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[Lezioni di sociologia storica]

di Massimo Paci, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013, ISBN: 978-88-1524-139-9

History, Social Sciences, Historical Sociology

This new book by Massimo Paci presents various elements that give it a very particular appeal. It is not just the flowing writing, the clarity of presentation or the erudition and knowledge demonstrated on the topics and authors dealt with. Nor is it the simple attention to the historical processes, so rare in Italian sociology but by no means new in the author who had already highlighted this tendency in his works on the transformations of Italian society, the labour market, welfare, etc.. The source of the appeal above all lies elsewhere.

First of all, the book is original in that for many aspects it shows a typically Anglo-Saxon approach to presentation and divulgation which is not very common in Italy. The author puts forward a sensitive style of explanation and information, combined with full, profound control of the scientific subject: he simplifies it without losing out on insight or complexity. His method is to organize the presentation through “lessons”, with a literary model that recalls the founding moments of the modern human and social sciences (e.g. after every lesson he includes an excursus of further study), and therefore he builds the volume around what is definitely a didactic, but not manual-style layout. They are not self-contained pictures or “portraits”, nor are they linked together by a mere evolutionary and cumulative logic apt for showing how and how much the historical dimension emerged in sociological analysis during the nineteenth century, to then assert itself in the first half of the twentieth century, and in part hence be eclipsed or nevertheless moved to the sidelines with regard to the mainstream line of sociology that dominated after the Second World War. In reality, these “lessons” are built around a thin common thread that aims to highlight a specific outline identifying the discipline of historical sociology.

From the moment that Paci singles out the sociological approach that deals with historical processes as his field of interest, historical sociology then becomes the place and way with which to retrace one of the foundations of sociology as a social science unto itself between the end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. While he explains what historical sociology is and has been, its currents, its contributions, its progressive marginalization or contamination, the author defines historical sociology as a specific autonomous reality. Not just autonomous from the other social sciences or -as we will see -from the historical disciplines themselves, but also autonomous within sociology in general, of which it was indeed at the origin, differentiating itself and finding itself in a minority with respect to the mainstream in the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, for Paci historical sociology presents a marked autonomy and identity (a sort of antidote) from the sociology that at this point has become a «normal science», to use Kuhn’s terminology (Kuhn 1962): a science now concentrated on the present although the historical approach paradoxically had a central role in its foundation (Elias 1987). In short, Paci not only explains historical sociology to us, but makes epistemological research and a heuristic critique of it as he contextualizes it within the social sciences in general.

It is worth briefly going into the specific contribution given by this book in defining historical sociology. The acceptance that Massimo Paci intends to give to the notion of historical sociology is in a certain way as restrictive as it is rigorous at the theoretical level. The outline that he intends to trace around it first of all excludes the social sciences and sociology in particular: some sociologists are inside this perimeter, many are outside it or on the

sidelines. What he undertakes is a true «journey» [14], first of all through the “classic” sociologists, then through the no great number of scholars and few schools of the twentieth century, and lastly through the latest tendencies. What he is explicitly attempting to do is define historical sociology by identifying its space and boundaries, forms and contents, methods and fields of application. So much so that in the first lessons of the book the author at times sets aside the chronological criterion in favour of a structure that emphasizes analysis by problems (e.g. Gramsci is placed after Marx and before Weber, or Durkheim before Marx).

It is Paci's intention, therefore, to present a «research on historical sociology», starting from the fact that this perspective involves some foundations of classic sociology, as well as to highlight the «ontological conception» in the authors' style of and methodological approach to historical sociology [14-15]. In other words, the author wants to build the disciplinary identity and epistemological autonomy of historical sociology at the same time as including and excluding schools of thought and methodological approaches. This explains, therefore, certain hierarchies and intellectual lineages, certain intersections and crossovers, which set a work of this kind apart from the linear, manual-style expressive code in the history of thought. Namely, it explains why one can find certain absences and presences in the book. Or the fact that some combinations may cause a sophisticated disorientation (such as Aron with Thucydides).

