

Presentation / Apresentação

Sociology and Phenomenology

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It was the philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz who inaugurated a paradigmatic sociological approach strongly influenced by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, followed by authors such as Thomas Luckmann and Peter L. Berger, among many others. This issue of *Civitas* discusses mainly recent developments of this sociological tradition, responsible for important influences on the contemporary sociological theory and on the development of empirical research, such as ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, socio-scientific hermeneutics and the biographical narrative approach. This special issue unites contributions that explore theoretical and empirical investigations anchored in these sociological traditions or that foster the dialogue between these approaches with other sociological perspectives.

As far as the interrelationship of sociology and phenomenology is concerned, it is important to mention that both disciplines are distinct with respect to their epistemology, methodology and methods. The sociological discipline concentrates on the analysis of concrete historical and empirical phenomena, such as e.g. power structures and inequality in specific societies, “states”, “communities” of a certain time. Sociology empirically investigates the “social construction of reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1989 [1966]) with respect to concrete socio-historical phenomena, using diverse qualitative and quantitative methods for its research. This parts from the assumption that from a sociological perspective historical worlds are socially constructed in concrete experiences and actions (Luckmann, 2007 [1999], p. 131).

On the other hand, phenomenology concentrates on how reality is constituted on the basis of general structures of experience depending on consciousness activities. The phenomenological discipline investigates how appearances of reality present themselves in space and time to our subjective consciousness. According to the founding father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist has to go “back to the things themselves”, that means back to the things as they are actually given to our experience (Husserl, 1992 [1931], p. 14). Consciousness is always the consciousness

of something; it is characterized by “intentionality” (Husserl, 1990 [1927], p.198) meaning that it is directed to the “things” or objects it focuses. Therefore, the concrete world in its spacio-temporal manifestation is only conceivable with respect to consciousness activities, such as experiencing, perceiving, thinking, remembering etc. The aim of phenomenological research is hence to reveal the intentional activities of our subjectivity to describe how the world and its objects are constituted.

Even though both disciplines – sociology and phenomenology – have different epistemological interests, both can profit from each other with respect to their research. It was Alfred Schutz who applied Husserlian phenomenological thought for a founding of Max Weber’s Interpretive Sociology by redefining the concept of “subjective meaning” involved in processes of action (Schütz, 2004 [1932]). And furthermore, Thomas Luckmann speaks of a “parallel action” of phenomenology and sociology when combining the two disciplines since they have the potential to validate and control each other with respect to their findings (Luckmann, 1983 [1970]). According to Luckmann, one has to rely on the “structures of the life-world” when doing sociological research, to allow to make research results comparable.

The interconnection of phenomenology and sociology is specifically established by Alfred Schutz’ theory of the life-world. This theory parts from the assumption that the life-world of the individual subject has to be seen as pre-theoretical world of experience. The core of this life-world is our world of everyday life that – as our paramount reality – is governed by a pragmatic motive. This means that we can act, work (*wirken*), and communicate in the world of everyday life. Furthermore, the social world and multiple everyday transcending realities (dreams, fantasies, religious worlds, worlds of play, scientific worlds etc.) are also parts of our subjectively centered life-world (Dreher, 2003, p. 143-144; Schutz, 1962 [1945]; 1962 [1955]; 1970 [1957]; Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). The Schutzian theory of the life-world, as demonstrated in his studies on “the stranger” (Schutz, 1964 [1944]), “the homecomer” (Schutz 1964 [1945]) and “the well-informed citizen” (Schutz, 1964 [1946]), particularly serves for what is considered “applied phenomenology” (Dreher, 2012). This approach concentrates on the analysis of the life-worldly conditions for the constitution of diverse social phenomena such as power, domination, violence, friendship, love, humor, and many more. This perspective not only allows sociologically investigating the social construction of these phenomena. It also includes the phenomenological description of the consciousness activities and life-worldly preconditions involved in the constitution of social phenomena. That way, sociological empirical

findings become epistemologically founded and, more important, they become comparable. “Applied phenomenology” establishes the ‘bridge’ between sociology and phenomenology parting from the theory of the life-world.

Besides the importance played by Schutz in the dialogue between sociology and phenomenology, which is emphasized in some of the articles published in the present dossier, there are other authors and perspectives that are present in this volume making even more explicit how proficuous is the intersection of sociology with philosophy in general, and with phenomenology in particular. The present dossier has the aim to present a brief overview of the current discussion and research in this field. Although some of the most influential sociologists are very skeptical – or it would be better to say critical – regarding the utility of the approximation of these disciplines, the articles here are very clear in many distinct ways in asserting how sociology can gain with the dialogues proposed by the authors of the articles published in the next pages.

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