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Literary fiction and social science. Two partially overlapping magisteria

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Abstract

Literary fiction and social science, despite the fact that they comprise two methodologically autonomous cultures, are nonetheless creatively interfering with each other. This paper explores the multiple points of contact between literature and social science and tracks the influences that literary fiction has had on social-scientific knowledge. Nine cases of ideas originally developed in literary sphere and then taken over by various social sciences and integrated into their conceptual vocabularies form the analytic material of this study. The main argument defended in this paper is that literary fiction is a great source of ideas that can inspire theory construction in social sciences. The corpus of literary texts which make up the textual universe of literature contains many embryonically foreshadowed concepts and proto-theories that can be worked out by social sciences into full-blown scientific conceptualizations. Literary tradition is also the depository of punctual propositions that can be distilled from fiction and translated into empirically testable hypotheses. This quality of literary fiction, of providing 'Prêt-à-tester' propositions, makes it a predilect source of inspiration for social science theorizing.[2]

Keywords

Literary fiction, literature, social science, social theory, third culture

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Setting the stage: literary fiction and social science as interactive magisteria

The system of knowledge produced and administered in academia has historically developed into a cognitive structure resembling a honeycomb pattern, with each discipline trying to hermetically insulate itself from its neighbors. However, the boundaries with which each discipline surrounded themselves in order to guarantee the achievement of the triple objective of institutional survival, epistemic autonomy and intellectual identity show cracks that makes them permeable to mutual influences. Inter-disciplinary communication is permitted and facilitated, instead, by the porous nature of the frontiers that separate different areas of knowledge in self-sufficient containers than by the desideratum of collaboration. Above all of the boundaries that structure the system of knowledge in a mosaical model there is a wall that trenchantly divides academia into ‘two cultures’ (Snow, 1993) [1959], each culture operating with its own distinctive logic. These are the scientific culture of the natural sciences, on the one side of the dividing line, and the humanistic culture of the classical disciplines (literature, history, philosophy, and various other human and cultural studies), on the other. Fields of study like sociology, individual and social psychology, social and cultural anthropology, and even political economy – disciplines housed together under the rubric of “social sciences” – are caught in the middle of these two antagonistic cultures. Due to their *in-betwixt position*, all of them have dual intellectual personalities, combining their humanistic legacy with their latterly acquired scientific outlook. Thanks to this in-betwixt position along the humanistic-scientific continuum, social sciences are intellectual spaces of creating interferences between the two cultures, realms where ideas with different disciplinary origins can meet and enrich each other. But social sciences are not only spaces of cultural intersection, intellectual cross-roads and *rendez-vous* places between the humanistic and the scientific culture; they can also be floating bridges transporting ideas from one cultural bank to another. Social sciences break up the binary equation of the humanistic versus the scientific cultures by advancing a third, mixed, culture that strives towards scientific rigor without denying its humanistic heritage. This dual nature of social science given by its in-betwixt position is best revealed by the special relationship it has with literary fiction.

Departing from these considerations as the starting backdrop, this paper proposes an analytical probing into the nature of the relationship between social science theorizing – defined as an empirically controlled rational speculation on social reality –, and literary fiction – by which we refer to an imaginative textual construction inspired from the phenomenal reality, but independent of the natural laws and sociological regularities that structure the empirical world. By creatively appropriating J.S. Gould’s (1997) notion of ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ devised for describing the relationship between the realms of religion and science, social science and literary fiction can be construed as forming two distinct, but partially overlapping and mutually interacting, magisteria. They are, on the one hand, distinct, as each magisterium is governed by its own intrinsic rules and procedures. Social science theorizing finds its *raison d’être* in constructing meaningful renderings of social reality that can be useful to either understand, explain or even predict the phenomena making up the social universe. The supreme twin criteria for assessing the quality of social theorizing are methodological observance, i.e., compliance with the methodological procedures in doing research, and the 'empirical fitness' of the theory, i.e., the degree to which theoretical statements are supported by empirical observations. Functional and also normative in this finite province of meaning, circumscribed by the prescriptions of methodological observance and empirical fitness, is what T. Parsons called 'cognitive rationality' (Parsons and Platt, 1973, p. 26), namely, the specific mode of cognitively processing the informational input in compliance with the canons of logical reasoning and formal procedures in order to generate a methodologically validated theoretical output.

