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## The Difficult Institutionalization of Early Italian Sociology

Alberto Martinelli\*

### 1 Preface

In the last decades of the XIX century the interest for sociology as a new scientific discipline was widespread and fast growing in Italy. Together with France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, Italy has been one of the countries where most of the sociological work prior to the first world war was done (Wallerstein, 1994). The social context of the country engaged in the difficult double task of nation building and modernization, and the cultural hegemony of positivism in the intellectual life, both favoured the growth of sociology, although as I will argue, a large diffusion went together with limited scientific development and little institutionalization. A few great figures, first of all that of Pareto, developed amidst a multitude of far less rigorous works by 'amateur' sociologists.

Sociology had to wait until 1923 to become a compulsory subject of study at the Florence School of Political Sciences 'Cesare Alfieri', mostly as a result of the fierce opposition of idealistic philosophy to any kind of knowledge which was in some way related to positivism. Moreover, the aversion of the fascist regime to free intellectual inquiry of Italy's social problems- coupled with the hostility of more established academic disciplines like law, philosophy and economics- contributed to confine it to a very few universities. Only after the second world war, sociology became fully institutionalized in Italian universities and research centers, still amidst the opposition of vast sectors of the intellectual establishment.

Aim of this essay is to discuss the early diffusion of Italian sociology in the age of triumphant positivism (in the last decades of the XIX century) and to account for the reasons of its sudden crisis (in the first decade of the XXth) and unachieved institutionalization, in spite of its theoretical developments, such as Pareto's theory of elites, ideologies and social change, the analysis of criminal behaviour by the school of Lombroso and Ferri, and the empirical research on various aspects of Italy's 'social question'.

I will start with a short discussion of the factors, both domestic and exogenous, both structural and cultural, which account for the genesis of Italian sociology and I will suggest a periodization. Second, I will examine the social and political background of Italian modernization and nation building in the last decade of the

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XIX century and in the early years of the XXth – which are the years of the largest diffusion of sociology and of its incipient crisis. Third, I will discuss the intellectual context, and, more specifically, the shift from the hegemony of positivism to that of idealism in Italian culture at the turn of the century, and the implications of these trends for the institutions of higher learning, in general, and the contested development of sociology, in particular. Then, I will describe the institutional framework in terms of academic disciplines, scientific reviews, publishing projects, museums, and other institutions aiming at the diffusion of high learning. And, finally, I will analyze the main factors accounting for the weak institutionalization of Italian early sociology.

## 2 When and why was sociology born in Italy?

Sociology is a typical product and a conscious effort in self-understanding of modern, industrial society. Its development in a given country tends to coincide with macro-processes of economic, social and political transformation, as those taking place in Italian society in the second half of the XIX century and in the early XX century. The building of new nations like Germany and Italy in the second half of the XIX century, programmes of transformation of society as in the French Third Republic, the integration of massive immigration flows, as in the United States and Argentina at the turn of the century, are all contexts favourable to the growth of sociological research. Nation building, industrialization and urbanization, social integration of new-comers (both of workers excluded from the bourgeois politics and of immigrants), and the attempts of governance of the social question, are the processes associated with the rise of the new social sciences, and of sociology among them.

With regard to the link between intellectual innovation and social change, the process of nation building – achieved in 1861 – was more important in the birth and development of Italian sociology, while questions related to the formation of industrial society became more relevant in a later phase, i. e. at the turn of the century. In fact, the famous D'Azeglio's sentence that "once Italy is made, it is time to make the Italians" expressed a widespread attitude among the Italian educated elites – who wished to know the real conditions of the newly born Italian state, intended to build a real national community, and wanted to overcome major inequalities and backwardnesses of Italian society.

The formidable tasks of building a national identity out of a multitude of separate regional cultures, of constructing a legitimate political system and an efficient state bureaucracy, of fostering industrialization, and reducing century old miseries and social injustices, all required the scientific investigation of social reality.

An indigenous tradition of socially concerned knowledge existed from Machiavelli and Gucciardini to Vico, to the works of the Milanese and Neapolitan Enlightenment of late XVIII century, with Beccaria, Verri, Galiani and Genovesi as major figures. This intellectual tradition had continued in the works of Gioia, Romagnosi, Gioberti, Rosmini, Ferrari, and Cattaneo. The last one in particular, a Milanese scholar and man of action, with a broad European cultural formation and an acute pragmatic mind, developed a coherent project of modernization of Italian society which included scientific progress, industrial growth, federalism, and civil development. With his review 'Il Politecnico', in the decades before and after the national unity, he was a staunch supporter of applied social science and of empirically-based, policy-oriented knowledge.

On the other hand, since the XVIII century many Italian intellectuals had opened themselves again to the great currents of European thought, and became active participants in the international intellectual debate. They played the role of gatekeepers and introduced foreign theories and ideologies, often reinterpreting and adapting them to the specific Italian reality. The *Weltanschauungen* of the enlightenment, of romanticism, and of positivism, all had a significant impact on Italian intellectual life, but it was the last one which was strictly bound to Italy's scientific development in general, and to the rise of Italian sociology in particular.

