

## Histories of life as method<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper provides strong arguments that validate the qualitative methods as privileged strategies for the study of the social aspects, particularly in the case of the stories of life; one of the fundamental arguments is that humans are not a piece of data, but rather, a process which acts creatively in their quotidian world, where the latter implies acknowledging its evocative and re-creative sense, elements that imply the possibility of self perception of the individual- subject of the history of life in its experiential relation with the contextual environment. The relation between text and context is created by the individual as part of his experience process, in so far as a historic agent. In the end, the histories of life have the capacity of expressing and formulating the quotidian lived of the social, formal and informal structures, from there the fundamental contribution to the social research.

**Key words:** histories of life, quotidian life, qualitative methods.

**Resumen:** El trabajo da argumentos de fondo que legitiman a los métodos cualitativos como estrategias privilegiadas para el estudio de lo social, en forma particular en el caso de las historias de vida; uno de los argumentos centrales es que el hombre no es un dato sino un proceso, el cual actúa en forma creativa en su mundo cotidiano, es decir, lo social implica una historicidad. Un segundo argumento es el de la necesaria vinculación entre texto y contexto, en el que este último implica reconocer su sentido evocativo y re-creativo, elementos que implican la posibilidad de la autopercepción del individuo-sujeto de la historia de vida en su vinculación experiencial con el ambiente contextual. La relación entre texto y contexto la realiza el individuo como parte de su proceso vivencial en tanto que agente histórico. Las historias de vida tienen, finalmente, la capacidad de expresar y formular lo vivido cotidiano de las estructuras sociales, formales e informales, de ahí su aporte fundamental a la investigación social.

**Palabras clave:** historias de vida, vida cotidiana, métodos cualitativos.

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It's been thirty years, almost a generation, since I published *Vita di baraccati* (1975) it is a rather short time, when, nonetheless, the poverty subjects, metropolitan marginalization and social exclusion seemed to become very soon "marginal" issues, if not irrelevant, to be solely considered *sujets honteux* (not very honored issues). Not to mention the problem of the methodological framework. Principally, sociologist elaborated arrangements under the weight of the unreachable model of the natural sciences, afflicted by an undefeatable feeling of guiltiness for not being sufficiently rigorous, exact in the statistical calculations and not certain at all when verifying their hypotheses. It was the time when the talk among sociologists, and in general among social issues scholars, was the method of "histories of life" as a serious method for the sociological analysis, perhaps the only one that allows to see a direct contact with the "experienced" of the people, thus, with the "raw material", founding of the social research; but it can be said there existed the risk to cause a complacency smile. The sort of smiles reserved for mediocre writers or failed novelists, and that in the varied social research field insinuates a miserably aborted literary vocation.

By then, as it occurs now, the qualitative methods were successful, and because of more than ineluctable reasons: they are rigorous methods, competing in numeric preciseness with the "hard" sciences, recklessly called "exact", of the nature, with sufficient distance from those disciplines of the vagueness and superficiality such as traditional human sciences are, and especially the historical-moral sciences. Other reasons usually given by the interested are prudishly whispered, but their weight is indubitable: qualitative methods allow previsions on the success and actual necessary time to research, mainly confident and, hence, of tranquilizer consequences for those asking for the researches, who gladly pay in order to have the results of it in real time, with diagrams and tables' groups completely on agreement with their approach, particularly of the pragmatic kind. What is more, as for the researchers, even in "in-field" researches —the celebrated *field-work*—, they must not dirty their hands more than the necessary. Qualitative instruments —questionnaires, notes, attitudes' scales, formulas for the correlation coefficients, etcetera— are already preconceived in such a way that they can be used and evaluated by the very colleagues.

It is simply necessary to apply them scrupulously following the instructions of use and keeping at a hygienic distance from the “objects” of study.

In this respect, the introductory pages by Pierre Bourdieu to *the misery of the world*<sup>2</sup> turn out enlightening and entirely suitable: How, as a matter of fact, not experimenting a feeling of unrest at the time of making public private statements, secrets gathered within a *trust contract*? [...] No contract is so loaded with tacit demands as a contract of trust” (Bourdieu, 1993: 7)<sup>3</sup>. Bourdieu even quotes Spinoza: “not deploring, not laughing, not hating, but understanding”. It is just for deep understanding, and not only for outer shapes’ descriptions that “histories of life” work. However, obviously, they have a price the quantitative sociologist can totally ignore: they force to gain the trust of their interlocutors, not to be limited to cross the right box (“yes”, “no”, “do not know”), to know how to listen and, within this listening capacity, to take the search beyond the mere sociographic-stock report or a police report. In other words, between the researchers and the “objects” of study there must be a significant relationship, an authentic interaction, that at the time it naturally involves the people on which the research is made, demands the researcher to remain in the cause and demolish the defensive wall traditionally located at the feet of the culture understood as private capital. An the very research leaves its asymmetric structure that performs, in this manner, more than a cognitive enterprise, it is about a power operation. The “histories of life” help to understand that in social research every researcher is also a “researched”.

In the the case of Bourdieu’s research, the outcomes of this declaration are notable, so they allow catching a glimpse of the obscure angles of the “societies of the abundance”. Particularly, it helps to measure the degree of greatness and to understand the meaning and dynamics of the new forms of poverty. This is not the chronic undernourishment of the last century any longer; nevertheless, certainly, and mainly among the most recent and

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<sup>2</sup> There is an edition in Spanish: *La miseria del mundo*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica. Part of the observations on Pierre Bourdieu’s work were seen for the first time as a review, in the “Cultural Section” of the *Il Sole 24 Ore* newspaper.

