Angelo Fusari

Methodological Misconceptions in the Social Sciences

Rethinking Social Thought and Social Processes

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To Alfonsina, Ludovico and Lucia for what they mean to me

*"Men are strange beings indeed!… I would admire them, but what do I see? Sophism, a meaningless sophism that blinds them to the evidence and paralyses them in front of an open door. Perhaps the main defect of men is their mental inertness, which enables them to achieve the most admirable developments based on well established notions rather than to engage in (*methodical*) criticism and revision of the foundations*

Bruno De Finetti,
Un matematico e l'economia*,*
Franco Angeli, Milan, 1969, p.33)"

Preface

Contemporary social teaching suffers from a grave deficiency: it is lacking rules of methodology and procedure suited to social reality that are, in particular, able to reconcile increasing creativity (implying irreversibility) with rationality, which are indispensable for the scientific judgement of theoretical ideas. Unfortunately, this lack is largely ignored, and eminent social scholars have even explicitly and emphatically theorized a rejection of method. This allows rhetorical and literary skills to prevail over the reasons of science, thereby promoting a deceptive instead of constructive pluralism, confusion in the study of contemporary societies and growing ineptitude in their government, what represents a main source of afflictions in the present world.

Our long-lasting studies on the organization and the vicissitudes of human societies made increasingly evident the poverty of the current methods of inquiry on society. This book intends to react against such poverty. It is complementary to a previous volume, *Economic Theory and Social Change*,[1] and extends the analysis to other branches of social thought and to the interpretation of history. Unlike the earlier book, however, the present work makes extremely limited use of mathematical formalization and other technical complications and obscurities; this is intended to foster easier and broader understanding of its contents and to facilitate the diffusion of studies of method outside the hermeneutics of a restricted elite. The present book has also been preceded by one substantial study of historical processes,[2] and another focused on the problem of power,[3] both published in Italian. These works confirmed our conviction that the advancement of social knowledge is severely hindered by some methodological misconceptions concerning the characteristics of social reality and that those same misconceptions also afflict the interpretation of history. The situation seems to be worse and, in a sense, more difficult and troublesome than

[1] See Ekstedt and Fusari (2010).

[2] See Fusari (2000). This study starts from primitive societies and embraces the great Asian and Mediterranean empires and societies, Arab civilization, European Feudal and Medieval societies and the Renaissance, through to the beginning of the eighteenth century.

[3] See Fusari (2008).

that afflicting the natural sciences before the methodological revolution of the seventeenth century. If this is indeed so, it is urgent to clear these misconceptions up.

Method is a two-edged sword: it offers powerful assistance in and enhances our capability of understanding and solving the problems of everyday life; but if the chosen method is inappropriate, it can seriously obstruct the advancement of knowledge. Significantly, the best contributions to social knowledge have been *ad hoc* studies that disregard method and simply apply common sense. But *ad hoc* studies suffer a lack of coordination, and the neglect of method makes it difficult to evaluate and select findings and results. As a consequence, *ad hoc* analyses have little chance of stimulating the cumulative growth of knowledge. Science needs method; in its absence, scientific thought is not possible and the growth of knowledge is difficult.

The human mind is able, in principle, to understand all that is the object of experience. In particular, humans should be particularly clever in the understanding of the social world, this being a product of human action, its creation. Seen in this light, it is surprising that the understanding and management of society on the part of its creator appears so difficult. But the dominant methods, together with their potential mistakes, always exert enormous power on the social scientists using them; and they may have the power to mislead even those who contest them. In fact, the critique deriving from the burgeoning perception of the limits and mistakes of those methods, instead of aiding clarification, has increased confusion, as is typical of times of profound crisis of current visions and methods of inquiry. The international scientific conferences on social problems, which assemble skilful scholars, are the best representation of this situation. Conferences inspired by heterodoxy and aiming to foster pluralism demonstrate a remarkable inability of participants to engage in dialogue with one another, due to the methodological cages that separate them and impede the valuation and dissemination of scholarly contributions, while those inspired by orthodoxy refuse a platform to dissenting views and persist in building on some crucial mistakes, even though these errors have been clearly identified and proved.

