whole milieu their personality as playing a relevant role within the context.

In any case, the both types can attain to a good standard of socialization when the interiorized cultural patterns become for the subject a source of moral suasion impelling to action in the same way as needs: indeed they become a sort of needs.

It is worth emphasizing this last statement: interiorized cultural patterns can perform as needs, in order to stimulate action, because of their close relationships with the actor's aim of being positively recognized. By whom? First of all by the *Generalized Other* (Mead):

members of the actor's milieu so as the actor himself could think at them. But at the same time, a positive recognition must come from the actor himself, as far as he (she) could feel his (her) own identity empowered by enforcing such patterns.

The theory here outlined could actually account for the Weber's twofold rationality, especially for the one related with values: which indeed has been only enunciated without any explanation, from the part of Weber, about the logic that should inspire human non-utilitarian behaviour.

The same theory could however also account for the relationships between the two dimensions of culture: the individual and the collective one. Some pages before we have still spoken about culture, but without specifying which dimension we were referring to: since it is well known that people in their everyday life often speak about "enriching one's own culture", where "culture" is identified with the whole "knowledge" of a single person. While scholars, on the other hand, usually speak about culture as an inheritance of a whole community.

Actually however, there is no inconsistency between the two points of view. As a matter of fact, culture is something mental, it consists of some contents of mind: then it couldn't stay outside of the mind of single persons. And we have yet indirectly analyzed the process of building a culture inside of a single's mind. At first a kid, but later a grown-up too, they constantly receive messages from the world outside; messages consisting of some information about the state of things, including also cultural patterns. This means that he (she) gets informed not only about the objective situation of things, but also about opinions and preferences of the *Generalized Other*, that's of the people living within the same milieu: opinions and preferences that people have set up formerly by having made experiences, and tried reactions together with their consequences, and having compared all this with experiences of other members. In other words, by this way our subject gets informed about the actual *culture* of the whole community where he (she) lives and grows up.

So culture becomes a collective inheritance of a community, that's the outcome of experiences of all members, shared and compared with one another, and related with needs individually as well as collectively felt. Whereas collective needs are needs individually felt by the most of members of a community, and then considered "right": so that behaviours aiming to satisfy them give place to shared cultural patterns. Whilst individual needs can have the same outcome only if they are consistent with the satisfaction of collective ones: otherwise they give place to negative cultural patterns.

Of course we yet know that culture is no mirror of a (supposed) pre-existing reality; now we see that it's rather a knowledge oriented to the action: information about the state of things in the world, but also patterns of action; and then it may be described not only by assertions, but also by prescriptions.

Why do we need just such kind of knowledge? Because the world is not something similar to a (traditional) classroom, where pupils ought to put in their mind some information without realizing its usefulness. On the contrary, since the beginnings of mankind people, thrown in their *world of life,* have been obliged to essay to survive, and in order to achieve such an end people have tried to *understand* what happened all around them: that means to give each event the "right" place within the whole image people had of the world around

(their *world of life*). The place of an event indeed may be "right" if people know what normally precedes such kind of events and what follows, as well as what consequences it might make for the people themselves, and how far they could control the whole process. In other words, to understand is to give a *meaning*: where one could suggest to employ the word "meaning" to denote the "right place" of a *whole kind of events*, while it would be much better to employ the word "sense" to denote the particular meaning of a *specific event* within its own context. Since a specific context could influence very deeply the real meaning of an event, as we all could see very well, looking at our everyday life: it would be enough to put our mind to the difference between an event so as a kiss in general, and that given Jesus by Jude.

In order to organize any kind of strategic behaviour, we need to know as much meanings and senses of events likely to happen in our world of life. So we need culture: a culture that we have built by ourselves, by our own experiences, but much more by putting together the information coming from people around as well as from books and other media. In other words, we need a personal culture, but something that is mostly shared by the members of our milieu, with a little part specific to each different subject. In the most cases such a personal dimension of culture is not so noteworthy: people share with the other members of their milieu almost all cultural patterns really relevant for the everyday life (the only one interesting such members). There are indeed some cases (usually those of scholars or of other persons intellectually creative) where that personal dimension of culture is so relevant that it influences their whole outlook on the world: from here comes the ongoing implementation of collective culture (the progress of science etc.).

Such a process is in no way typical of modern societies; on the contrary, it characterizes all phases of human history. Primitive men too, facing events influencing their survival, needed to *understand the sense* of them: where did they come from, and what consequences could they produce for themselves. The first kind of explication and understanding of events (natural as well as human) was religious: religion was the first *institution* created by primitive communities.

