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**REVIEW ESSAYS**

# CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY
## *Reflections in the Light of the Work of C. W. Mills, Olùfémi O. Táíwò, Kevin Ochieng Okoth, and the Positional Sociology*

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**ABSTRACT**: This article offers a critical reflection on the role of the social science scholar within the neoliberal university, interrogating the epistemic, institutional, and political constraints currently shaping the production of knowledge. Drawing on C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination*, the paper engages with three further key contributions: Olùfémi O. Táíwò's *Elite Capture*, Kevin Ochieng Okoth's *Red Africa*, and the collective volume *Sociologia di posizione* by de Nardis, Petrillo, and Simone. These works provide a conceptual framework for analysing the processes through which critical knowledge is co-opted, depoliticised, or rendered ineffectual. The article focuses on two prevailing dynamics: the hegemony of managerial rationality, which subordinates research to metrics of productivity and competitiveness; and the proliferation of symbolic forms of critique devoid of substantive political impact. In response, the paper explores the possibility of reclaiming the scholar's role as a situated and responsible actor, capable of reconnecting knowledge production with broader social struggles. The experience of the Italian network *Sociologia di posizione* is presented as a concrete attempt to collectively organise epistemic and material resistance, and to restore a public, transformative function to the social sciences.
**KEYWORDS**: Academic resistance, Critical knowledge, Epistemic positioning, Neoliberal university, Sociological imagination

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## 1. Introduction

According to C. Wright Mills (1959), the work of the social science scholar is inevitably shaped by value commitments, which cannot be separated from the research process itself. Far from being marginal or incidental, such commitments constitute the very framework within which inquiry unfolds: they guide its aims and delimit its epistemological boundaries. For this reason, Mills argues, to engage in the social sciences is to take a stance—an act that entails not only cognitive responsibility but also a political one, manifest in the capacity to critically interrogate one's historical moment and one's role within society.

It is from this provocation that I propose to reflect on the role of the researcher within the contemporary academic landscape, taking the figure of the scholar as a privileged vantage point from which to explore some of the tensions that traverse the field of knowledge production. In particular, I seek to illuminate how the progressive consolidation of the neoliberal model has profoundly reconfigured both the material and symbolic conditions of intellectual labor, eroding spaces for critical autonomy and marginalizing forms of knowledge oriented toward social transformation. Within this context, the researcher is often caught between a conformist adherence to institutional performance metrics and the risk of producing a critique that is toothless, self-referential, or easily co-opted.

Grounded in this diagnosis, the article is structured around a dialogue with four major theoretical references: Mills's *The Sociological Imagination*, Olúfémi O. Táíwò's *Elite Capture*, Kevin Ochieng Okoth's *Red Africa*, and the collective volume *Sociologia di posizione*, edited by de Nardis, Petrillo, and Simone. Although diverse in their theoretical orientations and contexts, these texts offer valuable tools for understanding the mechanisms through which critical knowledge is neutralized or disempowered—as well as for envisioning and enacting alternative epistemological and political practices. A central tension emerges, concerning not only the content of scholarly production but its very status: can sociology still constitute a public form of knowledge oriented toward emancipation, or is it destined to become a mere technique of social observation, functional to its administration?

In an attempt to address this question, the contribution focuses on two currently dominant trajectories within the university. On the one hand, there is the ascendancy of techno-managerial rationality, which reduces knowledge to an instrumental, measurable, and competitive enterprise. On the other, we witness the proliferation of critical postures which, despite claiming transformative intent, often fail to escape the dynamics of symbolic recognition and self-referentiality that render them politically ineffective. In both cases, what seems to be lost is the capacity of research to materially intervene in the conditions of life and structures of power—to act, that is, as a public and relational practice capable of linking analysis and action.