It seems not exaggerated to say that there is a need to go back to what may be termed the Medieval organizational view, that is, the attempt to understand the reason why societies have been organized the way that they are, and hence to learn to organize them more satisfactorily. Significantly, Bertrand Russel wrote: "it is false, from a theoretic point of view, to allow the real world inflicting us a model of good and evil".[4]

The present study is intended as a contribution that prevents method from becoming a prison for the mind as opposed to a stimulant of creativity and knowledge. In a sense, we are today living a condition opposite to that of the Enlightenment. In that era, a great intellectual revolution prognosticated reforms that sometimes proved unrealistic due to excessive abstraction but that, nevertheless, stimulated an intensive social change. Now the contrary is taking place: a deep social change is at work but is obstructed by the absence of a methodology able to promote the understanding and the profitable working of its content.

[4] See Russel (1981, p. 37).

We shall try to make clear our proposal on method by setting out a multiplicity of applications in the main branches of social thought, economics excepted as it has already been treated in another book (students interested in economics can read some substantial development of the discussion in Sect. 1.4 on positive and normative views, in the final section of Chap. 2 entitled 'Economic and social planning' and in the section of Chap. 3 entitled 'Mainstream economics and its opponents'). But we have considered that those applications are not sufficient and that, to adequately clarify our methodological proposal, the reasons standing behind it, and to stimulate meditation, a number of criticisms of outstanding social theories and schools of thought were also required. We beg the pardon of readers and authors for any misunderstandings that, notwithstanding our severe attempt at accuracy, may have occurred in the handling of such extensive and difficult literature.

Naturally, it is difficult to challenge well rooted methodological convictions. Probably, any hopes of overcoming the current difficulties of social thought must be placed on: (a) that minority of heterodox scholars aware that the absence of some shared methodological rules makes impossible a serious confrontation and reciprocal interaction among the plurality of contributions and a real challenge to mainstream methodologies; (b) those orthodox scholars who start to perceive the unreliability of traditional methodologies when applied to social science; (c) young scholars and their tendency to distrust current thought and cultivate a critical attitude, but hopefully found their own work on the accurate analysis of facts and errors, not mere polemic; (d) the good sense and mental openness of educated people, primarily those troubled by a growing dissatisfaction with the usual teachings on society; (e) and, last but not least, the dimension of the present social crisis and the growing perception of the impotence of conventional thinking in understanding and facing it.

Throughout history, men's instincts and special interests have caused untold human and social misery, often justified by a utilization of reason for purposes of mystification. The discussion, development and results that follow are aimed at combating those mystifications and miseries; the results on ethics should be of interest for educational and religious institutions.

Finally it is to be emphasized that, in light of the innovative content of our proposal on method, some initial patience is required of any serious reader; after the half of Chap. 2 understanding will progress quickly and, with it, enjoyment.

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My very helpful direct and indirect interaction with Boudon's extensive treatment of the method of the social sciences, which occurred primarily through my reading and criticism of various stimulating essays that he has published in Mondoperaio, together with a parallel reading of his main works. I was attracted by Boudon's attempt to provide social thought with scientific objectivity, including ethical values; but I found the basic idea of such a research unsatisfactory: the gravitation, in the very long run, of social phenomena and ethical values towards rational standards by trial and error in order that social systems may survive (diffuse rationality). Such an obliged landing of the author's objectivism as based merely on the observational method (and hence the connected idea of spontaneity) strengthened my initial conviction that *the* problem of social thought is rather to define a method able to illuminate the organization and administration of social systems so that to reduce the frequency and dimensions of the monstrosities of history implied by merely trial and error (i.e., Weberian diffuse rationality) but preserving the important role of creativity and free choice and avoiding that social interventions result in errors and abuses of a level directly proportional to their incisiveness.

