



Mariano Longo, *Fiction and Social Reality. Literature and Narratives as Sociological Resources*, Routledge, 2015, 176 pages

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implications of the findings in a broader sense, given the interest of sociologists and psychologists in this topic.

Luca Serafini

Mariano Longo, *Fiction and Social Reality. Literature and Narratives as Sociological Resources*, Routledge, 2015, 176 pages.

This book by Mariano Longo provides a useful tool for methodological analysis of the productive use sociology can make of narratives, whether understood as everyday stories about subjective experiences or as literary fictions. Given the theoretical scope of the topic, Longo's text necessarily positions itself as a wider reflection on the cognitive value of literature and on the epistemological borders defining the similarities and differences between the various human sciences. Indeed, the object of narrative and/or analysis of both literature and sociology, despite different methods and objectives, is the human being, understood as an individual who acts in a social environment and within a network of relationships.

Accordingly, the first two chapters of the book investigate which characteristics of stories in general, and of literary ones in particular, contain elements of relevant cognitive value, and how these can be structurally related to social research. Longo stresses first and foremost that ever since the so-called "narrative turn", storytelling is now considered a constitutive element of the experience that subjects make of their world. Narrative implies that certain items from the chaotic and fragmented reality of daily experience are selected, given an order and systematized on the basis of cause-and-effect, temporal relationships. Their connection also generally implies a transmission of specific ideas and values. Expressed in other terms, as noted by Roland Barthes among others, storytelling is a "meaning construction process". This also applies to narratives without any direct reference to reality, such as literary ones.

The need to go beyond a naive conception of the relationship between literature and social research – that literature has no value for social research precisely because of its lack of real referents – stems from this point. There is no need to resort to the example of naturalist and realist novels to give sociological value to literary stories. While describing the social reality of a period is a specific objective of the author in these types of narratives, practically to the point of becoming the deterministic cause behind the plot development, in other literary genres as well, says David Carr, the story unfolds based on typifications that are culturally defined and sedimented in the storehouse of social knowledge belonging to a context and historical period.

As Ricoeur once argued, literary narrative is a process with three stages, each coinciding with a different type of *mimesis*. The plot (*Mimesis 2*) is rooted in the pre-understanding of human action proper to the narrator and to the context in which he or she acts (*Mimesis 1*), and ends up having a retroactive effect on the reader's understanding of his or her daily reality (*Mimesis 3*). Hence, sociologists may also uncover useful information about a particular society in novels because the way the author connects certain events and represents the protagonists of his or her narrative is influenced in some ways by the cultural codes within which he or she works.

As Florian Znaniecki explained in his 1934 text entitled *The Method of Sociology*, literature can then become auxiliary evidence for sociological theories, allowing hypotheses to be validated in part through the use of narrative texts. Considering the ability of novelists to anticipate trends – new ways of thinking or new social concepts – literature can also become a catalyst for bringing new issues to light, serving in other terms as an intuitive basis for further hypotheses or research directions. In a word, the narrator is not only a mirror of the time in which he or she lives, but also in some ways anticipates it. This is demonstrated by literature's ability to shape our perception of reality: socio-cognitive notions such as “kafkaesque” or “bovarism,” for

example, are introduced by literary fiction, but later contribute to enriching our experience of the world.

The other important affinity between literary narrative and sociological research lies in the bond between the particularity of the single fact or episode that is recounted and its generalizability or typicality. As Park and Burgess brought to light in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), what distinguishes social research from mere story is the search for causal relationships that go beyond the mere empirical description of the data and allow it to be inscribed within a more general explanation of a phenomenon. However, as Lukács showed in particular, literature is positioned half-way between the fragmented knowledge of perceptual data and scientific generalization, since narrative can capture typical features in an individual event or character. Lukács believes that in art, literature included, the singularity of the phenomenon and its universal value coexist. Obviously these are universalizations of an intuitive, representative character, but this aspect is precisely what amplifies the cognitive value of literature. The novel not only sheds light on the particular structure of a society or epoch, but often suggests typifications that are valid for any society and any epoch.

Longo offers a good illustration of this characteristic in his text, referring to the use that Alfred Schutz makes of *Don Quixote* to exemplify the latter's theory of multiple realities, or a similar process that Peter Berger put into effect with regard to *The Man Without Qualities*. This allows Longo to reconstruct another important function that literature serves for sociology: to provide direct and intuitive illustrations of the discipline's concepts. Through a careful historical reconstruction, Longo highlights the most important studies illustrating the primarily didactic value that literature assumes for sociology.

The most important of these studies is probably Lewis Coser's *Sociology through Literature* (1963), which explains the great benefit students of sociology can derive from the exemplification

of the discipline's theoretical concepts through literary texts, which are more accessible and easier to understand. For example, students can be asked to identify a novel in which a specific social problem is treated or illustrate a complex concept such as "multiple realities" by referring to the earlier mentioned novels.

As Longo aptly points out, this allows some of the barriers between the language of sociology and that of everyday reality and common sense to be overcome. Through the well-known "postulate of adequacy," Alfred Schutz argued that scientific constructs should always be made compatible with the typifications at work in the everyday, taken-for-granted world, and that sociologists are therefore obligated by a sort of translatability of their arguments in order to make them immediately understandable to the social actors involved. For Longo, the incommensurability between sociological typifications and ordinary ones is insurmountable: when Dick Hebdige was studying subcultures, he noted that the social actors he was analyzing would probably not have recognized themselves in his descriptions, precisely because sociology, like all sciences, is not able to reflect back the experience that the social actors have of themselves. That is why literature can partially bridge this gap, since it exemplifies a given concept – such as "a subculture" for example – intuitively and figuratively, through a story and/or a character.

