

State, Nation, and Sociology

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Abstract

The sociological science must be employed in the amelioration of society. The intellectual climate of a nation is a determinant feature for the success of sociology. Actually, there are areas in which the frame seems more favourable. The establishment of new electronic journals, regional and national associations and sociological societies reflects the expanding range of interests and professional specialization.

Keywords: state; nation; sociology; national sociological associations; international sociological associations; national sociologies.

Introduction

All political structures are not a state. The concept of state is very different in Eastern cultures and in Western cultures, for instance. In the history of sociology, state concept has received a lot of attention, but has produced a lot of questions too.

After the crisis of welfare state and the difficulties of welfare mix we are dealing with the necessity of contextualize the state in its territorial and historical frame. Max Weber (1949) too doesn't help us so much in this matter. In historical terms, perhaps the feudal era was the starting point of state. But this presupposition still remains Western oriented. Actually, there are many states, many ideas of state, many realities of state. In any case, the state is not just an invention, it is based on a society, in particular on civil society according to Scottish school (Ferguson 1767).

The beginning of state consists in the end of feudal power, together with the evidence of social stratification as social problem.

The today's state represents a form of accomplishment of old Roman republic or empire. But this is just a stream. Other patterns of state come from Asia or Africa, even though they are the result of colonization and imposition from abroad, from outside (we can think of apartheid situation).

In any case the state is not a natural evolution. It is a social construction. And it is not an universal model. However we are conscious that the state in itself is not a solution of different contrasts. We have to take into account the presence of populism as a common way of political campaigns. This same populism can change the general frame if people discover that the corruption of political party in charge is under charge (like in Brazil, where the workers' party, PT, is in troubles because of some gossip concerning its internal corruption).

At the same time post-Soviet countries are searching for new legitimation, for a place in the European and/or world context. They ask for a new political order, in territorial and frontiers terms, stressing their peculiarity in ethnic, religious and language perspective.

East and West, South and North

The general situation is that, according to Neil Smelser (1994), the adoption of the Western state model created a kind of international society of elites (both North and South), with shared interest in governing and a kind of derived solidarity among themselves. This was not the purpose of Polish Solidarność movement, for instance.

Therefore the ideal and the idea of state have been discredited. And, in some cases, the authoritarian proposal has received more and more interest. Corporatism, crises in governance, diminishing national and international power, instability (in Africa for instance), international disorder, multinational character, revolution: these are some key points to discuss. Even the state of a nation is an abstraction from the experiences of its members, however people is a solid reality, with a variety of belongings. But a nation is a group of people who, normally living in a particular territory, wish to form their own state.

Our discipline, sociology, was born many years after the diffusion of nation idea. But the idea of a national sociology didn't come so late. Weber and Simmel (Wolff 1950) founded the German Sociological Association. More than one hundred years ago, in Philadelphia, there was the beginning of American Sociological Society, now A.S.A. And René Worms (1921) with other sociologists anticipated future developments creating the International Institute of Sociology in Paris, in 1893. Other national societies of sociology followed this initial path. Last but not least, the Italian Sociological Association had its first statutes in 1984. Now new national associations are emerging, for instance in post-communist countries, or in Africa, or in Asia. Together with national and international approaches, the new evidence concerns the necessity of more local convergences, based on regional areas. This is for instance the case of relevant networks in the United States, well formalized and historically organized, or of informal relationship, for instance in Europe, between Portuguese, Spanish, French, Greek and Italian Sociological Association (through the network named RESU), in order to discuss common topics on Southern Europe. In Eastern Europe there is the Balkan Forum, founded in 2011, to associate the sociologists of Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia. There are also other more specifically discipline-related associations like ISORECEA (International Study of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe Association) which takes an interest in the sociology of religion in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Perhaps there are more projects in progress, that we have to take in account.