What is Massimo Paci trying to do when he wants to grasp the heart of the historical sociology in its ontological dimension? What does he include in and, therefore, what does he exclude from his outline? It is very evident that he does not determine the boundaries based on the extrinsic use of historical knowledge or the exterior presence of historical narration as concrete exemplification within theoretical and abstract sociological reflection. Instead, he places his attention on the immanence of the historical fact as the basis for sociological analysis and elaboration on one hand, and on clarifying an appropriate type of methodological approach referring to the historical fact, on the other. This is why, in the first part devoted to the classics, authors like Durkheim and Marx, albeit different, are presented as an alternative model to historical sociology in its own sense as a result of the deterministic restrictions that to some extent condition them: as one is substantially a-historical in his positivism, and the other historicist (the rationality of history) in his philosophical inheritances and political orientations. While Gramsci (and before him Antonio Labriola) -in their anti-dogmatic Marxism -shift the question and instead are situated in the boundary area of historical sociology, avoiding explanations and interpretations stemming rigidly from a single cause.

Historical sociology comes into being and acquires consciousness, for Paci, with Max Weber (the only scholar, with Marx, to be honoured with two lessons to his name). With him we start to single out its ontology in terms of a conception of the social world as an eminently cultural or “significant” reality (in different forms and perspectives this central point would also be found in Norbert Elias, whose non-dichotomous approach at the methodological level the author perhaps a little reductively boils down -albeit with a caution of doubt -to “historical psychology”). Social reality, which historical sociology sees in this perspective, is not a «reality outside the subject»; it is made by the actions and human relationships that give living, even physical, importance to these «cultural ontic structures» which have undisputable historical specificity, but, precisely owing to these characteristics, can be seen within the explanatory intent of the social sciences [18-19], and then the specific lessons on Weber, in particular [114-118]. Then we must thank Weber for systemizing a decisive element at the methodological level: the importance of the comparative historical method.

A further interesting characteristic of the book is the fact that after the second part, rounded off with Norbert Elias, and devoted to the foundational classics of historical sociology with their range of interests and orientations, one can see that the following lessons no longer concentrate on single thinkers but are layered, putting authors together by geographical area (historical sociology in North America) or by topic (the birth and construction of the modern state, the torments of the rural world and social revolutions, the passage from the empires to the modern systems of international relations). It is almost as if the systemic intent -the analysis of society in its development and its becoming history -were diluted, to specialize in schools and more detailed fields of interest. Or rather, the moment that historical sociology had to face up to the mainstream sociology that had replaced it at the level of dominant sociological method, it seemed to seek bridges towards widespread academic legitimization, which it had always found difficult since the end of the Second World War. The “new historical sociology” or

the “sociology of events” dealt with in the last lessons mark the distance -at least in part - from another of the decisive elements in the first phase of historical sociology: that is the prevalent interest in problems of great social importance. Something similar to what happened in the fragmentation that has characterized the destiny of social historiography in recent decades, since its high point in the 1960s-80s.

Another of the appealing aspects of this book, furthermore, is the fact that the author tries to apply the method of historical sociology, of which he is gradually giving us his reading, to the object of his studies, that is, scientific thought in the social field. An emblematic example is given by the pages devoted to narrating the real and proper “drain” of post-Weberian German sociologists. After making a name for themselves during the Weimar Republic and giving academic legitimacy to the diffusion of historical sociology, these scholars had fled their country in the face of Nazism, transferring the discipline to the United States between the 1930s and 40s. Thus they helped develop this outlook across the ocean, in heated confrontation with the structural-functionalistic paradigm and the Parsons school which were in expansion at the time. As Paci says, these German defectors played an almost “maieutic” role of dissemination in the new world [200]. Thus his narration of an all-in-all specific event in the academic world helps cast light on the routes followed and strategies for the circulation and diffusion of ideas in the process of building scientific identity.

