

Revisiting Germani: the interpretation of modernity and the theory of action

José Maurício Domingues; María Maneiro

ABSTRACT

The work of the Italo-Argentinian sociologist Gino Germani has traditionally been classified as functionalist. However, recent studies have tended to change this perspective, emphasizing other important influences in his work. Against the backdrop of his broader theory, the objective of this article is to analyze, on the one hand, his perception, in the Latin American transition to modernity, of freedom as the essential issue in politics and daily life, and on the other, how this translates into a theory of action that remains overlooked, although only recently equivalents have been found in sociology, with his theory being more advanced in certain aspects than contemporary proposals in this direction.

Key words: sociology; Germani; freedom; creativity

INTRODUCTION

Sociology was originally an European and North American undertaking, consisting in a response to the wide-reaching changes that were sweeping through the Western world. Classical sociology, or at least the classical corpus of classical sociology, is therefore closely linked to this region, although important problems of conceptualization would have to be dealt with here in order to develop a more substantial argument. It can be seen as extending from the works of Marx, Weber and Durkheim to Parsons and symbolic interactionism, for example. In the XXth century, the so-called "Latin" America joined the front line of sociological expansion, with names such as Florestan Fernandes and Gino Germani, among others. Here we will dwell mainly upon some of the latter's pioneering and seminal ideas.

In the 1950s, Germani produced historical analyses and analytical tools that have been developed by contemporary sociology only more recently. Freedom, "elective action", contingency and choice were the axes around which his most original theorization was concentrated. Undoubtedly these ideas were closely articulated to a structural functionalist perspective and to an approach that was close to the theory of modernization, issues that have been the main focus of attention until now in relation to the works of Germani, although certain aspects of his more general project have already been highlighted, especially by Alejandro Blanco (1998; 1999; 2003a; 2003b). In this article, after outlining the more general picture of his sociological perspective, we shall concentrate on some of his more heterodox theoretical ideas, some of which appear to make a contribution, albeit in certain subtle aspects, that is not comparable to anything else in sociological theory – in the theory of action and the interpretation of modernity.

We shall do this in three steps. First, we shall look again at his functionalist discussion of modernity, in which the notion of "populism" takes pride of place and which is his most widely known facet. Then we shall dwell upon his understanding of freedom from an historical and sociological perspective, principally in as far as how this issue was seen in the Argentinean society of the time, linking this to his broader intellectual project. We shall then deal with his original theoretical contribution, especially his concept of "elective action". This will be related to more recent contributions, such as Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, and extend to include his concept of "disembedding", as well as Hans Joas' neopragmatist theory of action. We intend to show that certain aspects of Germani's approach can be useful for constructing theories of action and the conceptualization of modernity. Before this, it is worth underlining some of the fundamental aspects of Germani's career, since this author was to a certain extent ostracized. This by no means does justice to his work and the several important intuitions he contributed to sociology.

Germani was born in Rome in 1911. He began studying in Italy but soon decided to emigrate to Argentina after he was imprisoned by the Fascist government of Mussolini because of his socialist leanings. In 1938, he enrolled in the University of Buenos Aires to study philosophy. There he took an active part in student life. He worked in the Ministry of Agriculture, where he became acquainted with Ricardo Levene, an historian and professor of sociology in the School of Philosophy and Arts, who was organizing the Institute of Sociology and planning studies on contemporary Argentina. Germani worked with Levene until 1945. During the Peronist period, outside the university, he dedicated himself to reading and preparing a large number of translations and publications of authors unknown in the country and region, among whom Raymond Aron, Margaret Mead, Erich Fromm, Bronislaw Malinowski and Kurt Lewin stood out. Besides giving talks and seminars he began working in this period on his major work, *Estructura Social de la Argentina (The Social Structure of Argentina)*, that was essentially empirical in nature (Germani, 1955).

In institutional terms, the origin of sociology in Argentina was strongly linked to the return of Germani to the university. It was in 1956 that a solid and coherent project for constructing scientific knowledge began, only made possible thanks to the energy of a group of researchers working under his guidance. According to Giarraca, Germani was convinced that he was creating a new universal sociology, guided by scientific procedural standards and by strict international rules. Thus, he recognized in North American sociology the most advanced configuration of

scientific sociology (Giarraca, 1991; see also Germani, 2004). Nevertheless, his theoretical matrices were fairly broad and included a fairly plural spectrum.

Although scientific sociology was not created in the full sense of the word as a result of his intervention (Di Tella, 1979; Giarraca, 1991), it is as from the time of his activities in the university and as an editor that themes and vocabulary changed (Blanco, 2003b), as did the methods and techniques of research and measurement (Di Tella, 1979), thereby constituting a specific intellectual "field" (Neiburg, 1997). However, Germani is not only important because he represents the fundamental personification of the institutionalization of sociology in Argentina, but also because he is recognized as an important theoretician. He was often perceived, however, as an example of the application of the Parsonian theory. Indeed, as from a particular moment in time, Parsons is present in his intellectual production. Despite this, some recent works have cast light on a supposed unequivocal and mechanical relationship between the approaches of Parsons and Germani, and contributed to understanding how the former was received by the latter (Blanco, 2003a; 2003b).

Germani was not only socially recognized as the founder of "scientific" sociology in Argentina: he was also the personification of a specific type of construction of a perspective, according to which the social sciences would assume the role of generating knowledge about the means of social action and the production of instrumental rationality, i.e., in the words of Mannheim, the tools for planning and "the rational reconstruction of society". However, his concerns go far beyond this limit; Germani himself states that the problem of final rationality brings down the curtain on nothing less than the future of modern civilization and freedom, although he is incapable of perceiving whether the analysis of this theme will be faced by sociology, by philosophy or by a particular domain of non-rational knowledge (Germani, 1946). There emerges therefore a more complex Germani than the one revealed in those readings that emphasized his links with structural functionalism¹. If this is the image he created of himself as from a certain moment in time, by taking up a specific position in the broader intellectual field, his concerns are much more wide-ranging and heterogeneous than this would allow one to suppose.

