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HISTORICAL BASIS OF SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

“Facts are secret, opinion is free.”

C. P. Scott

The key pillar of every science, besides of determining the research subject, is the precise defining of the approach and manner in which the new knowledge shall be produced, and which shall be used to further advance the existing knowledge fund of the same. Science, as a dynamic category, requires continuous advancement, as well as continuous re-exploring of the already established scientific base. In fact, the methodology includes the theory or the upholding concepts of the given science, approach and manner of collection of data, their processing, reasoning and, of course, the answer to the posed research question and confirmation or refusal of the initial presumption on the researched topic (thesis). Social methodology is a separate scientific discipline which is based on sociology and for which the knowledge of the other particularly “related” scientific disciplines is of great importance. Accordingly, it significantly draws from the social or humanistic sciences; from the history in this specific case.

The main subject of this paper is the review of the historical base of the sociological methodology. Actually, it poses the question on the usage of the historical knowledge in the sociological research indicating that the specialisation of scientific disciplines should be further extended with their increased complementarity. However, it does not mean that the author of this paper suggests that the specialisation of scientific disciplines should be avoided, but that it should be contextualised, due to the fact that the related disciplines can only support the perception of the defined topic. It is very important for the specific scientific disciplines to “meet” each other in that inter-space, where each of them shall provide its frame and manner of perception of the given topic. In that context, interdisciplinarity is an

approach which leads towards the application of knowledge and methods of two or more sciences in the study of a particular phenomenon.

The paper shall mainly focus on two segments of the history usage in the sociological methodology. First, it shall indicate the usage of history in the creation of the research outline. Afterwards it shall indicate the usage of history in the specific strategies (methods) of research. Within the founding of theoretical concepts of sociology, the influence of the historical science is rather important; however, it shall not be elaborated in this context.

Sociology vis-à-vis history

History as human science and sociology as general social science have similar methodological research frames, as well as numerous specifics which make and clearly establish the “borders” between them. Both history and sociology have the “same subject”, but each of them studies it in own aspects and each needs the knowledge of the other science. In that context, it is said that history and sociology are complementary sciences. History deals with the past of the society, and sociology deals with the society itself in general and specific terms (while not losing sight of its historical basis). Their complementarity develops as of the creation of sociology¹ and is further followed through the sociology development as special scientific discipline. Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, believed that the historical method is its “main method, since the most important theoretical task of the sociology is to determine the general course of history”.²

The author believes that history should be increasingly used in the contemporary sociological research while separating “what of the historical material” shall be used and “how it” shall be used. It should be emphasised that it is very important to indicate whether history shall be used as secondary source of data, i.e. as “ready product” by the historians; then, whether the author of the sociological research shall make their own analysis of the collected history material by the historian or they shall themselves collect, select and analyse the historical material or these approaches shall be combined. One shall have to taken into consideration that the usage of history in the contemporary sociological research sometimes causes “confusion” and controversies, that is, it raises questions pertaining to various ethical dilemmas. The existence of several truths, and

¹ One should not forget that sociology, as a separate scientific discipline, was created more than two centuries ago, unlike history, which is much more “older”, and it is particularly important to have in mind that history was rather important for the creation of sociology as separate social science.

² Milić, Vojin, *Sociološki metod*, (Beograd: Nolit, 1978), p. 745

with that, of multiple perceptions of the events in the more distant and especially in the closer history additionally encumbers the “usage” of history in the contemporary sociological research. The archiving of documents which are accessed in various ways is, of course, a very important segment. One should not forget the fact regarding the destruction of numerous documents which are not in favour of certain historical actors in reference with a certain event or events, up to the strictly individualised and, of course, subjective interpretation of the same. Sometimes the possible outcome is the representation of “the historical truth as consensus” or as joint “turning a blind eye” or “acknowledgment” of certain fact, etc. There are numerous questions and controversies appearing on the surface in the contemporary sociological research, especially when the subject are topics regarding conflicts, tolerance, political institutions and events, family values, social inclusion, etc. Therefore, it is very important to take into consideration the various challenges pertaining to the historical material in the sociological analysis.

