REMAKING THE SOCIAL. THE CHALLENGES OF
SOCIOLOGY BETWEEN RISKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT. The challenges of sociology are anchored in the changes and
transformations of the social environment, into taking responsibility for new
strategies to investigate the social, in opening to public debate of topics essential to
the configuration of scientific and professional field such as the legitimacy and validity
of knowledge modalities, of the findings and social consequences generated by
research. Conceptual fluidity, paradigmatic multiplicity, and methodological
flexibility along with defining new roles and responsibilities represent not only
challenges but also opportunities for sociology to be promoted as a discipline
that contributes to identifying solutions and solving major issues of contemporary
society. Such an approach is a challenge in itself because it calls into question the
role and stakes of sociology as science, professional practice, and formative agency
of field professionals, namely sociologists.

Keywords: Romanian sociology, the challenges of social research, the public role
of sociology and sociologists

The world we are living in, as object of study of sociology, has never
been so fluid, dynamic, yet stable, on the one hand centralized, standardized,
reasonable and safe in terms of predictability, and on the other specific, local,
fragmented and uncertain or unpredictable. This affirmation is in itself a challenge
because the premise of a unitary reality, homogenous in its diversity and
heterogeneity may veil the existence of a multiple reality. Its epistemological
consequence is considering the appropriate modalities of knowledge in the case
of societies whose relevance is no longer defined with regard to territorial
delimitations but to features related to the content and shape of social interactions.
Do the pace of the changes and the intensity of societal and social transformations
justify the use – not in terms of discourse but of substance – of the multitude

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of phrases and labels assigned to present day society/societies? I shall mention only three of many possible options because their referents interfere manifestly with the challenges sociology is supposed to answer to: information society, risk society, and knowledge society. According to Castells, information society represents the attribute of a specific form of social organisation in which ‘information generating, processing and transmission become fundamental sources of productivity and power’ due to the latest technological developments (Castells, 1996:21). The knowledge society label is justified by the generalised dissemination of specialised (scientific) knowledge in all areas of social life (Stehr, 2002). As far as the risk society is concerned, Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) define it as a society where individuals are aware of the risks generated by their own activities and are interested in the manner in which related dangers can be prevented, minimised, dramatised or channeled (Beck, 1992:19).

An important issue resulting from the diversity of these definitions is the extent to which they actually reflect transformations, changes, divides that justify positing substance discontinuities of the social spaces and validate the realization of typologies revolving around the opposition old versus new societies. I firmly believe that for sociology such a question is interesting but is of little consequence and leads the investigation on a secondary and sterile course. The stake and major challenge are not so much related to our object of study being unitary or multiple (society versus societies) but rather to investigating the manner in which substantial transformations of features defining the studied reality (individuals and phenomena, cases and variables) compel us to rethink and redefine the modalities of knowledge practiced in the field of our discipline.

The current terms used by sociology (sociologists) to define the generic object of their analysis (the society or societies/new societies) have various roots and aims: some are descriptive, others are deliberately critical, often reflecting not so much features of the reality studied but positions of the researchers in relation to this reality. These positionings are frequently normative. For example, it is easy to notice that the already mentioned phrase that is frequently used to characterise contemporary society, namely the knowledge society, reflects (beyond a series of specific descriptors) a theoretical option that can be used to criticise the manner in which technology, empiricism and the new intellectualist approaches are applied to comprehend the multiple paths of global development (Webster, 2002).