TOWARD INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

It is important initially to outline Germani's theory in its general terms, in which the influence of functionalism is very clear. First, because these were the ideas that became established as the most visible legacy of Germani and second because the reader himself (or herself) might be able to contrast them with other elements, of a different hue, that we shall introduce later. Before taking this step, the role of functionalism in the course of Germani's intellectual evolution must be clearly set out. In fact, prior to the meeting with the main currents of North American functionalism, above all with Parsons, the influence of Durkheim's simplest concept of functionalism is obvious in his thinking. It was largely with this theoretical framework that, *as early as 1956* (Germani, 1965, chap. 9), he started dealing with the crisis and supposed anarchy of the mid-XXth century Argentinean society and the emergence of Peronism, issues which we shall discuss in the next section. Continuities and inflections of a theoretical and political nature may be found in this evolution. Now, however, in order to outline his general theory of the transition to modernity, we shall not dwell in greater detail upon the date of the publication of his works, since as early as in the mid-1960s the more general framework of structural functionalism

was clearly influencing his arguments. In contrast, later on, the order of publication of his works will prove to be decisive.

According to Germani, social structure should be approached as a totality, which he defines as a "socio-cultural" world, a linked together and interdependent set of parts. The notion of interdependency does not necessarily suppose, however, the integration, equilibrium or harmony between the different parts. In the relationships between them, or in themselves, as socio-historical constructions in constant change, there exists the possibility of disarticulation, conflict, tension, disintegration and asymmetry. The idea of interdependence emphasizes that modifications in some parts will affect, albeit not immediately, the other parts and the social structure in general (*idem*:37). Germani (*idem*:19-23) suggests analyzing the social structure on three levels that can be considered neither in an isolated way, nor disassociated one from another, but as three inseparable moments: the social organization plan, the social morphology plan and the social psychology plan. The first comprises the immaterial and non-manifest dimension of the socio-cultural world: rules, values and knowledge in themselves, independently from human carriers. The second plan, that of social morphology, focuses on the material surface of the socio-cultural world, implying the social groups. The third is the social psychology plan that focuses on the psychic content; the central target for analysis is the questioning of the agendas of behavior, the rules and values that are incorporated by individuals and by social groups (Maneiro, 2002:67-69).

It is very clear that the model presented in what was probably the last text written to appear in *Política y Sociedad en una Época de Transición* (Politics and Society in a Period of Transition), and aimed at analyzing social structure, bears great similarities with the one that Talcott Parsons puts forward in *The Social System* (1979). This, however, Germani only mentions with reference to the definition of society as delimited by the nation-state and as far as the question of status and roles are concerned, and not its fundamental analytical differences (Germani, 1965:20-24). The social organization plan is very similar to culture, the social morphology plan is similar to the social system and the social psychology plan is similar to personality. Moreover, the relationships between them also have many affinities, since both authors emphasize the relationships of the social organization plan (culture) with the social psychology plan (personality), defining it as a process of internalization, although the opposite direction is also present. This process of internalization of culture by the personality is one of the main elements for maintaining integration in a social structure, although it is not the only one. In every empirical society, however, a certain degree of "disintegration" is recorded. There are periods when this will be particularly intense or will include fundamental areas of human activity. Such is the case of the transition of "traditional" societies to "industrial" societies (*idem*:117-126).

Germani's theoretical model tried to understand and interpret the transformations of his time. He intended to use it to understand and deal with what he called the emergence of populism, whose analytical framework will be subsequently examined in greater depth. According to Germani, populism constitutes a particular type of social and political movement that is the product of an asynchronous modality of the transition processes in society. The concept of asynchrony (*idem*:17, esp. 98-109) refers to the co-presence of social groups, attitudes, cultural forms, institutions and types of personality, corresponding to different phases of the poles of opposition between a society grounded in ascriptive action and industrial society.

Every social transition includes a process of social mobilization. This is understood by Germani (1969:59-69) as having a series of moments that can occur either successively or simultaneously. The cycle begins with a state of integration, moving toward a process of breakdown or disintegration that would finally result in a new integration, going through the displacement of individuals or social groups that are made "available", which is a reply to this process (that may sometimes be a retraction and sometimes a psychological mobilization) and an objective mobilization. At the moment in which availability is translated into a more intense participation than was previously produced we must talk of mobilization. When finally the changes have been produced that allow for the legitimization and offer of effective possibilities for realization of the aggregated increase of the participation of the mobilized groups, we can talk of integration. From the process of social mobilization anything can be produced, from a transformation in the structure of the socio-cultural world to an assimilation of this process that inhibits its potential for transformation. Therefore, the result is contingent; it is not guaranteed (*idem: passim*, esp. 67).

In general, it is supposed that in the processes of social mobilization the elite assume a more active role than the masses, both in initiative as well as in leadership and organization. However, not all the process of social mobilization alludes to the existence of an elite. At least analytically, we must outline three possible situations: mobilization, with the active intervention of an elite outside the masses; mobilization, with the intervention of an elite inside the misplaced group; and mobilization without leadership. In concrete terms, these three possibilities do not present themselves in a pure form, but articulated and combined. In this perspective, the articulation between the available elite and the available masses might offer elements more favorable to the rise of movements that are in favor of social change. Although in the typologies that establish the elements of difference between societies of the "traditional" type and the "industrial" type Germani presents a great plurality of aspects, three of them play a fundamental role in the process of social change: the type of action and the preponderance in modernity of elective actions; the institutionalization of change (*versus* the institutionalization of tradition); and the differentiation and growing specialization of institutions (Germani, 1965:71-75).

