
INTERVIEWS

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SOCIOLOGY CONTINUES TO BE USEFUL AND EVEN NECESSARY

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СОЦИОЛОГИЯ ПО-ПРЕЖНЕМУ ПОЛЕЗНА
И ДАЖЕ НЕОБХОДИМА

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— **Professor Martinelli, thank you very much for agreeing to have a talk with us that will be published in a Special Issue of the Public Opinion Monitor Journal. I want to ask you just a little about your own past. How did you get involved in sociology? Why it was sociology? Who were your heroes in sociology?**

— I had my first degree in economics in Italy, then I studied sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, where I received my PhD. The reason of my interest in sociology was that studying economics I felt the need to frame economic analysis

into a broader cultural perspective for the study of social phenomena. I started working on the border between the two disciplines, because I published the Italian edition of Talcott Parson and Neil Smelser 'Economy and Society' and I wrote a long introduction which was useful in order to define my own approach. I then continued to teach and make research in economic sociology, a field that can be considered, to some extent at least, interdisciplinary, since is very close to what is political economy in political science and the institutionalist approach in economics. In spite of academic partitions, these disciplines have actually a lot in common in terms of concepts and research methods. Later on, I published books and essays also in other areas of sociological research and of other social sciences.

— **Now you have been in this profession for many decades. How would you characterized current sociology?**

— I think that sociology continues to be useful and even necessary because the complexity of social action and social structure is always there. There are new issues, new questions which require the sociological perspective. Major changes took place. For instance, we used to study problems within a well-defined context: the nation state; but in the last decades the many processes that we define with the catch-all word globalization can no longer be studied in the perspective of the nation state as the only context where social action takes place. Moreover, in some countries sociology risked to disappear, substituted by and fragmented into subjects like cultural studies, gender studies, ethnic studies. This risk of disappearing is over, but the risk of fragmentation remains

— **What is your assessment of the state of affairs in sociology? What are the main problems this field is facing at the moment?**

— I think it's a rather favorable moment for sociology. I will talk of the problems later. There has been a coming back of interest: some of the key problems of the contemporary world like multiethnic societies, migrations, the digital revolution and the change in the way of working, new types of professions, just to make a few examples, are all topics where good sociological research is made and should continue to be improved. Another example of good sociological research is the study of new modernizing countries that face similar problems to those of the now developed ones, but give to some extent different responses. I co-chair with professor He Chuanqi of the Chinese Academy of Science the World Modernization Forum, that will held its third conference in May 2019 in Beijing.

— **A question with regard to a jubilee of Karl Marx in this year. In the Soviet Union Marx was the only patriarch for the social sciences and students were oriented to study mostly his works. He was also popular in the West. How do you perceive Marx's legacy for contemporary social sciences?**

— Well, it was a mistake to study only Marx, of course, but an opposite mistake would be to ignore Marx. He has been one of the greatest social thinkers of modernity. For the bicentennial of Marx's birth there have been new books and seminars in several countries including Italy, I contributed to some of them. When I was asked the question 'What is dead and what is alive in Marx's theory to-day?', my synthetic answer was that his greatest contribution has been to show the inherent contradictory nature of capitalism. He underestimated the ability of capitalism to renew itself and to survive through change and his forecasts of the collapse of capitalism and mass

proletarianisation were falsified, but the link between economic growth and social inequalities (that are growing almost in all parts of the world), the analysis of labour market and the role of the industrial reserve army, still hold. Marx's theory suffered mostly from being transformed into the ideology of an authoritarian political regime. But as a social thinker Marx is one of the greatest and will last.