That of *institution* is maybe the basic concept in sociology; certainly it is the most cited, but often not so well definitely. First of all, *an institution is a system of meanings carrying out (at least) a function relevant in order to influence positively or negatively the steadiness of the social system as a whole*. Where it would be better to remind *that a system is a set of elements (material or immaterial) each one of which carries out a function relevant for the whole set*.

Maybe someone could be astonished by finding some explicit references to concepts as *system* and *function* within a discourse inspired by a phenomenological approach. But we have to remember that sociology is in no way a philosophical system: it consists of a set of theories (the so called *social theory*) having the *function* to support the understanding of social phenomena with their mutual relationships. And in order to pursue such an aim sociologists can employ all useful concepts, which are mere instruments, no metaphysical realities.

On the other hand, as we observe our definition at close, we have to emphasize that a function doesn't necessarily play a positive role for the steadiness of the system (so as functionalist sociologists generally take for granted). On the contrary it could also play a negative one, so as it happens for example in the case of gangs of offenders: they too being

institutions, in their way. But at last we couldn't forget that many scholars so as Foucault, Erikson and most labelling theorists, have emphasized the role of deviance for strengthening the social cohesion: where the boundaries between positive and negative role are put seriously in doubt (fortunately).

In our perspective, institutions are neither coercive, nor super-individual subjects compelling humans to behave in some ways fixed in advance: as a system of meanings, they are instruments created by the humans themselves to support their understanding of states of things in order to allow them to better organize their strategic behaviour.

First of all, institutions supply humans with meanings denoting classes of events: then, generic meanings. But in second and more realistic place, a combination of different classes of events coinciding in the same situation supply the specific meaning of a particular event, its *sense*. At this point, we ought to pay attention to the fact that among such events coinciding in the named situation there is also the Self of the actor interpreting the same situation, a Self with its image of the world, its personal culture, its specific ends to pursue. Then it contributes to form the context, the *frame* (to employ the term fortunately introduced by Goffman). So the sense given to the named situation is somewhat personalized, and by this way the institution itself is really influenced: another way to contest a functionalistic, coercive conception of institutions.

We still told that primitive humans tended to interpret (that's: to give sense) the most events by referring to the religious institution: for them, all the meanings of natural events, as well as human ones, were connected with religion, as far as humans are not able to control natural ones (and then they have to be controlled by much stronger forces). While human behaviour have to be not contradictory with such stronger forces.

During the following phases of human development, different institutions became independent on religion: politics, economics, law, art, knowledge (formerly philosophical, later scientific). Such process is named *laïcization*, that means reciprocal independence of the different systems of meaning. While by *secularization* (a process that we ought not to mistake for the former one) the religious outlook over the world tends to loose importance, until becoming irrelevant.

When we put laïcization in relationship with the constructivist perspective before illustrated (where knowledge isn't mirroring an external "reality", but interpreting experiences by building theories for giving sense to them), then we could infer some relevant consequences. Berger and Kellner have very well analyzed the modern mind as "homeless", while formerly Max Weber had spoken about a "values polytheism" referring to modernity. The real reason of such lack of firmness, much more than the cultural relativism connected with the present trend to globalization, is the (unavoidable) pluralism of different systems of meaning (institutions), each one of which involving a specific outlook on the whole world. For example, the religious quest for sense of the universe cannot be confronted and made consistent with the scientific perspective: none of them is "right" nor "wrong", each one must be considered within its own institutional context. Philosophers of the Middle Ages spoke about a theory of "double truth": that's really inconsistent only when we think at the truth as an external reality existent independently on us. But it becomes plainly consistent when the truth is considered only as "consistency with facts" (Tarski) or better (as we have pointed out) with experiences. Where experiences (the same experiences) could be interpreted within different contexts (frames)

pertaining to different institutions. Then, to sum up, creationism could be rejected from a scientific point of view, but accepted from a religious one (the one legitimated to make a quest for sense of the universe).

