

# Contingency and Crisis. Notes On a Sociology Considering Failure and the Unforeseen

*Contingencia y crisis. Apuntes para una sociología atenta al fracaso y a lo imprevisto*

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## Key words

- Social Action
- Social Constructivism
- Economic Crises
- Rational Choice
- Failure
- Decision Models
- Forecasting

## Palabras clave

- Acción social
- Constructivismo social
- Crisis económicas
- Elección racional
- Fracaso
- Modelos de toma de decisiones
- Predicción

## Abstract

This paper is proposed as a critical approach to normativism and rational-action based sociological models, starting from the idea that they overrate the capacities of agents to understand and evaluate the mechanisms of social life. In opposition to these theoretical approaches, we suggest that contingency and failure (not taken into account by these approaches) appear as constant realities, inevitable and appropriate for understanding social action. In this journey we rely on Ramos' proposal on the tragic dimension of action, in addition to the reformulation by Arendt of Heidegger's concept of care. Finally, we critique the role assigned to certain experts in the current scenario of economic crisis, from presumption of the ability to predict and correct social paths, pushing for success as a goal.

## Resumen

El artículo se propone como un acercamiento crítico a los modelos normativistas y acciorracionalistas de la sociología partiendo de la idea de que sobrevaloran las capacidades agenciales para entender y evaluar los mecanismos de la vida social. Frente a esos planteamientos teóricos proponemos que la contingencia y el fracaso (con la que no cuentan esas perspectivas) comparezcan como realidades constantes, inevitables e idóneas para comprender la acción social. En ese recorrido nos apoyamos en la propuesta de Ramos sobre la dimensión trágica de la acción, además de en la reformulación por parte de Arendt del concepto heideggeriano de *cuidado*. Finalmente, recalamos en la crítica a la función atribuida a determinados expertos en el escenario actual de la crisis económica, desde el presupuesto sobre su capacidad para predecir y corregir los rumbos sociales orientándolos hacia la consecución del éxito.

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been nearly fifteen years since Ramón Ramos advised that sociological models should take the tragic dimension of action seriously, drinking from the well of the ancient wisdom of Greek tragedy (Ramos, 1999). Some current developments in action-oriented social theory have proven this observation to be very insightful in thoroughly reviewing the different levels of attention to recurrent activities required for the analysis of social scenarios. This paper relies upon identifying paradoxical caesuras between the informal knowledge held by social actors, and the often cross-eyed focuses used in organisational contexts and in formal management models. Our intention is to recover the tragic warning and connect it to a reformulation of the concept of care, with its roots in Heidegger, based on certain findings by Hannah Arendt. We believe that this can lay the ground for a constructive proposal for more realistic models to analyse and manage that pertaining to the collective.

In opposition to rational-action and normativism based approaches or models, which overrate agents' abilities to establish, understand, and evaluate the mechanisms involved in social life, we advocate that the threat of severe frustration and failure should appear as an inevitable and constant dimension; something that is particularly useful in understanding, at its most basic level, the fallible quality of social action as a limited game that is always susceptible to, and demanding of, improvement. In order to do this, it is first necessary to bridge the gap between more refined and advanced feelings, knowledge and approaches that can improve our analytical and management models of the social, and the gap between certain practical procedures and the models that describe them.

More specifically, our proposal is to suggest a way of rediscovering the nature of social phenomena such as deviation and exclusion. These could be understood as inevitable

threats which are co-related to the centrifugal pressure inherent in the social game, and which compel us to give fundamental importance to the continuous and inevitable task of reconstructing and correcting the areas of social relations. If we look at social life — as we believe one must— from a sociological perspective that mainly looks at the capacity for the organisation of social enclaves in order to structure differences, what happens is that the specific cases of failure, or of supposed social inefficiency or inability, should not be seen as examples of ineffectiveness; instead, they should be perceived to recount and proclaim the inability of the organisation to synergically structure its plural nature. In short, room should be made for these cases in practical networks and, particularly, in the general monitoring and correcting processes of joint achievements and specifically joint performance, which would then be addressed from a plural approach. These failures and cases of inefficiency may also be underestimated and deemed to be insignificant fringes. Any analyses that fail to take these dimensions of social life into account are deficient; however, they are often considered pertinent and are used to justify, from their position of blindness and bias, decisions that affect society as a whole, and whose supposed benefits are not, or even offered to be, discussed.

All this seems interesting on two analytical levels that may be separated, but which are most fruitful when considered together. On the one hand, we have a meta-theoretical perspective focused on the solvency of the categories of a sociology that establishes rational actions and the capacity for agency of subjects and institutions as reference points of knowledge about collective life; and on the other, we have the complex network of actions and situations that make up the social fabric and warns of the difficulty involved in attempting to create appropriate categories. In this paper we intend to approach both levels by proposing an interrelation between

them that highlights the limitations of a conceptualisation that ignores that social life is a merely probable, open scope of activity, and that it lacks any assurances. That is, the fact that social actions are collective and plural must be taken into account, bearing in mind that they have no centre or organising principle that leads them in a certain direction, with the ensuing challenges in coordination. They are characterised by reflexivity and creativity, whilst maintaining the possibility of changing themselves and transforming their course as they move along. In this way, the required conceptualisation should be able to include the random, the unpredictable, the fortuitous, as well as failures, errors and thwarted expectations<sup>1</sup>... One of the most important problems arising when such perspectives of social aspects are disregarded by theoretical models is that novelty is deemed to be an exception, rather than a rule, of sociality. This facilitates analysis, but at the cost of generating a fundamental blindness, and substantial problems in terms of socio-political management. We also suggest that one of the outcomes of the referred interaction is to disturb the set of tasks for the social sciences, which must address reality from three perspectives: as sciences of action on the frontiers of time (with an eye on the “jumps” taken by actors with every step, based as they are in a present which not only relies on past experience but also looks ahead); as sciences of management that spheres of action (which addresses the care taken to improve them as areas of social production and social relations, mainly concentrating on the new scenarios to structure the emerging diversity); and, finally, as sciences of critical revision of the images of

the social world (serving to correct outdated representations, supported by the experience gained from integrating that which emerges, including the non-intentional effects of actions and of these corrective reactions)<sup>2</sup>.

## I. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICES

It is well known that many of the aspirations for sociology to be considered a science rely on the purpose of identifying regular patterns in the course of social action that enable accurate predictions. The challenge is to find a set of rules to be able to anticipate how an individual, a group or an institution, for instance, will behave, given certain conditions. Explaining social reality would be tantamount to knowing the rationale of their dynamics and integrating social change as a kind of determinism; social transformations would run in one or a different direction, given a specific set of circumstances. However, the apparent inability of the social sciences to predict surprising, unexpected events does not lead to questioning this model of recreating possible future scenarios. This can be seen in the efforts made by the social sciences to incorporate, a posteriori, events into a logical sequence that aims to explain them. Only incomplete knowledge of the factors involved would prevent an accurate forecast of this disruptive novelty which would thus become an effect of well-identified causes. This could not have been any different, but it was not possible to see it coming because it had not been looked at in a suitable way.

<sup>1</sup> Hans Joas opened up (possibly as nobody else did) the new theoretical and meta-theoretical vein that we must place at the core of our heuristic review and critique, the sooner the better. He did so particularly in his *Die Kreativität*, a study that Ramón Ramos was right to include amongst the monographs of Contemporary Classics of the Editorial Service of the Centre for Sociological Research. See Joas, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense we consider particularly promising the line of work undertaken by Benno Herzog in amending the sociology of Axel Honneth. It concerns the basic dialectic between recognition and contempt, including ideas from discourse theory that explore the mechanisms of “discursive exclusion” which would begin even before the process of the verbalisation of contempt. See Herzog, 2012.

The normative and rationalist models of social theory presuppose some assurance of collective reproduction. The former model, as a culture whose norms and values are able to guarantee collective action through socialisation; the latter, thanks to a model starring an actor whose rational behaviour is strategically orientated in order to maximise its calculations and allows social behaviour to be predicted. In both these cases a series of regularities and patterns is assumed to exist that make it possible to describe the working of social orders to find formulas for action and practical guidance, which are often aimed at ensuring the success of the joint venture. In the light of this, it may be highly appropriate to bear in mind G. H. Mead's conviction that such a phenomenon is in fact the result of a human propensity for constant rationalising (Mead, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. It is as if it were a "light" form of using the capacity for narrative, or of "giving account of"; as if we are ashamed to recognise that we have been previously ignorant of something, in the line of the far-too-clever person who straight away plumps for the new version found by someone else with an "I already knew it". Or, worse still, it is not wanting to recognise that the unforeseen and unexpected was strictly unpredictable and not to be expected. It would be somehow remaining stupidly and stubbornly anchored in ignorance, turning one's back to the fact that understanding the circumstances of our life is a precarious act, immersed in an ocean of ignorance. Because, contrary to what prevails

in our managing minds, the fundamental determinism with which to work, from the very ground of convictions, is the incapacity to effectively and accurately predict what is important in life and in social life, and the subsequent need to be constantly prepared to fix the inoperative organisation of human affairs.

However, the task seems difficult if we look at the tendency to separate action from the micro-sociological world of social actors and social processes. These often appear clothed in the abstract impersonality of the inevitable economic and social mechanisms and the majesty that accompanies them, something that ignores change for ridiculous reasons, such as human clumsiness, mistakes, errors or stupid confusions. This separation allows for the social to be responsible for well-born realities, but not for social monstrosities, which, in our view, is highly problematic; a type of veiled manufacturer of self-justification mechanisms; a perverse workshop for the generation of disguised ideological superstructures that were denounced, in their worst sense, by Marx and, in general, by the venerable tradition of the philosophy of suspicion.

In our discipline, much importance has been given to the prosopomorphic image of society as an assuring subject that is powerful and does the right thing. It is able to obtain its goals in such a way that, even when the particular moral system collapses at a specific historic moment, the prevailing perspective has been that such a collapse was the result of some internal law of social progress or efficiency. An unrealistic image is easily derived of a character who was always right, whatever it did, justifying the efficiency of the social mechanism. This idea that the social always gets it right is certainly suspicious, as it is apparently immune to however undesirable their productions may be<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth remembering here Mead's work on positivism and time. It unmasks the conservative, blinding games of rationalisation with which human beings tend to neutralise the effect that novelty has on our old patterns of interpretation, and even on our old views of the world. This would be an exercise in de-futurising the future, which we believe to be, above all, against freedom; against freedom of intelligence and against our moral probity, which does not quite open up to novelty, as if its emergence, apparently recognised, had had no effect on anyone or anything, not even on the person that is attempting to explain it. See Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> It is not that social science and its different disciplines have ignored the problematic nature of social action, as

The absence of examples of bodged, clumsy or stupid operation of social mechanisms is surprising, as in practice they are unavoidable variables, sufficiently important to be taken into account<sup>5</sup>. It is also astonishing that error and ignorance do not appear as basic ingredients of collective action and socio-historical evolution, since they played an essential part in the view of the world that radiates from ancient Greek tragedy, arising from the very cultural origins of our own. It is here that Ramón Ramos finds the necessary keys for the enrichment of the theoretical models that we use to think about and explore social action. The intention of these is to freshen up the underlying anthropology of the social sciences in a way best suited to take on the complexity of our social scenarios. With that purpose in mind, Ramos suggested adding the new species *homo tráagicus* to the current catalogue of actor prototypes that operate in social theory: *homo moralis*, *homo economicus*, *homo specularis*... This brilliant addition, despite having its origin thousands of years ago,

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shown by the analysis of the classics, concerned about the problems faced by society in their historical period. Likewise it could be said that different traditions exist in such different disciplines as history, anthropology, social psychology, and sociology itself, characterised by their shrewd glance at praxis or directed at various creative phenomena such as collective action and social movements. On the empirical plane, some intellectuals have also thought about the before and after of disasters and catastrophes, such as is the case of all of the literature surrounding the Holocaust. However, in the context of social theory and collective action, the hegemonic currents continue to give a marginal role to the creativity of action, and ultimately, also to the strict contingency of historical scenarios. They are still pinned down to the dream of being able to investigate the physiognomy of the social with the aim of predicting and finding the definitive key that would lead to success at the management level—or at least a number of practical lessons, if we lower the level of our aspirations.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, it must be noted that within the practical application of knowledge to social processes, there is little or no room for the victims of the social mechanisms started by the public management of organisations. As will be seen, this can be linked to the extremely low degree of responsibility assumed for the harm caused.

brings distinctive aspects to social theory that have an appropriate impact on the conceptions of the world, of action and, of course, of the social being (Ramos, 1999).

## II. CONTINGENCY VERSUS PREDICTABILITY. THE RELEVANCE OF *HOMO TRAGICUS*.

This, unlike its evolutionary relatives, does not presuppose that a pre-determined being (nature, identity or conscience) exists, which turns action into a development or deployment of such a previous reality. The radical position of Greek tragedy, from this perspective of social theory, lies in the fact that a representation of an action arises from it, a risky where nothing ensures that what has been done is congruent with the actors' intentions. What is at play here is the ideal life (*eudaimonia*), the Greek dream of balance and the possibility of living a full life that is worth living. Nevertheless, the very irony of tragedy is that this sought-after upward point of balance is an undeterminable remote singularity, which depends on something or someone that could change it at any time, and so the slightest action is capable of tipping it. In this way the mistake or tragic error exists as a continuous threat hovering over any course of action<sup>6</sup>.

In this world error is not the exception, as it is in the world of and (let us say that these hominids are part of a world in which error is not recognised as being relevant). *Tragicus* lives in a complex universe where the serene ideal of prudent growth is assaulted by spurts of excess (*hybris*), an almost unavoidable tendency of action to overflow, as the main driver in a plot whose consequences are be-

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<sup>6</sup> Javier Gomá's comments on the Aristotelian concept of are also relevant here. Following this concept, a random fatalism may at any time ruin a life objectively considered as happy and fully-lived. Here lies the foundation of the tragic feeling in classic Greece with respect to control of the circumstances (cf. Gomá, 2013:51-52).



yond the knowledge and control of the protagonist, and that will lead to the tragic end of the pathetic hero, the ironic outcome of the hero's own actions<sup>7</sup>. The tragic chorus laments or warns —although the protagonist cannot hear them— of how the hero's behaviour drags him towards an inevitable end. The problem is not that the hero breaks community rules. He is not an anomic person; on the contrary, the reckless conduct of the tragic hero consists in unilaterally following the cultural codes in a complex world whose boundaries are dynamic, fragile, blurred and ambivalent (Ramos, 1999).

What interests us here, from the sociological point of view, is that the theoretical model synthesised by Ramos based on Greek tragedy brings to the fore the problem of the coordination of collective action in the midst of an inescapable pluralistic heterogeneity, which is impossible to handle with general, and even less so, with universally valid, formulas. In this scenario, action is shown to be intrinsically risky, and failure, error and ignorance are given an essential role as vital mechanisms in the generation of social reality and as fundamental demands of corrective action.

As also mentioned by Ramos, one of the basic themes in the origins of the social sciences is the difference and the distance between the intentions and the consequences of action. The classics identified the problem that lies in such incongruity, which is a major theme in tragedy. However, if the tragic outlook considered it as an enormous problem, in the social sciences and their theoretical models it has been too often presented as a

functional mechanism that, curiously, allows messes to be dissolved and minimises the perturbing potential of failures, redirecting them to the higher plane of historical or social realisation. As remarked by Ramos, this pattern can be found in important theorists in the later history of social science, such as Leibniz, Adam Smith, Vico, Mandeville, Kant and Hegel (Ramos, 2002). These philosophers applied the “consequent principle”, a brilliant idea owed to Leibniz. They advocated suspending historical —and even scientific and rational— judgement when faced with anything that seems immediately unjustifiable, and which may be susceptible to a subsequent amendment (whether this comes from the course of historical productivity or from the provident God of their theodicies). A warning that in itself seems reasonable, at least until its application leads to a kind of secular theodicy where accident, error and even evil disappear, and end up being mere accidents integrated and domesticated into the service of a higher good (Ramos, 2002).

For example, Mandeville noted that “the short-sighted vulgar in the chain of causes seldom can see further than one link; but those who can enlarge their view, and will give themselves the leisure of gazing on the prospect of concatenated events, may, in a hundred places, see good spring up and pullulate from evil as naturally as *chickens* do from eggs.” (Mandeville, 1997: 56 Cited by Ramos, 2002: 1017). Thus, care needs to be taken in managing the social, as immoral intentions could give rise to positive consequences and moral actions, to negative consequences.

As Ramos warned, the moral judgement that addresses the consequences of the action, rather than the action's intentions, has the ability to absolve the action by providing the assurance of a greater morality than that of which the action forms part. But the characteristic feature of these philosophers is that, in the light of the mechanism described above, they hold that a large part of the elements that seem to cause concern disap-

<sup>7</sup> Conversely, perverse characters could be conceived of whose life path is later interpreted as being heroic. This conversion of a character into a hero, over which the protagonist has no control either, is not linked to the genuine reflection of the tragic end, but it does relate to the surprising randomness, also permitting that attention is not only focused on actions and deeds, but also on the stories told, which give them meaning.

pear, and errors and accidents become marginal. Thus the unacceptable incongruences between intentions and consequences dissipate, and most of them are surprisingly beneficial due to their functional usefulness. And that which causes a moral scandal, in reality, contributes to the betterment of the species, and something that could be considered bad is positive at the socio-systemic level<sup>8</sup>. For example, Adam Smith recommends us not to jump to judge selfish acts as being antisocial, as love for one's self is turned into public good through the Invisible Hand, without anyone seeking it. This is, for him, precisely the mechanism by which nature tricks us into reaching a social end — which we would not look for nor could obtain by ourselves— deludes us to lead us towards welfare for all and the preservation of the public good. The appetite for the means therefore achieves nature's ends, guiding us to collective ends through our instincts.

