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The lost canon. Social theory and social regulation from overturning to mirroring

ONOFRIO ROMANO

Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro
onofrio.romano@uniba.it

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Abstract. Facing the hitches of the neoliberal global turn, which first emerged with the 2008 financial crisis, social theory doesn't appear able to provide an overall critical interpretation of the current regulation pattern and to imagine a different institutional regime, addressing the problems on the ground. This is an unprecedented situation. As we contend, social theory has always glimpsed well in advance the social system crises, assessing at the same time an alternative paradigm, thanks to a sort of *canone inverso* played against the coeval institutional regime: when a horizontal form of social regulation prevails in a given period, sociology adopts a knowledge paradigm based on the primacy of the vertical social dimensions. And vice-versa. This attitude transcends any conceptual content and mainly concerns the "form" of the theoretical building. In general, social theory opposed both the self-regulating market regime of the nineteenth century, and the following state-centered regime of the twentieth century. Sociology has found its *raison d'être* in this kind of critical monitoring towards social regulation. What happens today is that the dialectic between social theory and social regulation appears jammed. Evoking the case of the generative social action approach, the article shows that, contrary to the past intellectual seasons, the form of social theory "mirrors" the form of social regulation, instead of overturning it.

Keywords: social theory, global crisis, horizontalism, verticalism, generativity.

Thought is late. Facing the hitches of the global turn, which first emerged with the 2008 economic crisis – still raging – and now again with the Covid-19 health crisis, social theory doesn't appear able to provide a paradigm aligned with the crisis depth, i.e. an overall critical interpretation of the current regulation model and at same time to imagine a different institutional regime, addressing the problems on the ground. This is an unprecedented situation. The thesis we will develop here is that social theory and, in particular, sociology has always glimpsed well in advance the social system crises, assessing an alternative paradigm. Contrariwise, contemporary sociology, regardless its multiple approaches, has lost in gen-

eral that critical posture towards the coeval institutional regime that was a foundational mark of the discipline. The loss of this critical, oppositional and reversive posture alters the traditional relationship between sociology and regulatory institutions. Sociology remains harmless before the crisis, rather than contributing to overcome it. The crisis of the current regulation system reveals the impasse of the discipline.

The article will develop as follows: in the first paragraph we will focus on the attitude of sociology towards the nineteenth century first hint to globalization, i.e. the regime of self-regulating market; in the second, we will reflect on the posture of sociology towards the golden age of the nation-state; in the third, we will try to frame an hypothesis about the reversive posture of social theory compared with the form of social regulation; in the fourth and last, we will focus on the attitude of the present social theory towards the global turn.

SOCIAL UPROOTING AS THE GENERATIVE FACTOR OF SOCIOLOGY

As Nisbet argues, the rise of sociology in the nineteenth century is not the fruit of an inner evolution of philosophy and social sciences, but the response «to crises of events and to the challenges formed by major changes in the social order» (Nisbet 1996: 9). All these “major changes” are ultimately triggered by a «loss of locality» suffered by the frames of social life in that historical juncture. In some way the thrust for globalization appears as the generative factor of sociology. The need for the emergence of that new scientific field called «sociology», the decisive boost leading to a methodical observation of social facts is originally impressed by the first and *ante litteram* «global turn».

A new institutional form arises from the progressive liquefaction of medieval bonds and orders. The single elements melted inside the communitarian aggregates of the Middle Ages embark on a process of «dis-embedding» (Polanyi 2001). They are gradually released from their communitarian sets. They start to move like separate entities, on the basis of autonomous strategies, leaving aside every central direction and breaking all boundaries. The whole they belong to is now only an abstract totality, without identity, where the principle of authority is replaced by a neutral form of regulation, being passive in front of the individual trajectories. The multiple institutions and authorities which weigh on the individual are replaced by a single regulatory infrastructure – i.e. the market rule. We witness «the monopolization and regulation of all ‘legitimate’ coercive powers by one universalist coercive institution» (Weber 1968: 337). Ideally, center-stage there are no more intermediate bodies or collective institutions but the pendulum now swings from the individual to an abstract universal space of interdependencies without established boundaries.

It is a «horizontal regime», i.e. arising from the grassroots, from the elementary particles of society. Social order is not *ex-ante* designed by an elected entity, but it appears as the «spontaneous» output of the interaction between the singularities released from the old communities: «the dominant objectives of the whole age [...] were those of release: release of the individual from ancient social ties and of the mind from fettering traditions. Towering over the whole period was the universally held belief in the natural individual – in his reason, his innate character, and self sustaining stability» (Nisbet 1996: 8).

Public institutions are not called to design social reality, but they have to simply watch over the inter-change between social players, in order for it to develop in pacific conditions and without hitches.

Norbert Elias (1969) has widely illustrated the strong connection between individualization and the stretching of social action chains. The self-perception of the individual as something separate and autonomous from the collective body, able to put at a distance the environment in which he acts, to reflect about it and to rationally manage and differentiate his behavior progressively develops when the communitarian organism opens up towards the outdoors, integrating in larger and larger territorial units, when the social functions differentiate, the interdependence chains widen and men start to depend on a larger and larger number of other men with whom they have to align their actions (Elias 1969: 642-43). So horizontalism is not to be confused with the granting to individuals of the freedom to move autonomously and without responding to any central authority. The individualized subject, separating himself from the communitarian mixture, has paradoxically to respond to a very binding set of injunc-

tions coming from the newly arising social space. Individualization is invariably accompanied by a huge behavioral «rationalization»: the opposite of spontaneity, intuitively evoked by the concept of «horizontalism». This movement of integration and differentiation is complemented by central administrative institutions that watch over the new and broader territorial units, monopolizing the physical coercion. The interaction space must be pacified in order for the interdependence circuits to become denser and wider. So individuals are prevented from using force on their own.