Clearly, the typifications in literature cannot be likened to the generalizations of social research, which are not based on merely intuitive knowledge but also and especially on methodological rules. However, what emerges forcefully from Longo's book is that the opening of sociology to exogenous sources such as literary texts corresponds to the progressive affirmation of a "humanistic" paradigm of the discipline itself. Starting from the first half of the twentieth century, in fact, particularly in American academic culture, one notices a growing mistrust toward the strict technicalization of social research. Calling into question the uncritical formalization of sociology opened the

doors to research topics such as Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and Harvey Sacks' conversational analysis. As noted by Niklas Luhman in *Sociological Enlightenment* (1983), sociology has begun to shed its pretense of providing universally valid explanations and focuses on contextual, partial truths, reassessing the analysis of everyday life. This does not mean abdicating a scientific approach, since the individual data are always connected together to arrive at more general explanations. However, it no longer considers itself capable of abstracting itself from the dross of irrationality present in the social reality, or of treating empirical data only through processes of formalization based on statistical data and not, for example, on the self-representation that the subject gives of him- or herself. The reappraisal of the latter aspect thus embraces the story of the social actors as a means of obtaining information on the social reality of everyday life.

Qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations, the use of documents including diaries, newspapers and even literary texts (all techniques used, for example, by the Chicago School) make it clear how the sociologist's knowledge of partial fragments of reality now depends in good part on the account of the subject narrator – a *homo loquens*.

Longo emphasizes that this turn must be safeguarded without giving in to the “mystique of the subject” – which transfers the uncritical aspect of the analysis from the statistical data to the respondents' accounts, conceived as a means for accessing their subjective experience. Rather, the narrative strategies always at work in the self-representation of reality and its reporting must be taken into consideration. Each account of an experience is actually the outcome of procedures of selection and subjective rationalization.

Finding the “typical” structures of a subjective story thus means maintaining the centrality of the social actor and, at the same time, a “softer” scientific approach. The caesura between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geistwissenschaften* also appears less clear

this way, and sociology simply adapts to the matured awareness of the provisional nature of scientific knowledge which, as highlighted by Kuhn and Popper, now rejects positivism's claim of reflecting reality in an objective and absolute manner.

Furthermore, thanks to its link with the cognitive processes at work in the artistic sphere, the qualitative research model is pivotal to the development of some of the most important concepts in the history of sociology. In his 1962 *Sociology as an Art Form*, Robert Nisbet emphasized that the "founding fathers" of the discipline, from Tocqueville, Weber, and Simmel to Durkheim, conceived their most important ideas starting from an artistic type of intuition about their surrounding reality. It would be very difficult indeed to argue that concepts such as the rationalization of history or that of anomia could be the result of a logical-empirical method conducted on the basis of precise and well-defined rules. Rather, the founding fathers were endowed with a sociological imagination that allowed them to create typifications similar to those of artists.

That is why the disenchantment with sociology understood as a science – with the power of arriving at universally valid generalizations supported exclusively by a quantitative methodology – brought the intuitive talents of researchers to the forefront. Starting from the empirical data that they perceive and investigate rigorously, they can arrive intuitively at much more profound and insightful typifications than those permitted by quantitative methods. To do so, they cannot leave aside the story of the social actor who is the object of their study, just as they cannot exclude literary fiction, understood in its dual role as a cognitive instrument of investigation and as a stimulus for the sociological imagination.

Supported by a wealth of bibliographic material, Longo's book reconstructs not only the intrinsic value of everyday and literary narratives for sociology but also the historical reasons that led it to view them as effective tools for the discipline. If sociology and literature remain profoundly different in the

methods and objectives they pursue, for Longo it is by now obvious that the former, as the science of human beings in society, contains within it such a markedly humanistic component that it cannot be viewed as alien to literary and artistic discourse. On the contrary, literature is an important and, in some cases, essential support for a discipline otherwise destined to be lost in the search for an absolute and universalizable objectivity that voids its richness and dramatically reduces its analytical perspectives.

William Outhwaite

Austin Harrington, *German Cosmopolitan Social Thought and the Idea of the West. Voices from Weimar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 440 pages.

One way of reading this superb book is as a counter to “slippery slope” accounts of German thought such as Georg Lukács’ 1955 *Destruction of Reason*, subtitled *The Path of Irrationalism from Schelling to Hitler*. Lukács portrayed Simmel, Max Weber, and Karl Mannheim as offering no alternative to, or even encouraging, imperial German irrationalism culminating in its fascist apotheosis; he speaks of “capitulation” and rebukes Simmel particularly for his closeness to *Lebensphilosophie*. Harrington instead points up the strength of liberal traditions of thought in Germany, despite their defeat in 1933. Against the image of the unpolitical German intellectual, dating back to Thomas Mann and recently restated by Wolfgang Iser in *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (2006) – see Harrington’s critique on pages 336-347 – he shows that many of these intellectuals *were* politically active. Even Simmel and Max Scheler were hardly unpolitical; Max Weber expected to be selected in 1918 as a parliamentary candidate for the Deutsche Demokratische Partei, co-founded and chaired by his brother Alfred, who directed the Heidelberg Institut für Sozial- und