

Social Research between the Use and Abuse of Reason

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Bio-sketch: Dario Antiseri is Emeritus Professor at Luiss Guido Carli University in Italy. As an epistemologist and social philosopher, he is well-known for his work on Karl Popper and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and his idea that fallibilism and hermeneutics refer, not to two different methods but to the same one. His books on the history of philosophy and the philosophy of social science have been translated in several foreign languages. In February of 2002, along with Giovanni Reale, professor Antiseri received an honorary doctorate from Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Abstract: This brief article discusses the criticism that one of the most distinguished and eminent Italian sociologists, namely Professor Luciano Pellicani, has leveled at methodological individualism. Following Durkheim, Pellicani defended the idea that culture is a holistic entity and must be regarded as an impersonal power that legislates, commands and punishes. The article argues that Pellicani falls into the trap of the realistic fallacy (that hypostasizes mental constructs) of methodological collectivism and that—contrary to what Pellicani claims—cultural constraints are easily and tranquilly explicable in terms of methodological individualism.

Keywords: Methodological individualism, Luciano Pellicani, situational logic, Max Weber, Ludwig von Mises

In order to understand the “object” and “duties” of the social sciences it is essential to survey the “nature” of collective concepts such as “state”, “party”, “class”, “nation”, “people”, “union”, “country”, “government”, “electorate”, and so on. There are two traditions concerning the issue under consideration: the *collectivist* (Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, Marx, neo-Marxists, structuralists, etc.) and the *individualistic* (the Scottish School, Weber, Simmel, Menger, Mises, Hayek, Popper, Boudon, etc.) There are three issues at stake: an *ontological* problem; a *methodological* problem and a *political* problem. The ontological problem: what corresponds in reality to the collective terms? For *collectivists*, the collective terms correspond to substantial entities that shape, standardize, establish individuals; for *individualists*, individuals are the only things that exist, think and act. The methodological problem: what “objects” must the social researcher take into account, where must he begin his investigation?

For the *collectivist*, research must consider those laws that create and produce the change of collective entities (states, nations, parties and so on); for the *individualist* the starting point of social research is human actions, whose interrelations give rise to events and social institutions, to deliberate consequences and unintended outcomes. The political problem: is the individual in function of the collective, for example of the state or party; or is the collective in function of the individuals? For the *collectivist* the first alternative applies; for the *individualist* the second.

In my view, there are the best reasons to consider the analysis of the unintended consequences of intentional human actions the specific task (Hayek would say: exclusive) of the social sciences. Human action has *motivations* and *consequences*: the motivations are the subject of the psychological sciences; the unintended consequences are not a problem; the unintended consequences are, in fact, the object of the social sciences. And the awareness of the inevitable onset of the unintended consequences of intentional human actions

destroys *constructivism* (as Hayek called the theory that *all* institutions and *all* social facts, in their genesis and changes, are outcomes of intentional actions, of plans drawn up, intended and realized); and the collapse of constructivism carries with it the collapse of the *conspiracy theory of society* (according to which, if all social events are results of intentional actions—and this is constructivism—then negative facts and social events, for example, rising unemployment, famine, etc., will necessarily be the result of plans or conspiracies of evil men) and *psychologism* (i.e., the theory that the explanation of all institutions and all social facts should be *reduced* to feelings, ambitions and intentions, and therefore to explanations of a psychological nature). Constructivism collapses because *not all* institutions and *not all* the social facts are outcomes of projects intended and realized—institutions such as, for example, language, currency, the market, the state; many localities have arisen spontaneously and many projects, although they succeed, do not succeed completely according to the original plans. The conspiracy theory collapses: because it is also true that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And psychologism collapses: from the psychological sciences, in fact, there escapes the entire scope of unintended consequences. It is thus that, inside of methodological individualism, there is founded the *autonomy of sociology* in particular and of the social sciences in general.