A last aspect of this book’s appeal, at least for the historian writing this piece, is its absolute novelty on the Italian publishing panorama. There have been systematic reflections in recent decades on the relationship between the social sciences and history, above all in the Anglo-Saxon and German area, in particular from the sociologists’ point of view (links that are very present in Paci’s bibliography, for example, D. Smith, P. Abrams, etc.), but not in Italy (Giovannini 2004). In Italy too, above all since social history on the contemporary age came into being in the 1960s and 70s, historians have tackled -often as the laymen that we are and in an empirical manner linked to the needs of historical investigation -sociology and the instruments of social and ethnographical research (Burke 1992). The recent cultural turn fully collided with social history when the paradigm of globalization made it implode, and it ceased to be history of society and renounced being a new social science (Charle 1993; Burke 2004). This fragmentation -at times a real and proper collapse -permitted a further step to be taken in the acquisition of instruments (for example in Italy the recently founded interdisciplinary journal *Studi culturali* is emblematic of this), but a lot less so the acquisition of new perspectives and awareness at the level of more general social knowledge. In any case, there has not been any real debate around historical sociology, either on one part or the other, not even in the more sensitive journals such as *Quaderni storici* (e.g. Marino Berengo, Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, etc.). Except in some exceptional cases, the communication and circulation have not been successful. But I will come back to that later.

In any case, Paci’s book -I hope -could trigger the interdisciplinary reflection and comparison that is lacking in Italy: the object, the study of historical societies, is the same; the objectives and approaches different, but today much less so than in the past, starting from the research methodology (Joyce 2002). Let us think, for example, of the innovative contribution at the level of restoring narrative and qualitative approaches in history, able to account for the cultural dimension in the broad sense in social life, which has been given by historiographical innovations such as micro-history, oral history, gender history, post-colonial studies, etc.. A phenomenon of methodological disorientation (which for example has led to the questioning of “Cliometrics”) which appears to me to have correspondingly struck the field of sociology itself, as Paci himself highlights in his last lessons, those devoted to the cultural factors in economic development and in social and state organization, to the contemporary historical sociology of P. Bourdieu, P. Abrams, A. Abbott, W. Sewell, etc..

I have said that not all sociologists, obviously, are included in the outline that Paci gives to historical sociology. Nevertheless, they are not the only victims of the exclusion. In conclusion to this review, may I underline, as a historian, that the initial exclusive choice knowingly led to leaving aside all those historians who -to some extent -have in their practice as scholars come face to face with the social sciences or nevertheless have striven to take on the sociologists at the same level, in contributing to a better knowledge of social life of the past as well as the present. In any case, declared victims of Paci’s selective intention are two figures of the calibre of Fernand Braudel among historians of the modern age and Edward P. Thompson among those of the contemporary age because they go outside, also by their own will, the outline of historical sociology. It is a legitimate choice, above all for

the period containing these two authors, but it leaves the historian reader perplexed if we are but to think of the long, fruitful intellectual dialogue during the 1970s and 80s between Braudel and Wallerstein (Sanderson 1995), of which Paci indeed makes mention [278].

It is even more disappointing that he has not highlighted, except in just a few passing comments, Marc Bloch, one of the founding fathers of social history and with Lucien Febvre the promoter in 1929 of the journal «Annales» which indeed wanted to feed off the dialogue with the social sciences and the other human sciences. Works such as *La société féodale* (1939) or *Les rois thaumaturges* (1924), despite being dedicated to the Middle Ages, show how those topics that just a few years earlier were being developed by Weber or then would be taken up again in another form and manner a few years later by Elias, were in reality both present and circulating in the most varied and distant scientific and intellectual environments (in particular around the cultural dimension in the construction of life and social relations). But these final comments are perhaps only the complaints of a historian who is seeing his discipline reduced to mere adjective in the face of sociology.