<sup>3</sup> Italics in the original.

desperate migrants, cases like this are not missing. On the contrary, the new poverty is given by social exclusion and impossibility —objective and psychological-cultural— to take part in community life. It is a material poverty, but in the first place moral and intellectual, which vertically sinks into the conscience of the marginalized, condemned to live or, simply, to survive in the gray desolation of the *banlieues* (suburbs) of the world. The system's new way to take advantage of the marginalized by the end of this century is not confiscation of the capital exerted by the capitalist. It is the abandonment, disregard, being at the margin of society and history.

The voices from the North American ghetto are, in this sense, relevant and make us understand how Malcolm X autobiography is not only a revolutionary text but also a testimony of quotidian life to meditate and analyze. Numerous preconceptions and stereotypes crumble down: for instance, the idea that among the poor there is a lot of solidarity. Actually, a paramount mistrust rules, almost paranoiac, and the reason is evident due to his declarations: the poor do not have margins, they can not afford the luxury of a mistaken encounter; they do not collaborate for they have nothing in common, nothing to collaborate with (Bourdieu, 1993: 169). But also for those who have been integrated to the system and have a steady job, the vital goals seem to be too tight. Let us think of the laborer, who is discarded, “unexpectedly cut”, because of the technological innovation (Bourdieu, 1993: 331) or in the “unavoidable gaps” of the “night shift”. According to Danielle, post office employee, “I never see the sun [...] one is always standing [...] when I get up to go to work, it is nighttime” (Bourdieu, 1993: 373). The capitalism's physiologic movement between high and low conjuncture, between crisis and *boom*, also affects the professionals in the middle of the productive structure, those who could be reasonably safe from the market fluctuations. “Seen from below”, as Bourdieu writes, these professionals in the middle of the productive structure, determined by the tightness of the technological innovations, with their expectations and careers destroyed, are the ones who manifest the deepest angst and an almost total uncertainty on the future perspective. They feel in disarray. Perhaps they are the most disquieting incarnation of what MA Weber called “the proletarianization of the soul” facing the straying of these social figures, who

feel trapped in a gear from which they know so little and which they are not able to govern, it seems evident, once again, that the individual's problems are not, nor are they reduced to a merely individual issue. The progressive mentality has been used, by generations, to recurring, in this fragmentation, to the State, particularly to the social State, often mentioned with unconscious irony, the *Welfare State*. The pages the Bourdieu's research reserves for the "violence of the institution" do not give much chance to illusions. From the scholastic system to that other *pensionistic*, Bourdieu coldly registers the "State's surrender". The remains of the State are those which Nietzsche correctly foresaw: among all of the gelid monsters, certainly the most gelid. Bourdieu stresses: the one who understands the least, the most reluctant to understand, the most bureaucratically protected and distant, the least capable of a "non-violent communication" (Bourdieu, 1993: 905).

In accordance with Bourdieu, respecting everything else, it is necessary to rethink politics, subtracting in a contemporary manner both "technocratic arrogance" and "dogmatic declination". On these "precepts" of the famous scholar, reserves can be legitimately held, mainly from those who know that politics is everything but a pious deed; what is more, it is solved in an arduous struggle for power among oligarch centers that it would be ingenious to support the idea that they are clean in their internal operations.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is true that the same struggle for power would provide better results maybe if instead of the hubbub of even generous approximations, it was conducted in a situation of the most updated knowledge of the problems, in agreement to the notorious but never heard saying: "acknowledgement in order to deliberate". "Governors —writes Bourdieu at the end of his work— are prisoners of an *entourage* of young technocrats who often ignore everything about their fellow citizens' life and it is them whom their own ignorance never remembers" (Bourdieu, 1993: 941). It is probable that Bourdieu, when writing this words, had in mind the young *commis d'Etat* (State's commissioners) graduated from the famous *École Nationale d'Administration* (National School of Administration). There are situations

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, let us refer to my *Simone Weil: la pellegrina dell'assoluto* (1996), in special to chapter II: "I partiti politici: un male non necesario", pp. 37-61.

which are much worse, where young collaborators of politicians do not graduate from prestigious schools. They are born in parishes or in the smoking rooms of the political parties' secretaries. In order to pinpoint them it is not necessary to bother "technocracy". They can be called, in a most prosaic manner, "porters".

Indeed, Bourdieu's initiative is greeted as an important conscience awareness in respect to the qualitative data and their capacity to offer us elements, for a deeper and more authentic interpretation of the social experience. Middle Ages historian, Jacques Le Goff, suspects that the fashion of the biographies is linked if not determined by the hunger for concretion and specificity the historian notices after ten years of "structuralism", of "history made with computer", it is, of abstract typological conceptualizations. "The historian of structures —he writes— perturbed by the abstractions, was hungry for concretion. He wanted to become the sort of historian Marc Bloch had desired, that similar 'to the ogre of the fable'", who "knows his pray is anywhere the smell of human flesh is felt. He is more the pray not the 'man' in society any longer, the man collectively trapped, but the individual: a precise historic character" (Le Goff, 1995: 11).

A reserve is legitimate: Are really in fashion, nowadays, biographies in social research? It seems plausible that the *experienced*, once the global beliefs were demolished and the great ideals dissolved, has reached a certain interest, taking also in consideration the psychologization of the structural issues operated in a rather conscious manner, by the feminism. Yet, this has nothing much to do with a renewed conception of history as a complete and tridimensional (*a tutto tondo*) search for the historic life in its multiple aspects, nor it carries the histories of life as privileged material of social research.