Vico, in his philosophy of history and with his large-scale vision, also observed that the world is articulated in different and opposite ways to the particular ends of actors with the purpose of preserving humanity. Providence helps, so that actors, driven by passions and blinded by their short-sightedness, produce what nobody was searching for. Passions become practical social mobilisers. Unintentional consequences are ratified above intentions. From ferocity, greed and ambition emerge institutions such as the army, trade, and the court. And from the dynamism of such complexes arise, at the same time, good outcomes such as strength, opulence and wisdom. This conversion demonstrates a providence which, through tricks and guile, pushes history towards objectives that nobody had intended, generating unforeseen moral orders, and so God deludes men for

their own good. As noted by Ramos, in all of these cases —as also happens in Hegel's capacity to "ensure the death of the tragic 'I' as an act of infinite justice" (Villacañas, 1993: 18. Cited by Ramos, 2000: 64), the deployment of these movements and ironic plays resonates in the genre of "a great universal comedy of reconciliation where the spirit cleverly plays with the passions to become realised in the world" (Ramos, 2000: 64).

It could be inferred from the main line of these theoretical positions that the power of social life resides in a capacity for abstraction that neutralises failure and permits conceiving of it as something necessary and establishing a causal link to a productive horizon of human prosperity. This is done retrospectively, looking back to the past or joining together the different events and phenomena to a future, as part of a unit that is recapitulated. The fashionable concept of "creative destruction", associated with a description of capitalist processes, works in a similar way, ensuring that destruction is associated with innovation. However, it is in the present tense where mistakes and bungling in the realm of social life are made apparent<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, it would be interesting to see how the recurring pattern of referring destruction to a higher level of abstraction — with the aim of ensuring and attenuating its disturbing effect on the cosmos— allows for a kind of outsourcing of morality, with highly problematic consequences. The problem with social science focusing on regularity, in an attempt to find the key to understanding social change once and for all, is that it loses sight of the absolute importance of novelty

<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the interpretation of reality as an expression of the best of all possible worlds, see Voltaire's entertaining parody Voltaire, 1974)

<sup>9</sup> It also has to be taken into account that, as noted by Ramos, the post-Enlightenment integrated this benchmark for unintended consequences, but not as corrective expressions or promoters of good, but as radical evils and seemingly inescapable risks. The change is, of course, significant, although as we have pointed out, it has not corrected the propensity to chain events as plots whose course can be anticipated and controlled.

and of the unexpected, and the challenge against which collective action is continuously measured.

### III. THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF EXPERTS

It is easier to ignore the core of the fallibility of social processes by looking back to the past and rebuilding processes, than to look at the present. When we set foot in the present we face a basic conflict. In the order of everyday life, social orders and the effectiveness of the mechanisms are perceived as depending on the merely probable (and fallible) interactions of social actors. There is an awareness of the human-made social orders that permeates our practical life directions. Several different sources of informal wisdom tell us that, given how complicated it is to carry out plans and ideals, there exists a continuous need for improvisation, which also affects the ends and, in general, the expectations. No plan is infallible and so reconstruction is a continuous and essential task of social organisation in all of its areas. However, many times we find rigidly designed plans which can lead to the fulfilment of expectations whose value is stated in abstract and, strictly speaking, unrealistic terms. Besides, some expectations become goals that require taking note of experts' recommendations in order for them to be accomplished. It becomes easier to then ignore the key aspects in the fallibility of social processes by looking to the past and reconstructing processes in the present time. Needless to say that this ethical disposition is not appropriate in scenarios that must be conceived of as being radically open to unexpected novelty. It is certainly conservative: one can see in it the fear of loss or of having to change, by those who are destined to change.

In fact, despite the inconsistency of some plans that only follow a pre-determined course (according to familiar parameters) of social

action that is susceptible to leading to success (defined as meeting expectations), some experts claim to have competence in the fields of social management, relying on the assumption that they have a wise understanding of the rationales and social laws that articulate its structure. A potential conflict could then be envisaged between the fact that some experts seek to extract generalisations that could be used to predict social change and the evidence that, in many cases, reality occurs "any old how", without having any knowledge or data available, without bothering too much about the consequences of actions, or relying on the possibility of falsifying indicators or passing them off as something that conveniently endorses their position.

This problem —the creation of a pretentious and extravagant state of affairs— materialises when we find that experts blame their incapacity to explain or predict reality on the irrational behaviour of social actors. Max Horkheimer's position can be interpreted in this vein when he said that "social processes are in no way the products of human freedom, but are the natural results of the blind operation of antagonistic forces" which implies that the predictions made by the social sciences are imperfect (Horkheimer, 1990: 49). Horkheimer almost seems to be acknowledging here that it is impossible to do science with these elements, or that it can only be done if people behave rationally (which is tantamount to saying freely, as it is understood that someone guided by blind impulses that they cannot control acts without freedom). The possibility that a social science may have the relevant predictive capacity would rely on a humanity that would have become free from the shadows and the irrationality that prevents their emancipation and the fulfilment of their potential for autonomy. Only truly autonomous subjects can fit within a model that rejects whims, that which is random, unreflecting, absurd..., that which prevents expecting reasonable behaviour in objectively defined contexts.



Faced with failures in the predictions, a usual defence is to argue that the models work “under normal conditions” (Taleb, 2008: 224-226). If we follow Horkheimer’s suggestion, such conditions would have to be subject to a highly cultivated “normalisation”; and that does not include the possibility of erratic, irrational, emotional, stupid or unexpected behaviour, despite that these types of behaviour form part of the usual (normal) set of answers. This perspective that equates normality to the rational also forgets that social actors usually rely on miscalculations, errors and holes in social systems to carry out their plans. It also obviates that, in many cases, the grounds for confidence that they accumulate are those that inhibit, mitigate or delay other intermediate plans, which also overlap in their social imagery, about possible partial demolition tasks of those systems.

Nassim Taleb warns us that knowledge, throughout the history of thought, has often tended to focus on minor, predictable events, time and again ignoring the unpredictability of momentous events. The rise of Hitler and the subsequent war was not anticipated, nor was the Soviet collapse, nor the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the spread of the internet (Taleb, 2008: 24). Recently experts have failed to predict both the democratic movements in Muslim countries and their corresponding effects in Europe and the United States, as well as the current financial crisis and its prolonged duration. Nor does it seem that the forecasts of the European Union experts and of other economic bodies such as IMF and the Central European Bank are being met, bearing in mind the continuous adjustments to the forecasts. Many experts argue that there is a lack of information. However, it would be strange for experts to be able to see the actual activity of the relevant actors, or that these actors would deliver information in good faith, or that the indexes would be transparent and that they reflected the true activity. Nevertheless, it has frequently been alleged that, if a certain piece

of missing information needed for solving the puzzle had been available, the model would have been capable of predicting what was going to happen. But the term information is sufficiently vague in that sentence to make us wonder what it refers to. What is the dividing line between “having the information” and the knowledge that is possessed afterwards, once we know what has happened?<sup>10</sup>

One of the problems that experts seem to have is the inability to include failure as a normal dimension of social action, a necessary recognition for correction activities. In the last few decades a technical tendency seems to have emerged in the criteria for the evaluation of policies in public management that does not make it clear to what extent it is possible to acknowledge failure and its integration as part of the formula that tries to explain social issues.

To this needs to be added an element that is even more serious than the imprecision of the measuring criteria. It not only affects the ability of the theory to integrate social complexity in all of its levels, but also has consequences for this very complexity. We refer here to the expectations that arise from the experts’ forecasts as to what their objective should be. Particularly in the context of the current crisis, development and economic growth objectives have been provided that are linked to social well-being and wealth, which are translated into zero deficit policies by these same experts, into measures that

<sup>10</sup> An ingenious text by Stanislaw Lem could be referenced here, where he recounts the critical review of a non-existent play entitled *One human minute*. In this play, the authors collected hundreds of tables with figures and statistics that showed what happened to humanity during one minute. This enormous and incomprehensible purpose seems to be loaded with meaning by the critic’s interpretation of the numerical data as a narrative and ends up telling a story in dramatic terms and criss-crossing the tables, being unable to simultaneously incorporate the full content of this human minute. Something similar could be said to happen to the claim that more thorough information is needed in order to be able to predict surprising courses of action (cf. Lem, 2005: 111-155).

pacify the markets, into brutal reductions in public investment and social protection programmes. The economic crisis has placed the experts in the front line of administrative management, taking for granted that these experts know where the failures in the system are located and how to correct them and so exit the crisis. In order to justify political measures that have immediate dramatic effects for the population, we have become used to hearing that the measures are necessary and there is no other alternative. Democratically elected governments assume and emphasise that they are unable to make autonomous decisions<sup>11</sup>. In this way all possibility of acting freely and actively defining alternative models is lost. This loss of the ability to discuss and define objectives reveals a perversion of the management model in two different planes. One refers to why the privileged position of certain experts is accepted and the second one, which is derived from this, questions both the choice of objectives and expectations as defined by these experts and the measures that supposedly will allow them to be reached.

Here we find an express statement of expectations that time and again shows the same horizon: an economic model that is not at all affected by the accusation that inevitably brutal social inequalities are created, and that reasserts the assumption that the overall balance may remain positive. In fact, that trust in the opinions of expert committees could be interpreted more as blindness than as clairvoyance. It seems that Horkheimer's concept of freedom has been left behind, as the blind antagonistic forces are precisely those that are driving and giving shape to this savage turn of the capitalist screw that has been consolidated within the globalisation

process, on which the so-called financial capitalism is based<sup>12</sup>. For as much as the decisions appear attempts to make a serious analysis of the forces that operate in the market and the rationales and dynamics that cause a country's debts to fluctuate daily, if there is one constant that repeats in these scenarios in financial capitalism it is that of excessive ambition, combined with Zygmunt Bauman's adiaphorisation. The latter shows how the growing distance between actions and consequences was at the base of the most amoral behaviour displayed by human beings in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Bauman, 2004: *passim*)<sup>13</sup>.

In this environment there is talk of financial sharks (true predators who do not hesitate if there is an opportunity for making a financial return), but also of small savers and investors who do not know the movements and practices of their capital's managers, who are only interested in the percentage performance of stock exchange investments made by their banks. Ultimately, the system operates under a simulacrum of order and control. It is impossible to clearly identify the agents responsible for its operation and to establish precise rules that predict the fluctuations and ebbs and flows<sup>14</sup>. It is not a coincidence that casino-style capitalism is also talked about and that financial speculation is seen as a game that generates bubbles that cause failures when they explode, but that also bring juicy profits to those few that have

<sup>12</sup> On that unshakable voracity, we refer to Barciela, 2012, amongst many other reports and articles.

<sup>13</sup> Strictly, Bauman uses the concept of adiaphorisation to define the growing modern separation between deeds and morals, referring specifically to violent situations. We would extend this soothing distance from potential moral qualms regarding the damages caused by actions (in line with Bauman's original proposal) to the day-to-day decision-making guided by financial capitalism.

<sup>14</sup> See the critical position of Nobel Laureate for Economics, Joseph Stiglitz, on the interpretation of the crisis and the measures implemented due to this blindness about economic reality in the context of globalisation and capitalism (Stiglitz, 2010, 2012, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> The most extreme expression of this transfer of decision-making by the political powers can be seen in the technocratic governments of Greece and Italy, which were appointed in the context of the European financial crisis.

been defining the flows of financial capitalism and the rules of the game, as well as the conditions for participating in it.

Nonetheless, in this scenario an expectation of the future is emerging that points to this “order” being maintained. The degree of barbarity involved in making this situation the major model of social organisation does not seem to be perceived, however. The success in maintaining this financial system whose basis does not allow for it to be monitored, and therefore, is left, in practice, in the hands of certain experts who supposedly know how to efficiently face “systemic risks”<sup>15</sup>, automatically involves failure for other social expectations aiming at a less soulless economy and not rejecting certain objectives in terms of justice and social equality.

In reality, the review of the analysis and management model of collective life would not pertain exclusively to the definition of actions that would ideally lead to success, but rather to the very definition of what success is.

It needs to be remembered that these presuppositions about the capacity for control and the predictability of social processes are firmly seated in the claim for control in the triumphant modernity. Therefore it would be expected that, in a scenario of questioning the postulates about progress and civilisation, doubts could also be raised as to the present exercises in supervision and control in order to reach a fixed goal in the future.

As noted by Bauman, referring to the tension between civilisation and barbarism, but aimed in the same direction as the modern confidence in the rational control of processes,

The dichotomy ‘maintenance of order versus violence’ is but one of the many and, in general, over-

lapping contradictions (such as those that exist between reason and passion, rationality and affectivity), imposed on a central modern opposition between that which is controlled and that which is out of control, the regular and the irregular, the predictable and the unpredictable. The ordering activity, the main pastime of modern institutions, is a question of the imposition of a repeatable and determined monotony; anything that resists this imposition belongs to the realm of the savage, the territory beyond the border, a hostile land yet to conquer or, at least, pacify (Bauman, 2004:20-21).

This claim, expressed here as savage spaces susceptible to being pacified and placed under control, seems to be resumed in the transfer of power to certain experts who dictate what steps are to be taken, trusting that they are capable of carrying out rational and successful action plans. These are, in each case, ways, as are thousands of others, of framing the experience of the world, exerting violence on it, or inventing reality in their own way (Goffman, 2006).

As we have already noted, problems arise here at various levels. On the one hand, regarding the belief that it is possible to bind and control the courses of action that relate to the dynamics of collective life. We have already emphasised the limitations of these analytical models that try to identify social laws in deterministic terms and state that the unexpected could have been expected if enough information had been available beforehand. On the other hand, problems are also identified in the realm of action and in the need to identify the subjects and institutions that exercise power in their area of control, and in the legitimisation of their decisions, both in terms of defining objectives and designing the policies to achieve them. It could be expected that the exercise of this power would be accompanied by the assumption of responsibility as to their consequences, especially when they prove to be failures or, very frequently, collateral effects linked to the

<sup>15</sup> This is how the crisis in Cyprus and the risk of bankruptcy was publicly defined by the Euro-Group representative Jeroen Dijsselbloem on 21 March, 2013.

achievement of certain objectives<sup>16</sup>. These models of analysis and management of social life would necessarily include other concepts that cover the perspective of failure and the thwarting of legitimate expectations linked to the deployment of policies designed for a generic objective (zero deficit, market confidence, sustenance of the financial system...); this would be the case if, unlike what happens in reality, the expectation of success (as a utopian horizon in the positive sense of the world, that is, as a driver and as a critical eye against present miseries) contemplated all of the subjects affected by the decisions being taken.

But that would involve a clear reconsideration of economic policy, such as that proposed by Hans Joas and which has been called the “democratisation of the differentiation question”<sup>17</sup>. A formula that means that the increased means that modern societies have to shape both their relationship with the environment and their internal structures, should not be obscured by a radical pessimism—whether of Marxist or systemic inspiration—as to the possibilities of social regulation. All of the conflicts about economic, political, military, or cultural conflicts arise, however, under a new form, offering new opportunities and a new momentum to social creativity”<sup>18</sup>. The entangled multi-dimensional complexity, with a myriad of unintentional effects, would necessarily require a “creative democracy”<sup>19</sup>, strenuously aimed at constant

correction of its processes, with an open public debate, wherever problems arise.

#### IV. CARING FOR COLLECTIVE LIFE AS KEY TO ITS ORGANISATION

Faced with this type of instrumentalist efficiency, a caution must be made that what is sacred in social circles, their radically changeable dimension, is the very need for the affirmation of social life in its plurality. This is the idea developed by Hannah Arendt, as the radical and authentic sense of social power<sup>20</sup>. The idea strengthens the need for a meta-activity concentrated on the care of the collective, on its flow and its continuous and changing circulation, renewing the vigilance against the demands posed by the problems of integration and regulation. There is not much need to imagine precise goals to stretch towards, but rather to turn the attention to the basics, to bend it. There is rather a need for vigilance that becomes much more pronounced, we believe, if we take a little more responsibility for the tragic reality of the inevitable failure of our organisations (as we have attempted here), when making room for the urgent disruptions of new lives, and the changes in the old ones (that they welcome and should enhance, but that always overwhelm them), to end up showing their inability, their relatively inoperative nature. The need to address such disruptions and listen to them carefully. We dare to combine our small gains with another sentence by Arendt, which affirms the plurality of the human condition, when she said that the plurality of unique beings is the “law of the Earth” (Arendt, 1998; 2005).

<sup>16</sup> It could be said, for example, referring to a recent local case, that “the loss of confidence by investors has been avoided (preventing a collapse in the economy)”, but the measures to avoid it have led to foreclosures being uninhibited (with thousands of evictions) and to transfer in lieu of foreclosure being prevented as a possible mechanism for alleviating such social bleeding.

<sup>17</sup> Joas 2013: 303. The translation that we have used is taken from the original Spanish version by Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera, soon to be added to the collection of classics of the CIS.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The concept of “creative democracy” is the title of the closing chapter of the book referenced here (Joas, 2013: 253-304), where Joas explained the consequences

—namely, the opening of horizons for interpretation and intervention— that could be derived from a theory of action radically revised from a creative perspective, when addressing collective action processes that characterise current social life

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ricoeur exploits this idea admirably (Ricoeur, 1996)..

These ideas delimit the sacred inner circle (after all, a unique one) that intimately constitutes the sociality which sociologists have to scrutinise in every global present, and in each enclave; to rediscover it as the singular problem to be urgently re-arranged that challenges us on the horizon, definitely loaded with contingencies. But this approach of the sacred character of the social life in its multiple plurality points to the most critical dimension of social activity, which constitutes the human condition. It is no other than taking care of life, that permanent endeavour—the waking state, worrying about what really matters—that mainly affects the care of the social circles; and what is decisive in them (always as a problem in their interstices): carefully checking over and over again if they really are convivial, welcoming, supportive, sufficiently capable of making room for this plural diversity, with its continually emerging new ways, and articulated from them. It is the role inherent in the strenuous tasks of repair work, of watchfulness, the desire for fixing, for reviewing life's progress, the devotedness to it, and the redirection of its random course, often harmful to our ways of managing social life in every nook and cranny of the work of living. This immense volume of social service activity cannot but make our knowledge and our social sciences increasingly more necessary.