Erudite and deep discussions with Hasse Ekstedt concerning central parts of this book, mainly in the light of logical-empiricism, his predilection for formal rigour in analytical procedure and his criticism of the basic postulates of mainstream economics.

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Guido Preparata, for profound criticisms and suggestions mainly concerning: the meaning and work of the market, in particular its reduction to a pure mechanism for imputation of costs and efficiency; the transformation of the financial market into a servant of production as opposed to a master of production; profit, the interest rate and banking system.

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The intellectual openness of the review *Sociologia* and its former editor Michele Marotta that published various articles of mine concerned, in the main, with pointing out a paradoxical vicissitude in the Medieval Christian teaching on science. The teaching underlined that the aim of scientists should be to understand the reason why the world has been made the way it is; but, the natural world being the product of an unfathomable will, a much more fecund approach has proved to be the attempt to understand its functioning through observation. My articles reproved the substantial acceptance in the end, by Christian social thought, of the hegemony of the observational view to the detriment of the Medieval teaching, notwithstanding that, being a product of humanity, it is crucial to understand the reason why the social world has been made the way it is and any implied 'errors', rather than merely observing its functioning.

Simon John Cook, who provided improvement of my English style

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Introduction

1. We are living in the age of science and technology, but modern humans appear increasingly unable to understand what concerns their immediate interests, which is to say, social relations. The methodological confusion that obscures thought on social problems and binds our hands will probably seem incredible, inexplicable, to future generations and will inspire great regret for the immense damage done to humankind. An energetic response to the situation seems indispensable.

Social thought has been imprisoned in a blind alley for a good long time now. Today a profound crisis has shaken its very foundations. The doubts and conceptual revisions are often taken for signs of cultural vitality, but they actually express a great bewilderment that, sooner or later, must bring to fore the necessity for some sounder, more fruitful methodological anchorage, as is already the case with the natural and logical-formal sciences. In pursuing such an anchorage, let us provide some brief definitions of notions crucial to the analysis on method that will follow:

The word *being* is intended to express existing reality, while the word *doing* is intended to express the human activity of transformation, implementation and, in sum, the organization of existing reality. For its part, the expression *necessity-constriction* indicates unavoidable aspects of reality that are required in the organization and management of social systems for reasons of organizational efficiency; while the expression *choice-possibility-creativeness* refers to possibilities, in the organization and development of social systems, resulting from choice and creative processes. The meaning of the last two expressions will be extensively clarified in Sect. 1.4 of Chap. 1.

This book proposes a methodological procedure and rules that: (a) weigh the role of observation with great caution, for social events are very largely non-repetitive and, in particular, flank the observational standpoint (being) to the organizational (doing); (b) allow a precise distinction between necessity-constriction and choice-creativeness, extending this distinction to the field of ethics. We show that the methodological specifications under (a) and (b) are essential prerequisites to understanding the generation and organization of societies over time and to surmounting diffuse misconceptions and acute contrasts afflicting social thought, such as the apparently

irreducible contrast between cultural relativism, which is dominant among students of society and sometimes goes beyond the question of values, and what may be called ethical absolutism, towards which the great religions incline. The methodological focus of the proposed theoretical perspective is on defining some criteria for the selection and classification of postulates for the derivation of general principles and basic organizational features, thereby avoiding both the theoretical fragmentation and superficiality of generic deductions and the merely inductive standpoint of dominating methodologies.

Unfortunately, the current misconceptions over method prevent correct exposition of the above two interrelated issues: *the combination of being and doing*, which is the most typical aspect of social phenomena and should be at the heart of any study of ethical values; and the distinction in social life and organization between *necessity* and *choice-possibility-creativity*, *what must* and *what can* be done. The first term of this distinction is often wrongly identified with what is durable and the second term with what is transient, in spite of the fact that durability and transience concern merely observational standpoint; the result is the downgrading the organizational view and element. This unclear state of affairs damages the administration of social systems and often results in the prevalence, at the expense of the general interest, of the interests of the most powerful and influential social groups. If we are to ensure the prevalence of the general interest then it must be proclaimed and unanimously recognized as such; and this in turn requires that the general interest be seen to rest upon clear scientific foundations.

