

# The Novelty of Phenomenological Sociology and Its Interdisciplinarity.

## An interview to professor Carlos Belvedere

*Edited by Michela Beatrice Ferri*

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*Dear professor Carlos Belvedere, which is the place that Sociology covers in the Phenomenological Background in North America?*

From the outset, Phenomenology aimed to produce a renewal of the sciences, not just of Philosophy. It was Husserl's commitment to refuse positivism in order to start a new conception of the sciences. Many of Husserl's students continued with this aim and contributed to refurbish different fields of research. Psychology, for instance, benefited from the contributions of existential analysis.

Nowadays, Phenomenology's invigorating spirit remains the same although the scientific context has somehow changed. Phenomenology found

new disciplines to interpellate, such as the Neurosciences and the Cognitive Sciences. It also found new fields of research for practitioners of phenomenology which in recent years have had a prolific expansion such as Environmental Phenomenology (just to mention one of many examples).

The widespread reach of Phenomenology in contemporary context discloses its interdisciplinary aim. This is no news since, as I said before, that was the aim of Phenomenology from its very beginning. That's why some phenomenologists prefer to speak of "multifarious Phenomenology" as regards the perennial spirit of its endeavor. This idea, in fact, is part of the title of a collaborative volume published by the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations, probably the main global institution of current Multidisciplinary Phenomenology.

What to say, then, about Sociology, a discipline oriented science? Is it possible to save such a perspective in the context of Multidisciplinary Phenomenology? Indeed it is not only possible but it actually happened that Phenomenology conceived Sociology in such a way that it became a multidisciplinary field of research in itself. For instance, that's what Alfred Schutz did: he considered sociology as a place of encounter with many and diverse disciplines, such as Anthropology, Linguistics, Historiography, Cultural Studies, Psychiatry, etc.

Due to the work of Schutz and others, Sociology turned out to be one of the scientific fields of empirical research in which Phenomenology has been most influential and productive during the 20th Century. In this matter, Phenomenology's contributions were groundbreaking all over the world. But when it comes to North America in particular, it should be added that Phenomenology has blossomed in Sociology as in no other science (letting aside Philosophy, which has also an inspiring development in the United States). What I mean is that something happened in American Sociology which captured the attention of sociologists abroad and scientists not specifically related to Phenomenology.

In my opinion, the novelty that Phenomenological Sociology brought in was to question the dogmatism proper to both, the naïve perspective of common sense and the unexamined assumptions of positivism. Phenomenology provided a new, insightful alternate to mainstream Sociology that could deal with fundamental issues that were put aside by a narrow minded positivism, such as the problem of meaning, subjectivity and everyday life. It provided not only a new perspective but also an alternative method and a new ontological region to explore.

*Could you explain if it is correct to say that a Phenomenological Sociology exists, or if it is correct to state that a Sociological Phenomenology exists?*

As a matter of fact, the most frequent wording is "Phenomenological Sociology"; although, this expression has at least two different, contrasting meanings.

On one hand, some refer to “Phenomenological Sociology” implying that Phenomenology is one of many perspectives in Sociology, i.e. that it is a part of Sociology. They think that Phenomenology makes valuable but partial contributions which need to be complemented with other perspectives. Accordingly, Phenomenology on its own would only produce a one-sided Sociology. Also this perspective takes it for granted that the problem is Phenomenology, not Sociology. I mean, that the bias and flaws come from Phenomenology. Therefore, we can take Sociology as it is (with its positivist assumptions, methodologies and techniques) and then adapt Phenomenology to this unquestioned paradigm. By doing this, what we get is the disarmament of Phenomenology, which must surrender to Science and set aside all critical and innovative pretensions. Once this is done, Phenomenology becomes a kind of Sociology among others, not a perspective in its full extent. As you can imagine, this is not the view I support.

