

# The populist obsession: theories and problems

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**Abstract** *The populist obsession: theories and problems.* Not a day goes by without a reference to populism both within the scientific community and within the political area, in addition to the information field—to define the attitude or characteristics of parties, movements and political context as a whole, but the question of what it is and in what it actually consists is open, or better, very open. It seems to be most frequently characterized by the elements of anti-establishment sentiment, authoritarianism and nationalism. The populist philosophy tends to exalt the virtues of "ordinary people" in opposition to the elites (which include not only politicians, but also representatives of economic and financial powers and intellectuals) seen as corrupt and dishonest. The aim of this work is to overcome the ideological debate that a great part of literature seems to dedicate to the phenomenon, reconstructing its genesis through a bibliometric analysis to the point of conceptualizing it through the Theory of Action.

**Keywords** Populism | Obsession | Politics | Phenomenology | Theory of Action





## 1. Theme genesis

The social sciences are sciences of reality, as they confront themselves with the concrete evidence of the empirical world. However, this operation is only carried out by distancing ourselves from this world: remembering Max Weber's words (1922), we are interested in historical individualities only through a "nomological" knowledge, a knowledge that simplifies the empirical world, which is in opposition with the historical individualities. This simplification takes concrete form through the representation of the ideal type, that concept which synthesizes in an "exemplary" form aspects or properties of a phenomenon selected on the basis of a specific interest.

It consists of "a synthesis that we assume for certain cognitive purposes" (Ibidem; tr. it., p. 120), accomplished through the abstraction and accentuation of certain components of a certain cognitive object. Weber assigns to the conceptual framework not the function of representing reality, but that of "providing the representation with a means of univocal expression" (Ibidem; tr. it., p. 108). By virtue of this characteristic, it is impossible for the ideal type to be empirically traced in reality; it assumes a purely heuristic function, exactly like a working hypothesis.

Somehow, it would be possible to affirm that sociology works with "empty" concepts, since they are constructions that serve precisely this type of reasoning, which is based - at least initially - on a departure from the empirical world.

In a constantly changing society, such concepts arising mainly from classical sociology (such as "gender", "status", "role", "social class", etc.) must today be subjected to a comprehensive process of revision and updating of the meaning. By now detached from the scientific paradigms that produced them, they are placed in a non-place of knowledge, at the risk of turning into real zombie categories (Beck, 1986). Created to describe the realities of the past, today deeply dried up, they aspire to be alive from the theoretical point of view, but they prove to be increasingly difficult to use, revealing wide margins of deviation from reality.

Among these, there could also be "populism", a phenomenon, or set of phenomena, very different from each other.

As an organized political movement, populism was born and developed in Russia in the second half of the 19th century, under the term *narodničestvo* (from *narod*, "people" in Russian), a movement of young students and intellectuals. The theorists of Russian populism theorized the duties of intellectuals to "go to the people" (identified above all with the peasant masses) and were inspired by ideals of agrarian socialism.

The "People's Party" was also inspired by ideals of rural democracy - but without encroaching on socialism - and was born and established in the United States in the last decade of the 19th century, expressing the protest of small and medium-sized farmers who had been hit by the agricultural crisis against the industrial and financial world. In the American context can be found confirmation of the suspicion of Alexis de Tocqueville (1835-1840): the French magistrate, Foreign Minister in the Republican



government of Louis Napoleon in 1849, linked much of his sociological thought to the experience of a study trip to America.

This trip gave him the opportunity to fully evaluate the political and social function of associationism, and therefore of social groups in the democratic system. However, he came to notice a sort of inclination in American democracy to express the “mediocrity” of the political class, considering the latter as a “necessary evil”. Democracy as a specific political regime was not, according to Tocqueville, the government of the technicians; the essence of the politician is not to build a diaphragm between the representative and the represented, that is, the concern of the democratic politician must not be to appear competent, but to ensure that social interests are not separated from the political class: the democratic political class does not necessarily have to be competent, but must instead show harmony with the sphere of society, representing its interests.

This was the problem, according to Tocqueville, of democracy, when the political class appears as a separate class, distant from the social situations of hardship.

