On the concept of normativity in the social sciences.

I will, therefore, start from the heart of the matter: "ought" versus "is".

Ought/ought not

This dichotomy can be traced back to Hume who stated that:

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, `tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason.ⁱ

The so-called "Hume's law" states that: **an "ought" cannot be inferred from an "is".** The observation logically depends on a very clear and famous distinction:

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, **Relations of Ideas, and Matters of fact**. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstrably certain ... propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. ... Matters of fact, which are the second object of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction ... That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, that it will rise.ⁱⁱ

Using a modern wording, we can call this the dichotomy between **facts and values**. As Hilary Putnam(2002:7) posits:

Every one of you has heard someone ask, "Is that supposed to be a fact or a value judgement?" The presupposition of this "stumper" is that if it's a "value judgement" it can't possibly be a [statement of]" "fact"; and further presupposition of this is that value judgements are "subjective".ⁱⁱⁱ

So we have to cope with many different biases that are widely accepted in the scientific community: we must divide our thinking into non-overlapping fields: facts and values; we ought to avoid to infer an "ought" from an "is".

Habermas is well-known for his support of the clear-cut separation between *values*, which are contingent social products depending on different *life worlds*, and *norms*, that are universally valid statements of obligation.

So the *world* can be split into two parts: *facts* versus *values*; *is* versus *ought*, *norms* versus *values*; the first set of terms of these opposing couples is, in modern logical positivist wording, *falsifiable*, that is empirically verifiable, the second set is not, or to be more

Rationality and Reasonableness

In contemporary philosophy a strong critique has been developed against this dichotomy. The main argument is that while a distinction between these two sets of concepts is tenable, an opposition is not, because a close inquiry into the way in which any kind of science, also the *natural* sciences, works demonstrates that there is actually an entanglement between fact and value. For Dewey and the classical pragmatist school it was quite clear that in any kind of inquiry, value and normativity, all experience permeates because normative judgements – that is, *ethical* but also *judgements of "coherence", "plausibility", "reasonableness", "simplicity", and of what Dirac famously called the "beauty of hypothesis" (Putnam, 2002: 31)* - are essential to the practice of science itself. These are normative judgements because they state what ought to be in the case of reasoning.

(p. 159?)

The traditional theory, both in its empirical and rationalist forms, agrees in believing that all the propositions are purely declarative or utterances of what exists or subsists previously, and that thus declarative function is accomplished and definitive in itself. The position assumed here holds, in contrast, that the declarative propositions, both factually and conceptually (principles or laws), are intermediate means or instruments (material and procedural, respectively) for performing the controlled transformation of the material dealt with, which is the intentional end (and ultimate goal) of all the declarative affirmations and negations. It is not, it ought to be said, the production of purely declarative propositions that is being denied here. On the contrary, as will be seen in detail further on, the existence of such propositions expressing relations intercurrent only between the factual data, on the one hand, and the conceptual material on the other, is something that is expressly stated. The controversial point does not regard their being, but their function and interpretation. *Our position can be stated in the following way: each piece of controlled research and each* institution of a grounded assertion necessarily contains a practical factor, an activity that acts and operates by reshaping the preceding existential material, thus constituting the investigative problem. The fact that this conception is not embraced ad hoc but represents what certainly happens (that is to say, a true cause) at least in some cases, will be demonstrated by examining some forms of investigation of common sense whose aim is to determine what needs doing by means of a practical utterance.

And furthermore:

