

Sociology: The "New" Language

edited by Luigi Tomasi

Laboratorio Sociologico

FRANCOANGELI

Teoria,
Epistemologia,
Metodo

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*To my mother Alice
on her eighty seventh birthday*

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Sociology: the “New” Language

by *Luigi Tomasi**

Introduction

When in 1962 it was decided to open a faculty of sociology at the University of Trento, its academic staff consisted of ‘literati’, given that in those years sociology did not yet exist in Italy. Thereafter, the faculty produced numerous ‘sociologists’, and Trento became the principal point of departure for their careers. Sociology was regarded as a ‘novelty’, and students flocked to enrol at Trento. Also worldwide, sociology faculties recorded a marked increase in enrolments. What was the reason for sociology’s popularity?

Firstly, sociology was seen as “something new”, even though in Germany it had a history of over two hundred years. Indeed, it was a science that dated back to the 1800s, when Max Weber (1), Emile Durkheim (2) and August Comte (3) laid its foundations. In the 1900s sociology became a “science”: suffice it to consider Robert E. Park (4), William Isaac Thomas (5), or Edward Shils (6) in the United States; or in Europe, Raymond Aron (7), Georg Simmel (8), and Alain Touraine (9). Toward the end of the 1960s sociology entered its golden age, especially in America.

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Innumerable young people were attracted by this ‘new’, ‘different’, and ‘dissenting’ subject that was sociology. The discipline gradually expanded with new courses and new faculties. This was the age of great expectations.

But sociology also gave rise to innumerable protest movements around the world. It was almost as if the world had reawakened; and student protests seemed never-ending. This was the period of “youth contestation” (10). Young people wanted to be protagonists, and they were convinced that their ideas were correct. Punks, The Beatles, Nirvana, etc. were the ‘myths’ of this generation. These were young people strongly committed to social issues, but they lacked a long-range vision. Indeed, they had a substantially short-term conception of society: they did not consider it as a whole, but as being of ‘today’. Students at the University of Berkeley, for example, or the University of Paris, with their leaders and heroes – such as Jack Kerouac – focused on the war in Vietnam.

As the years passed, students changed. During the 1980s, they became ‘softer’, more docile. Society continued as before, and students grew more serious; they devoted themselves to their studies and no longer thought about protest. With the advent of the Internet, however, everything changed: the world as a whole became close at hand and the structure itself of society was profoundly modified. Relations among societies now became close-knit, and also relationships among different cultures became more malleable. In short, the Internet changed ‘the life of the world’.

Whilst the Internet altered the life of the world, young people changed their inner lives. With the passage of time, from protesters they became conformists, and especially at the University of Berkley. Young people gradually transformed themselves. It was not their mentality that was transformed, but rather their culture; and it was the Internet that brought about this ‘transformation’.

The transformation consisted in a systemic mutation. Young people around the world lost the ‘theoretical afflatus’, so to speak, of contestation. They were more inclined to lead a ‘quasi-normal’ life; they were concerned more with their own interests than with protesting for those of others. This brings us to the 2000s and the ‘softness’ of young people.

Young people today are more realistic; they have lost the commitment which distinguished them in the period of protest movements. What are the

sociological causes of this loss? Has the world 'really' changed? What are the causes intrinsic to yesterday's society and no longer present today?

Young people have always expressed themselves with paradoxes and through protest, as exemplified by youth countercultures or the punk movement, which was the voice of dissent. 'No future', as the radical rejection of the time to come, resolutely affirmed the present, the ritual time when the expression of need is already its satisfaction.

In recent years, young people have been made more reflexive, more aware, and less intrusive by the Internet, which, as said, has changed the life of society. What prospects open up for sociology? In what terms? What will become of sociology? What future will it have? Will it develop a new language?

Today's society moves at a headlong pace: what used to take ten years can now be accomplished in one month. Behaviour is abrupt, fleeting, and fluid. Sociology was born in the mid-nineteenth century when the world was static, but it was nevertheless beginning to see itself more clearly, more distinctly.

