Is There a Place for Altruism in Sociological Thought?

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Abstract

This paper questions the possibility of considering altruism as a theme for sociology. Although the theme of altruistic behavior was introduced and deepened by the pioneer of sociology, Auguste Comte, it is no coincidence that subsequent studies have long removed this topic; the strong connection with values makes it difficult to conceptualize the problem and to treat it in the light of the scientific method. Nevertheless, the theme of altruism—a sort of puzzle for sociology—has re-emerged in the readings of classical and contemporary authors. This paper traces this path and tries to identify some spaces, especially in light of the fundamental contribution of Pitirim Sorokin, where this theme can have an impact on the understanding of these social phenomena today.

Altruism and Sociological Thought

As Mangone and Dolgov (2019) note, sociological thought has focused on the critical aspects of social life and the need for a scientific analysis of these pathologies, in view of their understanding and their overcoming. In the history of sociological thought, there have been many careful analyses of criminal or antisocial behavior and studies on racism, sexism, and violence. The attention given by the sociological gaze around the theme of conflict or social disorganization has been constant and attentive. Less frequent, the authors suggest, is the use of positive sociology (which is different from positivistic sociology, as they rightly point out), which focuses its attention on the pro-social aspects.

Other authors (Jeffries et al. 2006) have written of a real "field of specialization" for sociology—a sociology of altruism and solidarity that traces, at the same time, a field of interest and a key to understanding social phenomena. Sociology—together with other

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disciplines, such as psychology (Seligman 2003)—can contribute to the constitution of knowledge around the themes of solidarity and altruism.

Certainly, it is an interesting challenge for sociological knowledge: altruism is a purpose relevant to the particular historical moment in which we live when we observe, in many Western countries, a weakening of family and community ties and, even more, of the civic and relational dimension (Touraine 2010). At the same time, the study of altruism presents epistemological and methodological asperities[1] (Jeffries et al. 2006; Weinstein 2008).

It is no coincidence that the interest of sociology for altruism is intermittent and not without difficulties. This is a particularly relevant theme for sociological reflection because it establishes a bridge between the social actor and the other. The altruistic action incorporates the presence of the other before it takes place and assumes a conception of individual other than the one traced by Hobbes; for this reason, it configures a solidarity relationship that can help untangle the classic question of sociology about "how society is possible." Altruism, understood as "disinterested love for others" (Hanley Furfey 1981), "acting with the goal of benefiting another" (Piliavin and Charng 1990), or "voluntary behavior put in place to benefit another without an expectation of external rewards" (Cattarinussi 1994), poses, however, some dilemmas to the sociological theory. In the first place, it is difficult to explain the reasons for a behavior that potentially inflicts unrewarded damage to the one who does it (Wispé 1978; Wilson 1975). It is not by chance that, as we shall see, many of the theories that explain its dynamics are based on the fact that gratuity is only apparent.

Second, the altruistic behavior, to be such, calls into question the attitude of the one who expresses it. Altruism is not expressed exclusively in behavior, but recalls the mood of the social actor. An action is configured as altruistic not in itself, but beyond the subjectivity of the person who works: altruism refers motivations and ethos of the actor. For this reason, it is no coincidence that in common language, as well as in science, one can ask questions about the actual altruistic nature of apparently such behavior. The "altruistic" construct, in other words, inevitably refers to the subjective sphere of the actor, even more than the nature and the ways of action. For this reason, the concept appears elusive and not easy to define.

Third, precisely for the reason now exposed, it is a construct not easily translated into empirical terms and not easily distinguishable from other types of behavior. For example, a parallelism can be drawn with the help action—for example, in the field of social services—but it is not difficult to see that these are not necessarily overlapping concepts. The studies on altruistic behavior, which were also carried out by empirical surveys, still suffer from some methodological difficulty.