In more recent times, populism has also been used in reference to nationalist and authoritarian ideologies and movements. In particular, populists are those movements and regimes that have developed in Latin America since the 1930s – such as “getulism” in Brazil and “Peronism” in Argentina – that have tried to combine nationalism with social reformism, the fight against the old land oligarchies with a more or less authoritarian and personal management of power, and that have found their main basis in the industrial proletariat and the small urban bourgeoisie (Giardina, Sabatucci, Vidotto 2005).

There can be even found different types of populism (Fissore 2013):

- “national populism” is a mix of nationalism and militarism that includes the whole range of blackness, from Nazism to fascism. It also includes (but not everybody agrees) the Peronism of the Argentine Juan Domingo Perón, who in the divided world of the Cold War did not want to be either capitalist or communist, but ended up being conservative and authoritarian;
- “revolutionary populism”: tends towards red but is also authoritarian and nationalist. His ancestors are the Jacobins of Robespierre, “the lawyer of the people” who invented the Terror in revolutionary France and the notorious “tribunals of the people” where the “enemies of the people” were tried and guillotined. His totalitarian twentieth-century faces were Stalinism and, for their detractors, castrism and “chavism” that refers to the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez;
- “democratic populism”: it debuted in the late nineteenth century with the ephemeral American People's Party, pluralist within, nationalist and isolationist in foreign policy. The People's Party had its base among the farmers of deep America and its enemies in industrial and financial capitalism and progressive elites. When US populist President Donald Trump and his motto America first



are called populists in the United States, some overseas historians think of that “People’s Party” with stars and stripes from over a century ago;

- “tele populism”: in recent years, new forms based on mass communication have emerged, for example, the “tele populists”, who have addressed the people directly through the medium of television offering reduced programs and promises shared by many, but difficult to keep; or movements that use new technologies (“web populism”).

Populism presents itself as a threat but also as a possible corrective action for a policy that has somehow moved too far away from the people: from Trump to Obama, from Grillo to Salvini, from Le Pen to Farage to Syriza. The risk we run, however, is a complete conceptual chaos, since practically everything – right, left, democratic, undemocratic – can be defined as populist.

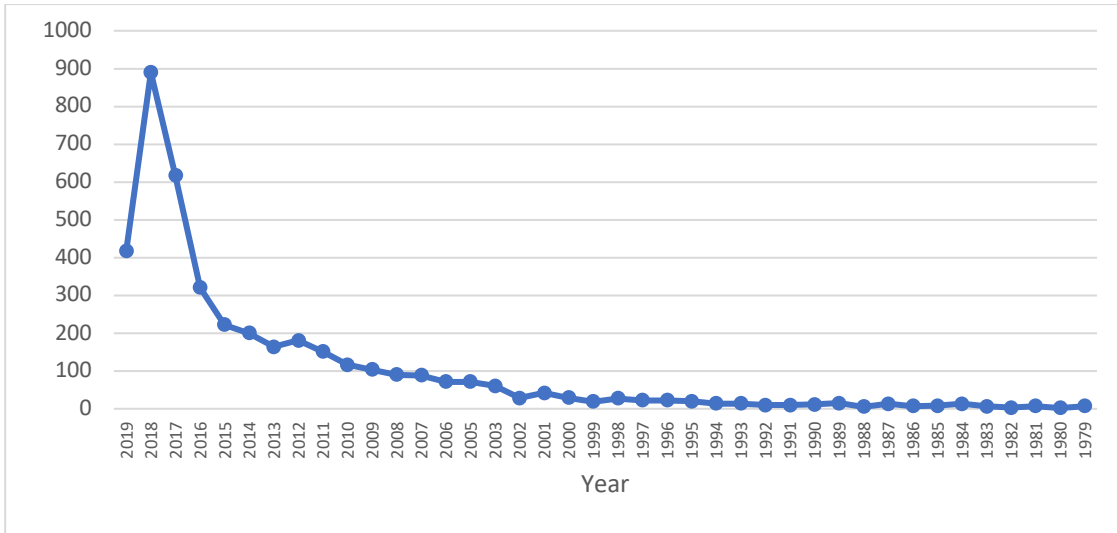
## 2. Towards a phenomenology of populism

With the aim of carrying out an analysis of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological relevance of populism, bibliometrics was employed, the branch of book sciences that concerns the mathematical and statistical applications of bibliographic analysis, statistical analysis of books, articles or other publications.