Its centrality is derived from the very plurality of social life, which must be at the core of the theory of social organisations. It was Arendt who developed the notion of the laborious, and even gave it the name of "labour", applying it to specific tasks (historically unheeded and neglected, but extremely important) that directly bear on the production and reproduction of living conditions and the maintenance of life. However, everything suggests that she despised them herself, trapped by an excessive propensity to hierarchy, coming from Greece and the intellectual high culture that prevented her from recognising the same basic dignity in all

types of active life. Her disciple Richard Sennett expressly sought this dignity in <sup>21</sup>.

This task of caring (perhaps the best name that can be given to the main task of organisation, that of the permanent arrangement and perfecting of our organisations as spheres of cooperation) is the core task of management and organisational theory. That enormous space for activity usually escapes the attention of organisers, politicians and theoreticians, perhaps, due to a reconstructive reading of the events that was closed to their novelty and so, to their contingency and new requirements. In addition to the painstaking work-related tasks, the care sphere involves all of the laborious tasks hidden behind home doors, and that makes up an essential part of our life activity. That direct care of changing lives, which come on to us with their demanding changes of attention, which go and we miss. We cannot but think of it as work that is central to the human condition, being both crucial and paradigmatic. Perhaps that is the crux of postmodernism, or of the decisive ethical advancement of modernity; its cordial re-launch (Cortina, 2007).

Without a doubt it is our way of watching over and returning to social life which marks its convivial destiny (welcoming, indifferent, ruthless) in any field. In other words it is a rethinking (which the threat of failure compels us to take completely seriously) of the creative and open dimension of sociality and identity. Both of these are always pending realisation and questioning in each of their actual forms, if measured against the normative demand arising from the constitutive plurality of their being, with all of the open innovation that it demands.

<sup>21</sup> Although his idea falls short compared to that suggested here, his exploration of the rich reality of practical intelligence in the skill of artisans' work does not fit in with Arendt's caricature of 'animal laborans', as she felt compelled to have pity for the slaving side of the anxieties for survival. See Arendt, 1974 and Sennett, 2009.



Maybe we tend to always subsume too quickly the question of organisation to improve life, with political meta-organisation, with the intention of reserving it for the great public sphere whose diameter is inescapably extended to the whole of the Earth. There is always, however, a “public” sphere and dimension, and a “political” problem of managing plurality—a sacred core; “the private is public”, said Javier Gomá—in every circle of human life. Its law is always the same: the coexistence of the plurality of unique beings and their unique contexts. These are currently inevitably buffeted by the global inter-dependence that, for the moment, we suffer critically, as our organisations fail when it comes to embracing their contingencies.

We tend to make a history of ideas, of culture or of the cultural ways that imagine us to be their prosperous heirs, instead of outlining their intricacies, emphasising the ambiguities and the fortuitous, all the material that constitutes the greater part of the basic genealogical mechanism from which we descend. History written with the benefit of hindsight produces an excessively clean version of social processes, as on many occasions, history’s losers cannot tell their stories’, either because they are crushed for a second time by the steamroller plot (Taleb), or because we do not feel inclined to notice them, as depressing stories are less attractive. All of this may give the impression to the survivors and particularly to their dependents, that the story has a clear meaning. This gives them a more plausible expectation of ensured continuity and surreptitiously trains them for it: the world is presented as a good world that we have received and is worth preserving, as it is a world of conquests and things are the way they are. The heroes of the adventures can always find reasons for the deaths and the wounds received by their fellow sufferers and faithful helpers, as necessary sacrifices that sanctify their endeavours. But over every adventure there looms the

danger of statistical bias: the trap of a genre that chronically adopts the point of view of the hero who always emerges victorious in his adventures.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Following this account of the reasons for our proposal of a sociology that is more focused on the unexpected and more aware of the inevitability of courses of collective action that challenge normative and rationalist interpretations and focuses, it makes sense to draw an open conclusion. Our proposal is linked to the purpose of finding in real processes of social actions that occur at each moment the element that conditions and disrupts the organisation of social life, the living together that is the essence of human sociality. This is why we issued a warning about the importance of care from an ethical perspective that, in our view, must also be transferred to the realm of social reflection. We understand that the awareness of the expectations of a shared life and the resources and ways to achieve them is what gives meaning to our aspirations, which would otherwise be blind efforts to obtain a deceptively guaranteed outcome.

In other words, the connected fields of action and of reflection should take on board the warning about the lack of rigour involved in considering social processes as unidirectional courses of action, to be explained by identifying lines that draw a logic and an increased ability to control the resources that enable the achievement of predetermined goals. To explain from this stance the complexity of our world could result in minimising the impression of its ungovernability, but in reality, it does not lead to governing it (in the sense of directing it). Too many realities and situations that do not fit the model are left out, which deal with not only the mechanisms of inevitable social reproduction and change that are involved in their dynamics,

but also with experts' explanations about what is happening and how to correct the negative situations that appear in the analysis of the present. In both areas, it is important to accept the presence of failure, of inefficiency, of surprising novelties, in order to avoid biased explanations that marginalise those who do not fit in the inner workings of these models that try to explain social action.

There is an immediate question which leads on from this: how can a sociology be implemented that incorporates all of the elements of social complexity? There is no immediate answer, but it requires a starting point of always being open to novelty, unintentional courses of action, the random factor, inefficiency, bodged jobs, deception, lies, jokes... a myriad of possibilities that a focus on finding cause-and-effect relationships and one-directional narratives towards achieving expectations would never be able to explain or recognise as features of our sociality. For the moment, in this paper we have only tried to show the reasons for these inadequacies, both through a sociological reflection and through the grounds for the role of experts in decision making. The conclusion remains open as an invitation to think about a new sociology that could connect, as we have noted, with the trail of (Ramos) with a proposal for creative action (Joas), taking as a guide the idea of care that emerges as an ethical—and political—imperative, which we are not always prepared to assume with all of its consequences. A sociology which, as argued by Hans Joas, should warn that all conflicts about economic, political, military and cultural questions, policies, arise ... under a new form, offering new opportunities and a new momentum to social creativity. Besides, as pointed out by Joas, in reality all these questions have to do with the degree and mode of differentiation that society should allow and, once the utopian possibility of their outright disappearance in a new world (such as in the case of socialism) has been ruled out, they cannot be appropriate-

ly raised in any other way. For this reason, based on a renewed approach of collective action from the angle of a creativity of action, he concluded that the questions being faced today in democracy should be interpreted as the result of reflexively applying the idea of differentiation on itself, in line with the "democratisation" of the processes of differentiation already noted: "in a modern democratic society, the institutions where political will is shaped, which emanate from the differentiation of society, remain in contact with it; they are the battlefield on which decisions are made about the way and the degree of differentiation that society can and must accept" (Joas, 2013). But these are, in any case, crucial matters that have been outlined here, to be dealt with in subsequent approaches from a sociology alerted to the sense of contingency and fully open to creativity; a sociology with a strengthened sensitivity to the capacity of human communities to become increasingly responsible for the situations they face, and that always require renewed ways of responding.

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# Contingencia y crisis. Apuntes para una sociología atenta al fracaso y a lo imprevisto

*Contingency and Crisis. Notes On a Sociology Considering Failure and the Unforeseen*

**Marta Rodríguez Fouz, Óscar Tejero Villalobos e Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera**

## Palabras clave

- Acción social
- Constructivismo social
  - Crisis económicas
  - Elección racional
  - Fracaso
  - Modelos de toma de decisiones
  - Predicción

## Key words

- Social Action
- Social Constructivism
  - Economic Crises
  - Rational Choice
  - Failure
  - Decision Models
  - Forecasting

## Resumen

El artículo se propone como un acercamiento crítico a los modelos normativistas y acciorracionalistas de la sociología partiendo de la idea de que sobrevaloran las capacidades agenciales para entender y evaluar los mecanismos de la vida social. Frente a esos planteamientos teóricos proponemos que la contingencia y el fracaso (con la que no cuentan esas perspectivas) comparezcan como realidades constantes, inevitables e idóneas para comprender la acción social. En ese recorrido nos apoyamos en la propuesta de Ramos sobre la dimensión trágica de la acción, además de en la reformulación por parte de Arendt del concepto heideggeriano de *cuidado*. Finalmente, recalamos en la crítica a la función atribuida a determinados expertos en el escenario actual de la crisis económica, desde el presupuesto sobre su capacidad para predecir y corregir los rumbos sociales orientándolos hacia la consecución del éxito.

## Abstract

This paper is proposed as a critical approach to normativism and rational-action based sociological models, starting from the idea that they overrate the capacities of agents to understand and evaluate the mechanisms of social life. In opposition to these theoretical approaches, we suggest that contingency and failure (not taken into account by these approaches) appear as constant realities, inevitable and appropriate for understanding social action. In this journey we rely on Ramos' proposal on the tragic dimension of action, in addition to the reformulation by Arendt of Heidegger's concept of care. Finally, we critique the role assigned to certain experts in the current scenario of economic crisis, from presumption of the ability to predict and correct social paths, pushing for success as a goal.

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## INTRODUCCIÓN

Va para tres lustros desde que, entre nosotros, Ramón Ramos advirtiera que en sus modelos la sociología debería tomar en serio la dimensión trágica de la acción, bebiendo del pozo de milenaria sabiduría de la tragedia griega (Ramos, 1999). Algunos avances actuales de la teoría social de la acción permiten demostrar la agudeza de esa observación para una fértil revisión de los diferentes niveles de atención a las actividades recursivas que exige el análisis de los escenarios sociales. Este trabajo trata de apoyarse en la detección de cesuras paradójicas a este respecto entre el saber informal que atesoran los actores sociales y los enfoques bizqueantes, nada infrecuentes, que se dan en los contextos de organización y en los modelos formales de gestión. Nuestra intención es recuperar el aviso trágico conectándolo con la reformulación del concepto de *cuidado*, de raíz heideggeriana a partir de ciertos hallazgos de Hannah Arendt, pues entendemos que esto puede ayudarnos a sentar las bases de una propuesta constructiva de modelos más realistas de análisis y gestión de lo colectivo.

Frente a los abordajes o modelos acciorracionalistas o normativistas, que sobrealoran las capacidades agenciales para establecer, entender y evaluar los mecanismos de la vida social, defendemos la necesidad de hacer que la amenaza de la frustración desoladora y del fracaso comparezca como dimensión constante, inevitable y especialmente idónea a la hora de comprender, en lo más básico, la acción social en su cualidad falible, como un juego limitado y siempre susceptible y exigente de mejora. Para ello es necesario salvar esa brecha entre las sensibilidades, enfoques y saberes más refinados y avanzados que mejoran nuestros modelos analíticos y de gestión de lo social, y la que se da entre ciertos procedimientos prácticos y los modelos que los describen.

En un plano más concreto, nuestra propuesta trata de sugerir una vía para redescu-

brir la índole de fenómenos sociales como la desviación y la exclusión, que pueden entenderse como inevitables amenazas, correlativas a la presión centrífuga inherente al juego social, que nos obligan a conceder una importancia fundamental a la tarea continua e ineludible de reconstrucción y corrección de los ámbitos de convivencia. Si observamos la vida social —como creemos que debería hacerse— desde una perspectiva sociológica que, como tal, atienda principalmente a la capacidad de la organización de los enclaves sociales para articular las diferencias, ocurre que los casos específicos de fracasos, o de supuesta ineficiencia social e inhabilidad, no deberían atenderse como ejemplos de inoperancia, sino advirtiendo cómo, en realidad, refieren y proclaman la discapacidad de la organización para articular sinérgicamente su pluralidad. Se trataría, en suma, de hacerles sitio en los entramados prácticos y, especialmente, en los procesos de supervisión general y corrección de las realizaciones conjuntas y de los rendimientos específicamente colectivos o conjuntivos, que así serían, en efecto, atendidos desde la pluralidad. Puede ocurrir, también, que esos fracasos e ineficiencias se minusvaloren como márgenes insignificantes. Los análisis que no atienden esas dimensiones de la vida social serían análisis deficientes; sin embargo, en multitud de ocasiones se consideran pertinentes y se utilizan para justificar, desde su ceguera y parcialidad, decisiones que afectan al conjunto de la sociedad y cuyas supuestas bondades ni son discutidas ni se ofrecen a serlo.

Todo ello nos parece interesante en dos planos analíticos que pueden diferenciarse pero cuyo mayor rendimiento se obtiene de considerarlos simultáneamente. Por un lado tendríamos una vertiente metateórica que centra la atención en la solvencia de las categorías de esa sociología que fija las acciones racionales y la capacidad agencial de los sujetos y de las instituciones como referentes del conocimiento acerca de la vida colec-



tiva; y, por el otro, tendríamos el complejo entramado de acciones y situaciones que conforman el tejido social advirtiéndolo de la dificultad que entraña el propósito de categorizarlo atinadamente. En este trabajo pretendemos abordar ambos planos proponiendo una interrelación entre ellos que permita subrayar las limitaciones de una conceptualización que obvie que lo social es un ámbito de actividad abierto, meramente probable y no asegurado. Es decir, se trata de insistir en la necesidad de tener en cuenta que las acciones sociales son colectivas y plurales (sin un centro o principio vertebrador que les imponga una dirección, lo que convierte en un reto su coordinación) y están caracterizadas por la reflexividad y creatividad (con la posibilidad de intervenir sobre sí y transformar su decurso sobre la marcha). Así, la conceptualización exigible debe ser especialmente susceptible de atender lo azaroso, lo imprevisible, lo fortuito, como también los fracasos, los errores, la frustración de expectativas<sup>1</sup>... Uno de los problemas relevantes que entraña la desconsideración de tales vertientes de lo social en los modelos teóricos resulta de considerar la novedad una excepción más que una regla de la socialidad. Esto facilita los análisis, pero al precio de generar una ceguera fundamental, además de problemas sustanciales en el orden de la gestión sociopolítica. Queremos sugerir también que uno de los resultados de la interacción aludida es conmover el elenco de tareas de las ciencias sociales, que deben abordar las realidades en una triple faceta: como ciencias de la acción en la frontera del tiempo (con la vista puesta en los «saltos» que los actores

van dando a cada paso, situados en un presente que se apoya en la vivencia previa y mira también hacia adelante); como ciencias de la gestión que *corrige* los ámbitos de acción (atiende al cuidado que se dispone a su perfeccionamiento como ámbitos de convivencia y de producción social, reparando ante todo en los nuevos escenarios de articulación de la diversidad emergente); y, finalmente, como ciencias de la revisión crítica de las imágenes del mundo social (que atiende a la corrección de las representaciones obsoletas con apoyo en la experiencia que se gana al integrar lo emergente, incluidos los efectos no intencionales de las acciones y de esas reacciones correctivas)<sup>2</sup>.

## I. ASPIRACIONES EPISTEMOLÓGICAS Y PRÁCTICAS DE LA SOCIOLOGÍA

Es bien sabido que buena parte de las aspiraciones de la sociología a ser considerada como una ciencia se apoyan en el propósito de localizar regularidades en los cursos de la acción social que permitan predicciones correctas. El desafío consistiría en encontrar una serie de leyes que consigan conocer de antemano cómo se comportará un individuo, un colectivo, una institución... dadas unas determinadas condiciones. Explicar la realidad social equivaldría a conocer las lógicas de sus dinámicas y a integrar el cambio social como una suerte de determinismo: ante tales circunstancias, las transformaciones sociales tomarán una u otra dirección. Con todo, la manifiesta incapacidad de las ciencias sociales para predecir acontecimientos sorpresivos que se convierten en inesperados no lleva a cuestionar ese modelo de re-

<sup>1</sup> Puede que nadie como Hans Joas haya abierto la nueva veta teórica y metateórica que en ese sentido debemos implantar, cuanto antes, en el núcleo mismo de nuestra disposición heurística y crítica. En especial a partir de su *Die Kreativität des Handelns*, un trabajo que Ramón Ramos acertó a introducir en el elenco de monografías de la colección de Clásicos Contemporáneos del Servicio Editorial del Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Joas, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> En ese sentido consideramos especialmente prometedora la línea de trabajo emprendida por Benno Herzog (2012) al enmendar la sociología de Axel Honneth, atenta a la dialéctica básica entre reconocimiento y menosprecio, con motivos de la teoría del discurso, explorando mecanismos de «exclusión discursiva» que comenzarían ya antes del proceso de verbalización del desprecio.

creación de escenarios futuribles. Puede verse en los esfuerzos que dichas ciencias tienden a hacer para integrar a posteriori los acontecimientos en una secuencia lógica que pretende explicarlos. Sería solo el conocimiento incompleto de los factores que habrían intervenido el que habría impedido un pronóstico atinado sobre el surgimiento de esa novedad disruptiva que, así, se convertiría en efecto de unas causas bien identificadas. En definitiva, no habría podido ser de otra forma, pero no se vio venir porque no se supo mirar adecuadamente.

Así, los modelos normativo y racionalista de la teoría social presuponen un cierto aseguramiento en la reproducción colectiva. El primero, en forma de una cultura cuyas normas y valores estarían en disposición de garantizar la acción colectiva a través de la socialización. El segundo, gracias a un modelo protagonizado por un actor cuyo comportamiento racional se orienta estratégicamente a maximizar sus cálculos y permite predecir la conducta social. En ambos casos se presupone la existencia de una serie de regularidades y pautas que permitirían describir el funcionamiento de los órdenes sociales para hallar fórmulas de acción y orientación práctica, con frecuencia con el objeto de asegurar el éxito de la empresa colectiva. Frente a esto puede ser más que conveniente atender a la convicción de G. H. Mead de que ese tipo de fenómeno es en realidad una propensión racionalizadora constante del ser humano (Mead, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. Es como si se tratase

de una forma «ligera» de empleo de la capacidad narrativa, del «dar cuenta de»; como si nos diese vergüenza reconocer ese haber estado antes en la ignorancia (en la línea del listillo que se apunta enseguida a la nueva versión recién hallada por otro con un «ya lo sabía»). O, todavía peor, se trataría de no querer reconocer que lo imprevisto e inesperado era estrictamente imprevisible y no esperado. Una especie de estúpido *errequeerre* de la ignorancia, del dar la espalda al hecho de que la intelección de las circunstancias de nuestra vida es precaria y está inmersa en un océano de ignorancia. Porque, a la inversa de lo que predomina en nuestras mentalidades gestoras, el determinismo fundamental con el que haya que trabajar, desde la base misma de las convicciones, es el de la incapacidad de una previsión suficiente, precisamente, en aquello que hay de fundamental en la vida y en la con-vivencia, y el de la consiguiente disposición constante a arreglar la insolvente organización de los asuntos humanos.