In contrast, the magisterium of literary fiction is governed by a different 'value orientation' and founded upon a very particular normative underpinning. Within the realm of literary creation, the value of artistic experience reigns supreme. The supremacy of this artistic principle does not mean that literature does not have important epistemic functions as well. Just like social sciences, literary fiction strives to make sense of and to give meaning to human experiences. This is especially true for that strand of literary thought that critically engaged with the social realities generated by the revolution of modernity, which W. Lepenies (1988, p. 155) thinks of as 'concealed sociology'. Along similar lines, K. Kumar (2001, p. 44) has argued that even in those societies where sociology did not find fertile ground for it to establish a tradition of social thought (as in 19th and early 20th century England), literature and social history were an 'implicit sociology', a 'sociology by stealth'. Having no institutional shelter in which to develop as a *sui generis* discipline, the sociological vision made itself present disguised in literature. This is why social criticism expressed in literary works can be taken as an implicit 'literary sociology', substituting or supplementing sociology proper as a form of social investigation. But apart from their epistemic communality as forms of investigating modern realities, the difference separating them lies in their divergent methodological approaches. Whereas social sciences employ standardized and intersubjectively approved methods of researching social reality, the ways of literatures are the means of insight and intuition. Its only test is not the one judging its 'empirical fitness', but that of the artistic experience. Although imagination has a crucial role to play in scientific craftwork, it is nonetheless confined to the realm of inventing conjectures and devising methods by which to test them. Imaginative reasoning is paramount in what Jacob Bernoulli (1713) called, three centuries ago, '*ars conjectandi*' – the art of conjecturing – just as it is decisive in methodological inventiveness to which resourceful scientists are obliged to resort in order to test their conjectures against reality. Products of human imagination, scientific conjectures still have to face the trial of experience, i.e., the exam of empirical reality. Literary products, instead, are 'free-floating' ideas, gliding over and above empirical reality without having to account any of its cognitive content to it. It escapes the methodological jurisdiction to which scientific ideas are bound. Inside the frame of reference specific to the limited province of meaning of literary fiction functions what might be called – paralleling Parsons' notion of 'cognitive rationality' – *artistic rationality* powered by imaginative thinking. As expressed in literature, by aesthetic rationality we are designating the mental operation of mobilizing cognitive resources in order to articulate reasonable imaginative structures in the guise of fictional scenarios. If theorizing in social science solicits hard reason as a formal prerequisite, literary fiction employs soft, imaginative, reason to construct plausible, reasonable, fictional scenarios. Stepping into the sphere of fiction, strong logical reason is diluted to 'imaginative reason' – a notion made popular by the 19th century English literary critic Matthew Arnold, but coined centuries earlier by Francis Bacon (Delaura, 1977, p. 7). Enjoying literary fiction could often require the cognitive effort described by the fellow English philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) in terms of 'the willful suspension of disbelief' (p. 145). By stark contrast, the scientific attitude (natural and social alike) prescribes a perpetual 'will to doubt' (Lloyd, 1907), a relentless criticism and restless suspicion exerted toward its object of study.

Despite the deliberately contrasting picture that we have painted between theorizing from a social scientific point of view and constructing possible worlds from a fictional perspective, social science and literary fiction are far from being parallel semantic universes. On the contrary, social science and literary fiction can be said to form *partially-overlapping magisteria*. That is to say, they are trapped in a dialectical relationship, each of them being the subject to the other's creative interferences and suffering mutual influences. The present analysis is unidirectionally restricted, focusing exclusively on the stimulative influences transmitted from literature towards social scientific theory. The study will exemplify a number of such influences by examining specific cases in which ideas originally developed in literary fiction stimulated social thought and were thereby worked out as rigorous scientific notions. The opposite direction of influence (more specifically, from psychology towards literature) has been thoroughly investigated by N. Mărgineanu (2002) [1970], who in his book *Psihologie și literatură* [*Psychology and Literature*] showed how psychological knowledge broke out from its disciplinary straightjacket to penetrate deeply into literature. Suffice it to mention in order to highlight the intimate connections between literature and psychology is the example of the 'Oedipus complex'. Having its origins in Greek mythology, the Oedipal complex first found its literary expression in Sophocles' 5th century B.C. play *Oedipus Rex*. Its literary avatars resurfaced in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and later in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, until it received its psychoanalytical reworking by S. Freud at the turn of the 20th century. After Freud theoretically articulated the concept and transformed it into a famous complex, the Oedipal topic was reclaimed by literary writers, reappearing in works such as D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, or in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Undoubtedly, after Freud, the complex bears the indelible mark of psychoanalysis. In a bold move, H. Bloom (1995), reasserting the literature's primacy over the notion, turns the tables and proposes, instead of a Freudian reading of Shakespeare, a Shakespearean reading of Freud. His analysis leads him to conclude that it was not Hamlet who suffered from 'Oedipus complex', but Freud who had a 'Hamlet complex' (Bloom, 1995, pp. 385-386). Another prime example comes from the literary applications of the psychological notion of 'stream of consciousness'. Coined and elaborated by William James in his magnum opus *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), it was quickly adopted as a principle of modernist literature, magisterially employed in masterpieces of 20th century literary works, such as Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The approach taken in this paper is based on the assumption that literature and social theory are different ways of knowing and representing the social world, each of them subscribing to its own specific set of internal or immanent rules of the craft. Although grounded in different epistemics, their target is often the same, namely, social reality. This is especially true in the case of the more realistically oriented brands of fictional literature, as is the case of literary realism or naturalism, for example. It is through their great power of insight into the social and human condition that writers can supply social researchers with invaluable input for social theorizing. Literary tradition, with its great body of texts, is for social theory a reservoir of thoughts and a veritable bank of ideas. As such, ideas developed by literary men and women can serve as heuristic tools made use of by social researchers for precipitating their theoretical imagination. And indeed, scrutinizing the history of social scientific thought, one can detect multiple instances of fictional structures *qua* ideational fertilizers that have catalyzed the development of theoretical conceptions as a result of a thorough scientific working out of the original insight. These cases of originally literary ideas turned into scientific concepts fall into two distinct classes: they are either i) somewhat loosely defined ideas and metaphors that were expressed already in the literary corpus and through a meticulous treatment they were given the status of scientific concepts, or ii) fictional phenomena and events narrated in literary works that, due to their prototypical quality, were proved by social research to be theoretical abstractions of empirically observable social facts. It goes without saying that the collection of examples presented below was compiled based on somewhat arbitrary criteria, with no claim to having exhausted the multitude of instances in which literature creatively interferes to fecundate social science. Their exemplificatory role is that of back-boning the argumentation by providing concrete illustrations. They were drawn deliberately from all across social sciences – sociology, psychology, social psychology, demography, and economics – in order to show the extent of literature's influences upon all strands of social thinking.