A number of tragedies propitiated by prestigious intellectual treatises on social problems – first and foremost in the first half of the last century – have not sufficed to direct scholars' attention to the acute need for methodological revision in social thought. Rather, they have instead produced a contrary effect: they have reinforced *strictly observation-based method, i.e. centred on being* and that privileges the spontaneity of processes against the organizational view.

Some features of our proposal on method are to be traced in current developments. But major, common misconceptions are well rooted in current thinking and strongly shielded. We apologize for the strength of some of our statement. We believe, however, that one's tone in denouncing misconceptions on some vital matters should be proportional to the deafness of the time servers and of those who, out of self-interest or cowardice, look the other way.

Of course, it is senseless to think that method, however well-founded, can immunize us against error; it only helps to recognize and reduce it. Every intellectual work suffers limitations and errors, which are directly proportional to the dimension of its scope and implications. We hope that other minds will evaluate and underline our own errors and the shortcomings of the present contribution; it is mainly aimed at opening up some useful avenues of investigation.

2. Now we summarize the structure and main contents of the book.

Chapter 1 develops some criticisms of the most frequently used methods of the social sciences and traces some first steps aimed at overcoming their basic drawbacks. Major attention is directed to the observation-verification method, where we distinguish between: (a) *strong observation method* (positivism in the

strict sense), which is based on the two hypotheses of 'acceptance of the observed reality' (what has happened had to happen) and its 'recurrence'; and (b) *weak observation method*, which rejects the hypothesis of 'recurrence'. This second method may be usefully referred to the case of minor mutations, e.g. such as casual and slow biological mutations and those of quasi-stationary societies. But it is inappropriate when faced with the accelerating, endogenous and innovative motion of dynamic societies. A large part of social thought and the most important students of society make use of the weak observation method, which consequently has caused the most important and the most rooted misunderstanding in the social sciences. The main cause of the inappropriateness for social studies of both the strong and weak observation methods is that they are based on *being* while ignoring *doing*, while doing constitutes the larger and most typical aspect of social reality.

We then turn to the constructivist view that, by contrast, is centred on *doing* but substantially ignores *being*. Accordingly, we insist on the need, in the social sciences, of a method able to conjugate *being* and *doing* and that, on this basis, seeks to understand *becoming*.

The fact that the social sciences mainly concern the organization of social systems implies the importance of a transition, in social studies, from the *observational to the organizational standpoint.* This need may be served by a methodological reformulation based on the binary contrast of 'necessity'/'choice-possibility-creativity' as developed in Chap. 2. The combination of *being* and *doing* allows us to transcend both abstract rationality, appropriate to the logical-formal sciences, and especially naturalistic rationality, in favour of an organizational rationality that rejects pure abstraction. But the organizational standpoint, while strictly combining permanence with change, must be careful not to imply the suppression of the subjective side – that is, the suffocation of individuality (a primary source of creativeness) beneath hypothetically all-pervasive social structures and organization.

Chapter 2 focuses on identifying some procedures and rules for the formulation, in social thought, of general principles. It seeks also for the design of some notions concerning the organization and development of social systems that are robust in the face of the intensification, in modern societies, of innovation and change and that may act as guidelines for social thought and action. The failure of the observation-verification method with regard to social reality, primarily due to the growing role of innovation and hence non-repetitiveness in society, implies that the method of the social sciences must be *deductive*. But the importance (as just seen) to be attributed to being indicates that deductions must be based on realistic postulates. The choice of these postulates represents, indeed, the real methodological problem (since we are obliged, by the marked non-repetitiveness of social reality, to mistrust of observational verification); its solution requires the *definition and specification of rules and classification procedures to guide scholars in the research and the corroboration of initial postulates* so as to move from generic, subjective and merely hypothetical deductions to an objective and more penetrating deductive approach that can offer general formulations and explanatory principles on a continuously changing reality. So the methodology we suggest begins with the *classification and selection* of postulates and deduces their implications for the organization of social systems. This means that our method embodies a completely different notion of