The following data were thus obtained through a bibliometric survey based on selective criteria, using three keywords (“populism”, “populisme”, “populismo”) carried out on “Scopus” and “Google Scholar”, two huge online databases of publications concerning scientific research. The proliferation of documents on the subject in question in the last forty years – articles, books, magazines, newspapers, conferences, sample surveys, for a total of 3555 documents – shows a decisive change in gear from the new millennium, reaching its peak – with about 900 works – in the year 2018 (Graph 1).

Although the object of study has its roots in a distant past, the real “boom” of interest is recent, indeed very recent.

For example, no election campaign in the United States has ever contained so many references to populism as the one that took place in 2015-2016, which has seen all its protagonists labelled as such, although belonging to political groups of different origins: it is therefore no coincidence that the point of maximum production of scientific documentation was just reached near that period.



**Graph 1** – Documents by year. Source: Scopus

In recent decades, in fact, there have been monographic works, both theoretical and of comparative and historical political science, with an impulse aimed at studying above all the populist language, the strategies of conquest of power and propaganda, the relations with democratic procedures and political representation, the social contents of populist policies and, finally, the structure of populist movements (Tab. 1).

N	Anno	Nr Cit	Autore	Titolo
1	1982	3399	W.H. Riker	Liberalism against populism
2	2005	2370	E. Laclau	On populist reason
3	1994	1921	H.G. Betz	Radical right-wing populism in Western Europe
4	1981	1688	M. Canovan	Populism
5	1989	1502	F.C. Weffort	O populismo na política brasileira
6	2000	1341	Y. Mény, Y. Surel	Par le peuple, pour le peuple: le populisme et les démocraties
7	2002	1272	P. Taggart	Populism
8	2001	1187	T. Frank	One market under God: Extreme capitalism, market populism, and the end of economic democracy



9	1999	1130	M. Canovan	Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy
10	2002	1058	J. McGuigan.	Cultural populism
11	1968	968	O. Ianni	O colapso do populismo no Brasil
12	2001	922	K. Weyland	Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics
13	1969	900	Ionescu G., Gellner E.	Populism: Its Meaning and National Character
14	1969	858	Donald MacRae	Populism as an ideology
15	1969	801	Peter Wiles	A syndrome, not a doctrine: some elementary theses on populism
16	2017	797	J.W. Müller	What is populism?
17	2002	743	J.V. Roberts, L.J. Stalans, D. Indermaur, M. Hough	Penal populism and public opinion: Lessons from five countries
18	2016	705	R.F. Inglehart, P. Norris	Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash
19	2007	691	J. Pratt	Penal populism
20	2007	642	J. Jagers, S. Walgrave	Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium

**Table 2** – Authors/number of citations/year of publication/title of works mostly cited in literature. Source: Google Scholar

The most quoted author in the scientific literature is William H. Riker (1982), one of the greatest American political scientists. Already in the title of his work, he proposes a clear division between liberalism and populism, describing the essence of the latter in a couple of propositions: 1) political decisions must reflect the will of a people as a whole; 2) the people are free when their will is law. The fact is that, according to Riker's radical reading, there is no instrument capable of revealing the will of the people.

A significant testimony to the current difficulty of conceptual categorization of the phenomenon is represented by one of the first conferences on populism, held at the London School of Economics, which came together in a volume (Ionescu; Gellner, 1969). The aim of this initiative was precisely to find a definition of the phenomenon; in particular, two major positions were outlined that were destined to be repeated until today: on the one hand, that of those who, like Donald MacRae (1969), defined



populism as a true and proper ideology centred on the cult of the homogeneity of the people and on the identification of a mortal enemy; on the other hand, that of those who, like Peter Wiles (1969), considered populism as a syndrome, a basically non-homogeneous set of oppositional and integrative attitudes, unified by a vague reference to the people.

Yet, in the end, the many participants did not agree on a general definition: one cannot help but think that, then as now, in the discussions on populism, every type of semantic disorder is expressed.

From these contributions, the contemporary debate seems to be divided into two macro positions: a) the one that considers the plurality of populism as the expression of a common *mentis form* or political habitus, finding in attitudes, values and the image of power relations the lowest common denominator of a plurality of manifestations, but that sees in it the expression of the antechamber of democracy; b) the one that, on the contrary, reduces populism to a real recovery of popular sovereignty, a set of practices aimed at mobilizing the masses and building a certain type of power and counter-power.

