

Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923)

Acclaimed by some, disparaged by others, Pareto's place in the history of social analysis persistently continues to arouse controversy. Although economists do not dispute his importance, while deploring his sociological drifts, sociologists on the other hand are outraged by his monstrous books, his impenetrable theories and his esoteric epistemology, despite the kindly-disposed comments of Raymond Aron, Talcott Parsons and a few knowledgeable sociologists.

The Italian Years

Born in Paris on 15th July 1848 of a French mother and an Italian father (in exile in France due to his liberal ideas), Vilfredo Pareto's family came to live in Gênes around 1854. In 1859 the Paretos moved to Casale Monferrato and there Vilfredo was registered for the Leardi College where he studied science and the classics. In 1867 he obtained a degree in mathematics from the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Turin and then, in 1870, a Civil Engineering Diploma from the Polytechnic College with a thesis on the theory of elasticity of solid bodies and on the integration of differential equations which define their equilibrium. In that same year he was engaged by the Rolling Stock Department of the Roman Railway Company in Florence. In October 1873 he was appointed an executive of the San Giovanni Valdarno forge of the Iron Industry Company. He became Managing Director in 1875 and resigned his post in 1890.

In 1893 Pareto was appointed Professor of political economy at the University of Lausanne and then, in 1907, holder of the *ad personam* chair of political and social sciences. He gave up university lecturing in 1911 to devote himself exclusively to his own work. Designated by the Government as Senator of the Kingdom of Italy, on 1st March 1923, he declined that appointment for personal reasons. He died on 19th August 1923 at Céligny in the Canton of Geneva.

From the time when he settled in Florence in 1870 Pareto participated, through writing and speaking, in the spreading of liberal doctrines, free exchange, anti-protectionism and pacifism commended by the Adam Smith Society. His liberalism was extreme and his moralism uncompromising. A critic of the policy of Italian Governments of the time, of the ideas and actions of the whole ruling class, Pareto could see in politics only ambition and bad faith, intrigues exploiting popular passions. Power is only corruption, trickery and malice. His hostility towards the centralizing and bureaucratic State went hand in hand with the quest for a fair social, economic and political order. His intransigence, his fight against protectionism, against armament programs, against Government Minister Crispi's gallophobia and

the malpractices of wheeling and dealing, left him on his own, a publicist without a public and without influence.

The Swiss Period

Around 1890, through the economist Maffeo Pantaleoni, he discovered the works of Léon Walras and the marginalist school. His conversion to the “new economic doctrines”, to mathematical economy and to the theory of general equilibrium was instantaneous. University lecturing made it possible for him to devote himself entirely to the study of economic theories and to applying mathematics to the social sciences.

At the age of 48 Pareto published his first book, *Cours d'économie politique*, in which he explains the theories of capital, production, trade and crises. After presenting the general principles of pure economy, a science which must be studied in accordance with the same criteria as those of physics, he puts forward the constants and uniformities of human actions. Some of these actions bring about a pleasant sensation, called *ophelimity*, an idea which “expresses the relationship of affinity whereby something meets a need or satisfies a desire, legitimate or not”; others, which are the *utilities*, supply certain conditions of health, development of the body and of the intelligence for individuals and aggregates, for whom they also provide for reproduction. By means of these ideas, Pareto worked out abstract models which allowed him to gather and classify facts and then draw empirical or rational laws from them. Thus, the researcher can explain specific and complex phenomena. A typical example of this conceptualization is given by the graph of incomes, or wealth graph. Pareto shows that the distribution of income takes the form of a spinning top with its point turned upward, in all countries. The poor form the rounded lower part of the reversed spinning top and the rich the upper part, at the pointed end. An increase in minimum income and a reduction in the inequality of incomes can only be produced, either in isolation or cumulatively, if the total of the incomes increases faster than the population. An increase in the number of large fortunes does not produce a general growth in wealth, any more than an increase in the number of the poor brings about general impoverishment in the country. In other words, the inequality of fortunes and the reduction of pauperism are two very different things. Redistribution of wealth could enlarge the base of the spinning top and thin down its pointed end, but the loss suffered by the rich would clearly be less than the poor would gain and so the social differences would remain practically the same. Improving the living conditions of the poor and the problem of greater social justice depend more on an increase in production than on the distribution of wealth. According to this theory, “Pareto's Law” also states, the “natural forces”, the causes which act to determine distribution, depend more on the nature of men than on the

