



The Public Role of Italian Sociology: Among Institutions, Universities and Social Engagement

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Abstract

Sociology has played an important role in Italy, although its centrality in public debate has fluctuated, and it has been supported or opposed by political power at different historical moments. Contemporary Italian sociology has developed since the 1950s and has been influenced in various ways by European and American sociological theories. Sociology has played an important role in Italian public debate and has offered a critical and scientific perspective on the country's social reality. However, this role should be understood in the context of the different stages of development that have accompanied the academic growth of the discipline and the presence of sociologists in 'policy making' processes. In the latter sense, Italian sociology has played an important role in the formation of public policies, as it offers a scientific analysis of social problems and proposes solutions based on empirical research. Within this framework, the training processes also need to be situated within what has been defined—albeit with conceptual ambiguity—as 'professional sociology', which involves important figures such as social workers, psychologists, and health workers. However, sociology has also played an important political role both in supporting the actions of policy makers and in analysing the contradictions of the capitalist system. This article also analyses the emergence of a 'transformative' positional sociology alongside the traditional public sociology. The goal of this transformative approach is to counteract the public role of Italian sociology, which seems to have lost its critical-explanatory vocation without ever having truly acquired a propositional function in the social context.

Keywords Italian sociology · Public sociology · University · Critical sociology · Politics and sociology

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Introduction

In 1946, in a famous speech at the London School of Economics, Thomas Humphrey Marshall stated that “*sociology should not be ashamed of its desire to be useful*”. In some ways, the British sociologist was anticipating some of the aspects of the wide-ranging debate on the social role of sociology that has unravelled over time, not least owing to the emergence of concepts such as “public sociology” and “service sociology”, up to approaches such as “critical sociology” and “positional sociology”.

How is this debate related to the two key nodes of an analysis of Italian sociology, particularly considering the ability to read the crises of society by a discipline that is always grappling with the sword of Damocles of its alleged epistemological and academic fragility? The relationship between sociology and crisis represents a relevant, if not constitutive, aspect of the relationship between the birth and development of the discipline and its ‘mission’ of reading political and social change. Thus, it is proposed that the theme of the crisis be disaggregated from that of the vicissitudes of Italian sociology to highlight the potential of a disciplinary perspective that has had, even if it has not always profitably fulfilled, the task of being the ‘science of the crisis’, the latter understood as sociohistorical contingencies that radiate and transform society in different historical phases (Reckwitz & Rosa, 2023). At a time when the perspective of “public sociology” raises the question of a relationship between sociologists and publics beyond the academic field, as well as the fruitfulness of the combination of scientific work and moral commitment (Burawoy, 2021), sociology is again faced with some of the founding issues of its presence not only within the professional-academic perimeter of its educational and research function but also in the broader public sphere, as an actor in processes of social and political innovation. This is the mission that Mills already set in relation to the “ability to reflect on oneself free from the familiar habits of everyday life, in order to look at reality with different eyes”, reading what is happening in society and politics to “transform public indifference into interest in public problems” (Mills, 1959: 15). A sociology that does not resolve itself is a chronicle of the present, repetition or indulgence in the common sense, mere sociographic empiricism or ideological construction. Based on these aspects, the emergence, even in Italy, of a debate on the prospect of a critical sociology and a sociology capable of taking a stand is confronted with the challenge that increasingly characterises sociology, more so than other disciplines. The issue revolves around how the definition of relevant social problems can be renewed, that is, how to establish that certain social conditions are defined as relevant issues on which to activate a series of claim-making activities (Kitsuse & Spector, 2001). Italian sociology has been moving on this score, confronting the redefinition of its public role and of the concepts of *avalutativity* and social and intellectual engagement and, more generally, the discussion of the values present in society to offer a groundwork for public reflection and to simultaneously elucidate the manipulations, inconsistencies, and inequalities and grapple with that emancipative process of the citizen through the critique of social, economic, cultural and political processes (Boltanski, 2011).

Different conceptual labels express (and sometimes conceal) different positions both on the academic role of the discipline and on what is normally defined as ‘public engagement’, which, in turn, has a wide internal articulation. Thus, the first task of

this article is to clearly and analytically define the concepts and practices that have accompanied the development of sociology and its public role in Italy. Subsequently, this article tries to account for the complex (and sometimes conflicting) relations between the public role of academic sociology and the social commitment (as well as political involvement) of Italian sociologists. Finally, an initial analysis of the opportunities that Italian sociology might have in the time of neoliberalism is outlined.