Clearly, these three elements derive from strong theoretical traditions, arising from the legacy of the major schools of classical sociology. The latter two undoubtedly echo the work of Parsons, although it is not correct to identify in him the only mouthpiece of this recuperation of classical sociology. Growing specialization and differentiation were already present, for instance, in Durkheim's reference to the passage from mechanical to organic solidarity – a theme that the functionalist currents subsequently adopted as decisive (Domingues, 2000a, chap. 4). In the second point, proximity to the thoughts of Parsons is also strong, but the idea of the institutionalization of change does not allude only to him, but to the whole way of understanding this type of process, which is characteristic of its era and has various exponents in sociology, and especially in North American anthropology, among them Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton and Melevile Jean Herskovits (Blanco, 2003b). Also with regard to the first element it is worth noting that despite being able to perceive a certain family air as far as one of the Parsonian "pattern variables" (as effective tools for the distinctions between types of action) is concerned, it is clear that Germani also distances himself from this when he openly states that, in relation to the pattern variables, only the difference between the ascriptive forms – particularist – and universalist performance seems to be convincing as far as its applicability to other historical forms of industrial society is concerned (Germani, 1965:79).

In short, the theory of elites (collective actors who have a crucial role to play in Germani's interpretation of transition and Peronism, although it does not develop the theme in any way whatsoever) was possibly incorporated directly from the works of Pareto and Mosca, Italian authors who were writing in the first half of the XXth century and with whom Germani was certainly familiar from their original publications. It is also from this perspective that he introduces the theme of totalitarianism, so fashionable at that point in time among the liberal opposers of fascism and communism, although not even here does Germani make a more conceptually detailed contribution. In any event, though the model that serves as a measure for the specific Latin American reality comes from the development of modern liberal European society, Germani partially distances himself from the theory of totalitarianism when he perceives that the participation of the masses is a central factor for the rise and legitimization of "populism"(see Barboza Filho, 1980).

We know that the analysis of Peronism, a concern with totalitarianism and the relationships of the latter with the working classes, are primary concerns in Germani's thought. It is when trying to deal with these issues that he would look for a theoretical model that, as we have already said, found in structural functionalism its points of support. However, it seems possible to believe that his natural concerns do not manage to fit totally in it. In fact, Germani's historic interpretation was already largely ready and finished when he introduced structural functionalism into his discussion. He superimposed it on that historical interpretation, somewhat confusing the reader, to the extent that the theoretical picture of functionalism would end up opening the book, thereby placing those of his discussions that were more directly pertinent to the imagination and to history in subsequent chapters in the organization of the volume, although not as far as the original dates of publication were concerned (see Blanco, 2003b). In fact the articles — transformed into chapters in *Política y Sociedad en una Época de Transición* — are as follows in order of publication or original preparation: chapter 9 (1956), chapter 4 (1957), chapter 6 (based on an article from 1960), chapter 3 (taken from various works from 1958 to 1960), chapter 8 (1961), chapter 7 (1961), chapter 5 (based on an article from 1961). Chapters 1 and 2 — written later on — before their publication in the book in question were only privately circulated among students on the courses given by Germani. Although this disparity of dates is camouflaged to a certain extent in the layout without further explanation of the articles in the book, it should be noted that a certain tension, as far as the interpretation of Peronism in structural and political terms is concerned, is obvious in its pages. The more structural functionalism imposes itself over the original Durkheimian functionalist matrix, the more Germani interprets Peronism in an unequivocally negative way, producing some heterogeneity in his argumentation. To these reasons of a theoretical order and that might have influenced this inflection one must add others of a political order, which refer back to the hardening of the debate on Peronism and probably the practical disputes that had deeply divided Argentinean society since the period when his first works were published until the drafting of his subsequent texts on the theme.

FREEDOM AND HISTORY, PERONISM AND RECOGNITION

In very summarized and schematic terms, the most crystallized and hard model for explaining Peronism proposed by Germani (1965, chaps. 5, 7 and 8) can be translated as follows. Initially the situation of brutal displacement of the population created by huge internal migration from the country to the city produces a radical "availability" of these popular masses. As an effect of this

process, the psychological mobilization of these masses takes place, which results in an objective mobilization, i.e., in an eruption in social life and in the search for space in political life. At the same time, enormous changes were occurring in the world due to the economic crisis of 1930, which had a strong impact on Argentina and led to the expansion of fascism throughout Europe. The conservative elite therefore tried to place limits, once more, on the participation of the masses, by seeking to roll back the clock to the time of previous political forms that excluded people socially, politically and economically. This, however, was no longer possible and "a new military intervention with totalitarian aims interrupted the conservative experiment of 'democracy limited by fraud'" (*idem*:231).

It is certain that if participation was inevitable there was no way whatsoever it could be exercised. Various functional equivalents of "integration" of these agents to political life could be defined. This process of integration could have occurred in the context of a democratic way, which would be desirable and expected in a "normal" situation of transition to industrial society. However, this did not happen. In Argentina, a specific "national popular" way was produced, although it did not create true integration. For Germani, therefore, the Argentinean problem is extremely complex because this other way is not, strictly speaking, a functional equivalent of social integration. This led, thus, to an "integration" of the popular masses in the context of totalitarianism, which for Germani was the Argentinean tragedy. The Peronist regime, as a typical "national popular" movement because of its origins, the character of its leadership and the circumstances of its rise, was destined to offer a substitute of political participation for the popular classes, representing a manipulation on the part of the new Argentinean elite. Its fall was only possible because of its internal limitations, the main one of which was that it should transform illusory participation into true intervention, thereby deeply transforming itself, which implied insurmountable problems because of its very nature. Given these problems and limits, Germani was far from finding that this second strand would work in a similar way to the functions of integration that were possible by means of the democratic way².

One should note, however, that in other passages of the book written previously and less at variance politically with Peronism, as well as less marked by North American functionalism, Germani offers a more complex and subtle interpretation of that regime. In these passages, we already find the subsequent questioning of the functions of this type of "tragic integration", but it is far from being exclusive. On the contrary, other questions appear on the scene — on possible historical determinations, on how memories that open up, but also limit, political and social possibilities operate in concrete societies — and themes — as the effects of fast processes of industrialization, migration and massive urbanization and the factors that affect the fundamental characteristics of social groups, both of popular classes (with very little union experience), as well as middle classes (without any tradition of prestige, although not yet having become proletarian) (*idem*:241-242). At the same time, as far as the question of the integration of the popular masses was concerned, he includes in his exposition the importance and the need for their recognition, thereby lending centrality to the problem of constructing the very freedom of these masses.

