

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY IN SOCIO-HUMAN SCIENCES

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-Review-

Traian Rotariu, Methodological Foundations of Social Sciences,
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Recently, the literature consecrated to research methodology in social sciences has been complemented with a remarkable work written by Traian Rotariu, a professor at the University “Babes-Bolyai” in Cluj-Napoca.

Structured in six chapters, the book approached a theme of great actuality, which regards not only the aspects pertaining to the decoding of the elements typical of socio-human research, but also the means of obtaining ‘reasonable’ knowledge in this domain.

These aspects are discussed by the author from the very first pages of his work, showing that the book is centered on the disputes which take place “in the field of social disciplines, mainly regarding their contribution to the acknowledgement of a specific reality, a reality built by people, represented by a series of super-individual aspects, inter-human relationships, but also of experiences, aspirations, feelings, representations or beliefs which are particular to each being or collectivity at a given time” (p.11).

In the former and latter sections of the book, the author approaches a series of his older preoccupations in the field of scientific research methodology. Yet, the aspects which are worthy of particular attention are the elements of novelty in the evaluation of the methods of gathering information in social sciences, as well as the thoroughness of aspects connected to: the level of structuring methods, the advantages and limits of research methods, the precautions regarding the correctness and accuracy of the information, the difficulties regarding the measuring and interpretation of certain events according to the context, the means of testing and validating opinion questionnaires, the errors owed to the activity of interview operators, the types of errors which originate from the registration of data or those connected to the interpretation of certain individual or group behaviors.

New aspects can also be found in the first section, where the author examines particularities of sociological research such as: the distinction between the elements of the realities that needs to be known and the knowing subject, the limited possibility of formulating general theories, the need to

define clearly the diverse undertones involved by the relationship between the theory and the practice of social research, signaling the different meanings which may be attributed to certain concepts, identifying the influences of the economic, political, social and educational context, the need to argue the methods and techniques used in one research or another, as well as the cognitive status of the different forms of social constructivism.

The following sections analyze the fundamental thematic lines of the relationship between quantitative and qualitative in researching socio-human sciences, the individualism-holism relationship, the duality of concepts like realism-constructivism, ending with the controversies of the relationship between methodological monism and methodological dualism.

In this regard, the Clujean professor considers that the terms “quantitative” and “qualitative” are used “to characterize the means of expressing primary (and quasi-primary) data obtained from the empirical research of the social reality, a reality regarded from its multiple forms, starting with the objectified one in institutions, norms, rules etc., passing through through macro-social phenomena, decreasing then to the collective and individual behaviors and reaching all the way to the subjective reality, pertaining to the universe of experiences, feelings, processes, beliefs etc., which we encounter at the level of each individual” (p.46).

Based on the numerous examples we find in this text, certain ideas are formulated which we can summarize in the following sentences: in social research, the quantitative and the qualitative are not excluded; the quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches are not equivalent; the qualitative and quantitative information or analyses do not have similar importance; neither one of the two research methods is blamable, as they complete each other.

Talking about legitimate and illegitimate extensions of the terms mentioned above, the author concludes that the expression “the qualitative research is a linguistic invention” which covers older or more recent concepts about the classical division between natural and social sciences. His opinion is that “there is no qualitative research, only research with qualitative means which satisfy the basic demands of the scientific discourse and others which are stories about stories or even about facts, but whose veracity cannot be confirmed” (p.70).

From the ample analysis which he makes to the individualism-holism relationship in the third section, I will first of all highlight the delimitation of the methodological individualism from other forms of holism. In this regard, the author systematizes the following discourses of individualism: the factual one (an objective process which consists in the “weakening” of the individual’s dependence on the group); the moral one (which appreciates

positively and which supports the individual's emancipation from the group or the community); the ontological one (which regards the relations of existence between the individual and society, supporting the priority of the individual over the social); the methodological one (which involves the need to start from the individuals in order to understand social phenomena). In the same context with individualism, holism involves the need to start from the social system and from its functioning logic, the individual actions being an integral explanation only within such a perspective. The indirect consequence is that the human individual needs to be regarded as being modeled by the social system, each social entity (group, institution, society) being considered a distinct whole, a fact which can only be understood by studying the individual elements that compose it.

