

## BOOK REVIEW

***Fundamentele metodologice ale științelor sociale***  
***(The Methodological Foundations of the Social Sciences)***,  
by Traian Rotariu. Iași: Polirom, 2016, 235 pages

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Traian Rotariu's "The Methodological Foundations of the Social Sciences" is a contribution to the epistemological foundation of sociology. It is the work of a scholar who ponders on his four decades of research work and evaluates the transformation of the sociological field since the 1970s. The six chapters approach major epistemological issues, covering the central dichotomies which have organized from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the debates in the field around the scientific nature of sociology as a discipline: idiographic and nomothetic, qualitative and quantitative data, individualism and holism, realism and constructivism, methodological monism and dualism. The book is construed as a polemical engagement with the postmodernist attacks on science and, especially, with the various trends of postmodernism in sociology. The old dichotomies are repurposed to put in perspective the criticism on the rationality of science and give a firmer foundation to the contemporary sociological endeavours as a coherent collective scientific project.

The reader is invited in the first chapter to recapitulate the debates surrounding the scientific character of sociology. It unpacks both the classical arguments against positioning sociology in the scientific disciplinary pantheon and the postmodern take on science as a modernist lore. The chapter makes a methodical inventory of the conceptual oppositions to create a complex classification of the research practices. It then places sociology in the matrix practices delineated by the various possible ways to do science. The result is a strong defence of sociology as part of the Illuminist hope for a rational, logical, and systematic way of investigating the social world.

The pretensions for an autonomous "qualitative sociology" is dismantled in the second chapter and exposed as an unwitting repurpose of the *Geisteswissenschaft* concept. In recent decades, many researchers have increasingly preferred qualitative

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methods, in reaction to the sophistication of the statistical apparatus which has evolved in a dizzying manner. Traian Rotariu re-examines the distinctions, on the one hand between the ordinal and cardinal character of numbers, and on the other hand between counting and measuring. The purpose is to make clear the differences between qualitative and quantitative scales. While measuring in sociology is sometimes problematic, counting is easier. Even nominal and ordinal traits can be counted. Classifying a trait on a qualitative scale does not discard automatically the possibility of counting. This insight is used to show that qualitative research cannot be opposed to quantitative research, and moreover these two purportedly distinct branches do not constitute different realms in sociology.

The third chapter discusses the opposition between individualism and holism by recapitulating the debates started in 1970s. In a complex manner, the literature is reviewed to carve a place for the author himself in the debates. He makes a careful distinction between the political, ethical, and ontological issues at stake to permit a detailed analysis of the ontological presuppositions of various strands of sociology. Rotariu unambiguously positions himself in the field of methodological individualism, or, more precisely in his own terms, *explanatory individualism*. Explanations in sociology should proceed until an understanding of the actions of those who were part of facts, process, or phenomena under scrutiny is achieved. Bounded rationality and the structural, functional, cultural contexts of the actions are major concepts mobilized to further specify the major assumptions of an explanation that appeals to understanding the individual's choices. Using Raymond Boudon work, the link between rational choice theories and explanatory individualism is investigated to show their intersections and, also, where these two paradigms depart. Through a detour to Pierre Bourdieu's action theory, Traian Rotariu further specifies the link between the explanation based on individuals and the aggregate effects of their actions with their unexpected consequences.

The fourth chapter dwells into the debate of whether society is real or constructed. The line of investigation on the ontology of the social world is deepened. Three forms of constructivism are posited: a strong program (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), a mild version (Hacking, 1999) and a cognitive one (Latour, 1993). These strands of constructivism are refuted by engaging critically authors like Peter Berger, Paul Boghossian, Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking, Thomas Kuhn, Bruno Latour, Thomas Luckmann, Paul Ricoeur, John Searle. The reality is affirmed as autonomous and knowledge is posited as an always partial representation. The knowing subject may organize the production of representations through collective scientific practices. That is, in a manner that is increasingly more precise in terms of predictions, applications, and consequence, based on Popper's falsification imperative.

The issue of causality is filtered through the debate on the methodological monism or dualism. The neo-Kantian insight on the nature of the historical facts as singular is used in chapter five to ponder on the issue of repeatability of the phenomena and facts in sociology. If explanatory individualism imposed the requirement to formulate explanations based on understanding the actions of the agents in contextual manner, the precise formulation of what is 'understanding' becomes crucial. If 'understanding' refers to singularity of the person's motives then the problem of the idiographic crawls back into the very heart of the explanatory individualism. Causality becomes questionable and the very purpose of the science as an exercise generality is jeopardized. Traian Rotariu relaxes the idiographic character of the understanding and shows that regularity can be found at the heart both of the scientist's empathy and of the subject's motives. Causal explanations are possible.