Who, and at whose Service? Italian Sociology

The itinerary of Italian sociology is affected by the historical and cultural processes that accompanied its birth, its long decline, its difficult recovery and, ultimately, its season of institutionalisation within the academic world. On the one hand, Italian sociology was influenced by Crocian idealism, which excommunicated it from a disciplinary point of view as an ‘infirm science’ and relegated it to a positivist horizon; moreover, it was denied its own epistemological statute. On the other hand, this discipline suffered forced oblivion during Fascism, with the dissolution of the Italian Society of Sociology founded in 1910 and the suspension of the publication of the *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia* in 1921. Despite its narrow disciplinary space, sociology had a very early season of emergence in Italy on issues related mainly to relationships with institutions, the state and, in general, a political orientation. This is the affair of elitism, in which the work and teaching of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Roberto Michels were asserted. In addition to this cultural heritage stratified in Italian culture after the Second World War, the communist world also had a prejudice against sociology that was linked to a prevailing philosophical culture. This difficult relationship was later overcome thanks to the influence of the student movements and the reception of the research of the Frankfurt Critical School in Italy. The ‘return to sociology’ in Italy is marked by a development that has been the subject of reflections and analyses mainly centred on the process of the institutionalisation of the discipline in the university sphere rather than on the actual birth of an epistemology proper to an Italian sociological canon (Barbano, 1985, 1999, 2003; Rossi, 2003; Cavalli, 2021). This path was marked by the gradual constitution of a nucleus of ‘first generation’ sociologists, whose training was influenced by paths other than sociology and who were nevertheless characterised by research and investigations into the social and economic conditions of a country undergoing reconstruction, with inequalities connected to both the urban sphere and the growing contribution of research on working conditions. Thus, it is no coincidence that this first generation of sociologists developed around numerous extrauniversity research centres, including the National Centre for Prevention and Social Defence in Milan, the COSPOS training in Milan and then Catania, the Olivetti Studies Office in Ivrea, the Social and Labour Studies Institute in Genoa, the Il Mulino Association in Bologna, the Sturzo Institute in Rome, and, later, the establishment of the Portici Institute in the southern region, which was also transferred to Catania and Svimez (Rossi, 2003; Cossu & Bortolini, 2017). This season was marked by the public role of sociology, which was emerging in the reform season of the first centre-left governments in Italy and whose empirical connotation did not have the goal of a critical theory of society. This original aspect

was used to determine the nature of Italian sociology, which for a long time lacked its own internal theoretical-critical corpus on which to develop the discipline even in dialectical terms (Gallino, 2002). At the same time, this was also the season in which American sociology was received due to the pioneering attendance of some of the main exponents of the first generation, especially with the lesson of Merton, and the reception of the contribution of the classics of sociology, including Weber, through the mediation of Parsons. However, as Rossi (2003) observes, direct points of contact with other European realities, especially Germany and France, were lacking, and research and work were received by the second generation of sociologists in the initial institutionalisation phase of the discipline in Italian universities. These years were also marked by the recognition of sociology with participation in the 1959 Stresa and Milan conferences, mainly by Renato Treves, and the 1961 Ancona conference, up to the watershed conference on the 'crisis of the sociological method' in 1971 in Turin. The 1960s also witnessed the beginning of the process of institutionalising sociology in universities, with the first sociologists moving from institute roles to professorships. In fact, the first national competition for sociology professorships took place in 1961 and was won by Franco Ferrarotti in Rome, Alessandro Pizzorno in Ancona (then a branch of Urbino) and Giovanni Sartori in Florence. These were the first entrances of sociology into the academy, as previously described only for the figure of Camillo Pellizzi in Florence, whose compromise with the fascist period did not interpret the season of the refoundation of Italian sociology.

The academic entry of sociology was part of the season of opening up to the mass university in Italy and related to the climate of protest that characterised the late 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the founding of the first Higher University Institute of Social Sciences in Trento in 1962, inspired by the vision of Bruno Kessler, played a central role in the season of Italian 1968, and some of the leading sociologists of that season, including Barbano, Braga, Ferrarotti, Acquaviva, Ardigò, Demarchi and later Alberoni, were among its lecturers. Over time, sociological publishing activity also began, with both journals, from the *Quaderni di Sociologia* founded by Abbagnano and Ferrarotti as early as 1951 to the *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* to *Studi di sociologia*, and the work of translating sociological texts by Edizioni di comunità, il Mulino, Utet and Einaudi. In this cultural and political climate of the birth of Italian sociology, the process of institutionalising sociology concealed a danger destined to impact the following decades. In fact, if the second generation of sociologists injected the culture of Italy's transformation into the Italian university in the cultural fracture of the 1960s, with the development of new research themes and the openness to the contribution of new authors of European sociology known during their studies abroad, from Touraine to Bourdieu, there was also a lack of 'consolidation of the criteria of scientificity and professionalism' (Cavalli, 2021), that is, of the epistemological status of the discipline. Once the form of enquiry had disappeared and a critical theory of society of its own had not been developed, Italian academic reproduction began to structure itself with both the reforms of the university, which were not always systematic, and the organisation of the sociological community on a 'political' basis. The discipline expanded academically through the emergence of groupings that were not always formalised but responded to the Marxist, secular-socialist and Catholic traditions. In reality, these experiences were internally dissimi-

