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## **An Alternative to Oppressive Epistemology: the “Methodological-Operational” View**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The “methodological-operational” view discussed in this paper starts with considering “whatever” as a result - and investigating how it might be obtained, acknowledging that a set of consistent propositions (“theory”) cannot afford confusing descriptive with “cause/effect” propositions. This view identifies the unthinkable as resulting from the duplication of “whatever” item into dichotomies, such as “subjective/objective”, “individual/social”, and many more. The matrix of these duplications can be found way before Plato’s “myth of the cave”, and they remain obstacles to the fulfillment of the consistency requirement of theorizing till date. Crucial tenets of this view are: (a) consistency requires an operational view of all meanings -any limitation of the field of inquiry by alleged “entities” entails a loss of consistency; (b) sociology works as far as it relies on shared meanings, including those of basic terms like “society” and “science”, both when devising its paradigms and when supporting them; (c) dichotomies such as “science/common sense”, “abstract concepts/empirical data”, or “nature/nurture”, stem from an unwarranted double reification replacement procedure, which is at the core of epistemological oppression; (d) the “anything goes” relativistic position is the most extreme form of dogmatic faith in having everything twice; i.e., in “the epistemic-procedural illusion”. First articulated within the context of pragmatist and phenomenological views, the methodological-operational apostasy provides a sober assessment of contemporary social issues, and an alternative to the epistemological validation of all oppressive social relationships.

**Keywords:** Epistemology; Oppressive Epistemology; Methodological-operational view.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

To briefly discuss the “methodological-operational” view and mention a few of its applications to sociological theorizing, my attempt to show its potential to disrupt taken-

for-granted ways of thinking that it puts within reach will begin by talking about values and metaphors, including the metaphor of “progress”, in the history of sociology. I will then move to the notion of “paradigm”, as this term was chosen by Silvio Ceccato (1914-1997) and other founders of a school of thought called “Scuola Operativa Italiana” in the late 1940s, within an original theoretical framework just about two decades before the term was popularized by Thomas Kuhn - and, of course, by his critics (Kuhn 1962).

Finally, I will introduce the “methodological-operational” view of the “cause and effect” relationship, and explore its relevance to the problem of distinguishing descriptive from causal statements, obviously including the problem of interpreting statistical correlations. From this point of view, Sutherland’s often neglected argument according to which, if you allow for the existence of “white-collar crimes”, poverty cannot be considered anymore as the “cause of crime” but only a possible cause of differences between white-collar crime and “street crime”, can be better understood. Its implications, when it comes to social policy, by no means with respect to crime only, are still as great today as they were when Sutherland made his case to the American Sociological Association as its President in 1940.

### **FROM GOBINEAU AND GOULD TO OURSELVES**

“I presume that no one becomes a sociologist to make the social world worse”, Mary Romero told her audience at the American Sociological Association’s annual meeting of 2019. However, she added, “from its inception, our discipline has existed with a tension between goals of a ‘value-free science’ and sociologists advocating an engaged sociology, intending change for a better world”. Furthermore, as a matter of fact, “for most of the previous century nearly all sociologists were white, middle-class, heterosexual, men” (Romero 2020). Placing the same set of problems in an earlier context, Stephen Gould argued that, at the time of his writing (Gould 1981), “no one would credit any claim that Gobineau”, who forcefully warned about the “fate of civilizations being largely determined by racial composition”, wrote “only in the interest of abstract truth”, and without supporting any kind of “political agenda”. Nonetheless, Gould points out, when Gobineau published his writings, and possibly today or shortly, as we might fear, that was his claim.

The preface to the American translation of Gobineau’s famous “essay” was written by an authoritative American anthropologist, and published in Philadelphia in 1856, right when the Supreme Court was concerning itself with the Dred Scott case, only a few years before the Civil War. It described the supposedly scientific “study of the races” offered by Gobineau as motivated by a “noble aim” (obviously, the aim of understanding the “truth” of the matter, “impartially and objectively”, given Gobineau’s reference to “all civilizations” as his field of studies), and argued that reading Gobineau “cannot be otherwise than instructive to the statesman and the historian, and no less to the general reader” (Gould, 1996, p. 380). It was in the interest of defending “civilization” by avoiding “decadence”, that according to the “best scientists” of the time the “white races” were to be “kept free from miscegenation”. Gould’s point, more than a century later, is that scientists are not “robots”. Even though there is a way to distinguish what is tenable and what is not in their theories and data, drawing this line is much harder than one would think.

Discussing the impact of his book, *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), on the occasion of its enriched second edition, Gould acknowledges that its title did get him into “some trouble” (Gould, 1996). “But I make no apologies and relish all the discussion”, he writes, declaring himself open to any criticism, as long as it is based on a disagreement with the stated “rationale” of his title. He describes it by saying that *The Mismeasure of Man* is an intended double entendre, not a vestige of unthinking sexism. On the contrary, he explains, “my title parodies Protagoras’ famous aphorism”, which was for Gould “about all people”. Also, he continues, his title “notes the reality of a truly sexist past that regarded males as standards for humanity and therefore tended to mismeasure men, while ignoring women”. By itself, one might say, generally speaking, that “neglect” is certainly revealing more than anything else about the structure of the neglecting mindset. As Richard Lewontin pointed out on many occasions to those who would ask him about the “gene for homosexuality”, there is no research on the “gene for heterosexuality” (Lewontin, 2000). More broadly, in so-called “behavior genetic” studies, complex phenomena like “intelligence”, or “homosexuality”, are often treated like sort of “things”, for which a “gene” is supposedly “identifiable” as its “cause”. Without taking into consideration that a paradigm of “intelligence”, or “sexuality”, always dictates what is supposedly “measured”, in the first place, and that it is a paradigm that often includes either positive or negative values - ascribed to the expected, or unexpected, “anomalies”.