The polemic against precision in a quantitative search in the interpretative studies on social experience in its literal meaning is not a current issue. It is enough to stop for an instant to ponder the question, and immediately come to the memory the names and titles which, to the polemic, have given supportive items and argumentations, the literary essayers to the historians of the economy and science, for instance from Lionel Trilling and Dwight MacDonald to John U. Nef and to A. Koyré, not to mention a

recently departed sociologist, with a turbulent political past, but not due to that to keep it a secret, Jules Monnerot (1946).

The properly philosophic debate is in itself rich and articulated. This sends us, in particular, to the crisis of *the European sciences and the transcendental phenomenology* (1961) by Edmund Husserl, and the criticisms to Galileo as for the mathematization of the nature had separated us from every possibility of a significant contact with the “world of life” or even to reduce to separate the richness of the lived experienced to *rigidize* it in dryness and in standard forms by mathematic formulae: i.e., in other words, until science loses all meaning for life and its sense of human effort in the name of the “geometrization of the world”. In political terms, the same criticism can be found in *Dialectics of the Illustration*, by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, for those who physical-mathematic scientific language would have subtracted, as for “oppressed being”, the “force to express”. It is not difficult to see how much of nostalgic and irrationally romantic is present in these criticisms and other ones in the same fashion, observing how a mathematic expression is nothing more than a language, at all similar to the rest of languages, hence, able to express a numeric representation of the experience’s quality, once the “fair or pertinent qualities” have been defined to express them in mathematic form.

Nevertheless, the fundamental observation that social facts are not susceptible of second degree elaborations in a mathematic sense is still standing. Why? Because of the simple reason that man is not a datum, but a process, and “laws” which have to do with him, cannot be *timeless* and *spaceless*, valid for any context and everlasting. Maybe there is in man in society a determination higher than that corresponding in nature, also because of the incontrovertible fact that man is a non-programmed animal and this makes him radically different, sociobiologists may say it, from the non-human animals. It is true, as it has been observed several times, that in sociology the quantitative datum, statistic, is frequently fundamental and its repetitions cause the definition of a sort of phenomena, which at the time come into the imperative “type” of something socially vast; however, the real is manifested in sociology not that much and not only in the repetition and in uniformity, as for a revolutionary rupture, in the “difference”, in the

moment of the crisis —crisis as a rupture, but, in the first place as a “separation”. Then there is in the crisis an epiphanic function, probably not substitutable, since actually social revolutions cannot be constructed agilely or be reproduced artificially in a laboratory.

The historicity of science offers healthy lessons in sobriety of the same measure as the scholar taken to reason in the modes of a pure thematicism, it is, to reason until insanity, confirming against all desire or unconsciously the saying that considers the insane person as that who has lost everything but reason. And then, it is so that I will gladly call the “dance of the paradigms”. These do not only “change the phase”, as Thomas Khun supposed, but they evolve even turning inwards. The exercises of science which are also supposed rational definitions, one has to keep in mind the unforeseen aspects of the intellectual trends and of the vague influences, a-rational and powerful, which too correctly are self-assumed in the suggestive and rather generic *Zeitgeist* or “spirit of time” —suggestive term, if it is not because of the presence of the term *Geist*, but also irritant, for besides all the aforementioned, it is ungraspable. This is basically true for those sciences of the vague or the *more or less* that in France are called *human sciences*; whereas in English speaking countries are presented as *social sciences*. In the mental climate where they are immersed and from where they are variably conditioned, the climate seems overly mobile, able to radical evolutions in a relatively brief arch of time.

In a not so distant time, in the years of the immediate postwar, it was usual to think in terms of a great dichotomy. Let me use a rather barbaric terminology, by then one could be “structuralist” or even “relationalist”. The former dealt with social phenomena “as things” — *comme des choses*, stated Émile Durkheim—, whereas the latter entrenched into primary groups, also called “face to face”; and from there they were willing to redesign those refined arabesques which presumed to scientifically express the varied “reticules” of the interpersonal relationships. The tension between both stances, which for an instant seemed dramatic, was supported on the one side by Talcott Parsons, yet with him all or almost all the European systematic tradition, and on the other, the picturesque inventor of the “sociometry”, the indefatigable hatted-traveler Jacob L. Moreno, but also the austere and

distractedly aristocratic Australian doctor and sociologist Elton G. Mayo, famous theorizer of the “human relationships” in industry.

It seems as though that epoch is now closed and those debates, already intense and full of *pathos*. “acts”, nowadays reread with attention seem to us gaunt and powdery. It is a severe lesson for those who image the scientific process as a sort of plain road with no curves or interruptions or u-turns, not to talk about retractions and regrets, linked to the supreme criterion of the “internal self-correctibility”; whereas, being also information of the assembly, sciences evolution does not take long to appear as what it is: a human enterprise, only human, a history started by contrasting “schools” and opposite groups a history made, certainly, of scientific conquests, yet of political struggles, of mortal jealousies, of conspiracies and blood.

Tension has mutated. It goes by and manifests among social analysts’ groups who refer to quantity or rather a statement, contrary and symmetric, founded on quality. It is not a lesser complaint. It does not finish in the academic environment, since it involves important economic interests and their representatives. In order to understand their substance it is necessary to refer to the historic perspective. During one hundred and fifty years the sociologist lived in his limbo, shaded and secluded. Patiently, he waited. In several occasions he covered his head in ashes. He suffered all the feeling of inferiority he was able to endure. As those who are afraid to be accused of bankruptcy, he desperately imitated and directed towards the scientists of nature; he attempted to elaborate a “physics of the customs”; he feared for being trapped into flagrantcy of weak scientific rigidity, that of not knowing the exactitude of his “ill science”, as an illustrious Neapolitan scholar. It is no coincidence that the positivist instance, still in its historical and theoretical limits, is even the founding moment of the social sciences as for sciences of observation —observatoin of data and external behavior to reach the interpretation of the internal motivation, in the “sense” of human acting in respect to the singular individual’s action or as a recurrent acting crystallized in the institutions—. Although nowadays it is the very sciences of nature, the “exact” sciences, which seem constrained to self-trouble, the ones which increasingly approach, and in an unforeseen manner, to the “sciences of the vague” and which renounce —or shamefully start to

renouce—to the concept of everlasting “law”, necessary or out of necessity, universally valid, timeless and spaceless in favor of the “tendencial uniformity” concept in a probabilistic meaning.