lar, marked by a cultural presence that since the dawn of sociology's return to Italy had seen the establishment of a Catholic orientation, especially around the group of Bologna Catholics and the Catholic University of Milan around Achille Ardigò, as well as a left-wing secular orientation expressed by the young sociologists of the second generation, including Guido Martinotti, Luciano Gallino and Alessandro Cavalli, which had its main territorial roots in the universities of the North (Milan and Turin, hence the definition of MiTo), and finally a secular-socialist orientation around Gianni Statera, concentrated mainly in the Centre-South (Scaglia, 2007, p. 24). Thus, the political-cultural rooting of sociologists laid the foundation for the birth of the Italian Sociology Association in Italy in 1982. The latter became the "home" of Italian sociologists, whose first congress was held in Viareggio in 1983 with the election of Achille Ardigò as president. Although many Italian sociologists were active in the main international sociology associations, especially the AIS (Associazione Italiana di Sociologia - Italian Sociology Association), for more than thirty years, the AIS was the only national association of Italian sociologists, forming the first sections (standing groups) of sociology of culture, political sociology, sociology of law, methodology, social policy, economics, labour and organisation, and sociology of religion; these were expanded later. The functioning of the AIS has coincided with the reproduction of sociology in the university, continuing to revolve around the three political-cultural areas, even though the political-cultural matrix of a Catholic, communist and secular-socialist orientation has gradually disappeared, even with the radical transformations that have taken place in Italian politics since the early 1990s¹. It remains to be considered whether and to what extent these components have instead generated a theory of society and research that is recognisable in terms of sociological "schools of thought", or whether the variegated internal composition has also only operated as an instrument of selection and progression within the academic community. Obviously, it would be a mistake to think that Italian sociology has not enriched itself over time with its own theoretical elaboration capacity or that it has not broadened its field of empirical research through interactions with international research groups. However, the growth of a form of critical reflection on its own role in society and politics has been lacking. The absence of a critical disposition that would substantiate alongside the development of a theory of society a parallel theory and critique of that same theory of society exposed Italian sociology to the progressive success of overspecialisation, the compartmentalisation into "sub-worlds" of sociologies. On the other hand, the question that was formulated by Lynd as "knowledge for what?" has dissolved or has not been properly explored. In other words, Italian sociology has struggled to place itself in the necessary, broader horizon in which the social sciences address the problem of the public role to be exercised in the historical context in which they are set (Gallino, 2002). In fact, the tangled skein between historical legacies, the process of rebirth, legislative provisions in the field

¹ Thus, in recent years, the same common house of Italian sociologists has seen the birth of two other sociology associations for the first time since 1982. Following a debate among the sociologists of the standing group of economics and organisation in 2017, SISEC (Società Italiana di Sociologia Economica) was founded, and 2017 also marked the founding act of SISCC (Società Scientifica Italiana Sociologia, Cultura, Comunicazione), the association that brings together sociologists of cultural processes and communication.

of universities, and internal divisions within the discipline have marked the development of sociology and its specialisations in Italy (Mangone & Picarella, 2023).

However, sociology has played an important role in the Italian public debate since its academic beginnings, offering a critical and scientific perspective on the country's social reality. At the same time, this role should be better framed within the different stages of development that have accompanied the academic growth of the discipline and the presence of sociologists in 'policy making' processes.

Precisely in this latter direction, the academic institutionalisation of Italian sociology—along with other social sciences—has contributed to supporting the formation of public policies, often offering a scientific analysis of social problems and suggesting solutions based on empirical research. Within this framework, the training processes must be placed within what has been defined—albeit with conceptual ambiguity—as 'professional sociology', which involves important figures such as social workers, social psychologists and health workers. The divide between "professional" sociology and "academic" (or research) sociology has fuelled confusion about the public role of the discipline, which is here understood as both a theoretical approach and a set of empirically grounded social practices. However, it should also be remembered that sociology has played a relevant political role both in supporting the action of policy makers and in analysing the contradictions of the capitalist system.

Nevertheless, this is the specific terrain in which the supposed, and recurrent, crisis of the social sciences can instead recover its mission through the thematisation of the contribution that sociology can make to the public sphere. It is assumed here that the sociologist's *Beruf* is constitutively formed by a relationship with democracy marked by a methodological rigour that does not exclude commitment, broader participation in public debate, training, or education for democracy (Cavalli, 1964). It is not a question of assuming the perspective of militant sociology that legitimises praxis in the name of an ideology confused with theory or, on the other hand, of indulging in the temptation to play an ancillary function with respect to political power. Instead, it is a matter of not hypostatizing the Weberian lesson by forcing the equivalence between *avalutativity* and the admonition that "the prophet and the demagogue do not fit the university chair" (Weber [1918] 2008, p. 42). The history of the relationship between sociology and society, as well as that between sociology and democracy, is an emancipatory endeavour of the social sciences, albeit one marked by a plurality of perspectives. Thus, it is necessary to reaffirm the centrality of sociologists in revealing the processes and manipulations that underlie the shaping of society in the different dimensions of which it is composed instead of merely operating within the perimeter of the academy (Van Bouwel, 2009).

On the one hand, this mission takes the form of a sociologist taking an active role not only in becoming a critical theorist of the processes of social oppression, especially arising from economic inequalities, but also in envisaging diagnoses of real transformative utopia of society itself through radically different types of institutions and social relations (Wright, 2010). This implies a different conception of a militant sociology that refers to an embedded conception of the sociologist in specific social, political or professional groups, according to a perspective that characterised the activity of both sociologists in the public role such as W. E. B. DuBois and Jane

Addams and nonacademic sociologists in Italy such as Danilo Dolci and Roberto Montaldi in the early 1950s. This is a disposition not only of position but also of action, which cannot but recall what emerged in postcolonial studies starting with Frantz Fanon or in a more direct anthropological approach proper to Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed".

On the other hand, the public mission of sociology is oriented towards critiques of social logic and of the very production of knowledge that is produced by research. A critical posture that can be directed towards the ways in which the sociologist constructs the research object is developed in the direction of a critical analysis of the reproduction of domination practices (in the direction of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology), leading to the more recent development of the German-derived critical theory of Honneth, Reckwitz and Rosa.