On the other hand, some refer to “Phenomenological Sociology” as a new paradigm that offers an alternative to positivist perspectives and avoids preconceived sociological notions, established recipes and formulas of research procedures. In other words, they believe that Phenomenological Sociology leads to a paradigm switch, promoting a deep renewal of Sociology as a science through the critique of unexamined assumptions. It also questions old-fashioned positivist divisions of scientific labor, counter to what the perspective which I criticized before implies (that Phenomenology can be integrated into mainstream sociology with no need to question any of its assumptions). This is the perspective that I like to call my own.

*Alfred Schutz, a phenomenologist more than a sociologist, or vice-versa?*

It’s not easy to talk about proportions, but my answer is that he was both, a Phenomenologist and a Sociologist. Although, the first part of my answer has been contested in the past.

Indeed, some scholars over the years have argued that uis not a phenomenologist because he refuses to complete the transcendental reduction and, consequently, he sticks to a descriptive, mundane stance which is deemed as naturalistic and dogmatic. In my opinion, these kind of objections come from orthodox, conservative perspectives which won’t accept any innovative position. Briefly, they are static, non-historical conceptions of Phenomenology condemned to scholarship and recite of already established positions. Phenomenology would have been lost for good if Phenomenologists had lost the ability to go back to things themselves over and over again and come up with better and better descriptions.

In this view, Schutz can be depicted as a genuine Phenomenologist, not only interested in Husserl’s writings but mostly in pushing forward Phenom-

enology in new directions. Not all disagreements with Husserl have to be interpreted as a “loss of Phenomenology”. In Schutz’s case, at least, it can be viewed as a contribution to Phenomenology. Whether or not Schutz is a phenomenologist should not be decided based on his proximity to Husserl (which, by the way, was very close and closer than what some of his critics think) but on an examination of his own perspective.

The main reason why I think that Schutz was, in fact, a Phenomenologist is that he actually had in mind a programmatic view of Phenomenology. He conceived of Phenomenology as a scientific, “technical device” (not as a “mystical gift”) which implied a switch of the natural attitude in order to clarify the complete system of intentionality within the frame of Phenomenological Psychology, both at the eidetic and the empirical level. Within this framework, Schutz pursues a “Constitutive Phenomenology of the natural attitude” as an “eidetic mundane science”.

The second reason why I think that Schutz’s stance must be accepted as phenomenological is that those “orthodox” critiques are now obsolete since there is a new consensus as regards naturalistic positions. They are now accepted by some of the most respected Phenomenologists of our times as valuable readings of Husserl’s latest writings. For instance, some Husserlians nowadays agree that much of what has been contested in the past about Merleau-Ponty’s positions are inspired in Husserl’s papers that were not published back then and now make them at least plausible. Well, I think Schutz has not yet been absolved by some enthusiastic Husserlians as Merleau-Ponty was absolved, and neither his contributions to the “naturalization” of Phenomenology have been fully appreciated. Whether he was or was not a Phenomenologist mainly depends on that.

About Schutz as a Sociologist, fortunately we can tell a very different story. Schutz’s work was adopted by mainstream Sociology as a contribution worthy to be counted as a part of its own legacy. Schutz himself presented main aspects of his work as Sociological. In his early years, he introduced his first book as a critique and foundation of Comprehensive Sociology. In his later years, he taught a seminar on the Sociology of Language. He had students, supporters and even detractors in Sociology. So, he felt like, and he was seen by others, as an important Sociologist.

Schutz’s idea of his own Sociology is closer to the first meaning of Phenomenological Sociology discussed before. His contributions are meant to be a part of Sociology and not to produce a paradigm switch. Instead, his idea of Phenomenology is closer to the second conception of Phenomenological Sociology that I mentioned –the one that I support. It works with different assumptions than mainstream philosophies and it’s not meant to take part in a broader framework but to endorse a holistic view in its own right. So, even

if I think that Schutz was both, a Philosopher and a Sociologist, I will have to admit that he was a Philosopher in a broader, deeper sense.

Although, regardless to what Schutz might think about his own Sociology, it actually is an alternative paradigm to mainstream Sociology. It was Schutz's students who realized that, and started the work of a new conception of Sociology. That's the reason why George Psathas, in his marvelous introduction to *Phenomenological Sociology*, could establish that, as a matter of fact, it exists in the many diverse enterprises and writings carried out in its name.