Gould’s account of the “mismeasure” of man shows, like Lewontin’s, Romero’s, and other accounts, that women were, and often still are, often included by self-proclaimed “social scientists” in the “inferior men” category, together with “savages”, “delinquents:”, “children”, “the poor”, and other “undesirables” (again, from the point of view, explicit or implicit as the case may be, of those self-proclaimed “value-free social scientists”). Gould was in fact “glad” that his parody was picked up by Carol Tavris in her title “The Mismeasure of Women” (Gould, 1996, p. 21), which identified this “mismeasure” with the use of men (or “some men”) as the standard for women. A position that makes sense to me as a humble acknowledgment of some degree of “neglect of women” on his own part. It is also worth noting that not much is known for sure about the actual views of Protagoras, an Athenian from Abdera who lived during the times of Pericles and Socrates (cherished individuals by the United States “founding fathers”, and in general by the “Western civilization” oriented mind), including if Protagoras was really talking about “all people” or not. Much of what the Ancient Greek world was actually like must escape even our best scholarship. Hopefully, Protagoras was talking about “all people”, like Gould says, feeling good about the heritage he felt he belonged to. But sadly, the Ancient Greek world was not any less sexist, or less ethnocentric, warlike, and dominated by slave-owners, than it is ours (ours which is a major source of information about it, on the other hand). Gould’s hopeful view about Protagoras is widely shared by mainstream philosophers today. In any case, it is obviously based on Protagoras’ use of the word “anthropos”, as would a plausible rebuttal of it also have to be. The “metron anthropos” principle, on the other hand, can be interpreted in a number of ways, including a “cultural” (not “individualistic”) view, and a “situational” (not “structural”) one, and so it has been.

In this paper, I present a much more recent view, the “methodological-operational” view, that can also be framed as following, to some extent, “Protagoras’ principle” - as are, of course, many other theoretical points of view, but not all of them.

Plato's Socrates, for example, as Gould put it, "knew he was telling a lie", when coming up with his "justification for ranking groups by inborn worth". Nonetheless, he put forward the lie in his writings, meant for the few and not for everyone, to be sold as the "truth" to the many. For the past two centuries, as it is well known by sociologists, "scientific claims have become the primary agent for validating Plato's myth" (Gould, 1996, p. 52). From "craniometry" to "intelligence testing", up to the more recent "Bell Curve", and we might add now more recent examples, Gould shows in great detail how "biological determinism" (of the Spencerian, not the Darwinian, at least in his view, variety), was embedded in mainstream psychology, sociology and other social sciences - and remained mainstream as an almost unchallenged set of assumptions, justifying the "modern lifestyle", academic careers included, until (literally) yesterday. Given the inconsistencies of past and present "social thinkers", one can easily find supposedly "conservative" sexist assumptions under the banner of "progressive" views. For example, in the way, De Hostos fought against what he saw as the "unjust situation that prevents women from developing their potential", in 1873. As Gabriela Mora wrote in 1993, even while considering the neglect of Hostos' lectures by feminists as a sign of the "persisting old prejudice" against women, "Comte, founder of sociology and of the positive method grants women a superior development of 'sociability' and 'empathy', nonetheless insisting on their inferior intelligence. Spencer, a major popularizer of Comte and very much admired by Hostos, while advocating for the opening of professional opportunities to women sides with the mainstream notion at the time, assuming that the reproductive function diminishes the feminine intellect thus causing the mental inferiority of the female sex" (Mora, 1993, p. 9).

A major turning point in the "strategy" of powerful "white men" (not accidentally, maybe, just when women won the right to vote in the United States), occurs at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, when craniometry is largely replaced by psychological testing as the mainstream, or authoritative, way to argue in support of the existence of a "single, innate, heritable, and measurable thing" called "intelligence", as Gould points out. Arbitrarily called "intelligence", such an unlikely "thing" (metaphorically placed "in our heads", like a potato in a refrigerator) is for Gould the result of the "double fallacy of reification and ranking". A double fallacy is due respectively to "our tendency to convert abstract concepts into entities", and to "our propensity for ordering complex variation as a gradually ascending scale", according to the "metaphor of progress" (Gould, 1996, pp. 56-57). However, things went in the past two centuries and before then, "that is clearly no longer the case", as Romero said in her above-mentioned Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association. Today, "members of communities that were previously the objects of sociological research" are "taking their place in the discipline as subjects". And "as faculty and researchers", Romero explains, "we are challenging sociological theory and practice with interdisciplinary concepts and approaches to research -- calling for further attention to race, class, gender, LGBTQ, indigenous, and differently-abled perspectives". Further, says Romero (2020), "we are conducting research in our communities' issues and priorities". The time has come for a thorough review of all basic assumptions and practices within sociology, starting from a full recognition that, in Romero's words, "nourishing a sociology engaged in social justice for a better world does not mean giving up empirical, grounded, valid and reliable research. But it does require acknowledging the historic role that gatekeepers have played in defining research agendas through

mechanisms including funding and prestigious placing in the academy, and recognizing the function that hostile teaching and learning environments have played in maintaining the status quo” (Romero 2020).