Sin embargo, parece que la tarea tiene su dificultad si observamos la tendencia a separar la acción y el mundo microsociológico de los actores sociales y el de los procesos sociales, lo que permite que a menudo estos aparezcan revestidos de esa impersonalidad abstracta propia de los inevitables mecanismos económico-sociales y de la majestad que les acompaña, algo que, por ejemplo, deja de lado el cambio por razones ridículas, como la torpeza humana, las equivocaciones, los errores o las tontas confusiones. Tal separación posibilita que lo social sea, más bien, responsable de realidades bien nacidas, pero no tanto de engendros sociales, lo cual a nuestro juicio resulta un gran problema; una especie de embozada fábrica de mecanismos de autojustificación; un perverso taller de generación de superestructuras

<sup>3</sup> Pueden recordarse aquí los esenciales trabajos de Mead sobre el positivismo y el tiempo. En ellos desmascara los cegadores juegos de racionalización, tan conservadores, con los que los seres humanos tendemos a neutralizar las repercusiones de la novedad en nuestros viejos esquemas de interpretación e, incluso, en nuestras viejas visiones del mundo. Se produciría así un ejercicio de desfuturización del futuro que, según entendemos, atenta, ante todo, contra la libertad. Contra la libertad de la inteligencia y contra nuestra probidad moral, que no acaba, así, de abrirse a la novedad, como si su aparición, aparentemente reconocida, no hubiera traído efecto alguno sobre nada o sobre nadie, ni siquie-

ra sobre quien la está explicando (véase Sánchez de la Yncera, 2008).

ideológicas disfrazadoras en el peor sentido denunciado por Marx y, en general, por la venerable tradición del pensamiento de la sospecha.

En nuestra disciplina ha tenido mucha importancia la imagen prosopomórfica de la sociedad como sujeto que acierta, garantizador y poderoso, capaz de obtener las metas que dispone de tal modo que, incluso cuando el sistema moral concreto de un momento histórico se desploma, ha tendido a prevalecer la perspectiva de que tal hundimiento era fruto de alguna ley interna de progreso o eficacia social, de la que fácilmente se derivaba una imagen, irrealista, de un personaje que siempre acertaba, hiciera lo que hiciera, justificando la eficacia del mecanismo social. Sospechosa cualidad esa del acertar de lo social, inmune al parecer a lo indeseables que puedan resultar sus producciones<sup>4</sup>.

Sorprende en este sentido la ausencia de ejemplos de funcionamiento chapucero o relativos a la torpeza o la estupidez en el funcionamiento de los mecanismos sociales cuando en los escenarios de la práctica son variables inesquivables y de suficiente im-

portancia como para que todos las tengamos en cuenta<sup>5</sup>. Por lo demás, también asombra que el error y la ignorancia no aparezcan como ingredientes fundamentales de la acción colectiva y de la evolución socio-histórica, cuando, en cambio, fueron piezas esenciales de esa concepción del mundo que irradia la vieja tragedia griega, viniendo de los propios nacederos culturales del nuestro. Precisamente en ella es donde Ramón Ramos encuentra claves para un enriquecimiento de los modelos teóricos con los que pensamos y exploramos la acción social, cuya intención es esponjar la antropología subyacente de las ciencias sociales de manera que sea más apta para hacerse cargo de la complejidad de nuestros escenarios de convivencia. Con ese propósito, Ramos propuso en la figura del *homo trágicus* la incorporación de una nueva especie al catálogo de prototipos de actor que circulan en la teoría social: el *homo moralis*, el *homo economicus*, el *homo specularis*... Esa flamante incorporación, aunque de origen milenario, aporta a la teoría social aspectos distintivos que afectan cabalmente a las concepciones del mundo, de la acción y, por supuesto, del ser social (Ramos, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> No es que la ciencia social y sus diferentes disciplinas hayan ignorado la problematicidad de la acción social, como revelan los análisis de los clásicos preocupados por los problemas que afrontaban las sociedades de su tiempo. Igualmente puede decirse que existen diferentes tradiciones en disciplinas tan distintas como la historia, la antropología, la psicología social y la propia sociología, caracterizadas por una sagaz mirada hacia la praxis o dirigida a diversos fenómenos creativos como la acción colectiva y los movimientos sociales. En el plano empírico, además, algunos intelectuales ejemplares han pensado en el antes y el después de desastres y catástrofes, como es el caso de toda la literatura alrededor del Holocausto. Sin embargo, en el propio contexto de la teoría de la sociedad o de la acción colectiva, las corrientes hegemónicas siguen concediendo un papel marginal a la creatividad de la acción, y, en el fondo, también a la estricta contingencia de los escenarios históricos, prendidas aún al sueño de poder indagar la fisonomía que conforma lo social con objeto de predecir y encontrar una clave definitiva (o diversas lecciones prácticas si bajamos el nivel de aspiraciones) que lleve al éxito en el orden de la gestión.

## II. CONTINGENCIA VS. PREVISIBILIDAD. LA RELEVANCIA DEL *HOMO TRÁGICUS*

Este *homo trágicus*, a diferencia de sus parientes evolutivos, no presupone un ser (la naturaleza, la identidad o la conciencia) previamente determinado que convierte a la acción en un desarrollo o despliegue de tal realidad previa. Lo radical de la tragedia grie-

<sup>5</sup> Igualmente, conviene advertir que, en el marco de la aplicación práctica del conocimiento sobre los procesos sociales, tienen muy poca o nula cabida las víctimas de los mecanismos sociales puestos en marcha por la gestión pública de las organizaciones. Algo, como veremos, que puede enlazarse con la escasísima asunción de responsabilidad sobre los males provocados.

ga, vista desde esta perspectiva de la teoría social, consiste en que de esta surge una representación de una acción, de una *praxis* arriesgada donde nada asegura que lo realizado sea congruente con las intenciones de los actores. Lo que en esta acción se pone en juego es el ideal de vida (la *eudaimonia*), el sueño griego del equilibrio y de la posibilidad de vivir una vida plena, digna de ser vivida. Sin embargo, la ironía propia de lo trágico es que ese buscado punto de equilibrio al alza consiste en una remota singularidad no determinable, o que se apoya en algo o en alguien que siempre puede modificarlo, de modo que la acción más insignificante resulta capaz de romperlo. Así el yerro o error trágico aparece como una amenaza que siempre se cierne sobre cualquier curso de acción<sup>6</sup>.

En este mundo el error no es, pues, la excepción, como en cambio ocurre allí donde moran *Moralis* y *Rationalis* (digamos que esos homínidos están, más bien, insertos en un mundo en el que a lo erróneo no se le reconoce un estatuto relevante). *Trágicus* vive en un universo complejo donde el sereno ideal del crecimiento prudente viene asaltado por los estirones de la desmesura (la *hybris*), esa tendencia casi inevitable de la acción al desbordamiento, resorte principal que moviliza una trama cuyas consecuencias escapan al conocimiento y al control del protagonista, y que desembocará en ese final trágico que sobreviene al héroe patético, el fruto irónico de sus propias acciones<sup>7</sup>. El

<sup>6</sup> Pueden traerse aquí los apuntes de Javier Gomá sobre la concepción aristotélica de la *eudaimonia*, donde comparece ese fatalismo azaroso que puede dar al traste en cualquier momento con una vida vivida plenamente y considerada objetivamente como feliz. Ahí reposa el fundamento sobre el sentir trágico de los griegos respecto al dominio de las circunstancias (Gomá, 2013: 51-52).

<sup>7</sup> En sentido inverso, podría pensarse en personajes miserables cuya trayectoria se reinterpreta retrospectivamente en una clave heroica. Esa conversión en héroe, sobre la que tampoco el protagonista tendría control, no enlaza con la reflexión genuina del final trágico, pero sí

coro trágico avisa o se lamenta —sin que el protagonista pueda oírlo— de cómo la conducta del héroe le arrastra a ese desenlace. El problema no es que el héroe quebrante normas comunitarias. No es un personaje anómico; al contrario, la temeridad del héroe trágico es seguir unilateralmente los códigos culturales en un mundo complejo cuyas lindes son dinámicas, lábiles, borrosas y ambivalentes (Ramos, 1999).

Lo que nos interesa, en definitiva, desde un punto de vista sociológico, es que el modelo teórico que sintetiza Ramos a partir de la tragedia pone en primera línea el problema de la coordinación de la acción colectiva en medio de una heterogeneidad plural, inescapable, que desborda la posibilidad de manejarse en ella con fórmulas generales y menos aún universalmente válidas. En un escenario así, la acción se muestra constitutivamente arriesgada y el fracaso, el error y la ignorancia tienen siempre reservado un papel esencial como mecanismos esenciales de generación de realidad social y como exigencias básicas de la acción correctora.

Como también señala Ramos, uno de los temas fundamentales en el origen de las ciencias sociales es el de la diferencia y la distancia entre las intenciones y las consecuencias de la acción. Los clásicos detectaron el problema de tal incongruencia, que es un tema principal en la tragedia. Sin embargo, si la mirada trágica la consideraba en su vertiente problemática enorme, en la ciencia social y sus modelos teóricos se ha presentado con demasiada frecuencia como un mecanismo funcional que, curiosamente, permite disolver desaguisados y que amortigua el potencial perturbador de los fracasos, reconduciéndolos en un plano superior de realización histórica o social. Como señala

con la clave de la azarosidad sorpresiva, permitiendo, además, que la atención no se centre en exclusiva sobre las acciones y los hechos, sino también sobre los relatos que las cuentan y dotan de sentido.

Ramos, esta pauta la podemos encontrar en teóricos tan importantes para la historia posterior de la ciencia social como Leibniz, Adam Smith, Vico, Mandeville, Kant o Hegel (Ramos, 2002). Estos pensadores aplican el «principio consecuencial», esa brillante idea que debemos a Leibniz, pidiendo la suspensión del juicio histórico (e incluso científico-racional) ante todo aquello que nos parece injustificable de modo inmediato, y que puede ser susceptible de una enmienda posterior (ya venga esta del decurso de la productividad histórica o del dios providente de sus teodiceas). Una advertencia que en sí misma parece razonable, al menos hasta que su aplicación desemboca en una especie de teodicea secular donde desaparece el accidente, el error e incluso el mal, que acaban siendo accidentes integrados y domesticados al servicio de un bien más alto (Ramos, 2002).

Por ejemplo, Mandeville señala que «el vulgo miope en la cadena de las causas no suele ver más del eslabón inmediato, pero los que pueden ensanchar su visión y entregarse al placer de echar una mirada a la perspectiva de los acontecimientos concatenados, podrán ver en cien lugares cómo el bien emerge y pulula del mal, con tanta naturalidad como los polluelos de los huevos» (Mandeville, 1997: 56; citado por Ramos, 2002: 1017). Así pues, hay que tener cuidado en la gestión de lo social, pues las intenciones inmorales pueden dar lugar a consecuencias positivas y las acciones morales a consecuencias negativas.

Como advierte Ramos, el juicio moral que atiende a las consecuencias de la acción más que a las intenciones tiene la capacidad de absolver la acción al proporcionar la garantía de una moralidad mayor en la que aquella se integra. Pero lo característico de estos pensadores es que, atendiendo a ese mecanismo, gran parte de los elementos que causan perturbación aparente desaparecen y los errores y accidentes se convierten en marginales. Así, las incongruencias inacep-

tables entre intenciones y sus consecuencias se disipan, de tal modo que la mayor parte de ellas resultan asombrosamente benéficas por su utilidad funcional. Y lo que provoca escándalo moral, en realidad, contribuye a la mejora de la especie, y algo que podría considerarse un mal resulta positivo en el nivel sociosistémico<sup>8</sup>. Por ejemplo, Adam Smith nos recomienda no precipitarnos juzgando los egoísmos como antisociales, pues el amor a uno mismo se torna en beneficio público a través de la *mano invisible*, sin que nadie lo busque. Es para él, precisamente, el mecanismo con el que la naturaleza nos engaña para lograr un fin social —que no buscaríamos ni podríamos obtener por nuestra cuenta—, conduciéndonos con argucias hacia el bienestar de todos y la preservación del bien público. El apetito por los medios logra así los fines de la naturaleza, dirigiéndonos a fines colectivos a través de los instintos.

Vico, en su filosofía de la historia, también observa, con su visión a gran escala, que el mundo se articula de manera diversa u opuesta a los fines particulares de los actores con objeto de conservar a la humanidad. La providencia ayuda, de modo que actuando estos impulsados por las pasiones y obcecados por su cortedad de miras dan lugar a lo que nadie buscaba. Las pasiones se convierten en prácticos movilizadores sociales. Las consecuencias no intencionales se afirman sobre las intenciones. De la ferocidad, de la avaricia y la ambición surgen instituciones como la milicia, el comercio y la corte. Y del dinamismo de tales complejos surgen, a su vez, bienes como la fortaleza, la opulencia y la sabiduría. Esa conversión da muestra de una providencia que, mediante engaños y astucias, empuja la historia hacia objetivos que nadie se había propuesto ge-

<sup>8</sup> Frente a esa interpretación de la realidad como expresión del mejor de los mundos posibles puede verse la divertida parodia de Voltaire en su *Cándido* (Voltaire, 1974).



nerando órdenes morales imprevistos, de modo que Dios engaña a los hombres para su propio bien. Como apunta Ramos, en todos estos casos —como ocurre también en el de un Hegel capaz de «asegurar la muerte del yo trágico como un acto de justicia infinita» (Villacañas, 1993: 18; citado por Ramos, 2000: 64)— el despliegue de estos movimientos y jugadas irónicos resuena con el género «de una gran comedia universal de reconciliación donde el espíritu juega astutamente con las pasiones para realizarse en el mundo» (Ramos, 2000: 64).

De la línea principal de estas posiciones teóricas cabría deducir que el poder de lo social estaría precisamente en una capacidad de abstracción que neutralizaría el fracaso y que permitiría concebirlo como algo necesario y encadenarlo causalmente en un horizonte productivo de prosperidad humana. Esto se realiza retrospectivamente, fijándose en el pasado o ligando los diferentes sucesos y fenómenos a un futuro como partes de una unidad que se recapitula a posteriori. El concepto tan de moda de «destrucción creativa», asociado a la descripción de los procesos del capitalismo, funciona de un modo semejante, cuidándose de asociar la destrucción con la innovación. Pero es en cambio, en el presente el tiempo verbal donde se hacen bien manifiestos los errores y chapuzas de lo social<sup>9</sup>.

Por otro lado, resulta interesante ver cómo la recurrente pauta de remitir la destrucción a un orden de abstracción superior —con objeto de asegurar y atenuar su efecto perturbador para el cosmos— posibilita una especie de externalización de la moralidad

de consecuencias más que problemáticas. El problema de que la ciencia social se fije en la regularidad a la búsqueda de la posibilidad de encontrar la clave que permita entender, de una vez por todas, el cambio social es que pierde de vista la importancia absoluta de la novedad y de lo inesperado y el reto con el que se mide continuamente la acción colectiva.

### III. EL AMBIGUO PAPEL DE LOS EXPERTOS

Cuando ponemos los pies en la actualidad nos encontramos un conflicto fundamental. Por un lado, en el orden de la vida cotidiana se percibe que los órdenes sociales y la efectividad de los mecanismos dependen de las interacciones meramente probables (y fallibles) de los actores sociales. Existe una conciencia sobre la factura humana de los órdenes sociales que permea nuestras orientaciones vitales prácticas. Diferentes fuentes diversas de sabiduría informal nos indican que, debido a lo complicada que resulta la materialización de los planes e ideales, existe una necesidad continua de improvisación, que también afecta a los fines y, en general, a las expectativas. Ningún plan es infalible, de manera que la reconstrucción es una tarea continua y primordial de la organización social en todos sus ámbitos. Sin embargo, en multitud de ocasiones nos encontramos con un diseño rígido de los planes que pueden conducir al cumplimiento de expectativas cuyo valor se afirma en términos abstractos y, en rigor, poco realistas. Unas expectativas, además, que se convierten en metas y requieren atender las recomendaciones de los expertos para que se vean cumplidas. Resulta más sencillo ignorar lo central de la falibilidad de los procesos sociales mirando hacia el pasado y reconstruyendo procesos en tiempo presente. No hay ni que decir que esa disposición ética en escenarios que, como decíamos, hay que concebir como radicalmente abiertos a la nove-

<sup>9</sup> Debe tenerse en cuenta, también, que, como señala Ramos, la post-ilustración habría integrado ese referente de las consecuencias no intencionales, pero no como expresiones correctoras y promotoras del bien, sino como males radicales y riesgos, al parecer, inequívocos. El giro es, desde luego, significativo, aunque, como venimos apuntando, no haya corregido la propensión a encadenar los acontecimientos como tramas cuyo rumbo puede preverse y dominarse.

dad inesperable, es desatinada. Desde luego, es conservadora: se adivina en ella el miedo a perder o a tener que cambiar, por parte de seres destinados a hacerlo.

De hecho, pese a la inconsistencia de unas planificaciones que solo atienden un curso prediseñado (según parámetros familiares) de la acción social como susceptible de conducir al éxito (definido como cumplimiento de expectativas), tenemos a ciertos expertos reclamando su competencia en ámbitos de la gestión de lo social, apoyados en la presunción de que disponen de un conocimiento atinado de las lógicas y leyes sociales que articulan su estructura. Así, podemos imaginar un conflicto potencial entre el hecho de que algunos expertos buscan extraer generalizaciones para poder predecir el cambio social y la evidencia de que, en muchas ocasiones, se reproduce la realidad «a la buena de Dios», sin saber ni disponer de datos, sin importar demasiado las consecuencias de las acciones, o amparados en la posibilidad de falsificar los indicadores o hacerlos pasar por aquello que conviene.