Nonetheless, as this article aims to show, there are experiences that challenge these dominant trajectories by seeking to construct collective, situated spaces for knowledge production. One such example is the Italian network *Sociologia di posizione*, which explicitly attempts to reorganize academic dissent, transforming individual frustration into political practice and rethinking the role of research in light of historical urgencies and social inequalities. In this sense, the sociological imagination may still serve as a vital resource for reactivating a critical form of knowledge—one that can challenge the prevailing symbolic order and elaborate concrete alternatives to the present.

Far from proposing a definitive model or a singular pathway out of the current crisis of the social sciences, this essay should be read as an invitation to reflexivity, politicization, and the construction of collective practices that restore meaning and responsibility to intellectual work. In an era marked by the crisis of public reason, redefining the role of the researcher is not merely an academic concern—it is, fundamentally, a political one.

## 2. The Politics of Truth in the Neoliberal University

According to C. Wright Mills, a researcher's value commitments do not arise spontaneously in the course of inquiry; rather, they constitute the reference framework within which research unfolds. In most cases, these values reflect those dominant within Western societies—the very context in which the social sciences historically emerged—and tend to be perceived as imported forms of knowledge when applied beyond this cultural horizon. While some scholars have treated these values as universal, attributing to them a validity that transcends any specific historical or cultural context, others have explicitly located them within a particular society and its historical configurations. From this latter perspective, values are neither transcendent nor intrinsic to the social order, but historically situated and culturally constructed. Mills is particularly incisive on this point, asserting that what we call moral judgment is often nothing more than an individual's desire to generalize the values they have chosen and to make them available to others.

In this light, to engage in the social sciences is above all to engage in the politics of truth. But what does it mean to practice a politics of truth? And, more importantly, how can one do so autonomously? Mills notes that the truthfulness of scientific results and the accuracy of conducted inquiries—when considered in their specific social contexts—may prove more or less relevant to the concrete problems affecting human lives. Whether and how they do so defines not only the role that reason plays in human affairs, but also the social function and epistemological responsibility of the researcher.

The scholar who seeks to understand a social phenomenon inevitably relies on reason. Yet this process does not always coincide with a fully developed epistemological awareness. Researchers often avoid reflecting on their own positionality in relation to the object of study, as well as on the aims and audiences of their scientific production. Under such conditions, the risks of self-referentiality, irrelevance, and uselessness intensify—opening the way both to political instrumentalisation and to an utilitarian drift. The latter is characteristic of the neoliberal university model, where the aim of research becomes the production of publications rather than knowledge (Åkerlind 2005).

In this scenario, the scholar struggles to recognise themselves as a situated rational subject—that is, as a "man of reason" aware of their own position and of the role they play within the very society they are analysing. This difficulty cannot be reduced to a mere individual or methodological shortcoming, but should rather be interpreted as the symptom of a deeper transformation in the historical structure of society. Specifically, it reflects the gradual erosion of the concepts of critical consciousness and intellectual autonomy, which have become increasingly marginal within neoliberal culture.

If, as Fisher (2009) suggests, neoliberalism is not merely an economic project but a political design aimed at dismantling the forms of critical awareness that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, then the roots of this transformation become clearer. Neoliberalism has systematically hollowed out the material and symbolic conditions that once enabled critical reflection on the social world—operating simultaneously on the terrain of political subjectivities and on the domain of knowledge production (Clarke 2005; Peck 2010; Dardot and Laval 2014; Moini 2020; de Nardis and Galiano 2025). In the latter domain, it has disarticulated research practices and intellectual approaches that had increasingly sought to move beyond the confines of narrow scientific mandates, in order to expose the political dynamics underpinning inequality and social injustice.