The objective of this paper is to focus on the basic, or epistemic, nature of these oppressive mechanisms and to show how the “methodological-operational” view, which was not at all conceived in the context of an egalitarian political agenda (quite the opposite, in many ways) turns out to be useful from a radically egalitarian standpoint - although, I must say, not radical enough a standpoint to become neglectful, and thus oppressive, of individual and collective differences, as they are perceived by those involved. The “Protagorean” take-home message here is that a paradigm (i.e., a specific result of our own “operations”) is always necessary, to find either “sameness” or “otherness”.

### **GOFFMAN’S WARNING ABOUT HIS METAPHOR OF “FLOODING OUT BEHAVIOR”.**

While offering his criteria for assessing the likelihood of what he called “flooding out behaviors”, Erving Goffman argues that it is “no accident”, if the fable of the invisible new clothes “concerns and emperor”. The “image”, as he calls it - i.e., the metaphoric use of the words “flooding out” -, seems to him “hydraulic and not entirely adequate”, suggesting as it does that “as the tension level increases”, within a social interaction, so will the likelihood of reaching the “breaking point” - after which the flooding out occurs. Common-sense use of this metaphor would “neglect”, says Goffman, “some important social determinants of how much tension can be withstood before a flooding out occurs”. His argument runs, “so much difficult disregard for nakedness could hardly be sustained in any case, including that of a less consequential figure”. In other words, the tale would work just fine with an idiot: it does not seem to require an emperor. However, it is quite necessary to have an emperor in the fable, because - as a sociological point of view allows one to see -, it is “during occasions when the reputation of large organizations or high persons are at stake that any open admission that things are not what they seem will carry externally relevant consequences that no one wants to face”. And so, here Goffman’s sarcastic touch comes alive, it is on those occasions that “a great deal of tension may be doggedly contained” (Goffman 1961). Embedded in a (potentially) metaphoric adverb, lies Goffman’s analysis final touch. The word “doggedly” has been part of English everyday language for centuries, but still may require the reader (obviously depending on the context, and previous knowledge) to draw its meaning from canine behavior. One may draw from a model “fight-or-flight” reaction, or from the image of a dog stubbornly trying to put up with the task of showing an appropriate level of engagement in a desperately embarrassing situation.

The “tension level” mentioned by Goffman may also be understood by analogy. Well documented by historians of science is the analogy put forward and shared during the so-called Enlightenment century between “fluids” and new phenomena called “electricity”. Later on, another powerful analogy entered the scene: that between “electrical” and “cognitive” processes. Other metaphors are also available: for example, knowing the potentially relaxed or tense muscles, or tens of muscles we have in our face will add meaning to the expression “tension level” within a “face-to-face” situation. At the end of the day, however, while Goffman contains himself (“doggedly”, or not) to a warning message, addressing the image he has just introduced (“flooding out”) only, by

doing so he also raises the much larger question of the potential neglect, as he says, of “important social determinants” every time we rely on results obtained by the natural sciences. For sociologists, in other words, the risk of relying on results produced by sources of information other than “social science” itself is to neglect just what they were looking for, thereby leaving the task of “defining the situation” they are describing either to “the child and the emperor”, or, in this case, to Hans Christian Andersen and his fable.

Goffman’s sociological considerations about “large organizations”, “high persons”, “reputations”, “externally relevant consequences”, and “doggedly behavior”, beg the question of how much the “containment” of tension also depends on the “child”; i.e., it can be hardly considered an “accident” that the fable also features a child among its two main characters. And, from a sociological point of view, one has to allow that, at times, the “externally relevant consequences that no one wants to face”, as Goffman describes them, are actually faced, and vigorously challenged. Or, in Goffman’s words, “under certain circumstances the individual may allow his manners to be inundated by a flow of effect that he no longer makes a show of concealing”. Goffman is much more focused on how what he calls the “interaction order” is unwarily sustained, than on how it may be consciously abolished and replaced in “revolutionary” times by a new set of consciously established rules. He is not interested, he argues, in singing a lullaby, but neither is he in “waking up” people. And he is not inclined to give them too much credit for “waking up” by themselves, even when they do, or say that they do.

Criticising Schutz he points out that to speak of “everyday life” as “the world of wide-awake practical realities” means “merely to take a shot in the dark” (Goffman, 1974, p. 26). On the other hand, he is not going to challenge what he calls the “primary structures” of the natural and the social “worlds”, nor he feels like challenging the mainstream, with its alleged “isomorphism” between “perception and what is perceived” - which is, from the point of view presented in this paper, the unwarranted core of all “theory of knowledge” speculations, and of all “epistemological oppression”. His own address to the American Sociological Association clarifies that the main reason sociologists should apply the scientific method to social life is that “it is ours”, and that it “exists”. Contrary to Romero’s assumption, it’s not because we might want to change it for the better - although, when he says that it is “ours”, that might be a reasonable implication of his position. His call for an “unsponsored” view of the situation, on the other hand, does not take into consideration that such a view, even if or when achieved, will have to be discussed with “non-sociologists” too, at some point, social life being obviously “ours” as members of society, not as sociologists. Goffman’s goal is clearly to provide an alternative to those who are at a disadvantage when it comes to the definition of what a “society”, or way more often a given “society”, is like. But when he validates or does not dare to challenge, the supposed “isomorphism” between “perceptions and reality”, well aware or not, he makes sure that providing any actual alternative (besides one’s own doggedly contained individual perspective) will be impossible.