Do national sociologies have better chance in the self-organization? If so, does this imply that national associations of sociology are best guaranteed also by an international body like I.S.A. (International Sociological Association)? And what about the relationship with national identity and language? These questions loom larger than ever before at the end of the 20th century. This was in particular the European experience but the principles are at a level of generality to be relevant to other regions of the world. According to Diderot, the nation is “une quantité considérable de peuple qui habite une certain étendue de pays, renfermée dans de certaines limites, et qui obéit au même gouvernement” (Diderot 1751), to say that nation is a number of people living in a limited territory and under the same government. The nation is the continuity with the past. The same we can say about national sociological associations. In spite of differences between specific areas of knowledge, current national sociologies have been shaped by certain characteristics of the beginning and of following history. In the Italian case, after Vilfredo Pareto contribution, we had the Fascist era, when no sociology was present in universities. But after the World War Two we had a new beginning, notwithstanding the intellectual opposition of a philosopher like Benedetto Croce (1950; 1950; 1993) who, because of his liberalism¹, was a strong enemy of our “ill” science² and namely of its most relevant representative, Franco Ferrarotti (1951). This peculiar heritage still remains in the social context of Italian sociology³. It is difficult to contrast a permanent stream. For instance, I had to send an official letter of protest against a state Italian TV anchorman, who criticized the sociologists, as professionals without any role or relevance in society. Millions of Italian TV watchers have received this kind of message: sociologists for what? The natural answer was evident: for nothing. But in the same TV program the anchorman (Bruno Vespa) was using the support of a sociologist (Renato Mannheimer) to comment his speech with sociological data. It is evident that a national sociological association is useful, also for this purpose: to protect the public image of our science, sometimes considered “soft”, sometimes “politically oriented”, sometimes “good for all topics and for all seasons”. In Europe, in general, the birth of an international association, to say the European Sociological Association, comes too late, many years after the construction of European Community. European sociologists were unable to foresee (in time) the relevance of new continental economic and political structure. Even today, the European network doesn't take off in a due manner. In any case the road has been opened; perhaps the future will be better. Emerging in a social setting of rapid urbanization, industrialization and now of globalization, we all we are dealing with a field concerned with social problems. Starting from unspecialized or too specialized interests, our associations

¹ Cf. Eugenio Pennati, “L'ultima polemica fra idealismo e sociologia”, *Il Politico*, 16, 3, dicembre, 1951, pp. 308-317.

² Cf. Laura Balbo, Giuliana Chiaretti, Gianni Massironi, *L'inferma scienza: tre saggi sulla istituzionalizzazione della sociologia in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1975.

³ Cf. Giuseppina Nirchio, “Sociologia e filosofia: significato e valore filosofico della sociologia”, *Il Politico*, 19, 3, dicembre, 1954, pp. 532-540.

are rich of diverse intellectual backgrounds. And afterwards, we are carrying on our research no more as individuals, but frequently as members of teams, of national associations, and of international networks.

New perspectives

In some cases, we see an unsuccessful attempt to establish our scientific discipline. But we have to begin. Therefore I was very happy when I participated in Beijing, as invited speaker, in First Chinese Meeting of Sociologists of Religion. Of course there is the weight of Chinese and Marxist ideology, but a new perspective seems to appear, thanks to a national relationship and to an effort to reach the international scientific standard. In other countries too, the study of society is largely undertaken from the perspective of local culture or political frame or religious confession. Therefore, improving the social and international link remains a basic, if not the fundamental, concern. Of course, a full respect for the state of art in local situations is necessary. We are not preachers. We are not missionaries. We have to offer proposals and to suggest ideas. Other people will decide if they want to accept. In this field, communication – I mean good and qualified communication – is a fundamental tool. Internet can help, but it is mandatory to manage it at best, to avoid misunderstandings, lack of information, surcharge of messages and news, impersonal and generalized ways of staying all together. The person, the individual, must remain the key point of reference.

The common task is to stress the usefulness of sociological knowledge to justify sociological teaching and researching.

However we are not specialized organizations for the occupational interests of sociologists as academicians or professional social operators. The increasing conclusion of courses of sociology in the universities is a goal to realize, but not in spite of scientific standards and quality of teaching. The sociological science must be employed in the amelioration of society.

The intellectual climate of a nation is a determinant feature for the success of sociology. Actually, there are areas in which the frame seems more favourable: Midwest of United States, Northern Italy and so on in other nations. But also specific places can give a strong impulse: Chicago or Paris, São Paulo or Montreal, Milan or Heidelberg. The role of these areas and university cities helps a lot for the emergence of our discipline in terms of added significance and distinctive part in the diffusion and improvement of sociology. And the professional organization or national association of sociologists is a direct descendant of a general intellectual movement that pushes other areas and people to follow the same trajectory. The starting point could be a scientific Centre or an Institute, but the final outcome is a Society or an Association. It is difficult to

distinguish between society and association. In general an association contemplates the presence of members not only at an individual level. Therefore collective members are a characteristic of national or international association (in the first case, collective members are Departments, Institutes, Centres and so on; in the second case, collective members are specifically national associations).