An evaluative proposition is not, therefore, just declarative either in respect to the facts or the conceptual material. The facts may be beyond all doubt; I have certainly made use of this object in the past; I can immediately make use of it now. Certain general principles can be accepted as "standard". But neither the facts, nor the standardised rules as they are presented are necessarily decisive in the evaluation that is actually carried out. It is a question of material and procedural means, respectively. Their applicability and their bearing in the present situation is to be determined by investigation, before one can carry out a well-founded evaluative estimate. It is clear that evaluative judgements of this kind are a case of practical judgement; or, more accurately, all the practical judgements are evaluations; being addressed to judging what needs doing on the basis of an estimate of the consequences of conditions that, in order to be existential nature, are in the process of operating in any case. The more the direct enjoyment, the loving, the admiring etc. is accentuated, as they are in themselves emotional springs in nature, the more they are modes of action (interaction). Thus, any decision concerning the commitment to them or indulging in them in a given situation is a practical judgement – a judgement on what should be done. An even more important point for logical theory is that these evaluative judgements (as has emerged from the latest discussions on judgement) concur in the formation of all the final judgements. There is no investigation that does not involve practical judgements. The man of science must continually evaluate the information that he draw from his own observations and from the findings of others; he must also evaluate what its influence is on the choice of the problems to be faced and the activities of observation, experimentation and calculation to be completed. While on the one hand he "knows"; in the sense of understanding, systems of conceptual materials, including the laws, he must, on the other hand, accomplish an appreciation of their value and applicability as conditions of the particular investigation undertaken. Probably, the main origin of the relative futility – or at any rate infertility – of the part dedicated to this subject in many logical texts that deal with the scientific method, lies in not having been able to forge a relation between the materials that are the object, of their exposition and the operations that have served to achieve them, as well as the further operations that they suggest, indicate and serve to direct.

If the social sciences alone are considered, then the criteria are even sharper:

It has been shown in the preceding treatise that there are judgements formed with explicit reference to the fact that they are an integral part of the reconstitution of the same existential material on which they are based in the last analysis. It has also been shown that the judgements in which this aspect has been expressed – and to be precise, the judgements of practical insight and the historical judgements -, are special cases in the reconstructive transformation of a preceding problematic subject, transformation which is the intentional aim and the objective consequence of the whole investigation. These considerations hold a particular importance for social investigation in its present condition. Indeed, the idea commonly prevails that such an investigation is genuinely scientific only in that it deliberately and systematically abstains from any relationship with the matter of social practice. The special teaching that the logic of the methods of physical investigation must provide for social inquiry is as a consequence that social investigation, in that it is inquiry, necessarily imports operations that existentially modify the actual conditions that, with their very existence, occasion the genuine investigation and provide its subject matter. Indeed, as has been seen, this teaching summarises the logical bearing of the experimental world (...). The rightness of the principle that condemns it and moral approval should be excluded from the operations with which they are obtained and the material data are pondered, and from those with which the concepts are instituted, apt to treating the data themselves. This is often converted, however, into the thesis that all the evaluation have to be excluded. This conversion comes about, however, only by means of a totally erroneous belief; and precisely the one that the blame and the moral approval in question is evaluative and is exhausted in the field of the evaluation. Indeed, they are not evaluative in the logical sense of evaluation. They are not even judgements in the logical sense of judgements. And this is because they rest upon a certain presupposition that there are some ends that are worth pursuing. Such a presupposition excludes the ends (consequences) from the field of investigation and reduces the investigation in the best of cases to the mutilated and deformed task of devising means for the realisation of already pre-defined objectives. The judgement that is actually a judgment (that satisfies the logical conditions of the judgement) institutes means and consequences (ends) in a closely interwoven relation between them. The ends must be judged (evaluated) on the basis of the means that one can use to achieve them, exactly to the same extent to which the existential materials must be judged (evaluated) in regard to their function of the material means for achieving a resolved situation. An intentional end is indeed itself a means, a precisely a procedural means.

But why are these points of view so diffuse? I mean, the empiricist and rationalist ideas in social sciences like economics?

In a wonderful book, Georgescu-Roegen (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971)^v set up an evolutionary analysis of science and he writes:

Especially after the astounding discovery of Neptune "at the tip of Leverrier's pen," spirits ran high in all disciplines, as one scientist after another announced his intention of becoming the Newton of his own science. Francois Magendie aspired to place even physiology "on the same sure footing" as mechanics". (...) No other science illustrates better than economics the impact of the enthusiasm for mechanistic epistemology upon its evolution. Does the transforming of economics into "a physico-mathematical science" require a measure of utility which escapes us? "Eh bien" - exclaimed Walras characteristically - "this difficulty is not insurmountable. Let us suppose that this measure exists, and we shall be able to give an exact and mathematical account "of the influence of utility on prices, etc. Unfortunately, this uncritical attitude has ever since constituted the distinct flavor of mathematical economics. In view of the fact that theoretical science is a living organism, it would not be exaggerating to say that this attitude is tantamount to planning a fish hatchery in a moist flower bed. (1971:39-40)

An economist very keen on mathematics such as Vivian Walsh, going through a critical assessment of the model of rationality stemming from the utility function, reached the same conclusion on the risks coming from this arithmomorphic attitude of economics between the end of the 19th and the late 20th centuries.

