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On the Social Life of Ideas and the Persistence of the Author in the Social and Human Sciences. A presentation of the Symposium

Ente di afferenza:
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On the Social Life of Ideas and the Persistence of the Author in the Social and Human Sciences

by Marco Santoro *and* Gisèle Sapiro

This Symposium is a contribution to the burgeoning field of research on the social life of ideas. Its focus is on one central aspect of ideas' life, namely the patterns and mechanisms of their circulation across languages and national borders. Inspired by a seminal article of Pierre Bourdieu on the social conditions of the international circulation of ideas [Bourdieu 2002], this Symposium is especially focused on the traveling of ideas and theories originally developed in the social and human sciences.[1] In this presentation we will illustrate the genesis of this Symposium and explain the rationale behind its contents, i.e. the five articles comprising it.[2]

Too often theories in the social sciences and humanities have been studied as if they had a life of their own – or no life at all. The common perspective when discussing social and cultural theories assumes that they exist independently of human bearers and the social institutions in which and through which they act. Only authors

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[1] This Symposium is part of a line of research the journal "Socio*logica*" is supporting since its inception. See in particular Santoro [2008], Chapoulie [2009], with annexed discussion, and Helmes-Hayes and Santoro [2010].

[2] The five articles of the Symposium are: Brahimi, M.A., and Fordant, C., "The Controversial Receptions of Edward Said. A Sociological Analysis of Scientific Citations;" Brissaud, C., and Chahsiche, J-M., "How to Become an International Intellectual? The Case of Thomas Piketty and *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*;" Canavese, M., "The Foucault Effect in Argentina (1970-1990);" Dumont, L., "The Moving Frontiers of Intellectual Work. The Importation and Early Reception of Roland Barthes' Works in the United States (1960s–1980s);" Grüning, B., "Beyond the Cold War? Arendt's Reception in Germany and Italy."

are considered worth of attention – according to a model well established in the humanities grounded on the notion of the "author" as the only creative agent authorized to speak. As a matter of fact, as pointed by Foucault in his seminal essay "What is an author?" [1969], the author's name is a disembodied label which serves to designate a body of works (this is what Foucault calls the "author-function"). This use of the author-function characterizes the handbooks tracing the history of disciplines and is instrumental in the building of their canon, following the model of the history of philosophical ideas.

However, the idea of the single "author" is far from being widely accepted in the social sciences and even in recent trends in the humanities. While intellectual history (especially Conceptual history – *Begriffgechichte* – as developed by Reinhardt Koselleck, and the Cambridge School around Quentin Skinner) has displaced the focus from authors to the broader study of ideas in society, including their circulation in non-canonical texts, and while literary theory claims to study of texts independently from the author's intention,[3] the social sciences have at least partially succeeded in making acceptable even among humanists (historians of art, film scholars, etc.) the argument that no art work exists without the active cooperation of a plurality of agents [Becker 1982] and independently of some social and institutional arrangement – be it conceived in the form of a "world," of a "system" or a "field" [see e.g. Bourdieu 1992; van Maanen 2009; Sapiro 2014a; Santoro 2016].

Oddly enough, the idea of the "author" survived in the social sciences exactly in those research areas where reflexivity should be stronger, that is in their disciplinary histories. Only recently the history of the social sciences has moved beyond its traditional focus on canonized authors and schools to embrace a much wider, and surely more history-sensitive, institutional approach. Bourdieu's study of the academic field and his book on Heidegger are landmarks in the rise of what we can call the "SSH studies" [Bourdieu 1984 and 1988]. The so-called "sociology of ideas" [Camic and Gross 2001] has developed along with a new trend in the history of the social and even human sciences focused on the institutional and even micro-social conditions under which knowledge is produced, interpreted, applied, diffused, and used [see e.g. Abbott 1999; Baert 2015; Borch 2012; Boschetti 1985; Calhoun 2007; Camic 1987 and 1995; Camic, Gross and Lamont 2011; Cassata 2011; Fabiani 1988 and 2010; Fleck 2011; Fourcade 2009; Gross 2008; Heilbron 1995; Heilbron, Lenor and Sapiro 2004; Heilbron, Magnusson and Wittrock 2013; Isaac 2012; Karady 1976; Lamont 1987; Matonti 2012; Sapiro 2009 and 2013; Steinmetz 2013; Stocking 1996].[4]