Over time, the reflection on the presence of sociology in the public debate has been enriched by an internal reflexivity within the international sociology associations that has contributed to bringing this topic into the agenda of national sociologies (Gans, 1997; Boudon, 2002; Goldthorpe, 2004; Burawoy, 2005)². An important starting point for our analysis is Michael Burawoy's eleven theses published in the *American Sociological Review* in 2005. From this analysis the first analytical definition of "public sociology" is derived, which is compared, on the one hand, with what Burawoy himself would define as "professional sociology"³ (whose "consciousness" is for him "critical sociology") and, on the other hand, with "policy sociology", which in fact represents a particular aspect of public sociology, here declined as a service instrument for (industrial and political) clients. Public sociology is entrusted with the task of both transcending the academic dimension and becoming an instrument for technical formulation, assuming instead that the relational element with the public is the foundation of a flow that is not top down but in which the 'conversation'

² In the lecture "Sociology that Really Matters", delivered at the European Academy of Sociology in 2001, Raymond Boudon identified four ideal types of 'sociological programmes', a cognitive sociology, an expressive sociology, a cameral sociology, and a committed or critical sociology). For Boudon, a liberal sociologist and pupil of Aron, the 'success' of an 'expressive and militant at the same time' sociology, like the 'descriptive' one, came at the expense of the scientific foundation of explanatory sociology, the recovery of which would indeed relegitimise the discipline in its scientific value. While recovering Boudon's sociological research idealtypes, Goldthorpe (2004) developed a different assessment of the role and potential of these orientations, proposing an alliance between 'chamber' sociology and 'sociology as a social science' (scientific sociology). Goldthorpe assumes the descriptive sociology proper to empirically grounded analysis as naturally conjoined with the theoretical analysis of the causality of sociological problems, and indeed such a connection prevents the occurrence of a 'sociological dandysm', which manifests itself in the pursuit of research topics for the intrinsic elegance and sophistication of models and not for their explanatory capacity (Goldthorpe, 2004, p. 100). According to this perspective, the normativity of 'critical sociology', with its ideological characterisation, and expressive sociology, with its methodological levity, contribute to the crisis of sociology as a social science.

³ "In Burawoy's formulation, the concept of professional sociology is not closely related to the so-called sociology as a profession, mostly understood in Europe in the double version of practical (or applied) sociology and clinical sociology (Bruhn & Rebach, 1996; Perlstadt, 2007). In fact, he makes it correspond to academic sociology, thus a kind of *sine qua non* of other sociologies, which is based on the accumulation of a body of knowledge, the creation of research questions, the elaboration of conceptual frameworks and methodological nodes. Thus, it is different from critical sociology, understood by him as the 'consciousness of professional sociology', attentive to confronting the major cultural and institutional issues of its time, rather than oriented towards constant technical specialisation" (de Nardis & Simone, 2022, p. 162).

is animated on themes in which there are not polarities but rather interconnections that generate knowledge (Burawoy, 2021, p. 4). The calls of public sociology do not identify the traits of an ‘ideologue’, even where the sociologist’s militancy in the social and political formations of which the public sphere is composed is desired. In contrast, relationality recalls an issue that has been present since the classics of sociology, namely, the necessary combination and interpenetration between scientific work and moral commitment. Although the progressive orientation of this type of approach has been acknowledged, such a disposition is not at the explicit service of a predetermined political party but results in a sociological orientation that can animate themes and problems of any potential social and political group. Not without a certain fascination and certainly a certain ‘fortune’ in the nonfiction field, however, the interpretations of public sociology are affected by the different ways in which it is received, which sometimes force its interpretation as a call to the role of the organic intellectual or alternatively shift the ‘place’ of the sociologist into the media agon as an opinion writer or columnist.

However, the overlaps among public sociology, professional sociology and policy sociology are much more pronounced than theorisation suggests. Burawoy himself admits this, and Fabio de Nardis and Anna Simone (2022) explain it very well in a recent article published in a prestigious Italian journal: “Professional sociology, guardian of epistemology and disciplinary methodology, is in fact the heart of the other three forms of sociology, even though it often runs the risk of self-reference. At the same time, policy sociology can also take on the traits of a public sociology, moving towards an extra-academic sphere, running the risk, however, of lapsing into forms of servility towards the client/financier” (de Nardis & Simone, 2022, p. 162).

If Burawoy’s theses were viewed with interest but also with suspicion in the North American academic world—particularly because of the risk of public sociology becoming (as de Nardis and Simone also recall) a sort of ‘leftist sociology’—in Italy, sociology faced its first test in the difficult cultural battle for its scientific recognition within the social sciences. The separation between academic and professional sociologists (Minardi, 2019) underlies their failure to build a community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Martini & Mangone, 2024). It is no coincidence that the Italian debate has often revolved around the poles of ‘theoretical’ sociology on the one hand and ‘applied’ sociology on the other, in which the former should have been concerned with the analysis and interpretation of society on the basis of well-established scientific paradigms, while the latter (in turn made up of many ‘families’) should have focused on the evaluation of processes and the measurement of social phenomena. Importantly, in the 1960s, such a debate was also present—with different tones and modalities—in American sociology; however, this debate was already beginning to highlight wide spaces of overlap between “theoretical” sociology and professional or “applied” sociology (Lazarsfeld et al., 1967). Applied sociology challenges the relationship with the commission of research, and inevitably, the distorting potential that forms of interest, public or private, can exert on the epistemological coherence of the sociologist in defining his or her relationship with the very object of research. However, this would be a question of unravelling the meaning of the adjective applied, as this could be composed of an openness to social and political issues and problems or, alternatively, resolved into mere support for the practices of the neo-

liberal university (Gordon & Zainuddin, 2020). From this second perspective, the critical scope of sociological work would be depotentiated as a function of its greater ability to attract funding and develop expertise, not knowledge, to be made available to public or private stakeholders. In the neoliberal twist of qualunquist fund raising, both basic research and any space for a critical perspective are undermined. Thus, the social sciences would face the burden of having to prove their “usefulness”, both in terms of research methods and results and by training “productive workers to support the new knowledge economy”, thus generating “academic capitalism through research” (Thornton, 2013).