scientific rationality from that of the natural sciences. Both those rationalities are scientific in that they are referred to the question of method. But, unlike observational (naturalistic) rationality, which is based on the acceptance of existing conditions (with the underlying idea that the real is rational) and which is typical of positivist and evolutionary social thought, ours is a prescriptive and organizational rationality appropriate to a reality that is the work of humanity. We do not specifically expose here the rules and classificatory procedure concerning the choice of postulates but rather set out some applications.

Some fundamental deductions may be based on postulates concerning important characteristics of the *general conditions of development* of the period under study. This allows to derive organizational features that may be called *functional imperatives* (but not in Parsons' sense) in that are features required by pressing reasons of functional efficiency not linked to the pursuit of specific (ideological, technological and naturalistic) objectives, conditions and choices but only to the 'general conditions of development'. These basic organizational features are enduring; that is, they change only when the general conditions of development change. Also basic technologies, i.e. technologies that are fundamental in characterizing the general conditions of development, and the organizational forms that they imply, are functional imperatives.

Some institutional and organizational features may be imposed by the conditions of nature. They are local and were decisive in characterizing the societies of the past. Their influence has been strongly reduced by technological development, mainly through the increasing speed of communications and the role of artefacts.

The implications of the conditions of nature and the functional imperatives give the field of 'necessity' in the organization and functioning of social system.

An important generalization is expressed by the notion of *ontological imperatives*. These are the result of very general and fundamental aspects of human nature, and so their operation is essential to the unfolding of human evolutionary potentialities. Ontological imperatives are, for instance, constituted by the tolerance principle and other conditions able to stimulate creativity. As such, these imperatives are universally valid, in all historical eras and mainly concern important ethical values. But unlike functional imperatives, they are *not* imposed and required (for organizational efficiency) by the general conditions of development and their motion. As a consequence, they may be repressed even for very long periods of time by the existence of a civilization that opposes them. They will certainly triumph only if, in the course of development, they also become functional imperatives. The suffocation of ontological imperatives prevents social development, that is, the change of the general conditions of development and hence the advent of new functional imperatives. With the establishment of modern dynamic society, various ontological imperatives have become functional imperatives; that is, they must be satisfied if this kind of society is to survive; they have thus become a 'necessity'. Among the other things, the notions of functional and ontological imperatives also offer clarifications on the concept of utopia and its possible relationship with scientific procedure.

Moving from the general to the particular, i.e. to classification concerning choice and innovation, an important notion is that of *civilizations*. This is intended as an institutional set of ideological and technological choices with the consequent

organizational forms, and marked by basic ideological choices (grand options) around which the society is structured and integrated. The forms of civilization, even if basically express choice, are distinguished by the pervasiveness of their effects on social systems and by their great duration. This illustrates the conceptual difference between necessity and duration: necessity is the opposite of choice, but the choices that embody grand options, at the base of civilizations, imply long duration. Next we consider the particular aspects of societies (innovations and single choices), as well as the role they should play in the building of the social science.

Social science should begin with the definition of functional and ontological imperatives and the identification of civilizations; accordingly, it should go deeply into the roles and interactions of these explanatory categories. Then the more specific aspects, i.e. specific choices and innovations, should be added, with their implications for the organization of social systems. Thus a combination of innovative flair and rational drive, innovation and structural organization, is specified, *the relationship between the two aspects being crucial to understanding social and historic processes*, as Chap. 4 shows.