On the other side, social sciences and sociology itself are moving and transforming. The limits of the comtian positivism are now so evident that they are undeniable. Apart from this, either about comtian fiscalism, or the durkheimian “cosalism”, they occasionally found experienced critics and subtly unkind. Not only in Italian culture, converted in province of a veteran-humanism essentially anti-sociologic. Also in France where the great “litter” of Durkheim never suffered serious interruptions. “In France”, Simone Weil wrote, “[...] there is a sociologic school thanks to which one can study myths, folklore, ancient and colored civilizations without finding anywhere a trace of spirituality”. And later, when approaching ancient Greeks, continues: “there are indefinable relationships by means of numbers”. And this was experienced by the Greeks not as an occasion of check or angst, but happiness, since the fundamental notion and “the injustice in a man consisted in ignoring his limits” (Weil, 1966: 245).

Is it then, possible to theorize an encounter halfway between quantity and quality? It does not seem so, thus far. The qualitative statement in social sciences has enjoyed and currently enjoys a great fervor. When the leader of a company has problems in a department, the quantitative sociologist comforts him with the answers from the workers around his researchers; everything is elaborated through a questionnaire with pre-coded answers; eventually, the leader can read some clean tables, with percentages and crosses as it is due. This is a dry language, he understands it immediately and it soothes him, although the real reasons for the workers’ agitation are not even clarified.

When the United States’ soldiers in the Pacific front, during the Second World War, blocked perhaps by religious or psychological complexes, did not shoot; it was the research by Samuel Stouffer and his collaborators the one which appeased the angst of the Major States with the diagrams of the monumental research on the *American Soldiers*. Quantitative methods treat the people who take part in a social situation to be analyzed; for instance the behavior of the *colonizers before the indigenous*. Let us not scandalize. They

behave exactly as any other professional, i.e., just like the latter, which under contract offers a service to a client who does not have any possibility of control, profane as it is, upon the very service.

In reality, social research, conducted to strictly quantitative methods, even currently in a dominant position among those of sociologic culture, owes large part of its success to reasons of extra-scientific nature.

a) It coincides and corresponds to the technocratic style of thinking and mentality, distinguishable in the management of industrial financial enterprise.

b) Offers illusorily certain results, expressed with the formal restrictive coherence of the numerical apparatuses.

c) Since it is not based upon an autonomous problematic conscience, the problem of the election of the survey's topics.

d) In this sense, it is found the availability to sell oneself in the market to the best buyer.

However, an advantage of technical nature can be later mentioned: using pre-constituted conceptual instruments, it is independently elaborated from the human type and characteristics of the research, it is in the possibility to conduct massive opinion surveys, which give at least the illusion of totality and of a certain predictive capacity, and all of this in a reasonable arch of time.

On the contrary, qualitative research has privileged community studies. Besides the extraordinary experience of the School of Chicago in the 1930's, they are classical studies by Helen and Robert Lynd (1929) (*Middletown* and *Middletown in Transition*) and those by Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman (1958) (*Smalltown in Mass Society*). In opposition to quantitativist researches, instead of placing upon the object of study categories, diagrams and pre-elaborated questionnaires and used in interchangeable manners, thus disregarding the specific historic context, qualitative researches tend to make emerge, from below in direct contact with the object of study (participating observations and that which, in my *Trattato di sociologia* [Ferrarotti, 1968] I call "in-depth research"), the "troublesome areas" and the eventual "operative concepts". These are not elaborated on a desk, they are the fruits of a statement of the essentially inductive research and which can not be

started but on the base of a “preliminary exploration”. These consent to elaborate or rehearse and setting ready a series of “sensitizing concepts”, as Herbert Blumer calls them, which make possible what I call “operative concepts” (since they can be “operationalized”, it is, being decomposed to be related with important variables for the research’s ends).

It comes as no surprise that, for the gathering of empiric data through qualitative analysis, the “history of life”<sup>5</sup> is fundamental. It is clear that the reading of biographic documents proposes more complex problems than a mere statistical elaboration of pre-coded answers. To start with, the reunion of histories of life presupposes, as I have previously pointed out, a relationship of trust between interviewer and interviewee. No one would narrate a tape recorder their *Erlebnisse*, their “lived experiences”. This means that research is conceived as a co-research and each researcher, far from being able to entrench into a pre-constructed methodological armament, the researcher is at the time a “researched”. In other words, qualitative research help us to understand that “scientism”, even that of illuminist ascension, is the cartoon of science, a cartoon so atrocious that it made a writer of the intelligence of Voltaire say that the treads of shellfish found on certain alpine rocks were product of the pilgrims’ stepping, who returned from the travel to Holy Land. It also makes us understand, that the *acritic* quantitative rigor disdains quality. Scientific rigor, in its own sense, historically conscious, calls for it.