Teatrum mundi: the Shakespearean axiomatic of dramaturgical sociology

In the first category falls the entire interactionist paradigm of dramaturgical sociology, concentrated on in E. Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The foundational axiom of the whole perspective is none other than the famous Shakespearean phrase 'All the world's a stage' from *As You Like It*. It is self-evident (at least for people with an abecedarian dramatic culture) that the sociological paradigm originated in Goffman's work is characterized by a minimal coefficient of intellectual originality. Goffman's major merit is that of translating the Shakespearean theme into a full-fledged sociological theory, through which he applied 'the world-as-stage' motif to concrete social interactions enacted inside the domain of factual reality, followed by formulating a detailed conceptual lexicon that enabled theorizing the social transactions performed on the stage of everyday life. Taking Shakespeare's metaphor depicting the world as a stage seriously, Goffman conceptualizes the individual as *homo theatralis*, as a full time actor performing her repertoire of roles, resorting to a careful 'impression management' through which she displays her self to the social world. Thus, a single dramatic replica inspired the polishing of a sociological lens, through which social life reveals some of its meanings that remained in a permanently paradigmatic-blind-spot as long as it continued to be examined through the prism of alternative theories. In this particular case, literary fiction performs the function of *sociological revelation*, unveiling aspects of the social reality hidden behind the scenes.

However, the paradigm of dramaturgical sociology is only the most thoroughly elaborated version and the most elegantly theoretically assembled in a long series of evolutions. The direct precursor of the Goffmanian variation is 'role theory' (Turner, 2001), the approach whose guiding ideas are consubstantial to the sociological perspective. Suffering successive developments, due to the significant contributions of G.H. Mead, J.L. Moreno, and R. Linton, role theory starts from the fundamental observations that social world is not chaotic, social interactions are not arbitrary, and individual behavior is not erratic. By contrast, social reality, being rigidly structured, makes inter-individual exchanges to comply with a normative scenario, and as a result, individual behavior settles itself into predictable roles. The conceptual hard core of role theory, that is the terminological pair of 'social actor' – 'social role', transcends the frame of reference bounded by a single theoretical perspective, having a transparadigmatic nature. The theatrical vocabulary – in which social actions are rendered as 'roles' performed by 'social actors' making up the *Dramatis personæ* of the play according to a more or less normative 'script' in front of an real or imagined 'audience' – is at the heart of the sociological vision. Whatever the theoretical species, the notions of theatrical inspiration are *pièces de résistance* of sociological perspective. This is one reason why sociology can be considered as a second-order dramatic discourse, or even a 'pseudo-dramatic science', since it takes over theatrical terminology that it diverts from its original purpose towards the systematic study of society.

'Werther effect': the demographic consequences of fiction

The second category is more generous, comprising a larger number of instances of literary ideas worked out through social scientific notions. Along with Shakespeare, another playwright included in the 'Western Canon' – as H. Bloom (1995) calls the constellation of the most valued literary creations of Western civilization – which has boosted sociological theorizing was Goethe. In 1774 *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published. The novel, written in epistolary form, tells the impossible love felt by the protagonist for Charlotte, love that ultimately ends with the suicidal act of Werther. The popular success of the novel, written in the vigorous 'Sturm und Drang' style was also certified by the wave of suicides retained in collective memory that succeeded the massive reading of the young man's drama, torn apart by the agonies of his unfulfilled love. From here to hypothesizing a 'Werther effect' was only a step away. The author of the sociological conceptualization of the social fact triggered by Goethe's work was D.P. Phillips (1974), who exactly two century after the novel's publication, statistically proved that the suicide rate suddenly increases immediately after the suicide of a public figure is widely publicized. Ten years later, I.M. Wasserman (1984) reinforced the original findings, showing that the publicity of a socially prominent individual sets off the 'Werther effect', i.e. the statistically significant increase of suicide rate in the population exposed to the highly mediatized suicidal case. Later on, using a quasi-experimental design, A. Schmidtke and H. Häfner (1988) were able to find conclusive 'new evidence for an old hypothesis'. The number of railway suicides registered among teenagers that were exposed to a TV series (a six episode weekly serial broadcasted twice, first in 1981 and then in 1982) relating the story of a 19 years old male student who committed suicide by throwing himself in front of the train (perhaps influenced by Tolstoy's heroine, Anna Karenina) sharply increased over the 70 day period starting from the broadcasting of the first episode. The authors found that most vulnerable to this 'copycat effect' were people closest to the fictional model – a modern version of Goethe's young Werther – in terms of gender and age. Among male teenagers with ages between 15 and 19 who watched the TV series, the number of railways suicides rose by 175 percent, with lesser and lesser impact upon older age group, as age difference were making people find less and less reasons to identify with the suicidal model. The social events triggered by the fictional tragedy of the young Werther generated demographic and quasi-experimental research, whose results statistically attest to the veracity of the impact that fictional imagination exercises on social reality. What these results show is the power of fiction to impinge upon reality. Fiction can turn into reality, by providing models of action to which people can resort in their real existences. Apart from direct mimetic suicidal behavior, as shown by real human casualties of the 'Werther effect' over the last two and a half centuries since Goethe published his novel, literary characters, with their fictitious courses of actions and solutions to different imaginary life situations, can become for people who read their stories 'fictional reference group' whose modes of actions can inform and influence real people. Fictional characters populating the world of literature can become 'role models', inspiring people on how to live their life, but also – as tragically revealed by the Werther effect – on how to bring it to an end. They provide their readers with ways of living as well as, alas, ways of dying.

