

Historiographic categories in the history of Italian psychology. Sante De Sanctis between psychiatry and psychology. **by Giovanni Pietro Lombardo***

ABSTRACT - Sante De Sanctis, psychologist and psychiatrist, is one of the most representative figures in Italian scientific psychology. Considered among the founders of the discipline and one of its main protagonists in the inter-war period, in the massive bulk of his scientific writings (more than three hundred works of general psychology, psychopathology, pedagogic psychology, criminal psychology and infantile neuropsychiatry) and in his uninterrupted institutional activity, he left a tangible mark on the history of psychology in our country.

In 1901 he obtained the Psychology professorship at the Philosophy Faculty in Rome, and a few years later was appointed to the first chair in Experimental Psychology at the University of Rome. At an international level, De Sanctis is the best known among Italian psychologists: some of his work has appeared in French, Swiss, American, German, Scandinavian and English journals and several books have been translated into English and German. He is the only Italian along with other second generation psychologists (Binet, Külpe, Münsterberg, Stern, Claparède, Ebbinghaus) to integrate the classical paradigm of Wundtian physiological psychology, in an attempt at the methodological and epistemological expansion of the discipline.

The aim of this paper is therefore to bring out the originality of his clinical-differential experimentalism which in the 1900s founded the psychology discipline, which with De Sanctis proved capable of “dialoging” with the main representatives of the variegated Italian scientific, cultural and academic world, consisting mainly of physiologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, criminologists, biologists, philosophers, many of whom had a neo-Kantian training, and pedagogists.

INTRODUCTION

Sante De Sanctis (1862-1935),¹ “student” of Ezio Sciamanna (1850-1905) and of Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936),² despite the fame and solid prestige won in the international field, has remained a figure – at least until the recent volume edited by Cimino and Lombardo (2004) – who was underestimated compared to other Italian psychologists to whom seminars, conferences, monographs and digital archives have been dedicated. From this volume and from the moments of depth-study that followed it, there emerge new historiographic categories within which Italian psychology, thanks to De Sanctis, can find its place in harmony with the international scientific panorama: these categories in fact develop the scientific venture of the 19th century positivists, scrupulously building a discipline that is autonomous on the epistemological plane, characterized by its own methodologies and objects of study, including both the generalist and the applied sides of psychopathology, psychology of work, and pedagogic psychology, which has deep ties to the European panorama. De Sanctis can in fact be considered the Italian psychologist who with his second generation colleagues - Binet, Külpe, Münsterberg, Stern, Claparède, Ebbinghaus – by extending the classic Wundtian laboratory experimentalism, constructed the broad scientific design of a discipline comprising various research sectors. Some of these, founded in the 1900s, were closely linked to the “modern” needs of the industrialized society that in Europe and the United States was experiencing a new organization of working rhythms and of public education³. De Sanctis can therefore be situated in a post-positivist philosophical panorama in which neo-Kantian

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1 On Sante De Sanctis see: Bianchi Di Castelbianco, Di Renzo, Prestinenzi Parisi, & Tagliacozzi, 1998; Ceccarelli, 1999; Cimino, 2003; Cimino & Lombardo, 2004; Ferreri, 1998, 2001, 2003; Lombardo, 2002; Lombardo & Cenci, 2004; Lombardo & Cicciola, 2005; Lombardo & Cicciola, 2007; Lombardo & Toscano, 1999; Luccio, 1981; Marhaba, 1981.

2 See: Appicciafuoco, 1946, pp. 17-18.

3 The social influences on the history of psychology were examined in Danzinger, 1990.

thought, the critical continuation of positivism, sought to develop an interdisciplinary programme of methodological renewal of the so-called “sciences of the spirit”. Among these there was also experimental psychology which it was hoped would thus be detached from positivistic physiologism, and guided in a modern direction towards the study of the so-called “consciousness issues” (Guarnirei, 1981).