Another version of the same process has been provided by Riesman (1950), who links the birth of the «inner-directed» type of conformity, at the turn of the 17th century, to the necessity for the subject to escape from the community, being unable to respond to the challenge posed by the demographic explosion.

All these changes converged towards an overall transformation of the societal structure during the 19th century. According to Nisbet (1996), the most striking processes generated by French and Industrial revolutions are: individualization, abstraction (production and re-production processes fall off of the communities where they were rooted) and generalization (the freed single components of the collective bodies are now integrated in a universal game). The institutional case of this kind of society coincides with the self-regulating market: «Nineteenth-century civilization rested on four institutions. The first was the balance of power system which for a century prevented the occurrence of any long and devastating war between the Great Powers. The second was the international gold standard which symbolized a unique organization of world economy. The third was the self-regulating market which produced an unheard-of material welfare. The fourth was the liberal state. [...] But the fount and matrix of the system was the self-regulating market. It was this innovation which gave rise to a specific civilization» (Polanyi 2001: 3).

The similarity between the 19th century institutional frame and neo-liberal globalization is underlined by Rodrik (2011). The nation-state sovereignty over society was structurally weakened by the strict monetary rules connected to the gold standard before World War I: «the global economic system operated along strict Golden Strait-jacket lines. The rules of the game – open borders, protection of the rights of foreign merchants and investors – were enforced by chartered trading companies or imperial powers. There was no possibility of deviating from them» (Rodrik 2011: 426). The Weberian «universalist coercive institution» smooths any public and sovereign garrison.

The birth of sociology can be interpreted as the reply to the contradictions generated by the new horizontal frame. While the institutional pattern of self-regulation triumphantly advances in Western society, the model of truth and justice it contains is already in disgrace. «Instead of the Age of Reason's cherished natural order, it is now the institutional order – community, kinship, social class – that forms the point of departure for social philosophers as widely separated in their views as Coleridge, Marx, and Tocqueville» (Nisbet 1996: 9).

The dramatic transformations produced by the Industrial Revolution, mainly regarding the condition of labor, land share, rural impoverishment, chaotic urbanization, the factory system, technology etc., engender a strong interest toward social topics and, at the same time, a deep questioning of the foundations of the new horizontalist regime. This reversive mood in thought reply will be increasingly embodied and structured in a new field of scientific knowledge: the one called «sociology». Nisbet renames the period between 1830 and 1900 «the golden age of sociology» (Nisbet 1996: 315).

Even if sociology is strictly linked to the age of progress and industrialization, its relation to modernity is very ambivalent. It rejects the set of unit-ideas framing the nineteenth century institutions and it decrees the ineluctability of the opposite set to preserve social order: i.e., classical sociologists oppose community to society, status to class, they emphasize authority against power, the centrality of the sacred *versus* the unsustainability of the secular, they call alienation what is commonly named progress.

It is possible to recognize a common path, winding from the descriptive to the normative dimension, in the work of the founding fathers of sociology, that emerges in watermark beyond any deep difference in the scientific approach and in the politico-intellectual vocation. The path is marked by three movements, resumable in three «D»: «deconstructing» the epistemological roots of the first global turn (in particular: the belief in the primary character of the individual and the image of a horizontal regime where every singularity freely plays its game); «denouncing» the basic unsustainability of the horizontal institutions, whose real functioning structurally undermines social order; «designing» new regulatory patterns all inspired by the recovering of some kinds of vertical and central dimensions.

Here we can only provide some significant hints about this path. In general, classical sociologists contend (and here lies the first «deconstructive» move) the «naturalness assumption» that in the 19th century culture envelops the individual: its alleged primary and original character; the idea that the individual has a substance in itself, which precedes its socialization and that it is possible to understand the social system and its dynamics by starting from the determinations, the will and the strategies of its single members, as they are in fact the original sources of the order.

The founding fathers of sociology definitely reject these ideas, claiming the opposite concepts: the primary character is held by society as a whole, or by other “vertical” entities. The individual is a peripheral exponent of a central will that has to be discovered.

This approach is particularly flagrant in Durkheim, according to whom society is a *sui generis* entity, not only different from the mere sum of the individuals who compose it, but also pre-eminent on them. «[Society] is a whole, or rather it is *the* unique whole to which everything is related» (Durkheim, Mauss 1970: 83). The Durkheimian reversive posture towards the *zeitgeist* is evident already from his definition of the proper subject of sociology: the «social facts» (Durkheim 2013), i.e. those ways of being and doing that do not belong to individuals, but upon whom they are imposed. A paradoxical concept: intuitively, we think that a way of being and acting belongs by definition to the one who «is and acts». Durkheim, on the contrary, tells us that social facts exist independently of their interpreters. «Social facts must be studied as things: that is, as realities external to the individual» (Durkheim 2005: XXXVI). And their nature is coercive. They impose themselves on individuals. Also the concept of «collective consciousness» seems an oxymoron. This entity, intuitively referred to individuals, is now attributed to collectivity. The basic values and institutions of a social consortium are not the fruit of bargaining among citizens, but they are always generated in times of collective effervescence. In this sense, religion is the basic ingredient of social cohesion: «There is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself. There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality» (Durkheim 1960: 427).