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In the horizon of such considerations, for some time now I have found baseless the criticism that one of the most distinguished and seasoned Italian sociologists, namely Professor Luciano Pellicani, has levelled at methodological individualism. He is convinced that in front of the individual “there are independent social facts—beliefs, values, rules, etc.—that are *imposed* by virtue of their coercive-regulatory power; facts that often emerged in ancient times [...], that have acquired the status of impersonal and objective *normae agendi*”; facts that “are not entirely attributable to the facts relating to the thoughts and actions of individuals” (Pellicani 1990, p. 106). In the wake of Durkheim, Pellicani affirms that “beliefs, shared values, institutionalized norms, legitimate expectations can be treated as if they were things, as they are actually realities *external* to the individual, *independent* from him and equipped with an almost physical *resistance*” (Pellicani 1990, p. 107). And here is how he makes explicit, with an example, his anti-individualistic conception. “The first scene of the film *Il Faraone* (*The Pharaoh*) by Jerzy Kawalerowicz

shows us the Egyptian army blocked, while conducting an exercise, by the presence of a beetle. The beetle for the Egyptians of the time when the story told by Kawalerowicz takes place was a sacred animal. In front of it, therefore, the army is obliged to make a wide diversion. The Pharaoh finds the thing absurd. ‘Not even a donkey would change his march in front of an insect!’ he exclaims angrily. ‘But a donkey’, replies the High Priest standing beside him, ‘could never reign over Egypt.’ In other words: the Pharaoh can order anything, except behaviors that the ruling religion strictly prohibits; he must, if he wants to rule without resistance, adapt to traditional customs, respect the established prejudices, conform to the institutionalized ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (Pellicani 1990, p. 108).

Pellicani thus comments on this example: “If we start from the definition of social action of Weber (or Mises), all this is inexplicable. We are faced with a typical example of the conflict between what controls the *ratio* and what commands the *tradio*. And the *tradio* is not a simple acquired habit. It is something more; rather it is something very different from habit: it is an impersonal power that legislates, commands and punishes. Deviating from the path set by *tradio* is equivalent to clashing with a widespread moral force, invisible and yet very resistant. In fact, the film shows us the attempts of the Pharaoh to rule by trampling on religious customs, attempts which end with the revolt of his subjects, offended in their most sacred sentiments. Eventually the *tradio* triumphs over *ratio*: Pharaoh is overthrown and replaced by a man who, with the support of the priests, will restore the validity of the ancient customs” (ibid.)

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Well, the example cited by Pellicani is—contrary to what he claims—*easily* and *tranquilly* explicable in terms of methodological individualism or, if you will, of *situational logic*. And the comment Pellicani makes shows clearly how he falls into the trap of the realistic fallacy (that hypostasizes mental constructs) of methodological collectivism.

Mises affirms that if you understand that what sets action in motion are ideas, then you cannot but admit that these ideas originate in the minds of some individuals and are transmitted to others. In doing so, however, he has accepted the fundamental thesis of methodological individualism, that is, that it is the ideas sustained by individuals that determine their group loyalty, and a collective no longer appears as an entity acting independently or on its own initiative (Mises 1978, p. 78). And that an idea’s (moral or religious,

for example) being rigid, unquestioned, spread over an entire population, and that it lasts for centuries, are not qualities that do not change the nature of the idea proposed and invented by someone, communicated to others, accepted by them and for them become a motive of action.

That being the case, it remains very difficult to understand how Pellicani can say that—if we start from the definition of social action, for example, of Mises—the episode from *Il Faraone* of Jerzy Kawalerowicz is inexplicable. The narration of the episode made in individualistic terms offers no difficulty: there are Egyptian soldiers marching, during a military exercise; along their journey these soldiers encounter a beetle; now, as the Egyptians of the time had the idea (widespread, normative, “formative”, i.e., inwardly assimilated, invented by others in perhaps distant times, and subsequently accepted by most or perhaps all) that the beetle was a sacred animal and that it was forbidden—under the punishment of the gods—to cross the line marked by the presence of the beetle, they act in accordance with this idea: they change direction and make a wide diversion. In doing so they are *perfectly rational* (à la Mises, à la Popper): they face a problem, and their action—the problem solver—becomes understandable (rationally understandable) as it is appropriate to the problematic situation as they saw it. And why should those soldiers not have changed direction, if crossing the line marked by the beetle would have incurred the punishment of the gods? Obviously, in the situation *as the Egyptian soldiers and the High Priest saw it* (a conjecturally reconstructed situation), changing direction was the best-suited means to achieve the end of avoiding the damage to be incurred by the wrath of the gods.