The 'Hemingway complex' and the psycho-genetics of suicide

The suicidal phenomenon constantly aroused sociological thought, benefiting over time from a special treatment in the evolution of the discipline. Keeping a connection to this sphere of interest, it should be highlighted that the interference of literature in social science is not strictly confined to the literary content of fictional production. Even the biographies of the protagonists from the literary field have the capacity to inspire conceptual creation in the scientific sphere. Ernest Hemingway, Nobel Prize laureate in literature in 1954, bequeathed to posterity the image of a tumultuous personality who lived an adventurous life. He not only lived his bohemian life to the fullest, but he also recorded it in his writings, as many of the works that made him famous are loaded with strong biographical tints (*The Green Hills of Africa*, *Snow of Kilimanjaro*, *A Moveable Feast*, etc.). It was precisely his incandescent lifestyle and especially his suicidal end that prompted P. Iluț (2009, p. 337) to create the notion of a 'Hemingway complex'. The complex bearing the writer's name manifests itself by a clear awareness of self-atrophiation (on the physical, intellectual, and erotic levels) brought about by aging that can predispose to suicide. Considering the American writer's pedigree, there is the possibility that the entire nexus of mental processes that make up the Hemingway complex might have a genetic foundation, taking into account the fact that the writer comes from a famous suicidal family (his father, brother, sister, and niece also committed suicide). In a revised formulation of the original concept, P. Iluț (personal communication) emphasized that although the Hemingway complex does not specifically include the suicidal ending, its centrality being the intense and tragic subjective experience of losing the bio-mental strengths of youth – a youth deeply admired and envied at the same time –, he now considers that the Hemingway syndrome can be a genetic predisposition which in conjunction with other factors favors the conscious and sudden renunciation of one's own life. Recent research suggests the possibility that the suicidal ideation generated by the consciousness of self-atrophiation could be simple epiphenomenal by-products of some underlying genetic factors. The hereditary factors thesis has lately acquired robust support in scientific literature (Roy et al, 1997; Turecki, 2001; Brent and Mann, 2005). A recent meta-analytic study (Voracek and Loibl, 2007) comprising a total of 32 studies collected from 13 countries, has found that suicide risk is significantly higher in monozygotic twin pairs than in dizygotic pairs. However, the great majority of researchers recognize the complexity of the suicidal phenomenon, considering it a multidimensional act, out of which only one dimension is represented by genetic factors. It would be a grave inferential fallacy to conclude that there is a suicide gene. Such a judgment would denote a *genetic vulgata* rather than a scientifically grounded reasoning. Among the circles of respectable geneticists, the controversy remains open over what is genetically transmitted. Apart from the relatively low possibility of transmitting an allegedly 'suicide gene', two hypotheses retain their plausibility: the transmission of genes responsible for psychiatric disorders and/or personality-related genes (Roy et al, 1997, p. 142). Of course, as it is acknowledged by geneticists themselves, heredity alone does not exhaust the explanation of the phenomenon in question. Like all of human behavior, suicide is a bio-psycho-socio-cultural phenomenon. Strict genetic explanations of suicide reveal not only a superficial biological reductionism coupled with a dangerous biological imperialism, but also expresses a gross misunderstanding of the social and cultural determinations of human behavior. É. Durkheim (1997) [1897] gave scientific honorability to the nascent field of sociology by showing the underlying social causes of suicide (the degree of social integration being highlighted as the key factor responsible for the variations in suicide rates). Following the paradigmatic exemplar established by Durkheim, a 'sociological autopsy' of suicide can be performed in order to discover the structural factors underlying suicide rates (Finch et al, 2001; Scourfield et al, 2012). A complete scientific necropsy of the suicidal act would be able to provide an integral equation outlining the specific causal weights of genetic, personality, concrete-contextual (situational vectors that influenced behavior), and social-ecological (social integration, socioeconomic status, area of residence, etc.) factors. Constructing this total equation of suicidal phenomenon, that so far remains a remote possibility, would discern the causal complex that constitutes 'the Hemingway complex'.

Deindividuation: shocking fiction and fictional shocks

By way of a strange coincidence, in the same year that Hemingway received the Nobel for Literature (1954), another memorable literary event took place: William Golding published his novel, *The Lord of the Flies*, which was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983. This literary creation inspired a famous social psychology experiment conducted by P. Zimbardo (1969) on the relation between anonymity and aggression. In his widely acclaimed novel, Golding fictionally constructs a social microcosm brought into being by the crash of an airplane on an exotic desert island, of which only a dozen former chorister boys survive. What concerns us from the whole narrative is the passage in which, for them to overcome their moral inhibitions that hampered their attempts of killing a sow in order to eat it, the boys painted their faces, hiding behind their new chromatic facial masks. The effect has been spectacular: they killed the sow without the slightest remorse of conscience. Intrigued by the moral metamorphosis facilitated by the anonymisation imagined by Golding, Zimbardo sets himself the task of studying the effect of anonymity on aggression in controlled laboratory conditions. His subjects (female students from New York University) were required to apply electric shocks to a victim who was actually a confederate of the experimenter, while the shocks were fictitious, and the victim's reaction thereto – credible simulacra. Following the methodological protocols required by an experimental design, he divided subjects into two groups. The control group, where students who were punishing the victim were identifiable were wearing their own clothing and also had badges on their chest with their respective names engraved on them in order to enhance their identities. The experimental group, in which the other half of the students were randomly allocated, were dressed in costumes similar to the Ku Klux Klan white robes, that completely camouflaged their identities. The result was clear-cut: the subjects to whom it was induced a consciousness of anonymity applied electric shocks for much longer periods of time than the subjects to whom their identity was highlighted. The explanatory model elaborated to make sense of these results was as simple as it was powerful: anonymity produces disinhibition, which releases aggression. Conceived as an imaginary social 'experiment', fictionally constructed by its author based solely on empirically unverified intuitions, Golding's fictional scenario, once introduced in the aseptic environment of the laboratory, has been translated into an authentic social psychology experiment ('true experiment', to use D.T. Campbell's phrase, 1963). This experimentalization of literary fiction did not only scientifically validate a literary intuition, but also set the foundation for what was to become the theory of deindividuation in social psychology. Golding's novel, through its inspirational action, served the function of *experimental suggestion.* It provided social psychology with a 'ready-to-test' hypothesis, and thus, Golding's insightful fictional scenario opens our list of examples displaying 'prêt-à-testability' that we are going to explore later in this article.