Institutions indeed are not only that macro-systems of meanings about which we have spoken so far. They are also smaller systems produced inside of each macro-system, and then smaller and smaller ones, as a set of Chinese boxes. For example, education is an institution inside of *knowledge*, universities and schools are institutions inside of education, etc. Market is an institution inside of economics, banks and stock exchange are institutions inside of market, etc. The whole of our world of life is enveloped by a thick net of institutions, but this is in no way a restriction of our freedom: on the contrary, it allows us to give a meaning to all our behaviours and to inform others that we are doing so. Sometimes maybe we would prefer not to inform others about our behaviour, and then we try to do it secretly; but generally social interaction needs an effective circulation of such information, mediated by institutions. Sociologists pertaining to the school of *symbolic interactionism* think at the society as grounded on interaction mediated by symbols; but symbols are meanings, that need to be integrated within a system: in other words, within an institution. Without institutions we would be unable to give sense to our behaviour, or more or less to our everyday life, as far as they supply the best ways to realize all kinds of good social practices, or to avoid all kinds of dangerous ones.

3. The institution sociology within the institution knowledge

Now it should be better to come back to our first question: can sociology help us to live a better life? But in order to answer such a question we should at first solve some preliminary problems.

Pointing out that institutions supply the best ways to realize all kinds of social practices, it's evident that to live a better life depends on which social practices we have to realize: for example, legal or criminal ones. And it depends as well on which relationships we have with such social practices: for example, whether we are gangsters or good citizens. But generally speaking and adopting in this case a relativistic attitude, we can say that they can help us, some way, to live a better life.

But then, is sociology an institution? If so, is it a good or a bad one? And in any case, in which way could sociology help us to live a better life? But at last, what means "to live a better life"? As we could see, the question is manifold and not plain.

We can start from the fact that knowledge is an institution. "Knowledge" corresponds to the Greek term *Sophia,* the friends of which have been named philosophers. In ancient Greece during the classic period (since the VI century b.C.) for the first time someone tried to detect the nature in order to give sense to the world around without referring to religion. Formerly in Greece, so as by all other known civilizations, only religion gave sense to the world, and only the priests were authorized to interpret it. Among the first philosophers, all laymen, some ones were also mathematicians (Thales, Pythagoras), while Chaldean mathematicians were priests. So in Greece mathematics and philosophy were for the first time considered features of a laïc knowledge. Until it circulated within a closed social milieu, this kind of knowledge was considered not so dangerous. But when Socrates began to spread this new critical attitude, he was convicted for corrupting Athenian youth: actually he was showing

them the possibility to refer to a truth not depending on religion. And by this way he was disconcerting young people as far as they were trying the first experience of the Weberian *Entzeuberung* of the world. But at last the game was over: laïcization of knowledge was made.

Starting from the first Greek philosophers until Newton and even longer, the word "philosophy" has been synonymous of "high knowledge" (to distinguish it from the "low knowledge" of peasants, craftsmen and housewives). Christian theologians and philosophers have tried, since the first centuries of Christendom, to reconcile philosophy with religion, and mostly to reabsorb the former within the latter. But at last the both remained reciprocally independent, for the sources as well as for the style of reasoning, notwithstanding the fact that the both aimed to give sense to the world as a whole. So when philosophers, during the Renaissance and the earl Modern Age, began to put aside the problem of the sense of the world by abolishing *teleology* (the discourse concerning the *ends* of the nature), modern *science* came into the world as a new kind of knowledge, really different from both philosophy and theology.

This description of the birth of modern science, though the best known in the schools, might be considered too plain, somewhat trivial as far as historians of science could tell a story much more complicated. We can only say, at this concern, that we haven't described the historical process of its coming into the world, but rather that of the *ideal type* (Weber) of modern science. Then we couldn't anywhere try realized the perfect theoretical model of modern science, corresponding to the one above illustrated, but we can single out only some relevant features of it.

First of all, we can state that, according with such ideal type, science would share with knowledge in general the basic couple of values they refer to: the couple *true/false*. As a matter of fact, indeed, when we want interpret a statement from the point of view of the institution *knowledge*, we have to ascertain whether it is *true* or *false (not true)*. But when we refer to *truth* within our discourse we have to pay attention to the context where such discourse is placed: when the context refers mainly to the institution *religion*, truth is strictly related with God and His messages; when it refers mainly to metaphysics taken as a chapter of philosophy, truth is related with some kind of reality existing somewhere with a nature independent on us and on our relationships with it. In both cases *truth* pertains to somewhat real (God or Nature, or Nature as God: Spinoza). But this is an hypostatical use of a concept that originally refers to the speech, not to things or persons: so a more suitable use of *truth* is that of the common sense, when for example we say "it is true that it rains", or "it is true that I had a headache", or "please, say the truth!". The common sense use of the concept of *truth*, indeed, is strictly related with the so called *low knowledge*, since the craftsmen' world of life as well as that of housewives are overall included in the everyday life.

