



The Phases of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Italian Sociology: Institutionalisation, Social Engagement, and Emerging Problems

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Abstract

This article reflects on the qualitative and quantitative methods developed and adopted by Italian sociology and the historical circumstances that have led researchers to focus on some fields rather than others. It will highlight how different research groups have articulated, over time, their reflection on the methods and techniques of social research, which can be said to be characterized by four phases. The first phase is formation, in which the methodological debate takes place against the epistemological contrast between positivist positions and anti-positivist traditions. The second phase is commitment, marked by the consolidation of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches and the dissemination of medium-range research focused on specific issues in certain areas of the country. The third is the stabilization phase, in which the choice of one field over the other is linked to a process of institutionalization of the discipline within academia, now mature. Finally, the contemporary phase highlights the need to combine approaches with the characteristics of a society in constant evolution, particularly after the advent of the digital age.

Keywords Research methods and techniques · Qualitative research · Quantitative research · Italy · Institutionalization

The Methodological Debate in the Emerging Italian Sociology: Between Absences and Ideological Clashes

A reflection on the history of methods and techniques of social research is a necessary step to reconstruct the history of Italian sociology. The choice among numerous approaches and tools available to scholars is not only tied to the research questions, but also reflects theoretical positions, epistemological frameworks, and value

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orientations regarding the role of sociology as a social science dedicated to studying socio-cultural phenomena (Merton, 1966). It also involves considerations about the role assigned to the researcher and the objects/subjects studied.

While it is true that the history of Italian sociology has been extensively addressed through essays, articles, and dedicated volumes (such as Barbano, 1989; Cavalli, 2021, Cossu and Bortolini, 2017; Ferrarotti, 1957, 1985, 1994), less attention has been given in Italy to the evolution of the methodology of social research. The weak link between ‘theoretical’ reflections and ‘methodological’ issues has long been a distinctive feature of Italian sociology. Especially in its early days, as will be seen in the following pages, Italian sociology was more focused on theoretical speculation - attempting to establish itself as an independent field in academia—rather than reflecting on research methods and techniques. Early Italian sociology was characterized by a “weakness of method and substance” as Ferrarotti (1994, pp. 484–485) points out. It derived its approaches and techniques for studying social phenomena from other disciplines, particularly statistics and demography.

This disconnection between theory and empiricism, a distinctive feature of early Italian sociology, also stemmed from the historical premises within which the discipline was being institutionalized. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, it was indeed characterized by a major clash between those taking the first timid steps within a positivist horizon and the scholars skeptical about the possibility of producing knowledge independent of the subject. This conflict primarily touched upon considerations on the nature of social facts (objectivism vs subjectivism) and the concrete possibility of studying them in scientific terms like more mature sciences, such as the natural sciences (physics and biology, for example).

Among the leading figures of Italian sociological positivism, the philosopher Roberto Ardigò (1886) stands out as the author of the volume *Sociologia*¹ [Sociology]. He was an attentive reader of the works of Comte and Herbert Spencer (with whom he maintained a long correspondence) and Enrico Ferri (2010), his pupil, among the first to develop criminal legal sociology.

A prominent role in the affirmation of positivist sociology in Italy was played by the “*Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*” [Italian Journal of Sociology]. Since its establishment in 1879, the journal directed the Italian sociological debate and provided a point of connection for all those scholars interested in sociology, even if trained in other disciplines. The journal was strongly influenced by French positivist sociology, particularly the ideas of Emile Durkheim, many of whose works were reviewed. It also contributed to introducing other foreign scholars, including Lester Ward, Guillaume De Greef, Eugène De Roberty, and notably Georg Simmel and the British economist John Stuart Mill.

¹ Roberto Ardigò contributes decisively to the spread of sociological discipline in Italy and pays close attention to the international scene. In 1904, just two years after its initial English edition, he translated into Italian the seminal book in the history of social sciences: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* by William James (1902).

Among the Italian scholars who actively contributed to the journal was Vilfredo Pareto. Despite his background in economics, in 1983 he was offered a chair in sociology. He showed great interest in the discipline, pursuing the goal of achieving a scientific theory of society.

In July 1897, Pareto published the essay titled “Il compito della sociologia fra le scienze sociali” [The Task of Sociology among the Social Sciences], in which he revisited the classic division between nomothetic and ideographic sciences by Windelband. He was undoubtedly among the main precursors of scientific positivism. The essence of science for Pareto lay in its logical-experimental character, characterized by two parts: logical reasoning and observation of facts. Ontologically, Pareto believed that the social world was governed by indispensable objective laws (equilibrium) and that social events could be explained through the collection of empirical data and the search for causal relationships among them. This led him to consider society as a complex system in which the actions of individuals (which he distinguished into logical and non-logical) could be the subject of scientific study (Pareto, 1935).

Italian ‘proto-sociology,’² soon clashed with the views of Benedetto Croce (1950)³, who argued that man is not subject to natural laws and that social science could never be anything other than history. Particularly during the fascist *ventennio*, it faced opposition from Giovanni Gentile (1917), who had become one of the regime’s official philosophers. Gentile aimed at renewing Italian culture under the anti-positivist renewal of Italian culture in an anti-positivist key.

For both these leaders of Italian philosophical idealism, reality is spirit: it exists insofar as it manifests itself to human consciousness or engages with it. Spirit cannot be known according to the forms of mathematics or the natural sciences, since these would fail to grasp its inexhaustible productivity that cannot be expressed in their static forms. Benedetto Croce “denied that the social sciences could produce knowledge because they were made up of schemes elaborated by the human mind only for practical purposes, and therefore contingent [...] only philosophy (not the social sciences) and the natural and physical sciences could produce knowledge. Consequently, he distinguished between pure concepts, discovered by philosophy, and pseudo-concepts produced by the social sciences” (Gobo, 2008, p.1).

This ideological clash between positivist sociological currents and those of philosophical idealism had several consequences for the institutionalization of the discipline in academia and did not allow for a systematic reflection on the methods of social research. This is both because the discussion was entirely focused on theoretical aspects and because positivist thought faced a setback with the rise of fascism.

² Regarding criminology, see also Morselli (1879), as highlighted by Mangone & Picarella (2023).

³ The Italian philosopher argues that sociology can only offer a pseudo-conceptual knowledge and, in terms of competence, tends to identify itself with the science of politics. Later in the years, in the article “L’utopia della forma sociale perfetta” [The Utopia of the Perfect Social Form] in 1950, his definition of sociology as a “sick science” became famous.

As Minister of Education in Mussolini's first governments, Giovanni Gentile implemented Croce's philosophical principles against sociology through legislation that controlled academic life in Italy, particularly through the structure of the university system. Specifically, he enforced academic ostracism that stifled the institution of courses and the creation of chairs in the field of sociology. Similarly, the teaching of sociology, along with psychology, was removed from the curricula of secondary schools and high schools (Cosentino, 2003)⁴. In 1921, the Italian Journal of Sociology was suppressed. Gentile's rise as an intellectual of the regime led to an openly hostile attitude towards Sociology and its empiricist currents from Europe and overseas (such as that promoted by the Chicago School).