An emblematic Italian case of the separation between “theoretical” and “applied” sociology is represented by the various approaches where the same studies have apparently been undermined by the success of cheap “practicalism” on the one hand and the standardisation of research on the other. Moreover, if the former is a trend that is already present in studies (and that has also contributed to the delegitimisation—at least in Italy—of those same studies), the latter responds decisively to a neoliberal logic that privileges an alleged “efficiency” (often founded precisely on the standardisation of academic research) over the quality of reflection and innovation in the same research. In those reductively defined “applied sociologies”, the category of “sociology of service” has also made its way. The latter is—it would be—that area of sociological research aimed at offering tools and services to public institutions and/or private enterprises; it is not “policy sociology” as defined by Buroway but something that—not limited to supporting policy making—moves in a grey area among public sociology, professional sociology and policy sociology itself. The notion of “service sociology” is obviously ambiguous because it refers both to activities carried out in commissioning situations and to the social and political engagement of sociologists, especially academic ones. In this ambiguity there is another grey area of Italian university culture, namely, that related to the variability of interpretations of the concept of the “third mission”⁴. In fact, despite the regulations in force, academic institutions often decline the “third mission” more as a consultancy activity in the service of (mostly private) clients than as “public engagement”. The prevalence of a vision of the “third mission”, limited only to the variable of “commissioning”, constitutes one of the background variables for the success of the category of “sociology of service” as well as its substantial irreducibility both to Buroway’s “policy sociology” and to the various facets of professional sociology. The idea of “service sociology” adds a further element of ambiguity to the public role of sociology and the function of sociologists’ communities of practice.

⁴ The Italian university system - in line with that of other European countries - provides for three areas of commitment for university lecturers. The first concerns the set of teaching activities within the university (“first mission”); the second concerns the research activities in which teachers participate in the various possible forms (“second mission”); finally, the third concerns “public engagement” activities, the valorisation of research and the production of public goods (cultural and social). The ‘third mission’ basically constitutes the set of scientific, technological, and cultural transfer activities as well as the direct interaction of the universities with civil society, also with the aim of promoting the economic and social growth of the territory in which the universities are located. It is generally regulated by special ministerial provisions, but its application is in fact left to the individual university institutions.

On the other hand, alongside a view of sociology as being “at the service” of institutions (and, for funding reasons, of governments and political power) and sometimes of private patrons, an idea of ‘service’ as a politically oriented activity has also developed⁵. Moreover, a distorting practice of sociology identifies its technical orientation as the practice of skills in support of preconstituted theses that seek ‘technocratic’ legitimisation in sociography, diverting the social sciences from contributing to the cognitive mission and relegating them to positions as handmaidens of the depoliticisation of policy making. In this case, this is not an approach that can be superimposed on that of critical sociology or even that of positional sociology (de Nardis & Simone, 2022) but rather a perspective that is in some respects similar to Becker’s (1968) view of a science that should not separate facts from values or even to the conception of “a superordinate science in the service of humanity” (Du Bois & Wright, 2002, p. 5).

The Public Role of Italian Sociology

Although the cultural recognition and academic legitimisation of sociology arrived relatively late in Italy (as did its institutionalisation in the universities), it nevertheless appears in the public debate on two levels: a) directly, through the works of ‘social researchers’, philosophers and intellectuals of different scientific backgrounds who adopt empirical approaches to the analysis of social reality; and b) indirectly, through the political debate, in which significant testimonies on the need for an empirical and ‘scientifically’ founded reading of reality emerge. The first level includes works that are the most articulate and sometimes difficult to connect to the sociological tradition of European and American universities, including *Esperienze Pastorali (Pastoral Experiences)*, a book by don Milani (1958), which recounts the young priest’s pastoral care experiences in Calenzano (in the province of Florence) and which was defined—almost immediately—as an essay of religious sociology (moreover, don Milani himself refers to French experiences of social analysis of religious phenomena) and constituted an exemplary approach in the field of the meaning of educational processes as an emancipatory practice of citizenship, later implemented in the *Scuola di Barbiana*⁶. At the second level, on the other hand, is the political debate that employs the tools of social analysis and hosts interventions by sociologists in the pages of party cultural journals; it is not surprising that the left-wing parties are the most sensitive to a “sociological reading” of Italian society and *Rinascita*—the

⁵ “Social research never serves to legitimise decisions that have already been taken (and, unfortunately, there is no shortage of researchers who lend themselves to being used in this capacity). By this I do not mean that the numerous researches and research carried out very often on behalf of local authorities are inexorably devoid of scientific value. The problem is that the client, more often than not only asking for confirmations, is content with poor quality products that, moreover, he would not be able to evaluate”. (Cavalli, 2010, p. 658).

⁶ *Esperienze Pastorali* has been defined, not by chance, as an emblematic example of sociological analysis of Italian society in the 1950s, interpreted through the perspective of a Catholic parish, strongly immersed in the Tuscan culture of those years. See, in this regard, Sorice (1988); Gruppo Don Milani Calenzano (2008).