Currently, many of the categories traditionally used to describe, analyse and explain the social fail to validly cover the features of the reality under scrutiny. A relevant example is the concept of society, with its instrumental meaning referring to the nation-state. Metaphorically, the nation state is the equivalent of a box containing the social processes and setting their limits. It is a container-concept that uses the physical space as a major criterion of ranging
social phenomena. In fact, to date numerous phenomena and categories essential to social knowledge (among others labour, the family and the household, decision making, voting) are rooted and result from cross border interconnections (Boyne and Beck, 2001). Globalisation does not only erode and blur space but questions the validity and relevance of traditional delimitations. Thus, the transnational character of social phenomena requires reconceptualisations that are theoretical and methodological challenges for social sciences. Some of these are due to the fact that the global (be it institution, process, discursive practice) simultaneously transcends national settings and resides in national territories and institutions (Sassen, 2007). Others originate in the fact that physical and social spaces multiply and combine in a blend that compels sociology (sociologists) to new conceptual definings and redefinings because of a reality that, instead of being factual and firm, is kaleidoscopic and delineated by fluid and dynamic polarities: virtual-real, local-global, private-public, center-periphery, national-transnational, economic profit-social solidarity. The emergence, development and quasi-generalisation of social corporate responsibility are examples of a phenomenon transcending traditional conceptual boundaries. The economic and social dimensions intermingle in new, completely original ways with economic profit not being determined any longer by economic performance but by investment and the development of complementary activities that are essentially non-economic. The mentioned phenomenon is interesting and relevant in at least two ways: firstly, it signals the institutionalisation of a new type of social solidarity, which is trans-individual and non-statal and, secondly, redefines the complementarity relationship between the economic and the social by the fact that economic performance is conditioned by the manifest acceptance of social responsibility. Instrumentally, the relation is paradoxical because, in order to maximise its profit, the economic actor has to renounce voluntarily a significant part of it.

For sociology, these transformations create the responsibility to identify new categories, variables, indicators, to highlight the significance and implications of these new phenomena and experiences, not necessarily in an ontological sense, but in terms of frameworks and contexts in which they unfold.

In terms of the methodology and theoretical and practical consequences of sociological research, despatialisation of categories and concept fluidity require rethinking the place and role of research methods commonly used in sociology. One of the traditional assets and strengths of sociology in the field of social sciences, which contributed greatly to the social visibility of sociological knowledge, has been and remains the quantitative methodology, frequently taking the form of the survey. The major feature and advantage of the survey in comparison to qualitative methods is that it uses clearly defined categories, which allows the unequivocal and unambiguous description and measurement of a well delineated reality. The quantitative methodology has been long considered a reliable strategy
of investigating social reality: the figures are strong, certain, factual, and true in a Platonic sense. By their reliability and certainty, they offer guarantees in relation to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the decisions based on them. However, it is common knowledge that the situation is more nuanced and more often than not figures do not differ from narratives in terms of their truth status. They may be more convincing from a rational or rationalising perspective but not necessarily more true. Even though, in principle, numbers measure and narratives convince, it is not seldom that its use and measurement reflects convictions, not realities. Moreover, despite being analysed by means of complex and sophisticated methods, survey data remain closed, which, paradoxically, makes them lose their general-universal validity to a contextual one, with particular and local (localised) relevance of their results. Through a mirroring mechanism, qualitative methodologies earn extra validity and relevance in the proper description and understanding of phenomena that transcend the individual casuistry and refer to macro-social contexts and frames.

In addition to the role transfer between the two major paradigmatic options that make up the methodologic arsenal of sociology, another important feature is that both data collection and the analysis and interpretation of findings may be placed in various conceptual architectures. What has been considered for a long time a weakness of sociology is becoming, in the context of a very dynamic and fluid social reality, a major advantage in the competition for instrumental knowledge in which sociology participates, voluntarily or not, alongside the other social sciences (economics, political science, psychology, anthropology). Even seemingly a weakness, the multitude of paradigms accompanied by a very broad methodological arsenal represent practically a trait ensuring great flexibility and additional relevance of the discipline in relation to the investigated themes and the identified solutions.

The second major challenge concerns the purpose of sociological knowledge, respectively, in operational terms, of the sociological research. The subject of neutrality and unbiased objectivity versus the obligation to take responsibility for social intervention based on a type of expertise that legitimise the sociologists’ intervention at least to an equal extent with that of the other social scientists (for example, the economists) is a topic as old as the discipline and I will not refer to it in this context.

A committed sociology is a sociology willing and capable to take risk (risks) as constitutive element of its activity. I do not refer to risk as a conceptual category, which is more or less successfully utilizable in describing and interpreting social reality, but to a type of endeavor that underlies the specialised knowledge of the social and defines a special manner of taking hold of its finality and consequences.