### **KUHN’S REBUTTAL OF THE MAINSTREAM METAPHOR OF “PROGRESS”**

The risky business of metaphors entails a specific problem that is always around the corner if you find yourself exploring the domain of sociology. The twin and controversial notions of “science and progress” are of critical importance, from the times of Henri de Saint Simon, Auguste Comte, and Karl Marx, to the maintenance of several versions of “modern empire”, including the current one. Consequently, they are both crucial

metaphors when it comes to the management of our own everyday “face-work”, as Goffman put it, both as social scientists and as “regular folks” trying to survive in the globalized world. Thomas Kuhn’s assessment of the notion of “science”, while not being crystal clear, does get at least close to the heart of the matter. When considering that “one often hears that successive theories grow ever closer to, or approximate more and more closely to, the truth” (and one perfectly understands that this is a reference to an “ontology”; i.e., “to the match between the entities with which the theory populates nature and what is ‘really there’”), Kuhn argues that “perhaps there are other ways of salvaging the notion of ‘truth’ for application to whole theories, but this one will not do”. According to him (however, by far Kuhn is not the only one to have ever expressed this view), this notion of “progress” that “one often hears”, is - and has to be considered - “illusory in principle”. Not surprisingly, after having said such an outrageous thing, Kuhn immediately changes hat by arguing that “besides that, as a historian” (implicitly, he means, as a historian of physics, chemistry, astronomy, and other examples of “the natural sciences”) he is “impressed by the implausibility of the view”: “In some important respects, though by no means in all”, is Kuhn-the-historian’s account, “Einstein’s general theory of relativity is closer to Aristotle than either of them is to Newton’s”; and so, he challenges anyone to find a “coherent direction of ontological development” in the chronological succession of Aristotle’s, Newton’s, and Einstein’s theories (Kuhn, 1962).

Possibly still unhappy with his own assessment, Kuhn concedes his “understanding” to those who give in to what he calls “the temptation” of describing his position as “relativistic”. But still, he counter-argues that “the description seems to be wrong” (again, implicitly he means “wrong” when taking into due consideration all the work he did in order to come up with an alternative view of what “scientific progress” is). Going back to the heart of the matter, he concludes (at last!) that “conversely, if the position is relativism, I cannot see that the relativist loses anything needed to account for the nature and development of the sciences” (Kuhn 1970, pp. 206-207). Kuhn is well aware that he is leaving the boiling potato untouched. The way he concludes his rebuttal to his critics (written seven years after publishing “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions”) might be surprising: “Scientific knowledge, like language”, he says, “is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all” (Kuhn 1970, p. 210). These have to be shocking final words for all those who thought of physics, or the so-called “hard” sciences, as providers of a model and of some kind of legitimacy, prestige, and power to the social sciences, when it comes to supposedly “value-free” assessments of the social “world”. Kuhn’s “relativistic” position leaves undefined, and thus leaves to others (and, of all people, to historians, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, economists, or philosophers) the task of understanding what “scientific knowledge”, or knowledge at all, is.

### **THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SOURCE OF MISLEADING METAPHORS**

Both Goffman’s sensible concern with a hydraulic image possibly leading his readers to neglect social constraints (and on the other hand his confidence, in using interestingly metaphoric terms like “tension level” and “doggedly”), and Kuhn’s weariness of the traditional, but illusory in principle, the definition of scientific progress (and on the other hand, his confidence in the “relativist position” not losing anything “needed to account

for the nature and development of the sciences”, whatever those “sciences” might be), can be related to a common source.

Goffman can overcome his obstacle by using the fable of the emperor’s new clothes as a background model (and, after all, currently used words like “tension” and “doggedly” are understandable), while Kuhn is not at all able to provide an alternative to the use of the metaphors he identifies as “not working” (all based on reducing the distance between two bodies: the “getting closer and closer” image). Consequently, Kuhn has to “stick to his guns” by defending his position as “not worse” than that of any of his opponents, while Goffman’s position is less uncomfortable. However, the common source of both problematic positions is clearly the old, utterly controversial, but still, very much alive conundrum involving the meaning of words like “knowledge”, “science”, “social science”, and so on. Under various names this conundrum has found academic recognition: “philosophy”, “epistemology”, and, to some extent, “sociology”, and other sciences too, all have to deal with it, at some point. “Scientific progress” is still today usually defined in terms of “getting closer and closer” to “what”, on the other hand, it is also argued, there is actually no way to establish if “it is there” or not. There is no way to do it, it seems, without having made a whole lot of “decisions” (“arbitrary” or not, being aware of them or not), about “what should be there” - either consistently, in the “natural”, or in the “cultural”, or at any given moment in “history”. This issue is easily found in the work of every major work in philosophy and sociology, and sometimes it is boiled down to the fact that it is hard to see how an “ought” can be “unrelated” to any “is” - and, of course, vice versa.