While reviewing the relation of sociology and history, one should not forget the fact that in certain periods there is significant “obsession” of the sociologists with history, while in others, it is “lacking”.³ The major questions of sociology regarding the society development stages, which were key during its creation, cannot be answered without having in mind the rich scientific base of the history science. Nevertheless, the gradual transition of the theories from a large scale to medium and micro level in general means reduction of the volume of usage of history in sociology; however, the direct or indirect perceptions of the history were taken into consideration on an almost continuous basis. We can say that when talking about family, religion, state etc., there is no sociology textbook which does point to their historical dimension by appropriately reasoning their development in the past. However, what is specific for the sociology is the fact that it basically uses the knowledge of history so as to complete the historical frame in terms of how they have developed and what is the extent of their impact on the current stage or, potentially, to establish the outlines or envisage the future development of the researched phenomenon. Or as Edward Carr would say: “Let us leave the borders between sociology and history open for two-way traffic.” The close “relations” between sociology

³ Tilly analysing the events in history and sociology underlines that „sociologists and historians at large remain woefully ignorant of each other’s sources, methods, models, ideas, and discoveries“ – Charles Tilly, *Historical Sociology*, Article for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, (Columbia University: 29 June 1999), p. 6756.

and history are mostly reflected in the establishment and development of the historical sociology as separate sociological discipline.

Historical Sociology

The term historical sociology refers to “sociological analysis based on historical data sources—either primary (such as original documents in archives) or secondary (the written history produced by historians themselves)”.⁴ Historical sociology, regarding its methodological frame, significantly deviates from the establishment of, let’s say, the “standard sociological methodology”, since one cannot simply label or monitor the behaviour of the actors on the current social scene. What usually makes the core of the methodological approach of the historical sociology is the simple usage of non-invasive research methods. Since the research subjects are the past events, it is rather logical to found the research on the corpus of remains from those periods. In that context, sociological researches are separated according to the database on which the same are based, whether the subject are data obtained directly from the monitoring on site or the issue refers to analysis of data obtained through indirect analysis of the past remains.

“Historical sociologists sought to connect the two through serious investigation of other settings than the ones they lived in. During the twentieth century, historical sociology has differentiated into four rather different pursuits. We might call them *social criticism*, *pattern identification*, *scope extension*, and *process analysis*. All are legitimate, effective forms of sociological analysis. They differ substantially, however, in aims, procedures, and results.”⁵

Another important aspect which is frequently mentioned is the fact that sociologists simply explain and interpret everything that happened in the past by looking through the prism, to a larger or to a smaller extent, of the present times in which they exist. That is also the case when cultures or communities to which the researcher does not belong are being researched. That also happens with history, as Edward Hallett Carr would say “the historian is of his own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence.”⁶

⁴ Gordon Marshal, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 1988, www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-historicalsociology.html. Accessed on 04.05.2014.

⁵ Charles Tilly, *Historical Sociology*, Article for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, p. 6753.

⁶ Edward Hallet Carr, *What is history?* (Penguin Books, 1987), p. 24.

Authenticity and representation of the research sample, regardless whether the issue is a quantitative or qualitative research strategy, is of great importance. It is impossible to make a sample if there is no systematic manner of archiving of documents or records from the past times. Therefore, history is often used to illustrate certain theories or concepts.

In the review of historical sociology, Marshall emphasises the fact that „extant historical data cannot directly answer the questions which are asked of them by the sociologist“,⁷ since those data cannot capture the positions, contemplation or simply the motives for a certain type of action. It is usual to use secondary data sources in the sociological researches, as static documents, as well as data from other researches, diaries and similar records; however, when talking about the research of the past, the same represent an important source of data, although it has to be emphasised that they are not, by themselves, sufficient for the purposes of complete elaboration and appropriate answer to the posed research questions.

Historical sociology, as separate sociological discipline, exists for a longer period of time, and is being taught at several universities. The opus of this field mainly represents a story of a successful integration of the usage of historical material in sociological research.⁸ In theme aspects, the historical sociology is increasingly being focused on the key social phenomena, such as the state, political systems, classes, and similar.

Historical Foundations of Sociological Methodology

The key thread throughout the paper is the review of historical basis of the sociological methodology, as an entirety, but also through separation of segments where it has specific meaning. At the same time, the author of this paper does not intend to indicate all segments, but the objective is to animate this question and to turn the attention to the fact that the usage of the historical material is of significant importance for the sociological methodology, and that certain topics are almost impossible to be studied without making a thorough insight in the history, and vice versa, and sociological analysis based on historical scientific records can shed significant light on the historical events and, in particular, to their later impact.

⁷ www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-historicalsociology.html

⁸ In the classical works of this scientific discipline, the following can be mentioned: : Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (1974,1980), Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (1986), Theda Skocpol *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). Works are given in the order taken from www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-historicalsociology.html.

The historical basis of the sociological methodology shall be reviewed through the research designs and the research methods or strategies.

I. Research Designs

Having in mind the fact that “the research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data”,⁹ it also provides data on the basic features and the course of the research process as well as drawing conclusions of the same. There are several research designs according to which sociological research is carried out, and, of course, the related social sciences. The degree and volume of usage of history depends on the type of the research design.