As Ferrarotti (1957) argued, the sociology of the first phase failed to break through the political ostracism of the intellectuals under the regime. The few Italian sociologists who managed to survive intellectually, particularly classic figures such as Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, did so because their sociological concerns and presentations were compatible with the philosophy of idealism and, therefore, with the goals of fascism. Indeed, they had significant propagandistic value (in areas such as demography, corporatism, charismatic leadership, and racism) in providing fascism with political and ideological justification, giving the regime considerable support. It is important to note that the fascist intellectual ostracism towards the social sciences, particularly sociology, was also because social surveys would inevitably highlight the huge territorial differences between the North and South of the country in terms of poverty and development existing at the time. This would provide arguments in support of those who opposed and attempted to delegitimize the fascist government (Seppilli, 2008).

Alongside these scholars, one cannot fail to mention the work of those early Italian sociologists who opposed the fascist regime, with major personal and intellectual costs. Gino Germani, persecuted in Italy for his anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian ideas (Mangone, 2018) is one of them. Exiled in Argentina, Germani was the driving force behind a genuine social reform movement in Latin America (Mangone, 2017) based, on a methodological level, on the application of an empirical method inspired by positivism, which he applied in several of his studies (Germani, 1955), thus connecting with the aforementioned Italian scholars who sought to affirm an idea of science free from philosophical and ideological interpretations.

⁴ Croce's anti-positivism was particularly active in the field of education. He is credited with the 'Gentile reform' of 1923, which was inspired, among other things, by the pedagogical principle that there is no method in teaching; each subject is a method in itself, it is not an abstract notion to memorize but an act of active and creative research. The teacher can use methodological indications to prepare the stages preceding teaching. Natural sciences and mathematics were downplayed because, according to Gentile, they were subjects without universal value, having their importance only at a professional level.

The Centrality of 'Committed' Social Research to the Post-war Challenges of Italian Society

The first reflection on social research methods coincided with the end of World War II and was linked to the concurrent action of two factors. First, the formation and subsequent diffusion of the first sociology chairs in Italian universities – hence the need to build, also from a methodological point of view, a set of tools specifically designed to address purely sociological. Second, the reconstruction of the country implied the need for deeper documentation on its social condition, which presented both structural and emergency problems, and greatly boosted social research. These factors led to a rebirth of sociology after the gagging experience undergone during the fascist regime: “Sociology emerges as the fundamental instrument of self-awareness and for the construction of the self-image of society” (Ferrarotti, 2011 p.63). But sociology was primarily, in this phase, an empirical sociology, an aspect that prompted many scholars to strengthen and modernize the methodological research tools to make them capable of meeting these new challenges.

This phase saw the consolidation of those positivist research traditions that had managed to survive fascism under the disguise of disciplines less hostile to the regime such as criminology and demography. This was thanks to the work of scholars like Corrado Gini (Mangone & Picarella, 2023), and especially in later years his successor Vittorio Castellano. It will not, therefore, seem strange that the appearance of the first Sociology chairs in Italy also stemmed from the need to ensure scientific legitimacy by asserting a preference for quantitative research approaches. In contrast, qualitative research traditions did not generate much interest, lagging considerably behind developments elsewhere.

“After the Second World War, philosophical idealism collapsed in Italy, and positivism, already well established in the nineteenth century (for instance, through the studies of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso), once again predominated. Survey methodology acquired authority in sociology and its methods and techniques slowly colonized empirical research. Qualitative research was thus marginalized for a second time” (Bruni & Gobo, 2005, p. 3).

The prevalence of quantitative research in early sociology also resulted from the fact that, since the first Department of Sociology, inaugurated in 1962 in Trento, many of those holding chairs in the discipline had trained in other fields such as philosophy, law, economics, and statistics. While this trend confirmed a quantitative methodological framework, it also raised the need for scholars to better train in the discipline. This, in turn, determined the possibility of understanding and introducing methods and techniques viewed with extreme suspicion in academia until then, such as some qualitative approaches.

A significant impetus for methodological training came from non-academic contexts, namely, from research promoted to address practical problems in industry and respond to issues of inequality between the Northern and Southern regions of Italy. These two situations led to a much stronger and fruitful connection between theory and empirical research, given that sociology had been

primarily concerned with theoretical and often philosophical issues (Direzzo, 1972). The role played by the American allies in the Italian reconstruction is well known. Their contribution touched all areas of society, including research. This strengthened the ties and exchanges between Italian scholars and their foreign counterparts, especially those who found the country a fertile ground to apply their theoretical and research insights. Ultimately, this established an unprecedented circulation and exchange of sociological and methodological knowledge (Treves, 1959). The research interests of these scholars, both Italian and foreign, were characterized by reflecting some typical features of the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions of Italy at the end of World War II. These were influenced by several concerns, including a) social change; b) modernity and modernization processes; and c) issues of national identity. The traditional rural society was giving way to a rapidly growing industrialized society. Factory work, work conditions, and the modernization of production techniques created an essential background and a fertile ground for the development of sociological questions – those same questions that elsewhere, like in France and England, were notoriously central to the birth of the discipline. On the second point, although modernization processes characterized all the country, they became more glaring in Southern Italy. It was an area primarily based on agricultural work, characterized by high rates of illiteracy, a strong push for emigration, and a condition historically compromised by the existence of organized crime. These situations made it necessary for sociologists to understand the challenges of adaptation (social, economic, and cultural) that the revival of these somewhat ‘abandoned’ realities required. Finally, it was necessary to build a national identity after the fascist period. Though united on paper, Italy was still culturally divided and needed to be reconstructed.

The intersection of these three concerns was also evident in the work of a scholar who, in the post-war period, was one of the main protagonists of the revival of Italian sociology: Franco Ferrarotti (Acquaviva, 1966), who was awarded the first chair of Sociology in the country. His research is important not only for contributing to shed light on core issues in the post-war period but also for his methodological insights, focused on highlighting the limitations of the quantitative, positivist-inspired approach (without denying the need for empirical sociology in contrast with Croce’s theses) and the necessity of integrating this type of knowledge with qualitative approaches and tools. Ferrarotti’s research received a significant boost thanks to his connection with Adriano Olivetti, an industrialist whose sensitivity to social issues, attention to humanism, and commitment to corporate democracy were legendary. This allowed Ferrarotti to find in the context of relations ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the factory a privileged field for sociological reflection and the development of his analytical and methodological tools (Ferrarotti, 2001).

Ferrarotti, who co-founded the journal “Quaderni di sociologia” [Sociology Notebooks] with Nicola Abbagnano in 1951, obtained most of his methodological training in the United States. Despite this, he held a rather selective attitude towards American knowledge: not everything had the same value to him. On the contrary, driven by a critical sociological approach, he did not embrace the interest his contemporaries had shown in the functionalist thought promoted by Talcott Parsons, nor

did he see American empiricism as a way out, given its weak theoretical orientation and descriptive reductionism. Ferrarotti (2001) was guided by the idea that sociology should be grounded and embedded in history, based on empirical observation but conceptually oriented, attentive to the analysis of real problems that plagued everyday life.