Robinson Crusoe: the heuristic formalization of a one-man fictional economy

Remaining cognitively captive inside the literary paradigm of the desert island, invented by Daniel Defoe in the early 18th century, Robinson Crusoe's solitary life inspired the economic theory of what L. von Mises (1996, p. 246) called 'autistic economics'. By taking for granted the situation narrated by Defoe, economists have constructed a one-man fictional economy, whose operating system they have mathematically formalized. Closely paralleling Defoe's novel, Robinson Crusoe economics assumes the existence of an autarchic economic order in which only a solitary economic agent is acting, being both the sole producer and the only consumer. Therefore, the Robinson Crusoe economy model is a theory of production and consumption grounded on a set of basic assumptions: a) the postulate of economic autarky, having as its corollary the absence of trade, money and prices; b) the postulate of agentic solitariness, i.e. the existence of a single economic agent; c) the postulate of rationality of the economic agent, according to which the solitary actor acts on the basis of the profit maximization principle.

The theorizing endeavors inspired by Defoe's fiction has undergone a critical fire, focused especially on two tender spots; namely, the artificiality of the model and the overrationality a priori attributed to the economic agent. Alongside K. Marx (1976, p. 9) [1857], we can call into question the epistemic value of this radically individualist economic model, the result of 'the unimaginative fantasies of eighteenth-century romances à la Robinson Crusoe', contesting its obvious artificial character. *Pace* Marx and the chorus of detractors of the merits of one-man economics, there is at least a strong reason to defend this way of abstract theorizing. This highly artificial undertaking of mathematically modeling the functioning of a fictional one-man economy that clearly goes against the grains of reality, can be sufficiently justified by invoking *the epistemological instrumentalism thesis*. A relatively strong defense can, thus, be constructed in favor of one-man economics by acknowledging that the theoretical model in this case does not claim ontological credit, since it contends to be just a mere calculatory device. Consequently, its merits do not lie in the theory's grip on reality – it has none, since its coefficient of empirical realism is close to zero –, but in its powerful heuristic effects. The other critical charge targeting the excessive rationality attributed to the economic agent can be answered by *the heuristic reductionism argument*, i.e. deliberate simplification of complex reality in order to enable mathematical formalization. Constructing such theoretical fictitious models is only possible by accepting certain reductionist assumptions, which underlie the logic of discovery in social science. In developing the Robinson Crusoe economy, two heuristic 'methods of discovery' were used (Abbott, 2004): a) the technique of analogy (with literature) that A. Abbott considers to be the 'queen of heuristics' (p. 118), and b) making a reductionist assumption, a heuristic gambit whose theoretical power derives precisely from its 'recklessness'. However, as convincingly shown by H. Simon (1957), as early as half a century ago, the rationality postulate on which the image on *homo oeconomicus* is erected, despite its epistemic fertility, is based on a gross oversimplification.

In conclusion, the conversion of Robinson Crusoe's story through mathematical modeling into a one-man fictional economy illustrates the heuristic function that literature has on social science. The heuristics of formalization, despite its obvious artificial nature, contribute to understanding the functioning of the economic mechanisms by simplifying them to a maximum. Moreover, challenging the hypothetical Crusoe's image as the basis for economic theorizing or rejecting what E. Zerubavel (1999) calls 'the mental Robinson Crusoe' reflects the function of counter-reference, that of critically engaging a fictional straw man in order to demonstrate its implausibility. For instance, the radical individualism presumed by the one-man economy model is repudiated by Zerubavel in his attempt to intellectually legitimize his program of cognitive sociology, where the point against which the counter-argumentation is targeted is precisely the cognitive autonomy of Robinson Crusoe.

Shakespearean ready-to-test hypotheses: the theory of prêt-à-testability

Apart from providing the seminal idea of the 'world-as-stage' which sprouted in Linton's role-theory only to fully blossom in Goffman's paradigm of dramaturgical sociology, Shakespeare's opus contains many other punctual ideas that can be translated into testable hypotheses. In the tragedy *Macbeth*, for instance, Lady Macbeth persuades her husband to stab to death Duncan, the King of Scotland, in order to fulfill the prophecy that her husband, a general in Duncan's army, becomes the king (an eloquent example of 'self-fulfilling prophecy', Merton, 1968). After Macbeth commits the abominable murder, Lady Macbeth washes her hands in a compulsive-obsessive manner, in repeated attempts to clean herself from the imaginary bloodstain that she sees on her hands. The historical tragedy dramatized by Shakespeare encompasses a statement that can be transfigured into an experimentally testable hypothesis: hand washing cleans conscience. This is exactly what researchers C.B. Zhong and K. Liljenquist (2006) did, with a delay of exactly four centuries from the original tragedy, in a series of three experimental studies, following which they proved, in laboratory controlled conditions, the production of what they called 'the Macbeth effect': physical cleaning purifies morally. On the same note, even if it cannot be classified as a purely literary work, from the perspective of methodological naturalism, the New Testament incorporates a series of mythological fictions, allowing its inclusion in this discussion. 'The Macbeth effect' is a concept synonymous for what could be equally called 'the Pontius Pilate effect' (Ciccotti, 2007), following the biblical account of the physical, but with ample symbolical repercussion, gesture done by Pilate after convicting Jesus: the Roman governor of Judaea washed his hands of the capital sentence. Just like it did in the case of Golding's novel that inspired Zimbardo to test the deindividuation hypothesis in controlled experimental conditions, in this case too, fiction delivered to social science an experimental resource in the form of a conjecturable statement suitable for scientific experimentation. Many literary ideas share the quality of being '*Prêt-à-tester*' propositions, ready-to-test hypotheses. Under such circumstances, one of the tasks of social science is that of detecting 'facts in fiction' (Rockwell, 1974), but also of screening out facts *from* fiction. The first step of probing and discovering facts embedded in fiction must be followed by the second step of validating facts from fiction through rigorous scientific testing.