The longitudinal approach in the sociological research means following of a particular social phenomenon in several time occasions, with the same research instruments and, of course, on the same research sample. Carrying out of several researches with the same instruments and the on same sample creates a database which can be used to see the development course of the phenomena, what they were like in the closer or more distant past and in the modern society. Research is being carried out, data are collected and analysis is made what it was like in the “closer past” in order to determine as “precise” as possible the development tendency or phases of the researched phenomenon. In the longitudinal study, regardless whether it is panel-study or cohort-study, the outline envisages analysing of the phenomenon in different time periods or in several returns. Such study of the social phenomenon requires a creation of a database which has its own “history” and from which one can deduce the relevant conclusions. Longitudinal studies on crime, situation in households, etc., were carried out. Longitudinal studies can be made in several countries or regions, so the results and conclusions can be additionally compared.

Besides of the longitudinal studies, the historical fragment is significantly important in the case studies in which the detailed study of the given phenomenon in given context should also contain its historical dimension. Regardless whether we are talking about a community or an individual certain religion, country, one or one type of families, political institutions and similar, it is very important for each case to indicate its history, so as to point to its specificity and its development. Newman underlines that “case studies can elaborate historical processes and specify concrete historical details”.¹⁰ Shaw’s¹¹ “jack-roller” study is a rather famous

⁹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 46.

¹⁰ Lawrence Neuman, *Basics of Social Research – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, (University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, 2006), p. 306. He says during the

case study. The study is based on the usage of data obtained with the method of qualitative interview of the life history of that person. This method of collection of data is also called a biographical method. The typology of case studies also mentions the longitudinal case type. This research design is characterised by the fact that it can be researched in several time period.

The comparative research design, which is applied in the sociological research, refers to comparisons of a given phenomenon in different environments (cultures) or in different development phases, “using more or less identical methods”.¹² When talking about different development phases (models, schemes, phases, ideal types), it is necessary to consult the rich historical material. The researched social phenomenon can be better understood if contrasting cases are compared, and data for the same can also be collected by using quantitative and qualitative methods or by combined methods.

This design is of particular importance for the sociological methodology since “nothing can be more useful for the sociologist than the good comparison, because they can never make experiments as their colleagues from the non-social sciences”.¹³ In fact, “comparative and historical research is the examination of societies (or other social units) over time and in comparison with one another.”¹⁴ The key benchmark of the comparative research design is “its ability to allow the distinguishing characteristics of two or more cases to act as a springboard for theoretical reflections about contrasting findings.”¹⁵

For the purposes of realisation of this research design, one can use the ready historical analysis of the collected material or make an additional historical analysis; however, it is essential to indicate that it is made on the basis of the discovered (known) available historical remains from the past. The comparison is made on a sample of two or several events or in two or several communities. The comparison is frequently made so as to arrive to the differences, to what is assumed that could have had significant possible impact on the event course (such as the role of a certain leader, certain economic indicators, external factors, etc.).

description of the research of Kathleen Blee (*Women of the Klan*) “historical photographs, sketches and maps in the book give readers a feel for the topic.”

¹¹ Shaw R. Clifford, *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story*, (University of Chicago Press: Phoenix Books, Chicago, 1966).

¹² Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 72.

¹³ Anri Mandra, *Osnovi sociologije*, (Univerzitet Crne Gore, Podgorica 2001), p. 14.

¹⁴ Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, (Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), p. 375.

¹⁵ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 75.

The term historical research is often used in various contexts of social sciences. Historical research is realised in order to explore the past “usually in one culture (e.g., periods, epochs, ages, eras, etc.) for sequence and comparison.”¹⁶ Specific is the fact that historical research means several phases which commence by determining or precise defining of the topic. This is followed by the period of data collection, their formal and logical control, with everything that does not fit in the frame left aside. The collected historical documentation is afterwards classified and appropriately processed (analysed). What makes the core of advantages of this method or approach is the fact that this method belongs to the group of **unobtrusive methods since the person who collects them cannot influence their creation. While using this method, one can encounter problems pertaining to the representation and authenticity of historical documents. The analysis of historical documents can be quantitative and qualitative. Whereas the analysis and processing of diaries, records of life and wide spectrum of records is being carried out mainly by using qualitative methods.**

II. Research Methods or Strategies

The research methods, that is, the manners for collection of data based on which the social phenomenon is sociology is later elaborated, are usually divided into quantitative, qualitative and combined. Within the spectrum of quantitative methods, such as the survey, structured interview, structured monitoring, analysis of content and secondary analysis and official statistic, it is important to indicate that on the base of determining the sample, as well as the other parameters (reliability, validity), the basis for making generalisations on the researched phenomenon are being created.