A significant example of this marginalisation can be found in the academic sidelining of research practices associated with the Italian workerist tradition, such as *inchiesta operaia* (workers' inquiry). These practices challenged the traditional model of knowledge production by promoting more direct and symmetrical relationships between researchers and the social subjects involved (Panzieri 1965; Alquati 1993; Gentili 2012). In a context where decision-making arenas appear increasingly permeated by processes of depoliticisation (Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller 2006; de Nardis 2017; 2022), the relevance of such experiences remains critical. Yet today, at least in principle, they no longer receive the recognition or support they once did. Within a regime where knowledge production is primarily assessed through metrics of measurability, economic

impact, individual productivity, and competitiveness, emphasis is placed on quantifiable outputs at the expense of knowledge rooted in local contexts, oriented toward social change, and often resistant to standardisation. Moreover, the increasing managerialisation of research and academia—with the introduction of business logics, audits, and ranking systems—tends to discourage approaches that deviate from the dominant techno-scientific model, branding them as partisan, non-objective, or non-transferable (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Benner and Sandström 2000).

As already noted, this shift reflects a broader process of depoliticisation of academic space, whereby knowledge is detached from its critical potential and subordinated to the functional requirements of economic and institutional governance.

In light of these considerations, it becomes evident that the figure of the scholar is now caught between opposing forces: on one side, the demand to conform to the standards of productivity and neutrality imposed by the neoliberal university model; on the other, the aspiration to reclaim a practice of research capable of restoring a critical, public, and transformative role to knowledge.

With this framework in mind, the following sections of the paper will analyse some of the ways in which researchers—far from being mere passive victims of these transformations—have responded to the shifting contours of the academic field. Particular attention will be given to both the forms of adaptation to dominant logics and the emerging strategies of resistance that seek to re-signify the scholar's role within the university. Despite operating within highly constrained conditions, these practices aim to reactivate a situated and reflexive politics of truth, laying the groundwork for alternative epistemological, methodological, and political approaches to knowledge production.

## 3. Between Ideological Morphinism and the Docile Robot

Mills argues that the sociological imagination enables those who possess it to perceive and assess the broader context of historical facts in terms of their impact on the inner life and outward behavior of entire social categories. However, the ordinary individual tends not to read their personal troubles in terms of historical change or institutional conflict, remaining largely unaware of the influence these dynamics exert on the kinds of humanity being formed, on the historical events in gestation, and on the conditions that define the possibility—or impossibility—of participating in social and political life. In this perspective, the present work seeks to apply the sociological imagination to the figure of the social science scholar, treating it as a historically situated social category. This involves an effort to recover—and critically reactivate—those forms of consciousness that, according to Fisher (2009), interacted in fascinating, productive, and profoundly threatening ways with capitalist order during the years surrounding 1968. It is precisely these forms of consciousness—class-based, psychedelic, and feminist—that neoliberalism has had to progressively uproot in order to assert itself as a hegemonic political-anthropological project.

The primary political and intellectual task of the social science scholar (in this case, the two dimensions are inseparable) is to identify the sources of discomfort and indifference affecting the contemporary subject. As Mills suggests, this is a responsibility that does not emerge solely from within the discipline itself, but is demanded by the broader intellectual community—from physicists to artists, from philosophers to writers—and it endows sociology with a public and transversal function. In this sense, the sociological imagination becomes, now more than ever, one of the most urgent mental faculties to cultivate. It enables us to connect individual biographies with historical processes, subjective experience with institutional structures, thus restoring analytical depth and critical awareness to a fragmented cultural landscape. If each intellectual epoch can be said to possess a dominant paradigm that guides cultural debate, the present moment is marked by the proliferation of fleeting cognitive trends, which rise quickly only to fade just as rapidly. These ephemeral enthusiasms, while animating the cultural and academic arena, tend to leave little or no trace in terms of lasting

intellectual reflection. It is precisely in this volatility that the need for the sociological imagination reveals itself once again—as a form of critical resistance to superficial thinking and the dissipation of meaning.

