

# Preface

Contemporary social teaching suffers from a grave deficiency: it is lacking rules of methodology and procedure suited to social reality that are, in particular, able to reconcile increasing creativity (implying irreversibility) with rationality, which are indispensable for the scientific judgement of theoretical ideas. Unfortunately, this lack is largely ignored, and eminent social scholars have even explicitly and emphatically theorized a rejection of method. This allows rhetorical and literary skills to prevail over the reasons of science, thereby promoting a deceptive instead of constructive pluralism, confusion in the study of contemporary societies and growing ineptitude in their government, what represents a main source of afflictions in the present world.

Our long-lasting studies on the organization and the vicissitudes of human societies made increasingly evident the poverty of the current methods of inquiry on society. This book intends to react against such poverty. It is complementary to a previous volume, *Economic Theory and Social Change*,<sup>1</sup> and extends the analysis to other branches of social thought and to the interpretation of history. Unlike the earlier book, however, the present work makes extremely limited use of mathematical formalization and other technical complications and obscurities; this is intended to foster easier and broader understanding of its contents and to facilitate the diffusion of studies of method outside the hermeneutics of a restricted elite. The present book has also been preceded by one substantial study of historical processes,<sup>2</sup> and another focused on the problem of power,<sup>3</sup> both published in Italian. These works confirmed our conviction that the advancement of social knowledge is severely hindered by some methodological misconceptions concerning the characteristics of social reality and that those same misconceptions also afflict the interpretation of history. The situation seems to be worse and, in a sense, more difficult and troublesome than

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<sup>1</sup> See Ekstedt and Fusari (2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Fusari (2000). This study starts from primitive societies and embraces the great Asian and Mediterranean empires and societies, Arab civilization, European Feudal and Medieval societies and the Renaissance, through to the beginning of the eighteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> See Fusari (2008).

that afflicting the natural sciences before the methodological revolution of the seventeenth century. If this is indeed so, it is urgent to clear these misconceptions up.

Method is a two-edged sword: it offers powerful assistance in and enhances our capability of understanding and solving the problems of everyday life; but if the chosen method is inappropriate, it can seriously obstruct the advancement of knowledge. Significantly, the best contributions to social knowledge have been *ad hoc* studies that disregard method and simply apply common sense. But *ad hoc* studies suffer a lack of coordination, and the neglect of method makes it difficult to evaluate and select findings and results. As a consequence, *ad hoc* analyses have little chance of stimulating the cumulative growth of knowledge. Science needs method; in its absence, scientific thought is not possible and the growth of knowledge is difficult.

The human mind is able, in principle, to understand all that is the object of experience. In particular, humans should be particularly clever in the understanding of the social world, this being a product of human action, its creation. Seen in this light, it is surprising that the understanding and management of society on the part of its creator appears so difficult. But the dominant methods, together with their potential mistakes, always exert enormous power on the social scientists using them; and they may have the power to mislead even those who contest them. In fact, the critique deriving from the burgeoning perception of the limits and mistakes of those methods, instead of aiding clarification, has increased confusion, as is typical of times of profound crisis of current visions and methods of inquiry. The international scientific conferences on social problems, which assemble skilful scholars, are the best representation of this situation. Conferences inspired by heterodoxy and aiming to foster pluralism demonstrate a remarkable inability of participants to engage in dialogue with one another, due to the methodological cages that separate them and impede the valuation and dissemination of scholarly contributions, while those inspired by orthodoxy refuse a platform to dissenting views and persist in building on some crucial mistakes, even though these errors have been clearly identified and proved.

It seems not exaggerated to say that there is a need to go back to what may be termed the Medieval organizational view, that is, the attempt to understand the reason why societies have been organized the way that they are, and hence to learn to organize them more satisfactorily. Significantly, Bertrand Russel wrote: "it is false, from a theoretic point of view, to allow the real world inflicting us a model of good and evil".<sup>4</sup>

The present study is intended as a contribution that prevents method from becoming a prison for the mind as opposed to a stimulant of creativity and knowledge. In a sense, we are today living a condition opposite to that of the Enlightenment. In that era, a great intellectual revolution prognosticated reforms that sometimes proved unrealistic due to excessive abstraction but that, nevertheless, stimulated an intensive social change. Now the contrary is taking place: a deep social change is at work but is obstructed by the absence of a methodology able to promote the understanding and the profitable working of its content.

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<sup>4</sup>See Russel (1981, p. 37).

We shall try to make clear our proposal on method by setting out a multiplicity of applications in the main branches of social thought, economics excepted as it has already been treated in another book (students interested in economics can read some substantial development of the discussion in Sect. 1.4 on positive and normative views, in the final section of Chap. 2 entitled 'Economic and social planning' and in the section of Chap. 3 entitled 'Mainstream economics and its opponents'). But we have considered that those applications are not sufficient and that, to adequately clarify our methodological proposal, the reasons standing behind it, and to stimulate meditation, a number of criticisms of outstanding social theories and schools of thought were also required. We beg the pardon of readers and authors for any misunderstandings that, notwithstanding our severe attempt at accuracy, may have occurred in the handling of such extensive and difficult literature.

Naturally, it is difficult to challenge well rooted methodological convictions. Probably, any hopes of overcoming the current difficulties of social thought must be placed on: (a) that minority of heterodox scholars aware that the absence of some shared methodological rules makes impossible a serious confrontation and reciprocal interaction among the plurality of contributions and a real challenge to mainstream methodologies; (b) those orthodox scholars who start to perceive the unreliability of traditional methodologies when applied to social science; (c) young scholars and their tendency to distrust current thought and cultivate a critical attitude, but hopefully found their own work on the accurate analysis of facts and errors, not mere polemic; (d) the good sense and mental openness of educated people, primarily those troubled by a growing dissatisfaction with the usual teachings on society; (e) and, last but not least, the dimension of the present social crisis and the growing perception of the impotence of conventional thinking in understanding and facing it.

Throughout history, men's instincts and special interests have caused untold human and social misery, often justified by a utilization of reason for purposes of mystification. The discussion, development and results that follow are aimed at combating those mystifications and miseries; the results on ethics should be of interest for educational and religious institutions.

Finally it is to be emphasized that, in light of the innovative content of our proposal on method, some initial patience is required of any serious reader; after the half of Chap. 2 understanding will progress quickly and, with it, enjoyment.

## References

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