

*On the interdisciplinary approach. The humanism of social sciences\**

2009. The story begins on 12 October, when Elinor Ostrom is awarded the Nobel Prize for economics (together with Oliver Williamson), «for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons». But first there is a long flashback. And an open finale.

1990. Ostrom brings out an intense work, *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Italian trans. *Governare i beni collettivi*. Marsilio, 2007), in which she develops a theory on the community governance of *common pool resources*, also called *common property resources* (CPR), capable of protecting and preserving the commons (the use of which is marked by scarce excludability and high subtractability) and of managing the use and consumption of distributable marginal units.

Ostrom's analysis takes as its starting point Garrett Hardin's 1968 article, *The Tragedy of the Commons*. The researcher objects to its premise, namely the unsustainability of the exploitation of land resources as a result of growing demographic pressure and unrestrained individual appropriation: the «tragedy of freedom in a commons». Hardin believes that only the intervention of the state is possible. Otherwise there is privatisation, letting the owner set the rules and prices. Ostrom demonstrates empirically (and historically) that not only are the two classic State-market solutions not the only possible, universally valid ones, but neither are they the best solution for the sustainable and productive use of joint resources. Success stories are those capable of endogenously developing institutions and the rules of management and use.

Ostrom's theory is one of complexity, identifying all the elements and conditions of interaction between man and the ecosystem needed for community management that is fair, efficient and sustainable over time. Many disciplines come into play: economics (the games theory), law (the institutions theory), anthropology, sociology, and so on. The exceptional element of Ostrom's work is not so much, or not only, the *what*, but the *how*. Ostrom's interdisciplinary, empirical method is a far cry from the abstraction of the mainstream economy which, in Ronald Coase's words, «is a theoretical system which floats in the air and which bears little relation to what happens in the real world». Through an intense and global field study, Ostrom made a substantial contribution in the form of elements and qualitative data to the top-heavy set of theoretical, quantitative data at the disposal of economists. Such as to imagine and understand the direction in which a functioning and effective model to be applied to reality should be developed.

---

\* Editoriale del n. 155, ottobre-dicembre 2009 di *queste istituzioni*, la rivista del CSS (<http://www.questeistituzioni.it>)

In the economics world not everyone was happy. Steven Levitt, an esteemed anti-dogmatic economist, a late-arriving but convinced supporter of Ostrom's work, commented: «the economics profession is going to hate the prize going to Ostrom even more than the Republicans hated the Peace Prize going to Obama» (<http://economistsview.typepad.com>). He was right. The criticism of many economists focused on the risks (!) of “contamination of the economic disciplines” (sic!). Yes, economics has always laid claim to special status compared with other disciplines, rejecting all contact with the social sciences. “A dearth of imagination”, someone called it. Sometimes economists seem to have too much imagination, in the image of themselves and in the deformation of reality. They seem to lack a curiosity for other disciplines, and above all for the real world. But Ostrom managed to give a lesson on the importance of the connection between theory and reality. At a time when economists were still in denial about such a need.

Moving on to the crisis. The speculative bubble and resulting disaster, with the crisis starting in 2008, helped to disclose an economic and social structure that is ever more frequently based on frightening and growing inequalities, as if they were the inevitable by-product of a model that is otherwise perfect in every other way. Because it works, the sums have been checked, strategies conjure up majestic views. Leading to a magnificent future. Creating the base for the multiple conceptions of win-all markets. We talk about this in this issue, following on from previous issues.

It is now extremely clear that the scientific and ethical programme to understand the social world needs some profound and continuous adjustments to our scientific culture. We should look to make sense of the world through reason, experience and shared civic values. The sciences already have at their disposal an effective tool in this search for meaning, for the purposes of attaining a greater understanding: the interdisciplinary method.

The discipline that has shown itself to be deafest to this discourse and to the lukewarm debate on the interdisciplinary approach is economics. News of the Nobel Prize going to Ostrom was greeted in the blogs of economists with bitter criticism and the most boorish of comments. The most moderate of comments likened Ostrom's Nobel to Obama's. Obviously with regard to the inconsistency and abstruseness of the motivation proffered for the award. Yet it is the science of economics that most needs the interdisciplinary method. The economy will have to be interdisciplinary in order to be significant, in view of the extraordinary failure to understand and predict real trends. There is no alternative.

Someone realised this, and asked the Nobel Prize Committee if the crisis had had a bearing on the decision taken. The Committee replied, impeccably, that the award is not given based on the events of the previous year, but in view of a body of studies and works that sometimes span a lifetime. Yet the crisis did have a bearing. We are sure of it. One of the lessons of Ostrom's excellent work is

that institutions shape the economy through their rules and actions. Different institutions give rise to very different models of production and consumption – as well as ways of life. Empirical experience of the *commons* teaches that market trading, productivity, efficiency and prosperity are achieved if institutions are doing a good job. This means: networks, communities, cooperation, bottom-up approach. The *what* as a function of the *how*. This is institutional economics. What some economists consider to be a minor discipline, the fruit of contamination with political sciences.