Nonetheless, the dominant trajectories taken by much contemporary social science research have tended to obstruct the exercise of the sociological imagination. This faculty, which is central to Mills's thought, stands in radical opposition to the mainstream conception of social science—one grounded in a set of formalistic techniques aimed at producing neutral knowledge in service of the market (Espeland and Stevens 2008; Borghi et al. 2013). Rather than fostering critical understanding of the social world, this approach tends to rigidify inquiry within procedural frameworks that weigh down and congest intellectual labor. The resulting methodological claims not only impose constraints that discourage independent reflection, but frequently generate self-referential knowledge disconnected from publicly relevant concerns (Bulmer 1982; Sciarrone 2011).

These epistemic obstacles—including methodological obscurantism and the proliferation of secondary issues lacking connection to ongoing social transformations—have contributed to a profound crisis within contemporary social science. In some cases, this crisis manifests as a form of analytical paralysis that, to borrow a term from Gramsci (1975), could be described as "ideological morphinism": an intellectual posture that finds comfort in illusions, retreating into disarmed forms of critique incapable of materially challenging existing power structures. This kind of knowledge, while maintaining the appearance of critical and transformative language, proves ultimately toothless, shifting social and political conflict from the material to the symbolic realm. The rhetoric of change is thus absorbed into apparatuses that simulate conflict while neutralizing its political efficacy, thereby reconfiguring it within the boundaries of institutional acceptability. In this way, social research risks becoming the unwitting accomplice of the status quo, even as it continues to speak the language of transformation.

In other cases, this dynamic gives rise to a more severe condition, captured in Mills's own formulation of the "docile robot": the academic subject—whether precarious researcher or tenured faculty member—who passively accepts the managerial logics imposed by the neoliberal university model, adapting to the rhythms of the academic marketplace, avoiding conflict and the development of critical perspectives, and limiting their work to purely technical practices of research and teaching, devoid of political drive or civic passion.

In both scenarios, scientific production is directed primarily toward increasing the volume of publications; research design is oriented exclusively toward participation in competitive funding schemes; and theoretical reflection is subordinated to the imperatives of efficiency and measurable outcomes. What is lost in the process is the aspiration to a form of knowledge capable of critically interrogating reality, responding to public concerns, and contributing to social transformation—functions historically at the core of the intellectual vocation, but now increasingly marginalized.

The rise of these two postures—ideological morphinism and the docile robot—both of which dominate the current academic landscape, is progressively transforming the very meaning of reason, of the pursuit of truth, and, consequently, of freedom. This is no longer merely a matter of individual orientation, but has become a public issue, and indeed a fundamental concern for the future of the social sciences.

## 4. The Millsian Independent Intellectual

The issues addressed in the previous section are by no means new; questions concerning the emancipatory purposes of the social sciences point to a broader and long-standing debate on their social relevance, a discussion that gained momentum within sociology in the early 2000s through a number of well-known contributions (Boudon 2002; Goldthorpe 2004; Burawoy 2005). Without delving into the specifics of that debate, recent years have seen renewed reflection on the social role of the social sciences, with scholars asking

what space still remains for an *emancipatory social science* (Busso et al. 2024). With regard to the individual scholar, the conceptual framework is shaped by the underlying tension between the neoliberal university model—sustained by intense competition among researchers, rooted in the "publish or perish" logic—and the emergence of an alternative university model oriented toward producing knowledge that serves communities and local economies (Richter and Hostettler 2015). In this second model, particularly when it comes to applied research, the objective is not publications but the provision of services (Åkerlind 2005). This tension is, at least partially, mediated by the fact that within the neoliberal university, publications are not the only currency of competition: the ability to attract research funding plays an equally important role (Ham 1999). As a result, scholars may adjust their research agendas in response to funding trends, producing commissioned research that is often self-referential and, in many cases, irrelevant (Laudel and Gläser 2008).