The second example of prêt-à-testability is drawn from the famous tragic story of Romeo and Juliet. Once again, a Shakespearean tragedy sets the foundations of a respectable psychological theory. No wonder H. Bloom (1995, p. 62) argues persuasively that Shakespeare is 'the center of the embryo of a world canon', given the depth of his probing, *via* literary means, into the human condition. The sequence of events that make up the plot of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, which became the archetype of romantic love in Western culture, is well known: Romeo, from the Montague family, falls in love with Juliet of the Capulet Household, but their love is forbidden by the deadly rivalry between their two families. Despite parental prohibition, the two marry in secret and then consummate their love. Due to certain dramatic complications, generating mutual misunderstandings, both protagonists come to commit suicide. This radical narrative reduction of the Shakespearean drama aims not to trivialize its literary value, but to extract the propositions denoting 'prêt-à-testability': the hypothesis that prohibitive parental involvement enhances the love between their offspring. The veracity of precisely this statement of central importance to the dramatic structure has been investigated by R. Driscoll et al. (1972) in a sociological survey conducted on a sample of 140 couples. The analysis of the responses collected through questionnaires supported the hypothesis that 'parental interference in a love relationship intensifies the feelings of romantic love between members of the couple' (Driscoll et al, 1972, p. 1). The conclusion retains its validity for both unmarried and married couples. The authors have labeled the phenomenon, whose existence they have scientifically proved, 'the Romeo and Juliet effect'. The potentiation of love triggered by undesired involvements of the parents can be elegantly explained inside the parameters of psychological reactance theory, developed by J.W. Brehm (2008) [1966]. Succinctly, reactance theory assumes that the individual holds a firm subjective belief in his freedom of action (agentic freedom). Whenever an individual detects a (perceived or real) threat restricting the freedom of his action, a state of 'psychological reactance' will be automatically activated, with mobilizing effects towards restoring the original freedom. Consequently, the individual will initiate actions in her attempts to restore the *status quo ante* of her undiminished freedom. For example, in the situation where the normative adoption of an option is imposed upon an individual, cancelling her freedom of choice, the theory of psychological reactance hypothesizes that she will adopt a position contrary to the indication, in an effort to reassert his optative freedom. Extrapolated to the interpersonal level, and calibrated so as to explain the 'Romeo and Juliet effect', reactance theory advances the idea that persons engaged in an erotic relationship that detect a parental intrusion in their intimate affair will interpret their parents' action as a restriction to their range of freedom. In reaction to parental interference, lovers will be motivated to neutralize the adverse effects by escalating their commitment in the romantic relationship. Once again, dramatic fiction has provided prefabricated empirically ready-testable-hypotheses, prepared to be incorporated in the stock of scientifically certified knowledge. In the aftermath of these illustrations, the case for the *prêt-à-testability* of some fictional literary ideas can be put forward. Literary tradition is teeming with insights and intuitions that can be transmuted into scientifically validated hypotheses. It is a kind of scientific transubstantiation that can enrich social theory by strengthening both its humanistic and scientific natures.

The kickback effect of scientific concepts *via* literature: elective affinities

Far from being unidirectional, stimulative influences between the two cultures take the form of ideational cross-fertilization. Tracing the tortuous intellectual history of the notion of 'elective affinities' across centuries, a pattern of *conceptual allogamy* emerges out of the dialogue between fiction and science. The phrase originated in eighteenth-century chemistry, as the notional creation of Torbern Bergman, whose work *Disquisitio de attractionibus electivis* published in 1775 included the idea of 'elective affinity', by which the Swedish scholar referred to the laws of association and dissociation governing the relations between chemical elements (Howe, 1978). Tracking the idea's trajectory in the intellectual universe of the nineteenth century, we find that the term is established in German language (the language and culture that would ensure its fame) in 1779 by its introduction in an influential dictionary of neologisms. In relatively short time after having made its entrance into the German cultural scape, the phrase was to be propelled to the status of notorious catchword through the literary work of Goethe published in 1809, entitled precisely *Elective Affinities*. Not foreign to scientific research (the proof in this respect being the theory of color that he developed in 1810 as a scientific rival to Newton's optics, Sepper, 2003), Goethe borrowed the chemical conception of elective affinities, literary transforming it into a metaphorical formula for the dynamics of attraction and rejection of inter-human feelings. However, despite reaching literary heights, the idea of elective affinities' journey does not end with Goethe's novel. It stays within the German culture but transits from the world of letters to that of the social sciences. With the emergence of Max Weber as a major social thinker, Bergman's and then Goethe's notion is incorporated into his conceptual armature into which it occupies a pivotal position. It has become commonplace in sociology the claim that Marx's specter haunts the entire Weberian opus, which is considered to be a continual 'dialogue with the ghost of Marx' (Salmon, 1945, p. 596). It is in the context of this remote intellectual exchange that the concept of 'elective affinities' comes into the picture. Weber appeals to this notion that he acquired from Goethe (Marianne Weber related how in his youth Max lectured all the 40 volumes of Goethe's work, McKinnon, 2010) in reaction to the mechanistic explanation of the emergence of capitalism formulated by Marx. In his celebrated *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, M. Weber (1930) [1905] explains how the capitalist societal formation was configured not only by simple economic determinism, but through the elective affinity between the Protestant ethos, whose expression was intra-mundane asceticism, and economic discipline. The ideational factor (Protestant ethics with its inner worldly ascetism and its individualistic, rationalistic, outlook) and the material one (economic organization) have 'sought' each other out in history, their conjunction producing modern capitalism. The long lasting ideal-material dichotomy (of which the opposition between the Hegelian idealism and the Marxian materialism was only its most recent philosophical incarnation) – source of simplistic, mechanical, and unidirectional explanations – was dismantled by, and replaced with, the explanatory device of elective affinities advanced by Max Weber.