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[3] This claim underlies Barthes' 1967 article on the "death of the author"; cf. also Burke [1998].
[4] Stocking [1968] is among the pioneering works showing what a sociologically inspired history

The study of the circulation and reception of academic works has developed in this context. Reception theory which arose in literary studies around Hans Robert Jauss and the School of Konstanz focused on text analysis. Intellectual history analyses the circulation of ideas in a discursive network of canonical and non-canonical texts. Historical sociology reintroduces the social agents, individuals (authors, intermediaries such as editors, publishers, translators, academics) and institutions (journals, prizes, research institutions, universities, media). Many of the reception studies focus on the national reception in the short or *longue durée* (for instance Azouvi [2007]; Matonti [2005]; Sapiro [2004]), but the interest in the international circulation of works and ideas, and more broadly in a transnational approach, has grown in the context of the critique of "methodological nationalism" [Cusset 2003; Hauchecorne 2009; Heilbron, Guilhot and Jeanpierre 2008; Joly 2012; Morgan and Baert 2015; Pinto 1995; Santoro 2008; Sapiro 2012, 2014b and 2014c; Sapiro and Dumont 2016; Santoro and Galelli 2016a].

Maybe surprisingly, these innovative studies had often authors as their foci (Bergson, Nietzsche, Bourdieu, Elias, Rawls), albeit considered not as solitary and almost disembodied inventors or creators of ideas but as fully-fledged social agents working and even creating in and through social networks and contexts. One reason for the survival of a more traditional history of the social sciences built around authors was indeed that, despite the claims of their "death" and the sociological insight that intellectual life is clearly social, "authors" are alive and kicking in epistemic discourses as well as in disciplinary practices and cultural fields – including the arts [see e.g. Kapsis 1992; Santoro 2002; Sapiro 2006; Quemin 2013]. Indeed, far from being dead, the "author" as both a cultural construct and an embodied agent or personified node in wider intellectual networks (even as simply as a representative name for a larger system of actors engaged around a certain set of ideas) persists as a driving force in the social life of ideas – their assemblage, their consumption, their diffusion, their discussion, their legitimation, their transgression.

If we accept that "authors" albeit in this much more complex and nuanced shape are still with us, there are at least three main perspectives through which studying the traveling of ideas in the social and human sciences. The first is through a focus on systems of ideas, i.e. paradigms and the likes; the second is through a focus

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of ideas can offer to a better understanding of the same social and cultural theory. See Jones [1981] for early remarks about the shortcomings of the traditional "history of sociological theory" and how they could be addressed following more recent trends in the history of (political) ideas. See also Shapin [1982] for an early, critical, and programmatic review of works at the intersection of sociology and the history of science.

on those institutions and organizations that host and contribute to shape intellectual production and consumption, as departments and research centres or laboratories [e.g. Abbott 1999; Bourdieu 1984; Camic 1995; Isaac 2012]; the third is through a focus on "authors", especially what are called *key* authors. Who is a "key author" is not easy to tell beyond the simple point that every discipline and research area develops its own (changing) canon of central authors (pioneers, founding fathers, classics, institutional founders, and so on [see Guillory 1993; Baher 2016]). Indeed, *who* is a key author and *why*, and especially *how* it happened for someone to become a central or very influential author in a certain discipline, knowledge area or research tradition – this is exactly the point of this Symposium.