In this context, the pursuit of a critical social science today constitutes a formidable challenge—especially for those committed to building genuinely global perspectives (Fanon 1961; Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Eisenstadt 2002). Yet, despite the obstacles, several epistemological approaches have emerged that have enabled scholars positioned at the margins of the neoliberal university to develop new forms of self-representation (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; Grosfoguel 2017; de Sousa Santos 2023). However, while these approaches carry emancipatory potential, they also risk reproducing—albeit in altered forms—the very same power logics they seek to challenge and overturn, ultimately becoming critical enclaves within the dominant order.

On this point, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's 1993 essay *Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals* offers particularly incisive insights. Gilmore opens with Audre Lorde's famous statement—*"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"*—to denounce the illusion that an oppressive system can be transformed using the very conceptual, institutional, or cultural tools it has produced. Her essay delivers a radical critique of the condition of so-called "oppositional studies" in the United States—such as Black Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, or Postcolonial Studies—which were originally established to contest the dominant social order and to restore epistemic and political legitimacy to historically marginalized subjects and cultures. According to Gilmore (1993), the problem does not lie in the existence of such fields, but rather in their progressive institutionalisation and detachment from the concrete practices of resistance from which they emerged.

Far from becoming authentic spaces of opposition, these fields risk transforming into sites of symbolic production increasingly disconnected from the lived realities of social struggle. Gilmore identifies three critical tendencies that undermine the transformative potential of these academic domains:

1. Individualist careerism, which instrumentalises oppositional agendas for personal academic advancement;
2. Romantic particularism, which idealises cultural authenticity without interrogating power dynamics within subaltern groups;
3. Luxury production, that is, hyper-abstract theorisation that is self-referential, inaccessible, and disconnected from the daily lives of those experiencing oppression.

In this way, even those who claim a critical position risk becoming what Gilmore calls *private intellectuals*: figures integrated into the very institutional logics that reproduce the inequalities they profess to oppose. Rather than acting in solidarity with marginalised communities, these intellectuals often benefit personally from a system that continues to exclude (Tàíwò 2024). In this context, Audre Lorde's assertion becomes even more significant: it is not enough to occupy marginal academic spaces through the creation of alternative departments—ethnic, decolonial, or gender studies—in order to enact real change. What is required instead, as Gilmore (1993) suggests, is a practice of dismantling and rebuilding: an organic praxis that reconnects intellectual labour to social reality, in a relationship not of instrumentalisation but of solidarity—capable of generating true processes of collective transformation.

It is precisely in this break that we may glimpse an emancipatory potential for the role of the intellectual. A possibility that, in truth, C. Wright Mills had already outlined in the final part of *The Sociological Imagination*, where he identifies three possible roles for the contemporary intellectual:

1. The philosopher-king, an auto-referential figure of academic baronialism;
2. The advisor to the king, a technical-functional scholar who sacrifices critical autonomy to serve the establishment;
3. The independent intellectual, who embodies an emancipatory perspective.

It is this third figure that is capable of exercising the sociological imagination—connecting individual experiences to structural mechanisms within society, and assuming a critical and transformative public engagement. And it is precisely this model—taken up also by Gilmore—that may offer a path for rethinking the role of critical studies: not as sites of symbolic recognition, but as spaces of active solidarity and political intervention.

In reality, however, inhabiting the role of the independent intellectual is increasingly difficult today. The privatisation and professionalisation of the university, as previously noted, have made it ever harder for academics to cultivate their critical potential (Pezzulli 2024). Trapped in a cycle of precarious employment, low pay, increasing teaching and administrative burdens, pressures to publish, and demands for institutional conformity—down to behavioural and emotional norms—many scholars find themselves at a crossroads: conform or withdraw.

Yet withdrawal is often not a liberating choice, but a form of social death for the intellectual—a forced silencing of their critical voice. Paradoxically, it is precisely this widespread frustration, this sense of systemic exclusion, that becomes folded into the institutional mechanisms of reproduction (Okoth 2024). It is what allows situated and oppositional studies to be progressively disempowered, separated from real struggles, and reabsorbed by academic elites or moderate reformist positions that neutralise their transformative potential.