The method proposed here implies the scientific derivation of many important ethical values that denies the dominant idea of relativism in all values.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the criticism of the startling array of methods used by social thinkers that represent various different attempts to grasp some important, peculiar aspects of social reality: the unpredictability of events (mainly due to innovation), choice, value judgments, radical uncertainty, evolutionary creative movement, learning processes, unintentional events and constructive action. We show that the great variety of methods, far from representing fecund and creative pluralism as many scholars would have it, are for the most an expression of a widespread bewilderment that obstructs the advancement of social science.

Chapter 4 delineates, using the methodological categories set out in Chap. 2, a theoretical framework for the explanation of social and historical development that will then be compared with a multiplicity of existing theories on this subject.

The foundations for our theory of social and historical process are the interrelationships among the notions of ontological imperative, functional imperative and civilization: depending on the manner in which it embodies *ontological imperatives*, the *form of civilization* either hastens or blocks creativeness and the related variation in the *general conditions of development*¸ and hence the advent of *new and more advanced functional imperatives* that cause, willy-nilly, the advent of *new civilizations* consistent with them.

More particularly, the causal picture (and interpretative chain) of the social and historical processes suggested by our methodological construction and categories can be summarized as follows:

A creative drive lies at the beginning of every developmental process. The way in which the resulting civilization satisfies (or denies) ontological imperatives (and hence creativity) determines the intensity of innovation, evolutionary motion and development. The consequent possible change in the general conditions of development generates new functional imperatives demanded by the new general conditions of development for cogent reasons of organizational efficiency. If one imperative is in

contradiction with the existing form of civilization, this form will inevitably be transformed into another that is consistent with the new functional imperatives. And so forth through the subsequent surges of innovation.

It is important to note that the pace of the development process depends chiefly on a civilization's accordance with ontological imperatives. If a civilization is adverse to (and hence suffocates) important ontological imperatives, i.e. suffocates the expression of the evolutionary potential of individuals and peoples, innovation and hence evolutionary motion will be obstructed, condemning the social process to a flat or parabolic course (stagnation and decadence). Stagnation or disintegration are powerfully spurred by an 'excess' of, respectively, rational drive or creative flair, and vice versa. Otherwise, a lengthening cyclical trend is fuelled by the alternation between innovation and the consequent structural reorganization; the length of the cycle depends on the degree of coordination between innovation and structural organization. Thus the degree of satisfaction of ontological imperatives and the relation between innovative drive and structural organization give rise to a sine, parabolic or flat development curve.

Our interpretation and its analytical tools allow a rigorous distinction of social process into historical ages. The notion of historical era, to be unambiguous, needs to be based on factors belonging to the realm of 'necessity' (such as functional imperatives), not the realm of 'choice' – even such crucial choices as those between civilizations. In short, historical ages are singled out by the character of the functional imperatives as demanded by the general conditions of development.

That the aspect of 'necessity' is flanked, in our theory, by that of 'choice-possibility-creativity' shows that the historical process is not deterministic. And the world appears – both from a scientific and a practical point of view – in its true characteristics: a never-ending 'correction process', resulting from the limitations of human nature and mind; a process that may ultimately bring humanity, not to the achievement of some earthly paradise (a senseless expectation indeed), but to the realization of the best of their potentialities – intellectually, ethically and operationally. Unfortunately, historical processes have not uncommonly involved devastating events and deviations from ontological and functional imperatives that have prevented the potential advance along that evolutionary path.

Chapter 5 offers, in the light of our interpretative framework, a critical review of some of the main theories of social and historical processes, ending up with Eliade's 'terror of history' and historical monstrosities. The reference to our methodological categories in the building and administration of human societies shows that it is the lack of a scientific basis of social thought that has allowed these horrors to have been perpetrated throughout history.

Part II explores some applications in various branches of the social sciences of the methodological proposal developed in Part I.

