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Sociological Knowledge and Labor Market: The Dilemma of Professions

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Sociological Knowledge and Labor Market

Paolo Diana *

[Review of the book: *Fare i sociologi. Una professione plurale tra ricerca e operatività*, by Carla Facchini. Il Mulino, 2015. ISBN: 9788815254436]

Self-reflection is one of the tasks and goals of the social sciences and, without any doubt, the book edited by Carla Facchini is an admirable case of self-reflection. This work is also appropriate considering the sudden transformation processes that are going through humanities and social sciences, and especially characterizing the sociological knowledge.

The innovation path of the academic teaching and the growing demand for specializations, together with the deep crisis of the intellectual labor market, have produced, especially in the last twenty years, a large gap that divides the recent social and economic changes from the tasks and goals that in the past have characterized the academic training in social sciences area.

The structure of this book shows how these issues significantly arise for the sociology of the new millennium, where the identification of new professionals and new skills still remains fuzzy and indeterminate, despite the demand for innovation among occupational profiles.

The general impression is that some of the innovative solutions offered for the training of the sociological knowledge are designed and implemented more for the enrichment of knowledge, language or rhetorical discourse than for a defined and coordinated planning needed to support work opportunities after graduation.

The book highlights a disconnection between the world of jobs and that of academic training. It is from this separation that the restructuring of contents and methods of sociological training programs needs to start.

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There are many factors that contribute to the enhancement of these critical aspects. Certainly also the University system has its responsibility remaining unbalanced and not functional in the development of sociological knowledge. The problem will not be solved if resources, competences and aims of universities remain self-referential and therefore dissociated from the external logic and their socio-economic contexts. This aspect also refers to the relationship that links, in an almost unbreakable way, the issue of the job placement of the sociologist and the legitimation of the sociology as an academic field.

Starting from these delicate problems, this book has led me to re-read some interesting reflections developed in some works of two important scholars such as C. Wright Mills and Göran Therborn, concerning the institutionalization and the educational process for social sciences in the American university. These readings suggest that the themes discussed in the book of Facchini have ancient origins, also developed by our “founding fathers”.

C. Wright Mills in “The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists”, published in 1943, criticizes the approach of the American sociology during the period of its academic institutionalization - between the end of XIX century and the first ten years of the XX century – describing and investigating the crisis of the community structures that dominated the country in that period (Rauty, 2001).

The most significant criticism of the method and the contents expressed by the American Sociology, not only as academic field, mainly concerns the myopia with which this discipline has looked at the structural features of society, avoiding any consideration of the overall social structure. Starting from these considerations developed about seventy years ago, it is necessary to rethink all the educational patterns implemented in Italy in recent years, mainly characterized by a technical approach to solve the problems in the field of security and social control.

The risk to realize in social sciences a so limited professional profile in its critical reflection capacity is to produce graduates who are close to what Wright Mills defined “social pathologists”. According to the “social pathologists” theory, society is articulated along an incremental path of evolution from one stage to another, in which change has its foundation in continuity and the real problem is to save community values, considered as the only concrete perspective for the individual (Rauty, 2001).

The lack of a critical and comprehensive analysis of the social structure leads to lose the basic reference points, such as, for example, the role played by the historical, cultural and economic dynamics in social action; this attitude leaves the sociologist to the status quo, making him as incomplete descriptor of social dynamics or mere “operator”; moreover, this acritical approach makes the sociology as residual and normative discipline compared to the categories of control, security and social change.

This happened, for example, in the early 1930s, when there was a “police administration” class at the University of Chicago.

Flexner's self-critical study (1930) at the Universities of Columbia, Chicago and Wisconsin - academic institutions that have played a key role in the early development of American sociology – highlights how the presence of this class together with other classes such as "marketing methods", "commercial correspondence", "sales administration", "retail advertising" and "national advertising campaigns" can be considered a compulsory moment for the recognition of sociology to the status of academic discipline.