This dichotomy recalls, in some ways, a well-known division, in this case between those who consider themselves ready to marry the populist ideology and those who intend to identify it as a real threat to all democratic systems: the work in question, although of different subjects, is *“Apocalittici e Integrati”*, written by Umberto Eco (1964), who proposes the “formations” – “for” and “against” – of the scholars of the so-called “mass society”.

However, one could reach, with a certain degree of agreement, the definition of Mudde (2004), according to which populism is identified in a “weak” ideology, which believes that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites” – maintaining that politics must be an expression of the general will of the people.

Sharing Paul Taggart's (2002) statement that wherever there is representative politics, populism is omnipresent as a potential movement or as a system of ideas suitable for being advocated by political movements, Ernesto Laclau, in his work entitled *“La Razón Populista”* (2005), defines the phenomenon like a social practice, a way of constructing political space. The Argentinean philosopher drastically opposes the identification of populism with terms such as abnormality, deviation or manipulation, and focuses his studies on the formation of the people and the fight against the elites. Justifying the populist phenomenon, he defines the people as a real relationship between social agents it is the sum of the individual questions that creates the chain of the people. From isolated, they are transformed into a global demand, the intent of which is to eradicate the ruling class. Obviously, to achieve this goal, the people need a charismatic leader or leadership capable of channelling dissent by creating an anti-elitist front. According to this interpretation, populism does not aspire to radically transform the political system but to denounce its malfunctioning, making its internal contradictions emerge.



Jan Werner Müller (2017) identifies three necessary conditions of populism, defining it as a particular moralistic vision of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that opposes a morally pure and completely unified people – fundamentally imaginary – to elites considered corrupted or somehow morally inferior. In addition to this condition, two other fundamental conditions are added: there must be a sense of direct contact and identification between the leader and the electorate, cutting off any mediator and depending as little as possible on complex party organizations that act as intermediaries between citizens and politicians; finally, in addition to being anti-elitist, the populists are always anti pluralists: they claim to be the only ones to represent the people.

However, what most of these contributions just examined, coming mainly from historical-political disciplines, are unable to use is a good case of “social theory”: even Müller states in his latest work that he has nothing that comes close to a “theory” of populism.

But is that actually real? Probably not, if you don't want to run the risk of reducing the studies on that object to a sterile ideological debate.

### 3. Populism through the Theory of Action

Most of the contemporary social research focuses on the description and explanation of individual behaviour within certain contexts: whatever we do, it's included in some system of elements, a structure of the situation characterized by a specific presence of elements. The structure of the situation never determines the flow of action, but conditions it.

The reference scheme of action is not something that exists in nature – reconnecting us to what was said previously about “empty concepts” – but it is an abstract elaboration, a conceptual frame that designates the set of acts that a subject performs to achieve certain goals in a given situation, in the light of external criteria of judgment and orientation and at the same time constitutive of his subjectivity. However, we cannot speak of individual action if we do not include such action within a structure of relations between individual or collective subjects.

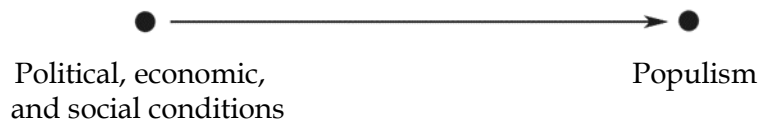
A social phenomenon can be explained as the function of a series of individual actions, which are also functions of the structure of the situation in which other actors find themselves.

All this produces a great difficulty for the social sciences, especially for sociology, since the object of analysis – the social phenomena – is compact, but the ground on which this object rests is not so compact, on the contrary, it could better be compared to an archipelago. This means that, despite the fact that the object of study remains such, the situational structure on which it rests is changeable.





If we try to represent this by taking up James Coleman's model in his work entitled "Foundations of Social Theory" (1990; tr. it., p. 20), we would arrive at such a scheme (Fig. 1).