Nonetheless, it is true that several qualitative researchers, facing an imposing mass of autobiographic material, do not know what to do and they use it lightly, at most like illustrative material of hypotheses elaborated beforehand, reducing it to “romantic” appendixes of the research, to a “brushstroke of color”. The point of the connection between theoretical hypothesis and empiric biographic document is still open. It would be needed instead of proceeding with the utmost analytical attention, to the reading

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<sup>5</sup> I remit to my research on metropolitan peripheries and, in respect to the epistemological establishment, in particular to *Storia e storie di vita* (1981) and *La storia e il quotidiano* (1986). *Cfr.*, as for the intervention of Ilio Adoriso, *L’identità perduta della sociologia*, in “Il Manifesto”, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1989.

of the histories of life, with the aim to reach the core and make the “troublesome areas” emerge; these often naturally exposed in terms of psychological individual perception, are associated to consequences with the determiners of the meta-individual historic-economic-cultural context, in such a manner that they make dialectic intertwining evident—or of “conditioning reciprocity”— among individual, culture and moment or historic phase. This means, taking in consideration the histories of life, learning the *nexus between text, context and intertext*. In respect to quantitative researches, the difference is fundamental: in quantitative search theoretical categories are pre-constituted and descend on the empiric material, with the aim to reorder it according to a design pre-established outside the research in its effective making. In qualitative research, the categorization process starts from the base; it is at least defined in an a priori manner; rather than considering results, it tends to indicate, problematically, the directions towards it is needed to excavate and explore. In this sense, qualitative research is a typically “open” search that induces the analyst to practice that virtue of humility, which Bacon already considered essential for any scientist.

Then, I have in front of me a history of life, very well registered, hence, “unwound”. I have obtained it from my interlocutor, gaining his trust.<sup>6</sup> Between us there was an “empathic” flow, fragile, yet sufficiently supported and based upon a process of interaction which canceled, at least for some time, cultural asymmetries and “gaps” of social stratification. The gathering of the history of life implies, for the researcher, some renunciations and the acceptance of some ethical principle rather important. It is necessary to renounce to culture understood as a private capital and antagonistic instrument of confrontation and power, and at unison it requires to accept to place himself at the same wave length as the interlocutor, recognize that researcher and “researched” are related, in the same title, in the same enterprise. The result of this complex operation, for which there are no pre-established methodological rules and which constitutes in a strict sense the

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<sup>6</sup> In *Storia e storie di vita, op. cit* I proposed the “biography of group”, yet for this end it will be necessary to deepen the analysis in another space.

qualitative moment and the first orientative phase of any social research, is the history of life in front of me. What is there to do in this respect? How are this “materials”, often uneven and unrelated, but fundamental for sociologic reflections, to be used?

The history of life is a text that is a “field”, a well-defined area. It is something “experienced”: with an origin and a development, with progressions and regressions, with very precise outlines, with its figures and its meanings. I must approach this text with humble attention, silencing the “interior adventurer”. It is necessary to approach the text with due attention and respect for the other different from oneself. One gets access into the text. It is not enough to read it with the external attention of that who reads just to be informed. It is necessary to “dwell it”.

It is so how I enter the text of the history of life. I populate it. I set with it a significant relationship where nor my identity or the otherness of the text tend to prevail. I calmly read, and it is so that from the text emerge the troublesome areas, those where the narration moves faster, the moments of crisis become precious, epiphanic and revealing. The history of life is before me as a history of constrictions that weigh upon the individual—a set of conditionings somehow determinant—and at the time as a complex of strategies of liberation, which the individual utilizes taking advantage of the “right occasions”, the interstitial inklings.

The “troublesome areas” of a history of life can concern primary socialization (family, school), sexual sphere, job, and the possibility of finding an occupation, as it is said, “creative”, partnership and parental bonds. It is the link between text and context what gives the measure and character of the *troublesome areas* and of the *emergent topics* of a life. Being unemployed, for instance, in a situation where unemployment is a strange phenomenon and not necessarily of masses, is something different from being so when unemployment is an endemic phenomenon. The unemployed person, in this case, does not feel unavoidable “rejected”, an outcast of society, a disadvantaged. Just to say it, he is in good company.

The history of life can be seen, from this perspective, as an essential contribution to *historical memory*, to the comprehension of the context. Nevertheless, linking text and context is not a simple task as it seems at

first sight. It is not only about a matter of quite pertinent data approximation. Between history and history of life there is a demarcation line that can be fractured.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one can talk overly easy on historical memory. The relation between history and memory presents an unsolved problem. The very concept of memory is not readily grasped, it is elusive and evanescent. More than on memory, let us talk in plural: on *memories*. Indeed, memory is a plural, dynamic, protean reality. More than a given reality, fixed, it is a magma, a process. It is true that it can be considered as a passive plate which registers—in a neutral, notarial manner from the outside—our experiences. It is reactive, it flees from the purely logical control. It is enigmatic, on occasions it pinpoints the reconstruction of the particulars until cruelty, sometimes suddenly blocked, out, lost in a turbulent void.

The great discovery of Freud essentially consists in having found that sometimes memory, apparently with no reason, blocks itself, hides instead remembering, inhibits and “cancels”, partially or completely, the experienced. It has the capacity to remit and recreate, as well as the disquieting capacity to “dichotomize”, obscure, select. Then, memory is also the faculty to forget. At the beginning of his *Confessions* Rousseau writes about the possibilities of possible “memory gaps”. He fears for his credibility before the reader. He assures that those eventual “gaps” will be filled with “some light ornaments”. Further on the text we will see that something more than a rhetoric artifice will be necessary. “I could have supposed as true—states Rousseau—what could have been, never what I knew was false”. But it is this scruple for truth what reveals us the impossibility to reconstruct the own childhood. The young Jean-Jacques reads in a loud voice for his watchmaker father Plutarch’s *Parallel lives*, he is delighted, reflects, he is deeply edified by that literature, nay, by the recollection of that literature, yet *forty years later*. The youth does not speak, it is the adult, the thinker, the writer of already broad experience, the worldly man who borrows the by-then kid now, all what he has learnt from life.