— **Well, if we can look for a moment at the current political scene in the world. Can you make a comment on the elections of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, on Trump phenomenon, on Putin phenomenon? What would be a sociological perspective on these events that media all over the world is obsessed with?**

— A few years ago I started researching on a phenomenon which is now well-known and much discussed and studied: populism, more specifically national populism, which is the combination of nationalist ideology and populist rhetoric, a very effective combination for getting a political consensus., Populism is a rhetoric, or an ideology with a thin but very strong core: the belief that a society is divided into two opposed components: the people, which is undifferentiated whole (which is sociologically wrong since it is actually composed of many groups with different interests, values, identities) and the corrupted and selfish elites. Populism is not necessarily anti-democratic, but is against liberal democracy, against pluralism and what in the sociological tradition are called intermediate bodies (political parties, unions, business and professional organizations, NGOs). But it is even more powerful, when its thin ideological core can be easily coupled with a more structured ideology like nationalism, that is the source of strong identities. National populism divides society in us (the people of the national community) and them (elites, foreigners, minorities, immigrants, which become scapegoats for all types of problems).

— **And what is the role of sociology here?**

— Sociology can try to throw light on this phenomenon, try to explain, first, that any society is a complicated system with different levels, with a variety of groups, with conflict, with complex patterns of conflict and cooperation, diversity and commonality. And it can also explain that aggressive nationalism is the major threat to peace. I'm studying national populism and, as a sociologist, I put this phenomenon in the context of the European Union. I prefer to speak of what I have studied and think to know better. But I add a few words on like Trump. Trump's national populism is different from traditional American patriotism in his continuous stressing on 'America first'. He does not seem to realize that the national interest is important, but cannot be pursued at any cost; that in a globalized world international cooperation is crucial and we have to cope with global problems through multilateral strategies. For a country which competes for world hegemony, it's important to persuade other countries with facts that its national interests is compatible with some common global goods like peace, economic growth and wellbeing. Otherwise it can be dominant, not hegemonic (in Gramsci's sense). But Trump seems blind on that.

— **Some scholars believe that sociology should be activist. Do you agree with this?**

— This will be the first ISA Congress in years in which I don't have my usual debate with Michael Burawoy on this question. I disagree with Michael's idea of public sociology. Sociology cannot be confused with political activism. Some sociologists can be

skillful politicians like the former president of Brasil Fernando Enrique Cardoso. But when they do this they are not playing the role of the sociologist, but of the political activist. If you make a confusion between these two roles, you are likely doing neither serious sociology, nor effective political activity.

— **So, what's its role, if not activism?**

— A social scientist should have a notion of what a good society should be and what are the political objectives to achieve it. But in doing research one you should have a necessary detachment from the social problems he or she is analyzing. It's not easy, but it's necessary. We all have our own value premises, preferences, prejudices, it's a fact. But a good scholar must verify his or her hypotheses with a rigorous methodology and keep an open mind to consider alternative views, different findings..

— **And when these views came to fore?**

— I don't believe in an entirely neutral and objective social science, I know it's not possible. But this attitude is miles away from thinking that a sociologist should be a political activist. These are two different roles. A person can play different roles if he's able to distinguish between the two. She or he may start as a researcher, then become an activist, then come back to scholarly work, this was not unusual in the 1960s and '70s. But in doing serious sociological work, one must keep in mind that we need, as I say, some critical detachment. Otherwise, one may try to manipulate data in order to pursue a political objective goals, to ignore contrary evidence Let's take an example about sustainability and climate change. I think to all those who on the basis of serious work try to convince public opinion that climate change is an emergency were badly harmed by a group of scientists, who manipulated data in order to show prove the threat was much greater. Their manipulation was exposed, and this created the risk of scientists losing their credibility.