*Which is the focus – “Lebenswelt”, “Everyday Life-World” – of the sociological theory of Alfred Schutz?*

In Sociology, Schutz is known as a Sociologist of Everyday Life. This is true although in some ways inaccurate. His contributions on this matter are in fact outstanding, but there is more to it than just another Sociological theory of Everyday Life. What makes the difference is that it belongs to a larger framework which enhances it since, for Schutz, Everyday Life is not a realm in its own but the core of the Life-World. In this broader view, Everyday Life is not just an ideology, an ensemble of “social representations” or a mere “cultural construction” but the heart of the paramount reality. Accordingly, the proper way to understand Schutz's Sociology of Everyday Life is to situate it at the center of the *Lebenswelt*.

In this regard, there is no dichotomy between both concepts in Schutz: one leads to the other. You can focus on Everyday Life or on the *Lebenswelt*, as you wish, but one thing will take you to the other. Anyway, the broader scope is the latest's, which includes and completes the former.

Although, it is true that Schutz became increasingly involved in developing his own theory of the *Lebenswelt*. Sure he was inspired by Husserl but his reflections on the subject start very early, way before Husserl's specific writings about it reached widespread diffusion. He also kept making progress until his late manuscripts, where we find his most extensive and sophisticated Philosophy of the *Lebenswelt*.

In Schutz's view, the *Lebenswelt* is the Alpha and the Omega of our reflections, as much in the Sciences as in Philosophy. This is one of the reasons why he rejects Husserl's transcendental reduction, which he considers impossible, unnecessary and redundant. Schutz even thinks that some aspects of the *Lebenswelt* such as the universal structures of the *humana conditio* can only be established by a philosophical Anthropology whose reach could surpass Phenomenology.

*Every time I mention Alfred Schutz in the field of the studies of Phenomenological Sociology, I need to talk about Aron Gurwitsch, too. Why our philosopher Aron Gurwitsch is a considerable voice in sociological theory ?*

There are a number of reasons why the name of Schutz evokes Gurwitsch's. In the first place, they had a long lasting friendship, which endured even through exile, and then starting a new life in the States -where Schutz felt at home. It was also a philosophical friendship since over the years they had shared their ideas with each other, agreed and disagreed on many subjects, and above all appreciated their friend's advice no matter how critical they might have been. Also, they were both "critical Phenomenologists" (as Helmut Wagner puts it), since each of them had a creative understanding of Phenomenology and pursued the dream of developing their own personal oeuvre.

Of the many subjects that overcame their differences and served as a common ground for mutual understanding, I would like to recall two of them which are in turn closely related to one another, the problem of relevance and the question of the constitution. They are at once a Philosophical and a Sociological issue. As a Philosophical matter, Schutz dealt with the problem of relevance as the constitution of the thematic field of consciousness; as a sociological matter, he based those reflections on his theory of power as imposed relevances. He discussed these ideas broadly with his friend Gurwitsch on a common ground, which is the rejection of Transcendental Phenomenology, on Gurwitsch's side, by getting rid of the ego, on Schutz's side, by getting rid of the transcendental.

*How can be defined the relationship between the position of Alfred Schutz and the theory of the sociologist Talcott Parsons?*

The relationship between Schutz and Parsons could be told from two different points of view. By reading their correspondence, you can tell that, in Parsons' perspective, a discussion with Schutz was meaningless. Parsons faced his exchange with Schutz as a Kantian discussion over the possibility of a valid knowledge in the Social Sciences. He also thought that their dialogue did not arrive at any interesting conclusion. Eventually, this is the interpretation that prevailed about the Parsons – Schutz affair. In Schutz's perspective, a whole different interpretation can be established. His expectations prior to their letters exchange was that a dialogue with Parsons was possible because they were both concerned with the theory of social action. In particular, Schutz was interested in the question of the rationality of social actions. He did have some objections to the way that Parsons understood this, partially because he misread Weber's idea of rationality. However, he felt that they shared a common ground in the field of sociological theory. And he regretted that they could not pursue a dialogue through their differences.