The quantitative research methods such as the analysis of the content and, in particular the secondary analysis of the already collected data (for example in the historical research) and of course the official statistics, as well as the other documents (from archives, museums...) significantly fill in the historical base of sociological research. These methods are also called unobtrusive (nonreactive) since the same are realised by using ready data bases which were collected in different periods and for the purposes of realisation of different objectives. Newman indicates the example of “researchers have examined family portraits in different historical eras to see how gender relations within the family are

¹⁶ Lawrence Neuman, *Basics of Social Research – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, p. 310.

reflected in seating patterns.”¹⁷ The research of different phenomena within a longer time period shall point to the regularities in which the same occur, when they are most expressed and, of course, the main reasons for them. The considerable data bases¹⁸ are abundant with data that portray the various historical periods and offer an excellent opportunity for realisation of additional longitudinal and comparative analysis, since the same are carried out on large territories or in several countries.

Their advantage is that the sociological research is carried out on ready data bases, which sometimes due to the re-analysis can reveal certain vagueness, especially in terms of their interpretation, the same are collected for various purposes and the contemporary research must be limited to those issues that have already been processed. Therefore, problems of the type “absence of key variables”¹⁹ or “nonreactive variables often have weaker validity because they do not measure the construct of interest”²⁰ might occur.

Sociological research which uses qualitative methods can refer to analysis of documents as data sources, as well as to the other qualitative techniques which absorb the historical dimension of the researched phenomenon. For example, that is the case with the qualitative interview, more specifically, to the life history and oral history interviewing. Life history interview is a kind of unstructured interview and it is related to the life history method, also known as biographical method.²¹ This type of interview provides data on the entire life course of the respondent or of the group of respondents, but it refers to his/her or their subjective views, understanding and interpretation of events through which he/she or they have passed. Oscar Lewis’ “The Children of Sanchez”: Autobiography of a Mexican Family²² (1961), is a good example for a study on this type of interviewing, and he calls this method multiple autobiographies.

The qualitative analysis in the sociological studies pertains to the following types of documents: “personal documents in both form (such as

¹⁷ Lawrence Neuman, *Basics of Social Research – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, p. 225.

¹⁸ See: British Crime Survey (<http://pgil.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/British-measuring-Crime-for-Last-25-years.pdf> - accessed on 11.04.2014) or European Social Survey (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> accessed on 17.04.2014) or World Values Survey (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp> - accessed on 17.04.2014).

¹⁹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 317.

²⁰ Lawrence Neuman, *Basics of Social Research – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, p. 245-6.

²¹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 488-9.

²² Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, (Vintage Books, 1961).

diaries and letters) and visual form (photographs); official documents deriving from the state (such as public inquiries); official documents deriving from private sources (such as documents produced by organizations); mass-media outputs and virtual outputs, such as Internet resources.²³

Diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, letters, photographs, official documents, personal documents, and in the recent period, the significant spectrum of virtual documents, represent a rather important source for historical research, which can be abundant with data and be important for the sociological research. In this context, it is important to indicate that within the sociological qualitative research, the processing of this group of documents can be made in three manners, as follows: qualitative content analysis; semiotics and hermeneutics. These three approaches can significantly enrich the historical base of the sociological research or a separate historical-sociological analysis of a certain social phenomenon can be developed.

The sociological research based on combined research methods may combine the various quantitative and qualitative methods and enrich the historical base of the same.

Concluding Remarks

For the purposes of establishment and realisation of the sociological research, the historical contextualisation of the researched phenomenon is of particular importance. The historical bases of the sociological research have a specific importance and offer it a more significant degree of knowledge for elaboration of the posed research questions, that is, they contribute to their elaboration in depth and contribute to the better understanding and interpretation of the researched phenomenon.

The historical sociology, established as a separate scientific discipline represents an important pre-condition for development of higher level of complementarity between history and sociology, that is, higher level of usage of the historical knowledge in the sociological research projects.

The historical bases of the sociological research are reflected in several research designs, such as: longitudinal, case study and, of course, the comparison. Based on the research outline, historical contents are significantly represented in both the quantitative and qualitative methods or strategies, as well as in the combined ones.

²³ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 543.

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The main objective of the author of this paper is to increasingly animate the question pertaining to the historical bases of the sociological researches and to turn the attention to the fact that the usage of the historical material is of significant importance for the sociological methodology, and that certain topics are almost impossible to be studied without making a thorough insight in the history, and vice versa, and sociological analysis based on historical scientific records can shed significant light on the historical events and, in particular, to their later impact.

The historical basis of the sociological methodology shall be reviewed through the research designs and the research methods or strategies for sociological research.