With the 'new' sciences, sociology is today almost stable. It is hard-pressed by other sciences like informatics and telematics, but it is still vigorous. Although it has been superseded, so to speak, by other sciences, sociology has a historical basis which those other sciences lack: namely society.

As said, society changes; and with the Internet it changes more rapidly. The task of sociology, I believe, is to interpret where society is heading. It is to analyse and explain the reasons why society is changing.

Sociology has a baggage of around two hundred years which cannot be neglected. Yet in these two hundred years matters have changed. Today, sociology has the extremely important task of 'foreseeing' the future as far as is possible. With what means? A sociology devoid of statistics is a sociology which is, so to speak, dead or almost. It must remain 'alive' notwithstanding the new sciences. Sociology must once again move forward with its head held high; and in any case, society cannot do without this 'science'. Society must be always analysed and interpreted, and for this reason sociology is constantly current. This has always been the case: there is always a need for interpretation, and sociology was born for precisely that purpose.

This, therefore, should be the purpose of sociology: that of analysing and interpreting 'today's man'; and this endeavour has no boundaries; it has no limits. This is the fundamental role of sociology: being the guide for the 'everyday'.

Sociology (Mankind), like theology (God) and philosophy (Reason), will never disappear because it is concerned with human beings. Therefore, as long as human beings exist, so too, probably, will sociology. Sociology has a future but it must nevertheless renew itself.

As indicated by its title – *Sociology: The “New” Language* – this book seeks to show how sociology has adapted to today’s times. It investigates what it is in the nature of sociology that makes it indispensable. Sociology must once again become important. But in what sense?

The principal handicap of sociology is that it must analyse current ‘transformations’ using statistics in real or almost real time. People of today are constantly in a hurry: they do not have time to stand and stare, to meditate. They can do nothing of this kind because they are overwhelmed by appointments, meetings, online communications, etc., all of which render them into ‘quasi-automatons’. And sociology must adjust accordingly.

Life today is frenetic, and sociology will only have a future if it can keep pace with it; if it can, in a certain sense, ‘anticipate’ the times. As society accelerates, so sociology struggles to keep up with it. Why is this?

Sociology will have a future if it can reconcile the ‘speed’ of research with its ‘timing’. It must address and give rapid responses to contemporary issues; or, as Peter Berger and Brigitte Berger put it, “Sociology is an intellectual response to the particular crisis of modern Western society” (and Eastern) (11).

Obviously, sociology must adjust if it is to keep abreast of the times. It must interrogate itself, acknowledge its errors, and as far as possible remedy them. Because society changes so rapidly, it must be interpreted on a sufficiently manageable scale. From one year to the next, society is no longer recognizable, and research becomes outdated. Is a new language necessary?

Sociology must recognize that the times have changed. In recent years, sociology has languished, but it continues to be the ‘principal science’ as theology and philosophy used to be. It is true that sociology has traversed a period of severe crisis before acquiring a certain stability. Obviously, other disciplines have arisen, but sociology is still an important stage in the development of science (12).

It is essential that sociology should become a ‘science’; that sociology, with its important role in contemporary society, should once again be a discipline able to interpret the times. It is well known that sociology has intro-

duced a range of original insights into the field of scientific inquiry, and this ‘novelty’ must be maintained.

Against this background, we may now turn to presentation of the essays in this book. There are four of them, and each of them views the reality and future of sociology in a different way; this too is a ‘language’!

The first essay is by Talis Tisenhopfs (University of Latvia, Latvia), and it is entitled “The New Language of Sociology”. It distinguishes three forms of sociology: theoretical sociology, public sociology, and literary sociology. Tisenhopfs conceives sociology as an endeavour “to explain society as interaction among diverse actors” with an array of “concepts, ideas, hypotheses, theories, postulates”. Theoretical sociology, according to Tisenhopfs, is concerned with “the development of conceptual models and the formation of multilevel systems of knowledge”. Public sociology seeks to provide “sociological explanations ... with the ultimate intention of defending the public good”. And literary sociology examines descriptions, essays, and the like, to elicit the “signifying reality”.