THE SCIENTIFIC PSYCHOLOGY OF SANTE DE SANCTIS

In his fundamental two-volume treatise on *Experimental Psychology* of 1929-1930 he therefore presents a complete, modern conception of scientific psychology which brings together both the **generalist** side (see the studies on psychophysical proportionalism, on the facial expression of thought, on dreams, attention, emotions, etc.) and the **applied** side of psychopathology, of psychology of work, pedagogic psychology and criminal psychology, seen in a general experimental framework, with attention to individual differences; the various disciplines use different methods in an integrated way. The scientific design adopted by De Sanctis is in fact based on a pluralist methodological approach in which use is made integratively of all the methods, like **qualitative observation** methods, divided into **introspective** or of inner observation (such as self-introspection and induced introspection, on the Würzburg school model in which the subject is “interrogated” by the experimenter or answers questionnaires) and **extrospective** or of external observation (in which the spontaneous reactions and expressions of the subject are observed). Alongside these qualitative methods we also find quantitative laboratory methods like the **psychochronometric method** (to measure the duration of psychic processes); the **psychophysical method** (to determine the size of the stimulus needed to provoke a given psychic phenomenon); the **psychophysiological method** (subdivided into structure method and psychodynamic method) and the **disintegrative method** (subdivided into anatomo-physiological method and disintegrative psychological methods such as hypnosis and psychoanalysis) (De Sanctis, 1929-1930, vol. 1). “Early 20th century” psychology, oriented both towards analysis and application, which De Sanctis helped to found, though considered valid, was not however welcomed by all in its scientific and methodological innovativeness and at times, in comparison to the psychological experimentalism of the late 1800s, it was seen as lagging behind in a “generalist” direction, or in the worst case, like psychotechnique, it was seen as practice without theory. The main criticism directed at the author claimed that his scientific production was coloured by “operative agnosticism” (Marhaba, 1981) and by the interchangeable use of various methods, and was thus particularly wanting from the theoretical angle. On closer analysis, this assessment is clearly contradicted by the theoretical intensity and methodological rigour of some of his works published in national and international journals and of his volumes published in Italian, German, French and which the international scientific community shows that they know and appreciate enough to make Sante De Sanctis the Italian psychologist best known abroad. The interpretative misunderstanding may have been generated by De Sanctis’s attitude - at times too clearly anti-philosophical – which was aimed at establishing the autonomy of the psychology discipline seen as a biological science; it cannot however be confused with the a-theoretical attitude of other authors working in psychotechnique in the two post-war periods (Lombardo & Cenci, 2004). Although De Sanctis was unanimously considered to be one of the five pillars of Italian psychology, he has mainly been classed, from the historiographic standpoint, as an “applied” and a “clinical” psychologist and, as such, viewed as eccentric compared to psychology’s high barycentre, being positioned in other traditions of basic research (Luccio, 1981, 1990; Marhaba, 1981). Placing his scientific production in this area regarded as peripheral and not central to the discipline, along with the converging contribution elaborated in his honour by the founders of modern childhood psychiatry, therefore explains why Sante De Sanctis was – quite inappropriately in our view – historiographically relegated to the role of psychiatrist that ended up overshadowing that of psychologist (Bollea, 1960; Cerletti, 1962; Gozzano, 1962). This characterisation, favoured by his being confined to a borderline area of psychology, has also weakened his scientific role seen exclusively as that of an exponent of child neuropsychiatry to which in Italy he did give a strongly psychological and clinical stamp (Bollea, 1967; Ossicini, 2002). The historiographic interpretation

argued in this paper leads us, on the other hand, to think of De Sanctis as a scholar who was able to integrate his original clinical training with a growing involvement in experimental psychology, transferring his scientific and professional skills of medical-psychiatric derivation into the disciplinary context of psychology of which he laid the foundation of clinical-differential methodology (Lombardo & Cicciola, 2007).

DIFFERENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF DREAMS

The scientific study of dreams, which can exemplify this, was probably the sphere which, more than any other, enabled the Italian psychologist to become known on an international scale thanks to having applied the canons of modern scientific psychology to investigate a topic which had previously been the province of “philosophers, moralists, men of letters and doctors” (De Sanctis, 1899, p. 5). This line of research was begun in the 1800s and, with hard work and systematicity, continued for several decades until his death in Rome in 1935. De Sanctis’s earliest scientific output has come to be characterized as a set of differential psychopathology contributions on dreams, with the clinical-diagnostic goal of classifying the dreams of the mentally insane in order to differentiate the psychopathological syndromes they were suffering from. In the 1899 monograph, *Dreams. In Psychological and clinical studies of an alienist*, which concluded a period of studies carried out previously starting in the mid-1890s (De Sanctis, 1896a, b, 1897, 1898a, b, c), one finds however that the clinical methodologies typical of his medical-psychiatric training were already productively integrated with psychometric instrumentation deriving from Galton and applied to the differential study of dreams, using specially drafted questionnaires. Understanding the limits of these tools in the use they had been put to up to then, De Sanctis arranged to construct questionnaires differentiated on the basis of the characteristics of the various groups of subjects analysed. (De Sanctis, 1899, p. 32) and designed to describe form and content of dreams in different sub-groups (children, the aged, men, women, neurotics, psychotics, epileptics, phrenasthenics, delinquents, prostitutes) compared to the control group (normal and abnormal). The book, with the extension of the studies from the abnormal to the sane and to animals, therefore marks the passage from psychopathology to the differential psychopathology of dreams, in an organic perspective of methodological fundamentalism, which would from then on be maintained and later further extended. From 1901 to 1913 De Sanctis did not publish any more specific works on dream life; the subject was to be taken up again only with the analysis of the then dominant psychoanalytic approach of interpretation of dreams in 1914 in two important papers (*La psico-analisi e il suo valore come metodo dell'oneirologia scientifica / Psychoanalysis and its value as a scientific method in oneirology* and *L'interpretazione dei sogni/The interpretation of dreams*) which make a critical examination from the methodological standpoint of the hermeneutical procedures used both by Freud and by his students (De Sanctis, 1914a, b).

Both in the 1916 paper *Il sogno: struttura e dinamica / Dream: structure and dynamics* (De Sanctis, 1916/1981), and in the others written later on this issue up until shortly before his death, he distanced himself radically and definitively from psychiatric psychopathology. This incontrovertible fact was not understood, as we said, by the interpretative mainstream who insisted on the medical-psychiatric character of De Sanctis’s research into dreams, not recognising its eminently psychological nature. Other contributions of the period, characterised by an enormous scientific output misunderstood up to now and never analysed in a historiographic sense despite its undoubted interest, include *I metodi onirologici / Methods in oneirology* (De Sanctis, 1920), where the author argues for the importance of naturalistic experimentation tied to the manipulation and induction of dreams by stimulation and intervention in the context of falling asleep. To be extremely brief, the experimentation carried out shows that the waking consciousness cannot directly influence the dreaming consciousness which is however able to autonomously elaborate daytime stimuli and after an indefinite period of latency, can find itself automatically creating the dream representations connected. Among the most important contributions of this second period there is *Psicologia del sogno / Psychology of dreams* (1922/2006) and *Nuovi contributi alla psicofisiologia del sogno / New contributions to the psychophysiology of dreams* (1933/2006) which take up and systematize the research topics long studied both personally and by his assistants. These works have recently been republished (in one case it is the first edition in Italian of a text previously

available only in German). They represent an original synthesis of the research produced from the first experiments into deep sleep many years earlier (De Sanctis & Neyroz, 1902) which were used to link the phases of sleep to the stability of dreaming and, lastly, to the most recent work by his assistant, the psychiatrist Antonio Mendicini (1920) who, by studying breathing rhythms with a pneumograph, had found that the experimental subjects had an altered breathing rhythm which was the empirical proof of specific phases of sleep linked to the production of dreams. The study of dreams in fact implied an adequate knowledge of the depth of sleep or of the phases of sleep and how to recognise them. Deeper sleep caused a chaotic activation by the trunk which the cortex (always “late” or “inexactly” in De Sanctis’s words) “commented on” giving rise to the bizarreness of dreams (De Sanctis, 1933/2006). The psychophysiological and psychodynamic model of dreams emerging from this research can be very briefly described as the product of a modern, early 20th century conception of experimentation so advanced that it recalls the first studies on the experimental psychophysiology of dreams of the 1950s. It is the product of a systematic experimentation and makes an integrated use of different methodologies, opening new fields and sectors of knowledge to scientific psychology which would be so original in their experimental approach that they would only be taken up again in this direction after the second world war⁴. Nevertheless, starting from Freud, the Desanctisian research view of dreaming was to be misunderstood in its experimental psychological matrix and collocated by historiography in a medical-psychiatric framework⁵.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS ON THE “CRISIS” OF SCIENTIFIC PSYCHOLOGY

