

THE SOCIOLOGICAL VALUE OF LIFE STORIES

Enrique Cambón*

I have been asked to introduce the various experiences that will be narrated during our conference from a sociological perspective. I will do so, briefly, in three parts in which I will:

1. explain **why we have allotted considerable time** to the empirical aspect;
2. describe **some of the incentives** that the facts discussed here can offer to sociologists and experts in the field of social assistance and social policy;
3. offer **some elements or clarifications** towards a better understanding and interpretation of what we will hear.

1. Relationship between theory and practice

In all branches of human knowledge, theory and experimentation go inseparably hand in hand.

It would be easy to show how, throughout history, while ideas, intuitions and working hypotheses have often opened up new roads to humanity, many times life itself has frequently preceded, enlightened, and even sparked and enhanced the understanding of reality and science. It is the so-called "hermeneutical circle" which, in the understanding and transformation of reality, combines *eidos* and *praxis*, theory and practice, scientific hypothesis and experimental verification, in a mutual enrichment.

All human history is a succession not only of events and currents of thought, but also of *mind-frames and sensitiveness* of various eras that have attracted new concepts and legitimate theories. It could not be otherwise, since – as the sociologist M. De Certeau keenly pointed out – every experience, even the ones we are least aware of, holds an idea which is neglected.

The various specializations of sociology offer a privileged opportunity – and a passionate one for me – to demonstrate and study their reciprocal influence or interaction (sociological studies on the family, on power, knowledge, culture, to mention only a few that are directly involved).

Pierre Bourdieu used to repeat that we often produce false opposites in sociology.¹ I believe that one of these unreal opposites concerns precisely the topic we are discussing here: the sociological relationship between theory and practice. In our case this particularly refers to the importance of "real life stories"²

Recently, Zygmunt Bauman gave a long interview during which he summed up his thought and position. He made two statements which I would like to examine more closely because I think they are co-related and very important.

* Instructor at the Pontifical faculty "Teresianum" in Rome; editor-in-chief of "Gen's" magazine.

The first statement indicated “that if the sociological calling is in some way useful to humankind, it is so in the service it offers human beings in their daily struggle to understand, to give meaning to their lives.”³

In the second statement, he said: “Sociology draws nourishment from its continuous dialogue with human experience.”⁴

This is exactly what we intend to do in presenting these life stories.

It is not a matter of offering a “spiritual” witness, although obviously this is not to be excluded. The goal we have set is to offer to sociological analysis *an experience which on one hand is inspired by a specific understanding of human relations, and on the other, is a precious opportunity for verifying the feasibility and universality of the criteria that imbues these relationships.*

2. Open queries

Given this premise, the social experiences we will listen to can be an inducement and may raise many questions from a sociological viewpoint. I will just give a few examples.

2.1 These experiences help us to see why it is so important to focus on a sociological analysis, as we are doing in this conference, precisely on human bonds. In fact, they reveal to what extent **the type and style of relationships** established on all levels is central and decisive to the social sciences for understanding the reality (on the following levels: interpersonal, intercultural, interreligious, political, economic, among ethnic groups, sectors or social structures, peoples, states).

As Alain Touraine has underlined on several occasions, it is not enough to speak of a civilization. We need to define what we mean by this concept, to clearly describe the characteristics that would enable us to recognise as “civil” a behaviour or even a society.⁵ Therefore, in listening to the experiences we will present, a question spontaneously arises: **which model of civilization are these experiences stemming from?**

Edgar Morin was among the sociologists who with great clarity and courage sensed the danger of a “western socio-centrism.” He did so above all in reference to the present-day phenomenon of globalisation (which he likes to call “planetisation,” world-society, homeland-earth, acknowledging in all human beings our common destiny as “earthlings”, as “terrestrial citizens”).

In his opinion – as confirmed by several other authors – what globalisation actually tries to do is to “westernise” the world, **confusing western civilization with “the” civilization.** Without realising – he affirms – that the western model has not eliminated myths. Rather, it has created new ones: science, rationality identified with the western way of reasoning, identifying progress with a weak and unilateral concept of development, one which over emphasises shrewd calculation, technology, trade, profit maximization: an economic-technological development that produces moral and psychological underdevelopment, exaggerated individualism and the loss of a sense of solidarity.