organization of society. The shape of the spinning top is not a matter of chance, otherwise it would be like the probabilities curve. Now the distribution curve differs totally from the probabilities curve, well known to statisticians under the name of "error curve". It is created by a universal law.

The *Cours d'économie politique*, in addition to the general principles of social evolution (history is immobile, cyclic, Man always the same throughout the centuries) presents a theory of social physiology according to which societies are never homogeneous. Differentiations, antagonisms, disputes and divergent interests are the resultant of "natural forces". The class struggle, in the shape of economic competition and confrontations for power, "is the major fact which dominates history". Impossible to eliminate it because "the laws of Nature soar well above the prejudices and passions of Man. Eternal, unchangeable, they are the expression of creative power; they represent what is, what must be, what could not be otherwise. Man can arrive at knowing what they are but could not change them." (*Cours d'économie politique*, § 1068).

In the two volumes of *Les Systèmes Socialistes* (1902-1903), social doctrines are analyzed from the point of view of logic and non-logic action as well as from the angle of the procedures used to convert objective truths into subjective truths. From this work it emerges that social problems cannot be resolved "by ranting based on a more or less vague ideal of justice, but only through scientific research to find the means of adjusting the means to the aim and, for each man, the effort and the trouble to the enjoyment so that the minimum amount of trouble and effort provides well-being for the largest possible number of men." (*Systèmes*, Ch. X).

Economy in Sociology

Although he continues to proclaim his determination to make social sciences exact sciences, Pareto, from the beginning of the century, dissects the imperfections of reason and reveals that what pushes men to act is feeling, passion and certain instincts.

In *Manuel d'économie politique* (1906), *homo oeconomicus* is an abstract being guided by egoism, economic systems are isolated from any possible influence and studied at a given moment in their history. The confrontation of abstract theory with specific phenomena (trade, protectionism, crises and economic cycles) leads Pareto to evaluate the importance of logical actions, non-logical actions, circulation of the élite, the role of ideologies, morals etc., as well as to indicate the aims and limits of economic science. He uses the concepts of ophelimity, the curves of indifference, the hill of pleasure, the paths of expansion etc. to explain the various types of equilibria, the properties of partial equilibria, of general equilibrium, to give a completed formulation of the theory of social return or of the collective economic

optimum. While the standard theories of general interest were based on the individual comparability of satisfaction, the maximizing of the sum total of satisfaction and a fair distribution of income, Pareto asserts that the ophelimities of different individuals cannot be compared and he consequently rejects all rules of distribution.

Direct proof of this evolution is given by the irreverent book *Le mythe vertuiste et la littérature immorale* (1911) in which moralism and puritanism, humanitarian ideologies, feelings of renunciation and asceticism, are judged to be displays of weakness, ways of duping the gullible.

In the monumental *Traité de sociologie générale* (1916), Pareto systematizes his conception of sociology as an "exclusively experimental" general social science which at once sets aside observable, commensurable and calculable behavior and as a matter of priority he concerns himself with linguistic customs, innate logic, forms of subjectivity irreducible in the calculation, regularities of cultural meanings, thoughtless motivations in social life, the justifications they are given, the sense attributed to the contents of historical actions, the internal structure of behavior, the component principles of affective, apparent and procedural rationality, and the non-logical. This sociology aims at revealing the mechanisms which produce society's symbolic universes. Instead of the idea of law, Pareto uses the idea of uniformity, i.e. of a statement true under certain conditions. Science must study the uniformities and mutually dependent ties which exist between social facts. It proceeds by successive approximations. Economy makes a first approximation towards the understanding of human behavior, a second approximation is provided by applied economy, and the others by sociology. The Science is neither a reconstruction-restoration of social reality, nor a pure reflection of it, nor is it a more or less impressionistic copy of it. It constructs scientific objects by artificial extraction from the actual universe; it defines the relations which connect the theoretical constructions together and then it transposes the results found to other simplified universes, indeed applies them by analogy to different realities so as to obtain new constructions of objects and conditional operators. At the basis of all analyses there is action, i.e. behavior oriented towards objectives; the action is an effort, an expenditure of energy implying at least a motive. Pareto works out a theory for the action in all its complex interdependencies. From this theory he deduces the properties of the "system object". The theoretical constructions thus obtained are "simple hypotheses" which stay alive as long as they agree with the facts, and die and disappear when new studies destroy this agreement." (*Traité de sociologie générale*, § 52).