(Pietro Causarano)

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In Search of Historical Sociology

1. Sociology as a science took shape when the rhythm of social change became rapid and intense, therefore making it possible for human beings (and scholars) to look at society as other, detached from themselves, ask questions about it, and make it a subject of study (Dahrendorf 1967). Hence, since its origin sociology has had a historical nature, has asked about processes of change, and sought interpretations and explanations for it. Paci's work starts with this given fact, going to see what readings the classic sociologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave to the great capitalist transformation – this was by far the most important process – and which approaches and tools of investigation they used. And so the first part of the book is devoted to an analysis of the «alternative theoretical approaches» that the author seeks out in the works of Durkheim, Marx and Gramsci. In reality, it is a sort of *pars destruens*, from which he (and with him the reader) progressively distances himself. This vein will continue throughout the book, in search of *true* historical sociology, of which, in his *Presentation* and the initial pages of the first lesson, the author had anticipated the theoretical and methodological outlines, before going onto patiently try to rebuild the route to its disciplinary foundation».

The structure of the book and its manner of presentation are clearly didactic, as Paci himself wants to indicate

in the title. The reader is accompanied step by step, critically retracing research paths and methodological analyses that are often well known by the specialists, but revisited to put together the elements making up historical sociology. Even in these first pages – for example in the comparison with the fundamentally a-historical nature of the works by Durkheim – the author is able to point out what is *not* historical sociology and, as a consequence, by negation, which methodological and epistemological requirements it becomes important to deal with: to look at concrete historical processes while looking for explanations “from the bottom”; to conduct micro-analyses; to make more systematic use of case studies; to trust the demonstrative capacity of qualitative methodologies (especially narrative, as we will see); and to look for important elements to explain processes of change in the actors’ motivations and choices.

It is in the works of Marx, but above all in the Italian Marxism of Labriola and Gramsci, that Paci already finds the point at which the Comtian positivism dominating in the sociology of the epoch is surpassed. In the first, albeit with some internal contradictions in his thought, we can make out highly sophisticated and complex perspectives and methodologies to analyse the social change and classes which go way beyond the rigid interpretive patterns of historical materialism: as shown by his case studies on the class wars in Germany and France in 1848 and analysis of Bonapartism.

But it is Gramsci who makes a definite step ahead, both at the methodological level, when he traces the historical anomaly of the Italian case to the different manner in which the feudal classes were replaced by the bourgeois compared to the cases of France, Germany and Britain; and at the more general interpretive level when – unlike Marx – he identifies civil society as the set of superstructural institutions, culture and ideologies, therefore putting economic and structural relations in the background and instead highlighting the autonomy of human action [82-99].

At this point along the author’s journey, we are a step away from Max Weber, who, together with Elias and to a lesser extent Aron¹, occupy the whole of Part 3 (which I would call the *pars construens*) of the book. With Weber, Paci upholds, the definitive bases or at least the foundations of historical sociology are cast. The discipline is freed once and for all from the causal determinism of the nineteenth-century mould, without renouncing an explanation of the social processes: however, the expectation is not that the identified cause is true, but, more laicly, that it is adequate or plausible. At the methodological level, historical sociology makes Weber’s refined multi-factorial analysis its own, an analysis adopted by the German sociologist in many of the case studies that have made the history of the discipline: the battle of Marathon, the rural labourers in the Elbe area, Calvino and the Protestant Reform, etc. [119-153].

With regard to Elias – nor could it be otherwise – he fully picks up on his processual approach, his idea of the reversibility of change, his overcoming of the dichotomy between individual and society, but above all the maieutical practice of interpretive understanding that accompanies all his work, and which would be among the main methodological choices of historical sociology in the late twentieth century.