The common sense statements are strictly empirical: they are true until a new experience give them the lie. Could the same be said with regard to the statement by the logic Tarski "Snow is white only if and until snow is white"? I'm not sure. Because Tarski refers to the *fact* that snow is white, and the same do all those empiricist philosophers that Lakatos names *positivists*: according with whom statements are true if, and only if they are proved by *facts*. But only a metaphysical assumption could authorize us to presuppose a relationship between speeches and *facts* (existing somewhere independently on us). While we wouldn't

face the same problem if we speak about *experiences* instead of facts: because experiences pertain to our world of life independently on the *reality* of the things there involved.

Why do empirical common sense statements seem to be fit, while logical and more generally scientific ones give no confidence when grounded on a sheer empirical basis? Because of their difference from the point of view of the respective *pragmatic* functions. The later presuppose a mirroring function of mind and, consequently, of the speech: then they imply a metaphysical involvement in the problem of *reality*. Whilst the former can be verified or falsified only by everyday experience: if you ground your behaviour on a false statement, you cannot pursue your aim. Stop!

Could a scientist adopt the same criterion? Of course: since he (she) would agree about taking his (her) statements only as interpretations of the state of things in order to carry on some new step of his (her) project (for example, some new step of the research he (she) is working about). From this point of view, *true* doesn't mean *corresponding to the reality (or to facts)*, but rather *fit to pursue our aim*.

On the other hand, Lakatos told us that many scientists and philosophers, among whom some physicists as Planck, Bohr, Heisenberg, thought that scientific theories are neither true nor false, but simply *conventions* working as *instruments* (whence such an attitude is named *conventionalism*). Someone could note a close resemblance between such conventionalism and our pragmatic empiricism (the foregoing theory). Actually there is some resemblance, but we have to mind also important differences between the both: conventionalism deals mainly with *theories* (systems of statements describing a phenomenon); while pragmatic empiricism deals not only with theories but also with basic statements (describing single experiences). Moreover (and more important), conventionalism considers theories only as instruments for *forecasting*: that's essentially to *know the future*, to *reproduce a (future) reality* in our mind; whereas pragmatic empiricism looks mainly at action.

But anyway, putting aside the pragmatic dimension, the both outlooks share the same thesis about knowledge, and particularly about science: that scientific theories haven't to be considered *true* nor *false*, but only *fit* or *unfit* (to preview some effects, or to gain some outcomes). At last we could also say that our pragmatic empiricism is a variant of conventionalism, where the value *truth* is assimilated to *fitness*, so as it happens in the everyday speech.

Truth, on the other hand, has no better chance by other philosophical schools, different from the ones we have just spoken about. For example, according with anarchist theories *à la* Feyerabend, science has had an important political function during the first centuries of Modern Age, when it has contributed to destroy the traditional, well arranged idea of universe, the *Kosmos* of the Greeks or the Creation of God. But nowadays it has become a big business and an arena where different theories and schools struggle each other against, for prevailing independently on the respective relation with *truth.* According with Feyerabend, epistemological anarchists seem as Dadaïsts, but we could add that they renew some well known attitudes of ancient Sophists. In any case, they radically undervalue the quest for truth, but by their relativism they bar the way to any effort to introduce some order (as conventional as it may be) within the complex and complicated world we live in.

These remarks about epistemological anarchism couldn't anyway stop us from admitting that science, becoming a big business, has only shown more clearly a phenomenon really

concerning the whole history of high knowledge. One could ask indeed how far through the history the truth principle has worked as a sheer justification (or mystification) of interest and power clashes: for example between philosophical schools in ancient Greece, or during the rising of the Royal Society, or around the awarding of Nobel Prizes. According with Lakatos, Polanyi has to be considered the strongest supporter of this "authoritarian" view over the history of science: it's a matter of fact that to establish which scientific theory has to prevail implies a power role; while on the other hand, to get so recognized involves winning a relevant role of power.

Such authoritarian view is considered by Lakatos as one of the philosophical theories concerning the relation between science and truth; but in my opinion it is much more a sociological than a philosophical view over science and its history. And as a sociological theory it points out some absolutely real phenomena, even if it doesn't face the problem of the nature of truth (a philosophical one) nor that of its function in the society (a sociological one).

