A course, I am going to give to Italian students on May 2,3 and 12, 2021

Day 1 : What is an inductive method ?

When talking of induction, does it mean the researcher has nothing in his mind before observing reality? Often it is said that induction means that it is possible to observe the social reality without any framework, grid of analysis, or scope. However, it is impossible to observe and then to describe a reality without any frameworks because they are organizing our way of looking at this reality. These frameworks are coming from previous field studies. In other words, it is understandable why starting a first field study is difficult. Doing qualitative sociology and anthropology is like doing craft. We must be train by several sociological “craft men”. Therefore, these difficulties are normal.

Given that, some new researchers are searching theoretical explanations to compensate their lack of field study experiences. Therefore, they search to discover some abstract patterns of interpretation which could be used for explaining the reality they will try to observe. Interpretation is given before the observation. I did that before going to Congo, when I was a young researcher.

Some other are using another way which consists in denouncing the bad sides, the inequalities, and the injustices of the society. The framework which organizes the analysis is framed by a pattern of a pure society which means a society without bad side like in the Manicheism of the 3rd century of our era. This religion influenced the beginning of Christianity. Conversely, the Chinese culture takes societies are made of good and bad sides. Interpretation is also given before the observation. This approach is often called a critical approach, but there is a confusion between denouncing and criticizing. All scientific approaches are critical in term of discerning what is true or not in the social reality. Therefore, critical approaches should be named “denouncing approaches”.

The third way is the inductive method which is a comprehensive way of dealing with an unknown reality. Comprehensive means to understand the functioning of a social phenomenon, in other words discovering the hidden social dimension of daily life such as the social games of actors, the power relationships, the material, social and imaginary constraints and so on. My hunch is that it is needed much more that one field study before inductive method being able to be applied and therefore the two first ways depend on the evolution of the experience of the observer. After many field studies, observing become my first way to understand the social reality. Then books become more important and interesting in helping to explain the social reality.

Therefore, denouncing liberalism, the deep state, or the financial world seems to be less efficient to change the bad side of the society than understanding how the society is working, how social actors with big power are under their own social, economic, and geopolitical constraints. For instance, big Chinese companies are threatening big European and American companies. It is also understood that even social actors who seemed to be dominated have more room for maneuver than it was expected before the observation.

 But observing needs some specific methods of observation and description which are built thanks to numerous observations. The main point is to avoid choosing only one angle of observation which means to be trained in getting a mobile knowledge. Mobile knowledge is based on six intellectual tools of mobility: history, or time mobility, geography, or space mobility, scales of observation, or mobility of angle of observation, the itinerary method, or the mobility of the decision making process, the life cycle, or the generational and aging mobility, and the social system of action, or the diversity of social actors therefore the mobility of point of views about the same issue.

To make a long story short, it is possible to understand now that out understanding of social phenomenon are framed by these tools in which the sociological theories are embedded. It means, if the angle of observation changes, then the interpretation of reality would change. This conclusion is not easy to be accepted from an intellectual point of view. Furthermore, we also know that all our interpretations of the world are threatened by a “black swan”, which means an unpredictable event, such as the Covid-19 in 2020, which disrupts the global social system of action.

However, thanks to our intellectual mobile tools we can observe some weak signals which means what is emerging among the changing world of daily life, companies, shopping, and leisure. For instance, I discovered, thanks to an observation of the provisioning system itinerary of 13 French families, that the storing step linked to a fridge, a freezer, a cupboard (closet), or a garden with vegetables, could be the most at stake in the weekly food consumption system. Families must cope with quick and slow rotation of food consumption, short (vegetables) and long preserving (tinned and frozen food) of food under the lockdown constraint. They were only allowed to go shopping once or twice a week and at the same time they must cook two meals a day instead of one, for the whole family. This shopping and cooking constraints explain why the storage step was so important. Families must stock more food, for more people, based on another system of rotation of goods therefore another system of domestic organization.

Before starting my observation of daily life under the constraint of the lockdown, I only know that there is an itinerary process which frames the provisioning system. Moreover, I had no idea about the effect of the lockdown on this process. But in describing the practices of the social actors all along the process, from the shopping step to the consuming one, I discovered how the storing step was at stake in the domestic provisioning system. Then I also discovered that the issue was not the same depending on the income, the occupation (with or without remote work), the size of the family (with or without children), the size of the home and so on. The main methodological point is that I cannot quantify how many people were concerned by this diversity of constraints. However, I discovered what a quantitative method was unable to find, as it was shown in the quantitative articles I read on this topic.

The conclusion is that an inductive qualitative method is not better or worst than a quantitative method, but it gives us another angle of observation and therefore allowed us to discover an invisible dimension of daily life which is at the heart of the domestic provisioning system. This invisible dimension from a quantitative point of view is interesting because it explains why it is so difficult to deal with the domestic management of waste food which is driven by the storage step. The waste food issue is also at the heart of a sustainable development.

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