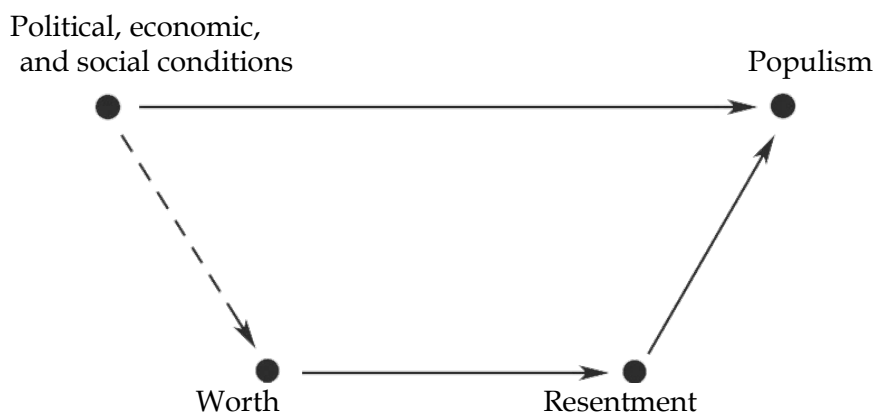
**Figure 1**

So far only one "macro-social" proposition is being pronounced: the political, economic and social conditions generate the phenomenon of populism. The aspect most highlighted by the studies taken into consideration in the previous paragraph concerns above all the macro perspective of the phenomenon.

However, this macro-relationship has no empirical referentiality, since both concepts – political, economic, social and populist conditions – are abstract: they do not belong to levels of reality but are systems of relationships. To avoid then the risk of running into a black box, and to enter therefore into the empirical referentiality of this relationship, we need to "decompose" the two terms in their "micro logical" characterization: if, for example, my survey context is represented by the functioning of the university, then each department represents the "micro" element; if my interest has to do with the students' satisfaction with the educational offer of a department, the "micro" will be represented by the individuals, while the "macro" by the department.

What I want to underline is that the same element can be considered "micro" or "macro" depending on the different situations.

By specifying the proposition also at the "micro" level in the model, it could be divided into three relations: one with an independent variable that concerns society and a dependent variable that concerns the individual; a second where both the independent variable and the dependent variable concern the individual; a third where the independent variable concerns the individual and the dependent variable concerns the society. Therefore, this system of propositions begins and ends at the macro level, but in the middle it is lowered to the individual level (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2**

The line that descends is dashed, from “macro” to “micro”, and can be carried out in many different ways, in which we aim to identify situational mechanisms – of the mind – that generate specific modalities of definition of the situation.

The three additional propositions, compared to the previous one, can be formulated as follows:

- 1) political, economic and social conditions influence certain values;
- 2) individuals with certain values adopt certain types of behaviour orientation (resentment);
- 3) certain behavioural orientations by individuals help to generate populism.

In an almost analogous way, it is possible to trace this decomposition in a work by Talcott Parsons, entitled “The Social System” (1951): taking as an example the theme of values, and using the metaphor of a “common thread”, it is possible to decompose a system obtaining many specific elements, but in each of them we will find common elements among them. His idea – and that of much of the cultural anthropology – is that there is essentially an “isomorphic” relationship between the structure of the personality and the cultural system. This isomorphism, in the words of Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), is much more than a mere analogy: if there is a standardization of temporal and lateral behaviour it means that there is a system, but what needs to be identified are the conditions that make this standardization possible.

The idea of Parsons is that macro phenomena, in a sense, are the large-scale expression of small phenomena that are already contained in the mind.

Today, when we talk about the “micro-macro” relationship, we refer to aggregative or cumulative phenomena, to the fact that micro decisions are composed in a macro scenography producing phenomena that have very large proportions and that are the effect of small decisions (electoral phenomena, fashion, consumer behaviour). There are phenomena that form a macro effect, which in reality is the product of a series of micro dynamics that aggregate with each other according to certain parameters of diffusion. These diffusion parameters were also studied by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955),



in the condition of mass communication systems: there are ways in which communication expands – from the media to opinion leaders and then from these to other actors – in which therefore many micro choices produce “macro-evidences” in the end.