In this respect, Pasquale Villari's essay "La filosofia positiva e il metodo storico" published in 1866 in the Second Series of Cattaneo's 'Il Politecnico' and written under the influence of John Stuart Mill's book "Auguste Comte and positivisme" can be considered the 'manifesto' of sociological positivism in Italy. Together with the monumental agricultural inquiry ("Inchiesta agraria") – which was initiated in those years by Stefano Jacini and portrayed the miserable living and working conditions of most peasants both in northern and southern Italy and the social relations in the countryside –, Villari's essay can be taken as a conventional date of birth of Italian sociology.

Italian sociology can be thus considered both the outgrowth of an indigenous intellectual tradition from Machiavelli to Vico, to Cattaneo, and of the acceptance, often acritical, of XIX century main European currents of thought, mostly positivism and evolutionism, with Darwin and Spencer playing a much greater role than Comte.

On the basis of these remarks, a viable periodization of Italian sociology can identify three major phases, each of which can be further subdivided into two sub-periods. The three phases reflect the major political regimes of the Italian nation state (the authoritarian democracy of the Savoy monarchy between 1861 and 1922, the fascist authoritarian regime with totalitarian features between 1922 and 1943, and the republican democracy since 1946); as well as the timing and sequence of the process of industrial growth and societal modernization (with major developments in the early XX century and in the post-2<sup>nd</sup> world war decades);



and the hegemonic intellectual trends (at first positivism, then idealism, and finally the open, diversified and cosmopolitan climate of the post second world war epoch).

The first phase – which goes from the birth of the Italian nation state in 1861 to the middle of the first decade of the XX century – can be called the birth, consolidation and crisis of positivist sociology. It can be further divided into two sub-periods: the first – from 1861 to the end of the 1880s (1888 is the year of the Italian translation of Spencer's "First Principles") – marks the progressive diffusion and assertion of positivist theories and method.

The second sub-period of the first phase – from the end of the 1880s to the middle of the first decade of the XX century (Croce's influential, anti-positivist, review "La critica" was first published in 1903) – is characterized by contradictory trends: on the one hand, large diffusion of sociological works, free university courses, new reviews and journals; on the other, constrained development and unachieved institutionalization of sociology as a recognized academic discipline. It is the time when Pareto exposed the research program of his later major opus "Trattato di Sociologia generale" in courses that he held at the Université de Lausanne and Università di Bologna, and a few other scientifically rigorous works were published, but together with a large number of poor quality, self-defined sociological publications. It is the time when generous attempts to root and spread sociology and social research were made by several scientific and political journals, but no academic institutionalization of the new discipline was achieved.

In the second phase in the history of Italian sociology – which goes from the first decade of the XX century to the end of the second world war – sociology was gradually pushed to the edge. The first sub-period – the first two decades of the century – was marked by the idealistic reaction of Croce and Gentile to sociology, as part of the more general attack against positivism. In 1905 an important conference on sociology was held at the Academy of Moral Sciences of Naples, where supporters and adversaries fiercely debated, but the outcome was largely hostile to the quest for academic legitimation of the new discipline.

The second sub-period is that of fascism. Although it is not true that fascism was totally opposed to sociology, the general cultural climate was not favourable to scientific freedom. A limited academic recognition took place with the first sociological chairs in the new faculties of Political sciences and several empirical investigations were made by a kind of state-controlled social demography and social statistics. Mussolini himself pretended to have been a student of Pareto during his exile in Lausanne and tried without much success to present him as one of the ideologues of fascism. Michels and a few other sociologists enjoyed the favour of the regime. But, on the whole, the authoritarian political nature of fascism and more than that its totalitarian features, did not tolerate serious intellectual critique, and imposed severe constraints to free scientific social analysis.

Finally, the third phase – which can be called the ‘age of the renaissance’ – starts with the formation of the new democratic Italy and can be further divided according to the timing and sequence of the process of modernization of contemporary Italian society. The influence of American sociology was at first very strong (from the end of the second world war to the ‘60s), while, later on, a more autonomous scientific production took place by a fast growing sociological community working in universities and independent research centers, with about one hundred chairs, hundreds of researchers, and thousands of students.

In this paper, I will focus on the second period of the first phase, i. e. the years at the turn of the century, since it is at that time that sociology made its major efforts to acquire full citizenship in Italian culture, and that major contradictions, strengths and weaknesses became apparent. This crucial period has not been yet deeply studied and discussed, in spite of a few valuable works by Treves, Barbano, Sola, Lentini, Rutigliano, and a few others.