Marx’s claim that “philosophers have so far interpreted the world, but the point is to change it” may be considered revolutionary, as much as Comte’s motto “savoir pour pouvoir” may be considered conservative. However, vague as they are, they do not amount to a rebuttal of Plato’s image of the “beautiful city”, quite mysteriously revealed to “the philosopher”, who is then supposed to act as the “critical conscience”, or “social engineer”, on behalf of whoever he or she feels like be deserving. Self-appointed “philosophers” have always tried hard to influence, if not to radically “change” one way or another, depending on their position in the social struggles of their times, the so-called “Western” world. Usually, of course, they side with the already powerful (and Marx is, to some extent, an exception to the rule here, like other thinkers are), but, in any case, without having provided themselves with recognizable criteria for self-identification, other than their supposedly “superior understanding of knowledge”, and thus “superior knowledge”.

Ian Hacking’s question, “The Social Construction of What?” may deserve some attention here, as an example. “I do not pretend to define the word ‘construction’ which so many others are able to use so efficiently”, Hacking says, in attacking mood (Hacking 1999, p. 229). However, while in a defensive mood, he explains he meant to “use the word idea in the most low-brow way imaginable” (whatever these criteria, which is clearly comparative, but at the same time lacking any explicit terms of reference, could mean). Moreover, Hacking reports he “had to “emphasize” to a German-speaking audience in Zurich, of all places, that his use of the term “idea” would be “simply in order to make a contrast to what I call objects” (Hacking 1999, p. 228). His criteria for distinguishing “objects” (“for lack of a better label”, he says), then, from “ideas”, are by his own account quite shaky (“I am well aware that there is much slippage in this coarse system of sorting”).

For example, for Hacking a “group of women refugees now meeting with the Minister of Immigration” would “count” as an object, even though any “class, set, or group” would have to be considered also as the “extension” of an “idea” or “theory” - which, on the other hand, as he awkwardly states, “does not need to be private” (Hacking 1999, p. 22). The contrast, in other words, is not so sharp. Like anything else one can describe, a “group of women refugees now meeting with the Minister of Immigration” can be categorized both as an “object” of observation and as an “idea”, of whoever is describing it, as well as the result of an unspecified “theory”, by that “someone” (Hacking in this case), or even in many other ways, obviously, by whoever is offering the descriptive statement. As a statement, it might be then considered “true” or “false”, based on agreed-upon criteria of comparison (for example, defining what the term “now” means, in this case), between a paradigm and an item to be compared to this paradigm: both items being represented by the meaning of the statement. Hacking’s need for a clear “contrast”, between “ideas and objects”, is immediately frustrated by his own use of the word “extension”, which is just as unwarranted and arbitrary as the word “construction” he so much wants to debunk. What he is doing here is adding an unwarranted layer of meanings, supposing a comparison between two very different “things”, when there was only one, to the definition of the situation. Such a move allows him, potentially, to rise above the people (or things) he is talking about, and call any statement “true” or “false” without sharing his criteria of verification with the people he is talking to or about (like an emperor with new clothes, then, blaming others for being “defective”, if they dare challenge his definition): in other words, it is “epistemological oppression”, from the point of view presented in this paper, whether he is aware of it or not.

#### **THE “METHODOLOGICAL-OPERATIVE” APOSTASY.**

In 1951, Silvio Ceccato’s views were taking shape under the labels of “operational methodology”, “operational awareness”, and “operational technique”, with the following, and apparently odd statement: “observer, observatum, observation are born together” (Ceccato 1951). As a side note, Ceccato’s first book was published in both Italian and English, as translated by Ernst von Glasersfeld (Accame 2007). A theorist in his own right, Glasersfeld moved to the United States a decade later, and during the 1970s, after playing a major role in the “Lana Project” by designing the Yerkish language (which was used to communicate with chimpanzees like Lana), gave his views the name of “radical constructivism” (Glasersfeld 1995). In more recent times, Glasersfeld (2008) challenged the mainstream concept of “the social construction of reality” as follows: It is, therefore, from my point of view, misleading if social constructionists and other socially-oriented constructivists speak of language or knowledge as though these items existed in a generally accessible environment, independently of the individuals that conceive of them. Such statements are incompatible with their fundamentally agnostic position with regard to ontology, which they claim to share with constructivism (Glasersfeld 2008). Of course, the *American Sociological Association’s Code of Ethics* provides a rebuttal to this argument when it says, to self-appointed “constructivists” or anyone else that:

“(c) with respect to the findings and interpretation of their research, sociologists take particular care to state all relevant qualifications. Sociologists also disclose underlying assumptions, theories, methods,

measures, and research designs that might bear upon the findings and interpretation of their work” (Lune *et al.*, 2010, p. 156).

However, as long as the premises, or underlying assumptions, of sociological research, do invoke an “ontological” level of some kind, Glasersfeld would still have a point.