Este problema —el de una composición de lugar pretenciosa y extravagante— se materializa cuando encontramos que, con frecuencia, el experto culpa de su incapacidad para explicar o predecir la realidad a los comportamientos irracionales de los actores sociales. En esa clave puede interpretarse la frase de Max Horkheimer cuando señala que «los procesos sociales *todavía* en modo alguno son productos de la libertad humana, sino que son resultantes del ciego actuar de fuerzas antagónicas», lo que supondría que las predicciones de las ciencias sociales serían imperfectas (Horkheimer, 1990: 49). Horkheimer casi parece estar reconociendo aquí que con esos mimbres resulta imposible hacer ciencia, o que esta solo podrá realizarse *cuando* la gente se comporte de modo racional (que equivaldría a libremente, pues se entiende que alguien guiado por impulsos ciegos que no sabe controlar actúa sin liber-

tad). La posibilidad de una ciencia social con la pertinente capacidad predictiva reposaría sobre el despliegue de una humanidad que se hubiese liberado de las sombras y del fondo de irracionalidad que le impediría emanciparse y hacer efectivo su potencial de autonomía. Solo los sujetos realmente autónomos pueden encajar en un modelo que desestima lo caprichoso, fortuito, irreflexivo, absurdo..., esto es, aquello que impide esperar una conducta razonable en contextos definidos objetivamente.

La cuestión es que, ante los fracasos en las predicciones, resulta habitual defenderse diciendo que los modelos funcionan «en condiciones de normalidad» (Taleb, 2008: 224-226). Unas condiciones que, si siguiéramos la sugerencia de Horkheimer, tendríamos en todo caso que dejar pendientes de una ilustradísima «normalización» suficiente; y que, por supuesto, no incluyen la posibilidad de conductas erráticas, irracionales, emotivas, estúpidas, inesperadas... pese a que tales conductas conforman un conjunto habitual (normal) de respuestas. Esa perspectiva que hace equivaler la normalidad con lo razonable obvia también que los actores sociales confían habitualmente en los malos cálculos, errores y agujeros de los ordenamientos sociales para ver cumplidos sus propios planes. E incluso que, en muchos casos, los motivos de confianza que acumulan en ese sentido son los que inhiben, amortiguan o postergan otros planes intermedios, que también se entrecruzan en sus imaginarios, sobre posibles tareas de demolición parcial de esos ordenamientos.

Nassim Taleb nos avisa de que el conocimiento ha tendido con frecuencia, a lo largo de la historia del pensamiento, a centrarse en sucesos previsibles y de poca importancia desdeñando, una y otra vez, lo impredecible de los sucesos trascendentales. No se logró anticipar el ascenso de Hitler y la guerra subsiguiente, ni el desplome soviético, ni tampoco se predijo el auge del fundamentalismo islámico o la difusión de internet (Taleb,

2008: 24). En la actualidad tampoco los expertos han predicho los recientes movimientos democráticos en los países musulmanes ni su efecto de réplica en Europa y Estados Unidos, o la actual crisis financiera y su prolongación en el tiempo. Tampoco parece que las previsiones de los expertos de la Unión Europea y otros organismos económicos como el FMI o el Banco Central Europeo se estén cumpliendo a cuenta de los reajustes continuos en las previsiones. Muchos expertos se defienden alegando déficits de información. Cuando, no obstante, lo extraño sería que el experto pudiera ver la actividad real de los actores relevantes o que estos se la entregaran de buena fe, o que los índices fueran transparentes y reflejaran la actividad real. Sin embargo, con frecuencia se alega que, de haberse dispuesto de cierta información que faltaba para completar el puzle, el modelo habría sido capaz de predecir lo que iba a ocurrir. Una frase donde el término información es lo suficientemente vago como para preguntarnos a qué se refiere. ¿Cuál es la línea de separación entre el concepto «tener la información» y el conocimiento que se posee a posteriori una vez que sabemos qué ha ocurrido<sup>10</sup>?

Uno de los problemas de los expertos parece ser esta incapacidad para asumir el fracaso como una dimensión habitual de la acción social, un reconocimiento necesario para las actividades de corrección. En las

últimas décadas parece haberse ido dando una deriva técnica de los criterios de evaluación política de la gestión administrativa que hace que no quede muy claro hasta qué punto es posible el reconocimiento del fracaso y su integración como parte de la fórmula que trata de explicar las realidades sociales.

A esto habría que añadir un elemento que resulta aún más grave que esa indefinición de criterios de medida, pues no afecta solo a la solvencia de la teoría para integrar la complejidad social en todos sus planos, sino que tiene consecuencias sobre esa misma complejidad. Nos referimos a la incorporación de expectativas que nacen de la previsión de esos mismos expertos respecto a qué ha de plantearse como objetivo. En particular, en el contexto de crisis actual, se apuntan objetivos de desarrollo y crecimiento económico que se vinculan con el bienestar social y con la riqueza, y que esos mismos expertos traducen en políticas de déficit cero, en medidas que tranquilicen a los mercados, en reducciones brutales de las inversiones públicas y de los programas de solidaridad social. El escenario de crisis económica ha situado a los expertos en la primera línea de la gestión administrativa, dando por hecho que dichos expertos sabrán localizar los fallos del sistema y corregirlos para procurar la salida de la crisis. Nos hemos acostumbrado a oír, para justificar medidas políticas que tienen inmediatos efectos dramáticos sobre la población, que no queda más remedio, que son medidas necesarias, que no hay otra alternativa... Los gobernantes elegidos democráticamente asumen y subrayan su incapacidad para tomar decisiones autónomas<sup>11</sup>. Y en ese ejercicio se pierde toda posibilidad de actuar libremente y de definir activamente

<sup>10</sup> Puede traerse aquí la referencia a un ingenioso texto de Stanislaw Lem (2005: 111-155), donde recoge la reseña crítica a una obra inexistente titulada *Un minuto humano*. En esa obra, los autores habrían recogido en cientos de tablas con cifras y estadísticas todo lo que ocurre simultáneamente durante un minuto a la humanidad. El ingente e inabarcable propósito parece cargarse de sentido a partir de la lectura que hace el crítico interpretando esos datos numéricos en una clave narrativa que termina contando una historia en términos dramáticos y recorriendo transversalmente las tablas, en ningún caso, pudiendo incorporar simultáneamente el contenido completo de ese minuto humano. Algo similar podría decirse que ocurriría con ese reclamo de una información más completa para haber podido predecir cursos sorpresivos de la acción.

<sup>11</sup> La expresión más extrema de esa cesión de decisiones por parte del poder político son los gobiernos tecnócratas de Grecia e Italia nombrados en el contexto de la crisis financiera de Europa.

modelos alternativos. Esa pérdida de la capacidad de discutir y de definir objetivos delata una perversión del modelo de gestión en dos planos diferenciados. Uno, el que apunta a por qué se acepta la posición privilegiada de determinados expertos y dos, derivado de este, el que cuestiona tanto la selección de objetivos y expectativas definidas por dichos expertos como las medidas que se suponen que permitirían alcanzarlos.

Aquí sí localizamos una formulación expresa de expectativas que, una y otra vez, señalan un mismo horizonte: el que tiene que ver con un modelo económico al que no le afecta lo más mínimo la acusación de generar inevitablemente brutales desigualdades sociales y que se reafirma a sí mismo sobre la presuposición de que el saldo global puede seguir siendo positivo. En realidad, la lectura que podría hacerse de esa confianza en los dictámenes de las comisiones de expertos apunta más a una ceguera que a la clarividencia. Parece que aquella libertad a la que apuntaba Horkheimer se aleja definitivamente, pues las fuerzas ciegas antagónicas son precisamente las que vienen impulsando y dando forma a esa salvaje vuelta de tuerca del capitalismo que se ha consolidado con el proceso de globalización, en el que se sustenta el llamado capitalismo financiero<sup>12</sup>. Por mucho que las decisiones quieran aparentar ejercicios serios de análisis de las fuerzas que operan en el mercado y de las lógicas y dinámicas que hacen fluctuar diariamente la deuda de los países. Si hay una constante que se repita en esos escenarios del capitalismo financiero es la de la ambición desmedida combinada con aquella adiaforización de la que hablaba Zygmunt Bauman para dar cuenta de cómo la creciente distancia entre las acciones y las consecuencias de las mismas estaba en la base de las conductas más

amorales del ser humano de los siglos XX y XXI (Bauman, 2004: *passim*)<sup>13</sup>.

En este entorno, se habla de tiburones de las finanzas (de auténticos depredadores a quienes no les tiembla el pulso ante la expectativa de obtención de un beneficio económico), pero también de pequeños ahorradores e inversores que desconocen los movimientos y prácticas de los gestores de su capital, y a quienes solo interesa el rendimiento porcentual de las inversiones en bolsa que llevan a cabo los expertos de su banco. En el fondo, el sistema opera bajo un simulacro de orden y control. Es imposible identificar nitidamente a los agentes responsables de su funcionamiento y, también, establecer unas reglas precisas que predigan las fluctuaciones y vaivenes<sup>14</sup>. No es casual que se haya hablado también de capitalismo de casino y que la especulación financiera se proyecte como un juego generador de burbujas que cuando estallan generan fracasos, pero propician también succulentos beneficios a unos pocos que seguirán definiendo los flujos de capital financiero y las reglas del juego y condiciones para participar en él.

Con todo, ante este panorama se perfila una expectativa de futuro que apunta al mantenimiento de ese «orden». No parece que se perciba la dosis de barbarie inscrita en la misma conversión de ese modelo en clave de la organización social. El éxito en la persecución de ese objetivo de mantenimiento de un sistema financiero cuyas bases y fundamen-

<sup>13</sup> En rigor, Bauman utiliza el concepto de adiaforización para definir la creciente separación moderna entre hechos y moral, remitiendo específicamente a situaciones de violencia. Nos permitimos, entendemos que en sintonía con la propia propuesta de Bauman, extender esa distancia apaciguadora de los potenciales reparos morales ante los perjuicios ocasionados por las acciones, a esas situaciones cotidianas en la toma de decisiones dirigidas por ese capitalismo financiero.

<sup>14</sup> Puede verse el posicionamiento crítico del Premio Nobel de Economía Joseph Stiglitz sobre la interpretación de la crisis y las medidas impulsadas desde esa ceguera sobre la realidad económica en el marco de la globalización y el capitalismo (Stiglitz, 2010; 2012; 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Sobre esa voracidad inmovible puede verse, entre otros muchos reportajes y artículos, Barciela, 2012.

tos no admiten ser revisados en la práctica dejándose en manos de determinados expertos que, se supone, saben cómo afrontar eficazmente los «riesgos sistémicos»<sup>15</sup>, supone automáticamente el fracaso en otras expectativas sociales que apuntan a una economía menos desalmada y que no descarte ciertos objetivos de justicia y equidad social.

En realidad, la revisión del modelo de análisis y gestión de lo colectivo no atañería exclusivamente a la definición de las acciones que idealmente podrían conducir al éxito, sino que incumbirían al núcleo mismo de la definición de en qué consiste ese éxito.

Puede recordarse, por lo demás, que esas presuposiciones acerca de la capacidad de control y predictibilidad sobre los procesos sociales se asientan firmemente en la pretensión de dominio de la modernidad triunfante, con lo que cabría esperar que, en un escenario de puesta en cuestión de sus postulados acerca del progreso y la civilización, pudieran ponerse también en duda esos ejercicios de fiscalización del presente a cuenta de un futuro prefijado como objetivo.

Como señala Bauman remitiendo a la tensión entre civilización y barbarie, pero apuntando en esa misma dirección de la confianza moderna en el dominio racional de los procesos:

El binomio «mantenimiento del orden *versus* violencia» no es sino una de las muchas y, por lo general, solapadas contradicciones (como las que existen entre razón y pasión, racionalidad y afectividad), impuestas sobre una oposición moderna central entre lo controlado y lo fuera de control, lo regular y lo irregular, lo predecible y lo impredecible. La actividad ordenadora, principal pasatiempo de las instituciones modernas, es una cuestión de imposición de lo monótono, repetible y determinado; cualquier cosa que se resista a esta imposición

pertenece a la esfera de lo salvaje, al territorio más allá de la frontera, una tierra hostil aún por conquistar o, al menos, pacificar (2004: 20-21).

Esa pretensión, que ahí se expresa como espacios de salvajismo susceptibles de pacificarse situándolos bajo control, parece retomarse en esa cesión de poder a determinados expertos que dictaminan qué pasos han de seguirse. Confiando en que están capacitados para ejecutar planes de acción racionales y exitosos. Son en todos los casos formas, como otras mil, de enmarcar la experiencia del mundo violentándola o inventando su realidad a su manera (Goffman, 2006).

Ahí, como ya hemos apuntado, advertimos problemas en varios planos. Por una parte, en aquel que tiene que ver con la confianza en que es posible ceñir y controlar esos cursos de acción que tienen que ver con las dinámicas de la vida colectiva. Ya hemos recalcado las limitaciones de esos modelos de análisis que consideran en términos deterministas la identificación de leyes sociales y que manifiestan que lo inesperado podría haberse esperado de conocer de antemano la suficiente información. También se advierten problemas en el plano de la acción y en la necesidad de identificar a los sujetos o instituciones que ejercen el poder en su zona de dominio y en la legitimación de las decisiones que plantean, tanto en términos de definición de objetivos como en el diseño de las políticas para lograrlos. Cabría esperar que el ejercicio de dicho poder fuera acompañado de la asunción de responsabilidad sobre las consecuencias del mismo, en especial cuando estas aparecen como fracasos o, muy frecuentemente, como efectos colaterales unidos al logro de determinados objetivos<sup>16</sup>. La integración en esos modelos

<sup>16</sup> Puede decirse, por ejemplo y por acudir a un ejemplo muy cercano y reciente, que «se ha evitado la pérdida de confianza de los inversores (evitando un colapso de la economía)», pero las medidas para evitarlo han conducido a que no se frenen las ejecuciones hipotecarias

<sup>15</sup> Así definió públicamente, el 21 de marzo de 2013, la crisis de Chipre y su riesgo de bancarrota el representante del Eurogrupo Jeroen Dijsselbloem.

de análisis y gestión de lo colectivo de esas otras claves, que recogen la perspectiva del fracaso y de la frustración de expectativas legítimas ligados al despliegue de políticas diseñadas por un objetivo genérico (déficit cero, confianza de los mercados, sostenimiento del sistema financiero...), sería obligada si, como en realidad no ocurre, la expectativa de éxito (como horizonte utópico en el sentido positivo del término, esto es, como impulsora y como aliento crítico contra las miserias del presente) contemplara al conjunto de los sujetos afectados por las diversas tomas de decisiones.

Pero así se apuntaría, en sentido estricto, a un claro replanteamiento de la economía política, como el que entendemos que se deriva de la propuesta que Hans Joas ha designado con la fórmula de la «democratización de la cuestión de la diferenciación»<sup>17</sup>. Una fórmula que «significa que los medios acrecentados de que disponen las sociedades modernas para conformar a la vez su relación con el entorno y sus estructuras internas, no deben quedar ocultos por un pesimismo radical —ya sea de inspiración marxista o sistémico— en cuanto a las posibilidades de regulación social. Todos los conflictos sobre cuestiones económicas, políticas, militares o culturales se plantean, al contrario, bajo una forma nueva, ofreciendo nuevas oportunidades y nuevos impulsos a la creatividad social»<sup>18</sup>. La enredada complejidad multidimensional, con su océano de efectos no intencionales, lo que demandaría necesariamente una «democracia creativa»<sup>19</sup>, lanzada

denodadamente a la corrección constante de sus procesos, en abierta polémica ciudadana, allí donde irrumpen los problemas.

#### **IV. EL CUIDADO DE LO COLECTIVO COMO CLAVE DE SU ORGANIZACIÓN**

Frente a esa clase de eficientismos instrumentalistas debemos advertir que lo que hay de sagrado en los círculos de convivencia, esa dimensión suya radicalmente mudable, es la propia necesidad de afirmación de la convivencia en su pluralidad. Tal es la idea trabajada por Hannah Arendt como el sentido radical y auténtico del poder social<sup>20</sup>. La idea robustece la exigencia de una meta-actividad concentrada en el cuidado de lo colectivo, en su fluir y en su circular continuo y cambiante, renovando la vigilancia ante las exigencias que plantean los problemas de integración y de regulación. Ahí no hay mucha necesidad de imaginar metas precisas hacia las que estirarse, se trata más bien de volver la atención hacia lo fundamental, de curvarla. Hay, más bien, una necesidad de vigilancia que se vuelve mucho más acusada, creemos, cuando nos hacemos cargo un poco mejor, como aquí se ha intentado, de la trágica realidad del fracaso inevitable de nuestras organizaciones a la hora de hacer sitio a las urgentes disrupciones de las vidas nuevas y de los cambios en las antiguas que acogen y deberían potenciar, pero que las desbordan siempre y ante las que acaban mostrando su discapacidad, su relativa insolvencia. La necesidad de atenderlas, de escucharlas con cuidado. Por eso nos atrevemos a conjuntar nuestras pequeñas ganancias con aquella otra sentencia de Arendt, que afirma la condición humana de la pluralidad, cuando dice que la

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(con miles de desahucios) y a impedir la dación en pago como posible mecanismo paliador de esa sangría social.

<sup>17</sup> Joas, 2013: 303. La traducción que empleamos está tomada del original de la versión española de Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera (Joas, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> La fórmula «democracia creativa» es el título del capítulo de cierre del libro citado (Joas, 2013: 253-304), donde Joas explicita las consecuencias —en clave de apertura de horizontes de interpretación y de intervención— que pueden derivarse de una teoría de la acción

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revisada de raíz desde la perspectiva de la creatividad, a la hora de encarar los procesos de acción colectiva que caracterizan la vida social actual.

<sup>20</sup> La idea la explota admirablemente Paul Ricoeur (1996).

pluralidad de los seres únicos es «la ley de la Tierra» (Arendt, 1998; 2005).