### 3 The social context of late XIX and early XX century Italy

In the last decade of the XIX century, Italy was a country where areas of modern industry, technology and social relations were in strident contrast with larger areas of poverty and ignorance. Per capita income amounted to 40\$, while in France it was 130\$ and in the United Kingdom 155\$. A badly needed agrarian reform was continuously postponed because of the political power of big landowners. The country was modernizing but in a context of deep cleavages between north and south, strong inequalities among social classes, and recurrent political conflicts. Major processes of social transformation contributing to the development of sociology and other social science were:

- The industrialization of the Italian North-West and the formation of an industrial working class (reaching 40% of the total labor force in Lombardy and in Liguria, in 1911) that claimed economic and social welfare and political rights;
- The growth of the big cities of the North-West and the exodus from the countryside (at the turn of the century the urban population increased 4% each year because of immigrant peasants);
- The backwardness and poverty of the Southern regions and of most of the countryside;
- The vast currents of external migrations which brought millions of Italians to the Americas;
- The growing political influence of the Northern industrial bourgeoisie at the expense of the so-called ‘agrarian bloc’ of the South (which was made of big landowners, a local service class of traditional professionals, other “notabili”, and the clergy).

This state of affairs gave rise to denunciations by foreign observers (as, for instance, those by King and Okey, 1902); and, more important, sharpened in the public opinion the awareness of old evils and new contradictions of Italian society and stimulated analyses of the 'social question' by concerned scholars. The deep and thorough transformations of Italian society were portrayed in famous parliamentary investigations, like the one by Jacini on the conditions of the peasants, and the one by Sonnino and Franchetti on Sicilian society, as well as in proto-sociographic surveys by scholars like Bertani who studied the health conditions of the people in the countryside.

Italy was a 'late comer' with its own specificities. Enclaves of industrial production and of modern culture grew in a context of backwardness. State intervention in the economy was significant, since many entrepreneurs asked for state support and protection, but it was not very effective. The ruling class was a compenetration of old and new elites striking unstable compromises, with a weak bourgeoisie unresolved whether to adopt a strategy of incorporating the workers in a democratic policy or isolating them through the violent repression of mass protest. Political corruption and financial scandals – like that of the Banca romana – involved top political leaders, and attempts to control the vote by the government through the network of 'prefetti' were denounced by concerned citizens.

The situation fostered tensions, contradictions, and conflicts. In 1893 a vast movement of protest (the so called 'fasci siciliani') erupted in Sicily, as a consequence of a severe drop in agricultural exports because of the custom war which the Italian government waged against France. In 1898, a larger wave of social unrest took place around the country, as a result of old and new grievances; traditional turmoil in the south because of the shortage of wheat – provoked by the famine of 1897 and by the diminished imports from the US due to the Spanish-American war – and the demands of women and artisans asking for bread and work in many provincial towns, went together with the modern protest of organized factory workers in the major industrial areas.

The wave of protest culminated on the 6th of May in Milan – the capital of Italian modern industry –, where the army shot at the crowd, killing hundreds of strikers. The central government gave the official version that the protest was the product of a socialist conspiracy and took the pretext for ruling the dismantlement of socialist political organizations and movements and the restriction of civil liberties. The shift toward authoritarian rule stirred, however, the reaction not only of the political left but also of large segments of the 'progressive bourgeoisie' of the North. The latter – the so-called 'State of Milan' – sharpened its critique of traditional rule and gave a different interpretation of the social unrest, seen not as the product of a socialist conspiracy but as the expression of a protest against the centralized state and the imperialist policy of the monarchy, which were both seen as obstacles to the civil progress of the country.

The turbulent years which followed ended with the restoration of a parliamentary government headed by Zanardelli, a coherent liberal, who opened the way to the reform governments headed by Giovanni Giolitti. These governments, known as the 'età giolittiana' (1901–1914), represented a period of relative political stability favorable to growth. Giolitti was a pragmatic liberal, an experienced administrator, and a shrewd parliamentary politician. He realized that the government should perform a policy of democratic reforms, which included an enlarged political suffrage, the first instances of social legislation, state neutrality in labor conflict, and policies favorable to economic development and social modernization. Giolitti's governments marked a turning point, without solving, however, old and new contradictions. The general social climate remained turbulent and open to innovation and change. It was a context which required serious social analysis and was potentially favorable to the development of sociological research. But, in those same years, the intellectual context became less and less favorable to sociology.

#### 4 The intellectual context: positivism, evolutionism, and competing paradigms

In the last decades of the XIX century, the Italian intellectual scene was dominated by evolutionary positivism. According to positivism, science is the only possible knowledge and any kind of metaphysics has no value at all; the scientific method can and should be applied to all aspects of reality, and, in particular, to the study of man and society – through the development of the key sciences of psychology and sociology; philosophy, having no proper field of study, tends to coincide with the totality of positivist knowledge and the conceptualization of the principles common to all sciences; the advancement of science is the basis of human progress, and the instrument for a whole reorganization of social life, capable to cope with the problems of the modern world. The positivist method stresses the central role of empirical observation, induction, quantitative analysis, the rigorous distinction between value judgements and judgements based on facts, and the viability of objective scientific knowledge. The logical-experimental method of the natural sciences is applied to the study of social reality, in order to discover the laws of societal functioning and social development.