Social phenomena have changing forms, manifested briefly by symbolic systems such as ideologies, customs, collective representations, traditions etc. On the other hand, the background is discovered by deduction or by inference. It is theoretical analysis which, through a study of relationships, reveals the nature and composition of this latent order. The form and background constitute, from another point of view,

the subjective and objective aspects of the phenomena. Representations of the phenomena and of the relationships between human actions are often deformed. Only the objective aspect is real, constant and unchanging.

Logical and non-logical actions

Social actions, grouped into categories of logical actions, which “are, at least for the main part, the result of reasoning”, and non-logical actions, which “arise mainly from a certain psychological state: feelings, sub-consciousness etc.” (*Traité*, § 161), The main object of research by sociologists are reasoning, deliberations, arguments, the logic of the subjects, objectifying the subjective, declarative and procedural knowledge which anticipates and prescribes the actions of the social actors. Social reality, formed of a non-conscious, constant part, can be grasped through its variable part, i.e. thanks to the conscious interpretations deposited like sediment in symbolic systems. Alongside demonstrative logic, Pareto conceives a non-demonstrative logic which is that of plausible and persuasive argumentation.

Logical actions logically unite the means to the end, while in non-logical actions this connection is non-existent. In logical action the connection must exist for the actor but also for all those “who have wider knowledge” (*Traité*, § 150). Action, to be logical, must be so either objectively (anybody having knowledge extending outside the action) or subjectively (the person acting). The former use experimental material and objective facts established and linked together by strict reasoning; the latter, by far the more numerous, and of great importance in social life, are more or less colored by logic; they form a “stack of absurdities” (*Traité*, § 445) and reflect the arbitrary nature and the change in the ways in which men think and act, the coercive weight of the milieu, the presence in each of the social agents of prejudices, beliefs, values and ethos which the socialization processes have incorporated into stable institutionalized symbolic systems. From then on, human action is crystallized into meaningful structures, neither exclusively external nor essentially internal.

In the logical reasoning and developments added to non-logical actions, Pareto again finds a pre-given, stable and latent fact, going beyond any empirical explanation, conceptualized through deduction from the system of symbolic structures, called *residues*, and a manifest and variable face, which can be observed empirically, called derivation.

The actor organizes his action consciously and continuously in relation to one or more systems of significations. The typology of the logical action is an operator, useful if his predictive value is good, if he helps to formalize the means / end relationship. However, if the efficiency and the cost cannot be arranged in accordance with a means / end relationship, if the figures are not commensurable, that operator is inadequate. Since the ends are neither given nor located, they

cannot be reduced to the formal rationality of scientific language. The rationality of science is different from the instrumental rationality of action and decision. The dispositional variables conjectured or conjecturable constitute a topic of logical value from which are drawn the premises of the arguments, of the conditional reasoning. It is to escape the eleatic paradox that Pareto builds the ontogenetic and phylogenetic underframe of the residues on which rest the reasoning and equivocation which underlie and accompany choices and decisions. It is true that, in doing this, he separates the representations from the actions, while recognizing that they can have a common source, in a field outside sociological analysis, reserved for psychologists and called the "psychic state" (*Traité*, § 1690-2).