Georgescu-Roegen and Walsh, in different historical periods – the 1970s as opposed to the 1990s – pointed out a very similar scheme of criticism – very dominant in part of today's social science theorists- that is, in Georgescu-Roegen's wording:

Opposition to Walras' and Jevons' claim that "economics, if it is to be a science at all, must be a mathematical science", has not failed to manifest itself. But, in my opinion, during the ensuing controversies swords have not been crossed over the crucial issue. For I believe that what social sciences, nay, all sciences need is not so much a new Galileo or a new Newton as a new Aristotle who would prescribe new rules for handling those notions that Logic a cannot deal with. (1971:41)

The problem, according to Georgescu-Roegen, is the logical positivist claim that is the model of rationality. This is the starting point of Walsh's criticism.

Within a more philosophical perspective, Toulmin (2001)^{v1} has argued:

The speculative pursuit of knowledge has played a central part in human culture for 2,500 years and more. From early on, the word "philosophy" referred to the systematic and methodical treatment of any subject. In this sense, it covered the whole range of inquiries that lent themselves to systematic investigation and debate, regardless of whether the twentieth century would classify them as Science and Technology or not. (...) In all these human activities "reasons" play a central part. They may be occasioned by particular events, the specific aims of individual actions, the goals of social policy, the factors responsible for successes or failures, the biological and physical causes of effects or phenomena, the striking features of an art object, the style or delivery of a speech; and a dozen other things. And, for more than two thousand vears, all such activities were given equal consideration. No field of investigation or speculation was dismissed as intrinsically unphilosophical. A few, like astrology, might prove to be ineffective, but that was another matter. From the mid-17th century on, however, an imbalance began to develop. Certain methods of inquiry and subjects were seen as philosophically serious or "rational" in a way that others were not. As a result, authority came to attach particularly to scientific and technical inquiries that put those methods to use. Instead of a free-for-all of ideas and speculations-a competition for attention across all realms of inquiry-there was a hierarchy of prestige, so that investigations and activities were ordered with an eye to certain intellectual demands. Beside the rationality of astronomy and geometry, the reasonableness of narratives came to seem a soft-centered notion, lacking a solid basis in philosophical theory, let alone substantive scientific support. Issues of formal consistency and deductive proof thus came to have a special prestige, and achieved a kind of certainty that other kinds

of opinions could never claim. It had not always been so. In mapping the reach of philosophy and human reason, the contrast between the reasonable and the rational is only one of half a dozen differences in our methods of inquiry. The contrast between the reasonableness of narratives and the rigor of formal proofs, between autobiography and geometry, is the contrast between the "soundness" of substantive argumentation, which has the body and force needed to carry conviction, and the "validity" of formal arguments, whose conclusions are determined by the starting points from which they are deduced. (2001:14-15)

When human affairs are at stake the relationship between reflective thinking and values is of mutual interdependence. As Gunnar Myrdal wrote in 1956:

It is impossible to study social reality if not from the standpoint of human ideals. A "disinterested social science" has never existed and cannot ever exist, for logical reasons. The value connotation of the most important concepts that we make use of represents our interest in a given topic, giving a direction to our thoughts and meaningfulness to our conclusions. It poses questions without which there are no answers. The recognition that our very own concepts are value-laden, implies that they cannot be defined in terms other than those of political evaluations. And it is precisely for reasons of scientific rigour that these evaluations should be made explicit.vii

In conclusion, social science cannot be value-free but only value-aware.

Economics and utility function

We can now shift our focus on economics because in this field of science the process that Georgescu-Roegen (1971: 79-83) named "Aritmomorphism", that is the identification of science with the possibility of dealing with measurable attributes, can be traced back very easily.