Another interesting investigation was carried out in 1901 and 1902 by an association of sociology graduates at the University of Chicago through a comparison of the academic programs in different universities. The findings of this research indicated that the sociological discipline in the United States was generally inspired by the Spencer's postulates, the need for "social improvement" as well as the theoretical approaches of German universities. In particular, many of the courses concerned disciplines like: “sphere of state activity”, “the state and industry”, “socialism”, “sociology of delinquent classes”, “criminology”, “social reform”, “practical sociology”, “social problems” (Tolman, 1902).

In the next years, other discussions on the theme of the sociological teaching and on the construction of a "professional" graduate with technical characteristics emerged. In particular, George Vincent, during the early twentieth century, quoted the strict intellectual position expressed by the Chicago Sociology Department: «To the newspapers the sociologist is the man who deals with the problems of dependence, vice, and crime. Settlement residents, probation officers, investigators of housing conditions, students of penology, are all known to the reporter as sociological workers» (1906, 9).

In our country, the same debate about the legitimacy of sociology stands some 50 years later, during a significant moment: the establishment in 1962

of the Istituto Superiore di Scienze Sociali of Trento. In those years, the Sociology was considered a new discipline, capable of providing appropriate tools for understanding, organizing and managing a rapidly changing society, but still looking for an academic legitimacy. In this regard, in 1965, the first two issues of *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* journal hosted the presentation of the distribution of the sociology teaching courses in Italian universities. In the early 1970s, the degree programs in sociology at Rome and Urbino Universities were established, followed, few years later, by those at universities of Naples and Salerno.

Once the legitimacy and institutional recognition have been achieved, a few years later, a phase of reflection on the professional paths of the first sociology graduates started. These aspects are developed by the works of G. Statera (1980) and Statera and Agnoli (1985), which open up to a series of studies characterized by experiences and analysis of different university contexts (e.g. see: Pacifico, 1996; Fasanella, 2007).

An important aspect emerged from the early research (Statera, 1980) and from this, in my opinion, it is necessary to restart: the illegitimate assumption of the perfect assimilation between the figure of the sociologist and the graduate in sociology. As Statera points out, this connection can be explained by the lack of a professional tradition of the discipline in Italian culture and the vagueness and indeterminacy with characterize the profession.

The book edited by Facchini puts this theme at the center of the debate, considering the changes of Italian university such as the "3 + 2" University reform in the 2001/02 academic year. More specifically, the issue of sociological professions in the new millennium was also discussed few years before the publication of the Facchini's book during important conferences such as "Sociologia, professioni e mondo del lavoro" (October 2012, in Trento), "La qualità del sapere sociologico" (October 2013, in Florence). Results and presentations of these conferences are synthesized in the book "Sociologia, professioni e mondo del lavoro", edited in 2015 by A. Perino and L. Savonardo.

As stated at the beginning of this review, the book of Facchini starting from the deep changes of the recent years – both of the academic system and the job sphere – analyzes the effects of these transformations. One of the main contribution of this book is the distinction between the conditions affecting the relationship university-work system and the discussion about the disciplines and macro domains in sociology.

In order to identify career paths, type and sectors of occupation of sociological post-graduates (bachelor degree, 3 years), a very large population of post-graduates is considered (9.000 post-graduates who have achieved their degree from 2004/5 to 2009/10). Data were collected from all the eighteen Italian sociology first level universities and integrated with CAWI interview to a sample of post-graduates to collect further information (with a approximate response rate of 40%, for a total of about 3800 individuals).

The analysis is more detailed than the AlmaLaurea - an inter-university consortium born in 1994 that carries out surveys and research on the training and employment paths of Italian students and graduates (www.alma laurea.it/en) - research with regard, for example, to the employment conditions of post-graduates and the relationship between the skills acquired during the educational path and those required by the working context. The large empirical basis is the starting point to reflect on the characteristics of first level sociology degree, its students and graduates, the job opportunities and the different types of skills that the sociologist has to acquire. This configuration is placed in a difficult context, i.e. a country where the share of graduates between 30 and 34 years old (22.4%) continues to be fifteen points below the European average.

More specifically, the book is structured in ten chapters. In the first one (by A. Decataldo and C. Facchini), the phases of Italian academic reform are explored and the precarious situation of Italian graduate students (that are decreasing, instable, subjected to “overeducation”, with skills that are more qualified than those required by the jobs they cover) is investigated, with a special focus on the impact of this situation on sociological training. It follows in chapter two the presentation of the research and its methodology (by A. Decataldo).