The denouncing move was also evident in Marx (1964), for whom the isolated individual is a fiction of utilitarian theory. The alleged spontaneity of market interactions, based on the “naturalness” of self-seeking and of the pursuit of profit, is unmasked as mere ideology, namely a cultural product that masks the relationships of domination in the production sphere: it is the narrative that a specific class tries to promote in order to preserve its own interests and to consolidate its dominant position to the detriment of the weaker classes (Marx 1963). So, horizontalism is a rhetorical device that masks a real hierarchical verticality.

Weber, despite his methodological (but not ontological) individualism, reveals the «transcendent engine» of capitalism. The vocation for growth and accumulation underpinning it is not the fruit of a natural predisposition of the individual, striving to satisfy his needs, but of a transcendent injunction: the «pre-destination doctrine» of Calvinism. «The earning of money within the modern economic order, so long as it is done legally, is the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling. [...] It is an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity» (Weber 1992: 19).

Simmel, for his part, emphasizes the centrality of the «form» for the interactions dynamics, above all psychological content. Another way to underline the coercivity and the «thingness» of the social facts.

«D» for denounce is the second stage in the sociological path. The more or less hidden argument of the founding fathers’ narratives is that an institutional pattern really and consistently inspired by horizontalism will fatally meet an insuperable impasse: it is unable to create a sustainable social order. A regime founded on the almost exclusive valorization of its immanent dimensions, on free circulation of its single molecules, without any central direction, if not in the form of a mere traffic regulation, is fated to create discomfort, malaise, injustices and finally to fall down.

The explicitly conservative sociologists denounce both effects: disorder and uniformity. “In *Gesellschaft*, as contrasted with the *Gemeinschaft*, we find no actions that can be derived from an *a priori* and necessarily existing unity. [...] On the contrary, here everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension

against all others.” (Tonnies 1963: 64). At the opposite, Tocqueville (2010) stigmatizes the spreading of mediocrity in democratic societies, the veil of uniformity that ends up enveloping society, not by imposition of a central power, but on the contrary by the mere unfolding of the horizontal logic. Everybody designs modernity as the realm of continuous innovation, but he feels that no society in history has been, in the final analysis, so fixed, so immobilized in its institutions, so hegemonized by trivial and middling ideas, inapt to evoke any real, big change.

On the opposite political side, the entire work of Marx appears as a blow against the catastrophic social effects of the global capitalistic turn. We witness the compression of the “social” character of man, and its regression to a «natural» being, almost to an animal. Autonomy hides the fact that, due to the appropriation of the means of production by the bourgeoisie, «the worker becomes a slave of the object [...]. The product of the worker is ‘alien’ to him, and [...] it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power» (Giddens 1971: 122-23). And above all, the mere unfolding of the capitalistic logic generates workers’ impoverishment, due to the falling tendency of the profit rate. Self-interest necessarily leads to disaster if we look at the system as a whole and if this horizontal logic is consistently deployed without external interferences: «the real barrier to capitalist production is capital itself» (Marx 1999: 245).

The prophecy of the “iron cage” is rather the falling point of capitalism for Weber (1992: 123). The religious ingredient that informed capitalism at its origin is fated to disappear leaving on the field an unbearable and disenchanting rationalized world: «there is hardly room for brotherly closeness in a culture organized purely on the basis of occupational work» (Helle 1985: 14).

Durkheim is probably, among the founding fathers of sociology, the most sensitive and obsessed by the disasters of horizontalism: anomy, first of all (Durkheim 1933; 2005). The perspective of a society of individuals devoted to the unlimited satisfaction of their needs is definitely rejected by Durkheim: «In fact, it is a general law for all human beings that needs and appetites are normal only under condition that they are limited. An unlimited need contradicts itself, because need is defined by the aim towards which it tends, and, if it is unlimited, it has no aim, because it has no end [...] They have to be subjected to some ends surpassing them, and only under this condition can they be really satisfied» (Durkheim 1992: 223-26). Religion is therefore inescapable in its specific function to provide a set of fundamental ends and norms to be kept in a safe, in order to avoid the unsustainable sense of vertigo generated by the freedom to elect and to discuss every social rule (Durkheim 1960).

Despite his pretended neutral descriptivism, Simmel has bequeathed to us a rich catalogue of the horizontal regime perverse effects: the diminution of man coinciding with the intellectualization engendered by metropolitan life or with that sensibility shutdown typical of the *blasé* modern individual (Simmel 1971); the reduction of the world to its quantitative dimensions due to the spreading of monetary mediation (Simmel 1990); the dissonance of modern culture related to the disproportion between objective and subjective spirit (Simmel 1971).

