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Post-commentary. Assuming the Fact of Being South: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for a Postcolonial Social Science

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Assuming the fact of being South is difficult. Theoretical perspectives on a different way of narrating modernity and Progress

“Everyone had asked me about the South [...] Some saw it as an economic and technical problem, they talked about public works, land reclamation, necessary industrialization, “remaking Italy” [...] Others felt that the southern problem was nothing more than a particular case of capitalist oppression that the dictatorship of the proletariat would solve [...] For all, the State could have done something, something very useful, beneficial and providential [...] So they were astonished looking at me when I said that the State, just as they meant it, was instead the fundamental obstacle to doing anything. It cannot be the State, I said, that resolves the southern question, for the reason that what we call the southern problem is nothing more than the State’s problem as it takes shape.”

(Carlo Levi, Christ stopped at Eboli, 1945)

I would like to introduce this paper telling an episode. In the summer of 2015 I was in Aliano, a small village near Matera, in the south of Italy, with a group of 30 students from the University of Parma who had enrolled in a summer school focusing on ethnography that I coordinated with Silvana Kuhtz, a colleague and friend of the University of Basilicata. Aliano is a very important site of memory: it is the place where the writer and politician Carlo Levi was confined by the fascist government in 1935 and which inspired him “Christ stopped at Eboli”, a poetic and powerful account of southern Italy in those years. Although he had left soon from there, he meant to be buried there in order to express his gratefulness to the place that had revealed the South to him, that had clarified him the running sore of being relegated out of history by a central power – which was then fascist – run by a local bourgeois class that mocked that place, “as do the poor disguised as rich, with a lot of nervous tics for fear of being unmasked and excluded again”. But that place had also shown him the relentless resistance of the peasant world to the process of inferiorization. In the book, Levi describes the forms of a different knowledge, which could still cure the exclusion wound, such as the knowledge of the “sana-porcelli” (“pig healers”), half vets and half priests, and so on. So, we chose Aliano for our school of sociology of “g-localization” for the very reason that it was a place where the narration of Progress was “still-born”: we thought that this, maybe, would have allowed us to activate ideas of History and Future being alternative compared to that of industrial progress, helping us to get a better understanding of our crisis now – the one linked to the interrupted industrial ascent – and to find formulas for resistance through the understanding of those that had been implemented there for long time.

In the course of the summer school, however, we realized that all the students who enrolled came from southern Italy, and that the same was for us teachers: families of southern origins, migrant journeys, new lives in the north. This element had ended up becoming central in our speeches and in the end had even dictated the research design, that is, the choice of a more properly “autoethnographic” method than an “ethnographic” one for collecting interviews in countries (Ellis et al., 2000; Roth, 2005; Schiedi, 2011). In other words, “we wanted to say about us”, about our relationship with the object of study, a relationship that became itself a new privileged object of analysis. The people interviewed welcomed us to their homes by saying “so, you come from the North, please sit down...”, we would have liked to say “no, we don’t come from the North”, but indeed it was true, we had to admit that we felt further North compared to them, though we had to admit also that that North was disappearing, that in the streets of Parma the South was now overflowing, brought about by rejected asylum seekers (rejected by commissions) who beg for a living, but also by increasing precarious multitudes which will never enter the wage and salaried labor market, and so on. So, involved in this debate on “our intimate geopolitics” (on our positioning with respect to our norths and our souths internalized as representations that are today challenged by reality, which come back to us and ask to be unearthed), we decided to split in two the field research diary, exactly as you can do in autoethnography. On one side of the page, we wrote descriptions and words from the interviewees; on the other side of the page, we wrote the memories of our perpetual journey to the North, our feelings evoked there by the fact of being looked at as if there were a North, and so on.

To give a few examples, one the students wrote: “*Here the earth devours the earth, the country is devoured. Here escape, retreat, maceration and decay are enacted. Here to delegate is to make peace, because here we already know what a torture it is to win*” (M, 25 years). Another student wrote: “*How do we carry around the shame of being a South? How do we amend it? Pretending to be other and persevering with the idea of a landing to the North that doesn’t come true. I am well aware of how I am looked by the Parmesans. I am well aware that when I will move elsewhere that way of looking at me will not change*” (F, 23 years).

I believe that in the considerations of university students of the South who have come North to attend the University there is much of what I would like to say in this short essay. Actually, how do we carry around the shame of being a South? How do we amend that shame?

We are learning and then teaching “being North”, that is reinforcing the idea of a possible permanent expansion of ourselves and of the social contexts around us as a necessary condition to land North, a permanent expansion that is no longer sustainable. According to Carlo Levi (see the quote at the opening), we were not destined to get there anyway, to get to the eman-

icipation from poverty by merely importing the meaning and the ways of production: from the beginning of its making, the modern State, with its local leading classes full of information that came from the productive North, defined definitely the suburbs as places of “insufficiency”, by turning them into areas of predation from outside. But of course, whatever modernity has been until now, we will not go further north than that. If Parma remains the south for Copenhagen, so Copenhagen in turn - thus being the global process of increasing exclusion implemented by a neoliberalism that needs less and less workers for its finance and its value production through the network and the virtual - is destined to “become South” itself.