Communist Party's cultural periodical—represents an extremely relevant laboratory space in this sense. If, in Italy, the relationship between sociology and politics has been repeatedly accused of translating party divisions into academic orientations, it is also true that there is a different possibility of reconstructing a fruitful relationship in terms of the ability to host nonprofessional (in the sense of academics) sociological analyses precisely in the phase of greatest capacity for cultural elaboration of political parties, as well as movements, both secular and religious. In addition to *Rinascita*, sociopolitical analyses emerged in the experience of *Cronache sociali*, the journal Giuseppe Dossetti's Christian Democrat left, in *Testimonianze*, the magazine founded by Ernesto Balducci and an expression of progressive Catholicism, and in *Mondoperaio*, a socialist periodical, all of which are laboratories of critical thought that can involve and form different audiences.

The link between sociology and politics is also evident in universities, to the extent that reference is often made to the 'tripartition' of Italian academic sociologists into three cultural areas or "components", apparently connected with the country's aforementioned three major political traditions: the Catholic, the Communist and the secular-socialist (Cossu & Bortolini, 2017). In reality, such a tripartition—actually coming from partly divergent theoretical approaches—is not strictly superimposable on the Italian political families of the period from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s; however, the fact that such an interpretation was possible highlights the importance (at least at the level of "storytelling") of the possible relations between politics and sociology. On the other hand, it is certainly true that after a phase of difficult public legitimisation, Italian sociology expressed many academic personalities who contributed to policy making processes, both indirectly through their presence in the public sphere, which was becoming increasingly mediated, and directly by working as consultants and/or experts for political parties. This is an obvious case of the intermingling of public sociology and policy sociology, as delineated in Michael Burawoy's categories, which we quoted a few lines above.

The period from 1968 to the 1980s saw several trends in Italian sociology and its public representation, which we can schematise as follows: (a) the first trend was that of militant sociology (or represented as such), which included the first sociology graduates who had acquired prominent positions in political formations of the 'new left' (and, in some cases, even in some terrorist organisations); (b) the second trend—which developed, albeit in a karstic manner, precisely in those years—was that of service sociology, often marked by a widespread mediatisation of academic sociologists; (c) the third trend was that coming from the media narrative that first used sociologists as commentators on anything and everything and then labelled them "*know-it-alls*" and essentially delegitimised their scientific expertise⁷; and d) the fourth trend—which has continued to the present day—was characterised by a substantial loss of social legitimacy and public centrality of sociology.

⁷ Obviously, this does not mitigate the role and responsibilities of sociologists themselves (of some of them) in more or less consciously placing themselves in the role of "everythingologists", reproducing through their presence in the mass media the stereotype and prejudice already inherent in the Croce definition of "infirm science". In other cases, instead, they derubricate the role of the sociologist to the pollster, an entrepreneur of research for rapid media consumption, as a token dispenser of decontextualised empirical evidence without any interpretative frame.

There are many causes of sociology's loss of social legitimacy, but we can identify at least three of them clearly enough.

The first cause concerns the scarcity of funds for the entire field of scientific research, which has severely affected the humanities and sociology in particular. This shortage of funds has resulted in a contraction of professorships and degree courses; in some cases, this contraction has also led to a lack of institutionalisation and legitimisation of certain studies. This is the case for gender studies (and the relations between gender and sociology), whose marginalisation has resulted in obvious career difficulties for scholars in this area.

The reduction in the budget available for 'basic research' (where Italian sociology has traditionally been placed) is closely correlated with a general framework element, namely, neo-liberal rationality, which has heavily affected scientific research and, in particular, that relating to the social sciences. Neo-liberal storytelling has heavily affected Italian university research, and sociology—along with other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities—has suffered the most from this situation. The rhetoric on meritocracy—which constitutes one of the specific features of the narrative of the neo-liberal imaginary—has played an important role in the affirmation of academic rankings and indicators that are not always reliable and often calibrated on the basis of the "bibliometric" disciplines, to which Italian sociology is traditionally alien. Thus, in the university system, modes of merit evaluation have been constructed through ranking logics and evaluation algorithms that are not always transparent and that—used for the recruitment of researchers—have resulted in the standardisation of scientific articles and the convergence on easily 'publishable' and mostly conformist topics. The introduction by the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (ANVUR) of quantitative indicators on scientific products for the national scientific qualification, for the distribution of the ordinary financing fund for universities and for the evaluation of PRIN (Projects of Outstanding National Interest) funding, has contributed to an exponential growth of "research products". Progressively, the "Italian case" has become internationally relevant precisely with reference to the doping of the strategic self-citation system (Baccini et al., 2019). One of the effects of this situation concerns the substantial 'marginalisation' of position journals and networks for discussion and debate, the abandonment of topics perceived as "divisive" or partisan, and even the delegitimisation of reflection exercised by manuals and sociological essays. Moreover, the rhetoric on meritocracy is consistent with that on "competition", not—obviously—the often collaborative competition between scholars and scholars but rather the exaltation of selfish individualism and success measured in terms of funded projects (which is necessary since research needs to fund itself because it is no longer a public good and collective value but only a segment of the market). The process of the 'marketisation' of research has thus accompanied the rhetoric on meritocracy on the one hand and the rhetoric on the virtues of competition on the other. In such a cultural temperament, Italian sociology has seen its spaces of social legitimacy diminish without the

growth—beyond the good intentions of many scholars—of a true internationalisation of Italian sociological studies and research⁸.

The third cause is precisely the emergence of service sociology, which often declines as support for the uncritical implementation of political projects or even the provision of expertise in terms of public policy. In many cases, the very scarcity of funds for research (and often even for the functioning of departments) has led to a spasmodic search for new sources of funding. In many cases, the step from public sociology to uncritical consultancy was very short and represented a doping element in the system. Within this framework, the loss of credibility of sociology and sociologists was also reinforced.