Reconstructing the intellectual itinerary crossed by the concept of elective affinities – starting from chemistry, passing through literature, and ending (for the time being) in historical sociology – the existence of an integrated circuit of knowledge becomes evident. In addition to an evolution through successive disciplinary appropriations, the history of the concept reveals a 'round trip relationship' between science and literature. The same phenomenon could be called 'kickback effect' *via* literature, since what was originated in chemistry has returned to the social scientific magisterium enriched after a beneficial literary stopover.

The West: a Spenglerian tragedy

In its turn, literary fiction taps into multiple sources of raw materials which it uses in its creative purposes. We have just shown, in the previous section of this paper, how the originally scientific notion of elective affinities has been capitalized in the world of letters. Is it not only sciences (social and natural alike) that are using the stock of ideas pertaining to the literary tradition; literature can also tap into the flow of scientific ideas, thus, putting science in its own intellectual service. Another rich deposit, whose intellectual lodes were thoroughly mined especially by romantic literature, is made up of folklore and popular legends. Perhaps the theme with the highest fecundity level that literature has successively harvested from popular culture is the dramatic story of the scholar who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for omniscient knowledge and worldly pleasures. The first exquisitely executed literary conversion of the Faustian motif from the vernacular into dramatic genre was carried out by Christopher Marlowe in his 1604 *The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. But only with the dramatic recoding performed by Goethe the Faustian theme acquires canonical centrality in the literary corpus of Western culture. Goethe's literary genius, whose maximum expression is arguably *Faust: a tragedy* [1808, 1831], allowed him to introduce a substantial 'dramatic license', by divesting through an auctorial maneuver the entire moral load carried by the tragic end of Doctor Faustus. If both in the popular version and in its first dramatic systematization performed by Marlowe, Faust is condemned to the tortures of hell, respecting each clause in the contract signed with his own blood, the end constructed by Goethe is radically different: instead of eternal damnation we have an apotheotical finale in which Faust is redeemed by divine grace. In this *Deus ex machina* ending that saves the Old Faust resides Goethe's lasting signature.

Popular fascination to the Faustic myth, resuscitated by recurrent dramatizations of the legend by literati heavyweights like Marlowe and Goethe, made the figure of Faust acquire broad cultural resonance. Finally, the Faustian theme also penetrated social sciences. Firstly, Max Weber (1930) [1905], in the closing chapter of his famous work dealing with the 'elective affinities' between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism concludes that modernity sacrifices 'the Faustian universality of man' (p. 180), caused by the organization of capitalist production whose success and efficiency are tributary to specialization and rational division of labor (Wilding, 2008). Yet the thinker who made best use of the Faustian metaphor was Oswald Spengler (1926) in his monumental *The Decline of the West*. In his quest to extract the 'logic' and the 'organic structure of history' (p. 5), Spengler noted that 'human history is the sum of mighty life-courses' (p. 3), a sequence of major cultural organisms, each animated by its own 'soul'. These tremendous cultural organisms unwrap themselves in history by passing through the invariable cycle of the spring, summer, autumn, and winter of their birth, growth, maturation and decay, each season being determined by the creative potency of the culture's soul. In his vast analytical panning, Spengler identified three types of cultures, which he calls: *Faustian*, Appolonian, and Magian that correspond to Western culture, classical culture, and Arabic culture respectively. In full accordance with the spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*), deeply permeated by a pessimism turned chronic whose intensity was amplified by the crisis of rationality that infiltrated the collective consciousness, Spengler advances the thesis of Western civilization decay precisely due to its Faustian condition. Western culture is described as having its hard core in what Spengler calls the 'Faustian science' propelled by the will to power and the untamed desire to dominate nature. Scientific experimentation is violating natural phenomena that are forced to reveal its secrets to the inquisitive and penetrating curiosity of the 'Faustian man'. Developing a behavioral pattern that R.K. Merton (1938) would later call 'ritualistic', the Faustian scholar is not interested in pure knowledge, but becomes obsessed by technical domination of nature. Precisely because of this cognitive orientation, Faustian science is prone to take uncontrollable risks that it cannot manage, which in the long run will lead to the decline of Western civilization. The organismic biases and prophetic tone that undermine Spengler's epic historical study notwithstanding, the linguistic labels of 'Faustian culture' and 'Faustian scientist' are conceptual descriptors that can be rescued from the gigantic Spenglerian scheme of things which ultimately proved to be epistemically bankrupt and ideologically contaminated. The Faustian myth's route from popular imagination, through dramatic genre, into the conceptual lexicon of social science illustrates a way of intellectual capitalization through societal extrapolation of a specific type of human personality.