From what has been said, it is perhaps possible to update the historiographic hypothesis that has prevailed up to now. This hypothesis saw 19th century positivism as the one great source of scientific psychology in our country (Bianchi di Castelbianco, 1998; Ferreri, 1998; Galati & Francioni, 1989; Legrenzi & Luccio 1994; Luccio, 1990; Marhaba, 1981; Mucciarelli, 1982, 1984). According to this vision, with the exception of some scholars like **Antonio Aliotta** (1881-1964), **Francesco De Sarlo** (1864-1937), **Eugenio Rignano** (1870-1930), **Giovanni Vailati** (1863-1909), the first part of the 1900s was generally marked by the opposition of post-positivistic philosophy to experimental psychology; this opposition supposedly brought on the “crisis” of the discipline, which had already been visible before the first World War and which then developed in both of the post-war periods (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998; Ferruzzi, 1998). This historiographic interpretation is certainly influenced by the idea that Italian post-positivist philosophy, marked by the “idealistic and spiritualistic reaction against the positivism and scientism” of the 19th century, later led to the crisis of scientific psychology and that the latter, generally under attack from philosophy, never progressed, at the political-institutional level, past the search for new academic spaces. The historiographic reconstruction that has been made also leads us to the dichotomy of viewing the scientific production of this phase as “minor”, being relevant to the sphere of social applications, encouraged politically by the fascist regime. The traditional picture however risks being schematic and not corresponding to historical reality due to its unilateral interpretation: it was only after Giovanni Gentile’s reform of secondary and university studies, and not before, that Gentile’s actualism and Croce’s neo-idealism progressively achieved hegemony in the Italian school and university system, leading among other things to the decline of scientific psychology. In the scenario of cultural hegemony already described, what in fact took root was psychotechnique, which, also with the support of a fascist regime interested in the backwash of applied psychology, achieved a relatively high social visibility. The character that scientific psychology acquired with Sante De Sanctis in this first phase of the 1900s was influenced instead by a post-positivist philosophical panorama which, in continuity with the past, showed interest in the sciences of the spirit in general, and in particular in experimental psychology, an interest that must certainly be

⁴ The theories that hold that deep sleep gives rise “to stimuli coming from the cerebral trunk that the cortex comments on in the dream, somewhat late and always inexactly” (De Sanctis, 1933/2006, p. 170) are the same and preceded by about forty years the hypothesis advanced by Hobson and McCarley (1977) in the Activation-Synthesis Model.

⁵ Vedi: Foschi, Lombardo, Introduzione a De Sanctis, 2006.

taken into account at the academic and institutional level (Lombardo & Cicciola, 2005). In this modern, post-positivist philosophical context, neo-Kantian criticism - in continuity and not in contrast with the traditions of the 1800s – had in fact prompted a modern programme of interdisciplinary scientific relations, successfully opposed by spiritualism and Gentilian actualism. It was only from the mid-'20s that it was possible in fact to find signs in academia and the institutions of their actual cultural hegemony which would progressively grow and even influence the post-war period and the 1950s and '60s (Bozzi, 1986). Until the mid-'20s, however, those in the philosophical panorama were actually critical of 19th century scientism and positivism but still open towards scientific knowledge in the modern sense and the sciences of the spirit which they hoped to help modernise. From a different historiographic perspective one can therefore suggest that the domination of spiritualism and historicism led to the failure of philosophical knowledge to interact in a modern way with scientific knowledge, developing the theoretical depth of the sciences of the spirit and their cultural relevance. The clinical-differential and experimental tradition developed by De Sanctis, misunderstood in this new panorama, was taken into the medical-psychiatric sector, while with Mario Ponzio, Agostino Gemelli and Ferruccio Banisconi, the institutions of the strictly psychological field opted for applied and psycho-technical lines of research and intervention. The reduction of the academic side of psychology, which only established itself a-theoretically as psychotechnique, is therefore the result of this *conventio ad excludendum* which underlies scientific psychology's failure to put down roots in our country. Marked attempts were made to take control of it, on the part both of the traditionally strong medical-psychiatric disciplines and of the pedagogical disciplines which were under the long-lasting anti-scientific philosophical influence of Gentile's actualism. This prevailing dualism (Mecacci, 1998) was to represent for many years the main cultural determinant in our country which after the second world war would be expressed separately and antinomically, either in the service of 19th century organicism and physiologism, or of spiritualistic historicism, definitively compressing the spaces and the identity of the psychology discipline. An indirect consequence of this is the historiographic representation of De Sanctis, considered a childhood psychiatrist, although his clinical-differential curriculum and his research into dreams are characterized with great originality by psychology and experimentalism (Lombardo & Cicciola, 2007; Foschi & Lombardo, 2006).

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