Critical and Positional Sociology

It is precisely in response to certain tendencies in public and “service” sociology that critical approaches and those recently termed “positional sociology” (de Nardis & Simone, 2022) have moved.

The adoption of a critical approach clearly emerged, particularly in the sociology of cultural and communication processes, as a reaction to the uncritical hyperoptimism that dominated the 1990s. Italian critical media studies have been traversed by two apparently distant cultural trends: on the one hand, the Catholic tradition of social communication studies (which had always rejected uncritical optimism, especially in the field of research on digital communication ecosystems) has developed and established itself; on the other hand, post-Marxist approaches or approaches linked to the area of *humanitarian Marxism* have emerged. Thus, an original trend that is in some ways comparable to critical media studies has developed. We could say—with some inevitable approximation—that Italian critical media studies address the traditional tripartition of media studies as a whole: the analysis of media industries (not coincidentally one of the first objects of investigation of the scholars of the Frankfurt School), the research on media messages (and texts), and the study of publics (audiences, first of all, but also subjects with a social positioning). However, each of the elements of the traditional triad has been revised in light of hybrid and multi-dimensional approaches. For example, the analysis of media industries is supported by Marxist analysis (and its evolutions), economic organisational studies and even approaches from philosophical pragmatism; research on media messages and texts is not limited to the old descriptions of television or journalistic texts but is supported by cultural analysis, critical discourse analysis, feminist perspectives, queer analysis and intersectional approaches (De Blasio et al., 2023). Finally, the study of audiences has abandoned mere “listening” analyses in favour of a more resolutely sociological perspective that can include ecological and more traditional approaches to reception.

⁸ In fact, there were many international studies that animated the Italian sociological debate as early as the 1970 and 1980 s. However, these were mostly individual initiatives or relevant comparative studies. This is the background to the important research work coordinated by Alessandro Pizzorno and Colin Crouch (1978).

However, in other areas of sociology—and in political sociology in particular—a new sensitivity to positional sociology has developed. As noted, “Today we advocate a new sociology of position that we call ‘transformative’ and ‘generative’. It is the bearer, on the one hand, of the materialistic instance connected to the theoretical generalisation of the method of the social-historical sciences; on the other, of the practical propulsion of the egalitarian instances of science within the mechanisms of social life, as well as of analyses of social structures that link it to history and the lives of social actors” (de Nardis & Simone, 2022, p. 163). The perspective of positional sociology would represent an opportunity to give voice to the voiceless (Spivak, 1988) without losing the necessary scientific rigour of social analysis. From this perspective, sociology assumes its role as “the intermediary, at once relational and conflictual, between the interpretation of economic, political and legal arrangements and the situated and positional social worlds themselves, both in terms of geography and the analysis of subjectivities” (de Nardis & Simone, 2022, p. 164).

The transformations of Italian political sociology also involve its need to reconfigure itself professionally and as a public sociology. In Italy and beyond, political sociology has a name that is much younger than the field of research (Bendix & Lipset, 1966), just as its autonomy as a scientific-disciplinary field in 1990 certainly does not mark the birth of a discipline that marked the beginnings of Italian sociology with the studies of the elitists and that after the Second World War permeated research and investigations, starting with the work of Poggi, Alberoni and Manoukian in the 1960s within the *Cattaneo Institute* on the organisation, militants and social and territorial bases of the PCI and DC as mass parties. The birth of political sociology in Italy was characterised by an epistemology rooted fully in sociology and, at the same time, by a public mission of particular relevance. As early as the research conducted in the first extrauniversity institutes (Alessandro Pizzorno’s Rescaldina research or Luciano Cavalli’s enquiries on the “habitori” in Genoa), the sociologist emerges as a social actor who actively participates in the process of emancipation of the individual and of society from the forms of oppression induced by the processes of manipulation by power. The sociologist is an actor of change and an “experimental creator of new social forms”, in which he or she works to unravel the processes of domination, as the social scientist is clearly opposed to the “many ras and many don Rodrigues” of manipulated democracy (Cavalli, 1964, p. 23). The development of a critical political sociology starts from the premise that the constant interconnection between society and politics does not assign complete autonomy to politics or, at the same time, a priority to society over politics. If politics cannot be explained by politics alone, equally political sociology cannot resolve itself into the mere identification of the social factors that condition the political order since institutions themselves are social structures and often influence society (Bendix & Lipset, 1957; Coser, 1967). Italian political sociology had a decisive influence with the reception of the Weberian lesson by the first nucleus of Italian political sociologists, from Luciano Cavalli to Gian Enrico Rusconi, as well as a direct acquaintance with American sociological culture, from Merton to Parsons, from Lynd to Mills, up to Lipset’s research, immediately placing itself in close relation with the theme of democracy. At the same time, Italian political sociology has developed an awareness of the indissoluble relationship between the sociologist and democracy as well as of the fact that ‘all sociology is

political' and political sociology is characterised precisely by the interconnection between society and politics because "political phenomena are normally rooted in more general social processes and their relevance is ordinarily commensurate with the effects they produce on society" (Cavalli, 1980, pp. 80–81). This distinction marks the autonomy of political sociology from political science, claiming the multifactoriality of interpretations of politics, in line with Lewis Coser's claim that political sociology deals with the submerged part of the iceberg as a metaphor for political and social phenomena. In other words, the gaze of the political sociologist seeks not only the functioning of institutions and electoral phenomena but also the power dynamics that elude simple observation and are not limited to institutions and official political actors. In this sense, political sociology can take on the awareness of a critical function with respect to the social and political processes at work in late modern society, assuming the specificity of a "science of the connections between politics and society", with particular attention given to the dimension of power and conflict in the very transformations of democracy (de Nardis, 2014; Viviani, 2017). The political sociologist remains an actor in democracy, both in his or her academic role in research and training in conscious citizenship and in relation to the public dimension of his engagement, including through his or her 'position' in society and politics. The latter, in particular, requires political sociology to fully learn Bourdieu's lesson on the need to think about politics not politically but sociologically (Bourdieu, 2000).