Estas ideas demarcan ese sagrado círculo interior (a fin de cuentas único) en que consiste íntimamente la socialidad que los sociólogos hemos de escudriñar en cada presente global y en cada enclave para redescubrirla como ese singularísimo problema de reordenamiento urgente que nos desafía en el horizonte, cargado a buen seguro de contingencias. Pero es que este planteamiento del carácter sagrado de la afirmación del convivir en su pluralidad múltiple apunta, por ello mismo, a la que a buen seguro es la más decisiva de las dimensiones de la actividad social, y que es constitutiva de la condición humana. No es otra que la del cuidado de la vida, esa esforzada labor de todo el día —el estado de vigilia, de preocupación acerca de lo principal— y que afecta primordialmente al cuidado de los propios círculos de convivencia. Y a lo que es decisivo en ellos (siempre pendiente como problema en sus intersticios): comprobar una y otra vez (cuidadosamente) si realmente son convivenciales, aditivos, solidarios, suficientemente capaces de dejar sitio al despliegue pleno de esa diversidad plural, con sus nuevas formas, continuamente emergentes, y de articularse a partir de ellas. Es el cometido propio de las esforzadas tareas de reparación, de vigilancia, el afán de arreglo, de revisión de la marcha de la vida, de desvelo por ella, y de reconducción del curso azaroso y tantas veces dañino de nuestras formas de apañarnos la convivencia en todos los recovecos de la labor de vivir. Ese inmenso caudal de actividad de servicios (sociales) que no pueden sino hacer cada vez más necesarios nuestros saberes y nuestras ciencias de lo social.

Insistiremos en que su centralidad se deriva de la pluralidad misma del convivir, y en que debe ser el núcleo de la teoría de las organizaciones sociales. Fue precisamente Arendt quien distinguió esa noción de lo laborioso, y hasta le dio el nombre de «labor», aplicándolo a las tareas específicas (históricamente menesterosas y menospreciadas pero de extraordinaria importancia) que tienen directamente que ver con la producción y reproducción de las condiciones de vida y del mantenimiento de la vida. Sin embargo, todo hace pensar que ella misma las desdeñaba, atrapada por una excesiva propensión jerarquizante, procedente de Grecia y de la alta cultura intelectualista que le impedía el reconocimiento de una misma dignidad de base en todos los tipos de vida activa. Su discípulo Richard Sennett ha buscado expresamente esa dignificación en *El artesano*<sup>21</sup>.

Porque esa tarea del cuidado (quizás el mejor nombre que se le puede asignar a lo principal de la tarea de organización, la de permanente arreglo y perfeccionamiento de nuestras organizaciones como ámbitos de cooperación) es lo medular en la tarea de gestión y en la teoría organizacional. Y ese enorme espacio de actividad suele escaparse del centro de atención de organizadores, políticos y teóricos, tal vez, como venimos diciendo, por una lectura reconstructiva del acontecer que se cierra a su novedad y, así, a su contingencia y sus requerimientos nuevos. Además de las tareas afanosas de carácter laboral, en esa esfera —la del cuidado— entra nada menos que toda la labor que se esconde tras las puertas del hogar y que concentra una parte esencial de nuestra actividad vital. Ese cuidado directo de las vidas cambiantes, que se nos vienen encima con sus cambios exigentes de atención, y que se nos van y nos faltan. No podemos menos que concebirla como una labor central (crucial y paradigmática) de la condición humana. Tal vez ahí esté incluso la médula de la postmodernidad, o del decisivo avance ético de la modernidad. Su relanzamiento cordial (Cortina, 2007).

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<sup>21</sup> Aunque su idea se quede corta respecto a la aquí sugerida, la exploración que este hace de la rica realidad de la inteligencia práctica en el buen hacer de las labores artesanas no encaja en la caricatura del «animal laborans» de Arendt, a quien tal vez pudo en este aspecto la piedad por la faceta esclava de los desvelos por la supervivencia (véase Arendt, 1974, y Sennett, 2009).



Es, sin duda, nuestra forma de velar y volver sobre ella la que marca el sino convivencial (acogedor, indiferente, despiadado) de la convivencia en cualquier ámbito. El replanteamiento, que la advertencia de fracaso nos obliga a tomar completamente en serio, de la dimensión creativa y abierta de la socialidad y de las identidades, siempre pendientes ambas de realización y de cuestionamiento en cada una de sus concreciones, si se las mide con relación a la exigencia normativa que se deriva de la pluralidad constitutiva de su estar siendo, con toda la innovación abierta que reclama.

Tal vez tendamos siempre a subsumir demasiado deprisa la cuestión de la organización para mejorar la vida, con la meta-organización política, con la querencia a reservarla para la gran esfera pública cuyo diámetro se ensancha indispensable, irremediablemente a la Tierra entera. Siempre hay, sin embargo, una esfera y una dimensión «pública» y un problema «político» de gestión de la pluralidad —un núcleo sagrado; «lo privado es público», dice Javier Gomá— en cualquier círculo de vida humana, cuya ley es siempre la misma: la de la convivencia de una pluralidad de los seres únicos y de sus contextos de convivencia únicos también, y hoy inevitablemente zarandeados por esa apabullante interdependencia planetaria que, por ahora, padecemos críticamente porque nuestras organizaciones fracasan a la hora de abarcar sus contingencias.

Tendemos a hacer una historia de las ideas, de la cultura o de las formas culturales que nos imagina como prósperos herederos de ellas, en lugar de trazar, más bien, sus vericuetos con hincapié en los equívocos y en lo fortuito, en todo ese material que constituye la parte mayor del mecanismo genealógico fundamental del que descendemos. La historia escrita desde el punto de vista de la posteridad produce una versión de los procesos sociales limpia en exceso, pues su proceso de producción viene marcado por el hecho de que, en innumerables ocasiones, los perdedores de la historia no pueden rela-

tar sus experiencias, bien aplastados por segunda vez por el rodillo argumental de la trama (Taleb) o bien porque no nos sentimos inclinados a reparar en ellas, pues las historias deprimentes no resultan tan atractivas. Lo cierto es que todo ello puede producir la impresión, en los supervivientes y especialmente en sus sucesores, de que el relato posee un claro sentido y hacerles, así, más verosímil la expectativa de continuidades aseguradas, los entrena subrepticamente para ellas: el mundo que hay se presenta como ese mundo bueno que hemos recibido y que conviene conservar, porque es un mundo de conquistas y en él las cosas son como son. El héroe de aventuras siempre puede encontrar razones para las heridas y las muertes de sus compañeros de fatigas y fieles ayudantes, como sacrificios necesarios que santifican sus empresas; pero sobre toda aventura se cierne el peligro del sesgo estadístico: esa trampa de un género que adopta crónicamente el punto de vista del héroe que triunfa siempre en sus peripecias.

## A MODO DE CONCLUSIÓN

Tras este recorrido donde hemos querido ir plasmando las razones para nuestra apuesta por una sociología más atenta a las irrupciones de lo inesperado y más consciente de la inevitabilidad de cursos de la acción colectiva que ponen en aprietos las interpretaciones de los enfoques racionalistas y normativistas, cobra sentido el planteamiento de una conclusión abierta. Nuestra propuesta enlaza con el propósito de advertir en los procesos reales de las acciones sociales que ocurren en cada presente aquello que condiciona y trastorna la organización de la convivencia, de ese vivir juntos que constituye la esencia de la socialidad humana. De ahí que hayamos desembocado en el aviso sobre la importancia del cuidado desde una vertiente ética, que, por lo demás, también cabe trasladar —es nuestra convicción— al ámbito de

la reflexividad social, pues entendemos que la conciencia sobre las expectativas de la vida compartida y sobre los recursos y caminos para alcanzarlas es, precisamente, la que dota de sentido a nuestras aspiraciones, que, si no, serían ciegas apuestas por un destino engañosamente garantizado.

En otras palabras, se trataría de incorporar tanto al ámbito de la acción como al de la reflexión (que, por lo demás, no podríamos concebir desligados) la advertencia sobre la falta de rigor que se deriva de considerar los procesos sociales como cursos de acción unidireccionales que pueden explicarse localizando líneas que dibujan una lógica y una capacidad creciente de dominio sobre los recursos que permiten la consecución de metas predeterminadas. Explicar desde esa clave la complejidad de nuestro mundo puede permitir apaciguar la impresión de su ingobernabilidad, pero, en realidad, no conduce a gobernarlo (en el sentido de dirigirlo). Se dejan fuera demasiadas realidades y situaciones que no encajan en el modelo y que interpelan tanto a los mecanismos de la inevitable reproducción social y del cambio inscrito en sus dinámicas como a las explicaciones de los expertos sobre qué está ocurriendo y cómo corregir las situaciones negativas que se aprecian en el análisis del presente. Tanto en un ámbito como en otro, es importante caer en la cuenta de la presencia del fracaso, de la ineficiencia, de la novedad sorpresiva, para evitar explicaciones sesgadas que dejen de antemano al margen a quienes no encajan en el engranaje de esos modelos que tratan de explicar la acción social.

A partir de ahí, la pregunta es inmediata: ¿cómo puede implementarse una sociología que incorpore todos esos elementos de la complejidad social? La respuesta ya no es tan inmediata, pero requiere de partida una disposición abierta a tomar siempre en cuenta la novedad, los cursos no intencionales de las acciones, las irrupciones del azar, la ineficiencia, la chapuza, el engaño, la mentira, la broma... toda la multitud de posibilidades que un enfoque orientado a la localización de relacio-

nes causa-efecto y de relatos unidireccionales hacia la consecución de expectativas nunca podría explicar ni reconocer como rasgos de nuestra socialidad. De momento, en este trabajo solo hemos pretendido mostrar el porqué de esas insuficiencias, tanto desde la reflexión sociológica como desde la fundamentación sobre el papel de los expertos en la toma de decisiones. La conclusión queda, así, abierta como invitación a pensar una nueva sociología que podría enlazar, como hemos apuntado, con la estela del *homo trágicus* (Ramos) y con la propuesta de la creatividad de la acción (Joas), asumiendo como guía aquella idea del cuidado que irrumpe como un imperativo ético —y político— que no siempre parecemos dispuestos a asumir con todas sus consecuencias. Una sociología que, como ha escrito Hans Joas, debe advertir que «todos los conflictos sobre cuestiones económicas, políticas, militares o culturales se plantean [...] bajo una forma nueva, ofreciendo nuevas oportunidades y nuevos impulsos a la creatividad social». Además, «todas estas cuestiones tienen que ver, en realidad, con el grado y con el modo de diferenciación que la sociedad debe admitir y, una vez descartada la eventualidad utópica de su pura y simple desaparición en un mundo nuevo (por ejemplo en el socialismo), no pueden ser planteadas pertinentemente más que de esta manera». Por eso mismo, acaba diciendo que, partiendo de un enfoque de la acción colectiva renovado desde el ángulo de la creatividad de la acción, las cuestiones a las que se enfrenta hoy en día la democracia se deben reinterpretar como el resultado de aplicar, reflexivamente, la idea de la diferenciación sobre ella misma, en la línea de aquella «democratización» de los procesos de diferenciación que ya se ha apuntado: «en una sociedad democrática moderna, las instituciones de formación de la voluntad política que dimanar de la diferenciación del cuerpo social permanecen en comunicación con este; son el campo de batalla donde se deciden el modo y el grado de diferenciación que la sociedad puede y debe admitir» (Joas, 2013). Pero son estos, en

todo caso, asuntos capitales que quedan apuntados y que deberemos abordar en sucesivas aproximaciones desde esa sociología alertada en el sentido de contingencia y plenamente abierta a la creatividad, con su robustecida sensibilidad hacia la capacidad de los colectivos humanos para hacerse crecientemente responsables de las situaciones que encaran y que requieren, siempre, renovación en los modos de respuesta.

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# Contingency and Crisis. Notes On a Sociology Considering Failure and the Unforeseen

*Contingencia y crisis. Apuntes para una sociología atenta al fracaso y a lo imprevisto*

**Marta Rodríguez Fouz, Óscar Tejero Villalobos and Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera**

## Key words

- Social Action
- Social Constructivism
- Economic Crises
- Rational Choice
- Failure
- Decision Models
- Forecasting

## Palabras clave

- Acción social
- Constructivismo social
- Crisis económicas
- Elección racional
- Fracaso
- Modelos de toma de decisiones
- Predicción

## Abstract

This paper is proposed as a critical approach to normativism and rational-action based sociological models, starting from the idea that they overrate the capacities of agents to understand and evaluate the mechanisms of social life. In opposition to these theoretical approaches, we suggest that contingency and failure (not taken into account by these approaches) appear as constant realities, inevitable and appropriate for understanding social action. In this journey we rely on Ramos' proposal on the tragic dimension of action, in addition to the reformulation by Arendt of Heidegger's concept of care. Finally, we critique the role assigned to certain experts in the current scenario of economic crisis, from presumption of the ability to predict and correct social paths, pushing for success as a goal.

## Resumen

El artículo se propone como un acercamiento crítico a los modelos normativistas y acciorracionalistas de la sociología partiendo de la idea de que sobrevaloran las capacidades agenciales para entender y evaluar los mecanismos de la vida social. Frente a esos planteamientos teóricos proponemos que la contingencia y el fracaso (con la que no cuentan esas perspectivas) comparezcan como realidades constantes, inevitables e idóneas para comprender la acción social. En ese recorrido nos apoyamos en la propuesta de Ramos sobre la dimensión trágica de la acción, además de en la reformulación por parte de Arendt del concepto heideggeriano de *cuidado*. Finalmente, recalamos en la crítica a la función atribuida a determinados expertos en el escenario actual de la crisis económica, desde el presupuesto sobre su capacidad para predecir y corregir los rumbos sociales orientándolos hacia la consecución del éxito.

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been nearly fifteen years since Ramón Ramos advised that sociological models should take the tragic dimension of action seriously, drinking from the well of the ancient wisdom of Greek tragedy (Ramos, 1999). Some current developments in action-oriented social theory have proven this observation to be very insightful in thoroughly reviewing the different levels of attention to recurrent activities required for the analysis of social scenarios. This paper relies upon identifying paradoxical caesuras between the informal knowledge held by social actors, and the often cross-eyed focuses used in organisational contexts and in formal management models. Our intention is to recover the tragic warning and connect it to a reformulation of the concept of care, with its roots in Heidegger, based on certain findings by Hannah Arendt. We believe that this can lay the ground for a constructive proposal for more realistic models to analyse and manage that pertaining to the collective.

In opposition to rational-action and normativism based approaches or models, which overrate agents' abilities to establish, understand, and evaluate the mechanisms involved in social life, we advocate that the threat of severe frustration and failure should appear as an inevitable and constant dimension; something that is particularly useful in understanding, at its most basic level, the fallible quality of social action as a limited game that is always susceptible to, and demanding of, improvement. In order to do this, it is first necessary to bridge the gap between more refined and advanced feelings, knowledge and approaches that can improve our analytical and management models of the social, and the gap between certain practical procedures and the models that describe them.

More specifically, our proposal is to suggest a way of rediscovering the nature of social phenomena such as deviation and exclusion. These could be understood as inevitable

threats which are co-related to the centrifugal pressure inherent in the social game, and which compel us to give fundamental importance to the continuous and inevitable task of reconstructing and correcting the areas of social relations. If we look at social life — as we believe one must— from a sociological perspective that mainly looks at the capacity for the organisation of social enclaves in order to structure differences, what happens is that the specific cases of failure, or of supposed social inefficiency or inability, should not be seen as examples of ineffectiveness; instead, they should be perceived to recount and proclaim the inability of the organisation to synergically structure its plural nature. In short, room should be made for these cases in practical networks and, particularly, in the general monitoring and correcting processes of joint achievements and specifically joint performance, which would then be addressed from a plural approach. These failures and cases of inefficiency may also be underestimated and deemed to be insignificant fringes. Any analyses that fail to take these dimensions of social life into account are deficient; however, they are often considered pertinent and are used to justify, from their position of blindness and bias, decisions that affect society as a whole, and whose supposed benefits are not, or even offered to be, discussed.

All this seems interesting on two analytical levels that may be separated, but which are most fruitful when considered together. On the one hand, we have a meta-theoretical perspective focused on the solvency of the categories of a sociology that establishes rational actions and the capacity for agency of subjects and institutions as reference points of knowledge about collective life; and on the other, we have the complex network of actions and situations that make up the social fabric and warns of the difficulty involved in attempting to create appropriate categories. In this paper we intend to approach both levels by proposing an interrelation between

them that highlights the limitations of a conceptualisation that ignores that social life is a merely probable, open scope of activity, and that it lacks any assurances. That is, the fact that social actions are collective and plural must be taken into account, bearing in mind that they have no centre or organising principle that leads them in a certain direction, with the ensuing challenges in coordination. They are characterised by reflexivity and creativity, whilst maintaining the possibility of changing themselves and transforming their course as they move along. In this way, the required conceptualisation should be able to include the random, the unpredictable, the fortuitous, as well as failures, errors and thwarted expectations<sup>1</sup>... One of the most important problems arising when such perspectives of social aspects are disregarded by theoretical models is that novelty is deemed to be an exception, rather than a rule, of sociality. This facilitates analysis, but at the cost of generating a fundamental blindness, and substantial problems in terms of socio-political management. We also suggest that one of the outcomes of the referred interaction is to disturb the set of tasks for the social sciences, which must address reality from three perspectives: as sciences of action on the frontiers of time (with an eye on the “jumps” taken by actors with every step, based as they are in a present which not only relies on past experience but also looks ahead); as sciences of management that spheres of action (which addresses the care taken to improve them as areas of social production and social relations, mainly concentrating on the new scenarios to structure the emerging diversity); and, finally, as sciences of critical revision of the images of

the social world (serving to correct outdated representations, supported by the experience gained from integrating that which emerges, including the non-intentional effects of actions and of these corrective reactions)<sup>2</sup>.

## I. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICES

It is well known that many of the aspirations for sociology to be considered a science rely on the purpose of identifying regular patterns in the course of social action that enable accurate predictions. The challenge is to find a set of rules to be able to anticipate how an individual, a group or an institution, for instance, will behave, given certain conditions. Explaining social reality would be tantamount to knowing the rationale of their dynamics and integrating social change as a kind of determinism; social transformations would run in one or a different direction, given a specific set of circumstances. However, the apparent inability of the social sciences to predict surprising, unexpected events does not lead to questioning this model of recreating possible future scenarios. This can be seen in the efforts made by the social sciences to incorporate, a posteriori, events into a logical sequence that aims to explain them. Only incomplete knowledge of the factors involved would prevent an accurate forecast of this disruptive novelty which would thus become an effect of well-identified causes. This could not have been any different, but it was not possible to see it coming because it had not been looked at in a suitable way.