Unfortunately, the University and other educational institutions - while realizing that the “race” is over - cannot enact a critical discourse on Progress which became narration being dysfunctional to equity (among many: Nisbet, 1980; Latouche, 2004), they cannot stop promoting the desire to become North, of an increasingly individual becoming, of becoming well educated and therefore rich. Under these circumstances, many of our students will become impoverished even if they deny their South: there is no room for them, indeed there is no room for almost anyone in a world where work is no longer paid and the system no longer considers the opportunity to include in the agenda the issue of redistribution of the wealth produced.

The constant effort to deny the fact of being South (to come from southern Italy, which is southern Europe, which is the south of the Atlantic Pact...), that is, the pain we take in disguising ourselves, victims of the inferiorizing paradigms that have had a big impact on us, our mimicking of the always-speaking English and of the resorting to more and more numbers (just to mention, a little impressionistically, some symptom of that competition that we daily accept simply to be considered as North) in short, all our cultural, personal and collective alienation is not enough to bring us North, to enlarge success so as to encompass us, to permanently become *élite*. On the contrary, because of us the “North” (the symbolic and material place of global success) has narrowed: as we were rushing we allowed it to exclude us without complaining too much. The North has become an elusive symbolic entity, which few of us can attach to themselves. In the most recent global analyses we now identify it with China of the future, talking about emerging Chinese capitalism, sometimes praising the spread of Chinese labour work as a demonstration of the emancipation function of capitalism (work to be able to consume freely) but neglecting the fact that there are created new vast peripheries of misery where there are never seen differences (the very rich close to the very poor) in the past unthinkable. In short, the social spaces where you feel “still too south” spread around the globe are becoming larger, the spaces in which that feeling of inferiority spreads that we in southern Europe and southern Italy still feel, that is attached to us, and which we ourselves while teaching re-

produce in the heart of every school pupils or university students when we indicate as the goal of self-perfected the similarity to those who succeed because they are rich, to those who are North.

The point then, as some important theorists say, is to subtract the production of knowledge from the inferiorization chain perpetuated in the name of a Development that nevertheless ends up rejecting the human (Chakrabarty, 2007; Santos, 2007; Ceccim & Merhy, 2010; among many). Do not reiterate this “race to the North” in the minds and lives of young people whom we train, with whom we do research, to whom we teach. In this respect, it is central to restart from our being South, from our experience of tiredness, fatigue, of our psycho-physical rejection of further social acceleration, but also from our good existence as South (women, peasants, countryside, precarious...) without feeling inferior (non-subjects, non-citizens, not-employed), and to give consideration to those critical analyses that allow us to emancipate ourselves from the idea of being insufficient, ourselves, going back to talk again about overall distortions of the system.

In this perspective, investigating the Souths as if they were other than us does not make sense anymore, neither sociologically (as a matter of fact, the neoliberal system relentlessly expands “waste lives” useless to extract value, and we are now part of it), nor pedagogically (as a matter of fact, you cannot empower people if it is only them who suffer, and so if it is them who need to change, to fill the gap, and so you indeed annihilate them, as it is well explained in the work of Paulo Freire, 1970). Then the idea is not so much to adopt the approach - widespread even in critical circles - of “*giving voice to the oppressed to empower them*”, but rather “*to give voice to our being simultaneously South to empower ourselves together*.” In short, there is a different way of telling modernity and of assuming the being South not as a metaphor for guilt but rather as a metaphor for a social suffering caused by identifiable historical phenomena, primarily colonialism, which have generated persistent forms of existence featuring common traits, to be observed and observed and legitimize. As Santos says, “the South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering. It is, therefore, an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the geographic” (Santos, 2014).

Assuming the fact of being South is possible. Empirical perspectives on knowledge production

In a monographic issue of the journal QTS, Monica Massari and I defined the set of these research positions as “*emancipatory social sciences*” by assuming the proposal of a sociological study on the inequality that can take on a

new form by creating new alliances among different “being Souths”, among different forms of precariousness (Massari & Pellegrino, 2019). “Emancipatory social science”, as stated by Erik Olin Wright (2010), alludes to processes of scientific production of knowledge on social relationships that involve both a project and an emancipation process. The project the author refers to is that of a systematic knowledge focusing on different movements of subtraction from being exploited and analyzing the “possibility” of redistribution and the exit from poverty in the future, looking for elements shared by individual and collective forms of resistance that are nowadays different and fragmented. Social research can accompany them in their becoming debate, in mutually seeing each other, in entering together - as allies - into the institutional space in order to be listened to.