— **May be another 'political' question. As a former President of the International Sociological Association how would you characterize the role of international associations in contemporary world? Do they unite or divide scientific community?**

— Good question. I think that what I call epistemic communities, as international scientific organizations are, can play a major role in global governance. first of all, they defend science and this is particularly important nowadays, at the time of post-truth, fake data and fake news. Science must be defended because science is our best hope to cope with common problems. Second, international scientific organizations bring people together and foster mutual understanding. Third, they fight against discrimination and prejudice since a person is evaluated in terms of her or his own personal achievements, not in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion or other characteristic. I am convinced that these associations play an important role and I actually dedicated a significant part of my professional life first, to the International Sociological Association (ISA) and, second, to the International Social Science Council (ISSC). The latter is the council which organizes the various international associations of the social sciences (sociology, economics, political science, psychology, demography, etc.) and social science research councils (or social science branches in national academies of science) of many countries in the world. When I was elected president of ISSC, I pledged to merge it with the other council (ICSU) that was the council of the natural sciences (biology,

astronomy, physics, mathematics, medical sciences, etc.). And we succeeded. Last week in Paris we were able to complete this long journey and now we have one single world organization of science, the International Science Council (ISC) that is a global voice for science in the world, an important step at a time when most governments are cutting funds for scientific research and many people on the net believe that they are experts of everything. It's enough to have one hundred likes to say very stupid things about questions you don't know like vaccines or asylum seekers. There is a risk of a crisis of knowledge-based ideas and evaluations. A single world organization of science can help.

— **And what are, in your opinion, the main challenges for promoting scientific knowledge?**

— There is a risk of fragmentation. That is why in ISSC I encouraged interdisciplinary dialogues not only within the social sciences, but also between social sciences and natural sciences, between social sciences and the academies of medicine and engineering, between social sciences and the humanities. And I fostered common research programs. I'll just mention one: «Future Earth», a research program on sustainability, where sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists are working together with biologists, climate experts, physicists, chemists. When they work together they understand the importance of knowing other perspectives on the same problem. Similar instances are provided by other joint research programs like that on disaster risk, which was originally confined to geologists, experts on earthquakes; but when these researchers realized that there were more casualties due to collective panic than to the natural event itself, they asked the cooperation of sociologists and social psychologists. Science councils like ISSC and ICSU-now ISC- can also counteract the tendency to disciplinary fragmentation the world of knowledge, that international scientific associations in a sense and to a certain extent certify.

— **Professor Martinelli can you predict, what will be with sociology in ten years, in thirty years from now?**

— You should then predict what the world will be in ten, thirty years. But, as I said, I believe sociology will still be there.

— **Maybe you have your own perception of the direction which the society is developing?**

— There will be the key problem of the modernization of vast regions of the world, China, India, Africa which is very fast and troublesome. There is here a very interesting ground for good sociological work.

— **So you would encourage young professionals to go to these countries, to study them?**

— Why not? Actually I expect that there will be many more interesting scholars coming from those regions of the world, rebalancing a situation where the West as such has played a major role. So, this is time that sociology, as any other science, becomes truly universal, with increased exchanges of scholars, between the world North and South, and within the South, whereas now most cooperation still takes place within the North

— **And what would be your advice to these scholars?**

— I have a great consideration for the classical thinkers of social science-Marx included- not because we have to replicate their theories, since they worked in a world

which was completely different, but because they provide theoretical and methodological examples. Sociological imagination is also very important, that often comes from fieldwork, not only theoretical work. Theory building and fieldwork. And then, I urge to travel, see the world, broaden your horizons; and also learn to work in team with people from other countries.

— May be the last question. You've actively participated at the last ISA Congress in Japan. If you were to make a comparison of the ISA Congresses in Yokohama and current Congress in Toronto what would you say?

— One thing I remark-and it's good-more women. In the opening ceremony, women- having key institutional positions (President of the ISA, the President of the Canadian Sociological Association, the ongoing President of the Canadian Sociological Association, the President of the Local Organizing Committee) outnumbered men. On the whole, as usual in congresses like these, some topics are too present and some other are not enough; sSome sessions are innovative and some dull or just repeating what was said in the previous congress. But on the whole, the ISA congress, as those of other international scientific associations, is a useful occasion to watch and assess the state of art of the field and subfields of sociology, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of sociological research in the various parts of the world. And a congress like this also fulfills the latent function of creating or renovating friendship ties, launching cooperative projects, fostering exchanges of knowledge and experience.

— Thank you very much for this wonderful conversation!