<sup>1</sup> Hans Joas opened up (possibly as nobody else did) the new theoretical and meta-theoretical vein that we must place at the core of our heuristic review and critique, the sooner the better. He did so particularly in his *Die Kreativität*, a study that Ramón Ramos was right to include amongst the monographs of Contemporary Classics of the Editorial Service of the Centre for Sociological Research. See Joas, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense we consider particularly promising the line of work undertaken by Benno Herzog in amending the sociology of Axel Honneth. It concerns the basic dialectic between recognition and contempt, including ideas from discourse theory that explore the mechanisms of “discursive exclusion” which would begin even before the process of the verbalisation of contempt. See Herzog, 2012.

The normative and rationalist models of social theory presuppose some assurance of collective reproduction. The former model, as a culture whose norms and values are able to guarantee collective action through socialisation; the latter, thanks to a model starring an actor whose rational behaviour is strategically orientated in order to maximise its calculations and allows social behaviour to be predicted. In both these cases a series of regularities and patterns is assumed to exist that make it possible to describe the working of social orders to find formulas for action and practical guidance, which are often aimed at ensuring the success of the joint venture. In the light of this, it may be highly appropriate to bear in mind G. H. Mead's conviction that such a phenomenon is in fact the result of a human propensity for constant rationalising (Mead, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. It is as if it were a "light" form of using the capacity for narrative, or of "giving account of"; as if we are ashamed to recognise that we have been previously ignorant of something, in the line of the far-too-clever person who straight away plumps for the new version found by someone else with an "I already knew it". Or, worse still, it is not wanting to recognise that the unforeseen and unexpected was strictly unpredictable and not to be expected. It would be somehow remaining stupidly and stubbornly anchored in ignorance, turning one's back to the fact that understanding the circumstances of our life is a precarious act, immersed in an ocean of ignorance. Because, contrary to what prevails

in our managing minds, the fundamental determinism with which to work, from the very ground of convictions, is the incapacity to effectively and accurately predict what is important in life and in social life, and the subsequent need to be constantly prepared to fix the inoperative organisation of human affairs.

However, the task seems difficult if we look at the tendency to separate action from the micro-sociological world of social actors and social processes. These often appear clothed in the abstract impersonality of the inevitable economic and social mechanisms and the majesty that accompanies them, something that ignores change for ridiculous reasons, such as human clumsiness, mistakes, errors or stupid confusions. This separation allows for the social to be responsible for well-born realities, but not for social monstrosities, which, in our view, is highly problematic; a type of veiled manufacturer of self-justification mechanisms; a perverse workshop for the generation of disguised ideological superstructures that were denounced, in their worst sense, by Marx and, in general, by the venerable tradition of the philosophy of suspicion.

In our discipline, much importance has been given to the prosopomorphic image of society as an assuring subject that is powerful and does the right thing. It is able to obtain its goals in such a way that, even when the particular moral system collapses at a specific historic moment, the prevailing perspective has been that such a collapse was the result of some internal law of social progress or efficiency. An unrealistic image is easily derived of a character who was always right, whatever it did, justifying the efficiency of the social mechanism. This idea that the social always gets it right is certainly suspicious, as it is apparently immune to however undesirable their productions may be<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth remembering here Mead's work on positivism and time. It unmasks the conservative, blinding games of rationalisation with which human beings tend to neutralise the effect that novelty has on our old patterns of interpretation, and even on our old views of the world. This would be an exercise in de-futurising the future, which we believe to be, above all, against freedom; against freedom of intelligence and against our moral probity, which does not quite open up to novelty, as if its emergence, apparently recognised, had had no effect on anyone or anything, not even on the person that is attempting to explain it. See Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> It is not that social science and its different disciplines have ignored the problematic nature of social action, as



The absence of examples of bodged, clumsy or stupid operation of social mechanisms is surprising, as in practice they are unavoidable variables, sufficiently important to be taken into account<sup>5</sup>. It is also astonishing that error and ignorance do not appear as basic ingredients of collective action and socio-historical evolution, since they played an essential part in the view of the world that radiates from ancient Greek tragedy, arising from the very cultural origins of our own. It is here that Ramón Ramos finds the necessary keys for the enrichment of the theoretical models that we use to think about and explore social action. The intention of these is to freshen up the underlying anthropology of the social sciences in a way best suited to take on the complexity of our social scenarios. With that purpose in mind, Ramos suggested adding the new species *homo tráagicus* to the current catalogue of actor prototypes that operate in social theory: *homo moralis*, *homo economicus*, *homo specularis*... This brilliant addition, despite having its origin thousands of years ago,

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shown by the analysis of the classics, concerned about the problems faced by society in their historical period. Likewise it could be said that different traditions exist in such different disciplines as history, anthropology, social psychology, and sociology itself, characterised by their shrewd glance at praxis or directed at various creative phenomena such as collective action and social movements. On the empirical plane, some intellectuals have also thought about the before and after of disasters and catastrophes, such as is the case of all of the literature surrounding the Holocaust. However, in the context of social theory and collective action, the hegemonic currents continue to give a marginal role to the creativity of action, and ultimately, also to the strict contingency of historical scenarios. They are still pinned down to the dream of being able to investigate the physiognomy of the social with the aim of predicting and finding the definitive key that would lead to success at the management level—or at least a number of practical lessons, if we lower the level of our aspirations.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, it must be noted that within the practical application of knowledge to social processes, there is little or no room for the victims of the social mechanisms started by the public management of organisations. As will be seen, this can be linked to the extremely low degree of responsibility assumed for the harm caused.

brings distinctive aspects to social theory that have an appropriate impact on the conceptions of the world, of action and, of course, of the social being (Ramos, 1999).

## II. CONTINGENCY VERSUS PREDICTABILITY. THE RELEVANCE OF *HOMO TRAGICUS*.

This, unlike its evolutionary relatives, does not presuppose that a pre-determined being (nature, identity or conscience) exists, which turns action into a development or deployment of such a previous reality. The radical position of Greek tragedy, from this perspective of social theory, lies in the fact that a representation of an action arises from it, a risky where nothing ensures that what has been done is congruent with the actors' intentions. What is at play here is the ideal life (*eudaimonia*), the Greek dream of balance and the possibility of living a full life that is worth living. Nevertheless, the very irony of tragedy is that this sought-after upward point of balance is an undeterminable remote singularity, which depends on something or someone that could change it at any time, and so the slightest action is capable of tipping it. In this way the mistake or tragic error exists as a continuous threat hovering over any course of action<sup>6</sup>.

In this world error is not the exception, as it is in the world of and (let us say that these hominids are part of a world in which error is not recognised as being relevant). *Tragicus* lives in a complex universe where the serene ideal of prudent growth is assaulted by spurts of excess (*hybris*), an almost unavoidable tendency of action to overflow, as the main driver in a plot whose consequences are be-

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<sup>6</sup> Javier Gomá's comments on the Aristotelian concept of are also relevant here. Following this concept, a random fatalism may at any time ruin a life objectively considered as happy and fully-lived. Here lies the foundation of the tragic feeling in classic Greece with respect to control of the circumstances (cf. Gomá, 2013:51-52).

yond the knowledge and control of the protagonist, and that will lead to the tragic end of the pathetic hero, the ironic outcome of the hero's own actions<sup>7</sup>. The tragic chorus laments or warns —although the protagonist cannot hear them— of how the hero's behaviour drags him towards an inevitable end. The problem is not that the hero breaks community rules. He is not an anomic person; on the contrary, the reckless conduct of the tragic hero consists in unilaterally following the cultural codes in a complex world whose boundaries are dynamic, fragile, blurred and ambivalent (Ramos, 1999).

What interests us here, from the sociological point of view, is that the theoretical model synthesised by Ramos based on Greek tragedy brings to the fore the problem of the coordination of collective action in the midst of an inescapable pluralistic heterogeneity, which is impossible to handle with general, and even less so, with universally valid, formulas. In this scenario, action is shown to be intrinsically risky, and failure, error and ignorance are given an essential role as vital mechanisms in the generation of social reality and as fundamental demands of corrective action.

As also mentioned by Ramos, one of the basic themes in the origins of the social sciences is the difference and the distance between the intentions and the consequences of action. The classics identified the problem that lies in such incongruity, which is a major theme in tragedy. However, if the tragic outlook considered it as an enormous problem, in the social sciences and their theoretical models it has been too often presented as a

functional mechanism that, curiously, allows messes to be dissolved and minimises the perturbing potential of failures, redirecting them to the higher plane of historical or social realisation. As remarked by Ramos, this pattern can be found in important theorists in the later history of social science, such as Leibniz, Adam Smith, Vico, Mandeville, Kant and Hegel (Ramos, 2002). These philosophers applied the “consequent principle”, a brilliant idea owed to Leibniz. They advocated suspending historical —and even scientific and rational— judgement when faced with anything that seems immediately unjustifiable, and which may be susceptible to a subsequent amendment (whether this comes from the course of historical productivity or from the provident God of their theodicies). A warning that in itself seems reasonable, at least until its application leads to a kind of secular theodicy where accident, error and even evil disappear, and end up being mere accidents integrated and domesticated into the service of a higher good (Ramos, 2002).

For example, Mandeville noted that “the short-sighted vulgar in the chain of causes seldom can see further than one link; but those who can enlarge their view, and will give themselves the leisure of gazing on the prospect of concatenated events, may, in a hundred places, see good spring up and pullulate from evil as naturally as *chickens* do from eggs.” (Mandeville, 1997: 56 Cited by Ramos, 2002: 1017). Thus, care needs to be taken in managing the social, as immoral intentions could give rise to positive consequences and moral actions, to negative consequences.

As Ramos warned, the moral judgement that addresses the consequences of the action, rather than the action's intentions, has the ability to absolve the action by providing the assurance of a greater morality than that of which the action forms part. But the characteristic feature of these philosophers is that, in the light of the mechanism described above, they hold that a large part of the elements that seem to cause concern disap-

<sup>7</sup> Conversely, perverse characters could be conceived of whose life path is later interpreted as being heroic. This conversion of a character into a hero, over which the protagonist has no control either, is not linked to the genuine reflection of the tragic end, but it does relate to the surprising randomness, also permitting that attention is not only focused on actions and deeds, but also on the stories told, which give them meaning.

pear, and errors and accidents become marginal. Thus the unacceptable incongruences between intentions and consequences dissipate, and most of them are surprisingly beneficial due to their functional usefulness. And that which causes a moral scandal, in reality, contributes to the betterment of the species, and something that could be considered bad is positive at the socio-systemic level<sup>8</sup>. For example, Adam Smith recommends us not to jump to judge selfish acts as being antisocial, as love for one's self is turned into public good through the Invisible Hand, without anyone seeking it. This is, for him, precisely the mechanism by which nature tricks us into reaching a social end — which we would not look for nor could obtain by ourselves— deludes us to lead us towards welfare for all and the preservation of the public good. The appetite for the means therefore achieves nature's ends, guiding us to collective ends through our instincts.

Vico, in his philosophy of history and with his large-scale vision, also observed that the world is articulated in different and opposite ways to the particular ends of actors with the purpose of preserving humanity. Providence helps, so that actors, driven by passions and blinded by their short-sightedness, produce what nobody was searching for. Passions become practical social mobilisers. Unintentional consequences are ratified above intentions. From ferocity, greed and ambition emerge institutions such as the army, trade, and the court. And from the dynamism of such complexes arise, at the same time, good outcomes such as strength, opulence and wisdom. This conversion demonstrates a providence which, through tricks and guile, pushes history towards objectives that nobody had intended, generating unforeseen moral orders, and so God deludes men for

their own good. As noted by Ramos, in all of these cases —as also happens in Hegel's capacity to "ensure the death of the tragic 'I' as an act of infinite justice" (Villacañas, 1993: 18. Cited by Ramos, 2000: 64), the deployment of these movements and ironic plays resonates in the genre of "a great universal comedy of reconciliation where the spirit cleverly plays with the passions to become realised in the world" (Ramos, 2000: 64).

It could be inferred from the main line of these theoretical positions that the power of social life resides in a capacity for abstraction that neutralises failure and permits conceiving of it as something necessary and establishing a causal link to a productive horizon of human prosperity. This is done retrospectively, looking back to the past or joining together the different events and phenomena to a future, as part of a unit that is recapitulated. The fashionable concept of "creative destruction", associated with a description of capitalist processes, works in a similar way, ensuring that destruction is associated with innovation. However, it is in the present tense where mistakes and bungling in the realm of social life are made apparent<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, it would be interesting to see how the recurring pattern of referring destruction to a higher level of abstraction — with the aim of ensuring and attenuating its disturbing effect on the cosmos— allows for a kind of outsourcing of morality, with highly problematic consequences. The problem with social science focusing on regularity, in an attempt to find the key to understanding social change once and for all, is that it loses sight of the absolute importance of novelty

<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the interpretation of reality as an expression of the best of all possible worlds, see Voltaire's entertaining parody Voltaire, 1974)

<sup>9</sup> It also has to be taken into account that, as noted by Ramos, the post-Enlightenment integrated this benchmark for unintended consequences, but not as corrective expressions or promoters of good, but as radical evils and seemingly inescapable risks. The change is, of course, significant, although as we have pointed out, it has not corrected the propensity to chain events as plots whose course can be anticipated and controlled.

and of the unexpected, and the challenge against which collective action is continuously measured.

### III. THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF EXPERTS

It is easier to ignore the core of the fallibility of social processes by looking back to the past and rebuilding processes, than to look at the present. When we set foot in the present we face a basic conflict. In the order of everyday life, social orders and the effectiveness of the mechanisms are perceived as depending on the merely probable (and fallible) interactions of social actors. There is an awareness of the human-made social orders that permeates our practical life directions. Several different sources of informal wisdom tell us that, given how complicated it is to carry out plans and ideals, there exists a continuous need for improvisation, which also affects the ends and, in general, the expectations. No plan is infallible and so reconstruction is a continuous and essential task of social organisation in all of its areas. However, many times we find rigidly designed plans which can lead to the fulfilment of expectations whose value is stated in abstract and, strictly speaking, unrealistic terms. Besides, some expectations become goals that require taking note of experts' recommendations in order for them to be accomplished. It becomes easier to then ignore the key aspects in the fallibility of social processes by looking to the past and reconstructing processes in the present time. Needless to say that this ethical disposition is not appropriate in scenarios that must be conceived of as being radically open to unexpected novelty. It is certainly conservative: one can see in it the fear of loss or of having to change, by those who are destined to change.

In fact, despite the inconsistency of some plans that only follow a pre-determined course (according to familiar parameters) of social

action that is susceptible to leading to success (defined as meeting expectations), some experts claim to have competence in the fields of social management, relying on the assumption that they have a wise understanding of the rationales and social laws that articulate its structure. A potential conflict could then be envisaged between the fact that some experts seek to extract generalisations that could be used to predict social change and the evidence that, in many cases, reality occurs "any old how", without having any knowledge or data available, without bothering too much about the consequences of actions, or relying on the possibility of falsifying indicators or passing them off as something that conveniently endorses their position.

This problem —the creation of a pretentious and extravagant state of affairs— materialises when we find that experts blame their incapacity to explain or predict reality on the irrational behaviour of social actors. Max Horkheimer's position can be interpreted in this vein when he said that "social processes are in no way the products of human freedom, but are the natural results of the blind operation of antagonistic forces" which implies that the predictions made by the social sciences are imperfect (Horkheimer, 1990: 49). Horkheimer almost seems to be acknowledging here that it is impossible to do science with these elements, or that it can only be done if people behave rationally (which is tantamount to saying freely, as it is understood that someone guided by blind impulses that they cannot control acts without freedom). The possibility that a social science may have the relevant predictive capacity would rely on a humanity that would have become free from the shadows and the irrationality that prevents their emancipation and the fulfilment of their potential for autonomy. Only truly autonomous subjects can fit within a model that rejects whims, that which is random, unreflecting, absurd..., that which prevents expecting reasonable behaviour in objectively defined contexts.

Faced with failures in the predictions, a usual defence is to argue that the models work “under normal conditions” (Taleb, 2008: 224-226). If we follow Horkheimer’s suggestion, such conditions would have to be subject to a highly cultivated “normalisation”; and that does not include the possibility of erratic, irrational, emotional, stupid or unexpected behaviour, despite that these types of behaviour form part of the usual (normal) set of answers. This perspective that equates normality to the rational also forgets that social actors usually rely on miscalculations, errors and holes in social systems to carry out their plans. It also obviates that, in many cases, the grounds for confidence that they accumulate are those that inhibit, mitigate or delay other intermediate plans, which also overlap in their social imagery, about possible partial demolition tasks of those systems.

Nassim Taleb warns us that knowledge, throughout the history of thought, has often tended to focus on minor, predictable events, time and again ignoring the unpredictability of momentous events. The rise of Hitler and the subsequent war was not anticipated, nor was the Soviet collapse, nor the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the spread of the internet (Taleb, 2008: 24). Recently experts have failed to predict both the democratic movements in Muslim countries and their corresponding effects in Europe and the United States, as well as the current financial crisis and its prolonged duration. Nor does it seem that the forecasts of the European Union experts and of other economic bodies such as IMF and the Central European Bank are being met, bearing in mind the continuous adjustments to the forecasts. Many experts argue that there is a lack of information. However, it would be strange for experts to be able to see the actual activity of the relevant actors, or that these actors would deliver information in good faith, or that the indexes would be transparent and that they reflected the true activity. Nevertheless, it has frequently been alleged that, if a certain piece

of missing information needed for solving the puzzle had been available, the model would have been capable of predicting what was going to happen. But the term information is sufficiently vague in that sentence to make us wonder what it refers to. What is the dividing line between “having the information” and the knowledge that is possessed afterwards, once we know what has happened?<sup>10</sup>

One of the problems that experts seem to have is the inability to include failure as a normal dimension of social action, a necessary recognition for correction activities. In the last few decades a technical tendency seems to have emerged in the criteria for the evaluation of policies in public management that does not make it clear to what extent it is possible to acknowledge failure and its integration as part of the formula that tries to explain social issues.