A society is a more generic *liaison*, without local structures, at least in principle. The risk concerns the fact that a national association can remain isolated, without exchanges, without comparisons, without debates outside its own field. When a national association doesn't favour an international debate or doesn't stress the usefulness of international dialogue between regional approaches loses the opportunity of knowing best practices, new issues, new results of a multifaceted contribution in the scientific arena. A national or international association cannot seem to become an exclusively self-referential preoccupation. Of course, a national association reflects the sensitivity of sociologists of that nation. Its spirit transpires in the scientific production of its members.

I think that the intellectual framework within which sociological and organizational problems have been approached has been too largely shaped by European and North-American influence. It is time to move towards new lines, new designs, and new projects, accepting and emphasizing the output coming from other horizons. I'm thinking of African nations, of Asian societies, of Latino-American experiences. Perhaps it is time to organize more and more regional conferences, to have a personal, direct contact between scientists, scholars sharing similar topics, using same or different methodologies, working in great and common areas. The sociological divide is not based only on digital software and hardware. There are costs of travel, of publication, of information to afford. We need a global programme, to manage international activities, meetings, seminars. I don't think that it is only a problem of costs. We know that if we want we are able to solve many problems, to find not expensive solutions. The sole problem is the political choice of doing so, to say to privilege the strength of reciprocal knowledge, of mutual relationship, of numerous occasions of dialogue.

Early American sociologists were not hesitant to recognize their indebtedness to British, French, German and other European predecessors and contemporaries, with whom they often came in contact, through travel or work abroad.

Nevertheless the intellectual characteristics of North American sociology are still manifestly North American. The same we can say about our national European associations. Problems, methods, assumptions and preoccupations do reveal the distinctive impact of each association and its members, through the books, the sociology courses in the universities, the volumes of national journals of sociology (*British Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Acta Sociologica*, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, and so on).

Today, we don't agree with Albion Small's (1907) four major sociological assumptions presented in 1906 during the first meeting of American Sociological Society: the search for scientific laws of human behaviour; the social change interpreted or a progress towards a better society; the direct human and meliorist intervention; the roots of society in individual behaviour. However, at least a point of Small's proposal we can corroborate, with a widespread acceptance: the individual in association can do a lot, can do the best. Therefore, as individuals, we don't have a great future but as sociologists in association we can survive, we can promote the continuation of our ideas.

We still are in a formative period, particularly in a globalizing perspective. If we stress the force of associative initiatives, of cooperative associations, we will not have many problems of time and space. After us, other sociologists will continue, around the world.

In Providence, Rhode Island, more than 100 years ago American Sociological Society counted only 115 members. Now the number is around 20.000. International Sociological Association is about a quart of National American Association. It isn't a problem of quantity because quality must go together with quantity.

Like in the American Sociological Association we need more comprehensive regional associations, for instance by continent or by other specific territories. The trend to make sociology more scientific in all countries will stimulate also field differentiation and specialization, for being scientific is generally understood to mean engaging in concrete research.

On the other hand, the participation of sociologists, in a variety of interdisciplinary ventures, functions to heighten the autonomy and independence of sociology as a separate social science, with its own viewpoint and its own body of knowledge. In any case, this doesn't mean to avoid a larger cooperation with other scientific societies or associations.

Conclusion

We have so much to gain from a larger scientific environment, in particular from economics, political science, statistics, history, anthropology, geography, right, psychology, etc. International Sociological Association, for instance, has now a *Sociopedia* on line. Finally we are aware of a more mature social science and of the need for sociology to deal with empirical, real phenomena, the relevance of multi-factorial explanations, the merits of qualitative methods, and the subjective-objective distinction, to say between personal values or viewpoints and scientific results.

The establishment of new electronic journals, regional and national associations and sociological societies reflects the expanding range of interests and professional specialization. Smaller local publications have been also founded by regional sociological societies. The main problem concerns linguistic barriers. For instance *International Sociology*, official I.S.A. journal, is giving room for reviews of books in non English language. Having a combined membership exceeding that of national societies, regional associations permit greater personal contact, fellowship and intellectual discussion among groups of scholars than it is possible at the national or international meetings, as well as increased opportunities – particularly for younger sociologists – to present research reports.

Any kind of congress, be it local, regional, national, international, is useful to interrelate the mass of different studies. Another purpose is to translate into English theoretical and empirical works, written in other languages.

And let me add a final proposal: we have to increase the exchange of scholars between countries and continents, to reinforce the trends already in progress in many parts of the worlds. International sociology has diversified its tools of investigation, specialized its methods and refined its generalizations and theories. In investigating the problems of the world in which they are, sociologists utilize prevailing European and North-American intellectual traditions and resources. Today there are other possibilities, accepting new sociological issues from Africa, Asia, Australia, South America, Central America.

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