Elinor Ostrom is, fortunately, in very good company. Comparisons have been drawn likening her work and the sedimentation of the thousand suggestions contained therein with Yochai Benkler's "The wealth of networks". The analogy is not without substance. Benkler's economy of networks, applied to the *commons* of the Network, develops the concept of the opening of market-based and centralised models to social processes, in participatory and creative terms, in order to expand the space of individual freedoms, without foregoing the efficiency of and control over pooled resources. This point of view is one that can be shared, without overlooking the difficulties inherent in the complex governance of the Internet.

Let us return to mainstream economic theory, where the debate on the interdisciplinary approach is still a non-starter, confining researchers to abstract constructions that are often *nonsensical* and based on a reductionist approach, alien to all epistemology of complexity which, as first shown by Edgar Morin (*Introduction to complex thought*, 1993), calls upon disciplines to become aware of the inadequacy of pure analytical theories, and to adopt, where possible, a holistic and global approach when looking at real-world problems.

The interdisciplinary approach is, indeed, complementarity, integration, interaction, convergence among the sciences, in order to achieve, as Jean Piaget wrote, «a reciprocity of exchanges, such as to produce mutual enrichment». The idea is to create a synthesis, a compromise, that can correct and move beyond the limitations inherent in every discipline, to add expertise and knowledge in order to aid an understanding of the human condition, based on research of the deeper structures of phenomena, so that they can be described and explained.

In this sense, we might talk about horizontal and vertical interdisciplinary approaches. In the former, the idea is to call upon a host of disciplines, each with its own set of data, instruments, theories, techniques and methods, to give their opinion about the same subject matter. In order to extract all available pieces of information and interpretation. Thus, dialogue among different disciplines pertaining to the same question. A vertical interdisciplinary approach is taken to mean a given discipline applying itself to the analysis and understanding of several dimensions of reality, to several subjects, thus contributing, adding to – either confirming or rejecting – findings produced by other disciplines, in order to have a full picture of the chosen area of study. Illuminating aspects

that other disciplines, due to their nature and scientific approach, fail to pick up or have no interest in examining. Thus, a cross between dimensions of a macroarea of investigation, having varying degrees of relevance, different subsets of intervention for each discipline. The two methods do of course sometimes coincide. They do not travel along parallel tracks. They do however offer a cross-check of data and theories, and can aid an understanding of social phenomena and processes that do not respect disciplinary boundaries. And yet, they ask to be governed. This is a complex approach, requiring a greater effort and longer time frames. Perhaps for this reason, an approach disliked and ignored by public sector decision makers, who are increasingly tied, in an unstoppable spiral, to a short, indeed very short-term, logic.

Let us move on to the consequences of the self-referential and ideological abstraction reached by economic theory in its *splendid isolation*. We have already spoken here about the alliance between economic theory and liberalist fundamentalism, the financialised economy, deregulation of the financial markets, deterioration and destruction of safeguards and working conditions, the great inequality in the distribution of income. Thus the crisis came about. In such a context there is no point in talking about the “real economy”. Such a gap between the financial economy and the real economy is unacceptable. We cannot remain deaf for much longer to an appeal coming from many parts. The Paolo Sylos Labini Association (Sylos Labini was one of the founders of the Consiglio italiano per le Scienze Sociali) has recently proposed a *Manifesto for the freedom of economic thought against the dictatorship of the dominant theory and for a new code of ethics* which, calling economics to the service of people, places the interdisciplinary approach as a pre-condition for methodological and ethical change (“The economic science must be intended broadly, without unilateral definitions and with a complete openness to exchanges with other social sciences. The aim of research should be to understand the social reality surrounding us, as the premise for political choices aimed at improving people’s living conditions and the common good”). The interdisciplinary method thus has the role of critically and significantly reordering the knowledge of reality in different sectors, in other words carrying out Piaget’s wishes: the *permanent breaking of boundaries*.

Despite what some economists believe, Ostrom is *also* an economist, an economist of the institutions, that has developed an area of reflection, taking the *commons* theme as a starting point, asserting the prospect of a sustainable economy that makes use of the innovative and inherently democratic and humanistic contribution of the knowledge economy. The recognition that comes with the Nobel Prize is important, and should be viewed with satisfaction. It comes twenty years after the publication of *Governing the Commons*. What does that mean? It means there have been

considerable obstacles to overcome in acknowledging the existence and worth of a field of studies and a cognitive approach that reject every form of theoretical radicalism pretending to be non-ideological.

C. L.