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<sup>7</sup> It can be decisive the contributions of the “histories of life” for a first exploration of these cultures and peoples who, from the Eurocentric point of view, seem to “do not have history” (cfr., for example, Grohs, *The Changing Social Functions of African Autobiographies*).

The reconstruction of that childhood cannot be more than artful; however, not only that. Rousseau digs into his own childhood not so much to reconstruct it as it indeed was, as he attempts and as he repeatedly remembers the reader, but besides he digs into it to discover, discovering himself, the essence of man, the universal concept of humanity, its archetype as metaphysical principle. He makes the discovery of himself with that of humanity coincide.

Understood even before thinking, such is the common luck of all humanity —he writes— and I felt it more than anyone. I ignore what I was at five or six years of age; I do not know how I learnt to read: I only remember the first readings, the effect they had upon me, and from then my self conscience arose and ever since it never left me (Rousseau, 1988: 17).

Is it true? Any doubt is licit.<sup>8</sup> The fact is that in order to understand and construct the spirit, the environment of a bygone age, to somehow feel actually contemporary of oneself and the men from the past, the greatest difficulty is not constituted by what there would be needed to know, but by what there would be needed to know how to forget, ignore, write between brackets, suspend in some manner. Maybe Mark Twain is right when he writes his autobiography renouncing to any pre-constructed logical criterion, either chronological or thematic. He sometimes writes *à bâtons rompus*, as it arrives, leisurely letting himself go, guided only by the unpredictable reclaims of the most diverse ideas, abandoning himself to the reactions of memory and the fluid association of ideas and assonances.

Memory is stimulated in manners and by factors frequently unpredictable or casually at all. A smell or a sound can be sufficient, part of a song fading to arouse and make us remember an entire page of our life to recreate it, evoking a “passage of the soul”. Or even a face, a particular line of the horizon, a photograph. Once visiting Israel for the first time, in the desert

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<sup>8</sup> For this troublesome ambit, it is necessary to almost suddenly slide in terms of the gratuitous metaphysism. Elémire Zolla: “On its own [...] man makes himself to his past ragged clothes, to his biographical identity [...] once subtracted from the dominion of his private archetype, the archetypal complex role or it is established, according to Keats, ‘a community with the essences, a certain unity’ and Keats stresses, that ‘destroys the person’” (Zolla, 1994: 79).

of Galilee, Ignazio Silone suddenly utters: “I have already seen this landscape. This is the land where I was born. It is the same land, arid and stony, as the Marisca”. Then, a lot of recollections take place, apart from the most explicit and known, such as the visual, locative, acoustic, olfactory. There are recollections founded on meaningful connections, although not immediately graspable. Georg Simmel attributed the pathos, the nostalgic trembling, and the aura we take contemplating certain ruins, partly already covered by vegetation, to the fact that a work of man is progressively returning to nature (Schama, 1995; Ferrarotti, 1994; Rilke, 1949).

Let us have the direct experience preceding any autobiography. It is sought to return to the source, returning and give checkmate to chronology and calendar. Suddenly one is victim of a double tendency, contrary and symmetric. On the one side, a very powerful sensation of time passing is experienced; on the other, an imperative question appears: who am I? where do I come from? Where do I go to? Passage, then, continuous transformation and necessity of permanence, metamorphosis and persona, flow of sensations, constant renovation and aging of the body cells, physical decay and at the time the construction of subjectivity, dominion of a unitary I, coherent, responsible. Then one returns to the origins. The past is reclaimed, the infantile stupor, the first discovery of oneself and the world around one. It is a complex game of chiaroscuro. One proceeds among gleams, lightings of lived light and steady shades, mysterious opacities. Memory remembers and cancels: luminous slate and at the time quiet sphinx, disquieting on the marmoreal silence.

One remembers the infantile stupor, yet, is for the child that attitude actually stupor? Or, on the contrary, does not it appear as stupor of the *blasé* (disconcerted) adult, who has seen so much and lived so much, who thinks again of childhood as a cleansing bath and of a fortunate excursion to the isle of the Lotus Eaters? Childhood: lost island, dreamt of, reinvented, rethought by the adult man, it is not any longer so; it is translated into different terms, resends to adult age an image which reclaims man the painful consciousness that recreation has concluded, and that innocence was consummated. The adult rethinks of his childhood and creates a mythical innocence of which he imagined as the faithful depositary, whereas in reality

childhood is, in the first place, ambiguous, innocent and perverse, fiendish and cruel. Sartre stated: "it is paradise". Reached in the phase of the absolute desperation, perhaps overly exhibited to be genuine, "the finite man", affirms Giovanni Papini: "I never had a childhood". It is like saying: I never was a child; I was always an adult. Is it true? And then, what to say about this child who certain autumnal Sundays in Florence, beforehand bored and decorated the horizon, took long walks, hand in hand with a taciturn father? It is true: there is a mysterious sense of destiny that can arise in the earliest childhood years and first youth. The rest of life takes place later to prove and self-assure and the others what he knew or sensed from the beginning. In this sense Alexander Pope is right: "*The child is father to the man*". Yet there also exist the *late bloomers*.

Childhood does exist. There is a time in life when it is necessary that mature men and in the threshold of old age, look at the eyes of a child, such as Dostoevsky suspected, the mysterious reflections of a different word. Denying childhood and memory is a rather hastened manner to introduce and endorse oneself as nobody's child, at most of oneself, *homo novus*. Then there is only one way to accept oneself and give a meaning to the very first inquietudes: to make coincide the own destiny with that of the whole humanity; to discover in the individual oneself the essence of the universal man and request, from that discovery, the saving rule of a supreme auto-therapy.