“Although,” he concludes, “technological-scientific, medical and social progress is admirable (and the poor must not be deprived of these), we must not underestimate the potentially dreadful, destructive and manipulative power of science and technology....

The western model of development is not sufficiently aware of the fact that its wellbeing generates unhealthy conditions; its individualism includes a good dosage of egocentrism and loneliness; its urbanistic goals create stress as well as noise and environmental pollution; and the rage of its power could lead to nuclear death A change of direction is needed.”⁶

Obviously, we could also list positive aspects and values that are transmitted by western culture. However, we quoted this text with all its provocative force because this problem clearly highlights *a first important aspect of the experiences we will present*: that is, the fact that **they express a noteworthy diversity of cultures, geographic areas, socio-economic realities and spaces of human-experience.**

2.2 There is a second aspect which I feel is worthy of special mention. We recognize the fact that the social phenomena most fraught with consequences for humanity are not the changes “**in the**” world, but the changes “**of**” the world, of which these smaller changes are only symptoms.⁷ Therefore, we can legitimately ask: could the type of experiences that will be presented be a sign that **a process of the change of an era has begun?** A change which will bring a new awareness of the human condition that unveils the centrality of dialogue and harmonious common living among the different components of society, as never before?

The question could be formulated in another way. Much has been written, in classical texts on sociology and in more recent ones, which clarify that the profession of the sociologist is not to be confused with that of a fortune-teller or prophet. Nevertheless, in these testimonies we will be listening to, and which are increasingly repeating themselves throughout the world, it is easy for experienced sociologists *to identify at its inception something that will later become a wide-ranging social phenomenon.* Could they not signify that humanity is positioning itself – in spite of the inevitable slowdowns, regressions and huge tragedies we are all familiar with – to make an evolutionary and cultural leap?

Can we not see, in the experiences that will follow, that reciprocal relationships which are more harmonious, based on freedom, equality, justice and solidarity - in a word, on brotherhood - **are as necessary to human beings and society as oxygen is to the lungs?**

If, as Bauman also affirmed, sociology “must necessarily focus its attention on the transformation of the human condition,”⁸ it would be possible to see, exclusively from the perspective of sociological analysis and observation, a paradigm (of the person, of society and civilization) is coming to life on our planet which expresses a more unitary and integral vision of the human being. Would this paradigm respond in greater measure to the demands of a good part of humanity today?

I cannot speak about this at length, but the same type of question can be formulated from another perspective. Sociological research demonstrates – as Stefano Zamagni, a prestigious economist, indicated in a recent conference – that the great contradiction resulting from the prevailing model of development in the world is the following: never as in recent decades has social inequality been so evident, while global wealth has continually increased at an unheard-of pace.

At the same time, the increased wellbeing of a privileged minority is not at all accompanied by an increase in overall happiness⁹. Are these not signs, also to a sociological observation, of the outdated, inadequate and inhuman parameters which often determine economic, political and cultural relationships among individuals, States and multinational institutions?

2.3 Finally, I will very concisely deal with a third obvious question that can arise from listening to the experiences we are introducing.

We cannot fool ourselves, we all know that one can end up being extremely pessimistic when we observe that humanity appears to be still immature, unprepared and far from taking steps of the kind exposed here on a wide-ranging scale, on a global and structural level. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the meaning of the experiences that are being lived, of which a small sample will be presented to us during these days.

Above all, which **social behaviour, actions and mediations** are capable of influencing public opinion, creating new awareness, improving the future of minorities today making them the majority of tomorrow? Has this not occurred in many other moments of history, when behaviours that seemed utopian become the common mentality?, The *sociology of social changes* could for example considerably assist us in our search for the answers to these questions. Perhaps, for those who wish, this could be one of the tasks that we take on from this conference: to work towards a collaboration on the level of reflection and research.

3. A Trinitarian key to understanding

So far we have mentioned the reason for the importance of the empirical dimension of our work, and we identified three important aspects of the life stories that will be presented: the wide range of backgrounds (social, cultural, geographic, and so forth), their human and social significance, and some future perspectives.

Before concluding, I felt it was imperative to highlight a fundamental aspect that will provide us with the key to understand better what will be presented.

When these experiences focus our attention on human relations, what is exactly meant by the term “brotherly”? I do not want to enter into explicit definitions, but rather to explain briefly a vital dynamic process.