Residues and derivations

Language reveals to us the tendency of men to split hairs, to argue in order to make their behavior and beliefs plausible and acceptable. It comes before all forms of logico-experimental and structural rationality, by means of discursive class objects, the symbolic universes.

Residues do not exist, they are pre-constructed, both the content and knowledge of common sense; they are sources of sociality, conditions necessary for structuring the symbolic meanings. At the moment of granting actors a ready-made "logic", given in advance, they perform functions of identification, representation and nomenclature. Their composition is found to be the extension of spontaneous, balanced and self-regulated organization and of actions of classification, standardizing and persuasion.

We do not know whether the residues, on account of the adaptative value, have selected behaviors to which they are predisposed, whether they are socio-cultural representations of human resources faced with environmental constraints, or more or less direct manifestations of the phylogenetic factors reached by inference, categories of predispositions of behavior selected by nature. That residues constitute the implicit premises of equivocation used unknowingly by the social actors is an indubitable fact. In some instances, they express emotions, in others they are deduced from a representation; they always vary, throughout history, in number and intensity. In view of the fact that the concept of residue encompasses the intention and symbolization of the intention, the "feelings, subconscious etc.", transformed into symbolic relationships, become intelligible and comprehensible, and therefore accessible, objects. In other words, the residues transcend experience and logic, are located beyond scientific language, and give great autonomy to natural language. On the other hand, derivations give a certain foundation to value judgments relative to the purposes of the action. Produced from specific experience thanks to the mediate inference of argument techniques, they provide the arguments capable of explaining

how we act. By legitimizing both the objectives and the means, by filling in and systematizing the gaps in our knowledge, derivations give an apparent form of truth to the values, beliefs and convictions of social actors. They precede feelings and contribute to strengthening them.

Of course, the typologies and classifications of the residues and derivations are also typologies of the macro-sociological social processes, worked out from the universalism/particularism dichotomy where universalism is the code and particularism is the context. This dichotomy is generalizing for the residues of the instinct of combinations and the persistency of the aggregates. The four other classes (the need to show feelings through external acts, residues in relation to sociability, the integrity of the individual and his dependencies, the sexual residue) are specifications and particularizations of the first two classes and, while being heterogeneous they contain the elements essential for ensuring the overall constancy in spite of variations in detail. With regard to the types, they vary during the stages of social development. Nevertheless, the variations are still compensated so that the classes invariably remain constant. Discourses, pseudo-scientific theories, ideologies in general (and Pareto considers everything normative as such) are only a simple reflection of real interests. Like the residues, derivations are arranged in classes and types. There are four classes: affirmation, authority, agreement with feelings or with principles, verbal proof; they are based on language and make residues perceivable thanks to the treatises, but they are unsuitable for converting assertions into verifiable propositions. Derivations have no intrinsic value, they do not act directly in fixing social equilibrium; they are only the manifestations and indications of other forces "which are those which act in reality in determining social equilibrium". There is no determinism of the residues over the derivations since the former are dependent on the latter and the latter can affect the residues either by hindering the manifestations or by configuring them otherwise from time to time.

What relationship do actions have with "social utility" (*Traité*, § 1687)

In the first place, for the static part, Pareto examines the distribution of residues in a given society and in different strata of that same society; next, for the dynamic part, he studies how the residues vary in the course of time, either that they change in individuals of the same social stratum or that the change takes place due to a mixture of the social strata with each other, without omitting to study how each of these phenomena acts. Residues and derivations are propagated by imitation or due to other circumstances. A study of the propagation processes shows the existence of a third factor: interests.

Conditions of intelligibility of the action, deprived of objective existence, connected to each other by mutual dependence or by multiple causality, the residues, derivations and interests, the factors necessary for equilibrium, however cannot ever be grasped in their entirety. Is the method, therefore, inadequate, indeed sterile? No, because

the “even imperfect idea of mutual dependence” avoids the difficulties of an explanation based on a single causal structure. Thanks to the imperfect method of multiple causality, it is known that residues are more constant than derivations, that they are partly the ‘cause’ of the derivations, “but still remembering the secondary action of the derivations, which can sometimes be the cause of the residues, if only in a subordinate way.” (*Traité*, § 1732).