At the end of his Confessions, Rousseau has an explicit purpose:

Tout le reste du jour, enfoncé dans la forêt, j'y cherchais, j'y trouvais l'image des premiers temps, *dont je traçais fièrement l'histoire*, je faisais main-basse sur les petits mensonges des hommes; j'y osais dévoiler à nu leur nature, suivre le progrès du temps et des choses qui l'ont défigurée, et comparant l'homme de l'homme avec l'homme naturel, leur montrer dans son perfectionnement prétendu la véritable source de ses misères. Mon âme exaltée par ces contemplations sublimes s'élevait auprès de la Divinité, et voyant de là mes semblables suivre dans l'aveugle route de leurs préjugés, celle de leurs erreurs, de leurs malheurs, de leurs crimes, je leur criais d'une faible voix qu'ils pouvaient entendre: Insensés qui vous plaignez sans cesse de la nature, apprenez que tous vos maux vous viennent de vous (1988).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Italics are mine.

Then it is nature, not society the one under accusation. Childhood is the good and happy age; that of the wanderings in the woods, in contact with the natural forces and their unpolluted beauties, before the works of man and their scattered interventions devastate it. Technically “progressed” society has been humanly barbarized at the same time. Only the privileged bourgeois, triumphally grabbed from a throne of economic power and social decorum that shed tears and blood, can proclaim to be satisfied. In diverse forms, with a radical criticism of the society and its rules, but not because of this with a dithyrambic exaltation of the nature, that attitude returns with a singular persistence in other authors.

The attempt to link text and context, it is, linking the history of life to the contextual characteristics of the objective historic frame, where the history of life has been developing, does not only place the issue of the relation between micro-analysis and macro-structure, which some authors indicate as “theories of mid level” or “meso theories”, which will guarantee the “micro-macro connections”, with a terminology that seems to ventilate the topographic instructions of a map rather than approach to theoretical discourse (Collins, 1992). This attempt forces, in the first place, to verify that a certain degree of collaboration between quantity and quality is ineliminable and in every evidence it shows the inconsistent banality of the “intellectual war” declared by someone “on qualitative sociology” (Ferrarotti, 1989). The linking between text and context bears the decomposition of the concept of context according to a triple directive:

a) Context in the *historical* sense, with its peculiar difficulty to be related to individual memory, not only in the sense of a presumable “abuse” of the memory (Todorov, 1995) that is rudely compared to a sort of *magazine* of fragmentary information, but also of a “historic horizon” in the sense of “problematic environment” (Ferrarotti, 1987).

b) Context in the *evocative* and *recreative* sense.

c) Context in the sense of *socioeconomic-statistical objective frame*, where numerical approach is, obviously, fundamental.

It seems important, once we have reached this part, to deepen into the concept of context in its evocative and re-creative senses due to an intuitable: conscious the exam of self-perception of the individual-subject of the history of life in his experiential linking to the contextual environment.

What is it that we see when we look? We know for sure that nothing is immediately observable. In other words, we see with the eyes and look with memories, impressions and preceding readings. We see with the eyes of the body, but we also observe, or maybe, mainly with the eyes of the mind. All we see is, literally, a *déjà vu*.

When Maurice Halbwachs, the eminent member of the durkhemian “litter” and author of *The social frames of memory*, arrived for the first time to London, it seemed as though he had already been there. He had seen it through the eyes of Charles Dickens’ novels. Now he was “seeing it again”. Each person carries within their landscapes, part and set stimulus of their recollections —their “landscapes of the soul”, the car index of their memories—. The importance of the book of Simon Schama (1995) consists in making understand, if it is not demonstrating in a tight sense, the weight of memory in the contemplation of any landscape, and stress the fundamental unit of the human experience, in the invincible tendency to consecrate forests, rocks, streams, attributing them meaning which transcend their empirical characteristics. From this perspective, the book has a great originality, challenges and faces common places and the slothfulness of conventional wisdom. Indeed, there is a tradition of thought of Cartesian ascension —actually Platonic— which is founded, justified as well as celebrates dualism: nature and culture, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, body and soul, empiry and theory. Assuming a quite original perspective, Schama’s contribution is founded on the intent of joining two terms. Human presence is essential even to document absence. It is not true that it is impossible to withdraw into the desert in the fashion of ascetics and anchoresses of the II and III centuries just because petroleum was found in there. If we observe a desert, if we contemplate the sandy waves apparently immovable, ready to retake their unpredictable dance no sooner does the fearsome *ghili* arise, or even worse the *Kahan-sin* that burns the eyes and blurs sight, common sense tells us it is desert that which is deprived from human life. The paradox is that it is man, with his presence, who defines the desert.

Landscapes —writes Schama— are culture before being nature; constructions of the projective image upon the jungle, upon water and rock [...]. It is necessary to recognize that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision has been set in a given place, it conquers the particular capacity to confound categories, to make metaphors of its referents more real, to transform itself, as a mater of fact, into a part of the frame (1995).

Schama's examples are enormously pleasurable. The pages dedicated to the Third Reich's Marshal, the Nazi Hermann Göring, who by the end of 1934 worried about the state of the forests in the confines of the oriental territories and he walks among the forests dressed as a supernumerary of the *Freischütz*, of the authentic "hippopotamus", sensual and ravenous, deign complimentary companion of the anal vegetarian Hitler, are of an irresistible black humorism, heavily stressed by the general *understatement*. However, more relevant are the observations which Schama dedicates to *De Germania* by Tacitus.