The third “D” (the design of vertical institutional alternatives) is certainly less developed in the classical sociologists. It often remains implicit, mainly in the authors most engaged in the definition of the anti-normative status of the discipline, like Simmel or Weber. As is well known, Marx mostly focused on the analysis of capitalism, but he never developed in depth the proposal of a communist society. Anyway, the aspiration to the restoring of a collective, vertical sovereignty against blind improvement is undeniable: «the realm of freedom ... can only consist in the socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under the common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature» (Marx 1999: 559). Durkheim (1933) is without any doubt the most explicit. In order to face the weakness of collective conscience and the risk of anomy, modern State has to take charge of the active community building, mainly investing in public education and corporatism (a proxy of the lost community).

SOCIOLOGY AND THE STATE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The recurring accusation to classical sociology to be held hostage by the nation-state is indisputable (Cicchelli 2016; Pendenza 2017). But methodological nationalism is rather the effect of the hegemonic imprint of struc-

tural-functionalism in a limited season of the history of sociological thought. On the contrary, as we have seen, globalism has provided the decisive thrust for the constitution of sociology as an autonomous scientific field. It pertains to its genetic code. It is also true, on the other hand, that if one looks at the theoretical and empirical contents, classical sociology has actively contributed to affirm the centrality of the nation-State in the twentieth century. But, as we will try to show now, these contents are not consubstantial to sociology. If in the nineteenth century sociology has opposed the «globalist» regime, nevertheless it has adopted the same reversive posture in the twentieth century towards the hegemony of the state-centred regulation.

1929 Wall Street crisis marks the collapse of the faith in the capacity of the market rule to automatically engender growth and prosperity for all. But, according to Polanyi (2001), it is the USA's rejection of the gold standard in 1933 the point of no return for the self-regulating market regime. Here starts the real systemic revolution at a global level. Namely, we enter the verticalist regime.

«After a century of blind 'improvement' man is restoring his 'habitation'» (*Ivi*: 257). For over one century, man had left the production and the reproduction of his own existence to a blind device (the market rule), placed beyond his space of sovereignty. Now, economy is re-embedded in society. Restoring sovereignty means, above all, that the social system returns to put in check and to give order to production and reproduction of resources. This activity can no longer be left to the free initiative of the actors, but a central intelligence takes charge of it, primarily by restoring a collective sovereignty over the three factors of production (money, land, labor).

Everywhere, in short, social systems restart working according to a logic of redistribution that progressively undermines the hegemony of market exchange. A new kind of verticalist paradigm arises in social regulation, taking different political guises. The State, anyway, holds primacy in the new regime.

Looking at the institutional regulation, the season that in Western countries goes from the thirties until the dawn of the eighties has a fundamental unity. Both the regimes, pre- and post-war, have to be interpreted as reactions to the crisis of the horizontalist system. The symbolism of the community stands anew as a pivot. Starting from the end of World War II, a regime of «societal modernity» (Giaccardi, Magatti 2003) or, more precisely, of «societal capitalism» is established in all Western countries. In this expression there is an allusion to the fundamental mediation between capitalism and society, by the State. A form of «embedded liberalism» (Harvey 2005). The State adopts a maternal attitude toward the citizen.

How does sociology react to the new institutional regime?

At the beginning, faithful to the verticalist mood dominating the founding fathers' works, sociology has mirrored and ideologically supported the state-centered regime. After all, it has actively and very precociously contributed, in the previous century, to promote the collective institutions primacy. This role has been mainly played by Talcott Parsons, heir and at the same time executor of classical sociological thought. Parsons (1991) realizes a precious and detailed work of scientific systematization of social theory, refining its conceptual tools, reconnecting and reintegrating in its corpus the contributions of other human and social sciences. But, in some way, he also anesthetizes the critical content of sociology, transforming it into a vestal of the statist regime and into a privileged handmaiden of its historical deployment.

But the more verticalist thinking passes onto the power side, invading its rooms, the more its real influence in culture and in the scientific domain declines. Most vital thought undertakes a completely different direction, and like a flood imposes its hegemony. Horizontalism is the new mood. Verticalist *Weltanschauung*, asserted by the dominant institutions with their mere presence, is the object of a strong criticism. First, with the friendly fire of Robert K. Merton (1963), who from the inside of the structural-functionalist domain disputes the tendency to build grand theoretical buildings, aiming to provide a total image of society and he deconstructs the same postulates of functionalism alluding to a sort of «natural» unity of the social system.

From the outside, starting from midcentury, the heir becomes a crossfire target: «criticism of structural-functionalism opposed mainly its assumptions in critical areas of sociological theory: the vision of man and society it presumably implies; its paradigmatic model of social order; and its more concrete analytic paradigms, and research hypotheses» (Eisenstadt 1976: 195).

A first counter-model is provided by the conflict school. Wright Mills (1999) claims that Parsons and his mates have made social order and its legitimacy unproblematic, abstracting it from the historical flow and losing any

interest for conflict and change issues. The alliance, under the auspices of structural-functionalism, with the main centers of political power (especially in the USA) has led sociology to play as a supporter of the ruling class, to participate in safeguarding its interests, which include the manipulation of the weaker classes. In Parsonian formulations, the shared character of social goals and values is almost taken for granted. But dominant values and goals are often an expression of the interests of specific groups, located in leading positions. Indeed, the institutional order is not guaranteed by the sharing of a given set of values, but by the control over resources and by domination practices. The emphasis on the value-normative dimension is here replaced by power and conflict. So the claim of the system to always act in the name of the general interest and of the universal needs is unmasked. More generally, Dahrendorf (1969) frontally criticizes the Parsonian concept of socialization, in which the actor appears like a mere executioner of the role injunctions, whose architecture is *a priori* designed by the institution. This formulation prevents a real comprehension of how society and individuals work.