2. Paci’s research continues following the developments of modern (Part 3) and contemporary historical sociology (fourth and last part). But the author’s objective is already clear: to look for a «visual angle that permits us as far as possible to look at both the wealth of the particular human experience and the general sense of historical experience together» [246]. The cited authors (from Smelser to Bendix, from Barrington Moore Jr to Skocpol, from Wallerstein to Rokkan) all directly or indirectly deal with the great capitalistic transformation, its historical roots, the movements that accompanied and preceded it, the formation of the nation-states, and so on. However, Paci’s interest is constantly attracted by the theoretical and methodological aspects, which he proposes systemizing according to three approaches: *universalizing* (that is, pre-conceived in an abstract form and centred around the concept of “system”: indeed separated and independent from its concrete historical application); *individualizing* (which seeks the explanations for changes not only and not so much in the structures of context as above all in the motivations for the action and in the choices or non-choices made by the actors); and *generalizing* (because those who adopt it want to causally explain the differences observed between the cases under examination and, if possible, arrive at historical generalizations). Paci does not hesitate to leave out of “his” historical sociology those

¹ With regard to Aron, Paci above all takes on board the idea of unpredictability and chance in the historical process.

authors who, albeit important, follow the first model (Smelser, Eisenstadt, Wallerstein), for the fundamental reason that this approach eliminates the actors' autonomous role from history.

We are at a turning point in Paci's work: he does not bow out when faced with the complexity of sociological explanation, but nor does he not want to succumb to it, a-critically accepting every methodological orientation and every cognitive model. A choice needs to be made. And now, at this advanced level of analysis, the author wants to express his methodological convictions: 1) it is observation and the *compared study of several historical cases* that «by grasping similarities, analogies and regularities gives us a wider vision over the structural factors and unexpected upshots of actions»; 2) it is necessary to make use of qualitative analyses, and especially that set of techniques which go under the name of *historical narrative* to best clarify the specificity of the processes under examination and above all «the actor's intentional role in the given situation» [246].

The last part of the journey, in which Paci presents the main contributions of contemporary historical sociology, provides further elements of theoretical and methodological evaluation on the discipline. The studies on the different ways to political and economic modernization which have attracted so much of the researchers' attention in recent decades have made the role played by socio-cultural factors and by so-called social capital clearly emerge, forcing a «"finer" and more in-depth analysis at the historical-empirical level, also using qualitative elements of information» [295]. The necessity (of qualitative analyses: life stories, biographies, participative observation, oral history, first-hand evidence, etc.) has rapidly become a virtue, for reasons that Paci gradually specifies while looking to the more recent studies of historical sociology, and especially comparative historical sociology. One. It is increasingly rare to take a single approach to causal analysis; indeed, on the contrary, a methodological and technical eclecticism that aims to keep together quantitative and qualitative analyses can frequently be seen. Two. The latter (the qualitative analyses) progressively tend to expand their spaces, for many reasons, but above all owing to the greater rigidity of the quantitative techniques, which do not adapt well to the recursive and complex nature of the historical configurations. Three. Analysis by standardized variables has a great capacity of explanation at the synchronic level, but is in no way suitable to account for a social reality that is by its nature diachronic and processual. Four. Because the relationship between theory and research is fundamentally rigid, unmodifiable even, when quantitative techniques are used, whereas, by its nature, historical sociology needs a continual dialogue and continual reformulation of its theories and hypotheses in light of the elements that gradually emerge from research activities.

As already anticipated, the sum of these cognitive experiences is that to *narrative* is recognized a central methodological and technical role in the researches of historical sociology. Because the world, unfortunately for mainstream sociology, does not have a simple causal structure. In order to grasp interrelations and dependencies, often hidden or unconscious, lost in time or buried in the memory, details need to be grasped, the objective and subjective dynamics of the events rebuilt, and uncertain and fragile temporal sequences put back together in order to cast "real" light on the causal explanation of the processes under examination.

3. At this point, the author's search of historical sociology has concluded and it is necessary to discuss its quality, results and the issues that have remained open.