Chapter 6 concerns anthropology, which refers to the first stage of the human adventure and to very simple societies, albeit with a variety of cultures; such variety highlights the importance of civilization in investigating social processes and its crucial role in stimulating or, more frequently, obstructing further development. A number of functional imperatives typical of primitive ages are considered that

allow us to bring to light and to better understand some basic common features of primitive societies, notwithstanding their extreme variety. In particular, we comment upon the nature and the meaning of the 'power of society', which, with its various and sometimes eccentric features, is probably the most important and involved characteristic of primitive civilizations. We underline the strong opposition of the power of society to evolutionary process and take note that the oppressive character of such a power is frequently misunderstood by anthropologists who eulogize a mythical freedom of primitives from domination. Finally, the chapter sketches the transition from the power of society to 'command-power' and 'state-power'.

Chapter 7 is mainly concerned with politics. Political action – the exercise of power – is particularly subject to abuse and mystification. We analyze the problem of sovereignty and its legitimization, starting with the contributions of Benjamin Constant, Jean J. Rousseau, Gaetano Mosca, Karl Schmitt, and Hans Kelsen to show that, without a strict distinction between 'necessity' and 'choice-possibility' in the organization of social systems, the theoretical legitimization of power is impossible. The remedy offered by democracy is partial, and the separation of powers may simply produce (as it has often done) a division of the power to abuse. The notions of power of domination and functional (or service) power are sketched out, and we show that a science of the organization of social systems, built mainly upon the analytical categories disclosed in Chap. 2, provides a powerful antidote to the degeneration of power by providing a scientific solution to the problem of how to control controllers.

The binary 'freedom-responsibility' and the relations between the two and with the problem of power are then investigated. We note that 'responsibility' goes beyond individual action and point out that the definition of a system of responsibilities requires the notions of functional and ontological imperatives, necessity and choice-possibility. The philosophical and theological aspects of this question and theodicy are examined.

We then emphasize that the observational method is anti-reformist, in that the acceptance of existing conditions (the real is rational, the real is necessary) is inherently conservative. We also consider the hyper-relativist prejudice that any and all ethical choices and reform proposals are acceptable in principle. It appears that the primary cause of these attitudes and prejudices is the lack of a clear distinction between 'necessity' and 'choice-possibility'. Afterwards, the problem of inequalities versus social justice and its far-reaching implications are deepened. The last section provides a wide-ranging illustration of the meaning of political action in the light of a number of major historical events and lost opportunities.

Chapter 8 begins by underlining that law is mainly concerned with doing, even if it cannot disregard being. We show that if we are to justify normative action, explain its foundations and detach the command power (as far as possible) from free will, the connection of being with doing and the organizational view, together with our methodological categories, are indispensable. Using our distinction between 'choice-possibility' and 'necessity' and the objective character of some ethical values, we set out a critique of the following: natural law doctrine, positive law, and the sociology of law.

In particular, considerable space is given over to the opposition between natural and positive law, the contents and roots of such opposition and related errors concerning command-power. Then we discuss the ambiguities of the Enlightenment and contractualist view, specifically the idea of the social contract, the one-sidedness of which left an opening for the historicist reaction.

The perplexities of some contemporary authors on the foundations and the role of law in dynamic societies are considered and criticized. Finally, we set out a theory of *juridical objectivism* derived from our methodological categories, laying down some analytical foundations for the explanation and the construction of legal order.

Chapter 9 is mainly dedicated to sociological cognitive method, one of the most important methodological approaches in sociology. The individual is the backbone of cognitivism, which almost totally neglects social aspects and structures. In effect, the role of the individual is one of our ontological imperatives; but Weber and Boudon ascribe excessive importance to the individual. The assertion at the centre of Boudon's theory of social evolution, namely that individualism advances incessantly across history, is questionable in the extreme, as we can see from the constant presence across history of so-called 'closed' societies alongside open ones.

Weber's meditations on method are variegated and also include an anticipation of Popper's falsification method in setting out the methodological sequence: choice of initial point of view, elimination of the explanatory factor posited, comparison of the resulting hypothetical process with reality in order to verify the causal role of that factor. However, this is just an incidental episode in Weber's treatise on method. He does not follow up in order to develop the strong observational features that it suggests. Here we limit ourselves to noting that one of cognitivism's most ambiguous aspects lies in its notion of rationality. Weber's analyses and interpretations insist on rationality, but one crucial aspect of his sociology, i.e. ethical relativism, neglects rationality entirely and thereby arrives upon the ambiguous and misleading notion of double ethics.