## 5. The Positional Sociology Initiative

In *Elite Capture*, Táíwò (2024) cites a seminal essay by Jo Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (1972), in which the author critiques the idea—then widespread in feminist and other radical movements—that it was possible to organize without formal structures. Freeman's text had a significant impact on debates around organization, leadership, and power within social movements, anticipating many of the insights later developed in the fields of intersectional feminism and new social movement theory. Freeman argues that the absence of structure is a dangerous illusion. Drawing on numerous examples, she shows how even within groups that declare themselves to be horizontal or non-hierarchical, structured dynamics nonetheless emerge. These, however, are informal structures—unacknowledged and, precisely for that reason, less visible and less subject to accountability. Such settings, marked by the lack of rules and organizational clarity, tend to favor the rise of informal elites—individuals with more charisma, available time, resources, or social capital—who end up exercising disproportionate power and reproducing unequal patterns of participation.

In the central part of her essay, Freeman analyses the women's liberation movement, showing how structurelessness did not resolve issues related to the unequal distribution of power. On the contrary, it provided cover for informal elite networks—primarily from privileged backgrounds—to conceal their dominant influence over the group's culture and activities. This phenomenon, now widely known as *elite capture*, first emerged in development studies addressing the Global South, where it was used to describe how socially advantaged groups appropriated financial benefits—especially international aid—that were not originally intended for them (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000; Acemoglu and Robinson 2008; Martinez-Bravo et al. 2017). More recently, Olúfémi O. Táíwò has broadened the scope of the concept, arguing that *elite capture* refers more generally to the tendency for political projects to be redirected—whether in principle or in

practice—by privileged actors leveraging their material, symbolic, or relational resources (Táíwò 2024). The term is now used across economics, the social sciences, political science, and related disciplines to denote the tendency of socially dominant classes to gain control over resources and benefits intended for collective use.

In the contemporary academic context—and particularly within what Pezzulli (2024) has described as the "indigestible university"—the risk of elite capture is especially acute. Yet even within the tightly regulated and consolidated structures of the current system, it remains possible to exercise meaningful power and responsibility.

For some time, especially in the United States but also in other contexts, scholars and intellectuals have sought to escape this systemic mechanism by carving out spaces—often outside official academic structures—where they could claim what might be called a *right to refusal*: the right to reject institutional codes and logics, or to resist co-optation. This *fugitive* posture—as theorized by Moten and Harney (2004)—refers to forms of living that make possible the survival of communities otherwise subject to oppression. Such fugitive practices have played a crucial role in preserving critical and alternative approaches. Yet they have rarely resulted in a concrete response to the actual conditions of knowledge production and academic labor, largely because they often remain spontaneous, anarchic, and individualistic forms of resistance—marked, once again, by the structurelessness that Freeman warned against.

In 2023, in Italy, a group of scholars—mostly from the field of sociology—sought to intervene precisely at this critical juncture by founding a network aimed at transforming disorganized refusal into collective action endowed with direction, positionality, and purpose. The network is pointedly named *Sociologia di posizione* (*Positional Sociology*), where "position" is understood as a socially constructed and therefore inherently political location within the social space—historically determined and fundamentally incompatible with any claim to neutrality (de Nardis and Simone 2022). In the network's manifesto-volume, *Sociologia di posizione*, the authors write:

> Sociologists of the past possessed a strong historical subjectivity, capable of being shaped by—and in turn shaping—the material conditions of social existence. In doing so, they generated a toolbox for the creation of new political, legal, and social models. Building on this legacy, we have felt the need to reaffirm the public, emancipatory, political, and transformative role of sociology by constructing a network of 'positional' sociologists." (de Nardis et al. 2023)

For these scholars, *position* expresses a relationship between points—a gravitational field that, in Bourdieu's (2015) formulation, is also a battlefield. *Position*, they argue, is also—and necessarily—*positionality*. And it is from this positionality that the group has built a network capable of embodying and organizing a new approach to research and social theory—an approach that resists the parameters imposed by the neoliberal university, and that seeks to reactivate forms of critical consciousness developed in the 1970s but later neutralized by neoliberalism.