For Germani the popular masses had made no progress as far as the need for carrying out structural reforms under Peronism was concerned. Nevertheless, the analysis is very different with regard to the other two central elements in the process of real integration: the acquisition of the consciousness of their power and the recognition of their labor rights. Taking as his matrix

the writings of Simone Weil — *La Condición obrera* —, Germani develops some interesting reflections on the exercise of power by the workers and their self-awareness, both in the context of October 17, as well as in the union struggles in general, especially the strikes they called³.

The masses gaining their freedom — the immediate freedom of workers to be able to affirm their rights before their bosses, to experience union organization to the full, to feel they are their own masters, to be recognized as equals — is the central element of Germani's theses about Peronism at that point in time. By taking a position opposed to the interpretation that he calls the "plate of lentils" theory, according to which popular support for national popular movements, specifically Peronism, derived from the supposed prioritization by the workers of their own interests and material advantages, Germani states that the most important results must be sought in the recognition of rights and in the fundamental circumstance that, as from this point in time, the popular masses must be taken into account. What really matters is their "participation experiment". This is why they so enthusiastically supported the Peron regime. For the intellectuals and the middle classes, the regime could show itself as highly authoritarian. In particular, for the former, freedom of expression was a "concrete freedom". However, this was not the case of workers, for whom it meant little. The limitation of the freedom of expression could coexist with other "significant experiments of freedom". In short, workers never in fact participated in "high politics", feeling, in turn, that they had won the "concrete freedom to affirm their rights to the foremen and bosses [...]". Therefore, this did not derive solely from "pseudo-freedom" generated through the demagogy of the dictator, not to speak of Peronism not achieving the "technical perfection of totalitarianism" (Nazism and Italian fascism, we must suppose) (Germani, 1965:161 and 240-244)⁴.

In fact, in the comparison and differentiation that Germani constructs between Fascism and the national popular Latin American movements, this is the type of issue that means that the choice of the popular masses in the latter is not actually "irrational", as was the choice of the middle classes in the former. Despite recognizing that in these national popular movements there was a certain degree of irrationality and that the most profound rational option would have been the democratic one in its broadest sense, he also admitted that, as we observed above with reference to the elements of "concrete freedom" that they expressed, these movements contained some aspects of substantive democracy that were absent in the European regimes. Furthermore, an effective democratic path, given the conditions in which Argentina found itself after the 1930 "coup d'état"⁵, was impossible (*idem*:251). Germani develops this argument using subjective characteristics that the popular classes had in the 1940s; their recent entry into urban life and industrial activities, their weak or non-existent political experience, their low educational level, their precarious possibilities for obtaining information and the limits that objective circumstances placed in the path of their political action, as well as the resistance offered by the traditional elite, which was blind to the need for change and averse to democracy.

We now come to a central theme in Germani's works and one that permeated all the intellectual discussions at the time in the context of the rise of Peronism and for which, as for so many others, he looked for a specific response, thereby producing one of his, in fact, most often quoted texts: "La crisis de las sociedades modernas" (The Crisis of Modern Societies). Also published long before Germani's meeting with Parsons, it was included in *Política y Sociedad en una Época de Transición* as Chapter 9 (Neiburg, 1997, chap. 5). It is worth noting that Germani

(1946:12) had already also defined sociology as the "science of times of crisis", and in that context it was in fact an individual and collective *total crisis*:

"The psychic tensions to which contemporary man is submitted, the so-called crisis of personality, are undoubtedly linked to this need to choose, under highly changeable conditions, without having, on the other hand, a spiritual education that is appropriate for this choice. This does not mean [...] that the passage from the traditional to a system that requires of the individual a growing capacity for self-determination should not be considered an advance [...]. Initially, this freedom was the privilege only of the elite [...] it now extends to the vast majority, to the common man and this represents magnificent progress. But at the same time it represents a grave danger, because in order for this freedom to be actually exercised it is necessary to rely on appropriate objective and subjective conditions and such conditions do not exist at this time [...]" (Germani, 1965:234).

In a world in constant change, in which tradition loses its power over people, *reflexivity* — which he treats as synonymous with rationality, as is the case with all of the Western tradition — begins to take on an enormous importance, without its being possible, however, for everyone to exercise it. Even political democracy did not offer in a generalized way real possibilities "for effectively using freedom and exercising the rights that formally belong to everyone", beyond an abstract and rhetorical concept. On the contrary, it needed to be felt as something "real and concrete". The local community, a solution with a touch of de Tocqueville, then comes up in his arguments as being fundamentally important for this. Furthermore, the company imposes itself as a crucial domain in order for freedom and responsibility to assume a character of concrete and effective experience, above all by means of the workers participating in its management, alongside, but in a more advanced manner, than the merely union aspect (as a matter of fact, with this he anticipates the ideas of *co-management* that German social democracy would later adopt). The Argentinean elite would have to allow these steps, at the same time as a substitute of participation and the possibility of effective, albeit limited, participation and concrete freedom for the workers (*idem*:236-237) if they did not want the perpetuation of Peronism.