The emphasis on the anti-systemic conflict also characterizes the supporters of the «ecological-group» model, from Bendix (1968) to Collins (1975) and the social anthropologists like Goody (1971). The systemic-organic idea is here replaced by the vision of society as a battlefield, in which different and multiple social groups compete to further their political, ideal or economic interests. «The emphasis is on the action of human beings; ideals and organization forms are to be interpreted as the creations of human actors, as individuals try out various strategies to gain collaboration or subordination of others» (Collins 1968: 67).

Here comes what has been called the «micro-sociological revolution» (Munch, Smelser 1992: X): phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and frame analysis. All these sociological schools –taking over in the sixties– bring about a decisive change even in the object of sociology: the traditional aim to understand society as a whole gives way to the capture of specific «frames», single snapshots of limited portions of social life. The gaze cordons around the actor and his relations, forsaking the pretention to «look at things from the top» that was the proper engagement of sociology at its origins: «individual social actors are seen as being of crucial importance in the very process of the construction of social roles, structures and orders and it is stressed that they cannot be subsumed under these roles or structures. Indeed, potentially they are also creators of roles, of their meanings, of the definitions of situations. [...] Also of special importance in this context has been the strong emphasis on the dimension of power and of the symbolic construction of reality in the shaping of situations of interaction and institutional orders» (Eisenstadt, Helle 1985: VII-VIII).

Reality is composed of a set of meaning perspectives built by multiple and different interactional contexts. Namely, there is no single mental construct that impregnates the community and is shared by its members. Mental constructs are the outcome of an interaction process always in the making, localized and characterized by changing boundaries. Under these conditions, the unity of a social entity is unthinkable. Truth lies beyond the forms. Relevant social life (regarding its meaning) swarms beyond the institutions, hides in the ravines where non-mediated relations between actors are interwoven. In order to understand social life we have to investigate inside these environments.

The shift is not simply towards the individual. «Human beings construct their behavior in the course of its execution, rather than responding mechanically to either external stimuli or such internal ‘forces’ as drives, needs, or motives» (Manis, Meltzer 1967: 495). Social life key, its meaning, lies neither in institutions nor in individuals. It is neither interpretable as an activity aiming at satisfying the social organism’s needs, nor aiming at satisfying individual needs. It is only shaped by the meanings that actors socially elaborate while they act and interact. All is fluid. Centre is nowhere.

As in the nineteenth century, also twentieth century sociology develops along the three «D» path: it «deconstructs» the epistemological pillars of the coeval form of regulation and «denounces» its unsustainability. But it also implicitly «designs» another institutional form. This analytical approach has evidently a political and normative implication: a regime is good and right if it doesn’t establish *ex-ante* the aims and the values of social order, promoting on the contrary the maximum freedom to build the social meanings by interaction, i.e. a horizontalist regime, without vertical injunctions, without pretentions to build a unifying, consistent and enduring frame of meaning, to promote static and non negotiable orientation values.

CANONE INVERSO

The history here retraced allows us to contend Nisbet's thesis about the foundational «conservative» spirit of sociology. The ontological tie with premodern order doesn't hold up against the time. When, in the twentieth century, a new form of collective sovereignty on the territory (even if in the enlarged form of State) has been recovered, then sociology has started to underline the primacy of the elementary particles against every institutional injunction, both on the descriptive and on the normative plan, so pre-figuring a new global and neutral arena, freed from any striation by forms of collective will. Dis-embedding and emancipation appear the new vocations. Hence, considering conservatism as the common thread through sociological theories is probably an optical illusion that rather hides a particular kind of reversive attitude, rooted in the structure and the imaginary of modernity.

In general, theoretical thinking is naturally called to reflect on the gaps in a given reality, on what it lacks, and on the negative effects that some of its features could yield in their working. Surfing on its abstraction devices, thought is naturally able to imagine and simulate the development path of a specific pattern of society, well before we go through it. We can say that thought is faster than reality. More specifically, social theory is faster than the coeval model of social regulation.

Of course, between the organizational structure of society and its knowledge framework there is a strong relationship. Scheler (1960) tends to think of this link in an analogical way: «all knowledge is ultimately also conversely determined by the society and its structure» (17). But during modernity the logic of the inverted mirror (also contemplated by Scheler) has clearly prevailed, mainly due to the peculiar position occupied by the intellectuals: «a relatively classless stratum which is not too firmly situated in the social order» (Mannheim 1991: 137). This condition frees intellectuals from the traditional function of maintaining order, to which professional thinkers were assigned in the past ages: «one of the most impressive facts about modern life is that in it, unlike preceding cultures, intellectual activity is not carried on exclusively by a socially rigidly defined class, such as a priest-hood, but rather by a social stratum which is to a large degree unattached to any social class and which is recruited from an increasingly inclusive area of social life» (*Ivi*: 139). These outlandish individuals offer the modern order the chance to compare with an external top-down view. They provide a self-consciousness reserve for exploring the social system nature and its working model. The freedom of intellectuals ensures that thought, in modern society, is not exclusively used for maintaining order: its development is released from the social structure and, if necessary, goes the opposite way, often in alliance with antagonistic classes. «If the objective of thought were simply to 'reproduce' reality, it would be the slave of things; it would be chained to reality. It would have no role except to 'copy' in a servile fashion the reality that it has before it. [...] Therefore, thought has as its aim not the reproduction of a given reality, but the construction of a future reality» (Durkheim 1955: 141).