The following two chapters deal with the analysis of the main features of the post-graduate students (chapter 3 by M. Triventi) and the main reasons that determine their choice (chapter 4 by G. Ricotta). These elements allow to understand the current career status taking into account also individual factors and choices, characteristics of the academic planning and labour market conditions. Different career paths can be also contextually explained: the success of a sociological program was/has been easier in an area such as the so-called industrial triangle where the demand for social graduates is higher (Martinotti & Moscati, 1982) than in an area

such as the south of Italy where the economic and employment problems cause a disadvantage for social graduates.

In other words, the success of academic programs is dependent on social, economic and cultural contexts.

From the chapter five onwards, the reader comes to the core of the analysis where the issues of job opportunities of first level sociology degree are addressed through the analysis of the entry into the labor market (chapter 5 by A. Decataldo), the career path and instability by economic sectors and socio-economic local contexts (chapter 6 by G. Argentin and G. Fullin), the heterogeneity of salaries and the diffusion of low salaries among sociologists due to the low request of qualified sociological profiles (chapter 7 by G. Argentin, G. Assirelli and O. Giancola), the lack of a distinguishable sociological profile (chapter 8 by R. Carriero and M. Filandri), the mismatch between the competence acquired during the education path and those required in the labor market (chapter 9 written by C. Facchini and P. Zurla). The last chapter (by C. Facchini and G. Ricotta) presents the evaluation made by respondents on their academic program, providing interesting ideas and insights.

Some of the results seem to be indicative of the occupational conditions of sociological graduates: after 8 years from their degree, about 40% of the graduates show temporary or unstable occupations (non-standard employment). Only a minority of the sample hold positions strictly related to the sociological profession. Moreover, a wide heterogeneity in salary and occupational tasks and content emerge.

The sections of the research related to occupational competencies highlight the presence of different professional profiles. These competences cover three areas: social research methods capabilities; organizational and problem-solving capabilities; administrative, secretarial and management capabilities which do not require specific sociological skills. The findings on the self-assessment of post-graduates of their academic course also provide a significant starting point for the design of a learning process, able to deal with the new challenges of the labor market.

The research has the value of bringing out many problematic issues on which it is necessary to open a new debate within the community of sociologists: the need to rethink the entire structure of bachelor and master degrees, the delicate relationship between practical and theoretical knowledge especially in terms of professionalization of postgraduates and the possible strategies to expand the recognition of the sociological profile

not only among students, but also in the job market and in the public discourse.

Moreover, the book contributes to clarify the sociological skills among all those who could be interested in this professional path. With the implementation of specific research, such as the survey presented in this book, our discipline can achieve a deeper and reflexivity oriented knowledge of its object, in the direction of a legitimacy growth. In order to provide a wider and comprehensive knowledge of the sociological profession, it would be useful to enlarge the analysis also to master graduates.

The richness of the analysis also fosters the development of forms of collaboration and coordination among Departments and graduate programs contributing, in this way, to address the challenges that the discipline – suitable for interpreting phenomena of uncertainty and innovation - is now, more than ever, called to answer.

On these issues, the debate within the sociological departments is still open and must be developed to answer set of needs expressed by the different stakeholders (e.g. public administrations, social services, private and public companies, etc.). This is the direction to re-configure and re-define the professional profile of graduates in sociology, placing them in relation to the institutional, social and cultural networks that are present in different academic contexts.

These factors call the academic deans to a more careful and articulated reflection on the importance of the role that institutional and economic actors play in this moment of transition, in order to identify the tasks, specific profiles and possible job placements of the sociology graduates.

Indeed, the relationship between what is produced and the place where it is produced is never contingent (Therborn, 1976). This applies to all disciplines but it strongly applies to sociology which by definition analyses the social world. As recalled by A. Bruschi (2015), this process is not easy to implement, due to the complexity of legislative framework of the Italian university system, as well as the lack of the financial resources and the blocked turnover of the teaching and research staff.

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