The characterization of the objective and subjective conditions of freedom is proposed more extensively in texts from the same period, when Germani wrote prefaces for the works of Erich Fromm and Harold Laski – with which the correction of Blanco's (2003a) thesis on the relevance of his editorial activity provides ample evidence. In relation to the translation into Spanish of Laski's book, *Liberty in the Modern State*, Germani introduced the theme of the total crisis of Western society. However, instead of resigning himself to its decadence and decline, he demanded it be broadened beyond liberal society and the liberal state. Now it was a question of conquering the "positive freedom" of socialism, based not on property but on the very rights of personality, thereby making it compatible with planning (Germani, 1966, chap. XI). In the article about Fromm, "Las condiciones subjetivas de la libertad", Germani (*idem*, chap. XII) signaled that from the point of view of personality, democracy could only expand if the former developed in such a way as to become autonomous and capable of rational decisions. There were many open possibilities but it was also close to a catastrophe because people were living through a crisis of individualization and strong tendencies toward homogenization were at work, returning to imposed positions and the handing over of individuals to a strong leadership. It is interesting to note that this theme has always been a mark of Germani's approach, in line with his functionalism that originates in the Durkheimian tradition.

In his first relevant text on modernity in general Germani faced up to the problem of the anarchy and social disintegration that resulted from the transition to a different society, in which the "atomization" of individuals was a symptom and consequence of an incomplete social integration. However, the crisis was above all one of "growth" because the process of individualization, created by social evolution, was in itself positive and must therefore be "harmonic". This did not occur at that time because of the various rhythms that were stamped on the different parts of the social organism during the transition process. Leaning on Mannheim, Germani stated that, in particular, human faculties had developed unequally — know-how and science had advanced much more than the moral and the social order, without the rational domain of society being able to establish itself; nor was the individual capable of controlling his impulses and supporting an "autonomous personality". He saw himself, therefore, in a situation of availability, because social structures, in particular education, were not yet capable of preparing him for dealing with extremely fast change. Above all, profound and problematic oscillations in know-how and the economy created phenomena such as inflation and mass unemployment and therefore instability and insecurity. People saw themselves deprived of "maps" capable of guiding them socially; great anguish, without "a defined object", derived from such disorientation. Therefore the "mass of 'common men'" were obliged to "choose", under more or less free conditions, "consciously and deliberately the values and rules that shall govern them", without appropriate resources for such a complicated task. This situation became dramatic when they were, on the other hand, exposed to "typifying techniques", a theme that he discovered in Fromm (also mentioned in the original edition), and that complemented his reading of Mannheim (Germani, 1945:55-62).

These themes would be revisited during the time when he was developing his work. Thus, Germani proceeded, especially as his sociological perspective advanced intellectually, taking as his starting point one of the central themes, if not the most central, from the modern imagination: *freedom* (see Domingues, 2005, chaps. 1-2). Methodologically, although the issue is in no way discussed, one can even suggest that in place of, or at least in parallel to, a structural description, what he achieves is a general *hermeneutic* approach. On the other hand, if he did not really advance toward existentialism, a certain near-Sartrean touch, for example, can be perceived in his texts. It is true that Parsonian functionalism itself, as we shall see later, was not ignorant of this issue. However, it relegated it to the second division when, out of preference, it embraced the problem of order. Germani did not take this route; on the contrary. His discussion of the transformation of society from a "traditional" to an "industrial" one — despite references that were not unfitting *vis-à-vis* the theme of social integration (which in this case could be translated by another term, also crucial for modern imagination, namely, *solidarity*), but were far more problematic when it comes to "populism" — emphasizes the issue of freedom, therefore of the added contingency that characterizes this civilization and of the demand for self-determination among individuals and groups, notwithstanding the problems that threatened such developments. In fact his own typology of social action, which would be decisively used in his functionalist scheme, has the theme of freedom at its core, referred to in another way when he alludes to the question of "elective action". And this is precisely where we must now move on to.

ELECTIVE ACTION AND FREEDOM

The influence of Parsons in Germani's general scheme of action is quite explicitly substantial. He defines action with emphasis to begin with in the "normative framework", a theme that always weighs heavily in the Parsonian body of work, although he also highlights that the "end" of action is decisive and that all action in the end bears results. Three conceptual strands organize Germani's scheme: 1) the actor, who is the "individual" or the "group"; 2) the situation, which comprises ends, means and conditions; 3) and the normative framework, including norms and agendas, values and knowledge. As far as the individual actor is concerned, in what seems to be a more concrete analytical plan, he is, on the one hand, a person, a socialized being — in which Germani explicitly recognizes the relevance of the formulations of George Mead, whose work he had published in Spanish and for which he wrote the preface — and on the other, a beam of status and roles, which comes close to the Parsonian categorization at the analytical level (Germani, 1965:49-53).

Before continuing with the explanation of this analytic scheme, certain considerations are necessary. At the outset, we should observe that it is very simplified in comparison with the Parsonian scheme, which is much more complete and sophisticated. Curiously, moreover, in this decisive passage Germani mentions only the North American author's *The Structure of Social Action* (1949) and *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1962), written in collaboration with several other authors. Now, if in the former the Parsonian action scheme is still incipient, although some of its permanent elements had already been introduced in the analytical definition of the "unit act", in the latter he presents only a summary of the arguments of the theory of action. *The Social System* (1979), in which Parsons' action scheme reaches its most complete formulation, is not mentioned at all. Furthermore, it is in this book that structural functionalism is proposed in a systematic way as a *second best* inspired by biology, since the "social physics" postulated in his first book was at that moment in time unattainable. However, in turn, we need to see that Parsons' formulations of action at the beginning of the 1950s strongly incorporated the pragmatism and "interactionism" of Mead. If, with the exception of Thomas, Parsons does not mention these authors, the reasons for this have to do with an academic dispute in the field of sociology, in which at that time the functionalism of Harvard opposed the "symbolic interactionism" of Chicago, led by Herbert Blumer. In short, we must note that, contrary to the concept of the Parsonian "collective actor" and despite the latter's prior and excessive focusing, the notion of "group" is not made very clear in the general context of the Germanian theory. It tends in theory toward a concept that is primarily descriptive, although the actors may enjoy a collective identity (Germani, 1965:29-30), with Germani often referring to this sort of actor (such as elites) in his work without, however, any conceptual development of the idea.