“Sociology”, Tisenhopfs writes, “always seeks to disclose typical reality, characteristic interactions and forms of organisation of social life ... the socially meaningful reality behind vivid personal experiences”. The essay is extremely thought-provoking, and it demonstrates how sociology acquires value in today’s world.

The essay by Zdzislaw Krasnodebski (University of Bremen, Germany) – “Back to the World” – is a theoretical text whose ideas have been prompted by a study visit to the United States. “This monotony of the landscape of world sociology (or at least ‘Western sociology’)”, Krasnodebski maintains, “could itself be explained sociologically”. His contention is that, notwithstanding the “existence of ‘multiple modernities’, we still think that there is one global sociology” The essay analyses the situation of sociology in the contemporary world with an abundance of insights and highly appropriate observations.

Anthony J. Blasi (Tennessee State University, Usa) has contributed an essay entitled “The Problem of the Commodification of Sociological Knowledge”, where commodification, “following Karl Marx, is the alienation of a human’s activity into an object that stands apart from and even against the human that produced it”.

Biasi argues that sociology can be important in research activity, “but it will gain discipline-relevant insight only occasionally, by happenstance, or not at all”. The essay is very dense in its content and broad in its scope, ranging across sociology’s legacy from such figures as Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Alfred Schutz.

The last essay is by José Machado Pais (University of Lisbon, Portugal): “Decipherings of the Social: ‘My Home is a World’ (the Homeless)”. The essay recounts research which shows that the problem of homelessness in contemporary society is as acute as it ever was. Pais points out that the hardships of poverty are today extremely widespread. His essay, based on participant observation, evidences that the signs of ‘misery’ are increasingly evident in the contemporary world, but also that sociology has a crucial role in abating such misery.

Conclusion

The purpose of all four of the essays in the book is to illustrate how sociology ‘lives’ in today’s world and to indicate how sociology can be used to interpret the behaviour of social actors in a state of constant change.

The thought of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, August Comte, and others, must be interpreted in conformity with contemporary phenomena. Sociology will have a future if it is able to grasp the ‘times’ and the ‘occasions’ of the moment; if it is able to respond in the ‘instant-now’. And to do so it requires a new language.

The world has changed, and sociology must adapt itself to this increasingly rapid transformation. Only if it is able to grasp problems and interpret them swiftly will sociology have a future.

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The New Language of Sociology

by *Talis Tisenkopfs**

Introduction

This essay argues that in contemporary sociology three important forms of language can be distinguished, which, supplementing each other, improve the understanding of social processes and the communication of knowledge, i.e.: theoretical sociology, public sociology, and literary sociology or depiction and essay. Theoretical sociology deals with the development of conceptual models and the formation of multilevel systems of knowledge; it creates conceptual explanations and draws theoretical conclusions about the society. Public sociology exists in the interaction between sociologists and other groups in the society and mediates sociological ideas and research results in wider social circles. Literary sociology makes use of the language of metaphor and an idiosyncratic approach; it highlights the individual forms of social existence, the uniqueness of social facts. These forms of language are rooted in the history of the discipline; but what is new is their application and combined use in the explication of the complexities of contemporary society. The diversity of language expands the capacities of sociology to identify critical contemporary developments and engage in their governance. Language is also a means for the self-representation of sociology and expression of the identity of a sociologist. This article explores the potential of sociological language in its different forms, its stylistic diversity, creative use and complementarity. Examples of how different forms of sociological language can be used and

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combined are taken from scientific articles, joint European research projects, public and literary engagements of sociologists. Nowadays sociologists work with an abundance of concepts, ideas, data, reflections, intuitions, metaphors, rhizomic and fluctuating meanings in an endeavour to grasp the essence of ever-fluctuating social reality. This article argues for creativity in sociological analysis and expression.