I have to make a brief reference to the heart of Christian faith, not of course from a theological, but a social and sociological view, to arrive at the perspective which interests us most in our Congress.

The Christian faith in a God who is Love implies that he is “relationship in himself” (there cannot be love without a relationship). Therefore, from the early days of Christianity it was possible to affirm that God “is one but he is not alone,” because his intimate life is a total and reciprocal gift among “Three real Persons who are One” (C. Lubich), where each one is himself in the other and through the other.

But what we want to bring into evidence here – our conference is sociological not theological – is that this statement of faith, today is increasingly perceived not only as a

religious reality, but also as an archetype symbol¹⁰, an exemplary “model”¹¹, a paradigm¹² for all realms of human existence.¹³ This conviction or intuition is expressed by all kinds of experts, believers and non-believers, ranging from the fathers of Federalist thought to well-known exponents of psychology, contemporary pedagogy, scientists, physicists and biologists, theorists and professions in the fields of economics, politics and sociology.¹⁴

What are these “*Trinitarian*” characteristics that evoke abundant elements for thought and practice? Chiara Lubich mentioned them in her opening message to this Congress. Vera Araújo will offer us some in-depth reflections in this regard, but because her paper will be given after the experiences are presented, I think it would be helpful to mention some of these “*Trinitarian* elements”.

Let us take, for example, the fact that the total gift of self can be considered as the fundamental “law” of human existence. If this gift is given wholeheartedly, the individual grows both personally and socially. It is a giving which finds fulfillment in reciprocity, a reciprocal giving capable of reaching the deepest unity, fully respecting and promoting the others’ unique gifts. It is a holistic vision that takes into consideration the whole, precisely because everything is in relationship with everything, from the micro to the macro in the universe, from the individual to society. There is inter-relationship and indwelling, which also has typically “*Trinitarian*” characteristics. For example, the result of the combination of several elements is superior and different from the sum of its parts; in some way the whole can already be present in each of the parts.

These few words undoubtedly require further explanation, but they simply want to highlight the wealth of meaning contained in the experiences we will hear. When the speakers talk of a certain way of listening, of an attitude of acceptance and dialogue, of deep and free attention for others, of identity or empathy with regard to the situation of others, of that mutual “losing oneself” in the other which makes each one more fully himself or herself. The experiences speak not of imposing, but of offering convictions, of warmth, friendliness and sharing which enlightens the intellect and facilitates even the systematic search for truth. They speak of a kind of brotherly love which produces greater fulfillment and happiness. Well, I must point out that when we speak of this type of behaviour, we are not speaking of simply “good”, edifying experiences, but of a behaviour which bears a profound and stimulating intellectual and social insight, due precisely to that “*Trinitarian key*” which is the soul of all such relationships.

One day a great thinker, Emmanuel Lévinas, made the following surprising statement: “It takes the courage of a Samurai to describe ordinary, everyday life.” If those who during these days will speak of life experiences have found the courage to do so, it is because they are convinced that their experiences are the fruit of a particular vision of reality. Besides deserving the interest of sociology, these experiences contain a potential and positive factor which some authors have called “revolutionary”, in the sense that they can offer hope to humanity for a different kind of world, a more civilized world because it is more humane.

It is an undeniable fact that the *quality and style of relationships* established in all sectors of life radically mark each culture. Therefore, I would like to conclude by quoting one of the many definitions of culture,¹⁵ one that is in harmony with our reflections during this conference and on that “Trinitarian style” we mentioned. This was said by a political analyst and an expert in social doctrine, and can be applied not only to individuals but also to entire nations: “Culture is a process of self-transformation through relationships, contacts and encounters.”¹⁶ It is in this light that I feel the following accounts of social living are culturally very significant.