Germani's truly decisive and innovative contribution is expressed in the introduction to the concept of "elective action", which he typologically opposes to "prescriptive action". Indeed, it is through this that Germani, by making it central to his truly theoretical scheme, recovers the issue of freedom, a crucial theme in his original interpretation of modernity, which remains current despite his most severe and controversially unilateral evaluation of Peronism. Prescriptive action is grounded in a "rigid" normative framework, whereas in elective action the norm is more flexible. In prescriptive action means, conditions and ends are "internalized" by the actor. On the contrary, elective action imposes a certain "choice" (*elección*) in place of a fixed course of action, although the conditions in which it is processed have always to be taken into account by the actor, who does not have "absolute freedom" to choose. The election, therefore, becomes a "normative mandate". In fact, there is some variability in the prescriptive action itself, since

concretely adaptations and deviations are necessary and inevitable. Nothing compares, however, to what, in elective action, derives from "a *prescription to choose*, to an *affirmation of individual freedom* (and of *responsibility as far as the exercise of this freedom is concerned*), a *value sustained by culture* ('individualism')" (Germani, 1966:57). This has nothing to do with the anarchy that is characterized by the absence of norms, which emerges as the structural and psychological consequence of quick social change (Germani, 1965:58-60).

Having presented his distinction between the two types of action, Germani then sets out to find the antecedents of his proposition. He finds them mainly in Weber, suggesting a fairly curious and heterodox reading of his typology of action (*idem*:60-64). In relation to values and ends, he revisits the Weberian opposition between "traditional action" and "rational action". This is, he imagines, a type of elective action. Rational action in relation to ends would imply a "rational" and "conscious" evaluation of the means that must be used to achieve certain ends, while in traditional action in relation to values an ethical, religious and aesthetic mandate would predominate that must be elaborated consciously by the actor given his situation. This demands *reflection*, and rationality, contrary to what happens with traditional action⁷. The difference between Weber's formulation and his, says Germani, is that the latter starts with the normative framework and this is not explicit in Weber. As far as the Weberian "habitual action" is concerned, Germani observes that it would imply a certain automatism and the absence of reflection. However, different from traditional action, many habitual actions are included in the elective framework, whereas others are confined to the prescriptive. When the first case occurs development takes place "beneath the conscious level, without a reflexive or deliberative step", with the elective action being repeated and becoming a habit after a choice has been made for the first time. In fact, adds Germani, habitual actions correspond to the majority of human actions. In turn, affective action is parallel to the distinction between election and prescription implying "affection and sentimental states" (*idem*:61-65).

Where does the novelty and relevance in Germani's formulation lie? When classical sociology and even the sociology of most of the XXth century is looked at there is, in fact, a trivial aspect in the typology and opposition that Germani proposes between elective action – typical of "industrial societies" – and prescriptive action – that refers back to what in principle is conventionally called "traditional society", although Germani does not use this term, but instead talks about "ascriptive" and not acquired positions and status (*idem*:56-57). Certain innovations are, nevertheless, very interesting and fruitful. If a comparison is made with the Weberian discussion, which Germani himself highlights, a strong displacement can be observed. Weber was above all interested in the *rationalization* process of the "West" and in the means of domination to which this gave rise, paying little attention to the issue of freedom, even in his evaluation of Protestantism and world religions generally (see Domingues, 2005:41-42). It is precisely rationalization that stands out in his typology of action (Weber, 1978, vol. 1: part I, chap. 1). Germani, on the contrary, constructs his typology maintaining that issue as central to his concern. After all, his historically oriented interpretation of modernity had already precisely highlighted freedom.

If we compare, on the other hand, Germani's typology with the Parsonian scheme of action in its most sophisticated form, i.e., the one present in *The Social System* (1979, chap. 1), we see that in an underhand way, the problem of freedom, in a certain way previously called the "problem of action" in *The Structure of Social Action* (1949, chaps. 2 and 3), ends up subordinated to what

this book defines as the "problem of order", both of which, in the formulation of that point in time, were the most important for sociology. In fact, Parsons perceives that social life and the interaction between actors, individuals and groups are permeated by what he called the "double contingency". Social stability, however, relative though it is, is guaranteed by the socialization of actors and the internalization of social norms, whereby disruptive possibilities are immediately reduced, with the freedom that is potentially present in action being always controlled (see Domingues, 2000b). Germani chooses another path: elective action is strongly linked — in fact, excessively so — to modernity. He also maintains the freedom of the actor in his scheme as being essential for this type of social formation. It is only more recently that this type of problem and solution has strongly emerged in social theory⁸.

From a general point of view, Giddens' theory of structuration (1976; 1979; 1984), not by chance influenced by Sartre, looked for its own synthesis of theories, which he called "objectivist" and "subjectivist". In his "duality of structure", by means of which he articulates these two fields, action always implies the possibility of the actor acting in another way. For Giddens, that means the actor always maintains a certain degree of autonomy and freedom when faced with the "structures" that are a "constraint", but which he uses, on the other hand, as a "resource" for forging his own conduct. However, it was only later that Giddens articulated this to modernity, albeit in a diffuse fashion. The "disembedding mechanisms" of modernity (systems of experts and symbolic tokens, such as money) remove people from the immediate contexts of their existence, forcing them to more sustained reflection (which he describes in a totally Cartesian manner, implying a "radical doubt" and the near transparency of the actor to himself) in order for them to situate themselves in the world (Giddens, 1990:1991). His theory of action and the relationship of this with the structure play, however, a vague role in his theory of modernity, although the atmosphere of freedom — otherwise never really named — encompasses his arguments here, as in his previous works. Joas (1996), on the other hand, seeks to deal with the "creativity of action", against the normativism of Parsons, by resorting to pragmatism. He does not theorize about modernity, nor does he refer to freedom. However, the permanent possibility of the actor to change contingently his courses of action permeates his theorizing, which has the advantage of moving beyond the Cartesianism that is present in Weber's theory and, in part, in that of Parsons. This is true even though he does not consider that Parsons tends to substitute the "unit act" of *The Structure of Social Action* for something as a more diffuse "unity of action" in *The Social System* (1979:8-9), when, under the hidden influence of pragmatism, ends become in many cases diffuse and imprecise. Thus, it is in the concrete "situation" in which he finds himself, with his body, and dealing with other actors and material conditions, that the actor operates, with an unclear view of himself and of what surrounds him, with ends and means becoming confused, having only a piecemeal awareness of his concrete actions. Both authors, Giddens and Joas, despite the inevitable – fruitful – dialogue with Parsons, initially discard functionalism.