To this needs to be added an element that is even more serious than the imprecision of the measuring criteria. It not only affects the ability of the theory to integrate social complexity in all of its levels, but also has consequences for this very complexity. We refer here to the expectations that arise from the experts’ forecasts as to what their objective should be. Particularly in the context of the current crisis, development and economic growth objectives have been provided that are linked to social well-being and wealth, which are translated into zero deficit policies by these same experts, into measures that

<sup>10</sup> An ingenious text by Stanislaw Lem could be referenced here, where he recounts the critical review of a non-existent play entitled *One human minute*. In this play, the authors collected hundreds of tables with figures and statistics that showed what happened to humanity during one minute. This enormous and incomprehensible purpose seems to be loaded with meaning by the critic’s interpretation of the numerical data as a narrative and ends up telling a story in dramatic terms and criss-crossing the tables, being unable to simultaneously incorporate the full content of this human minute. Something similar could be said to happen to the claim that more thorough information is needed in order to be able to predict surprising courses of action (cf. Lem, 2005: 111-155).



pacify the markets, into brutal reductions in public investment and social protection programmes. The economic crisis has placed the experts in the front line of administrative management, taking for granted that these experts know where the failures in the system are located and how to correct them and so exit the crisis. In order to justify political measures that have immediate dramatic effects for the population, we have become used to hearing that the measures are necessary and there is no other alternative. Democratically elected governments assume and emphasise that they are unable to make autonomous decisions<sup>11</sup>. In this way all possibility of acting freely and actively defining alternative models is lost. This loss of the ability to discuss and define objectives reveals a perversion of the management model in two different planes. One refers to why the privileged position of certain experts is accepted and the second one, which is derived from this, questions both the choice of objectives and expectations as defined by these experts and the measures that supposedly will allow them to be reached.

Here we find an express statement of expectations that time and again shows the same horizon: an economic model that is not at all affected by the accusation that inevitably brutal social inequalities are created, and that reasserts the assumption that the overall balance may remain positive. In fact, that trust in the opinions of expert committees could be interpreted more as blindness than as clairvoyance. It seems that Horkheimer's concept of freedom has been left behind, as the blind antagonistic forces are precisely those that are driving and giving shape to this savage turn of the capitalist screw that has been consolidated within the globalisation

process, on which the so-called financial capitalism is based<sup>12</sup>. For as much as the decisions appear attempts to make a serious analysis of the forces that operate in the market and the rationales and dynamics that cause a country's debts to fluctuate daily, if there is one constant that repeats in these scenarios in financial capitalism it is that of excessive ambition, combined with Zygmunt Bauman's adiaphorisation. The latter shows how the growing distance between actions and consequences was at the base of the most amoral behaviour displayed by human beings in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Bauman, 2004: *passim*)<sup>13</sup>.

In this environment there is talk of financial sharks (true predators who do not hesitate if there is an opportunity for making a financial return), but also of small savers and investors who do not know the movements and practices of their capital's managers, who are only interested in the percentage performance of stock exchange investments made by their banks. Ultimately, the system operates under a simulacrum of order and control. It is impossible to clearly identify the agents responsible for its operation and to establish precise rules that predict the fluctuations and ebbs and flows<sup>14</sup>. It is not a coincidence that casino-style capitalism is also talked about and that financial speculation is seen as a game that generates bubbles that cause failures when they explode, but that also bring juicy profits to those few that have

<sup>12</sup> On that unshakable voracity, we refer to Barciela, 2012, amongst many other reports and articles.

<sup>13</sup> Strictly, Bauman uses the concept of adiaphorisation to define the growing modern separation between deeds and morals, referring specifically to violent situations. We would extend this soothing distance from potential moral qualms regarding the damages caused by actions (in line with Bauman's original proposal) to the day-to-day decision-making guided by financial capitalism.

<sup>14</sup> See the critical position of Nobel Laureate for Economics, Joseph Stiglitz, on the interpretation of the crisis and the measures implemented due to this blindness about economic reality in the context of globalisation and capitalism (Stiglitz, 2010, 2012, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> The most extreme expression of this transfer of decision-making by the political powers can be seen in the technocratic governments of Greece and Italy, which were appointed in the context of the European financial crisis.

been defining the flows of financial capitalism and the rules of the game, as well as the conditions for participating in it.

Nonetheless, in this scenario an expectation of the future is emerging that points to this “order” being maintained. The degree of barbarity involved in making this situation the major model of social organisation does not seem to be perceived, however. The success in maintaining this financial system whose basis does not allow for it to be monitored, and therefore, is left, in practice, in the hands of certain experts who supposedly know how to efficiently face “systemic risks”<sup>15</sup>, automatically involves failure for other social expectations aiming at a less soulless economy and not rejecting certain objectives in terms of justice and social equality.

In reality, the review of the analysis and management model of collective life would not pertain exclusively to the definition of actions that would ideally lead to success, but rather to the very definition of what success is.

It needs to be remembered that these presuppositions about the capacity for control and the predictability of social processes are firmly seated in the claim for control in the triumphant modernity. Therefore it would be expected that, in a scenario of questioning the postulates about progress and civilisation, doubts could also be raised as to the present exercises in supervision and control in order to reach a fixed goal in the future.

As noted by Bauman, referring to the tension between civilisation and barbarism, but aimed in the same direction as the modern confidence in the rational control of processes,

The dichotomy ‘maintenance of order versus violence’ is but one of the many and, in general, over-

lapping contradictions (such as those that exist between reason and passion, rationality and affectivity), imposed on a central modern opposition between that which is controlled and that which is out of control, the regular and the irregular, the predictable and the unpredictable. The ordering activity, the main pastime of modern institutions, is a question of the imposition of a repeatable and determined monotony; anything that resists this imposition belongs to the realm of the savage, the territory beyond the border, a hostile land yet to conquer or, at least, pacify (Bauman, 2004:20-21).

This claim, expressed here as savage spaces susceptible to being pacified and placed under control, seems to be resumed in the transfer of power to certain experts who dictate what steps are to be taken, trusting that they are capable of carrying out rational and successful action plans. These are, in each case, ways, as are thousands of others, of framing the experience of the world, exerting violence on it, or inventing reality in their own way (Goffman, 2006).

As we have already noted, problems arise here at various levels. On the one hand, regarding the belief that it is possible to bind and control the courses of action that relate to the dynamics of collective life. We have already emphasised the limitations of these analytical models that try to identify social laws in deterministic terms and state that the unexpected could have been expected if enough information had been available beforehand. On the other hand, problems are also identified in the realm of action and in the need to identify the subjects and institutions that exercise power in their area of control, and in the legitimisation of their decisions, both in terms of defining objectives and designing the policies to achieve them. It could be expected that the exercise of this power would be accompanied by the assumption of responsibility as to their consequences, especially when they prove to be failures or, very frequently, collateral effects linked to the

<sup>15</sup> This is how the crisis in Cyprus and the risk of bankruptcy was publicly defined by the Euro-Group representative Jeroen Dijsselbloem on 21 March, 2013.



achievement of certain objectives<sup>16</sup>. These models of analysis and management of social life would necessarily include other concepts that cover the perspective of failure and the thwarting of legitimate expectations linked to the deployment of policies designed for a generic objective (zero deficit, market confidence, sustenance of the financial system...); this would be the case if, unlike what happens in reality, the expectation of success (as a utopian horizon in the positive sense of the world, that is, as a driver and as a critical eye against present miseries) contemplated all of the subjects affected by the decisions being taken.

But that would involve a clear reconsideration of economic policy, such as that proposed by Hans Joas and which has been called the “democratisation of the differentiation question”<sup>17</sup>. A formula that means that the increased means that modern societies have to shape both their relationship with the environment and their internal structures, should not be obscured by a radical pessimism—whether of Marxist or systemic inspiration—as to the possibilities of social regulation. All of the conflicts about economic, political, military, or cultural conflicts arise, however, under a new form, offering new opportunities and a new momentum to social creativity”<sup>18</sup>. The entangled multi-dimensional complexity, with a myriad of unintentional effects, would necessarily require a “creative democracy”<sup>19</sup>, strenuously aimed at constant

correction of its processes, with an open public debate, wherever problems arise.

#### **IV. CARING FOR COLLECTIVE LIFE AS KEY TO ITS ORGANISATION**

Faced with this type of instrumentalist efficiency, a caution must be made that what is sacred in social circles, their radically changeable dimension, is the very need for the affirmation of social life in its plurality. This is the idea developed by Hannah Arendt, as the radical and authentic sense of social power<sup>20</sup>. The idea strengthens the need for a meta-activity concentrated on the care of the collective, on its flow and its continuous and changing circulation, renewing the vigilance against the demands posed by the problems of integration and regulation. There is not much need to imagine precise goals to stretch towards, but rather to turn the attention to the basics, to bend it. There is rather a need for vigilance that becomes much more pronounced, we believe, if we take a little more responsibility for the tragic reality of the inevitable failure of our organisations (as we have attempted here), when making room for the urgent disruptions of new lives, and the changes in the old ones (that they welcome and should enhance, but that always overwhelm them), to end up showing their inability, their relatively inoperative nature. The need to address such disruptions and listen to them carefully. We dare to combine our small gains with another sentence by Arendt, which affirms the plurality of the human condition, when she said that the plurality of unique beings is the “law of the Earth” (Arendt, 1998; 2005).

<sup>16</sup> It could be said, for example, referring to a recent local case, that “the loss of confidence by investors has been avoided (preventing a collapse in the economy)”, but the measures to avoid it have led to foreclosures being uninhibited (with thousands of evictions) and to transfer in lieu of foreclosure being prevented as a possible mechanism for alleviating such social bleeding.

<sup>17</sup> Joas 2013: 303. The translation that we have used is taken from the original Spanish version by Ignacio Sánchez de la Yncera, soon to be added to the collection of classics of the CIS.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The concept of “creative democracy” is the title of the closing chapter of the book referenced here (Joas, 2013: 253-304), where Joas explained the consequences

—namely, the opening of horizons for interpretation and intervention— that could be derived from a theory of action radically revised from a creative perspective, when addressing collective action processes that characterise current social life

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ricoeur exploits this idea admirably (Ricoeur, 1996)..

These ideas delimit the sacred inner circle (after all, a unique one) that intimately constitutes the sociality which sociologists have to scrutinise in every global present, and in each enclave; to rediscover it as the singular problem to be urgently re-arranged that challenges us on the horizon, definitely loaded with contingencies. But this approach of the sacred character of the social life in its multiple plurality points to the most critical dimension of social activity, which constitutes the human condition. It is no other than taking care of life, that permanent endeavour—the waking state, worrying about what really matters—that mainly affects the care of the social circles; and what is decisive in them (always as a problem in their interstices): carefully checking over and over again if they really are convivial, welcoming, supportive, sufficiently capable of making room for this plural diversity, with its continually emerging new ways, and articulated from them. It is the role inherent in the strenuous tasks of repair work, of watchfulness, the desire for fixing, for reviewing life's progress, the devotedness to it, and the redirection of its random course, often harmful to our ways of managing social life in every nook and cranny of the work of living. This immense volume of social service activity cannot but make our knowledge and our social sciences increasingly more necessary.

Its centrality is derived from the very plurality of social life, which must be at the core of the theory of social organisations. It was Arendt who developed the notion of the laborious, and even gave it the name of "labour", applying it to specific tasks (historically unheeded and neglected, but extremely important) that directly bear on the production and reproduction of living conditions and the maintenance of life. However, everything suggests that she despised them herself, trapped by an excessive propensity to hierarchy, coming from Greece and the intellectual high culture that prevented her from recognising the same basic dignity in all

types of active life. Her disciple Richard Sennett expressly sought this dignity in <sup>21</sup>.

This task of caring (perhaps the best name that can be given to the main task of organisation, that of the permanent arrangement and perfecting of our organisations as spheres of cooperation) is the core task of management and organisational theory. That enormous space for activity usually escapes the attention of organisers, politicians and theoreticians, perhaps, due to a reconstructive reading of the events that was closed to their novelty and so, to their contingency and new requirements. In addition to the painstaking work-related tasks, the care sphere involves all of the laborious tasks hidden behind home doors, and that makes up an essential part of our life activity. That direct care of changing lives, which come on to us with their demanding changes of attention, which go and we miss. We cannot but think of it as work that is central to the human condition, being both crucial and paradigmatic. Perhaps that is the crux of postmodernism, or of the decisive ethical advancement of modernity; its cordial re-launch (Cortina, 2007).

Without a doubt it is our way of watching over and returning to social life which marks its convivial destiny (welcoming, indifferent, ruthless) in any field. In other words it is a rethinking (which the threat of failure compels us to take completely seriously) of the creative and open dimension of sociality and identity. Both of these are always pending realisation and questioning in each of their actual forms, if measured against the normative demand arising from the constitutive plurality of their being, with all of the open innovation that it demands.

<sup>21</sup> Although his idea falls short compared to that suggested here, his exploration of the rich reality of practical intelligence in the skill of artisans' work does not fit in with Arendt's caricature of 'animal laborans', as she felt compelled to have pity for the slaving side of the anxieties for survival. See Arendt, 1974 and Sennett, 2009.

Maybe we tend to always subsume too quickly the question of organisation to improve life, with political meta-organisation, with the intention of reserving it for the great public sphere whose diameter is inescapably extended to the whole of the Earth. There is always, however, a “public” sphere and dimension, and a “political” problem of managing plurality—a sacred core; “the private is public”, said Javier Gomá—in every circle of human life. Its law is always the same: the coexistence of the plurality of unique beings and their unique contexts. These are currently inevitably buffeted by the global inter-dependence that, for the moment, we suffer critically, as our organisations fail when it comes to embracing their contingencies.

We tend to make a history of ideas, of culture or of the cultural ways that imagine us to be their prosperous heirs, instead of outlining their intricacies, emphasising the ambiguities and the fortuitous, all the material that constitutes the greater part of the basic genealogical mechanism from which we descend. History written with the benefit of hindsight produces an excessively clean version of social processes, as on many occasions, history’s losers cannot tell their stories’, either because they are crushed for a second time by the steamroller plot (Taleb), or because we do not feel inclined to notice them, as depressing stories are less attractive. All of this may give the impression to the survivors and particularly to their dependents, that the story has a clear meaning. This gives them a more plausible expectation of ensured continuity and surreptitiously trains them for it: the world is presented as a good world that we have received and is worth preserving, as it is a world of conquests and things are the way they are. The heroes of the adventures can always find reasons for the deaths and the wounds received by their fellow sufferers and faithful helpers, as necessary sacrifices that sanctify their endeavours. But over every adventure there looms the

danger of statistical bias: the trap of a genre that chronically adopts the point of view of the hero who always emerges victorious in his adventures.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Following this account of the reasons for our proposal of a sociology that is more focused on the unexpected and more aware of the inevitability of courses of collective action that challenge normative and rationalist interpretations and focuses, it makes sense to draw an open conclusion. Our proposal is linked to the purpose of finding in real processes of social actions that occur at each moment the element that conditions and disrupts the organisation of social life, the living together that is the essence of human sociality. This is why we issued a warning about the importance of care from an ethical perspective that, in our view, must also be transferred to the realm of social reflection. We understand that the awareness of the expectations of a shared life and the resources and ways to achieve them is what gives meaning to our aspirations, which would otherwise be blind efforts to obtain a deceptively guaranteed outcome.

In other words, the connected fields of action and of reflection should take on board the warning about the lack of rigour involved in considering social processes as unidirectional courses of action, to be explained by identifying lines that draw a logic and an increased ability to control the resources that enable the achievement of predetermined goals. To explain from this stance the complexity of our world could result in minimising the impression of its ungovernability, but in reality, it does not lead to governing it (in the sense of directing it). Too many realities and situations that do not fit the model are left out, which deal with not only the mechanisms of inevitable social reproduction and change that are involved in their dynamics,

but also with experts' explanations about what is happening and how to correct the negative situations that appear in the analysis of the present. In both areas, it is important to accept the presence of failure, of inefficiency, of surprising novelties, in order to avoid biased explanations that marginalise those who do not fit in the inner workings of these models that try to explain social action.

There is an immediate question which leads on from this: how can a sociology be implemented that incorporates all of the elements of social complexity? There is no immediate answer, but it requires a starting point of always being open to novelty, unintentional courses of action, the random factor, inefficiency, bodged jobs, deception, lies, jokes... a myriad of possibilities that a focus on finding cause-and-effect relationships and one-directional narratives towards achieving expectations would never be able to explain or recognise as features of our sociality. For the moment, in this paper we have only tried to show the reasons for these inadequacies, both through a sociological reflection and through the grounds for the role of experts in decision making. The conclusion remains open as an invitation to think about a new sociology that could connect, as we have noted, with the trail of (Ramos) with a proposal for creative action (Joas), taking as a guide the idea of care that emerges as an ethical—and political—imperative, which we are not always prepared to assume with all of its consequences. A sociology which, as argued by Hans Joas, should warn that all conflicts about economic, political, military and cultural questions, policies, arise ... under a new form, offering new opportunities and a new momentum to social creativity. Besides, as pointed out by Joas, in reality all these questions have to do with the degree and mode of differentiation that society should allow and, once the utopian possibility of their outright disappearance in a new world (such as in the case of socialism) has been ruled out, they cannot be appropriate-

ly raised in any other way. For this reason, based on a renewed approach of collective action from the angle of a creativity of action, he concluded that the questions being faced today in democracy should be interpreted as the result of reflexively applying the idea of differentiation on itself, in line with the "democratisation" of the processes of differentiation already noted: "in a modern democratic society, the institutions where political will is shaped, which emanate from the differentiation of society, remain in contact with it; they are the battlefield on which decisions are made about the way and the degree of differentiation that society can and must accept" (Joas, 2013). But these are, in any case, crucial matters that have been outlined here, to be dealt with in subsequent approaches from a sociology alerted to the sense of contingency and fully open to creativity; a sociology with a strengthened sensitivity to the capacity of human communities to become increasingly responsible for the situations they face, and that always require renewed ways of responding.

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