The most genuine theories are born and develop in opposition to the dominant order. According to Eisenstadt (1992), the source of this attitude resides in the consciousness (most developed in modernity) of the arbitrariness of any social and cultural construction, i.e. «the consciousness that any given order is only one of several, perhaps many, possible alternatives, including the possibility of living beyond any social order whatsoever» (Eisenstadt 1992: 68). No order can melt the eternal tension between equality and hierarchy; no division of labor can satisfy once and for all the expectations of social players; no democratic openness can exhaust the desire to participate in central symbolic and institutional arenas.

So, during modernity, social theories, regardless of the different and multiple contents of any construction, have taken an architecture, a general «form», inverted *vis-à-vis* the one taken by the institutions in office, i.e. by the dominant ruling model. The relation between theory and society has been marked by a reversive principle.

As we have seen above, the last two centuries have been characterized by an alternation of hegemony between a horizontal paradigm and a vertical paradigm. For horizontality, immanence is the privileged dimension. To understand society – it is believed – we must first refer to individuals and their relational strategies. In general, we pretend to find the true meaning of a social entity by looking at its single players and the networks they interweave. The order doesn't radiate from a central control room, but it is thought as the *ex post* result of the interaction

dynamics between social actors. The single parts may be independent of one another, or melt according to common principles, but anyway they do not respond to a central intentionality.

The descriptive level is also linked to the political manifestation. Here the dominant narrative sounds more or less like this: a social order is much more desirable insofar as it leaves out the subject «as is», promoting a process of self-revelation. “Let it be” is the motto. Individuals must be what they prefer to be. The more social players are free to act and interact based upon their own preferences, the more society as a whole will be happy. Both on the analytical and normative level, the horizontal view is led to imagine the existence of a sort of basic region, alien to any institutional form, where «authenticity» lies. It imagines that the molecules and the singularities swarming in this grassroots dimension have an original character that needs to transpire and to emerge: any attempt to steer these molecules from outside is not only impracticable, but also abusive and immoral. Horizontality appears to be the «natural» order, more harmonious and suited to individual moods.

Horizontality constantly contends a verticalist hegemony in the theoretical field and in the social sphere. For verticalism, the truth of a social organism, its real engine, cannot be found in the single preferences of the individual units that compose it. At an analytical level, we have to consider that individual expressions are not original: they are derived from some systemic injunctions. We mustn't look at the single parts of the system, but at the whole. Because the system is not the mere sum of its single parts, but a *sui generis* entity, which works like an organism, according to a principle of unity that we have to recognize. There are some «transcendental» and invisible dimensions that decisively inform the players involved in the system. The individual's truth is not in what he claims to be and to prefer, nor in his behavior. His truth lies elsewhere. Verticalist logic imagines the existence of a central intentionality placed outside the phenomenal reality, i.e. beyond human interactions as they appear to the observer. In order to understand social life we need to locate and to decode this top-down intelligence, that underlies the whole system.

What is the political-ideological implication of this narrative? Society as it is, in its immanent dimension –as it appears to the naked eye– does not correspond to its real essence. Furthermore, it is not the «right» society. The result of the interaction between single molecules is not the best social condition attainable, *ergo* we need to build a different institutional device that can change things from the top. Ratifying spontaneous interactions means ratifying «injustice», the law of the strongest. The form generated by spontaneous relationships is not necessarily good, nor the best attainable, as it is affected by invisible powers, behind which lurk the interests of the strongest people. We need to create instruments in order to deliberately forge the general framework of society, because its spontaneous building from grassroots is neither right nor desirable for the social players. Political institutions must “design” reality, adapting it to some selected values and principles of justice.

In horizontalism and verticalism there is a clear echo of the Sorokinian concepts of «sensate» *versus* «ideal» form of integrated culture (Sorokin 1985).

In the last two centuries, as we have outlined in the previous paragraphs, the hegemonic alternation between horizontalism and verticalism has developed out of sync: when the social regulation was based on a horizontal model, we saw the restructuring of social thought around a verticalist paradigm (and the birth of sociology was the most striking manifestation of this twist). Conversely, when verticalism has taken over the structure of society, social thought has embraced horizontalism, both analytically and normatively. This oppositional dynamic between theory and institutions has proven very useful in times of crisis. By focusing on the failings of the coeval model and simulating its development, theorists have been able to forecast the dire consequences of the given institutional order.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE GLOBAL CRISIS: THE CASE OF THE GENERATIVITY APPROACH

The providential mismatch between social theory and social regulation appears jammed in the present crisis of neoliberal globalization. The new horizontal institutional cycle started forty years ago, between the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties (of the past century), has not yet been really challenged and overturned by social theory, despite more than a decade of financial, economic, social, ecological and now health crisis.

Is critical thinking disappeared? Not exactly. Critical social thoughts abound, but beyond the large range of «contents» they oppose to the ruling institutions, it is very hard to see a real questioning of the current «form» of social regulation and consequently the outline of a real alternative in this specific dimension. The circumstance prevents social theory to assume the original reversive function played by sociology during modernity.