1. Theoretical sociology: development of conceptual models and creation of multilevel systems of knowledge

The basic function of sociology is to explain society as interaction among diverse actors or, paraphrasing Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton, to discover the system and process aspects of *social facts* at macro, meso and micro levels (the levels of *grand theory*, middle-range theory and empirical sociological research). The vocabulary of theoretical sociology consists of concepts, ideas, hypotheses, theories, postulates, etc.; its generic forms and practical arrangements are comparisons, integrated analysis, synthesis, conclusions and the like. Theory functions as a research device or *cognitive engine* that anchors the base-line methodology, enables its application, unfolds the research process, and sustains its integrity. Theory cannot be detached from the practical research procedures and arrangements within which it is developed – collaborative research projects, empirical fieldwork, scholarly exchange, scientific writing etc.

The development of conceptual models is a *sine qua non* of scientific research. Conceptual models tie together all the elements of both theoretical and empirical work and give rise to multi-level systems of knowledge. In other words, conceptual modelling is the heart of scientific production. The purpose of developing conceptual models and creating multi-level systems of knowledge is to deepen the explanations of complex social processes, their interactions and relatedness within the context of other processes.

The following cognitive logic can be observed in the development of conceptual models: defining the problem and theme of research; choice of relevant reference theories and concepts; formulation of research ideas, hypotheses and questions; translation of conceptual models into empirical research methodology; implementation of fieldwork in which the conceptual framework is provided with the empirical material; testing the conceptual model in

analysis of the empirical material; fine-tuning the model with comparative analysis and synthesis; finally, revision and enrichment of the original theoretical model and the proposal of new ideas. Conceptual models can also be put at the basis of research recommendations and dissemination processes. In brief, conceptual modelling has the following functions: conceiving a research idea; organizing the research design; devising the research process throughout its *stages, phases, and work packages*; conveying the knowledge between the disciplines and between research and praxis.

Conceptual modelling resembles driving a modern car assisted by three-dimensional satellite navigation equipment: the driver watches the road and steers the vehicle in accordance with the route plan displayed on a screen. Similarly, navigation in complex research projects is assured by means of conceptual models. These are not only *cognitive road maps* adopted by multidisciplinary research teams; they also resemble internal rules of conduct. We may discern several dimensions in the constitution of conceptual models: the ‘time-line’, ‘evolution’ and ‘saturation’. The time-line relates to paradigmatic, contextual, large-scale changes in the society within which the given social process is investigated. In the transition studies literature, a time-line is often referred to as a ‘landscape’, meaning macro-level conditions which change over time (Geels and Schot 2007). Evolution refers to the internal dynamics of the social processes under investigation. Saturation concerns the configuration of actor-networks and interactions – the very core of the processes studied. The idea of saturation means that interactions and networks become denser and more complex as initiatives and projects develop (Brunori *et al.* 2007).

The conceptual modelling and elaboration of multi-level systems of knowledge can be illustrated on the basis of two European research projects in the field of agriculture and rural development: IN-SIGHT and SUS-CHAIN. The IN-SIGHT project¹ investigated innovation processes in agriculture and rural development; the SUS-CHAIN project² explored the sustainability aspects of food supply chains (relationships among producers, processors, retailers, and consumers).

¹ IN-SIGHT - Strengthening Innovation Processes for Growth and Development, FP6-2005-SSA-5A. Contract no. 44510. The original work can be found in project reports at <http://www.insightproject.net/>.

² SUS-CHAIN - Marketing Sustainable Agriculture: An analysis of the Potential Role of New Food Supply Chains in Sustainable Rural Development, EU FP5 Project, Contract No. QLK5-CT-2002-01349. The original work can be found in project reports at <http://www.sus-chain.org/>.