Actually, it is necessary to distinguish two major phases in positivism: in the first half of the XIX century, it is mostly a reaction to the crisis of European society in the age of the Restoration, after the Enlightenment and the French revolution, and it is concerned with the question of social and moral order to be responded through the study of the historical evolution of mankind. In Comte's thought, sociology plays the key role in a programme of general reform of knowledge and society and in the theory of human evolution. But in this first phase positivism is obscured by the predominant influence of idealism and romanticism.

It is only in the second half of the XIX century that positivism became hegemonic in the European culture. It was largely seen as the embodiment of the values, attitudes, and hopes of modern industrial society; and it became to a large extent the ideology of the bourgeoisie, which identified progress with science and technology, and economic growth with political liberalism.

In Spencer's sociology, under the influence of Darwin, the evolutionary perspective becomes biological and even more evident: the history of mankind is interpreted as the progressive adaptation of human beings to their environment, according to natural laws. In the present highest stage of evolution, that of 'industrial society', individuals' free initiative plays a much greater role than in previous 'military society', within more differentiated and organized social structures. But individual initiative against the constraints of community is shaped by heredity and environmental factors. At the same time, other social scientists, like Quetelet and Le Play, develop a kind of 'social physics', through a systematic assessment of the quantitative dimension of social phenomena.

These authors were well known in Italy, and exerted a deep influence at various times and on different authors. But Darwin and Spencer were much more influential than Comte. The main reason for the different impact of the former with regard to the latter is that positivism came later in Italy than in France and England, it came in the late decades of the XIX century, because Italy was a late-comer in the process of both scientific and economic modernization.

This later arrival, at a time when positivism was already hegemonic, contributes to explain both the large and successful diffusion, and the more orthodox and rigid application. In spite of widespread dogmatism, however, positivism had a beneficial impact on Italian social knowledge. As Asor Rosa (1976) remarks, it developed a draft of sociological science, fostered educational studies and methods, developed the study of criminal and psychiatric behaviour, gave a strong impulse to movements of social reform through the famous investigations of Southern Italian society.

In the last decades of the XIX century, Italian sociology was also open and exposed – within the dominant positivist atmosphere – to the influence of major political ideologies. I already pointed out that positivism was fully compatible with political liberalism, as the works of Stuart Mill and Spencer clearly show. One of the most interesting sociological reviews (in a broad sense) is 'Riforma sociale', founded in 1894 by Francesco Saverio Nitti, one of Italy's most intelligent political leaders. In the pages of *Riforma sociale* appeared significant contributions by Durkheim, Simmel, Sorel, and Colajanni, Einaudi, Graziani, and interesting empirical sociological investigations of the life and social conditions of peasants' and workers' families– conducted according to Le Play's method.

A second major influence on early Italian sociology was historical materialism and other ideological foundations of the newborn socialist movement, which



took place mostly through two reviews, Turati's 'Critica sociale' and Colajanni's 'Rivista popolare di politica, lettere e scienze sociali', and through the works of authors like Loria and Ferri, that I will discuss later.

A third, relevant influence was the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, set out by Leone XIII. The major vehicle was the 'Rivista internazionale di scienze sociali' founded in 1893 by Giuseppe Toniolo under the influence of Leone XIII. This review stressed the interdisciplinary study of social reality, the dialogue among intellectuals of different countries, and the refusal of a neutral social science in favor of a catholic-oriented one. A few years earlier, in 1889 the 'Unione cattolica per gli studi sociali' was formed in Padua, which offered courses in sociology, introduced the teaching of sociology into the seminaries for priests, and influenced the social policy program of the catholic movement.

While the relationship of sociology with marxism became more and more controversial in the following decades, the relationships with reform-oriented socialism and with the catholic movement was much less problematic. This special relationship helps to explain why both socialist and catholic intellectuals were to play a major role in the renaissance of sociology after the Second World War.

We can now draw a preliminary conclusion on the influence of the intellectual context in the development of Italian sociology: the identification of the new discipline with an often dogmatic version of the positivist theory and method – was very strong in the last decades of the XIX century. While it was not a sufficient condition to guarantee academic recognition, it exposed sociology to the subsequent reaction of idealistic philosophy and made it a major target of the critique of positivism in Italian culture.

## 5 The institutional context of social sciences

Positivism favoured the building of scientific institutions – both in the natural and in the social sciences – as major ways to improve the knowledge basic to economic and human development. The scientific approach and the notion of progress inherent in European positivism were very well received into the Italian culture, where representatives of old and new disciplines, from law to history, from philosophy to economics, affirmed the need to root the process of nation building and social development on solid scientific bases.

In the last decades of the XIX century, Italy's main cultural institutions were deeply influenced by positivism: new disciplines like economics, anthropology and criminology grew into the academy. In 1875, the School of Political sciences Cesare Alfieri was established in Florence with the aim of forging the cadres of the bureaucracy of the newly born Italian state, on the basis of a curriculum different



from that of the law faculties, in line with the suggestions made by Romagnosi and Cattaneo.

New publishing projects were accomplished like the 'Biblioteca dell'economista' and several series of translations and original works in social sciences were published by specialized publishers like Bocca in Turin. A national system of statistical reporting, from the data on strikes to the data on agricultural output, was established. New scientific museums were opened in major cities.