Moving the discussion on a methodological level, Traian Rotariu develops an interesting comment regarding the assumptions of methodological individualism, certain themes being relevant in this regard: the individualist paradigm as a means of expression, the role of understanding and interpretation for the explanation of social phenomena, the interdependence between human actions and social contexts, social, functional and cultural constraints which intervene in the adjustment of human behaviors, the principles of methodological individualism and the resorts of rational actions.

At the end of the comparative analysis of the relation between methodological individualism and methodological holism, the author reaches a conclusion according to which "the explanation of social phenomena – not of the actions of a given individual – requires: (i) the description of the context in which they take place; (ii) understanding the actions of the individuals who take part in them; (iii) constituting systems of relations of causality, dependence, influence etc. between social phenomena" (p.112).

A distinct space in the structure of the work is devoted to a controversy which became classical between social realism and constitutionalism. After analyzing the different theses of realism and undertones it involves, the author focuses upon social constructivism (p.125 and the fol.) regarded from an ontological perspective (which states that the "strong" elements of the social are socially constituted, "namely appeared in historic practice of self creation of society") and the perspective of cognitive constructivism (which states that "all the aspects of knowing are constructions generated by the social context where they take place").

Traian Rotariu does not only stop at the discussion of different perspectives, but also questions numerous correlations which appear between concepts and expressions such as: social reality, social constitution, conscious human activity, a system of theoretical and explicative knowledge,

a system of practical and applicable knowledge, weak social constructivism, criteria of validating objectivity, cognitive relativism, the conventional character of concepts, defining the situation and its interpretation etc.

The adept of a rational and flexible position, the author wishes to mention that “the existence and reality of individual physical objectives have a character which is different from the existence and reality of concepts or typologies. The latter are obviously constructions of human thinking, namely the result of a basic operation in the complex processes of knowing (generalization etc.) and that their formation and use are marked by social contexts. It seems to me true that they have, for this reason, they have a rather contingent character, in the way that their apparition and use depend on certain circumstances where human activities take place” (p.135).

On a similar level, the author also discusses the methodological monism – methodological dualism dichotomy, phrases which eventually denominate “two methodological traditions constituted along the passing of time, in connection with the way in which socio-human disciplines can aspire to the status of sciences” (p.153). After mentioning the numerous conceptions regarding “scientific knowing and the elements which contribute to its edification among social sciences, Traian Rotariu states that these sciences are constituted on the principles of methodological pluralism, that this involves a merger between the “naturalistic” vision and the comprehensive-interpretative one, and the understanding and interpretation of the subjects’ behaviors do not replace the explanation of the social phenomena, events and processes.

The author does not miss the opportunity to formulate certain minimal conditions which should be assumed by the methodological pluralism pertaining to the research of the social (pp.177-178), such as: the general may also take “weaker” forms, as laws become tendencies; human actions and their results cannot be regarded as “singular” as there is a repeatability which may be assimilated to the law; repeatability is founded on the common “social frameworks” where the individuals activate and on the relative stability of the systems of norms and values interiorized by the individuals in the process of socialization; “comprehension” is indispensable for the “understanding” of human actions and for their “explanation”; the methods of knowing typical to social sciences must also be adapted in order to represent the interpretative-comprehensive behaviors; although the involvement of the subject is more significant within comprehensive knowing, this does not mean that subjectivity replaces the objectivity of knowing, because the demands of objectivity and repeatability remain available.

Although there are also other aspects which would be worth discussed, I will conclude that the analysis carried on in the book we are

dealing with is characterized by depth and clarity, the ideas and theses enunciated are thoroughly supported by arguments, and the approach perspective depends on numerous elements of originality. All of these make professor Traian Rotariu's book a work of reference in the field of socio-human sciences in our country, which is one reason why I strongly recommend it to researchers, professors, students and all of the other people who are interested in getting familiar with these areas of social reality.