To the extent to which sociology’s role is not only to describe and explain but also to warn (Luhmann: 1993:5), risk is a legitimate sociological theme. The concept of risk and that of risk society have become central to sociology.
alongside with emphasis shifting to reflexivity as a major social knowledge modality. Risk is an inherent normal dimension of contemporary societies differentiating them from previous societies not because reality is riskier today than in the pre-industrial period but because never before has institutional decision-making been so frequently based on risk assessment. Rationality and predictability, the basic tenets of modernity, have created the conditions for risk to become central in present day society. In economics, risk is a positive concept. Risk maximises profit, allows new markets to emerge and new products to appear. In sociology, the concept is neutral and its becoming a positive concept and subsequent valorisation (in terms similar to economics) depend on the manner we define the role of sociology, with special emphasis on the actional purpose of sociological knowledge, respectively on the positions sociologists take in relation to the valorisation of this knowledge. Essentially, it is all about considering benefits and costs not as explanatory variables related to social behaviours, but as the instrumental orientation of sociological research, which is manifestly preoccupied with the consequences of produced knowledge.

To sum up, beyond the normative nature of such an approach, challenges are related to the validity (relevance) of the diagnosis and the legitimacy of engagement. A first issue concerns the fact that risk-oriented research and subsequently set actional strategies (objectivised in decisions and interventions) represent a risk accepted by and often mostly by experts. In other words, identifying risks may not be without consequences for the person who does that.

Sociology may adopt at least two strategies, one of them being riskproof: the analytical description, claimed to be an objective and factual description of reality, is without risks. The analysis can often include the identification of causes and effects but risk-taking is minimised by making cut-outs, taking into account the description and explanation of phenomena and processes that have already occurred while systematically ignoring predictions on the subsequent development of the studied phenomena. Some relevant examples include defining unemployment as a 'threatening social risk because of the low level income provided by protection plans, which places the unemployed in the category of the poor' or assigning a disproportionately high poverty risk to Rroma persons (Panduru et al, 2009:34). It is easily noticeable that an analytic description of unemployment identifies causes and attributes without taking the risk of a type of knowledge that would transcend immediate evidence and simple conceptualisation.

There are at least two paradoxes of sociological knowledge aiming to minimise the risk of error, intent on avoiding controversies and questioning from outside the sociological field. The first concerns the manner in which problem identification (risk always is bound to a problematic issue) is equivalent to its objectivation. It is a mechanism resembling magic in the sense that assigning a label, namely identifying a phenomenon as risk, makes it real, by its objectivation
into the material world. There is no doubt as to statute of truth of the assertion that unemployment is a major risk during economic crisis. Even more so when experts claim it since the knowledge they generate is consistent and in tune with common knowledge. But before starting to look for solutions, it is worth taking into consideration the fact that a defining characteristic of postmodernity is that, in order to give meaning to reality elements, we must place them in particular contexts. Meaning, though, cannot be universal. From the perspective of traditionally used categories, unemployment is a risk for state economy. By changing the reference frame and including new contexts, unemployment may become a saving solution for a company that uses dismissals to avoid going bankrupt, or opportunity for the unemployed migrating abroad. In the same vein, it is worth remembering that there was no unemployment during the communist period but a large part of economy had budget allocations for expenses higher than the planned benefits.

The second paradox consists of using certainty for filtering out risks. A factual statement such as “most of the Roma people are poor” is translated and presented as risk under the form “Roma have excessively high poverty risks”. Statistics becomes shield and guarantee of the validity of sociological knowledge. Statistical certainty legitimates and reconfirms the infallibility of the sociologist and of sociology. Knowledge is factual and neutral. However, the social utility of such knowledge remains minimal; at the same time, operating with this type of certainties means giving up the benefits (and costs) associated with the risk of asserting truths inaccessible (or at least non-evident) to common knowledge. The social importance of such sociology will remain peripheral.

The second strategic option is to value sociology’s special conceptual and methodological capital to identify problems in their incipient stage and propose solutions. Such an option means an open commitment to the responsibility of assessing benefits, costs, consequences and directions of social actions. In spite of being a debatable and questionable option, I consider it necessary for a science of sociology mature enough and prepared to take on a more extended role than that of theoretical science, respectively to manifestly and programmatically accept a practical dimension. An immediate predictable consequence would be an increased influence of sociology in defining and implementing public policies. One of the problems of Romanian sociology is not the absence of the relevant quality research, but the fact that results are ignored by political class, respectively by decision factors in general. If it is correct to assert a failure of sociological research, this is not related to the research activity, but to the lack of ability to transfer results into defining and implementing efficient policies. Between specialised expertise and political decision there is currently a gap, which is also favoured by sociologists being stuck in predominantly descriptive approaches that open the way for participation in decision making, but limit the sociologists’ role to
an advisory one. The manifest and open orientation of research towards the
assessment of benefits, costs, and consequences of social actions redefines the
position of the field and of the experts in the power relation with the decision
making bodies at least as a result of emphasizing of the marginal costs associated
to the neglect of this expertise.