In the last decade of the XIX century, new scientific reviews were founded, such as *Giornale degli economisti*, *Rivista internazionale di scienze sociali*, *Rivista di etnologia*, *Rivista italiana di antropologia*, *Rivista di sociologia*, 'Rassegna di sociologia e scienze ausiliarie'; and, in 1897 – the same year Durkheim founded in Paris the *Année sociologique* – the 'Rivista italiana di Sociologia' was born.

Institutional innovations were, however, obstructed by a conservative university system. Italian higher education was centralized and rigid. The Casati education law, enacted in 1859 by the Cavour government for the Kingdom of Sardinia and the provinces of Lombardy, and later – after the birth of the Kingdom of Italy – extended to the rest of the country, put universities under the direct control of the state, required that rectors were nominated each year by the king among full professors, and fixed the number of universities and of faculties within them.

The Italian system was a kind of mix between the French model and the German model; and tried to find an uneasy compromise between the century old tradition of autonomy and localism and the recent need for state bureaucratic control. Political instability (between the birth of the Italian kingdom in 1861 and the rise to power of fascism in 1922 there were 40 different education ministers in 56 different governments) made it difficult to adopt coherent and farsighted educational policies. The great heritage of the Middle Ages – which had later deteriorated in a multitude of provincial particularisms – was to a great extent frozen, so that new projects found it very hard to be implemented. There were on the whole four faculties – Law, Medicine, Sciences (with the related Schools of Engineering), and Humanities – which were present all together only in the universities of Bologna, Padova, Pavia, Pisa and Naples. Only the holders of Liceo classico degrees could enroll in those faculties. At a lower level, there were the Scuole di applicazione (Schools of Applied Sciences) in Agriculture, Commerce, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine. The official goals of universities were scientific research and professional education; but pure research was less important than the formation of the elites, and among them of the public elites. But the above mentioned Florence School of Political sciences which was intended to form the new political elite through an innovative curriculum remained an isolated phenomenon for many decades, given the strong opposition of the powerful law schools.

The position of sociology was a peculiar one. On the one hand, as we have argued, the concern with the scientific study of many complex problems of Italian

modernization, the influence of major inspiring figures of positivism like Comte and Spencer – who defined sociology as the first social science –, the quest for unity of the many streams of inquiring and theorizing about social phenomena, were all factors favoring the foundation of the new science of sociology.

On the other, the very ‘imperialistic’ tendency of sociology – a newcomer which pretended to sit at the top of the scientific pyramid – threatened the established academic power of older disciplines, first of all law, philosophy and history, and frustrated the various attempts to introduce chairs of sociology in Italian higher education. In 1886, Roberto Ardigò – Italy’s most famous positivist philosopher – published his influential book ‘Sociology’ (which is actually a book of social philosophy). In the 1890s, several extra-curricular courses in sociology were taught in Italian universities (Giuseppe Carle in Turin, Errico De Marinis in Naples, Alfonso Asturaro in Genua, Filippo Virgili in Siena, Icilio Vanni in Perugia, the influential Achille Loria in Padua, and many others). In 1896–97, Salvatore Cognetti De Martiis, director of the Department of Political economy taught the first regular course at the University of Turin. But no official chair in sociology was created, the attempt to establish a post-graduate School in social sciences in Milan did not succeed; and the ambitious project of the ‘*Rivista italiana di sociologia*’ – founded in 1897 and closed in 1921 – which aimed at unifying into a single synthetic science the various sciences dealing with social phenomena such as philosophy of law, statistics, philosophy of history, geography, economics, criminal law, and anthropology – was not achieved.

The result was that, whereas many members of other disciplines were writing on sociological questions, neither sociological communities and schools were created, nor a unified sociological paradigm – distinct from that of other social sciences – was worked out. The reasons of this weak institutionalization were multifold and complex as we will argue in the next pages.

## 6 The weak institutionalization of early Italian sociology

The institutionalization and legitimation of a new intellectual discipline is a complex process which requires both the existence of a constellation of favorable conditions, and either the absence or the relative weakness of negative ones.

The most relevant favourable conditions are: a context of change requiring new interpretative models; one or more prominent ‘founding fathers’ willing to dedicate time and energy to systematizing the new paradigm and to challenging existing structures of scientific and academic power; and a school of devoted scholars who build the teaching and research structures required for disseminating knowledge and for consolidating the new methods and theories. The individual strategies of a few ‘*capi scuola*’ competing for intellectual hegemony in scientific

markets and academic domains and capable of creating new scientific institutions – such as universities, laboratories and research centers – are certainly of primary importance; but informal networks of scholars and small scientific communities around a major figure are also necessary ingredients for the affirmation of a new discipline – and of different schools within it – since they provide a basic link between the individual projects and the institutional framework. And, as I argued earlier, a generally favorable social and cultural context must exist as a fundamental preliminary condition.