In the sociology of that time, including Marxist sociology, Ferrarotti saw no sign of momentum, “as it was marked by the influence of the idealistic philosophy of Croce and Gentile, and was therefore characterized by being essentially theoretical, anti-empiricist, that is, incapable of coming to terms with reality” (Ferrarotti, 2001, p. 63). Ferrarotti (1985) reproached Italian sociologists who professed love and enthusiasm for structural-functionalism, given its tendency to produce abstract theories, detached from the reality of social facts, and asked them to “wake up, look at what was going on around, describe, question, understand” (Ferrarotti, 1985, p. 90). In light of these premises, the scholar sympathized with qualitative methods and non-directive social research techniques such as biographical interviews and participant observation, which he applied in his studies on both the industrial world and the city of Rome.

It is within this focus that his interest in the biographical approach solidifies, which he sees in contrast with the discipline that, by definition, deals with the passage of time and memory: history. For Ferrarotti, however, the historians of his time deal with history that is “already consolidated, marbled, catalogued, *i.e.*, with historical history” (Ferrarotti, 1985, p. 90) and not with social history. This attention to ‘individual histories’ is central to Ferrarotti’s work and is evident in his research in the city of Rome.

In the eyes of the scholar, the Italian capital was an interesting sociological ‘laboratory’, a context in which to engage with his ‘critical’ sociology and refine his biographical approach. His research in Rome, partly reflected in *Roma da capitale a periferia* (1970) [Rome from capital to periphery], partly in the subsequent *Vite di baraccati* (1974b) [Life of the shack-Dwellers], and *Vite di periferia* (1981) [Lives in the Outskirts], focuses on poverty and marginalization. Ferrarotti examines how the objective conditions are perceived and analyzed as experienced by the inhabitants of the shantytowns and slums. He highlights the human interchange between the center and the outskirts of Rome, emphasizing how urban marginality, as experienced by the slum dwellers, was essential to urban centrality itself. Many of the most humble and fundamental jobs in the city were carried out by the women and men of the suburbs. These studies, besides confirming the importance that Ferrarotti attributes to qualitative approaches to research, also confirm his proximity (in terms of themes and methods employed) to the research traditions promoted by the Chicago School between the 1920s and 1930s, first and foremost through the works of Robert E. Park and Burgess (1967) on the theme of the ‘City’, which requires the use of tools that go beyond a purely external and statistical analysis of the phenomenon, as Ferrarotti notes:

“To understand it properly, one has to ask the inhabitants of the suburbs: “But how do you live, where do you work? And it turned out, then, that they often worked in the big bourgeois and petit-bourgeois buildings that had sprung up right next to the suburbs, next to the shacks. They answered: ‘We work in the city, in Rome’. And

they talked about Rome as if it was far away, as if it wasn't really there. Another planet. A different world" (Ferrarotti, 2001, p. 80).

Central to his biographical approach was the idea of the interview as co-research⁵, touching on key epistemological issues such as the relationship between observer and observed, subject and object in scientific social research. The term 'co-research' refers to the fact that research takes root already in the initial knowledge phase, when the researcher explains their motives to the interviewee and follows in the autobiographical narration, which involves both, in a relationship that goes from the researcher to the researched and vice versa: the interviewee can question the researcher, assess their degree of involvement and participation. This framework means that the researcher, rather than supporting the existing power, gives power to the subjects, reducing the gap between interviewer and interviewee that is almost always present in traditional methodology (Gianturco, 2007). The centrality of life stories—*Vite da baraccati* (1974b) is based on a single interview—is grounded in two epistemological and methodological convictions. The first is the rejection of sociological determinism: "We must abandon the determinist model, which directed the attempts to interpret the individual through sociological frameworks, borrowed from bad textbooks of naturalistic science, which the most alert scientists themselves had already abandoned. The individual is not an epiphenomenon of society. In relation to the structures and history of a society, he is an active pole, and he impresses himself on it as a synthetic practice" (Ferrarotti, 2022, p. 24). The second conviction is that "Techniques are not theoretically indifferent. They are not neutral, they do not constitute a free zone, nor can they be considered interchangeable, that is, applicable with indifference to any problem" (Ferrarotti, 1986, p. 155). Therefore, his sociology is a "critical" sociology that adopts a perspective looking at society "from below".

Even before Ferrarotti, some Italian scholars looked favorably upon qualitative methods, particularly life stories. An example is Danilo Montaldi (1961, 1970), an intellectual and Marxist militant, along with scholars from the fields of anthropology and the history of popular traditions, such as Rocco Scotellaro (1954), Danilo Dolci (1956), and the ethnographer Ernesto De Martino (1959)⁶. All these scholars followed the fate of the poorer regions of Southern Italy with apprehension⁷. Some of these focused on the conditions of peasants and laborers in the South, while

⁵ As well as the many difficulties and numerous theoretical implications of this approach. It will be in 1974, in an advanced sociology course at Boston University, that he will reflect on the qualitative approach, on the contribution it could make to sociology, to the social sciences (Ferrarotti, 1974a). Among his students is the Frenchman Daniel Bertaux, who would later be one of the founders, along with him, of the Biography and Society committee of the ISA (International Sociological Association).

⁶ For example, Ernesto De Martino, in documenting the phenomenon of 'taranta' – a popular dance in Salento that was believed to have the goal of healing the bite of a spider, which seemed to affect women particularly – used a variety of techniques, such as ethnographic notes, audio recordings, and video footage.

⁷ "The South, still under the influence of a 'south-focused' tradition (meridionalismo) that emphasizes the exceptional character of this part of Italy, remains a privileged field for anthropological and psychological analysis of the peasant world. These analytical currents do not intersect. A nationally oriented trend will only take shape in the 1970s with the consolidation of the discipline" (Pinto, 1980, p. 286).

others, especially De Martino, concentrated on religious phenomena and beliefs in certain areas of Southern Italy. Montaldi was a forerunner of the biographical method in analyzing class relations in the Po Valley. In his works *Autobiografie delle leggera* [Autobiographies of petty criminals] (1961) and *Militanti politici di base* [Grassroots political militants] (1970), he used biographical interviews, inviting participants to tell their stories without intervening, faithfully reporting inconsistencies and redundancies in their language. He then reworked them during the analysis to arrive at sociological reflections.

These studies also had the merit of inaugurating an Italian research trend known as ‘community studies’, which in the United States had begun with the famous research conducted by Mr. and Mrs. Lynd in *Middletown* (1970). Some examples include Banfield’s research (1958) on Chiaromonte in Basilicata and Pizzorno’s studies (2010) on the industrial development of Rescaldina in the province of Milan. These studies were significant not only for shedding light on many aspects central to the debate on the economic, political, and cultural revival of the nascent Italian Republic but also for their research settings that extensively used ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

Epistemological and Methodological Issues in the Context of the Institutionalization Process of Sociology in Italy

The attention to a reflection on the methods of social research in Italy became inextricably linked to the process of institutionalization of sociology in academia, which took place between the late 1950s and the early 1970s.

