Sociological Knowledge: The Double Error of Scientism

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One of the issues that has always been discussed when addressing the problem of scientific knowledge in sociology concerns the very tools suitable for knowledge and the consequent technical needs of the researcher: in one term, methodology. We have already had occasion to explain in previous studies (Corposanto 2022 a, Corposanto 2022 b) the proposal of an inclusive sociology, epistemologically tolerant, without any claim to be exhaustive in its space-time arguments (which, moreover, as is clear from particle physics, are themselves social constructions lacking the requirements of objectivity and truth in themselves). A sociology, however, that is open to the versatility of knowledge and the certainty of the absence of linearity in conclusions, to the awareness that there is no true paradigm that does not at the same time presuppose a possible error, and finally that the gaze, albeit fleeting, on the social world must nevertheless try to make the maximum effort to be credible, even before being plausible.

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I. SCENARIO

In the famous Rede Lecture of 1959, scientist and novelist C.P. Snow (2012) argued that the intellectual world is divided into two parts, the sciences and the humanities, each of which expresses its own culture. Over time, the 'two cultures' become increasingly incomprehensible to each other as they develop. Snow asserted that the future of mankind would therefore depend on the ability of intellectuals to dialogue in such a way as to integrate the two cultures, so that science would once again be characterized by an understanding of the concrete, everyday human condition. What is the state of the art today? The dialogue between the two cultures hypothesized by Snow has only been hypothesized: in fact, there seems to be a close correlation between the ever-increasing decline of the humanities and the uncontrolled growth of a scientistic approach, underpinned by the belief that the model of explanation can be standardized using a single scientific approach. Today, scientism has taken on the characteristics of a veritable ideology, which pervades all the sciences and the most diverse spheres of society: from art history to music; from the field of evaluation to the varied and complex world of education, school and university (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem 2007; Robinson & Schubert 2014; Scruton 2014).

But how did this happen?

Among the many reasons, one can distinguish some more general structural causes related to the historical and social context, and others more specific related to the state of the sciences as a whole and, more specifically, of the humanities.

Regarding the structural causes, it is not so strange that the imbalance between the sciences and the humanities has become more extreme in recent decades. As Giddens (2000) observed, in times of globalization, a whole series of fundamentalisms develop, the expression of those who, disoriented and overwhelmed by change, react with anguish and sometimes violence, rejecting dialogue, cultural diversity and

cosmopolitanism and seeking salvation in clinging to the traditions of the past. But fundamentalism is not confined to religion. Scientism, in this sense, is also to be considered a clear form of fundamentalism (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem 2007).

But let us come to the more specific causes related to the state of science. Scientism is the opium of scientists. It works as a veritable 'agent of removal' (Partial 2015), simplifying reality and eliminating, only apparently, the criticalities linked to the natural complexity of social phenomena. The social sciences, for their part, have found themselves, on the basis of subjective conditions, particularly susceptible to the invasion of scientist ideology (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem 2007). Marradi (2010), for instance, highlights the inferiority complex that has led many social scientists to adopt both vocabulary and epistemology to the method of the natural sciences.

Nevertheless, there are many stances and attempts to react to the pervasiveness of scientist ideology. Among the many stances that have been taken over time in the debate on the subject, perhaps the most cutting is the one that refers to scientism as those "*unfortunate attempts to unduly extend to other fields the intellectual clothes proper to the physical and biological sciences*" (Hayek 1952). Because, as the author himself recalls, the scientist even goes so far as *'to deny the foundation of social science, that is, the existence in the social world of regularities that have matured spontaneously, outside of any programmatic deliberation, through logics that are autonomous from the subjects*' (ibid).

II. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

From a strictly methodological point of view, in any case, the question appears interesting above all for what we might call a double error: one entirely conceptual, the other strictly operational.

As far as the first error is concerned, let us try to analyze it from a threefold perspective. Firstly, the epistemological one, which lives in the opposition between absolute and (purely) relative knowledge. To put it with pervasive incisiveness, a perspective aimed at "*constructing a scientific truth capable of integrating the vision of the observer and the truth of the practical vision of the agent as a point of view that ignores itself as such and tests itself in the illusion of the absolute*" (Bourdieu 2001).

Secondly, there is the ontological question, articulated in the opposition between the classical elements analyzed by the 'hard' sciences (atoms, genes) and those at the center of the social sciences, namely individuals. Only if we understand that knowledge in the social sciences is never absolutely anything other than that particular model that we are able to conceive, institutionalize, use and socialize - and that somehow allows us to come to terms with the reality we live in and within which we live - is it possible perhaps to overcome that dualism that still today tends to kill off a central part of the method proper to the social sciences. Knowledge is, necessarily, always a certain part of reality; temporally and locally determined in each case.

The third aspect is peculiarly concerned with the ethical question, which has many facets. We will mention here one for all and it concerns the relationship that the researcher has with time, understood as a historical moment of life and analysis. This is because all our knowledge is inextricably linked to our evolutionary, social, and cultural experience. And precisely to the extent that we can highlight its peculiar temporal characteristic, it is possible to think of 'generalizing' it to broader and more articulated spheres.

The scientist perspective, in short, precisely because of the epistemological, ontological, and ethical aspects just described results in a gross methodological error for the social sciences.

But as mentioned, this is not the only error. Because we would also like to reflect on another aspect, certainly related to the very function of the discipline considered from a strictly operational point of view, and therefore on the very side of its expendability (and perhaps, incidentally, the most ardent scientists turn out to be those who have never grasped the importance of research not only

aimed at the academy, but contaminated with people, groups, interactions that daily tread the streets of the world). The second big mistake that scientists make is therefore intimately linked to the very way research is done. In the case of the social sciences, for example, it manifests itself in a systematic, exclusive, sometimes even morbid recourse to the classical tools of quantitative analysis and statistics. This tendency is so pervasive and deep-rooted that it even influences the work of those qualitative scientists who, by virtue of a real sense of inferiority (cf. Marradi 2010), seek their own redemption in a clumsy attempt to 'quantitativize' the qualitative.

In fact, from our point of view, the best possible approach is that of an integrated, even doubly integrated perspective.

The first level of integration consists in the removal of the classical alleged problematic nature of the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy. This makes it possible to grasp the essence of things as fully as possible, overcoming the dualism between methodologies so called hard and soft. Exactly as happens, for example, in evaluation processes, where the absence of some important point of view may prove deleterious from the point of view of the result. In fact, therefore, from a strictly operational point of view, the best perspective is that of a qualitative-quantitative integration that thus recovers certain aspects of the use of tools common to all the sciences, where possible, placing them alongside those traditionally belonging to the social sciences. This is how it works, in fact. This is how, in fact, even a good part of the most hardened scientists work, while publicly disavowing this approach.

But as anticipated, there is a second level of integration that, in our opinion (Corposanto 2004), must also be pursued from a further perspective: the intrusive/periscopic one. Because in this way, the triangulation of results will also be done with methods that compensate for their respective criticalities.

A double error, in short, that committed by the scientist approach. One exquisitely theoretical, the other certainly operational.

This is how a 'neutral', epistemologically tolerant methodological approach of the scientific disciplines that can draw information from it, brings different scientific approaches back on the same level, no longer hard or soft as a sort of scientific-academic allotment has always maintained (Corposanto & Molinari, 2022).

Just in this perspective, sociologists can once again occupy a leading position in the scientific debate, making use of their ability to read in advance the situation to be analyzed (the hypothesis formulation phase), carrying out an adequate intervention plan (by means of imagination) and being able to count on an apparatus of techniques that today appear more adequate to grasp the meaning of things (Wright Mills 1953).

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