As Walsh (1996)^{viii} argued:

We would not ordinarily say that a choice or action was rational but unreasonable, nor that it was reasonable but irresponsible, nor that it was responsible but unwise, nor that it was wise but morally indefensible. Our ordinary concept of rationality is embedded in a delicate fabric of interconnected ideas which can be understood only in the context of the family of uses of words and expressions which are employed in making, explaining, and defending rationality claims. The concept of rationality in formal, axiomatized economic theory is not like this; it can be given a formal definition. A "rational agent" in such a model is simply one who obeys certain axioms an that is the end of it.(1996:1)

But how and when was this strong assumption on rationality defined in Economics? Here is Walsh once again:

The newly debated concept of rationality perhaps first became widely known among English-speaking economic theorists with Lord Robbins's famous Essay (1932) [An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science, London, Macmillan, Author's note](...)Rationality was now cut down to the exercise of efficiency in the allocation of scarce means towards the attainment of "given" and unexamined ends. It was stipulated that the ends were not the concern of the economic "scientist": "economic science", it was claimed, was a wholly value-free exercise. (...) This concept of utility had been borrowed from 19th-century utilitarian philosophy, and the account of rationality in terms of utility was never able to outgrow some of its ancestral traits, despite the austere axiomatic garb in which it was eventually clothed in the 1950s.(1996: 3)

The contemporary criticism of the maximisation of the utility function stems directly from Dewey:

When happiness is conceived of as an aggregate of states of feeling, these are regarded as homogeneous in quality, different from one another only in intensity and duration. Their

qualitative differences are not intrinsic, but are due to the different objects with which they are associated (as pleasure of hearing, or vision). Hence they disappear when the pleasure is taken by itself as an end. (Dewey, 1978).

Are pleasures, utility or whatsoever homogeneous in the actual world?

Contemporary theorists go back to Aristotle for whom the good is to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete (Nicomachean Ethics 1,6,1098a 15-20), but it is multifaceted because with those who identify happiness with virtue or some one virtue our account is in harmony; for to virtue belongs virtuous activity. But it makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in a disposition or in activity. For a disposition may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well. (1,9,1098 b 30), and the good therefore comes from a full range of activities for all these properties belong to the best activities; and these, or one- the best- of these, we identify with happiness. Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions, we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness, such as good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with virtue. (1,9,1099a) and 1099 b 1-5).

More generally, the criticism of this idea of rationality in contemporary economic theory is largely due to Amartya Sen, but it goes back to Aristotle's claim on the critical role of *external goods* to attain a person's ethical objectives, and Smith who, according to Amartya Sen, being a professor of moral philosophy and a pioneering economist, *did not in fact lead a life of spectacular schizophrenia*. Economics was born as field of *philosophia moralis* and it was not by chance that Adam Smith was a professor of *philosophia moralis*. The idea that the wealth of nations was nothing but a normative model for achieving a political objective came from his epistemological world. As John Maynard Keynes, for instance, pointed out:

Perhaps the economists' main task at this time is to distinguish anew the government agenda from the non-agenda; and the task related to policy-making is to devise forms of government, within the scope of democracy, that are capable of fulfilling the agenda (...) (Keynes, 1926)^{ix}

The concept of *capabilities*, stemming from Dewey and somehow "reinvented" by Amartya Sen, captures some of the ancient moral themes and can be traced back to Aristotle, Smith and Marx. The concept of capabilities, and the statement that there is a social obligation to their development for each individual, as part of the economic theory, represents a real breakthrough in neo-classical economics.

Situation/ Context

If a different paradigm of rationality is to be considered, then the "context" or, as Toulmin (2001:21) suggests, the "situation" within which something occurs should be taken into consideration. It means coming back to what "Aristotle recommended in the Nichomachean Ethics. "The Good", Aristotle said, "has no universal form, regardless of the subject matter or situation"" (Toulmin 1990: 31-32). In a modern wording the recovery, in the analysis of social and economic development, of complexity as an analytical dimension leads us to consider, irrespective of the disciplinary fields and according to the different theoretical approaches shared in the different disciplinary fields (e.g. Institutionalism), the variety and