Boudon, by contrast, insists on the objective character of values, deriving objectivity from the Weberian idea of 'diffuse rationality' that states that in the long run societies converge towards rational solutions and organizations by trial and error. Like dialectical idealism, this convergence, which is a pillar of Boudon's theory of social evolution, implies that the real is both rational and necessary (inevitable), even if in Boudon's exposition this spontaneist point of arrival has a liberal flavour. But the Weberian 'diffuse rationality' (a merely observational idea) operates in the very long run at best. It ignores the main problem of social thought, i.e. how to avoiding the sometimes horrifying historical disasters that have marked the spontaneous, extremely slow and laborious convergence towards the rational.

The tenth and last chapter discusses ethical values and their connections with religious thought. In particular, we underscore four principles (deriving primarily from the Christian message) that have powerfully stimulated the evolution of society. The historical events that have followed from those dynamic seeds are briefly recounted, and their successes and failures in defeating the circular motion and vision proper to stationary societies in favour of the linear-progressive vision of historical process are set out.

Next, and by way of a comparison between stationary and dynamic societies, the relativist and absolutist views are analysed and some equivocations on values, as characterizing social and religious thinking respectively, are discussed on the basis of what we have called *cultural objectivism.* The roots of civilizations (which feed opposition between peoples) are considered in historical perspective; their vitality and ability or inability to adapt to evolutionary motion weighed and the usefulness of *cultural objectivism* (that is, the objective definition of fundamental ethical values) to this type of inquiry is emphasized.

Finally, we treat some current misunderstandings regarding the problem of a global ethics – crucial in this age of globalization – illustrating them with examples that bring out the substantial nature of *cultural objectivism*. Some aspects of Christian social thought and its mix of faith and reason are discussed, and the positions on values of some philosophers and students of society of modern and contemporary ages are criticized.

Part I
Theory

Chapter 1
Preliminary Considerations on the Method of Social Thought

1.1 Introduction

This chapter is a sort of provocative introduction to the methodological questions developed in Part I of the book.

Man is obliged, by the limits of his cognitive skills, to proceed by trial and error, especially if he operates creatively or is forced to cope with non-repetitive situations. Moreover, he is obliged to learn by mistakes; and to be able so to learn he must suffer the tribulations and adversity caused by his mistakes and so be prompted to act with mental flexibility. This structural dependency of human learning and improvement on the adversities caused by mistakes can make the world resemble a sort of enormous reformatory, whatever one's religious feeling and belief may be.

Human beings are, however, endowed with reason, the intense and appropriate use of which enables men to ease the cost of their evolutionary mission and significantly reduce the suffering inflicted by mistakes and the learning process. But in their social relations men insist on wasting or stifling their cognitive skills. This can be clearly seen if we consider one of the most striking shortcomings of civilization: the extreme modesty of ethical improvement, notwithstanding the rapid increase of technical capacities and knowledge. From the dawn of history men have listened to and approved the exhortations of important religions to strive for moral purpose, goodness and brotherhood; they have admired and exalted the sacrifices of martyrs and heroes inspired by such sentiments; but in practical life, they have largely ignored all of this. This shows that ethical exhortations as such are not persuasive, that they are obscured by personal interests. To be effective, such exhortations must be preceded by scientific teachings that reinforce them and prevent the use of reason to perpetrate and justify abuse and vice. We accordingly address our analysis to what seems to us to be more solid and engaging ground, namely the way that human knowledge is formed. We shall see that this line of inquiry leads to a scientific clarification of some important questions on ethics (*ethical objectivism*): a clarification that may improve moral behaviour and allow religions to carry out their work much more wisely and incisively

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