INTRODUCTION: EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL

Epistemology on the one hand, and “the social” on the other hand, have been considered alien to one another for rather a long while. Not only when epistemology was understood as theory of knowledge in general (something that is still normal in the English-speaking world) but also when epistemology was understood in the more restricted sense of philosophy of science (as is more customary today in other linguistic areas). Indeed, epistemology understood as general theory of knowledge seems to be specifically concerned with those cognitive operations that are performed by an individual knowing subject and are supposed to be essentially the same for every knowing subject, operations that, for this reason, are often considered as performances of “the mind” in a rather abstract sense. Society as such is incapable of knowing and, at most, can act as a set of external conditionings that, rather than help, could disturb the mind in the correct performance of its tasks. This situation does not change when epistemology is considered as a synonymous of philosophy of science, because in this case it is understood as the investigation of the conditions under which science constitutes a form of knowledge (and indeed the most advanced form of knowledge). Implicit in this view is the tenet that epistemology does not have a descriptive role, but rather also a normative one, in the sense that scientific knowledge is valid knowledge par excellence, and epistemology is precisely entrusted with the task of clarifying the conditions under which this valid knowledge in science actually obtains. Therefore, any intromission of “the social” is seen again as a disturbing factor of which epistemology should rather teach us how to get rid.

A second reason for this distance was represented by the fact that, if one considers epistemology as philosophy of science, it is implicit that it
can be concerned only with scientific knowledge understood as a special kind of knowledge. But what kind? As is known, for almost two centuries the domain of the modern sciences was circumscribed, in the Western culture, to mathematics and the natural sciences, and “the social” was excluded from such a domain for a series of reasons that we are not interested in indicating here: the study of the social was considered a part of the “humanities” as distinct and even separated from the “sciences.” Of course, there were important exceptions with regard to this view (for example, Gianbattista Vico had maintained already in the eighteen century that the genuine sciences in which we can uncover the causes of the investigated facts are the social-historical ones, because we humans are the producers of such facts), but the paradigm of the natural sciences became so prevailing that a deep struggle was necessary when, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the social-historical disciplines wanted to vindicate their status of “sciences.” This story is well known and need not be remembered here. What we want to note is that such a vindication was possible thanks to a serious epistemological debate, that is, a debate in which the concept of science was shown to be “analogical” and not “univocal” since it admitted two distinct exemplifications, and in such a way we can say that epistemology and the social started to become more friendly: epistemology had opened to the social the possibility of being a legitimate object of science, by creating in itself a new branch, the “epistemology of the social sciences.” This new discipline has been a mixed enterprise: in certain cases it was a kind of application of “general” epistemologies to the peculiarities of the social sciences, or even the marginal output of grand philosophical theories about man and societies (as in the case of ideologically inspired epistemologies); perhaps less frequently it has been the result of self-conscious reflections by practicing social scientists. Under any of these forms the epistemology or methodology of the social sciences has been a “philosopher-friendly” area more often than not, due perhaps to the fact that sociology, anthropology and political science are (to use an evolutionary metaphor) among the disciplines which have a more recent “common ancestor” with philosophy.

Taking the social seriously, however, as it was implicit in the very fact of considering it as a legitimate object of scientific investigation, was likely to produce as a natural consequence the adoption of an inverse point of view, that of including science itself in the domain of the social and to submit it to sociological inquiry. This inquiry was obviously many-faceted, and could very naturally regard several aspects of “doing science” as a social activity (which it actually is especially in