Many other authors today identify in the forms of resistance to the system - resistance to the systematic exclusion that Development generates - their privileged subject of study by looking for common elements in many parts of the world: cooperative forms, the common good, self-organization indicate the emergence of a growing dis-adaptation to competition. To be properly called “emancipatory” this type of research, not only devotes itself to the study of these processes of emancipation, but, as we said, it does so by creating alliance between different conditions of subjugation, promoting a different way of public speaking during the same research path, since the experience of mutual listening gives greater awareness of one’s own possibilities, mutual listening gives a form of increased social recognition that powers the advocacy of the subjects.

I will try to sketch some working paths on how to do research and produce knowledge to implement this perspective consistently, ie I will bring some examples on some methodological elements belonging to this research approach.

In order to succeed in some way in the intellectual attempt we are talking about, and therefore empirically define the ways of operating of an “emancipatory social science” as described, there are some basic elements, described in the issue 1\2019 of QTS, which I have also dealt with in more detail in other works (Pellegrino, 2009; 2015), which I would like to exemplify now starting from small basic functions in the production of academic knowledge, micro-devices to be adopted to try to achieve the goals described through consistency between the “how” to research (investigate through the emancipating experience of listening to each other) and “what” we are researching (the processes of emancipation precisely).

Find below some examples.

It is of course impossible to do “emancipatory social science” without listening to what other Souths see of us, since the deep links of “being South” - the fact that we are involved in the production of inequalities of this sys-

tem as well as oppressors and as oppressed, that we are someone's south and someone else's north at the same time - are crystal clear to us when we listen to what others say about us, the people we meet, for example, newly arrived migrants (Pellegrino, 2015; 2016). We have deeply reflected on specific research approaches that focus on "reciprocity" as a technique of mutual description: I listen to you and give you back what I hear, you look at me while I am working on my research and give me back what you see of me. A clarifying example. For two years I have carried out a course on sociology of globalization where I teach together with refugees, asylum seekers, migrant women of local associations. In fact, our preparatory work is great: the co-design of the contents of the course, centered on the elements of the global social change of which they are witnesses, is for me a subject of research. Before the lessons we try to focus on what they think Europe "does not understand", removes, can hardly listen to. So we select the themes that change year by year. The migrant women from the "Sguardi Incrociati" group, which is part of the Intercultural Center of Parma, - coming from many different countries - prepare the lessons on sociology of globalization by writing together their autobiographical memoirs on the various themes and mutually reading them, looking for both differences and continuity among their biographies. They then compose a collective text where one comments on the life of the other: and this "collective storytelling" is the text they use to start each lesson; they stage it during university lectures to engage students in thinking about globalization and the hybrid cultures of the contemporary world. In this "reciprocity" of stories (each of them tells about herself and then thinks about the other, including the researcher) then staged for an audience (students) in the public space (the university classrooms) there is a production of knowledge that shows the tensions, fears, sufferings of the female subject in all cultures (and not only in those of the "South of others"), without producing abstract and fixed representations of cultures.

There are many other developments in these research approaches centered on some "reciprocity": participatory research, which shares the research design as well as the public circulation of results (among many, Mac Taggart, 1997); art-based research, in which researcher, artists, and the public involved deconstruct their initial approaches to the issue through images and artistic productions (Pellegrino, 2019; Iannicciello & Quadraro, 2019); the self-ethnographic research I have already mentioned, and so on. These forms of research methodology are important work paths.

I also believe that it is difficult to do "emancipatory social science" taking for granted the vehicular language, adopting for example the colonial language. In Latin America there is a very wide-ranging debate about a post-colonial approach to translation within the social sciences. It seems difficult to produce a shared critical knowledge on the future global order without

problematizing the mechanical use of English in social research. I am well aware that it is a pragmatic choice to understand each other. But I think that taking such choice without wondering about it is an act of instrumental submission with a view to gaining more visibility. And this is exactly the issue of subalternity: to give in to gain some visibility that is never enough but rather reiterates exclusion. Of course, the problem of a common and vehicular language remains. The pedagogical friends I meet in Porto Alegre and that taught me the “socially relevant universities” thought inspired by Freirian thought (Ricardo Burg Ceccim and Emerson Merhy already mentioned, among others) for example use to ask the participants in the seminars which is their favorite vehicular language, so as to choose the most widespread ones and organize listening and debate in small groups where an informal translator is always present. Or in their magazines they always publish each essay in two languages. In this way no one feels unconfident in the dominant language, because no language is dominant, empirically.

I need to make these examples to state that very concrete methodological attention is at the heart of the theoretical approach. I have talked about the main focus now is not only telling the topics of inequality, but rather, in doing research, trying to create a new encounter and new listening between social groups in a position of sub-alternity, involving the social actors involved in the production of knowledge (in public speaking, in taking care of the products of research together). The others talk in our researching activities, and they talk about us in our research. Research is also an opportunity for “our South” (not only for the “other Souths”) to redefine itself, to understand itself, to escape its own mute mortification, therefore reprocessing more deeply our experience of aching modernity.

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