

Francesco Giacomantonio, *Sociologia e sociologia. Dinamiche della riflessione sociale contemporanea* (Trieste: Asterios, 2012)

This task is humble, for the author explores the main tenets of well-established schools of thought within the recent history of this discipline and its closest cognates, such as social philosophy and socio-political theory. As such, the book is the shorter analogue of a common undergraduate textbook, since it touches upon the most influential theoreticians and traditions, highlights their crucial contributions and summarises their pivotal methodological and conceptual assumptions. The book's task is equally bold, though, for it aims at bringing together a vast array of "giants", whether major (e.g. Habermas) or lesser (e.g. Bauman), and offering an overall account of today's sociology qua family of variously self-aware views of late modernity.

The book comprises an introduction, three chapters, and an epilogue.

Apart from outlining what is to follow, the introduction offers interesting considerations concerning the close relationship between sociology and philosophy, which is both the spring whence sociology came into existence and the sea that receives sociology's deepest ethical, political, epistemological and ontological implications. Also, the introduction stresses sociology's "theoretical polytheism" (17), meaning the pre-paradigmatic status of sociology as a science, whose many adherents have not come to an agreement upon the fundamental methodological and epistemological assumptions to be taught and utilised. Giacomantonio is not critical of this status that, for one, sociology shares with other social sciences too, such as psychology and economics, even if major efforts have been made therein over recent decades to attain the semblance of a paradigmatic status by preventing unorthodox specialists (e.g. Thorstein Veblen, Cornelius Castoriadis) and alternative schools of thought (e.g. critical economics, psychoanalysis) from receiving consideration within official academe and therefore survive within teaching curricula.

In the first chapter, Giacomantonio reviews "the condition of social thought today" (19) and surveys several conceptions of the fast-changing social meanings pertaining to reality, social relations, space (e.g. Marc Augè's "non-places", 22), time, knowledge, rationality and identity. The result is a picture of late modernity as a profoundly chaotic, individualistic, possessive and fear-driven age, which finds adequate representation in relativist conceptions of social phenomena, essentially sceptical scientific epistemologies (e.g. Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend), and case-specific applications of sociological skills and knowledge that eschew

altogether larger theoretical knots.

In the second chapter, Giacomantonio furthers his account of the late modern age as a troublesome time obsessed with its own finitude, incapable of producing or believing in comprehensive theoretical systems, run by “the brutal imposition of economic interests” (45), pervaded by apocalyptic visions, anomie, alienation, numb hedonism, and deafened by the roaring sound of billions of meaningless words. If Marx, Simmel, Durkheim and Weber had already detected the malaise of the modern age, late modernity would seem to be in even poorer health.

The third chapter offers a tentative way out of the malaise: “sociology” (59). Its inspirers are Berger’s and Luckmann’s “social constructivism” (63), the “critical theory... of the Frankfurt School” (65) and Foucault’s “post-structuralism” (77). Together, these three inspirers provide Giacomantonio with a conception of human knowledge as irreducibly diverse—indeed polytheist—yet capable of constructive communication and caring. Thus, “articulation, openness, care” are the three pillars of Giacomantonio’s reconceptualisation of contemporary sociology as a sociology that, even if aware of its own epistemological limitations, can attempt to provide the modern mind with a modicum of social hence existential meaningfulness.

Giacomantonio’s account is most erudite. In particular, the first two chapters of his book provide the reader with an interesting map of several issues addressed by leading sociologists and social thinkers with regard to a number of troubling aspects of late modernity. The third chapter is somewhat perplexing, for sociology is outlined in so abstract terms that it is actually impossible to determine what it is. Indeed, abstractness characterises the whole book, which never descends from the heights of theoretical speculation by providing, for instance, a concrete example, a token of practical application, or a reference to a particular episode or event. Any reader that is not well-versed in social theory is bound to find this short book (109 pages, bibliography included) a daunting challenge. The expert reader, instead, will have more than a chance for some serious reflection upon contemporary sociology and late modernity.

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