Concerning these two approaches, despite their limitations, with respect to the claim about the clarity of ends and means, to the emphases on rationality, to the understand of modernity in a manner that is very different from other social formations, it is worth a comparison with Germani. When thinking about the social processes from the point of view of structural functionalism and seeking to give them theoretical precision, Germani presents the distinct contribution of thinking of "elective action" in terms of a specific social formation, modern civilization, and relating it directly to one of the fundamental cores of its imaginary – freedom.

We need, however, to think about the issue of choice, taking into account the processes of disembedding, of similar or different types, indicated by Giddens, as well as thinking about it beyond the limits of the Cartesian tradition, with another construction of the concept of reflexivity and considering rationality from a point of view that requires a less transparent and dominant ego than the one implicitly present in Germani's theory.

It is moreover necessary to discard the opposition that Germani again takes up between modernity — "industrial" society — and societies based on ascriptive action, thinking instead about broadening, on account of social mechanisms, the scope of action and the need to do so. On the other hand this should not forcibly imply embracing the modern ideology that sees total change in this civilization, the result of which would be, for the first time in history, the establishment of social contingency, faced with which the processes of integration cannot even be thought of in functionalist terms. A more interactive perspective than that of Germani, Giddens and Joas (despite the latter talking about the situation as though including other actors), as the example found in Mead and Parsons, would be help one, on the other hand, to escape from a theory of action overly centered on the individual actor. Besides, the "groups" about which Germani talks, inspired to a limited extent in the "collective actors" of Parsonian theory, would have to be better theorized and incorporated into the nuclear argument before a more complete conceptualization of the theme of "collective subjectivity" in general and in modern times can be achieved. Perhaps in this way, indeed, in his discussion of the role of the "elite" and their relationship with the "masses", the problem of freedom and the creative articulation between leaders and the popular sectors could assume a more sophisticated and suitable form, taking into account the interpretive hermeneutics present, in some way, in his first texts. However, it is not for this reason that the issues outlined by Germani lose in significance and relevance, nor even in originality.

CONCLUSION

Gino Germani's sociology was among the most rigorous and inventive in the Americas, having appeared during one of the most productive periods of this field. Our objective in this article was to highlight some of the most interesting theoretical aspects of his work, which have not been given the attention they deserve. We do not believe that there is a specifically regional sociology, especially from the theoretical point of view, although conceptual adaptation is necessary and new paths can be suggested, based on the concrete social processes and themes of each region and country studied by researchers. Indeed, Germani (1964:4-5 and 136) himself believed that it would be through the consolidation of sociology toward the Southern part of the Americas, in principle and at his time, on a national level, that one might contribute, with no limiting nationalisms or regionalisms, to the universal development of this field, also becoming free from a relation of intellectual dependence. This was precisely what we have tried to underscore in this article: both his theory of action and his systematic reflections on freedom in modern times are a general asset for the social sciences and one that can be absorbed into the mainstream of theorization in our time.

NOTES

1. Among the authors that list the interpretations of Germani with structural functionalism, Dennis (1964), Delich (1977), and in part Verón (1974) and De Ípola (1989) stand out.

2. Murmis and Portantiero (1969) offer the main theoretical and empirical criticism of Germani's interpretation of Peronism, with reference in particular to his theories on internal migration. See also Ramos (1957), Peña (1971), Di Tella (1965), Laclau (1978) and Torre (1989), among others. Apparently, Germani himself, for political reasons and perhaps because of the hardening of the debate, would emphasize the question of migration and the limitations of the new working class, by also increasingly embracing the functionalist aspects of his argument and afterward drawing close to the "theory of modernization" (Germani, 1969; 1973; 1978; 1992). In contrast, elements that we shall stress below, above all the "concrete" freedom that Peronism represented for the workers, are forgotten.

3. October 17 is often considered as the date of the "foundation" of Peronism, the day of the *shirtless* and of *loyalty*. That was the day when scenes never before seen in Buenos Aires occurred. Suddenly the poor workers arrived from the suburban neighborhoods and started gathering at the most important points in the center of the city, with their cry of freedom for Peron, who had been jailed a few days earlier. The opposition called this crowd that took over the public areas the "zoological torrent", since in their mind those happenings made no sense. The character of the episodes and how they occurred were for years the topic of debate between historians and social scientists. At one extreme were the authors who underline the spontaneous character of the march and the little political experience of the participants and at the other are those who emphasize the role of the unions on that day.

4. It is in this sense that Inés Izaguirre states that "perhaps because the search for freedom had been his obsession since his adolescence Germani knew how to see these different meanings of Peronism for the different classes: he always recognized the freeing content it had for the worker and the militant trade unionist when faced by the bosses and how it allowed them not to feel subjugated, which was different from what happened with the middle classes and particularly with their illustrated fractions" (Solari, 2000:498).

5. In September 1930 there was a coup d'état in Argentina and José Félix Uriburu assumed the Presidency, thus setting off what would be known as the "infamous decade", characterized by authoritarianism and electoral fraud.

6. Later he notes that in modernity economic action is elective; how to elect it, though, is prescribed and this fixes the "principle of instrumental rationality" (Germani, 1965:73).

7. In this sense the exception is to be found in some aspects of Simmel's (1978) work, who emphasizes the theme of freedom without achieving conceptual systematicity with regard to the theory of action, which, on the other hand, occurs as far as contingency and creativity in Blumer's (1969) work are concerned, without any discussion of modernity *vis-à-vis* freedom. In any event, these authors do not appear in the Germanian bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

BARBOZA FILHO, Ruben. (1980), *O Populismo: Um Balanço Teórico*. Belo Horizonte, Editora da UFMG.