It is interesting in this context to report the perspective of a privileged observer, the scholar Gordon J. Direnzo (1972), who arrived in Italy from the United States with a Fulbright program. In his article “Sociology in Italy Today”, Direnzo gathers numerous data and details regarding the institutionalization of sociology in the country between the 1960s and 1970s. For Direnzo, this decade saw the creation of the first chairs in the discipline; sociology became a fundamental subject in the degree courses in statistics and demography, and complementary in ten different degree courses in seven different faculties: Letters and Philosophy, Law, Political Science, Economics, Pedagogy, Agriculture, and Architecture. As he noted, the existence of legislation prescribing or allowing sociological teaching in specific academic programs did not mean that courses were offered in all programs of the Italian university system; there was a lack of teaching staff, and much of it consisted of professors holding multiple positions, giving lectures in different faculties of the same university, moving between different university locations in the country. Furthermore, the programs were greatly influenced by the subjective interests of the researchers, with a marked inclination towards rural, economic, and industrial sociology, but with very little attention to research methodology, considered as “an occasionally esoteric area” (Direnzo, 1972, p. 40).

The singular advancement of sociological teaching in Italy occurred with the establishment of the first sociology faculty in Trento in 1962. This faculty offered the only available degree course in Italy aimed at providing a systematic and

concentrated education in the field of sociology, comparable to what was happening in America. This was followed by the inauguration of two additional sociology degree courses at the University of Rome La Sapienza (under the direction of Professor Ferrarotti) and the private University of Urbino.

Regarding social research, *Direnzo* (1972) noted that the deficiencies in specific training in social research methods were partially addressed, towards the end of the 1970s, by doctoral programs and specialization courses aimed at new sociology graduates⁸.

What emerges from *Direnzo's* analysis (1972) are two aspects: first, these specialization courses, unlike basic university courses, were more empirically oriented, with interests ranging from traditional methods of quantitative research to relatively new ones introduced by qualitative research—not in terms of complementarity, but competition. Second, theoretical speculation was still the focus during the years of discipline stabilization in academia, at the expense of more specific knowledge of social research methods and techniques; much of this postgraduate specialization “grant a certificate or diploma upon completion of prescribed curricula, but these awards carry no official recognition or accreditation” (*Direnzo*, 1972, p.42). Moreover, as the institutionalization and stabilization of the discipline progressed, a gap became more evident between how it was practiced in academia and those areas where it was concretely applied to address social problems. This highlights a distinctive feature of Italian sociology, namely:

“pluralism with regard to styles of enquiry, but also opposition between an idealized value-free sociology and the engagement of social scientists, a distinction which has re-emerged periodically in the trajectory of Italian sociology, sometimes as a way of denouncing its increasingly academic character [...], they were signs of increasing tension between an effort to achieve disciplinary legitimacy, which came from other sectors of intellectual production, and a desire to forge close links between sociological practice and aspirations to grassroots social reform” (*Cossu & Bortolini*, 2017, p. 18).

This opposition between research styles was also evident concerning the chosen methods. Sociologists who were gradually settling into academia seemed more inclined to use quantitative research methods, an aspect that also emerges in the analysis of the textbooks and manuals of the time. As *Gobo* (2008) recalls, English was not a widely known language among students, so the only books used were those translated into Italian, including “*Goode & Hatt*, 1952, translated in 1962; *Hyman*,

⁸ The scholar identified six: the one at the Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali “Pro Deo” under the direction of Professor Franco Crespi. The one at the School of Advanced Studies in Sociology and Social Research, established in 1966 in Rome under the direction of Professor Vittorio Castellano. The one at the Istituto Superiore di Sociologia at the University of Milan in 1968, under the direction of Professor Angelo Pagani. The one at the Istituto Don Luigi Sturzo to continue the work and tradition of this Catholic priest who was one of the founders of the former Italian People’s Party. The one at the Istituto Superiore di Sociologia in Castellamare di Stabia with a program mainly modelled on that of Trento, including a school of social work. The one at the Center for Specialization and Economic-Agricultural Research for Southern Italy (also called the Mezzogiorno), located in Portici (Naples), included a sociological section for a training program in rural sociology.

1955, translated in 1967; Kahn and Cannell, 1957 translated in 1968; Blalock 1960 and 1970 translated in 1969 and 1976” (Gobo, 2008, p. 5). These were mostly texts of Anglo-Saxon origin with a statistical and behaviorist approach, which were absorbed in our country also thanks to the reception of Parsons’ functionalistic sociology, contributing to “the establishment of an increasingly rooted prejudice against qualitative research: its (presumed) non-scientific approach” (Gobo, 2008, p. 4).

Starting from the 1950s, some publishing houses (including Il Mulino, Edizioni di Comunità, and Einaudi) actively promoted the translation of many classics of American sociological literature. In this period of maximum diffusion of structural-functionalistic thought, powerful translations of the works of Talcott Parsons were born, such as *The Structure of Social Action*, published in 1962 with an introduction by Poggi, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, by Parsons’ student Robert K. Merton (1966), a proponent of middle-range theories, and a collection of the works of Paul Lazarsfeld (1967) edited by Capecchi. Italy also showed maximum attention to the procedures and techniques of quantitative research, now partly purged of the main criticisms levelled at them, such as that of naive realism, which had characterized research methodology during the early positivism of the nineteenth century (Corbetta, 1995).

The affirmation of Lazarsfeld’s thought (1955) and his rigorous attention to empirical procedures, brought quantitative methodology from a macro-sociological orientation inclined to work on global units – analysis of cultural products or administrative statistics – to standardized observations of social reality made directly by the sociologist on the individual. The tool used was the survey: research on samples with standardized tools administered to population samples for the study of values, attitudes, and behaviors. It is also thanks to the dissemination of his theses that the distinction between sociology and a specialized discipline for the study of methods and techniques of social research, known as ‘methodology,’ is defined (in terms of imagination). According to Lazarsfeld (1955), methodology is the discipline that consists of the analytical examination of surveys conducted by sociologists on various topics to define procedures and explanatory models and suggest organizational principles through which to integrate and codify knowledge. While sociologists study man in society, methodologists study the sociologist at work.

The years that followed, especially starting from the student movements of ‘68 and the women’s rights movements, directed scholars once again towards the need for empirical, engaged, and committed sociology. This aspect also reverberated in the most popular trends in terms of research methods. Thanks to the translation of some foreign works – among which we find Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1969) and Erving Goffman’s *Asylums* (1972) – there was an unprecedented interest by Italian sociologists for micro-sociology.