You might think of this as the opposite to Schutz's correspondence with Gurwitsch: they did have some serious differences, however they respected

each other and believed that the criticisms they were given actually represented the most qualified and precious contribution. If only Parsons would have been open to an honest debate, Sociological Theory could have profited so much from the sincere exposition of their differences and hopefully from a higher synthesis of what unhappily remains as one of the core dissents in 20th Century Sociology.

Because this consensus was never achieved, all that remains is Schutz's well known criticisms of Parsons as a Sociologist with serious problems of adequacy since he replaces the man on the street by a kind of puppet made up in accordance with his own theoretical expectations, not with the reality of the social world, which is not produced by Sociological Theory but by the ordinary man who lives and acts in the Everyday Lifeworld.

*Could you explain us which is the relation between Phenomenology and the Ethnomethodology founded by Harold Garfinkel?*

Even though Ethnomethodology is a fresh perspective, you could say that it has Phenomenological roots. If you consider what Garfinkel read during his college years, you will realize that he had a solid Phenomenological base. For instance, he was familiar with the writings of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Aron Gurwitsch, Marvin Farber, and others. Also his best known papers include many quotations from other Phenomenologists, mainly from Maurice Merleau-Ponty but also Martin Heidegger, among them. However, Garfinkel's concern with Phenomenology was not philosophical and neither theoretical. He was focused on descriptions, not ideas.

Probably, the most important description that Garfinkel borrowed from Husserl is that of the "occasional expressions", which in Ethnomethodology gave rise to the concept of "indexical expressions". That which for Husserl is a particular kind of expression (terms such as "I", "you", "here", "there", and the like), whose meaning changes according to the peculiarities of who is speaking, for Garfinkel it was an instantiation of a feature common to all expressions, which is, that its meaning is irremediably contextual. Briefly, for Garfinkel any meaning is contextual.

In turn, the most important claim that Garfinkel borrows from Schutz is that Phenomenology must be pursued as a description of the natural attitude (which Husserl, as well as Schutz, named Phenomenological Psychology). According to George Psathas, in his PhD dissertation Garfinkel came up with the idea of turning Phenomenological Psychology into an empirical research program. He realized that the natural attitude had systemic properties, which means that an alteration of one of their features would have holistic consequences. Therefore, if you alter any particular feature, you get a shocking experience that strikes the natural attitude as a whole. Years later, this idea in-

spired his “breaching experiments” and the experimental alteration of “trust” and Everyday Life “assumptions”.

*The position of professor George Psathas comes from the tradition that began with Alfred Schutz. But we have also Berger and Luckmann. Could you explain which are the right places that these scholars covered and cover now in the history of Phenomenological Sociology?*

George Psathas played a main role in the institutionalization of Phenomenological Sociology. He realized that this perspective existed as a matter of fact since there were a number of researches carried out in its name. So he organized a session on Phenomenological Sociology at the meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1971. Then he edited a book with prestigious contributors whose “Introduction” is, to me, a whole manifesto, since it depicts Phenomenological Sociology as “a paradigm”. He also makes a “historical overview” and lists a number of “issues and problems” to be addressed, among them, the Life-world, the subjective dimension, the assumptions of Everyday Life, and intersubjectivity. He also founded the journal *Human Studies*, which gave voice to what had been so far more of a movement than an established perspective. He also had the clear minded idea that Ethnomethodology was a way of *doing* Phenomenological Sociology and made evident some important relations and affinities (a few of which I commented on in my previous answer). Those who practice Phenomenological Sociology are indebted to him for his kind work and his mindful observations.

Berger and Luckmann wrote the most influential book in Phenomenological Sociology, *The Social Construction of Reality*. It opened new paths for this perspective and got many Sociologists who don't necessarily consider themselves Phenomenologists interested. Of course, there are good reasons for the huge success that it achieved. One of them is the systematic aim of the book which, among other things, led the authors to take into consideration not only the “subjective reality” of society (which is what many would expect from an average Phenomenologist) but also its “objective reality”, including among others the dimensions of the institutionalization, sedimentation, tradition, and social organization.