The scheme taken up by Coleman and represented in this paragraph does not claim that the attributes of a single individual are able to determine the phenomenon. Rather, the social phenomenon – whatever its nature – can be considered as an aggregate of actions. The two main concepts are therefore those of “action” and “aggregation”. Each of them corresponds to one of the two phases of the explanation in terms of “methodological individualism”: the phase of the understanding of actions, which provides the basis for the explanation, giving meaning to the behaviour of the actors, and the phase of the aggregation of actions, which forms the body of the explanation showing how the phenomena to be explained are the consequence of the combination of these actions (Boudon 2005).

As Parsons and Shils (1951) recall, action is a behaviour oriented towards the pursuit of an end: this definition says everything but opens up an abyss, as it involves a cognitive dimension of the actor, what Weber (1904) himself called the “internal experience of conduct”, that is outline elements that recall in a broad sense the dynamics of mental life.

Our ability to act therefore requires a selective mechanism of knowledge, and when this filtering operation takes place, the subjective ability of people to process the information they receive comes to the fore. However, the course of action often takes place in an obscure semi-consciousness, escaping the reflexive mind.

The whole theory of rational choice is based on this problem, that is that cognitive premises do not consequently lead to behaviours that conform to these premises.

People, who find themselves in a relationship of interdependence, respond to an environment that is made up of decisions taken by other people, but the most interesting thing is that sometimes, even by binding, individual actions produce consequences that are no longer attributable to individual decisions: these complex effects of aggregation can also be called emerging effects, or for those that are considered undesirable, “perverse effects” (Boudon 1977).

These emerging properties were already recognized by Le Bon (1895), who considered them similar to the process that takes place in chemistry, where the bases and acids combine to form a new body with properties different from those of the bodies that served to its formation.

The most difficult task, therefore, is to reconstruct the decision-making mechanisms that generate the phenomenon: making these actions comprehensible means rediscovering the sense they have for the social actor.



#### 4. Findings

Despite its wide spread, the practical success of populism tends to conflict with an apparent theoretical indeterminacy. It does not seem to designate a circumscribable phenomenon, but a “social logic” whose effects cover a variety of phenomena.

The concept of representation today becomes synonymous with democracy, but from the historical-conceptual point of view this coincidence is not so obvious. The original idea of democracy - understood as self-government, absence of leaders, and coincidence between rulers and governed - cannot be considered practicable within complex societies, since it would become incompatible with modern market economies. As Hans Kelsen (1929) notes, in fact, real democracy is born from a compromise called “representative democracy”.

Political representation thus proves to be a logical fiction, since it is not necessarily true that a Parliament must be the representation of the entire people. This is only a logical hypothetical assumption, since there is no such thing as a “people”; the latter is better interpreted as a plurality of competing interests: there is nothing that comes close to what today is the assumption of all populisms, that is a homogeneous people.

After all, a retrospective look at the history of democracies shows that the dissatisfaction of some citizens with the various aspects of society is actually a constant.

On the one hand, the social theories underlying the phenomenon require a sort of “rediscovery”: the ideal type of “charismatic power” in Max Weber (1922); the thought of the so-called “Italian elitist school” (Michels 1911; Pareto 1916; Moscow 1933); the trend of the “psychology of the crowds” (Le Bon 1895); the double concept of “in-group” and “out-group” by William Sumner (1906).

On the other hand, I tried to talk about the dynamics of social action in terms of “unintentional consequences of intentional actions”. The fact of living in environments that absorb us so much, to the point that ideas act within us without realizing it, puts a strain on the individual critical system. There is no way to expect social actors - here the voters - to be aware of the reasons that drive them. But in saying this, we don't mean at all to consider the social actors as irrational.

Such an analysis is not far from the explanation that Max Weber (1922) proposes of magical beliefs. They seem strange and irrational to us. We easily see ourselves as the product of unknown forces or causes. No, says Weber, primitives have reasons to believe in the existence of causal relationships that we perceive as magical. If they seem strange to us, it is because our cognitive resources are not those of primitives. We know the laws of energy transformation, and it is because we know these laws that we consider the behaviour of the man of fire as rational and that of the man of rain as irrational. These beliefs are therefore based on reasons that make sense for the social subject.

However, these reasons explain the choices, which can be methodically reconstructed. The validity of this reconstruction depends on two conditions: it must



be traceable to acceptable psychological propositions, then these hypotheses on the reasons and motivations of the actors must account for the data in detail of their structure.

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