Going back to classic statements, for example when Durkheim (1897), explains what he meant by a “*sui generis*” reality (“by the use of this expression we, of course, do not intend to hypostatize the collective conscience. We do not recognize any more substantial a soul in society than in the individual. But we shall revert to this point”, or “whatever one’s opinion on this subject, such a tendency certainly exists under one heading or another. Each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths”), it is clear that the problem of assuming an “ontological” level of description has troubled sociologists of the past, possibly even more than it troubles much of contemporary sociology, but also not enough for them to take a clear position on it. When discussing the “looking-glass self”, to give another well-known example, Cooley points out that not only John’s “self-concept” is not necessarily the concept Mary has of him. John cannot make any progress without taking into consideration that the way in which Mary sees him is still, as far as he knows, still a result of his own interpretation - just as for her, her knowledge of the way he sees her is not, or nor necessarily, what he actually thinks of her. The two must “communicate”, in order to find out. “Society” is then nothing else than a “name” we give to the process of communication, and its results, thus adding a third level of analyses (as Simmel and Goffman, or Geertz, also recognize) which is the point of view of the sociologist, or the anthropologist. That’s all there is to it, one might even say, there is no reason to fear, like Goffman for example seems to fear, an explosion of duplications of “mirror-like images” (Goffman 1974), as long as we are not looking for an “isomorphism”, or “match between subjective and objective things” (or to get “closer and closer” to some presumed “independent” reality).

Many of the supposedly “fundamental problems” embedded in sociological theories can be dismissed as stemming from an unwarranted common source; namely, the concept of “knowledge”, philosophically thought of as the result of a comparison between “subjective ideas” and the supposedly “objective world”: an impossible comparison, according to Ceccato and Glasersfeld, as well as many other thinkers of the past, Socrates in all likelihood included, which begins with the unwarranted duplication of whatever is perceived. The metaphoric expression “born together” meant to Ceccato that the three words were to be considered outcomes of the same sequence of “operations”: a sequence that, as a whole, can, of course, be called “observation”. For example, a common scale, Ceccato argued, can be viewed like an “observer”: the difference between two of its possible states being interpreted as the weight of an object (the “observatum”) causing the scale to change its outlook. He described this procedure by using the terms “paradigmation” (the scale at “0”), “differentiation” (the scale at “5”), and “levelling” (the “object’s weight”, defined as “five grams, ounces, or another unit of measurement”). However this metaphor may be considered, it will be noticed that using a scale is often taken as an “image” for the concept of “justice”, which entails the comparison of an individual or group to a standard, and that the level of description is here not clearly distinguished from the level of explanation - as the “object” placed on the scale may be considered the “cause” of what changes in the scale. The problem of describing what an “observation” might be can be raised only after the process of observation itself has been performed so many times that no observer can possibly

remember much about what they did, even if they wanted to. And so this question, unfortunately, but also understandably, has to be framed, at least initially, “by maintaining that observer and observatum subsist before and independently from observation”: “each as such in itself”, Ceccato adds, with a clear reference to Kant and the classic German philosophical tradition Kant “inaugurated” (Thielk and Melamed, 2019).

As a result of a style of inquiry which is “lacking operational awareness”, any answer to the question of perception, or knowledge, can only be solved by virtue of a set of operations labeled “passivism” by Ceccato, who describes them as: (a) “doubling the observer into ‘observer as such in itself, but awaiting to observe’ and ‘observer who observes’”, and, (b) doubling also “the observatum into ‘observatum as such in itself, but awaiting to be observed’ and ‘observed observatum’”. Once you do that, the stage of epistemology is set up and ready to go. Either one of the two basic alternatives must now be picked or a “compromise solution” must be found:

(1) one adds “observation” as an activity of the observer (obviously the “right” one, since the observer was previously doubled) “on the observata”. And this “activity”, supposedly, “transforms the observata from ‘observata awaiting to be observed’ into ‘observed observata’”. Thereby obtaining what Ceccato recognizes as “idealism”, or the philosophical solution, or tradition, prioritizing the “subject of knowledge” over the “object”.

(2) adding observation as a presumed “activity of the observata (again, the one which is “observed”, not the other one, supposedly standing idle “in itself”) “on the observers”. An “activity”, or supposedly so, “that transforms the observers from ‘observers awaiting to observe’ into ‘observers who observe’”. This way Ceccato obtains a definition of “realism”, the philosophical tradition prioritizing the “object”, and imagining the mind as a “mirror” for it. In both cases, (1) and (2), as well as in any “compromise solution”, Ceccato points out that the “observation thus introduced” is added to a situation where everything was already done (as explained with the metaphor of the scale) and “is precisely the symbolizatum of ‘knowing’”, in the strictly philosophical sense of the word; i.e., within the so called “theory of knowledge” speculations, including the skeptical tradition. The latter, or “relativistic” solution is thus identified as a third option which follows and depends on the same basic and unwarranted dichotomy:

(3) the “pessimistic” philosophical tradition proclaims the intellectual bankruptcy of the whole enterprise: it is, as a matter of fact, not possible to make a comparison between “two”, or “four”, “things”, that are made up and supposedly located in different “places”, namely “inside and outside” the observer. External or internal to what is never possible to say because it is, actually, the same thing we are talking about: be it a number, a horse, a neuron, or whatever. But still, the skeptical or “relativistic” position makes use of the word “knowledge” in the same philosophical way - even though, supposedly, only in order to demonstrate its impossibility.

The significance of this effort to define the boundaries of “philosophy” is the implicated offering of an “operational methodology”, as an alternative to endless and fruitless speculations: Ceccato’s goal of replacing all forms of “passivism” in the name of some kind of “doing” was widely shared at the time (possibly, even more than it is today). Crucial in this context is the issue of “values”, now conceivable as specific results

of one's operations (and then shared or not shared by others, as it may be, through the communication process), rather than passively "acquired" (by a "knower") as duplicated entities, or "values in themselves" - from a supposedly "authoritative source" (besides all claims by the given source of being "religious", or, supposedly, "scientific").