Paradigms of course have been powerful vehicles for the circulation of ideas and intellectual exchange – think of Marxism, structuralism, (neo)positivism, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, keynesianism, symbolic interactionism and so on. Beyond national and even disciplinary boundaries, they provide a common language and a set of shared references. A focus on paradigms and their circulation is obviously a matter of interest when studying the social life of ideas.[5] Since paradigms and theoretical frameworks however are always more or less associated with a few thinkers, authors persist as crucial reference points for any social study of ideas intended to go beyond the assumption that ideas do have a force in themselves, and their spread is simply a consequence of their supposedly immanent force.

A focus on authors as the socially recognized "creator" of ideas – or even simply as the crucial "bearer" of ideas – is a compulsive component to any social study of ideas. How did these authors – these and not other – achieve (international) recognition? How did their ideas and theories spread across spaces and times? Methodologically speaking, this question can be approached through quantitative analysis of their works in translation [Sapiro and Bustamante 2009], of the citations of their works [e.g. Sallaz and Zavisca 2007; Santoro and Gallelli 2016a], and/or of the reviews, articles, dissertations, books dedicated to their thought, depending on the specific research questions [e.g. Santoro and Gallelli 2016b]. Quantitative analysis can be combined with a qualitative inquiry on the intermediaries such as translators, publishers and other intellectual producers who played a role in their circulation and with a study of the critical reception and uses of their works. Their participation in conferences, talks, and publications in academic journals in the reception field are significant indicators of their involvement in the reception process and in their in-

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[5] To be sure, paradigms and formations – such as structuralism, Marxism, Cultural studies, Gender studies, etc. – have been the topic of a focused research stream inside the wider research project from which this Symposium arose; they will be the object of a forthcoming special issue of the *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*.

ternational strategy. These venues and publications should be situated in the structure of the reception field, in order to understand the signification and uses of their work in a context which differs from the one where it originally appeared. Their reception within the academic field raises questions such as: how was their work interpreted? Was it used as random (superficial) reference, for theoretical discussion, or to build up progressive research programs (using Lakatos' terminology)? Is their large reception related to their crossing of disciplinary and geographic boundaries by hybridizing different theoretical and/or empirical traditions (like Habermas who brings together American pragmatism, the sociological classics and speech act theory, or Bourdieu who combines Durkheim, Weber, structuralism and Marxism)? However, the international circulation of ideas often transcends the academic field. The reception of these author's works in foreign media is telling of the broader cultural, social or political meaning they acquire in this different context. The distance from the original field and the different context can favour ideological uses that were not meant by the author, as illustrated by the reception of John Rawls' theory of justice in France [Hauchecorne 2009]. Moreoever, their reception may contribute to the internationalization of the public sphere and to the transformation of the figure of the (public) intellectual. An interesting and under-researched question is how their reception abroad affected their trajectory. Finally, the legacy of these authors in the present is a crucial issue which has reflexive and epistemological implications.[6]

These are the main questions driving the research project from which this Symposium is drawn[7]. Specifically, the five articles that follow explore how a few selected (and internationally well known) Twentieth-century thinkers/writers in the social and human sciences were received and circulated across various disciplines and countries in Europe and America. We selected thinkers/writers who have had a profound social or political impact in a variety of knowledge formations and even beyond the academia: Thomas Piketty (an economist who in a very short time and mainly thanks to a single book gained the status of an international public intellectual), Edward Said and Roland Barthes (representatives of literary criticism in respectively its postcolonial and semiological varieties, both widely renown as scholars and intellectuals), Hannah Arendt (a Jew female scholar representative of an uncommon blend of socio-political theory, philosophy and journalism, risen to a sort of iconic status in the last decades), and Michel Foucault (possibly the most read and quoted philosopher and social theorist of the second half of the Twentieth century, whose ideas have an impact well beyond the boundaries of philosophy).

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[6] On the science of science as a tool for reflexivity, see Bourdieu [2001].
[7] See *infra* for details.

The countries involved in the processes of reception under investigation are variously located in the global map, and with different political and cultural weight and histories: the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Argentina, Canada.