On the other hand, the most relevant negative conditions for the institutionalization of a new scientific discipline are: repressive political powers and dogmatic political ideologies and religious doctrines – which are either suspicious or openly hostile to autonomous scientific inquiry and to critical thought in general; unfriendly established disciplines – that defend their intellectual turfs and oligopoly positions in the scientific markets; and powerful existing intellectual paradigms – which do not allow the growth of alternative competing frameworks.

In order to allow the growth of a new discipline, not only positive factors should prevail over negative ones, but they must mix according to a delicate and complex pattern of timing and sequence.

In the case of Italian sociology at the turn of the XX century this delicate and complex mix did not succeed.

Italian society was painfully trying to modernize itself, among huge contradictions and acute cleavages and inequalities. There was a context of change and the related need for new interpretative models and fresh analyses of the situation. But modernizing reform-oriented actors had to face strong opposition of entrenched interest groups as well as both conservative and revolutionary ideologies. In my view, not any process of modernization creates a favorable context for the development of sociological research, but only a process where there are strong self-conscious modernizing elites and collective movements, usually stemming from the bourgeoisie, as well as the new professional and technical middle classes and the organized labor movement.

In the historical period I consider, modernizing, reform-oriented elites were weak in Italy, squeezed as they were between reactionary landowners and rebellious peasants, and engaged in an uneasy dialogue and confrontation with a transformist political class. ‘Trasformismo’ (i. e. the behaviour of those members of the Italian parliament who changed their alliances according to narrow group demands or personal interests) and ‘ribellismo’ (i. e. the behaviour of the masses tending to challenge any kind of political authority and to reject reforms and orderly change in favour of utopian plans of global transformation) were typical features of the political culture; while vast masses in the countryside were cut off from the public sphere by misery, exploitation, ignorance and ‘amoral familism’ (i. e. the attitude

in which obligations toward one's own family are considered to be much stronger than, and even to some extent opposed to, those of the larger society).

The constitutional monarchy did not favor reformist policies either, since it was more interested in waging costly colonial wars than in solving the 'social question', and was often tempted to approve of the 'suspension' of civil and political rights advanced by law and order hard-liners like the prime minister Francesco Crispi. A more favorable climate developed in the first decade of the XX century with Antonio Giolitti's 'center-left' governments; but this potential opening came too late, when the anti-positivist reaction of idealist philosophy was already strong and widespread.

Italian sociology had a major figure like Vilfredo Pareto. But Pareto, contrary to the role played by Worms and Durkheim in France, Small, Giddings and Park in the United States, Weber and Toennies in Germany, neither got a permanent chair in an Italian university, nor formed a school, nor founded a review of sociology, nor established a disciplinary association. Besides, in the last decade of the XIX century – when the cultural climate was more favorable to sociology – he was not yet the most influential figure in Italian sociology, since Roberto Ardigò, Enrico Ferri and others were more widely known and more clearly identified with sociology. When he became the most prestigious representative of Italian sociology (his major sociological opus, 'Trattato di sociologia generale' was published, in 1913), it was too late, since it came in a cultural climate already hostile. Pareto took it as his fundamental task to lay the theoretical and methodological foundations of sociology, but he fully neglected the need for institutionalization, on the basis of the naive assumption that institutionalization would follow scientific recognition, whereas the reverse is usually true.

Isolated in his beautiful exile of Celigny on the lake of Geneva, Pareto became a lonely scholar, unable and unwilling to create a community of scholars around him. He reduced more and more his relations with colleagues, friends and students to a few persons: some colleagues at the University of Lausanne, the well known Italian economist Maffeo Pantaleoni, Roberto Michels (who developed his study on the oligarchic tendencies of political parties along lines similar to Pareto's theory of elites), Pierre Boven (who translated the *Trattato* into French), and Maria Kolabinska (who wrote a dissertation on the circulation of elites in France). Pareto increasingly developed an attitude of acute irony and pessimism, and lost the hope to influence public opinion as he had tried to do for most of his life writing for the liberal press.

The creation of the *Rivista di Sociologia* in 1894, and the *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia* in 1897, as well as of other more political than academic reviews of sociological interest, was an important factor, but was not enough to win either scientific legitimation or academic institutionalization.

Other important projects, which would have much contributed to the development of sociology, first of all the project to create in Milan an 'école supérieure' in social sciences in 1898, failed because of inadequate funding and insufficient social support. Milan was the industrial capital of the country, where segments of the bourgeoisie and the main newspaper – 'Il Corriere della sera' – favored a mild reformism, and a disciplined working class backed the social democratic wing of the Italian socialist party (PSI) and built institutions for the advancement of workers such as the Società Umanitaria. In the same years, or just after, the University of Engineering and Architecture ('Politecnico') and the Bocconi University of Economics and Commerce were established in a city which did not yet have institutions of higher education. The founding of a university of social sciences would have completed the network of institutions of higher education geared to the formation of the new intellectual elite for the modernization of the country. And the history of Italian sociology would have probably been different. Unfortunately, the attempt failed, and the only result of this effort was the creation of just another review, the 'Rassegna di sociologia e scienze ausiliarie'.

