

# Franco Ferrarotti and the Challenges of the Social Research

## Exploring the Dimensions and Definitions of Research in Social Sciences in Addressing Major Quests on the Individual and Society

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### Abstract

The paper analyses the role and impact of Franco Ferrarotti<sup>1</sup> in defining the nature, boundaries and methods of modern sociology.

Considered as the “founder of the Italian sociology”, Ferrarotti definitively represented a strong contributor in shaping the definition, methodology and practices of the modern sociology, a science capable to understand, address and forecast today’s global societies challenges and dialectics.

The discussion on the role of scientific research in the social development of today’s and tomorrow’s humanity, the attention that must be given on the duality between knowledge and conscience as a marker of this development, is a rare inheritance Ferrarotti left to all researchers of our times who deal with the individual and its behavior, its social interactions, the world they create and the future orientation of mankind.

**Keywords:** Franco Ferrarotti; modern sociology; sociology of the individual; scientific method; critical sociology; conscience; science

### Introduction

When it comes to analyze individual and social phenomena, researchers and academicians have faced continuously a problem of subject-object conflict, which in most of cases have raised the confrontation up to the disciplinary competence between philosophy and sociology, by questioning in many cases their scientific validity in assessing and addressing such investigation.

This by forgetting that sociology itself, as a lot of other modern sciences, came out from philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The technicalities elaborated to develop such new sciences have

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Ferrarotti, considered as “the founder of the Italian sociology” passed away on November 13th 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "On the strained relationship between philosophy and sociology." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 10 (2014): 14-19.

contributed to increase confusion, but at the same time evidencing that the same have problems in defining the specific field of research and research methods.

Franco Ferrarotti, with his introduction in Italy to the "life stories method", brought to the attention of the scientific and academic sociological debate into a global scale the importance of the concept of the "sociology of the individual" which represents a 'schism' from the traditional sociology, but capable to understand, interpret and forecast social dialectics, by considering the dilemmas of the individual and social conscience of our time.

### **A transforming world dynamic**

The social, economic and political events since the mid '900 has been in focus to Ferrarotti's researches through an attentive observation of society. All developed by empiric analysis based in concepts and hypothesis with inductive effects and by a critical interpretation.

The industrial society represents a focal moment where characteristic tendencies of relations between generations started to change and this was more observable referring to the family.<sup>3</sup>

The observation of the individual and its dialectics was developed through the qualitative method and an attentive integration of the quantitative.

The usage of techniques and methods that enable a critical sociology created at the same time greater space for objectivity in definitions.<sup>4</sup> The interaction with the comparative method and a wide documentation brings the issue to the hands of the researcher<sup>5</sup>, by questioning its knowledge and conscience.

The passage has been analyzed by viewing the "modern world" and its destiny as a society based on rational calculation, which provides a link between desired social goals and available resources to reach them. It is also a challenge for the decision-making power groups, unable to face the consequences of such rationality that begins as a liberation from traditional values and ends up in some sort of "steel cage"<sup>6</sup>.

By analyzing Webber's concept of 'modern world' Ferrarotti highlighted the evolution of the concept of 'modern' when it comes to define and understand industrialized

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<sup>3</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Italy in the Balance. Electrons and Bourbons. Thinking of the recent past in order to understand the present and to plan the future." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 4.08 (2013): 13-55.

<sup>4</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Biography and the social sciences." *Social Research* (1983): 57-80.

<sup>5</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Biography and Social Resarch." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 13.26 (2022): 9-26.

<sup>6</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Bismarck's Orphan: The Modern World and Its Destiny, from "Disenchantment" to the "Steel Cage"." *Social Research* (1982): 634-667.

societies, by stressing upon the process of rationalization. At the same time, he points out that:

.....Sociological analysis has often gone forward by way of a schematic counterposing of historically different situations and phases, nicely summarized in an umbrella concept such as: community versus society, nature versus culture, economy versus ideology, structure versus personality, tradition versus rationality, military versus industrial society, and so on. As regards these rather mechanical, historically ingenuous dualisms, Weber's position appears much more problematic and complex, and in any case far removed from black-and-white interpretations. One can even say that he was strongly attracted by the contradictory aspects and antinomies of rationality.<sup>7</sup>

Dealing with the crisis of scientific rationality, which according to him is the case of self-defeat, due to the search for self-confirmation, Ferrarotti warns us on the widening of the gap between rational and irrational.<sup>8</sup> The 'eclipse' of the sacred enhances the importance of this last one, in the conditions of a market society, where the pure instrumental nature of social and human transactions risks the set of final values, which are core to the existence of a society.