As Táíwò (2024, 77) observes: "History built the rooms we move through, think through, and act through every day"; and it is true that we operate within contexts shaped by resources, relationships, and incentives we did not choose. However, this does not mean that established power fully determines our actions. It is precisely within this space of possibility that the initiative of *Sociologia di posizione* is situated—a collective effort not born of frustration or mere hope, but grounded in organization. Through this collective practice, the group aims to disrupt and imagine concrete alternatives to the neoliberal university.

Perhaps we cannot control how the room will respond to our words and actions—but we can still speak.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis presented has addressed some of the structural contradictions traversing the contemporary academic field, with particular attention to the role of the social sciences in producing public knowledge and transforming social relations. Drawing on the sociological imagination as both an analytical and political resource, the essay has sought to critically reflect on the positioning of the researcher within a university system increasingly governed by performance-oriented, market-driven, and hierarchical logics. Within this framework, the figure of the sociologist risks being progressively stripped of their critical function, caught between the self-referentiality of academic discourse and the hetero-direction of knowledge production imposed by neoliberal governance.

However, as this analysis has attempted to show, such transformations cannot be read solely in terms of subordination or passivity. The researcher, far from being a mere cog in the academic machine, remains an active subject—capable, at least in part, of reconfiguring the margins of autonomy and meaning within their own work. From this perspective, assuming one's positionality becomes crucial—not only as a standpoint, but as a generative principle for praxis and responsibility. What is at stake is not merely the individual ethics of the scholar, but the very possibility of constituting a social science oriented toward emancipation, capable of critically redefining its objects, methods, and aims.

Far from proposing a nostalgic return to past epistemological models, this contribution invites reflection on the concrete conditions—material, institutional, symbolic—that make critical knowledge possible today. In this sense, the crisis of the social sciences is not only a crisis of content or paradigms, but a crisis of role and function: a crisis of their capacity to intervene, to be recognised, and to restore meaning to a research practice that does not simply describe the world, but contributes to its transformation.

Within this context, experiences such as *Sociologia di posizione* represent a compelling attempt to repoliticise academic knowledge. These are forms of organised resistance to the isolation and co-optation of critical subjectivities by the neoliberal order. More than mere networks of solidarity among scholars, such collectives can be understood as epistemological and political laboratories in which alternative research practices are experimented—practices grounded in social responsibility and in connection with the lived worlds from which research originates.

What these experiences illuminate is that the alternative to the neutralisation of the social sciences does not lie in the rhetoric of militancy, nor in the celebration of engagement as a value in itself, but in the construction of organised forms of thought and action capable of holding together positionality, rigour, relationality, and transformation. It is precisely this articulation that makes it possible to envision a new space for social research: a space in which questions are not defused by the logic of efficiency, but reformulated in light of historical urgencies and the lived conditions of social actors.

Ultimately, the social sciences can still fulfil a critical and public function—provided they do not allow themselves to be fully absorbed by the evaluative metrics imposed by the neoliberal academy. This demands a dual movement: on the one hand, the capacity to expose the mechanisms currently governing knowledge production and its priorities; on the other, the collective will to experiment with alternative modes of research, teaching, and dissemination that restore meaning to scientific practice as a form of engagement with the world.

In a time marked by profound social transformations, the very idea of sociology—as critical knowledge, as relational practice, as a space for imagination—is called upon to redefine its boundaries. It is within this space of possibility that we must situate the question of the researcher's role and the function of the social sciences—not as a definitive answer, but as an opening toward new forms of thinking and organisation. In other words, the task is not so much to *save sociology*, but to reaffirm its public and transformative vocation, refusing to reduce it to a mere technique for observing and measuring the social.

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