

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

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

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## Key words

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

## Palabras clave

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

## Abstract

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

## Resumen

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

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## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## I. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### III. THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF EXPERTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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