Whereas favourable conditions were either absent or came late or took place in isolation from each other, on the other hand, a powerful set of either difficult or openly hostile attitudes and of constraining factors were at work.

First, there was the controversial relationship with marxism. At the beginning, marxist socialism and sociology seemed to coexist well enough. This attempt in coexistence went as far as suggesting, with Antonino De Bella, an ibryd 'trinity formula' composed of Marx, Darwin and Spencer as the intellectual core of socialist thought. Although this extreme position was not too widespread, the dialogue between sociology and socialism and the attempts to reconcile them, was well alive. As I already mentioned, two of the best reviews of the socialist movement – 'Critica sociale' founded in 1891 by Filippo Turati and 'Rivista popolare di politica, lettere, scienze e arti' founded four years later by Napoleone Colajanni – proved particularly interested in sociology.

'Critica sociale' published interesting empirical studies of the lower classes – the best of which is Gaetano Salvemini's research on Molfetta published in 1897 –, passionate essays on various aspects of the social question, and attempts to reconcile historical materialism with positivism and evolutionism, by well known scholars and political leaders like Filippo Turati, Leonida Bissolati, Achille Loria, Guglielmo Ferrero. The 'Rivista popolare', although more interested in contingent political questions, also published articles both by sociologists like Pareto and Sergi and by socialist representatives like Loria and Ferrero.

Besides these two influential reviews, several books show this effort in reconciliation. Just to give a few examples, Amilcare Puviani's 'Del sistema economico borghese in rapporto alla civiltà' (1883), Filippo Turati's 'Il delitto e la questione sociale' (1883), and Achille Loria's 'La teoria economica della



costituzione sociale' (1886), are all clear examples of a mix between historical materialism and sociological concepts. Enrico Ferri – one of the most enthusiastic proponents of this synthesis – even declared that “sociology will either be socialist, or will not be”.

On this question there was however no general agreement among socialist theorists. The most rigorous proponent of Marx' theory in Italy, Antonio Labriola, was very critical both of Spencer's sociology and of the influence of social darwinism on Italian culture and even on Italian socialism. In three works written between 1895 and 1897 – “In memoria del manifesto dei comunisti”, “Del materialismo storico”, and “Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia”, he fiercely and cogently criticized the diffuse dogmatism, oversimplification, and misunderstanding in Italian works concerning basic elements of Marx' thought and he traced them – at least partially – to the mechanistic and deterministic conceptions of evolutionary sociology and social darwinism.

Yet, the dialogue between marxism and sociology went on for long. Antonio Labriola himself testified this effort in a series of lectures in 1902–1903 on the relationships of historical materialism with sociology, history, and the philosophy of history. While, on the other side, a severe critique of marxist theory like Pareto in his book “Les systèmes socialistes” showed his appreciation – and even his admiration – for Marx's theory of classes, and evaluated Marx's sociology far superior to Marx' economics.

While the relationship with marxist socialism was a controversial one, a second and more dangerous opposition was represented by the open hostility of already established academic disciplines – especially law, philosophy, history, and economics – which felt threatened by the newcomer. Even the numerous members of these academic disciplines who claimed their self-defined sociological competence contributed to bar sociology from officially entering into the Italian university system. Their attitude was resented by sociologists like Colajanni who often criticized in the pages of his ‘Rivista popolare’ the widespread attitude among law professors to consider sociology as a conceited ‘parvenue’ which invaded the ground of other disciplines.

The situation was aggravated by the fact that the average quality of the vast production of works which define themselves “sociological” was not high, and that only a limited number of them could be considered good scientific products, according to the evaluation criteria shared by the scientific community of the time. The remark made by the young Luigi Einaudi – a scholar not unfriendly to sociology- in an article for Colajanni's review that “never as to-day sociological publications have been so many, and never so rare real scientific works which can resist even a superficial critique” is a revealing symptom of a more general attitude.

The staunchest and more severe opponent of sociology at the beginning of the XX century was, however, Italian neo-idealism, who had in Benedetto Croce



its major representative. Croce's philosophy has been defined and self-defined as 'absolute historicism', where the adjective radically differentiates it from the other forms of contemporary historicism. For Croce – in accordance with Hegel and against the philosophy of XVIII century enlightenment – the foundation of historical knowledge does not constitute a philosophical problem, since, as in Hegel, what is rational is real, and in Croce's words "life and reality are history and nothing else than history". Croce criticizes the abstract rationalism of XVIII century enlightenment – that considers reality divided into a high world of ideas and values which must be imposed upon a low world which until now has reflected them only in an imperfect way.

For Croce man is his history, history is the only reality, and history is the realization of reason. To put it in different words, his central argument is the identification of philosophy and history. He rejects any distinction between facts which have historical meaning and facts which have not. And he maintains that "every history is contemporary history, since historical facts however remote they are, are always related to present needs and situations, where their vibrations still propagate"; and that "man is a microcosm, not in a naturalistic sense, but in the sense that he is a compendium of the whole history". History is 'perfect rational knowledge', which also includes the so-called 'irrational elements' of action and sentiment. Men's anguishes, hopes, and struggles are "history in the making". Action and sentiment are the manifestations of human vitality; they are not the expression of civilization and morality, but are the premises of civilization and morality. In his late writings Croce was concerned with the risk that his notion of history as perfect rationality would amount to a justification of the existing reality – which included illiberal political regimes – and introduced a distinction between the rationality of history and the rationality of the moral imperative.