Thanks to this system of relationships, varying from society to society, from one social class to another, from one era to another, mediation is possible between internalized objective structures and individual conducts.

Social equilibrium

Society is made up of different interdependent elements (the soil, climate, fauna, flora, the actions of other societies on it, history, race, residues, derivations, interests) “making up a system which we shall call a *social system* [...]. This system changes form and character in the course of time and when we name the *social system*, we understand this system as considered both at a particular time and in the successive transformations which it undergoes in a particular space of time.” (*Traité*, § 2066). To analyze it, it is necessary to define a state at a given moment. It is the state of equilibrium. Emphasis is put on relationships of interdependence. Neither the ultimate ends nor the indeterminable objectives outside the system, nor even the matter of the change which is introduced in the course of evolution, are taken into consideration. Of course, there are disruptions in the equilibrium (wars, epidemics, floods, earthquakes and other disasters) but imbalance implies an automatic return to equilibrium. Therefore, social phenomena have a wavy form. Pareto does not give a real general theory of the equilibrium of society but only a theory of an empirically determined system, a theory unsuitable for explaining the transition from one system to another, for giving an explanation of the reason for imbalance.

Composed of different groups which are antagonistic due to age, sex, physical strength, health etc., society is not homogeneous and the equilibrium is precarious. “The utilities of the various individuals are heterogeneous quantities and to speak of the sum of these quantities makes no sense; there is none; we can envisage it. If it is wished to find a sum which is related to the utilities of the various individuals, it is necessary first of all to find a means of making these utilities depend on homogeneous quantities, which can then be added together.” (*Traité*, § 2127).

Conflict of utilities, conflicts of interests, division of society, antagonistic values involve divergencies of aims which gives rise to heterogeneity and to finding out that there is no rationality of society. With the impossibility of establishing what is the appropriate means to an end, of locating the end for which the action is taken, of homogenizing the criteria which are at the basis of the choices, deliberations and

actions with a view to obtaining a utility, in brief of discovering the ends, Pareto does not give any precise indication of how to reconcile rationality of action with epistemic rationality in the interpretation of historico-social actions.

Undulatory movement and historical events

Insofar as residues are transformed slowly, societies also change. The thesis according to which *reason* has an ever greater share in human activity gives rise to several errors. Progress comes about by following an undulatory or rhythmic movement. The oscillations or rhythms have different ranges, durations and intensities. When a phenomenon reaches its highest intensity, it is the oscillation in the opposite direction which is generally close. This makes it impossible to explain social phenomena by using simply linear causality or a more or less rigid determinism. Political, social or religious revolutions are just, right, necessary to some, and unjust, wrong, unnecessary to others. However, to science, there is no sense in that. "A scientific proposition is true or it is false, it cannot in addition meet any other condition [...]," "Science only concerns itself with finding out the relationships between things or phenomena, and with discovering the uniformities of these relationships. The study of what are called *causes*, if by that we understand facts in certain relationships with others, is a matter for science and comes within the above category of uniformities. However, what has been called *prime causes*, and in general all entities which go beyond the limits of experience, are found there even beyond the field of science." (*Les systèmes socialistes*, I).

Elites and circulation of the élites

Society is divided into heterogeneous groups and classes but within the groups and classes and between groups and classes there is intense vertical and horizontal circulation. The groups and classes are in conflict but there is also a struggle within these groups and classes. The part of the group or class which tries to ensure hegemony over its own group or its own class, or also over all groups and all classes, is called the élite. The theory of the élite claims to be a generalization of the class struggle theory.