The new trends in Italian position sociology are still too young (and marginal) to be able to draw a balance. However, they do indicate a perspective that challenges Michael Burawoy's (2005) traditional breakdown and facilitates a review of the founding axes of the definition of public (and/or service) sociology. At the same time, these trends move within the discursive framework of the alleged "crisis of sociology", which has, however, been discussed—at least in Italy—since the early 1970s, as was clearly highlighted as early as 2010 in the special issue of the journal *Il Mulino* dedicated precisely to Italian sociology (Cavalli et al., 2010). However, a "positioned" sociology could also favour the more convinced adoption of intersectional approaches capable, for example, of fostering the sometimes challenging relationship between Italian sociology and gender studies.

Conclusion: Italian Sociology in the Crisis Paradigm

At the time of writing (January 2024), there are 1,211 Italian academic sociologists, 68% of whom are concentrated in the areas of general sociology and the sociology of cultural and communication processes⁹. This figure refers to those with an official teaching assignment and therefore does not consider contract lecturers, doctoral students or postdocs (who, moreover, are in a state of training and are difficult to place unambiguously in a precise area of research). This is a very significant teaching and research population; however, it does not have a "public" impact corresponding to its presence in university classrooms. One of the reasons that impacts the public role of

⁹ The figures are those of the official staff of the Ministry of Universities and Research: <https://cercauniversita.cineca.it/php5/docenti/cerca.php>.

sociology fits neatly into the crisis paradigm (Davis, 2019), where the social demand for short-term “efficient” responses often hides a social design vacuum. One of the commonplaces of sociological knowledge, in fact, concerns precisely its alleged inability to provide accurate predictive models on the evolution of society. This is a commonplace that develops precisely from the anaesthetising idea of sociological knowledge as a “service tool”, functional to the interests of government (political, territorial, relations, etc.). It is no coincidence that the possibility of investigating relevant social issues and proposing solution hypotheses for the problems of coexistence that they pose seems to rely on the ever-increasing availability of data and tools to process them in a short time, ‘in real time’. Within this interpretative framework, “efficientist” and functional to the logic of neo-liberal society, the role of sociological knowledge is diminished (and even delegitimised), especially in the process of critical understanding of society, which should represent one of the constituent assets of sociology. On the other hand, the development of processes of datafication, the increase in forms of control typical of the “platform society” (van Dijck et al., 2018), the anaesthetisation of social conflict, and the ambiguous use of communicative ecosystems represent trends that sociological knowledge would know how to confront. However, we should ask ourselves whether public decision-makers still want—in the time of dedemocratisation (Brown, 2006)—intellectuals and researchers who are willing to critically confront such social processes.

The Italian academy realises the dystopian future imagined by sociologist Michael Young in 1958, but the meritocratic imperative contributes to the university environment through the formation of competitive hyperindividualisation as an academic social acceleration that produces and reproduces inequalities that have little basis in the quality of research. In a recent volume titled *Perché la valutazione ha fallito. Per una nuova Università pubblica (Why Evaluation Failed. For a new public University, 2023)*, a series of Italian sociologists highlighted the limits, or rather the failure, of evaluation as applied to the Italian university. Starting from the critical awareness of the pervasiveness of neo-liberal meritocratic methods and the production and reproduction of inequalities (Sandel, 2020), the thesis is that of a bureaucratising steel cage imposed on scientific knowledge, such that science divests itself of the dimension of knowledge, just as it divests itself of its uniqueness and quality, to conform to pre-established productive needs, with which the market and political power cooperate to tame science. Here, merit ceases to be a qualitative dimension that emerges where talents freed from starting inequality can be compared and becomes a reward for best practice established at the bureaucratic-political level.

In this scenario, Italian sociology has several challenges that lead to the redefinition of the very scheme of public sociology. If, in fact, the challenge of public sociology as a means of relational participation in the process of social and political innovation is an integral part of the sociological mission, Italian specificity requires a commitment to initiate a critical reflection on the theory of society emerging from its academic community. This is not a question of focusing on the *interna corporis* of the discipline but rather one of examining the mutual knowledge and fruitful contamination of the “scattered branches of sociology”. At the same time, there is a need to foster the emergence of ‘an integrated social science’ that guides and establishes the reading of new social and political phenomena (Cavalli, 2022), from new inequalities

to the environment, from new media infrastructures to the role of populisms. A sociology that is aware of its mission can articulate its plurality at the service of a project to analyse society and form an active citizenship equipped with the cognitive tools to participate in social processes. In this sense, Bourdieu's definition of sociology as "a combat sport" is valid because the "taking of a position" in society is given not by the mediatisation of its individual exponents, illuminated in the spotlight of notoriety, but by the capacity to develop in a choral and conscious manner an active, critical and relational role within society and history.

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