While on the other hand it helps us to point out the sociological nature of (high) knowledge and of science, taken as institutions. Indeed pre-modern philosophy was an institution, inside which there were other institutions so as the Platonic Academy, the ancient schools of rhetoric, the universities of the Middle Ages, etc. But also the new science is an institution, with its system of meanings and its new particular institutions: the Royal Society, the laboratories, the new scientific academies, later the policlinics, and overall the universities. All these particular institutions can be summed up to give place to the so called Scientific Community: the supreme judge over the outcomes of all subjects working within science, from the utterances of which comes the sense of all their work in general, as well as the meaning of each particular behaviour of theirs.

A philosopher of science aiming to establish the best criteria for pursuing the *truth* may be much troubled by such discourse; but a sociologist has to interpret it as the way to understand what really happens (and likely couldn't not happen) in the relationships between knowledge and society. Which actually can be interpreted as it follows.

People build their culture each one by him(her)self, so as we have seen above. Each personal culture consists of cultural patterns: in other words, ways to solve little and big problems of the everyday life, mostly meeting the approval of the referring social group.(By the way, we could point out that this is the reason why it is so difficult to rescue deviant people, when they live their everyday life within a social milieu where their deviant cultural patterns are shared by the most other members). The process by which the content of a personal culture becomes widespread inside its milieu is imitation of successful patterns: there is no need of so much discourse, nor verbal elaboration and conceptualization, because imitation of a concrete successful behaviour is enough.

But all this happens within the boards of everyday life; primitive societies, where almost all experiences of each member took place within the everyday life, and where social communication was quite face to face, were characterized by fully shared cultural patterns. As societies are becoming more and more complex, on the contrary, people make different experiences and give them a different sense; then they begin to need to compare each other their cultural patterns, and by this way to build a collective culture. But the last one is always somewhat different from those pertaining to each one of the single members of the community.

A single member could feel uncomfortable with some of his (her) own patterns, because it seems to be unfit to pursue the expected aim. In such case, he (she) could compare this pattern with the collective culture, and then he (she) could look for modify it in order to make it more fit; but he (she) could also engage him(her)self for a change in the collective culture (that's a very hard political task, indeed). When social change becomes more and more fast, and local communities are put in always closer relationships with a bigger context, even with a global one, then confusion of patterns becomes very likely, deception of expectations is very frequent and discontent is widespread.

Such discontent dips its roots within the global social and cultural change, but it is felt at last by single people or little groups within their world of life. For them it becomes a *social problem*.

Very often such discontent is considered as a kind of mental trouble and moves a psychological intervention. But usually its real roots don't plunge in a mental disease: on the contrary, they refer to social phenomena which can be studied and understood in their mutual relationships. And this is indeed a sociological task.

That's the reason why just during the first decades after industrial revolution, people needed for the first time some kind of knowledge which could help to understand, by scientific methods, the increasing social change consequent to that big phenomenon. And Comte proposed to name it "sociology". That's also the reason why during the XX century the rushing increase of social change gave a so strong impetus to sociological knowledge: sociologists have the task of studying the relationships between social phenomena (or also between other kinds of phenomena and at least one social phenomenon) in order to give them a sense.

European sociologists at first paid the most attention to the big social phenomena, in order to map out the mega-trends of human development. So their work remained very close to that of historians, on the one hand, and to that of social philosophers on the other one. Later (namely in America with the Chicagoan school) sociologists turned their attention to local social problems by empirical research, but mostly with a descriptive approach. R.K. Merton the first, at the middle of XX century, tried to connect each other theory and research, proposing to develop theories of middle range, able to help us to better explain particular social problems. But afterwards sociologists have not always followed such very wise proposition.

Nevertheless, they continue to face day by day *social problems*: situations where people feel uncomfortable with something related with their social context. That makes an important difference between sociology and other (hard) sciences. When sociologists don't want to map out a big historical-theoretical picture of human development, they must not take the themes upon which to make research from the work (theoretical as well as empirical) of preceding sociologists (so as it happens with physicists, chemists or mathematicians), but rather from direct or indirect experience of actual and present social problems. As a matter of fact they are almost all *clinical sociologists*: that's sociologists aiming to give people actually an answer enabling them to better face their difficult situation.

But sociologists are neither physicians nor thaumaturgists: they only manage a scientific knowledge which aims to make understandable the relationships between different

phenomena in society. How could such a knowledge help people to solve their problems? How, finally, should a clinical sociologist work?