Individuals who show great capability in the respective branches of social activity make up the top layer, usually taking in those who govern, while the rest form the lower layer, to which the governed belong (*Traité*, § 2047). This stratification of society, corroborated also by the distribution of wealth theory, is based on the nature of men, on the role of fecundity and mortality of the social groups and on a series of other factors; it is not the product of economic forces or of special organizational capabilities. The inequality of status between men is determined particularly by the

possession of certain "capabilities" in performing any human activity. The "capabilities" are the natural disposition of the individual to excel in a particular activity. It is doubtful that these "capabilities" exist in nature in the state of blind determinisms. They are rather the product of social interactions and socialization operations. Pareto sometimes speaks of the weight of social origin and of the technique of corruption as a means of "incapable" individuals accessing or staying in the *élite*, but he firmly believes that the normal condition is and remains "personal capability".

Elites can survive and keep going provided they are renewed continuously, eliminate degenerated elements and accept new elements within them in certain proportions. Circulation between the lower layer and the upper layer - mobility - must above all be vertical, upward, but must also be downward. There is no mobility when there is simply assimilation or co-opting. Movement is therefore synonymous with equilibrium and the law which governs the continuity and forming of *élites* is subject to a kind of *anaklasis* or *refraction*. Although *élites* can disappear for various reasons (biological destruction, psychological change in attitudes, decadence), there are two ways of maintaining stability and social continuity: eliminating those who contest and therefore jeopardize the social order and the existence of the *élite*, and/or absorbing the elements of the governed class who may be useful or usable. This process of endosmosis, whereby the elements of the governed class come to form part of the aristocracy of power, is "the phenomenon of social circulation". The capable *élite* is the one which is continuously renewed and rejuvenated. It may happen that those opposed to the *élite*, in order to eliminate their adversaries in power, make use of the discontent of the governed classes or use foreign intervention. The class in power then has to defend itself. Guile and force are necessary but it is also necessary to obtain the passive consensus of the governed class.

Types of social systems

An "open" social order is the product of equilibrium between the residue of the instinct of combinations and the residue of the persistency of aggregates; between innovation, discovery and invention on the one hand and conformity with the rules, values and social ethos on the other. Regimes are characterized by the psychology of the *élites*. The distribution of residues among individuals and among social classes is at the origin of the types of social systems. Wherever a strong instinct for combinations prevails there is a high number of speculators, entrepreneurs, reformers, inventors and ambitious men capable of the most hazardous undertakings, and wherever a strong concentration of the residue of the persistence of the aggregates is encountered, there is a predominance of people of independent means, of individuals for whom the past is a present asset and who want nothing to

change. Speculators usually prevail by trickery, guile and other manipulations. However, they never manage to keep control of the situation for long because they are ousted by those of independent means who, in turn, are driven out of power by the speculators, in a perpetual movement.

The increase in individual and collective security, the weakening of the spirit of enterprise, the growth of well-being and the peaceful co-existence between peoples, reinforces the reticence of governments to use force. New rules and values spread and make traditional cultural models totter. Traditional authority is shaken by this and rebellion then becomes possible. The old social equilibrium is replaced by a new equilibrium, a new class takes the place of the old one by force. Social and political life is cyclic. Social change is only an ongoing rotation of minorities which only have their sights set, beyond all else, on controlling. A change in minority is therefore a change in form and not a change in the structure of power, indeed a change in substance. One reality alone is ever-lasting: there is a stratification in political and social life, that of the ruling and the ruled. It is essentially oligarchic. Politicians promise radical change but as soon as they have won power they defend a society which has nothing to do with whatever they promised. Then, social life is hell, cruelty is unending and the social agents are victims of illusions and myths. Men have only one small light at their disposal, a single weapon with which to fight: science.

Pareto today

The blocks put down by Pareto on the building site of logic and non-logic still remain rough hewn. Contemporary sociologists have made no real breakthrough in research on useful beliefs, practical efficacy, the logical consequences of non-logic reasoning, the weighing of reason in the production of historical effects. With his concerned historical typology of contexts and their indivisible effects, with his use of this typology in the study of actions which are reasoned but not entirely reducible to the logical calculation, Pareto has drafted a method which makes it easy to observe and describe the differential departures between models or typologies and modeled or typologized social actions. This method is also a contribution to establishing fruitful relationships between sociology and history, to consolidating sociology as a historical discipline.