"Passivism" has something of great value to offer to, as Goffman would say, "large organizations and high persons", who wish their definition of the situation to remain unchallenged. To anyone who is enjoining a powerful social position, the duplication of all things, beginning with "knowledge" itself, provides unlimited opportunities of framing the desired situation as inevitable, if not fair, and to be accepted by potential challengers: i.e., the emperor's voice will be accepted as stating whatever just as, supposedly, "that's the way that it is, we can't do anything about it", regardless of any kind of operations anyone would have to perform in order to obtain it as a result. Ultimately, for logical reasons any view of the "world as it is" will sooner or later have to give way to skeptical remarks, but even in that case "absolute values" (idealistic or materialistic) can still be replaced by the so-called "relative" ones. Once it is established that "knowledge" either belong to "groups", who define it as they please or is "nothing at all", as Kuhn put it, even an embarrassedly naked emperor has a much better chance to successfully, if not convincingly, sell to his doggedly crowd that the "troublemaker" is the poorly dressed, wildly screaming, little child, who is jumping up and down, crying and laughing that "the emperor is naked !": and that, ultimately, the "problem child" is not "intelligent" enough to see his wonderful new clothes. Ceccato identifies in the debates between Socrates and his philosophical opponents the first awareness of the "problem of knowledge", but he finds some evidence of it within non-European traditions of thought as well.

### THE "ITALIAN OPERATIVE SCHOOL'S ALTERNATIVE TO "EPISTEMOLOGY"

In 1951, Vittorio Somenzi suggested taking into consideration what he called "the frequently encountered operation of setting up a paradigm". This suggestion was a cornerstone of the "operational technique" proposed by Silvio Ceccato, which was meant to overcome the limitations of Bridgman's "instrumental and arithmetic operations" (Somenzi 1951). In his paper, reviewed before publication by Percy W. Bridgman himself, and by Philipp Frank, and Charles Morris, Somenzi pointed out that "even the most advanced logics do not feel the need for a distinct name for the set of operations that makes something a 'cause'". A "paradigm" is described as "a term of comparison, to which other things are referred, the differences between the paradigm and each compared thing (*comparatum*) being filled by means of a *leveller*". Somenzi then offers a series of examples which starts with the following one:

Paradigm, **P**: Body at rest;

Difference, **D**: A body in motion;

Leveller, **L**: A force acting in the body or on the body ("Explanation" of the difference).

In other words, Newton's paradigm (as far as "rectilinear motion" is concerned) allows him to drop the Aristotelian distinction between "natural" and "violent" forces (or factors, like in social science mathematically oriented language) "causing motion" within his paradigm. However, it does require an explanation of "circular motion" (which is found in his "gravitation") Aristotle did not need (due to his use of different paradigms

for terrestrial and celestial bodies), and is not needed in Einstein's "theory" - assuming an already "curved space-time physical world". Likewise, here is another example given by Somenzi, the "origin of language" problem can be framed differently, and different problems of explanation will arise from it, if one starts from a paradigm allowing all apes, and possibly other animals too, to have "languages" due to their own nature (as described by the chosen "paradigm"). Especially since the 1970s, sociologists started to look into one of the major premises of Blumer's "symbolic interactionism" and found that, as Wilkie and McKinnon point out: "Mead does identify the use of symbolisation and language as a difference between humans and other animals. However, he is also inconsistent about the extent to which this was an absolute species difference or one of a series of characteristics that distinguish a range of different species". And so, "Mead's texts are full of unresolved contradictions", but in the end, "in treating all animals as situated on a continua of difference, rather than simply distinguishing between humans and animals, Mead was far ahead of his time" (Wilkie and McKinnon, 2019). The "problem of the origins of language" can be summarized, in terms of Ceccato and Somenzi's "operational technique", as follows:

**P:** Human beings (without language)

**D:** Language

**L:** Origin of language ("divine origin", or "by natural selection", or "by chance", and so on).

The point here is that while Bridgman's "operationism" does not allow one to reach an operational definition of terms like "cause" and "effect", as Somenzi points out, Ceccato's "operational technique" does. And such a procedure may be applicable, at least in principle, to all results one obtains, by means of what they called "afferred" operations, or "investiture-operations". Unlike regular operations, which "transform" something into something else (like boiling potatoes, as opposed to counting "three" potatoes, or measuring them, or calling them "energy storage devices or bank accounts").

The name for these operations will later become "constitutive operations", as a consequence of Ceccato's interests in "cybernetics" which will bring him to articulate a model of the mind based on the principle that such constitutive activity may be analyzed as a sequence of combining units, called "attentional" states by analogy to other uses of the term, possibly within Wundt's experimental psychology, and certainly by "intuitionist" philosophical research on the "foundation" of mathematical procedures and concepts, assuming a bi-stadial function (0-1, open-closed, etc.) both as a methodological strategy and a neurophysiological hypothesis (given its compatibility, at the time and still today, with the results of both computer science and neurobiology). It is important here to emphasize that "the unit is methodologically assumed as minimal", as "nothing prevents it being analyzed if we change the analytic criterion" (Accame and Sigiani, 1991): similarly, the notion of "atom" which was initially thought of, philosophically, as the "ultimate" component of matter, has been later analyzed in terms of its own structure, dynamics, and components. As an explicit homage to Kant, the results of combining these units has been called by Ceccato a "category", and the term "mind" allocated to the whole set of activities, which does, of course, involve the combination of "attentional" units (ascribed to a hypothetical "attentional organ"), to the functioning of the rest of the human "organism". By investing the "mind", in this sense, of the "function-organ" relationship with respect to a "nervous system" and an organism

which supports it, the traditional dualism implicated by the traditional “mind-body problem” is, hopefully, forever dismissed - together with the “triangular” concept of “linguisticsign” picked up by Ogden and Richards.