NOTES

1. See the collection of his conferences and interviews published with the title *Choses dites*, Les Éditions du Minuit, Parigi 1987, the first answer of the chapter which is entitled “*Punti di riferimento*”.
2. These precise topics have been dealt with a number of times, for example by F. Ferrarotti: for a summary of his thought one can see *Le storie di vita come metodo*, in *Le storie di vita come metodo*, in *L'ultima lezione. Critica della sociologia contemporanea*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1999, pp. 63-101 (where one finds reference also to his former works where he deals with this theme more extensively). For an autobiographic approach see L. Porta *Autobiografie a scuola. Un metodo maieutico*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2004 (note the aspects of sociological importance of this methodology in the writing of R. Cipriani, pp. 175-185, with bibliog.) on sociology of everyday life one can see the “classic” text of A.W. Gouldner, *La sociologia e la vita quotidiana*, Armando, Roma 2002 (with an introduction by R. Rauty); for an overview of the different meanings of the expression “everyday life” in sociology see M. Ghisleni, “*Vita quotidiana*”, in A Melucci *Parole chiave. Per un nuovo lessico delle scienze sociali*, Carocci, roma 2003, pp. 225-232; see also P Jedlowski – C Leccardi, *Sociologia della vita quotidiana*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2003; P. Jedlowski, *fogli nella valigia. Sociolgia, cultura, vita quotidiana*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2003.
3. Z. Barman, *La sociologia di fronte ad una nuova condizione umana*, in “*Studi di Sociologia*” 4 (2002), p. 346.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
5. A number of his writings can be quoted in which reference has been made to this topic, but we can cite one for all, in Italian, expressed during a conference in the Third University of Rome, published in part with the title *Il trionfo dell'individuo. I valori nell'età dei consumi*, in “*La Repubblica*” (17 gennaio 2004), pp. 42-43; much more detailed and explicit is the book published by the same author when interviewed by F Khosrokhavar, *La ricerca di se'. Dialogo sul soggetto*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2003.
6. See a summary of his thought in this regard given in a conference and the discussion that followed, published in: J. Baudrillard – E. Morin, *La violence du monde*, Ed. Du Félin – Institut du Monde Arabe, 2003.
7. *Il mondo che cambia* is the title of a book by Anthony Giddens, Il Mulino, Bologna 2000.
8. Z. Barman, *cit.*, p. 360.
9. See S Zamagni, *Beni, ben-essere e scienza economica. Nuovi approcci ad un tema antico*, in “*Nuova Umanità*”, XXVI (2004/6) n.156, pp 931-946, where he analyses two recent works: L. Bruni, *L'economia, la felicità e gli altri*.

- Un'indagine su beni e benessere*, Citta' Nuova, Rome 2004; L. Bruni – P. Porta (edd), *Felicità ed economia. Quando il benessere è ben vivere*, Guerini, Milano 2004.
10. See G.P. Di Nicola, Per un'ecologia della società'. Problemi di sociologia, Ed Doniane, Rome 1994, pp 264-275. "God may seem as an hypostasis of all that is social (but also, as Kingsley Davis, the symbol of a communitarian human world which is unseen)" (p.265)
 11. "A model is a formal interpretation and/or description, usually similar (but at times also metaphoric or metonymic) of one thing through another for heuristic, explicative or verifying aims" (W Outwaite, T. Bottomore, E. Gellner, R. Nisbet, A. Touraine, [edd.] *Dizionario delle scienze sociali*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1997, p.436).
 12. A general definition of paradigm can be that coined by T.S. Kuhn: "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community" (*La struttura delle rivoluzioni scientifiche*, Einaudi, Torino 1995, p.212)
 13. For a broader and more detailed description allow me to refer to my publication entitled *Trinità modello sociale*, Città Nuova, Roma 2005.
 14. The importance of social relationships based in some way on a "Trinitarian action" is expressed by Christian sociologists, eg. P. Donati in his many works or T. Sorgi, *Costruire il sociale. La persona e i suoi "piccolo mondi"*, Citta' Nuova, Roma 1991, as well as sociologists who have no specific religious belief, like E. Morin: see *Il metodo 5. L'identità umana*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2002; or his previous work *Introduzione al pensiero complesso*, Sperling e Kupfer, Milano 1990. We would like to point out not so much that he repeatedly uses the word "trinity" but the reference to the "Trinitarian" type of dynamics, which we will mention afterwards. He grasps this and describes its various levels of reality, using some of the most varied and updated scientific disciplines.
 15. The classic text of C. Kluckhohn – A. L. Kroeber, *Il concetto di cultura*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1982, includes hundreds.
 16. J. Y. Calvez, *La creación de una nueva dirigencia y una nueva cultura política*, in "Foro Ecuménico Social" 1 (2004), p. 25.