Given, in short, their religious idea, the consequent action of the Egyptian soldiers was rational. Just as is *rational* today the action of those Italians who turn back and change path upon encountering a black cat crossing the street. One could say that the action of the Egyptian soldiers was rational, given their beliefs, but that these beliefs were not, however, at all rational. In this way, however, the question changes: what is accepted as true by one person may be false for another, true beliefs accepted and believed by entire groups for long periods have later been dismissed as illusory and false and replaced with other beliefs. But this does not change the fact that every individual acts and tries to solve problems through the ideas he considers true and well-founded. Many of us today equate the *rational attitude* with the *critical attitude*. This idea of rationality, however, does not affect in any way the *principle of rationality* which, as we know from Popper, simply assumes “the adaptation of our actions to our

situations-problems as we see them,” and that makes human actions understandable (Popper 1967, pp. 149-150).

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One more consideration. The episode of the film of Kawalerowicz shows us the struggle between individuals with different ideas; a fight that ends with the revolt of the subjects and the replacement of the Pharaoh. Pellicani comments on the outcome of this struggle between individuals stating: “eventually *treditio* wins out over *ratio*.” One understands well what he means: the subjects who were fully convinced of the validity of the ideas of their fathers and their forefathers defeat the Pharaoh, who had different ideas from them. Here, too, however, what is striking is the *collectivistic style* of the Pellicani’s phrasing: *treditio*, *ratio*, almost independent entities from the individuals and that work independently from the individuals. And then, why is the Pharaoh’s idea *ratio*? Maybe because it accords with some idea of many of us today? Or maybe it is the duty of the historian to judge the *rationality* of the ideas of others? Nor do I think that this is even the task of the sociologist. The historian is faced with traces from which to reconstruct actions (and their consequences) of individuals who had certain ideas or beliefs. Nor does it seem to me, moreover, that the idea of the Pharaoh can be defined as *ratio* because it is different or new in relation to that of his subjects. *The Pharaoh’s idea was simply different from that of his subjects*. There is no *ratio* in the abstract: this is what I mean. *Ratio*, or the idea of rationality understood as some of us understand it nowadays, and that is, as a critical attitude, is an idea that is the result of the ideas of other people who since the time of the pre-Socratics have proposed certain theories, and put together certain discussions, and so on. Not because an idea is new or different—as is the case of the Pharaoh—from the one shared by most, is it *ratio*. If it were, we would have to include in *ratio* all the most outlandish or dogmatic ideas of human history.

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Pellicani once more insists: “To realize how inadequate the cognitive strategy is that the partisans of methodological individualism offer, it is enough to recall here the military conduct of the Aztecs against the *conquistadores*” (Pellicani 1990, p. 110). The Aztecs, writes Pellicani referring to *The Conquest of Mexico* by W. H. Prescott (1978), “did not try to bring down their enemies, but to take them prisoner to sacrifice them according to the rite imposed by their culture.

Such a practice was fully functional within a state organization whose main purpose was “the production and redistribution of substantial amounts of animal protein in the form of human flesh” (see Harris 1981, p. 124). But it proved to be highly irrational in front of the completely different way of conducting war by the Spaniards. Nevertheless, the Aztecs did not alter their military practice; and they did not do so because it was religiously sanctioned. Even when their capital was put under siege by Cortés, they gave up the fight according to the rigid schemas of their *traditio* and in so doing, procured their ruin” (Pellicani 1990, p. 110).

Well, before the description of such events Pellicani asks: “Is this not a particularly strong example of how tradition determines the *forma mentis* of men and, consequently, the way they act? Does this example not illustrate the coercive-normative nature of culture and its autonomy over individuals?”

To Pellicani’s question I answer by saying that the example shows only that certain individuals had made their own ideas transmitted by their fathers, and that they acted according to them, unable to cope with, in this case, what was for them a new issue. But this is what always happens. If an individual does not have new ideas to propose, he uses those he has, which he has accepted from others. Castiglioni, in his *Storia della medicina* says that, at the beginning of the last century, Giovanni Rasori treated a case of pneumonia by withdrawing in four days 4230 grams of blood and administering 4-5 grams of emetic (stibiated tartar) (see Debenedetti 1947, p. 134). Everyone can imagine the outcome of the treatment. But what matters for us is to see that Rasori’s therapeutic action was the result of a physio-pathological idea he had accepted from Brown and considered true. Individuals always act with the ideas they have, which they have accepted or have managed to create on their own, and consider valid.¹

NOTES

- 1 This article draws directly from chapter 2 of Antiseri and Pellicani (1995).

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