Now, if you allow me, I would like to say a few words about Luckmann's personal contributions to this perspective. He edited Schutz's manuscripts on the structures of the Life-world—in my opinion, one of the most outstanding works by Schutz. Even though some scholars consider it a “secondary bibliography,” I think that—with the exception of one chapter- it gathers and systematizes fundamental writings of the late Schutz in a way that makes them available for discussion and enhances the understanding of his oeuvre. Also



he developed, in his own perspective, the theory of social action and contributed to an update of the problem of intersubjectivity in contemporary context.

*Which themes, nowadays, are at the center of the debate of Phenomenological Sociology?*

It's my belief that nowadays consensus prevails over debate in Social Phenomenology. Ideas such as the importance of subjectivity, the constitution of meaning and the social construction of reality are widely accepted. In recent years, they gave rise to a number of insightful investigations on matters such as power, social management of time, social aspects of trauma and memory, social withdrawal, institutional crisis, politics and the Life-world, and so on. These issues drew the attention of many colleagues in the United States, Germany, Japan and South America.

However, over the years, a few debates have taken place. I will mention one of them in particular, with regards to the very existence of Phenomenological Sociology. The question was: Is Phenomenological Sociology possible?

Basically, the issue was if Phenomenology is solely a Philosophy or if it can also be a Science. Here we have two different stances, each one of them with its own "geographical disseminations" and "prominent representative" (according to Thomas Eberle). The German tradition, led by Thomas Luckmann, considers Phenomenology as mere Protosociology. On the contrary, the American tradition, led by George Psathas, considers that many important contributions of Phenomenology take part of Sociology as a Science.

In Luckmann's view, since Phenomenology is a Philosophy, it can only be Pre-sociological or Proto-sociological because Sociology is an Empirical Science. As they proceed through completely different methods, a Phenomenological Sociology is a misnomer because Phenomenology is not a Science but a Philosophy dealing with phenomena of subjective consciousness from an egological perspective. Alternatively, as a Science, Sociology deals with phenomena of the social world from a cosmological perspective. Accordingly, even if Phenomenology can ground Sociology, it cannot be a part of it.

In Psathas's view, Phenomenology is at once a Philosophy, a method, and an approach for Social Sciences. Thus, it can also be an empirical endeavor dealing with the Life-world as experienced by ordinary human beings living in it. Consequently, there is a Phenomenological way of doing Sociology (for instance, as I said before, Ethnometodology is one of them).

In my opinion, the terms of this debate should be updated since a lot has been going on in the Sciences during at least the last two decades. One of the main changes, which had a huge impact in Phenomenology (particularly in North American Phenomenologists) is the rise of inter- and cross-disciplinarity. This makes it impossible (or at least much more difficult) to sustain such a clear distinction such as that upheld by Luckmann between Philosophy and

the Sciences, which, of course, makes Psathas's position stronger: not everything that has some philosophy in it is external to Sociology. We should reconsider matters like this if we aim at taking Phenomenology as a new paradigm.

Personally, I have been dealing with these issues from the perspective that I like to call "Social Phenomenology". It includes, of course, Phenomenological Sociology but it does not exclude Philosophical subjects and it also involves all Social and Cultural Sciences. Briefly said, Social Phenomenology is the regional ontology of the social realm at all levels, empirical, eidetic and transcendental (if you accept Transcendental Phenomenology). For instance, the problem of intersubjectivity would not be seen as a Philosophical problem but as one of the core issues of Social Phenomenology. You could even say that it's both Sociological and Philosophical, and even that it involves all the other Social and Human Sciences.

This makes Social Phenomenology a multidisciplinary paradigm, with a wider aim and scope than Phenomenological Sociology and Phenomenological Philosophy on their own. At the same time, it allows us to leave behind the sterile discussions about boundaries in order to focus on enhancing Phenomenology as a whole. It is my hope that if we, Phenomenologists, accomplish this switch in attitude, it will make a brighter day.