“This marked the beginning of a felicitous opening for micro-sociology in Italy, a tradition neglected by the first generation of post-war sociologists. As a matter of fact, the latter regarded the triad represented by Parsons, Merton, and Lazarsfeld as sacred and had little to do with other styles of theory, from exchange theory to symbolic interactionism—only in the writings of Pellizzi and Braga did some intellectual acquaintance with American pragmatism appear. In just a few years, nearly all Goffman’s books had been translated, mostly by Il Mulino. A young sociologist

and former student of Sartori's, Pier Paolo Giglioli, who had won a Fulbright Fellowship to pursue graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, literally imported the micro-sociological tradition" (Cossu & Bortolini, 2017, p. 56).

This interest in micro-sociology, as mentioned above, was also linked to the flourishing season of movements that culminated in the youth uprisings of 68',

"Which brought the attention of sociologists back to everyday life and to the 'qualitative' dimension of social relations. The students' movement—and even more so the women's movement – affirmed the public dimension of the private sphere and refocused the (critical) debate on issues concerning identity building and the boundaries between public and private life, the subjectivity of experience and its social organization" (Bruni & Gobo, 2005, p. 4).

The '70 s and much of the '80 s, following a mature process of sociology institutionalization with numerous tenured professors in various university locations both in the North and South of Italy, witnessed the acceleration of the process of sub-specialization within sociology. This process, still consequential today, inevitably affected the methodological field. In addition to the multiplication of chairs in the social sciences methodology and research methodology and technique (considered fundamental teachings in the curricula for obtaining a sociology degree in the '80 s), sociologists' interests diversified into specific subfields. Some were traditionally connected to the discipline's institutionalization process, such as industrial sociology, urban and rural sociology, economic sociology, and labor sociology (Pinto, 1980). Others were emerging, like early research in the fields of health and illness (Ardigò, 1980), everyday life and youth (Cavalli, 1981), religion (Cipriani, 1975), and especially communication (Statera, 1983), facilitated by the widespread use of television as a medium replacing print media in shaping public opinion. These emerging fields promoted a broader diversification of research approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, aiming to adapt techniques to their specific study objects. This trend increasingly emphasized the need to overcome the quantitative/qualitative debate. Advocates of each approach were no longer driven by the assumption that one was more scientific and valid than the other or tied to specific Italian sociological schools⁹. Instead, they were motivated by the practical need to choose research tools based on the questions guiding their research. The '80 s marked the end of grand narratives, as reality appeared much more complex than it had been interpreted from the prevailing perspectives of structural-functionalism and Marxist-influenced sociology until that moment. The heuristic challenges posed by post-modern society, to the classical concepts of sociology (identity, community, social class, status, etc.) confronted the researcher with the need to use all the tools

⁹ Regarding the hypotheses about Italian sociological schools, some scholars are particularly skeptical. Cesareo (2001), drawing on writings by Gianni Statera, notes the absence of a dominant sociological "paradigm" in Italy. "The 'schools' in Italy, consequently, take on the aspect of occasional aggregations of interests that are not sub-communities defined by common theoretical and methodological premises, as well as by convergent scientific interests (...) These interests are much more frequently linked to the narrow dynamics of academic power and its external projection in terms of resources (...) than to large theoretical or methodological options" (2001, p. 110).

of the sociological armory (Barbano, 1989)¹⁰. Consequently, from this moment onward and in the years that followed, the debate became increasingly focused on the affirmation of qualitative approaches and the necessity of overcoming the qualitative/quantitative quarrel. Indeed, qualitative methods still faced criticism from proponents of quantitative methods who still perceived them as unscientific¹¹. As Bruni and Gobo note, “Despite this attention to qualitative sociology, qualitative research was not immune to heavy criticism. Between the 1980s influential Italian methodologists such as Statera and Leonardi “attacked” from time to time the ‘myth of qualitative research’. This can be regarded as a symptom of the fact that the spreading of qualitative research was an undermining event for Italian methodology” (2005, p. 5).

From the Qualitative-quantitative Debate to the Digital Turn: Between Potential and New Limits

Among the most significant events that marked the qualitative-quantitative debate in Italian sociology was the conference held in Parma on December 2–3, 1993. During those days, the leading figures in Italian methodology gathered to discuss qualitative methods.

At that time, Italian sociology had already assumed its current configuration, consisting of three main orientations: the Catholic one (identified in the project of Sociology for the Person Spe project, with Vincenzo Cesareo as a reference), the Roman area (close to the figure of Gianni Statera), and the Milan-Turin axis (represented by figures like Alessandro Cavalli and Luciano Gallino) (Scaglia, 2007). Alongside these, the Italian Association of Sociology played a significant role, intending to reflect a certain balance among these components, especially in the formation of its leadership¹². The conferences proposed by the association were also the moments when these different orientations came together and confronted each other within

¹⁰ From a theoretical perspective, Italian sociologists responded to these challenges by inaugurating a very promising “meso” theoretical strand, which continues to this day and aims to find a solution to the individual-society debate that characterized modern sociologies. Meso-sociology in Italy has taken on two perspectives: the first finds its greatest expression in the relational sociology promoted by Pierpaolo Donati (1986), and the second in the theoretical and methodological perspectives promoted by the analysis of social networks. While relational sociology presents itself as an independent and entirely original perspective compared to the international debate on the subject, the second perspective is undoubtedly linked to the spread in Italy around the 1990s of works produced elsewhere, which inquire into the concept of “network” (Piselli, 2001), considering the latter as a useful metaphor with which to interpret contemporary social phenomena (Di Nicola, 1998; Tronca & Forsé, 2022), and the acquisitions around the technique of network analysis (Chiesi, 1999) and the need to provide it with a precise and well-defined theoretical status (Amaturo, 2002).

¹¹ Essentially, qualitative sociology was criticized for its lack of rigor, its recursive nature, and the fact that the results did not lead to a representative understanding of phenomena because they were based on a small number of cases: “The subtext of these criticisms was still the assumption that the standards of social research were set by quantitative criteria of validity and that qualitative ones should be compared against them using the same criteria” (Bruni & Gobo, 2005, p. 6).

¹² See Mangone & Picarella (2023).

the various thematic sections that had been created, with the Methodology section being particularly lively, then coordinated by Antonio De Lillo. The result of this confrontation, besides inaugurating an event then repeated some years later, gave rise to an initial publication edited by Antonio De Lillo and Costantino Cipolla titled *Il Sociologo e Le Sirene: La sfida dei metodi qualitativi* [The Sociologist and the Sirens: The Challenge of Qualitative Methods] (1996). The choice of this title was indicative of the state of the debate on qualitative methods in Italy during those years, still considered by many as a non-homogeneous set of ‘exotic’ approaches and techniques that produced knowledge with little connection to the neutrality and objectivity that only formal logic and numbers could guarantee:

“The sirens represent a mythological image that evokes the idea of a fascinating danger, an ambiguous seduction against which resistance is appropriate. [...] Yielding to this solution entails a mortal danger, but resisting it implies a loss, a renunciation, an abandoned possibility, destined to denote unexplored paths and regrets” (Campelli, 1996, p. 17).

