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INTRODUCTION

The general treatment of problems connected with the causal conditioning of phenomena has traditionally been the domain of philosophy, but when one examines the relationships taking place in the various fields, the study of such conditionings belongs to the empirical sciences. Sociology is no exception in that respect. In that discipline we note a certain paradox. Many problems connected with the causal conditioning of phenomena have been raised in sociology in relatively recent times, and that process marked its empirical or even so-called empiricist trend. That trend, labelled positivist, seems in this case to be in contradiction with a certain type of positivism. Those authors who describe positivism usually include the Humean tradition in its genealogy and, remembering Hume's criticism of the concept of cause, speak about positivism as about a trend which is inclined to treat lightly the study of causes and confines itself to the statements on co-occurrence of phenomena.

Yet at least since the turn of the 1940's there has been the custom in sociology of verifying how statistical relationships behave after the introduction into the analysis of "third variables" of various kinds. That procedure is used to check whether those relationships are not merely spurious in character. The recommendation that one should not confine oneself to establishing relationships among variables but try to explain them is one of the basic rules in the methodology of social research. This is done, among other things, by reference to causal hypotheses. Moreover, causal analyses have reached a certain degree of complication due to the use of mathematical formulas and mathematical concepts. People analyse not only relationships between two variables (submitted to the spurious relationship test), but also systems of many variables and construct for such systems models of causal interactions.

The various methods of causal analyses have been worked out by authors who are sometimes called representatives of positivism in sociology. But should we accept that label we would have to come to the conclusion that their practice is at variance with some features of that trend, especially with the claim that it treats lightly the study of causal links. Moreover, we would have to speak about positivism in specialized disciplines in a different sense from that in which we speak about positivism in philosophy. In general there are differences between the trends and schools which can be singled out in the philosophical reflection on science and in the various disciplines (such as sociology) or in reflections that belong to the methodology of such disciplines. Finally, the semantic content of the general terms used to characterize orientations in science, such as "positivism", is often poor, and those terms are often applied when we want to use a name that evokes associations which are emotional rather than topical.

Nicholas Mullins in his work on theoretical trends in American sociology[1] mentions the group of those scholars who formulate so-called causal theories as a separate theoretical school. In his opinion, the fundamental assumption and slogan of the school of "causal theories" consists in the thesis that one can arrive at theoretical statements through empirical analysis. This is, however, an abbreviation: one arrives from empirical facts at theoretical statements neither directly nor along a straight path. Nevertheless, the proposals advanced by those authors who construct causal theories are methodologically interesting, and the role ascribed to such theories can additionally make one become interested in causal analyses in the social sciences. By the way, the inclination to engage in causal analyses is not typical of American sociology alone, as is proved by the numerous works written by authors living outside the United States.[2]

In the present work I shall present and submit to a comparative analysis proposals of a causal interpretation of data obtained in sociological research of various types. Reference will be made to data from single (or synchronic) studies, diachronic studies, and experimental studies. The essential point will be the indication of

those assumptions which one makes when suggesting and applying the various methods of analysis. I shall also discuss the semantic (conceptual) problems related to the proposals for the study of causes. Finally, I shall reflect on how we can speak about theories and models with reference to causal analyses.

The various chapters have been written so that one could read them independently of one another according to one's interests, which accounts for some repetitions of explanations and statements.