the meaning of *context/situation*. The term *context* is too generic for the use we have to make of it and thus requires some specification. Indeed, in the literature of the last two decades, the channelling together of different approaches and disciplines has allowed us to isolate some concepts that, generated within the scope of specific disciplines, have been extended to other disciplinary fields. We are not referring to the metaphorical use^x of specific concepts, generally of little use, but to a full-blown work of 'translation' of specific concepts into equally specific concepts; these concepts benefit, as information technologists might say, from a certain degree of 'portability', and are precious because they allow for multi-disciplinary analyses of complex arguments. The concepts we are referring to in this case are those of the transactional and contextual environmentxi. The transactional environment of an organisation is the one with which it interacts in carrying on its primary task; however, there is also a broader ambient, beyond the ambient relating to the task, which can be called 'contextual ambient' or the situation within which each organisation operates. Now, whereas there is larger consensus as to the relationship between business organisation and transactional ambient, the relationship with the broader ambient is seen indiscriminately as background and, at most, the place of possible constraints on the business activity. In the past few years, there have been contributions coming from the most diverse disciplinary fields - ecology, economics and sociology with an Institutionalist orientation, the Italian tradition of analysis of districts, etc. - a reassessment of the salience of the contextual ambient which appears to be anything but undifferentiated and with a much more strategic role than that of setting constraints. As Becattini and Rullani state: "In actual fact, production is an intrinsically situated process. Each location mobilises in production its own natural conformation, its own history, its own culture, its own social organisation: all resources and circumstances that, taken in their combination, are different from the ones that can be mobilised from any other place. (...) The specificity of the local systems regards the way in which the economics of the enterprise system is integrated into (and is nourished by) its environmental backdrop. In fact, it is the local milieu, the arrival point of a natural and human history, which supplies the productive organisation with some essential inputs, such as labour, entrepreneurship, the material and immaterial infrastructures, the social culture and the institutional organisation (...), producing does not just mean transforming a set of inputs (data) into an output (end-product) according to given technical processes in a given time-span, but also means reproducing the material and human premises from which the process itself starts off. The production of the goods includes the social reproduction of the productive organism: a really 'complete' productive process should co-produce, together with the goods, the values, the know-how, the institutions and the natural ambient that serve to perpetuate it."xii In fact, it is at this level which some people call meso level - that the selection is determined between the different sets of strategic variables, all theoretically equi-probable.

The current argument is that the process of globalisation jeopardises the role of the local situation. As Saskia Sassen (2003: 1-2) has pointed out, in the process of globalisation there are "two distinct sets of dynamics". One regards the formation of "explicitly global institutions and processes" but the second set "does not necessarily scale at the global level as such, yet, I argue, is part of globalization. These processes take place deep inside territories and institutional domains that have largely been constructed in national terms in much, though by no means all, of the world. What makes these processes part of globalization even though localized in national indeed subnational settings, is that they involve trasnsboundary networks and formations connecting multiple local or "national" processes and actors, or involve the recurrence of particular issues or dynamics in a growing number of countries. (...) Geography, more than any other of the social sciences, today has contributed to a critical stance toward scale, recognizing the historicity of scales and resisting the reification of the national scale so present in most of social sciences, but also alerting us to the risk of exclusively scalar analytics that disregard the thick and

particularistic forces that are part of theses dynamics (e.g. Amin, 2002; Howitt, 1993; Cox, 1998)."

So, once again, the paradigm of rationality should take into consideration the local dimension not only as a scalar dimension but as such that should be inquired because it is a *situation*, that is an idiosyncratic constellation of social dynamics.

Some concluding remarks

In an empirical research we are not collecting facts but collecting facts according to a theory and for a purpose, so we are working with values and norms. We have to illustrate our values and norms.

We cannot simply induce from the facts a set of concepts and deduce policies from this set. On the contrary, we are selecting what is relevant to support our claim of a strategic role for low-tech industries in Europe because of the intrinsic value we attach to the positive social role of low-tech industries. As a matter of fact, our main concern is about a positive European social landscape; our problem is to argue and to support, based on the empirical research, the possibility of such a positive sum game. This is the *demostrandum*.

We can include any kind of report including narratives and evaluation coming from interviews, discussion groups and whatever, as part of our knowledge and understanding of the situation we are inquiring into. This part is of the same heuristic value, on an epistemic ground, as the other sources of knowledge. This specific source of knowledge is very relevant in a multidimensional and complex situation in which people must deliberate on a very open and unclear environment.

We have to reduce the complexity and multidimensional pattern of an actual case but this must be done, on the grounds of a theoretical hypothesis and without *scotomising*, from the *picture* of the situation, the system of purposeful actions and strategies as well as of values at stake for the main actors, or the stakeholders, or whatever wording is used.

We have to situate the low-tech industries; this implies the comprehending the mesh of social and institutional relationships embedding these industries; the local dimension must be considered not in opposition to the global trends but as a dialectical part of a complex dynamic of reciprocal determination.

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