However, the need to engage with qualitative methods was evident among these scholars in giving dignity and recognizing a set of research traditions that the spread of “Parson-inspired functionalism combined with Lazarsfeld-inspired quantitative focus had, more or less unconsciously, attempted to annul” (Cipolla & De Lillo, 1996, p. 12). This meeting, however, went well beyond the need to provide further legitimacy to research practices and techniques which, as seen in the previous pages, were already widely spread in the Italian academic reality. Its objective was to respond to a major challenge for sociology: to address, for the first time and collectively on Italian soil, the subjectivity/objectivity and qualitative-quantitative debates¹³. The attempt to overcome these oppositions arose precisely from the need for the scientific community to arrive at a vision where the choice of research methods and techniques was no longer based on ideological conceptions, often identifying with certain schools of thought, but on the idea that approaches could coexist for the more effective achievement of the explanation/understanding of social phenomena.

Regarding this possibility—a relationship between qualitative and quantitative analysis—an article that sparked much discussion was Franco Leonardi’s (1991) titled “Contro l’analisi qualitativa”¹⁴ [Against Qualitative Analysis]. From this essay, two theses emerged. The first, ‘strong’ or ‘epistemological’, emphasized the absolute difference between the two methods in their research procedures, based on assumptions that made them incommunicable and opposed. Alongside this ‘ultra-quantitative’ thesis, on the opposite front were scholars who claimed the equally absolute preference for qualitative methods over “the alleged senselessness of numbers, the ideological nature of quantitative analysis, its superficiality, its constitutive inability to grasp the meaning of action and the intentionality of the actor, the epistemologically disruptive and subversive nature of qualitative sociology, which would

¹³ On the qualitative-quantitative debate, see also Ricolfi (1995) and Bichi (2002).

¹⁴ After Leonardi (1991), Gianni Statera (1992, 1994) addressed the issue with two critical essays on qualitative methods.

constitute point by point the alternative to ‘conventional’ sociology” (Campelli, 1996, p. 21). A second, ‘weak’ thesis sought forms of collaboration based on the division of phases in scientific work: qualitative methods could be useful, when necessary, for the setup of quantitative research in the initial exploratory phases to define concepts, refine analysis categories, suggest hypotheses, etc. Alongside this ‘technical’ solution—in which the subordinate and ancillary nature of qualitative techniques to quantitative ones is highlighted—there was recognition of the possibility of another version of the qualitative-quantitative relationship, the ‘residual’ one, where qualitative methods practically filled in everything that quantitative methods were unable to achieve or take on.

However, several hypotheses were advanced on that occasion discussing the possibility of a meeting point between qualitative and quantitative methods. These ranged between the two poles of the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ theses. According to the criteria traditionally used to distinguish qualitative from quantitative (uniqueness/representativeness, measurement/non-measurement, context of discovery vs justification, involvement vs neutrality), these were considered as criteria of “approximation, prevalence, and mix, and in no case sufficient to constitute a clear or even approximately precise demarcation (...) there is not a single act, a single research decision that is not an inextricable mix of quality and quantity, and therefore characterizable exclusively in terms, far from strong, of the relative prevalence of one or the other” (Campelli, 1996, p. 30). Cavalli, on the other hand, insisted on the need to be guided in resolving the qualitative/quantitative debate by the level of practices “the operations that each of us performs when facing new research, guided by a cognitive intent” (Cavalli, 1996, p. 102). Therefore, qualitative methods primarily concern a preliminary phase of constructing a research object or an initial phase of research that operates with an already consolidated theoretical framework.

Agodi (1996), on the other hand, highlighted how research traditions, different schools, and various research designs are not assigned to a ‘qualitative’ or ‘quantitative’ side. This perspective did not disavow some characterizations circulating in sociological circles:

“On the other hand, the polarization between qualitative and quantitative approaches does not account for the fact that internal diversification within both approaches also constitutes a set of convergences that make it almost impossible to attribute many research strands exclusively to either one: content analysis originated within mainstream sociology, even though it later tended to be opposed to it as ‘qualitative’ (...) Discourse analysis (...) the study of social representations, on the contrary, originated in opposition to mainstream sociology but now uses absolutely quantitative analysis techniques” (Agodi, 1996, p. 108).

Among the solutions proposed on that occasion, undoubtedly one that perhaps had the greatest impact in structuring the Italian debate on qualitative-quantitative methods was that put forward by Alberto Marradi (1996) in his essay “Due Famiglie e un insieme” [Two Families and a Set]. The scholar, highlighting how the use of the qualitative/quantitative pair constituted an abuse in the Italian methodological debate of the time, serving to differentiate approaches to research within the human sciences, proposed to distinguish these sciences (and the related conceptual and operational tools derived from them) into three broad sets: the first two

constituted a ‘family’ (that of experimentation and that of co-variation), the third a ‘non-integrated set’ whose common denominator was the fact of refusing to adopt the assumptions that were fundamental to the family. The central assumptions for both the family of experiments and the family of co-variation, according to Marradi, were: 1) to produce statements (or connections between statements) that are impersonal about reality; 2) that these statements (or connections between statements) should concern relationships between the properties of objects. He proposed to define as ‘non-standard’ those sets of research activities “that produce statements lacking reasonable claims of impersonality” (Marradi, 1996, p. 172). From this, the scholar derived other characteristics typical of this set (which are not present in all research strands), such as a) the minimal gap between scientific knowledge and common-sense knowledge; b) strong dependence on context and a preference for micro problems; c) distrust of generalizations; d) a strongly inductive orientation; and e) an understanding of specific situations rather than the establishment of linear causal relationships between variables. Marradi’s conception, based on the rejection of adhering to labels such as qualitative and quantitative, preferring instead the terms ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ generated quite a few criticisms from his contemporaries. The primary criticism was his definition of ‘non-standard’ as the negation of the standard¹⁵, rather than as something with its specific nature that required distinct treatment.

“Any representation of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative analysis in which one stands to the other in a relationship of exception and rule, discipline and undiscipline, seems unsustainable at this point. The usefulness and intrinsic clarity of a model of this kind, which tends to define one of the two elements as ‘standard’ and the other as ‘deviation’ are not apparent when both elements normally and with a simple prevalence flow into the normal research activity. This is not to mention the normative implications that this lexicon seems to implicitly carry with it (standard = right?)” (Campelli, 1996, p. 32).