A third challenge is related to the status of knowledge in contemporary
societies and the manner in which specialised knowledge, produced by experts,
traditionally addressed exclusively to communities of practice and power factors,
is opening to the public and is being negotiated with and by non-specialists. It
is not only a challenge for the general scientific knowledge but for sociological
knowledge in particular due to the fact that the latter might be directly and
immediately used for decision making in resource allocation.

In present-day society, two major sources contribute to the opening
towards a non-specialised public not in order to disseminate results but to
convince as regards the legitimacy and validity of sociological knowledge. The
first is an emergent ideology promoting the necessity of democratisation of
scientific knowledge. The second is a process of democratisation of access to
specialised information, which occurs separately from the previously mentioned
ideology and is mostly correlated with new social practices generated by the
development of new communication technologies, particularly the Internet.

As far as the ideology is concerned, it affirms the application of democratic
practice in the field of science and technology, respectively the necessary
involvement of citizens in expert debates on topics related to science and
technology (Lovbrand et al., 2010). The major consequence of this fact is that the
findings of sociological research are validated not only within/by the exclusive
and informed community of experts but also become part of a process of external
acknowledgement and legitimisation in which the evaluator is a public whose
traditional roles used to be only as beneficiaries or research subjects. In this
process, the fundamental modalities used in sociological knowledge such as
critical judgement, abstract thinking, generalisation of particular experiences,
logical thinking and rationality no longer suffice, because they compete with
emotional convictions, with trust and lack of trust in the experts’ practice and
findings. The validity of the data and findings has to be backed up now by
plausibility and persuasiveness in their presentations. Specialised knowledge
generated within the field of sociology is and will continue to be an essential
resource for decision making but currently experts are frequently in the position
to persuade larger publics (no longer only the exclusive decision making group)
on the one hand as part of the process of legitimisation of the scientific domain
and (re)gaining confidence and, on the other, to ensure the resources necessary
to research or to make possible the transfer of knowledge into planned social
action.
As far as the new communication technologies (the Internet) are concerned, they contribute critically to the redefinition of the relationship between the public as consumer-evaluator of specialised knowledge and the experts in charge of knowledge production. I shall refer here to the process of increasingly individualised consumption and the decreasing dependence on institutional intermediation carried out by specialised agents. Individualisation is a result of at least three factors: increased accessibility of scientific knowledge in non-specialised environments, increased autonomy of the public in relation with the traditional factors responsible for the production and dissemination of content, passive consumption is being replaced by search, consultation and interaction. The autonomy of the public in relation with institutional intermediations is relevant in at least two ways: part of the attributes traditionally associated by the general public with expert knowledge, such as reputation and prestige, do no longer depend on specialised agents; technologically mediated communication dissolves not only the physical space but also a part of social distances while the de-territorialisation of information consumption is accompanied by an increasing public influence on decisions related to the production of specialist knowledge. All together these elements transform the relation of power between the expert and the consumer (the public) by balancing it and increasing the level of control that the public exerts over the experts.

Beyond problematizations that remain distinctive and inherent to each of the mentioned challenges, seen from a different perspective, the themes discussed here hold a special relevance through the way they reflect the interdependency between sociology’s object of study (the social reality), the scientific field of the discipline, the professional practice taken on by sociologists and the public control over these practices, respectively over the application of the results. The critical reflexivity over our own discipline is an obligation, not a whim related to theoretical fashions that are more or less temporary, which has clarifying stakes for the definition of sociology as a science and a profession.

To conclude, the configuration of challenges defined by the rapid transformation of the social environment, the conceptual and methodological fluidity, the dynamic relationship between sociology, decision makers, and the public and, last but not least, the new type of responsibility in terms of the finality of sociological research require us to use sociology in order to re-think the place and the role of the discipline in present day society. It is a theme to reflect upon and debate which has no answers free of new challenges.

Personally, I believe in a committed sociology, respectively in a science whose vocation is to solve problems. This option is in itself a challenge and a risk because problems can neither be identified nor solved without a normative framework. Finally, the major challenge is the answer to the question: how "can we do that" without transforming sociology into an ideology and the sociologist into a demagogue activist?
REFERENCES