Historical sociology in Italy. The point lends itself to two lines of argument. Massimo Paci has undertaken a mission that in Italy – with this layout – has no precedent. Evidently, it is his intention to pave the way to a discipline that is little cultivated in our country, as shown by the clear difficulty with which the author attempts to document the presence of Italian studies of this kind. Among other things, the two main lines of research that he recalls – on areas of hidden economy and on the development of welfare systems – can only in my opinion be forcefully included in the historical sociology studies, and nevertheless do not stand up to the quantitative and qualitative comparison with those much more "disciplinary" studies of other countries. One must say, this is also owing to a certain rigidity in Paci's selection, as he leaves out important experiences and contributions that moved in this direction. To quote just some, on the same topics referred to by the author: the researches of Roger Absalom (1991) on the Italian modernization "unleashed" by the passage of the allied armies and the long time spent in Italy by escaped allied prisoners; or the "Braudelian" studies of Giacomo Becattini and his fellow researchers (2001); the works of Giovanna Vicarelli on the roots of health policy in Italy (1997); or – to skip to a

macro-topic – the research by Giovanni Arrighi on the twentieth century and the origins of our times (1994). But many others could be quoted (Grendi, Crainz, Casiccia, Lanaro, Cavalli, Rullani, Ginsborg, ...). The point is that the quoted names are *not ever* of sociologists, but of historians, economists, anthropologists, etc.: and Paci instead stubbornly wants to define and outline the (theoretical, methodological, empirical) field of a *historical sociology* where the accent is placed on the noun, which acts as a barrier to entry.

One of the various possible hypotheses to explain the restrictive nature of this approach is that Paci, whether intentionally or not, wants to favour the institutionalization of, or at least strengthen, the discipline in Italy. Without doubt, if we look for data on the presence of historical sociology (or similar subjects) in Italian universities, the situation is desperate. The discipline under that name is not present in any university. If we are to look at “nearby” disciplines, the only one with a significant presence is Social History (65 courses), with differing course contents, and taught above all in the faculties of Arts and Philosophy (27), Political Sciences (12) and Education (10). In addition, we find scattered presences (7 courses) where in some way and with the most bizarre names, history and sociology are combined.² In conclusion: there is absolutely no trace of historical sociology in Italian universities, nor, do I think, are there the premises to introduce it. In passing, Paci himself realizes this when he wonders why in Italy a historical sociology approach has never taken off: finding an important, albeit not exhaustive, answer in the “expulsion” of Gramsci (whose “philosophy of praxis” came close to this approach) from the national sociological tradition³.

History and sociology. During the volume, and, slightly to my surprise at least, Paci repeats several times that he wishes to keep out of his work the problem, which is instead very widely debated, of the relationship between history and sociology (Burke 1989; Giovannini 2004). In reality, however, it is implicitly evoked at all times, before becoming explicit in the final pages with a statement, which I fully agree with («... sociology... can only be historical sociology» [420]), but which seems to be in substantial contradiction to his tireless search for a specific discipline and a scientific autonomy for historical sociology. But why this concern? It is true that Paci is not alone in this search for a definition (Abrams 1982; Smith 1991; Boudon, Bourricaud 1982; and many more). But why? Historical sociology is substantially a disciplinary approach that has asserted itself across the spectrum of the traditional sociological sectors. It above all marks a need that has become pressing in both historical and sociological studies: to study and understand how past and present, historical events and social processes, individual actions and structural mechanisms are related and intertwined. Even though history and sociology have not become a single intellectual adventure, as Braudel (1969) desired, in the second half of the twentieth century and in recent years without doubt there has been a convergence (in the facts at least) between historians and sociologists, both at the level of scientific interest and their methodological approaches. We have been (and still are) seeing a genuine mutual fecundation, to the point of verging on a hybrid discipline. Sociology of history and social history have acted as Trojan horses to penetrate the respective citadels of mainstream historical and sociological tradition. This is a consideration that I believe escapes the author – or from which, perhaps, he flees for reasons of disciplinary alignment or for fear of an encroachment that would probably mark the undoing of historical sociology.

Paolo Giovannini

² Data taken from OFF-F, the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research database on curricula.

³ While he had significant influence on historical sociology (and on sociology in general) in both North and South America.

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