In 2011, almost two decades after the conference in Parma, Costantino Cipolla, Antonio De Lillo, and Elisabetta Ruspini (2011) met again in Milan to further explore social research methods. This time, the discussions were more mature, focusing on overcoming the qualitative-quantitative debate and introducing some methodological innovations that emerged due to the explosion of what Costantino Cipolla would later refer to as the ‘web society’ (2015). Two volumes were

¹⁵ There was no shortage of voices of scholars, such as Ruspini (2011), who saw qualitative methods as the negation of quantitative ones, where the former were everything that the latter were not. This point of view proposed anew a sexist view of scientific activity. The idea was therefore widespread even in the scientific environment that the qualitative was more feminine (softer, more reflective, more subjective, less rigorous, and scientific) and the quantitative more masculine (harder, more rigorous, more objective and scientific). Moreover, the suspicion that qualitative methods were associated with stereotyped characteristics of the feminine world was already evident from the title of the conferences in Parma and Milan, with the choice of the Greek myth of the Siren: “If in the field of the so-called ‘human’ sciences, which do not, however, have a dominant position in the complex of knowledge, procedures socially recognized as more feminine than masculine are admitted, the more one enters the field of the exact sciences, the more the masculine is associated with rigor, logic and scientific objectivity” (Ruspini, 2011, p. 14).

published because of this meeting (Cipolla, De Lillo & Ruspini, 2011, 2012). In comparison to the first volume, one notable aspect is the involvement of many young researchers in the debate. Unlike the previous generation, these researchers demonstrated greater flexibility and versatility in proposing forms of integration between qualitative and quantitative methods. This was due to their diverse training in research methods and techniques, acquired through university courses and attendance at dedicated summer schools¹⁶. It was also a result of their increased familiarity with the technological advancements of the time. The use of software, both for quantitative analysis (most commonly SPSS) and qualitative analysis (ATLAS.ti, NVivo, T-Lab, etc.), was a necessary step for those intending to specialize in this field¹⁷. This was in addition to the epistemological and theoretical knowledge that had significantly characterized the training of their mentors. As Ruspini (2011) emphasized in the preface to the first volume, although the debate on the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods had taken different terms in Italy (methodological triangulation, combined research, hybrid methods, etc.), the use of the term ‘mixed methods research’ was becoming more widespread, reflecting a trend that had already emerged internationally (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Mixed methods were conceived in two senses: for some, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was almost a research style, a technique for data collection and analysis; for others, it was a methodological approach reflecting independent and specific epistemological assumptions. Regarding this latter option, Gabriella Punziano (2011), proposing the mixed approach, argued that mixed methods “encompass and overcome the blurred boundaries of qualitative and quantitative research, reflecting a unitary reflection. They allow, through the development of an integrated structure, albeit complex, to proceed simultaneously between quantity and quality, between micro and macro approaches” (Punziano, 2011, p. 239). Therefore, according to this proposal, the relationship between qualitative and quantitative was imagined as dynamic, a continuum within which different and possible forms of integration were observed. The integration between qualitative and quantitative was not episodic but systematic, starting from the research design that was intended to be as harmonious as possible. The proposal of mixed methods, as a distinct research method, did not limit itself to the technical dimension but also sought to address the inevitable doubts that arose at the ontological and epistemological levels. The goal was to allow the ‘mixed methods’ to contribute to an equal status with what was proposed by the positivist and interpretative paradigms. This was pursued through a pragmatic orientation to social research:

“The pragmatist paradigm allows and justifies the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods by setting aside the theoretical level to seek explanations

¹⁶ These include the summer schools promoted by the Paidea association in the village of Terravecchia and the ‘non-standard’ ones at the University of Brescia. For further details, please refer to the official website <https://www.paideiascuoleestive.it>.

¹⁷ It is the opinion of the author that this push toward the technical dimension is not without problems, as mastering these skills requires a significant investment of time and resources. This aspect has somewhat played to the detriment of the epistemological and theoretical dimension, which still seems to have a residual role in the training of young researchers today.

in concrete research practice. This position has been adopted, in the debate described, by realists who advocate the need for methodological pluralism, allowing researchers to use different techniques to access different aspects of the same social phenomenon” (Punziano, 2011, p. 143).

This proposal, furthermore, went far beyond the solution indicated, for example, in the choice of methods and techniques based on the research questions (Corbetta, 1995). It started from the belief that research hardly begins based on a single question and most likely includes a complex set of questions that justify a mixed approach.

The second volume, *I sociologi, le sirene e gli avatar* [The Sociologists, the Sirens, and Avatars] of Cipolla, De Lillo, and Ruspini (2012), anticipates the central themes of the current Italian methodological debate. Recent technological developments have increased the scope and range of online social spaces and the forms and timing of participation: “The digital [...] It also introduces digitally native objects of research, such as cyberbullying and digital identities, which have a direct impact on mainstream sociological problems” (Delli Paoli & Masullo, 2022, p. 618). The discussion, only outlined in the Milan conference, will be more solidly addressed in a subsequent publication (Cipolla, 2015), clarifying that the possibilities inaugurated by new means of communication have implications that go beyond a specific field of study, that of communication, touching on foundational issues of the discipline. In particular, these allow for a redefinition of:

- The considerations expressed on communication within the broader context of globalization processes, through the selection of theoretical frameworks more suitable for understanding the relationship between individuals and the media.
- The labels and definitions used to define the current historical and social phase—the web society—linking it to the broader debate on postmodernity.
- The issue of the most suitable methodological and technical tools to describe and explain reality, as it is increasingly asserting itself in its communicational dimension.

From a methodological perspective, the ‘digital turn’ provides both new objects of study (born in the web) and digitized data, in addition to being an innovative source of new ‘digitally native’ methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2019). According to Amaturio and Aragona (2019b), digitized and digital data, also known as big data, are linked to digital traces and routine interactions of people (such as search engine queries, phone calls, purchases, banking interactions, social media posts, narratives, etc.). The impact of this shift on the epistemological and methodological framework of social research is undeniable due to the specificity of such digital data (Agodi, 2010) and the opportunities for creative and innovative research practices (Giuffrida, Mazzeo Rinaldi & Zarba, 2016). Therefore, some, like Stefanizzi (2016, 2021), hypothesize a shift toward a fourth paradigm in the social sciences based on the power of algorithms and computers.

Although the discussion on the digital turn is still in an embryonic stage, it is undeniable that pervasive digitization requires interpretative frameworks and methodological options better suited to capture the current complexity. These challenges call for a rethink of the epistemological and methodological positions of

social research from a dual perspective: firstly, by adapting the established methods of social research to the practices and interactions people engage in when acting online (digitized methods), or by creating new methods and techniques to analyze online experiences that cannot be framed using the tools of traditional social research methodology (digital methods). These issues remain open in the Italian methodological debate, to which are added specific aspects that have not yet been sufficiently explored, such as the nature of data collected online, which is drastically different from those collected through questionnaires, surveys, or interviews (epistemological question), and the fact that they are collected without the actor being aware of it (ethical question) (Corposanto & Valastro, 2014). Ethical issues also arise concerning algorithms, a ‘moral agency’ in the sense that choices and decisions that sometimes have ethical implications are delegated to machines. For example, when the algorithm reflects the characteristics of those who produce it or is built on data that carry biases, as feminist theory has recently emphasized regarding the discriminations produced by algorithms against women or LGBTQ+ individuals (Farci & Scarcelli, 2022).