Pareto has challenged sociologists to describe the requisites of actions, interactions and pseudo-logical representations, to elucidate the unwanted relationships of actions and conducts and perverse effects, to establish the differences between utility for a collective unit, utility of a collective unit and ophelimity. That challenge has not yet been taken up. The distinction between the truth of an utterance and its social utility, the methodical description of the heterogeneity of ends, costs of social events and the analysis of subjective utilities in social actions, are fields of research

which still lie fallow. Nowadays, the theories of action and the cognitive theories of knowledge struggle against the same problems as Pareto posed so well, but they have not been at all satisfactorily resolved. Neither the positivist, culturalist or naturalist theories which seek causes of action elsewhere than in reason, nor functionalism, rational choices, the theory of exchange which place them in reason, none of these theories has been able to take advantage of the paretian breakthroughs.

In the research into arguments and scientific rhetoric, into innate or natural logic, where “arguing is more a matter of showing than demonstrating”, the presence of Pareto’s work is more evident. Trends in recent sociology aim at transferring the legacy from Pareto into interactionist sociology by means of research into natural and non-demonstrative logic. Revealing the rationalist influences of John Stuart Mill on the theoretical and non-theoretical paretian constructions gives a new dimension to the scope of the emotivist doctrines in the *Traité de sociologie générale* and brings its author back into the rationalist tradition.

If it is believed that the social sciences are not saving sciences capable of bringing happiness to men who have so far sought it in vain; if one is convinced that no social science will ever manage to define the general interest and the public good, to resolve the problems of living well and the good society; if, however, one is convinced that the social sciences are means capable of making social relations intelligible, that they show how man believes, acts, produces and answers questions on the organization and conditions of life in society, on existential destiny, then reading the works of Pareto can help researchers to free themselves of illusions about truth and objectivity as absolute values. Such reading can give a glimpse of how and why individuals produce certain knowledge, how such knowledge becomes the basis of action, how it is used to vitalize hopes and projects. Sociology also shows the limits and sparsity of the contents of our knowledge. Produced in particular contexts, this knowledge is neither eternal nor absolute. Essential wisdom which science tends to make intelligible. However, the intelligibility is always contextual and historically situated. Sociology assists, like a constant critique of all forms of production of knowledge, in understanding how the study of society is a powerful means of mobilizing energies in order to arouse consent, to justify, explain and rationalize social action, to obtain consensus, but also in order not to confuse rationality of action and decision with epistemic rationality.

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FINAL ABSTRACT

Renowned economist, professor in the University of Lausanne, wealthy Genoese marquis, esteemed and feared polemicist, Vilfredo Pareto always seems to engage in new departures. He abandons the world of industry and the beauty of Florence in order to devote himself to the field of domestic economy. He puts aside the study of purely theoretical economics and builds piece by piece a "sociology" intended to be solely experimental, in other words a science that is not dependent upon value judgments. Disdaining the sociologies that call themselves "humanitarian" and "metaphysical", or "christian" and "marxist", rejecting propaganda and ideologies, he seeks to dispel the "fog of nonsense" that pervades the political and social struggle. Disenchanted, skeptical, piercing, remarkably learned and insatiably curious, yet at times incredibly naive, awkward and headstrong, Pareto pursues the chimera of a new science that, after essaying to give proper weight to Man's desperate and unceasing need to justify his conduct, might proceed to shed light on the profound reasons motivating that conduct and discern the factors that promote equilibrium or mutation in society, that cause the rise and fall of the ruling classes. From the mass of his writings there emerges an imposing tableau of customs, beliefs, problems, hopes and feverish quests for liberty. Denigrated and worshipped, now read but not quoted, now paraphrased but not read, contested by all, honored by few who however have not understood him, Pareto is surely one of the forerunners of present-day sociology: functionalism, structuralism, rational choice, action theory, ethnomethodology ..., these are all his spurious offspring. The article offers a concise presentation of Pareto's intellectual life and positions his current research in sociology.

Index words

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