Here the jungle ceases to be the stage for an operetta of dubious taste. It is consecrated for it is the seat of the primigenial divinity, which from the roots emerges and affirms as the indigenous force destined to punish racial arrogance, beyond the supposed technical superiority of Publius Quinctilius Varus and his legions. In the dense, obscure and dreadful Teutoburg forest, Varus and his troops were ambushed by Arminius. With a daring comparative turn, not odd in this book, Schama compares Varus with the general Cluster circumcised by the Indians: "poor Quinctilius Varus, the Cluster of the Teutoburg forest; Cluster for more than a reason, due to Velleius Paterculus, the only surviving testimony, gives particular attention to the racial and cultural arrogance of Varus, who despises Germanics who 'do not have anything human save voice and arts'". Nonetheless Arminius, who had been taught in the Roman military arts, was an indigenous, certainly not ingenious, and later it would be time for Agriculus to avenge the shame of Varus' defeat, partly copying the military techniques and strategies of Arminius. So that, he should become a myth, the hero of the German forest par-excellence, as such uncovered in the years prior to Nazism and because of him the minister of agriculture, Rudolf Darrè, who is attributed the paternity of the slogan *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil).

Schama's analysis is largely indebted to Tacitus, but he does not seem to be completely conscious of the pedagogical attempt that motivates the rigid Tacitian writing such as, centuries later, will justify the paradoxical defense of the cannibalism by Montaigne. In both cases, it is for Tacitus, to put before our eyes the corrupt Romans, and for Montaigne that of the hypocritical catholic Europeans, the example of the primitive but genuine, sober, and of admirable simplicity.<sup>10</sup> Schama rises a diverse and very interesting issue: how far the myth can be incited, the need to sanctify the origins, the obsession for the beginning.

The real problem —he pinpoints much equilibrated— consists in saying if it is possible to take seriously the myth in its own terms, to respect its coherence and complexity without being morally blinded by its poetic force [...]. Of this I am sure. Not taking seriously the myth in the life of a clearly “disenchanted” culture such as ours means, indeed, impoverishing our comprehension of the world we have in common [*our shared world*].

Schama validates the same statement in his genial exam of the water and mountains. The reconstruction of life and works of the singular “friend of water” who Gian Lorenzo Bernini, with the fountains of the four rivers, that of the “barge” of the Square of the Spain and of the Triton, it is rich in unexpected approaches as well as in the reconsideration of Henry David Thoreau and of John Muir makes us see again the interpretations, nowadays so traditionalized by recent movements of reply. Beyond being an absolute novelty, perhaps, it would be necessary to convince oneself that large part of the reply and the contemporary juvenile counterculture finds in the Romantic of the century before their last progenitors, if not their archetypical exemplar.

10 Memorable pages on Tacitus and civic desperation (“the gates of the temple were wide opened and a superhuman voice announced that the gods were leaving...”) were written by Lidia Storoni Mazzolani (*L'impero senza fine*, 1972); as a result of the pedagogical attempt of Tacitus and Montaigne, *cf.* my *La tentazione dell'oblio*, 1994, pp. 44-56.

The comparison between text and context is not, thus, assimilable to a historic rationalized sequence. Acknowledge and re-acknowledge. See and re-see. There are explorations of new territories and unforeseen returns, almost as a superimposed archetype led the experience of the subject in the wider adjacent meanders. The relation between text and context is essentially a *reciprocal conditioning*. It is not about two realities confronting in a speculative manner. One is the other, influences and at the time is influenced by the other. I tend to see only what I have already seen. But here where the context surprises me with the *unexpected*. In this sense, nobody is ever alone. *We interdepend*. I do not perceive anything, in any circumstance, absolutely on its own. The landscape I contemplate contemplates me. In reality, it co-opts me, absorbs me, makes me become part of it. *I can see the landscape as long as the landscape sees that I see*. A poet dealt with this delicate and crucial matter:

Is not the secret of Rembrandt's greatness perhaps that he saw and painted men as if they were landscapes? By means of light and shade (with which morning's essence and evening's arcane touched each other), he talked about the life of those he painted, and this life became vast and potent [...]. Is not Christ like a lonesome tree, erected against ruin? [...] he was able to paint portraits for he penetrated deeply in the faces as though they were countries of vast horizons and agitated high skies (Rilke, 1949: 42-43).

This does not mean much. It only means either the text or context can not be reduced or nullify each other and among them there is not a prevailing priority level. Historic agent is an individual who makes certain things, makes or not certain decisions, moves, his time of life lapses. And all of this takes place in a frame which, nevertheless, is not static but reactive, helps and blocks him, stimulates or paralyzes him. It is not true, as someone affirmed, that "contextual macro-structures do nothing". They help or impede the unfold of personal behaviors on the micro-situational level. Their configuration, either in its formal codification, in juridical sense, or as a traditionalized habit, is an important assumption for the analysis and comprehension of the histories of life.

Similarly deficient, or at least unilateral, is the conception that exhausts the meaning and tasks of the histories of life in the reconstruction of the “culture, history, tradition of a community, a group or a social stratum” (Bruschi, 1996: 117).<sup>11</sup> It is not possible to support with good reasons that this conception is completely erroneous. On the contrary, it is memory, within certain limits, and adequately expresses the first phase of the histories of life in the pure and simple “broadening of horizons”, for which from the individual case the general case is reconstructed, a program at the time excessive and reductive appears: excessive, due to the pretension of broadening of the historic horizon, on its own belonging to elaborated periodizations, based on the logic of the chronicles, which undergoes individual vicissitudes; reductive, via the subordinate role recognized in the biographic material in respect to the historic level in full sense. The real challenge that histories of life present for social research is rather to have the option to take, express and formulate the “pulp”, to somehow express it, the quotidian experienced, of the social structures, formal and informal.

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