Conclusions: the 'third culture' as humanistic science and scientific humanism

Taking stock of the various instances in which fictional structures have inspired social theorizing, a list of intellectual services that literature can provide for social sciences can be compiled. The examples we have explored in this article show that literary fiction can perform a) a general function of ideational fertilization, by stimulating and enriching social thought with ideas, intuitions, and insights first developed in the literary realm. More specifically, as shown by the Shakespearean underpinnings of Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, literary ideas can inspire b) paradigmatic revelations by opening up new theoretical angles from which to see the social world in a different light. Next, Zimbardo's theory of deindividuation inspired by Golding's novel together with the 'Macbeth effect' and the 'Romeo and Juliette effect' developed from Shakespeare's tragedies illustrate c) the function of experimental suggestion. All of these literary ideas exemplify what we have named as '*prêt-à-testability*', that is to say, the quality of a literary idea of being a 'ready-to-test' hypothesis in rigorously controlled experimental or statistical conditions. A fourth valuable service that literary fiction can provide for social theory, as illustrated by the model of one-man economical system inspired by Defoe's story of Robinson Crusoe, comes as d) the function of heuristic formalization. The same example illustrates yet another function, e) that of argumentative counter-reference, performed by providing theoretical straw men against which social theory can exercise its critical faculties. Finally, as shown by Spengler's use of the Faustian personality type to characterize macroscopic cultural systems, literature can serve f) the function of conceptual extrapolation. Testing literary ideas against empirical reality can act as a *de-fictionalizing device*, by grounding literary imagination in phenomenal reality from which the former is in principle independent, since literary fiction is granted by definition a clause of 'ontological exemption'. As literature is not accountable to reality, not to any principle of 'empirical fitness', social science can be its reality-check apparatus. Passed through statistical or experimental filters, literary ideas can acquire ontological grounds in factual reality as they are translated, through sound scientific testing, from the magisterium of fictional constructions into the realm of de-fictionalized social scientific notions.

Literary reflections on the human condition, however insightful, remain suspended inside the realm of fictional reality as imaginary constructions. Only through the decisive means of empirical testing these proto-hypotheses can they acquire a qualitatively different cognitive status. The genius of literary reflections on human nature and social reality developed without the systematics conferred by the scientific method emphasizes the 'dramatic-sublime condition' of social sciences (Iluț, 2009, p. 235). As 'epistemic communities' (Zald, 1995), social sciences strive towards producing systematic and meaningful knowledge on the social world, backed by a scientific warranty of quality. Despite such ambitious aspirations, most of the conclusions reached by social research do not meet the requirement of non-triviality. Few of the theories they develop rise beyond the cognitive level of common sense and popular wisdom. In this incapacity of decisively detaching from truistic, commonsensical, knowledge resides the dramatic condition of social sciences. The fact that social sciences still absorb massively from literary wisdom, as this paper has hopefully shown, highlights a double crisis confronting the social sciences: a) *an inspirational crisis*, at the level of conceptual imagination, as literature remains a leading source of ideas and provider of linguistic labels, b) *a shortage of conjectural creativity*, as social sciences tend to become a mere scientific apparatus of testing the proto-hypotheses formulated in literature. Relying too much on literary imagination to suggest ideas and hypotheses to be worked out by the social sciences creates the risk of the latter becoming '*ancilla litteraturae*' – auxiliary disciplines to literary fiction. On the other hand, in order to convert fiction into scientifically sound theories, as well as to extract testable hypotheses embedded in the fictional structures, what is needed is the crafty art of methodological ingenuity. Even if they rely on literature for providing them with testable material, social scientists will still have to exercise their creative faculties, albeit restricted to the task of devising clever ways of testing literary ideas. However, as counterweight, the epistemological sublimity of social sciences (which should be clearly dissociated from literature's artistic sublimity) consists in the superior degree of certainty acquired by propositions passed through the 'acid test' of scientific method.

Given their strategic location along the humanistic-scientific continuum in which they occupy an in-betwixt position, social sciences are ideally places for bridging the 'two cultures'. This 'in-betwixtness' of the social sciences makes them the loci of enriching creative interferences and intense ideational transactions between the historically antagonized scientific and humanistic cultures. In fact, it is tempting to think of social sciences as forming a 'third culture' (Lepenies, 1988), interposed between and creatively drawing from the scientific culture and *l'esprit littéraire*. It is a possibility that was glimpsed even by Snow (1993) [1963], in a reflection on the essay in which he proposed the distinction that made him famous. One of the conclusions of this article is that the social sciences should take full advantage of their status as the 'third culture'. Along the line of thought stemming from M.N. Zald's (1991) observation that sociology (and social sciences in their entirety, it may be added) is a discipline both quasi-scientific and quasi-humanistic, the case can be pleaded for enriching social sciences by closing in towards literature, in the same time as they remain faithful to their scientific methodology. One way in which social sciences are doing this, documented in this article, is by tapping into the pool of ideas envisioned in the fictional magisterium of literature and then translating them from the realm of (literary) fiction into the sphere of (empirical) reality.

Ultimately, the argument advanced in this article can be taken as a plea for using literature as a source of inspiration for theorizing social reality and for converting 'fictional imagination' into empirically falsifiable 'sociological imagination'. The nexus of symbolical constructions loaded with fictional content – that is say, the world of literature – constitutes a genuine bank of ideas waiting to be conceptually and methodologically capitalized upon by the social sciences. Without falling into what might be called 'the realistic fallacy of literary representations', epitomized by F. Engels' [1888] conviction that 'I have learned more [from Balzac's depiction of French society] than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together' (Marx and Engels, 1976), literary realism can be converted into sociological realism. As shown by the list of the above examples, with adequate theoretical, statistical and/or experimental treatment applied to raw fictional ideas abstracted from literature, these can become fruitful concepts or even theories that can complete the cognitive equipment used by the social sciences to make sense of social reality. Even though it is not the ‘royal way’ in social-scientific theorizing, since this method is parasitical on fictional intuitions, it can be a major source of intellectual inspiration that can enrich and enlarge the cognitive horizon of social thought.

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