But, which is precisely this form of regulation? Between the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties the accumulation of contradictions caused a total reversal, a true upset of the paradigm inspiring social regulation: the «glorious» verticalist model gave way to a «neo-horizontalist» regime. The change was prepared for a long time, as we have seen, during the decades of verticalist development and, in particular, during the «thirty glorious years», by an ample and diversified literature, coming from epistemology, philosophy and, last but not least, social theory. The direction of the change lies in a sort of «free exit» principle, applied to the elementary particles of society. The singularities composing the system, first of all «individuals», are deprived of the strength, the protection but also the «load» of collective organization. This mechanism of liberation spreads in all spheres of society, not only in the economic field. Everywhere, the project of order is lost, to the profit of the autonomy of the peripheral molecules: more precisely, the representatives of the collective will are expelled from the cockpit and an «autopilot» is installed in their place. The idea that society as a whole could be ordered by a human central intentionality irreversibly fades. It even becomes illegitimate. Sovereignty is no longer concentrated at the center of the system (i.e. public institutions), but it seems to disappear into thin air. Government turns into «governance» (Deneault 2013). Any sovereign center that overcomes (and that is not the fruit of) horizontal interaction between singularities is marked by a stigma. It doesn't mean that individuals stop obeying external authorities. They stop obeying the institutional entities which bear the collective will, i.e. the «legitimate» authority (Weber 1968). The economic sphere underwent the most incisive restructuring actions. The idea of a development planned by the State, by fiscal and monetary levers, by public undertakings in the key sectors and in the basic services, by the redistribution of the production fruits through rights and welfare protections, gave way to a global competition principle. The saturation of the internal market spaces, due to the success of «societal capitalism», led to bet all on the ability of the economic actors to get back on track in search of new development spaces on the whole global checkerboard (Harvey 2006; Magatti 2012; Magatti 2017). A further way to escape from saturation was the investment in post-material (Inglehart 1990) and de-standardized economic sectors. Services, care, relations, personalized commodities etc.

There is no doubt that the new horizontalist regime has reaped extraordinary successes. Regarding economic development, we have witnessed the redoubling of the GDP in two decades (Magatti 2009). Capital has gained new regions, not only investing in the traditional industrial countries, but also in multiple emerging areas, freed by the erasing of the enclosures in the global competitive arena.

But the neo-horizontalist season appears today like a butterfly, with a brilliant but short life. In 2008, as we know, the world economy suffered a severe standstill, starting from the bankruptcy of Lehmann Brothers and the subprime crisis. The financial crisis evolved into a persistent recession in Western countries and a significant slowdown in the emerging countries.

Something similar to 1929 crisis is happened. It is the typical crisis coming from horizontalism. Starting from the eighties, the commodification of productive factors has been definitely reintroduced. It is the same commodification that, according to Polanyi, ends up not only in an economic crisis, but above all in the erosion of the foundations of society. It attacks «habitation».

How does sociology reply to the crisis?

As anticipated above, our hypothesis is that, in general, sociology is late (contrary to the past regulatory seasons). It struggles to really question the horizontal form of the current institutional regulation, despite its crisis, and to imagine alternative institutions able to cope with the troubles on the ground. And this is a totally unprecedented situation. It will be easy to show it with respect to those streams of sociological thought that explicitly and legitimately mirror (although in a more or less critical way) horizontality, like for example the cosmopolitan perspective (Beck 2006; Pendenza 2017; Cicchelli 2016; Crouch 2018). Every epoch, as we have already underlined, is marked by the hegemony of a strong mirroring thinking (see the structural-functionalist sociology). What

is new is that also social theories that frontally oppose the horizontal institutions get trapped, in the final analysis, in horizontalism. It is a general mechanism that pervades multiple and diverse theoretical outposts. We can call them «con-formist alternatives», in the sense that on the one side they clearly and sharply denounce the harmful effects of the current regulation pattern; then, the suggested solutions, in order to face the drifts of the dominant pattern, always and invariably rank inside the horizontal form: the recipes to escape the crisis are taken from the same thought stream from which the regulation pattern in disgrace draws inspiration.

Of course, any attempt to report these multiple cases will be inhospitable here. We can only refer to a particularly significant case that well illustrates the general mechanism. We refer to the «social generativity» approach launched by an international research group led by Mauro Magatti (2018).

In the last decade, the author has built one of the most powerful and comprehensive critiques to the neo-horizontal regime, that he calls very significantly «techno-nihilist capitalism» (Magatti 2009). This one is characterized by a clear separation between «functions» and «meanings», i.e. by a disconnection between the collectively elaborated values, on the one side, and social organization, on the other. Social order is no longer founded on a set of shared values and meanings, but on mere functionality, aimed at enabling everybody to make his own game and freely circulate towards the individually chosen destinations. The goal is to build «an order without a project». *Legein*, intended as the discursive elaboration of the meanings giving order to society, gives way to *teukein*, which refers to the verb “to make”, evoking the aim at increasing beyond any limit the capacity of each citizen to operate, to transform reality, to “make it be”, regardless of the destinations of these activities and their inspiring values (Castoriadis 1975). So we access a maximum of institutional neutrality. The two adjectives of Magatti’s formula – technical and nihilistic – are very telling. The new regime decrees an absolute «reversibility of meanings»: all values are worthy of being pursued, provided that they are concretely, i.e. «technically», actionable. The public institution has only to increase at its best the ability of each citizen to act, regardless of his purposes and of the values orienting the choice of his goals. In the end, it is nothing but a radicalization of the classical posture of modernity: let man elaborate and implement his own sense. To this end, institutions self-neutralize. Sovereignty is transferred –ideologically speaking– from the political and institutional authorities to the grassroots: the elaboration and the choice of the meanings orienting action become an exclusive prerogative of individuals. The meaning issue is integrally delegated to individuals, so it is no longer a public affair, around which the community gathers and discusses.