BLANCO, Alejandro. (1998), "Gino Germani: Las Ciencias del Hombre y el Proyecto de una Voluntad Política Ilustrada". *Punto de Vista*, nº 62.

_____. (1999), "Ideología, Cultura y Política: La 'Escuela de Frankfurt' en la Obra de Gino Germani". *Prismas. Revista de Historia Intelectual*, año 3, nº 3, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.

_____. (2003a), "Los Proyectos Editoriales de Gino Germani y los Orígenes Intelectuales de la Sociología". *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 43, nº 169.

_____. (2003b), "Política, Modernización y Desarrollo: Una Revisión de la Recepción de Talcott Parsons en la Obra de Gino Germani". *Estudios Sociológicos de El Colegio de México*, vol. XXI, nº 63.

BLUMER, Herbert. (1969), *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

DE ÍPOLA, Emílio. (1989), "Ruptura y Continuidad. Claves Parciales para un Balance de las Interpretaciones del Peronismo". *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 29, nº 115.

DELICH, Francisco. (1977), *Crítica y Autocrítica de la Razón Extraviada. Veinticinco Años de Sociología*. Caracas, El Cid Editor.

DENNIS, Alfredo Parera [Milcíades Peña's pseudonym]. (1964), "Gino Germani sobre C. W. Mills o las Enojosas Reflexiones de la Paja Seca ante el Fuego". *Fichas de Investigación Económica y Social*, nº 2.

DI TELLA, Torcuato. (1965), "Populism and Reform in Latin American", in C. Veliz (ed.), *Obstacles to Change in Latin American*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

_____. (1979), "Gino Germani: In Memoriam". *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 19, nº 74.

DOMINGUES, José Mauricio. (2000a) *Social Creativity, Collective Subjectivity and Contemporary Modernity*. London, Macmillan and New York, Saint Martin's Press.

_____. (2000b) "Creativity and Master-Trends in Sociological Theory". *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 3, no. 4.

_____. (2005) *Modernity Reconstructed*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

GERMANI, Ana Alejandra. (2004), *Gino Germani. Del Antifascismo a la Sociología*. Buenos Aires, Taurus.

GERMANI, Gino. (1945), "Anomia y Desintegración Social". *Boletín del Instituto de Sociología*, nº 4.

_____. (1946), "Sociología y Planificación". *Boletín de la Biblioteca del Congreso*, nº 57.

- _____. (1955), *Estructura Social de la Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Raigal.
- _____. (1964), *La Sociología en la América Latina*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires.
- _____. (1965), *Política y Sociedad en una Época de Transición*. Buenos Aires, Paidós.
- _____. (1966), *Estudios sobre Sociología y Psicología Social*. Buenos Aires, Paidós.
- _____. (1969), *Sociología de la Modernización*. Buenos Aires, Paidós.
- _____. (1973), "El Surgimiento del Peronismo. El Rol de los Migrantes Internos". *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 13, nº 51.
- _____. (1978), *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism*. New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books.
- _____. (1992) [1973], "El Peronismo", in J. R. Jorrot and R. Sautu (eds), *Después de Germani. Exploraciones sobre Estructura Social de la Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Paidós.
- GIARRACA, Norma. (1991), "Gino Germani y su Época a Ochenta Años de su Nacimiento". *Boletín de Informaciones de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales (UBA)*, nº 8.
- GIDDENS, Anthony. (1976), *New Rules of Sociological Method*. London, Macmillan.
- _____. (1979), *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London, Macmillan.
- _____. (1984), *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge, Polity.
- _____. (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge, Polity.
- _____. (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge, Polity.
- JOAS, Hans. (1996) [1992], *The Creativity of Action*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- LACLAU, Ernesto. (1978), *Política e Ideología en la Teoría Marxista*. Madrid, Siglo XXI.
- MANEIRO, María. (2002), "Estructura Social y Procesos de Movilización", in S. Lifszyc (ed.), *Introducción al Conocimiento de la Sociedad y el Estado*. Buenos Aires, Gran Aldea Editores.
- MURMIS, Miguel and PORTANTIERO, Juan Carlos. (1969), *Estudios sobre los Orígenes del Peronismo*. Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI.
- NEIBURG, Federico. (1997), *Os Intelectuais e as Origens do Peronismo*. São Paulo, EDUSP.
- PARSONS, Talcott. (1949) [1937], *The Structure of Social Action*. New York, Free Press.
- _____. (1979) [1951], *The Social System*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- _____ *et alii*. (1962) [1951], *Toward a General Theory of Action*. New York, Harper & Row.
- PEÑA, Milcíades. (1971), *Masas, Caudillos y Elites (La Dependencia Argentina de Yrigoyen a Perón)*. Buenos Aires, Ediciones Fichas.

RAMOS, Jorge Abelardo. (1957), *Revolución y Contrarrevolución en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Amerindia.

SIMMEL, Georg. (1978) [1900], *The Philosophy of Money*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

SOLARI, Fabiana. (2000), "Entrevista a Inés Izaguirre", in H. González (ed.), *Historia Crítica de la Sociología Argentina, los Raros, los Clásicos, los Científicos, los Discrepantes*. Buenos Aires, Colihue.

TORRE, Juan Carlos. (1989), "Interpretando (Una Vez Más) los Orígenes del Peronismo". *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. 28, nº 112.

VERÓN, Eliseo. (1974), *Imperialismo, Lucha de Clases y Conocimiento (Veinticinco Años de Sociología en la Argentina)*. Buenos Aires, Tiempo Contemporáneo.

WEBER, Max. (1978) [1921-22], *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Translated by Deborah Neale

Translation from **Dados - Revista de Ciências Sociais**, Rio de Janeiro, v.47, n.4, p.643-668, 2004.