To answer such a question we have first of all to remember that sociology doesn't pertain to the low knowledge, to that usually employed by the members in their everyday life: as a matter of fact indeed, ordinary members of a community think about their problems in their turn, and often build some kinds of theories about them. The way they build such theories is just the matter ethnomethodologists are mainly involved in. But if by this way ordinary people could well manage all their problems, nobody would have invented sociology.

Then sociology must pertain to the high knowledge. We have still seen how much problems would arise about the nature of science and of its methodology; even more problems would arise about the question whether sociology is a real science or not. But I suggest not to take a definite party in this debate, because anyway, in my opinion, it is not so useful: scholars make their research and pursue some outcomes (often very important ones) independently on the answers given to that questions (and almost all philosophers of science agree about that).

But in any case high knowledge must differ from the low one as to the *rigour*: its discourses can't be made casually nor approximately; they can't be built on sheer personal opinions, nor on some kind of wishful thinking. Rigour implies first of all a good faith from the part of the sociologist: he (she) has to take seriously the problem at stake in order to really help the social partner to feel fit with the answers given by sociology. In the second place, sociologists have to single out as much phenomena likely to be someway connected with that which gave rise to the problem, without deceiving him(her)self as well as the partner about the real cause of the problem: to seek the *causes* of a social phenomenon (then also of a problematic one) can be misleading, because social phenomena are usually so interconnected that the one can influence the other and vice-versa. Then actually we can only observe that a change in the one is very likely to modify the whole net of phenomena, but it is very difficult to forecast exactly how much and in which direction it will be modified.

In third place, rigour in the sociological discourse implies to clear all the premises of each reasoning as well as all consequences that one could forecast as likely. Thus any partner of the sociologist, should he (she) be a colleague or a layman, can verify his agreement or disagreement by furnishing arguments for it. Confronting and comparing such discourses could bring to a final agreement, or to an explicit disagreement, but the both grounded on clear basis.

Rigour is not only a moral rule for a scholar. In the case of a sociologist involved in solving some social problem it is necessary to avoid any kind of wishful thinking: that's a real danger, one of the worst, for people managing or feeling pain.

But rigour is not enough to implement a clinical approach in sociology, that is in its turn a condition for helping someone to live a better life. At this point sociologists have no remedy, no drug for directly helping partners feeling pain in the middle of a problematic situation. They only can resort to a technique still well known, coming from the professional experience of psychoanalysts: they too don't use indeed any drug to face the disease of their patients.

This technique consists of making partners (patients for the psychoanalysts, members of a little or big community, for sociologists) conscious of the whole net of phenomena (variables) inside which the pain flows. At first this could increase the pain, but then professionals must intervene for helping to try some change in some point of the net where it is possible, and to experience the outcomes of such a change.

For the members of a community (a big or a little one) consciousness not only of the whole net of variables defining their situation, but also of their power for influencing it in some direction, could be undoubtedly a factor of strengthening the *identity* of single members as well as of the group as a whole. Where identity is, at last, the image each one (single or group) has of his (her) Self compared with that they think *Generalized Other* have of the same Self (Mead, Corsale). While, in its turn, the content of such image consists at last, for the single members, of the net of cultural patterns (i.e. the personal culture) he (she) has interiorized during his (her) lifelong socialization. And for the groups or communities, it consists of the collective culture members have built by comparing each other and finally by sharing mutually cultural patterns coming from the members (among whom the leaders of the group play a main role).

But coming back to our question posed at the beginning of our discourse, what is finally a *good life*? If one looks at a happy life, neither sociology nor anyone other could really help him (her) in such direction. But if one looks at a life with a strong and gratified identity, then sociology could really be useful. And namely clinical sociology.

I said "could" and not "can", because nobody can assure us that members of the community helped by sociologists are actually able to change their situation in a positive direction. But that derives from the human nature (of the members as well as of sociologists), to which almightiness is not granted.

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More than the usual academic textbook, the present volume presents sociology as terrain that one can virtually traverse and experience. Each version of the sociological imagination captured by the chapter essays takes the readers to the realm of the taken-for-granted (such as zoological collections, food, education, entrepreneurship, religious participation, etc.) and the extraordinary (the likes of organizational fraud, climate change, labour relations, multiple modernities, etc.) - altogether presumed to be problematic and yet possible. Using the sociological perspective as the frame of reference, the readers are invited to interrogate the realities and trends which their social worlds relentlessly create for them, allowing them in return, to discover their unique locations in their cultures' social map.

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