Furthermore, big data, together with the development of computational sciences, has allowed the dissemination of innovative explanatory models and simulations (topic modelling, machine learning), although their nature of being ‘searched’ and ‘found’ online can push social research toward a data-driven approach and a new naive empiricism, as recently highlighted (Amaturo & Aragona, 2019a). If, on the one hand, this field has innovatively expanded the toolbox of the social researcher, on the other hand, it has highlighted a dangerous trend toward a return to pure empiricism, proposing studies and research that, despite their “sophistication,” show little reflexivity and weaknesses in the theoretical approach¹⁸.

Conclusions

The analysis of the historical interweaving between the institutionalization process of sociology and the emergence of major approaches to social research in Italy is no easy task. The feeling experienced by the scholar in writing it—and especially in concluding it—is that of having forgotten along the way historical events, occurrences, and protagonists who contributed to the development of Italian sociology or, in this case, the establishment of a specific research tradition. Space constraints are only part of the problem, as the difficulty of undertaking such work also lies in the need to define a priori valid criteria around which to construct a homogeneous and coherent view of what happened in a process that was characterized by contradictions and discontinuities. Therefore, it was almost natural, as well as necessary, to

¹⁸ As evidence of the centrality of this theme in the contemporary Italian sociological debate, see the recent Conference of the Italian Sociological Association held in Milan from December 13-15, 2023, titled “I Dilemmi della società digitale: Riflessioni epistemologiche e metodologiche sull’uso e sulle conseguenze sociali delle tecnologie digitali” [The Dilemmas of the Digital Society: Epistemological and Methodological Reflections on the Social Consequences of Digital Transformation].

prioritize certain interpretations (and some protagonists who animated them) at the expense of others a factor alone indicating the need for reflection on the history of Italian research and how it might be revisited and explored in the future.

Aware of these limitations, the general starting assumption was that the analysis of this debate could contribute to shedding light and shadows on the institutionalization process of the discipline itself, thus defining some of its peculiar characteristics. This includes, foremost, the prevailing normative and ideological horizons, as well as the public function that the discipline and research have played and continue to play for political action and social reform.

In summary, from the previous pages, four phases have emerged. The first phase, which we could label as the 'formation phase' (coinciding roughly with the years before and after the fascist period), concerned the way sociology began to appear on the 'stage' of Italian social sciences. It was characterized by a relative lack of reflection on research methods. The initial insights were formed within positivism but did not have the opportunity to solidify within a specific sociological disciplinary framework, as the discipline lacked a robust scientific status in this phase, along with real social, political, and consequently academic legitimacy.

The second phase corresponds to the years following the Second World War, during which there was a strong interest among scholars in empirical research; research that was 'committed' to addressing some challenges arising from the internal contradictions of the country, dealing with the aftermath of the global conflict. This phase coincided with the beginning of the institutionalization of sociology in academia, which, on the one hand, favored the need to acquire new skills related to social research tools. On the other hand, this process mainly unfolded in the direction of quantitative methods, already cultivated by scholars sympathetic to sociology who had been trained in other disciplines. Some scholars, such as Ferrarotti, are exceptions. Actively engaged in social research, they began to express dissatisfaction with quantitative methods and to prioritize theoretical and methodological approaches that were more attentive to historical, as well as subjective and hermeneutic dimensions. These traditions had developed in Italy in fields outside academia (such as industry or investigations into the condition of Southern Italy regions) but were starting to be introduced, albeit with varying degrees of success. It's worth noting that qualitative research still faced the prejudice of being considered less scientific, and incapable of producing results extendable to the rest of the population.

The third phase coincided with the process of stabilization of sociology in Italian universities, which could be considered concluded in the late 1970s. This led to the establishment of numerous sociology courses and faculties staffed by scholars from the first generation. This phase certainly contributed to the development and consolidation of the methodology and techniques of social research. On the one hand, there was a greater emphasis on quantitative research traditions; on the other hand, the rise of qualitative traditions was influenced by the historical events of that period, especially the youth movements of '68 and the battles fought by feminism. Sociology was deeply involved in these movements. The discipline, becoming more open to micro-sociological perspectives, also specialized in numerous sub-disciplines, contributing to the complexity of the methodological debate. This complexity included

the need to overcome the qualitative-quantitative quarrel, a challenge that engaged Italian methodologists for much of the subsequent years, up to the mid-2000s.

The last phase under examination, extending up to the present, highlights a mature atmosphere in the Italian methodological qualitative-quantitative debate. Certain issues have been sufficiently overcome, such as the idea that qualitative approaches are less reliable or less scientific than quantitative ones. There seems to be a prevailing tendency toward integration rather than opposition. The qualitative-quantitative quarrel has transformed into an opportunity for sociologists to rethink classical paradigms of social research or propose new ones with their specific characteristics, as seen in the discussion regarding mixed methods.

Even considering the cultural and social changes that have affected Italy because of the spread of new information and communication technologies, Italian methodologists seem today focused on redefining classical approaches and tools of social research or devising new ones (digital methods) in response to the knowledge challenges posed by the digital society.

In this latter field, it is perhaps more possible than in others to trace trends in the future of sociology as an empirical science, a future marked by several critical issues. These become evident when examining certain trends in social research, whether quantitative, qualitative, or quali-quantitative.

Another aspect to consider is the public function of social research, namely the need for researchers to address the concrete problems of citizens and disseminate their results to reform society. This relationship between sociology, social research, and society has always been ambivalent. In the first phase, it was sacrificed at the altar of science, only to be taken up again in the second phase in an almost 'militant' form. It then became progressively more marginal in subsequent phases, to the point of nullification. This has also been influenced by reforms in the university system that have pushed sociologists, especially the younger generation, towards an intellectual drift founded on the mistaken idea "that 'qualitative' research is easier and faster, (...) combined with the old wisdom of publish or perish, now elevated to a system and a bureaucratic criterion, self-sufficient and universal, in urging the production of small, limited, and fast products to be counted according to the rules" (Campelli, 2018, p. 6).

Thus, the qualitative-quantitative debate seems to take on another meaning: this time, the factors influencing the choice to lean towards quantitative (or qualitative) methods are no longer scientific interests or ideological oppositions but the system that regulates access to an academic career in Italy, primarily the National Scientific Qualification (ASN). While the ASN was established to ensure transparency and meritocracy in a system historically characterized by co-optation, it has often highlighted 'perverse effects' that can be summarized in the 'race for publication', meaning the need to surpass increasingly high 'thresholds' set by the Ministry of Universities and members of national scientific committees responsible for evaluating individual candidates. For these reasons, there is a suspicion that sociology, in its frantic quest to secure a place in academia—which continues due to competition with other disciplines for space and resources—has diverted attention and connection (which it had in the past, albeit with ups and downs) from actions and movements for social and political reform, thus losing much of its critical dimension.

In addition, there is a risk that many research endeavors carried out ‘to publish at any cost’ lack sufficient theoretical rigour, but more importantly, they may lack the vitality, passion, and sense of social justice that had animated many of the masters of Italian sociological thought.

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