Once again, after the long season of the twentieth century, social organization is entrusted to a blind self-regulating device. Social order is no longer governed by collective meaning, but by a «technical macro-system» and by a set of «functionalized institutional spheres» (Magatti 2009). The technical macro-system integrates in a single code all the technological innovations that impose themselves on the basis of their power to increment, in general, the ability of the actors in making, operating and transforming. The big organizational systems of society are managed on the basis of this technical integration that follows self-referential logics, without responding to political inputs or local normative specificities.

Technical standards are then doubled by the integrated systems of transnational and trans-cultural rules and procedures, which give order to the so-called «functionalized institutional spheres» (financial markets, healthcare systems, law, sport, research and so on). Here also arises a principle of self-organization that completely deprives any «authority» embodying the collective will. Functional efficiency, the promotion of the most fluid circulation of players and materials are the only legitimated coordinates.

Every collective trail is evacuated, in order to prepare a plain space into which individuals can slip with the least possible number of restraints. The public institution does not aim to recompose individual preferences, because they are an exclusive prerogative of the private realm. It is reduced, *de facto*, to a traffic controller. This kind of institutional frame produces a structural and fatal crisis, that has three main forms of manifestation: financial, social and ecological (Magatti 2012).

Following this analysis, one might then expect from his author a contribution for the overcoming of the neo-horizontalist institutional blindness and, in some way, for the restoring of humanly elaborated meanings framing collective life. None of that it is possible to see in the GSA (generative social action) perspective, defined as «a possible way out of the cultural as well as economic stagnation in which we have been stuck since the 2008 financial

crisis» (Magatti, Giaccardi 2018: 11). This way out doesn't question the current horizontal frame, it leaves anyway untouched the institutional domain, but trusting on a sort of social actors maturing (so the alternative spreads from the bottom, from the horizontal dimension). It is no coincidence that the term «generativity» is taken up by the psychological field: according to Erikson (1987), the seventh phase in the evolution of human personality is marked by the dilemma between stagnation and generativity, i.e. «a condition in which self-expression can offer a contribution to the surrounding context and is sensitive to future generations» (Giaccardi, Magatti: 13). So the generative attitude involves not only the act of giving birth to something but also of taking care, protecting, nurturing and improving the world where the generated entity has to live. In this sense, GSA stands as the opposite of the consumerist anthropology promoted by techno-nihilist capitalism: «while consumption claims to be able to remedy the subjective sense of emptiness by multiplying the possibility of choice, generativity follows the opposite track, searching for satisfaction in the creation of something new, which is able to draw the subject out of his/her self» (*Ivi*: 17). The GSA develops along three movements: bringing into the world (transforming a personal desire in a concrete realization that becomes a trace of our passage into the world); taking care for what has been generated in order to make it last; releasing it by an act of endowment (Gherardi 2018) favoring its capacitation and autonomous flourishing. In this way GSA becomes a talking action whose effects are disseminated along the three axes of intersubjectivity (authorization), intertemporality (durability), and contextuality (exemplarity). By encouraging and supporting generative forms of self-realization, social institutions may promote a «generative society», i.e. a collective consortium «in which institutions favour the development of people's capacity to empower each other, creating shared value in the process» (Gherardi, Magatti 2018: 198).

GSA is clearly a con-formist alternative, because it tries to pour new wine in the old barrel, i.e. to fill with a new content (different from consumerism) the current general form of social regulation. If techno-nihilist regime arises on a principle of reversibility of every meaning and value (as Magatti himself teaches), if this one is structurally indifferent to any content, value or meaning, how can a new content (a new kind of value or meaning) challenge the system.

Of course, we are not interested in judging the good foundation of the GSA perspective. The case simply reveals the impasse before neo-horizontalism: even those who are able to precisely frame the nature and the critical consequences of the current institutional pattern end up falling, both analytically and normatively, in the horizontalist paradigm, like the prisoners of the Bunuelian Exterminating Angel. Why the hegemony of horizontalism is so hard to impress?

The fundamental reason lies, in our opinion, in the progressive shortening of the life-cycle of social patterns, mainly due to NICT (new information and communication technologies). The social dynamics triggered by a specific institutional regime are now faster than the speed of thought. For social theory it is always harder to keep up with social reality. This circumstance calls sociology to an additional effort in a direction inscribed in the same methodological status of the discipline: i.e. the ability to put at a distance and disentangle from the coils of the contemporary society, in order to escape its cultural hegemony and to gain critical autonomy at the descriptive and normative level. Only breaking free from society, paradoxically, sociology may regain its most genuine social function.

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