The last chapter takes the hard toil of making a comprehensive classification of methods in sociology. Yet, this is not just an intellectual game. The classification of methods, techniques and procedures is closely linked to the epistemological options and ontological assumptions. Rotariu argues that there are two major classes of methods: observation and experimentation. Observation can be done in sociology in four ways: directly, or as document analysis, survey, and interview. Experiment is rather complicated in social sciences, except for the social experiment done with rather small number of people or with a sort of a simulacra, the 'comparative method'. The comparative method is not a simple method of collecting information, but a way to order the observations to mimic an experiment. This taxonomy avoids any qualification of a method as qualitative or quantitative; subjective or objective; subjective or intersubjective; monographical/case study, sample based, or census. Any such alternative reiteration may sin through attempting to reinstitute the old dichotomies that place sociology in a realm of investigation that is not scientific or scientific enough. On the contrary, this organisation of the methods has the virtue to make similar or comparable the everyday research practices of the sociologist with that of a chemist or physicist.

This is a beautifully crafted book, with a very dense and structured analysis. Nonetheless, at least two aspects could have received more attention. First, the reader would have benefited if more attention would have been given to what exactly constitutes reality. A strong stance of the book consists in positioning a realist ontology. However, this ontology is predicated on a critical posture against constructivism, holism, and methodological dualism. Less time is dedicated to elaborate and affirm of what exactly a realist ontology consists of. Reality is posited as existing independently of the knowing subject which represents it through models. Some part of the reality is readily available and is manifest. Nonetheless, some part of this reality has a latent character. That is, the knowing subject

only infers the latent dimension's existence. This is the backbone of the current debates in realism. Yet, the author does not position himself in relation to critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998; Collier, 2005) or to any other major contemporary paradigm on debating realism (Archer et al., 2013).

Another theme that probably would have captured the attention of the reader is that of the *context of enunciation*. Using John Searle (1995) language, Rotariu is interested in the truth value of a sentence, not in the social origin of a sentence. In this way Foucault's genealogical analysis is discarded, becoming irrelevant for the truth content. Even if the Foucauldian analysis is recognized as important in terms of modelling the context of a sentence, the Popperian attitude is affirmed repeatedly, i.e. science is a collective endeavour of a community in search for the truth through logic, by modelling reality by means of representations prone to falsifications. However, no systematic scrutiny is given precisely to the collective game of recognizing the truth of a sentence, or to the possible distortions given by the context of enunciation. Power, capital or coloniality are somehow eluded and the truth is left to speak through its own intrinsic logic. No extra-scientific resources hinder the truth.

For the reader acquainted with the Easter European and Romanian sociological debates, many of the arguments raised by Traian Rotariu are fully emerged in this particular context of enunciation. To take some examples, in the first chapter Rotariu upholds strongly that sociology is a fundamental science, not an applied science. This position echoes his strong opposition to the technical understanding of sociology as a tool for the bettering of the socialist society (Cernea et al., 1970; Constantinescu, 1974). In the third chapter, Rotariu's interpretation of the Weberian axiological neutrality is in dialog with the debate that unfolded during socialism, in the 1970s and 1980s, about axiology, ethics and sociology (Kallos and Roth, 1968; Roth, 1986). In chapter six, in a short note, there are other positions mentioned on the classification of the methods in the Romanian field formulated in the 1970s. However, the stakes are barely fleshed out. Yet, the Bucharest school was strongly rooted in the monographical tradition with a clear interest in having the case study as a distinct method, while thematising the issue of generality in terms of regional studies (Stahl, 1975). Rotariu's classification is mounted also against this context. His positions are in conversation with some of these themes and many of his criticisms are at least partly related to these unreferenced debates.

Much of this book has circulated for years now in various ways. It has circulated as coherent syllabuses for the epistemology and methodology classes and ideas that were formulated or discussed in professor Rotariu's classes. These ideas were also sketched out in other texts, while drafts of these chapters circulated as lecture notes. They influenced other researchers as in the shape

of the methodological choices made in various research teams where Traian Rotariu was either principal investigator or a team member. They are part of the epistemic assumptions in his research papers and books. In fact, Traian Rotariu moulded many generations of sociologists at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj. The book is a coherent approach that summarizes four decades of thought on the logic of social inquiry. I was one of professor Rotariu's students, and I, alongside many, found in his teaching a secure base from which to explore new epistemological venues and ideas. We all built on these ideas and further explored the nature of the scientific character of sociology and of the political and ideological uses of the scientific ideals. This book invites the reader to develop an acute sense of the epistemological stake in a research and to ponder on the implicit or explicit decisions in all of the sociological researches.

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