Some of these ideas can be shared by historically conscious sociologists. But Croce's absolute historicism does not allow the quest for scientific laws of human behaviour and societal development, it is opposed to any kind of nomothetic knowledge. And his emphasis on the role of ideas and action is against the positivist emphasis on 'natural laws' and on structural factors.

In Croce's system of knowledge the theory of law and the state belongs to the 'economic form of the spirit'. With a peculiar reverse of the rational theory of classical economics, the 'economic form of the spirit' is the sphere of the irrational and the contingent, of the passions and the needs. The notion of law is linked to those of utility and force, and is independent from morality; the state is identified with government – that is with the process of actions useful to a group of individuals – and the life of the state is a dialectical relationship of authority and liberty, force and consensus.

In Croce's work there is room for the theory of law and the state, and of economic action, but there is no place for sociology, nor for psychology. In

reviewing Durkheim's 'Règles de la pensée sociologique', Croce states that if the object of sociology is the study of norms and institutions created by the human collectivity, sociology is nothing else than either the science of law or the history of law. In the exchange of letters with Pareto, Croce always insists that sociology is a science which does not have its own principle. In spite of the courteous patience shown by Pareto in their correspondence, and disregarding the intellectual prestige of Pareto – he delivers very hostile critiques of both the 'Manuel d'économie politique' and the 'Trattato di sociologia generale' – he reaches the point of defining the latter a 'case of scientific teratology'.

Croce's critique of sociology is synthetically expressed in the response published in his journal to the letter sent in 1906 by fifty-eight university lecturers to the Minister of Education asking for the establishment of university chairs of sociology. He argues that "sociology considered in its historical sense, that is as the effective modern sociological movement, is nothing more than positivism ... as positivism, it is therefore an implicit negation of freedom for determinism, of teleology for mechanisms; a more or less coherent, more or less disguised affirmation of materialism. Such is sociology in its historical genesis (Comte) and in its living spirit; and this is why anyone of idealist conscience rejects, and must necessarily reject, the presuppositions, the methods, the conclusions, and even, I would say, the style of modern sociology".

Croce had some good reasons for demolishing the superficial and pompous dogmatism of many so-called sociologists of his time. His exposure of the most evident weaknesses of evolutionary positivism can be easily accepted. He was, however, himself superficial and obtuse in his critique of Pareto's works. He did not perceive what Parsons clearly showed years later in *The structure of social action*, i. e. the emergence in the *Trattato* of a voluntaristic theory of action from the positivist tradition (in ways similar to the evolution of Durkheim's thought), nor was he able to appreciate the role played by Pareto in establishing a link between the micro level of individual action and the macro level of systemic consequences. Croce did not acknowledge these intellectual contributions, because he could not conceive of any kind of study of human action that would be independent from historical-philosophical knowledge, and therefore could not admit an autonomous social science. This position brought him to ignore most of the important sociological works made in other countries, first of all those of Weber.

The hostility of Croce – and of idealistic philosophy in general – was damaging for Italian sociology in several respects. He gave intellectual legitimation to the academic opposition of already entrenched disciplines and highbrow intellectual circles in Italy. Moreover, he made for decades the very name of sociology suspicious to the ears of some of the most interesting interpreters of Italian society. The case of Antonio Gramsci is the most evident. With his studies on

the role of intellectuals, on political parties, on class relations, on hegemonic rule, Gramsci is one of Italy's most brilliant sociological minds; and yet he fiercely criticized sociology, since under the influence of neo-idealism, he fully identified sociology with the positivist method. Finally, and worse than that, Croce's attitude contributed to cut off many Italian intellectuals from the European debate on the historical method and on the relationships between history and social sciences, and delayed the critical assimilation of fundamental currents of the European culture of the XX century.

To conclude, the case of Italian sociology in the last decades of the XX century and in the early XX century is the history of a too rapid success in terms of diffusion and acritical reception of foreign dominant paradigms, and of an abrupt crisis and decline, which did not allow an adequate intellectual legitimation and academic institutionalization.

It should not be forgotten, however, that early Italian sociology gave important scientific contributions, such as the theory of elites by Pareto, Mosca, Ferrero and Michels, the analysis of criminal behaviour by the school of Lombroso, Ferri, Scighele, and the empirical research on various aspects of Italy's 'social question', like the investigations on the Mezzogiorno. The most relevant scientific achievement are the contributions of Pareto's sociology to the methodology of social sciences, the theory of social action, and the theory of systemic change.

The concept of society as an interdependent system, the theory of elites' circulation as a major mechanism of change, and the analysis of ideologies and of the non rational character of political action, are long lasting contributions to sociological theory, that are worth a critical reappraisal as major instances of a specific Italian sociological tradition.

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