What Somenzi referred to as the “frequently encountered operation of establishing a paradigm”, and the following instruction of the “operational technique” can be also described in terms of recurrent and structured combinations of a unitary dynamism open to study in terms of both semantics (at the sub-symbolic level) and neurophysiology. While the term “technique” may be applied to the use of a “paradigm, difference, and leveller (P-D-L)” type of analysis, “methodology” remains as an appropriate name for the whole set of operational types of analyses that can be put forward as long as the principle of avoiding unwarranted duplications of “entities” (“results” they must remain, from the “methodological-operational” point of view), is maintained.

A clear difference between the two labels (“methodology” and “technique”) was initially lacking even though, as the titles of his books also indicate quite clearly, Ceccato always had a preference for “technique”. In 1953, linking his views to an emerging field, he chose “cybernetics”, which soon became “third cybernetics”, or “logonics”, to distinguish his projects (mainly “automatic translation” projects, but also an “observing machine” research project, all carried out in the 1960s) from the mainstream. Operational models can be provided for all meanings within the context of models of “constitutive” operations, the “mental” operations in Ceccato’s later terminology - thus, hopefully, over time “filling the gap” between “functional” (idealistic) and “organic” (materialistic) models, or, rather, disentangling the hybrid nature of all sociological theories. It may be too much to ask, but there might not be another way to move beyond the present shortcomings of theoretical, methodological, and empirical production, in sociology and in other disciplines. Not too long ago, three sociologists, while presenting a detailed study of the three authors included in what is called today - and rightfully criticized as - the “canon”, feeling the pain of Lyotard’s “post-modernism” wrote that “there are no settled principles for the discipline, no theories that all would espouse and no methods of approach that receive universal assent (Hughes, Martin, Sharrock 1995).

## CONCLUSION

Stephen Gould pointed out that “no scientific falsehood is more difficult to expunge than textbook dogma endlessly repeated in tabular epitome without the original data” (Gould 1978). James Baldwin had already rhetorically asked, many years before Gould published his study about Morton’s “finangling” with his skulls, at the time of the Civil Right Movement - to which Gould then actively participated: “are we so sure we so much want a Negro student to be enrolled by the University of Mississippi when nobody cares about having him there learn how he is a member of an inferior race”? Baldwin’s momentous question and Gould’s point are still very much alive and relevant today.

Consider the following introductory textbook, in a crucial moment of synthetic “truth”: Sociologists view society in different ways, it states. “Some see the world basically as a stable and ongoing entity” (imagine that or even just trying to change that !). “They are impressed with the endurance of the family, organized religion, and other social institutions” (implied message is: and you should be too). “Other sociologists see society as composed of many groups in conflict, competing for scarce resources. To still other sociologists, the most fascinating aspect of the social world are the everyday,

routine interactions among individuals that we sometimes take for granted. These three views, the ones most widely used by sociologists, are the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives. Together, these approaches will provide an introductory look at the discipline” (Schaefer 2013). In this account one can find one “aspect of the social world”, and three “views”. Two of the views actually appear to “see” something (“everyday, routine interactions among individuals”, and an “impressive endurance” of some “institutions”). Another two of the views happen to see (society), instead, “as” something else: either as a “stable and ongoing entity”, in which the impressive institutions “like the family and organized religion” are supposed to be located or, “as composed of many groups in conflict”.

In other words “society”, the student will have to think, must be there somehow, but as such it cannot be properly described, even by sociologists. Possibly because it’s very hard to see anything besides an “aspect” of it, which would be the “everyday, routine interactions among individuals” (those “individuals” you can see! But the “symbolic” nature of those interactions will be introduced only later on in the textbook, and without an explanation of the delay - may be a typo?). However, one can be “impressed” by the endurance of “the family” and of “organized religions”. And, of course, “resources” are always “scarce” and people fight really hard over them (especially “races”, Gobineau would say, but the student will later find out that it is supposed to be Marx who “actually” founded this “perspective”, just as he will find that Durkheim, the author of “Suicide”, was “impressed” by the “stability” of the crumbling institutions he was actually trying to save from total destruction).

Besides all these problems sociologists are supposed to have with the observation of the “social world” (or with “the world” pure and simple - but that’s possibly another typo...), they do not seem to actually, or openly, ever disagree: they just see things “differently”, but work “together”, within a “discipline”. How they can do so can be surprising. Mill’s “sociological imagination” is described as an ability to “translate”, for example, but as soon as the problem of actually “translating” is dealt with, the student meets with the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” (against which, on the other hand, as much evidence is available as there is for it in the student’s everyday life).

From a “methodological-operative” point of view, this is a perfect example of “epistemological oppression”: one thing is to acknowledge that you need a paradigm to verify it, and another matter is drowning the notion of “paradigm” in the foggy pond of epistemological oppression and its related inconsistencies which no doubt will be blamed on their victims.

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