For the selected authors, the articles investigate her/his intellectual biography with a specific transnational perspective, organizing their argument around a variety of empirically grounded questions: in which disciplines and countries his or her ideas were adopted and by whom? How did they achieve international recognition? How did their theories spread over time, and how were they involved in this process? Which aspects of his or her work were taken up, and for which intellectual purpose? What alterations or emphases were made and why? Still: who were the first in local, i.e. national fields, to introduce these ideas and with what agenda? What was the professional relationship between the key thinkers and those who introduced and diffused their ideas? By what means were the ideas introduced (e.g. the organization of a special conference, or the editing of a book, or a program of translations)? Were they used to subvert the dominant theories in the disciplinary field of reception? Who were the main scholars who rejected or criticized these ideas and why did they? How did the work of these key thinkers become part of the canon? Which impact had their work on the definition, and transformation, of canons? Was it used for social or cultural policy? Is their large reception related to their crossing of disciplinary and geographic boundaries by hybridizing different theoretical and/or empirical tradition? Where there political issues at stake in their reception? Not every article of course addresses all these questions (space wouldn't permit), but these are the kind of queries and curiosities that guided each case study according to the general research framework set forth for the wider project.

As should be clear, the articles here collected do not have special theoretical ambitions, even if they help in refining and integrating existing theories and models. Their objective is another: to ground on possibly solid empirical basis the study of ideas as vehicles and outcomes of social processes in localized social worlds.

The following articles are selected[8] results of a collective research project (IN-TERCO-SSH), funded by the EU and coordinated by Gisèle Sapiro, with the participation of research units from the UK (Cambridge University), Italy (University of Bologna), Austria (University of Graz), the Netherlands (Erasmus University), Hungary (John Wesley Theological College, Budapest), Argentina (CONICET, Cordoba), and France (Paris, CNRS). More specifically, they are the outcome of a special task, coordinated by Marco Santoro, on the circulation of authors, which in-

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[8] All the articles have been peer-reviewed by the editors and at least one external expert not originally included in the project.

cludes studies also on other "key authors" as Antonio Gramsci, Karl Polanyi, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gayatri Spivak, to be included in a forthcoming book together with chapters on the circulation of paradigms [*Ideas on the move,* Palgrave 2018].

We have collected in this Symposium these five articles as representative of the kind of research we have done in these years along the lines of an empirically grounded social study of the social and human sciences, to be developed as a much needed and potentially fruitful integration to the well established "social studies of (the natural) sciences" (SSS).[9] Our approach of "SSH studies" however broadens the scope to the historical sociology of intellectuals [Eyal and Buchholz 2010] by studying the circulation of ideas not only in the scientific field but also beyond, in the public sphere and in the field of ideological production.

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[9] For a relatively recent assessment of this transdisciplinary field, see Hackett *et al*. [2007].

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Abstract: The Symposium is a contribution to the burgeoning field of research on the social life of ideas. It focuses on one central aspect of ideas' life, namely the patterns and mechanisms of their circulation across languages and national borders. Inspired by a seminal article of Pierre Bourdieu on the social conditions of the international circulation of ideas [2002], this Symposium is especially focused on the travelling of ideas and theories originally developed in the social and human sciences. In this presentation we illustrate the genesis of this Symposium and explain the rationale behind its contents, insisting on the persistence of the "author" as a driving force in the social life of ideas – their assemblage, their consumption, their diffusion, their discussion, their legitimation, their transgression.

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Gisèle Sapiro is Professor of Sociology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and a Research director at the CNRS. From 2010 to 2013, she was the director of the Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique. Her interests include the sociology of intellectuals, of literature, of translation and the history of the human and social sciences. She is the author of *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* [1999; English transl.: *French Writers' War.* Duke UP, 2014] and of *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* [2011]. Between 2013 and 2017 she run the European Project INTERCO-SSH (*International Cooperation in the SSH*).