Following this line of reasoning, the dialectics of power distribution between individuals, groups and institutions that marked and was the outcome of this industrialization process, which is still continuing with its fourth wave, brings the need to analyze the connections between ideology and sociology.

By considering the relationship between ideology and sociology as full of intrinsic mutual influences, where the social sciences aim is to analyze the process of social evolution while the ideological goals tend to concentrate on the middle-range and distant future, once again the definition of sociology, its tools, methods and field of research come to question and:

...social science itself, that is the quest for reliable information about and understanding of social structures (institutions) and behaviour, nothing but a carefully planned flight from personal anxiety or commitment.<sup>9</sup>

The end of ideological enthusiasms for the unfilled ideological promise of changing the existing social and economic conditions transformed in many cases the sociological analysis as an attempt of persuasion.

<sup>7</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Bismarck's Orphan: The Modern World and Its Destiny, from "Disenchantment" to the "Steel Cage"." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 2.04 (2011): 11-34.

<sup>8</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Sacred and Profane. Essential ambiguity and vital necessity of the Sacred." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 9.17 (2018): 9-35.

<sup>9</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Introductory remarks on ideology and sociology." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 12.24 (2021): 16-38.

## Scientific research and the dichotomy of knowledge

By considering sciences as belonging to two broad categories, demonstrative and interpretative ones, Ferrarotti argues on the fact that no science can be considered as neutral, since that at the present all sciences cannot presume to offer universally valid "laws", timeless and spaceless, but only general, probabilistic tendencies.

The technological advancement transformed what is considered as the output of science into a "new religion", but even what are the starting presumptions of research and the facts used in order to demonstrate them, are nothing but a selection of elements always referring to the concept of time.

For these reasons, scientific research cannot be considered as a profession, 'the researcher', and cannot be attributed to specific structures or procedures following a linear process of making research. Instead, it should be considered a natural human undertaking, which can be of success or failure but that always must try to cope with what society needs in different stages of its development.

As Ferrarotti points out:

... the scientific discourse is one essentially marked by its internal self-correctability, or by its ability to place itself autonomously in crisis when faced with new «facts» which do not form part of the «theory» achieved, able to correct itself by research and renew itself to the point of including the new facts with new, original theories – so presenting science as an activity constantly in crisis, permanent and fundamental – certainly means to have grasped one of its important features. But it also means limiting oneself to a purely internal view of it.<sup>10</sup>

The discourse of science with conscience comes at stage, arising at the same time the question of the effects that this brings in terms of scientific advancement and social development.

Does technical progress, from automation in industry to artificial intelligence, enriches humanly our society? Does it improve it?

The biggest transformation and greatest challenge that humankind has ever faced through its journey is that of transferring part of its unique functions and inputs to artificial entities developed by humans themselves.

This does not represent only a shift in what is perceived as essential for the human existence, but as Ferrarotti points out, it is enhancing the cult of numerical precision.

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<sup>10</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco. "Science, for What? Or: Science with Conscience-The Invisible College of Dissenting Nuclear Scientists." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 10.20 (2019): 12-33.

Reality becomes virtual, machine a substitute of the human and the human the continuum of the machine, solutions are expected by the artificial intelligence.

Ferrarotti shapes this debate by making very important highlights on regard:

.... The machine works. It functions. Man thinks. The machine can be put on, put off, put on again. Man is either alive or dead. Internet is a marvellous machine. It can accomplish complicated operations in a few minutes. But it is a stupid machine, because it cannot doubt, reflect, take time.

Science cannot substitute conscience. Artificial Intelligence cannot take the place of human responsibility. In a world dominated by numerical precision and technical efficiency, there is the risk of a society technically advanced and humanly impoverished<sup>11</sup>.....

By considering time as an existential experience, Ferrarotti argues on two elements: age perception, which is not a number but a state of feeling of the individual, and the consequences that the growing division of labor brought in the division between public and private time (life) of the individual.

Social life becomes limited, social contacts and exchanges diminished, the concept of free time becomes a variable of the work time which follows the demands of society of consumption and at the center of the human existence there is no longer the 'man' but 'time', relevant time.

If creativity has been one of the core components of the real advancement of humanity, creativity itself needs time to grow. And the individual must find this time. The risk is that in the lack of time for this pursue, we develop artifices that illude us to be able to create by challenging the lack of time.

What today's societies and individual risk is the missing of social exchange and confront, the crisis of reason which since subjectivized becomes formalized.

And as Ferrarotti warns us, the highest risk is that Instrumental values could overcome final values and determine the end of meaning.

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