Finally, the study of altruistic behavior appears to be inextricably linked to the theme of values also by the researcher himself, who often transfers his positions on the level of scientific analysis; altruism becomes, for many authors, not only a modality of behavior, but also a goal of social transformation. This cumbersome entry of values into science is, as one can imagine, not without of controversial aspects.

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[1] At the level of empirical research, we can consider studies carried out at the micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, these are studies aimed at investigating the interpersonal behavior of individuals and the characteristics of the "altruistic personality." At the meso level, voluntary organizations, cooperation, and social networks are considered above all. This literature crosses the broad line relating to social capital. The macro level inserts the theme of altruism into broad reflections related to social stratification, institutions, globalization, and the same image that altruistic behavior assumes in contemporary contexts (Piliavin and Charng 1990; Trobia 2011).

Therefore, the interest and the keys of interpretation that sociology has used to explain the altruistic behavior are multiple and often divergent.

In order to synthetically represent this path, we can identify, in a schematic and non-exhaustive way, four main phases.

In the first phase, which precedes the birth of sociology in the strict sense, but which introduces a modern reflection on the theme of altruistic behavior, the prevailing attitude is of criticism or disenchantment. In a vision of the individual strongly anchored to that of *homo economicus*, altruism is substantially denied. Utilitarian philosophers such as Bentham, Mill, and Ward, who conceived pro-social behaviors as secondary derivations of a utilitarian attitude, were motivated to maximize individual advantage. It is a kind of "selfish altruism," in which behavior aimed at the good of others actually derives from a calculation of opportunities of a utilitarian nature. In other words, altruism does not stand as the real engine of action, but as a strategic attitude put in place by the social actor. Along this path, for example, Ward (1883), the first president of American Sociological Association, formulated a sort of "altruism paradox," whereby the altruistic behavior, the same with those who rescue another person in difficulty, works to placate a genuine sense of punishment arising in the social actor at the sight of the conditions of the other. Altruism, therefore, however sincere and aimed at helping the other, works in a functional way to defend the psychic equilibrium, and therefore in egoistic terms.

The perspective taken in the second phase is different. In this period, we can consider as if the dichotomy of egoism/altruism is placed at the center of attention, and the second is attributed a regenerating value. This is an important period in the history of the social sciences; it is here that modernity is entering into European society and with it there is a strong demand for social transformation and regeneration.

Thus, according to Comte (1854), the author to whom we owe the same formulation of the term that will then enter the social theory, altruism is one of the principles on which a new society must be founded. In his *Système de politique positive* the author—interested in founding a sort of religion of humanity able to accompany the world in a new phase—leaves behind definitively the old order and underlines how his program identifies: "love as a principle, order as a foundation and progress as the goal."

Altruism is a key concept capable of explaining the very nature of social relationships, and at the same time it is capable of nourishing the regeneration of society.

The concept of altruism for Comte is certainly peculiar and the differences with authors who follow are certainly evident. However, although significantly different, Durkheim will continue to use the term coined years earlier by his master. As is well known, this author constructs a theory of altruism as a peculiar mode of relationship that cannot be reduced to the logic of interest (Boltanski 1990). In the peculiar conception of Durkheim, altruism does not emanate directly from the individual, but is a product of the social pressure imposed on the individual himself. When Durkheim (1927) identifies the types of suicide (egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic), he contrasts altruistic behavior and selfish behavior, but for this author the meaning that altruism covers is linked to the theme of solidarity and the moral forces that make it possible and, with it, even the society. Durkheim describes altruistic suicide (typical of archaic societies) not as an act aimed at helping others, but as the product of the complete annulment of the ego within the social group. In altruistic behavior, the ego is confused with something foreign to itself and therefore with the social group (Durkheim 1934).

What is meant to be emphasized here is that, in this second phase, even if there are differences in approaches that are also significant, altruism still plays a significant role. As

Wuthnow (1993) notes, Weber, too, does not seem far from such reflections. Wuthnow writes that he "was concerned with its importance when he wrote of the heroism and self-sacrifice characteristic of the ethic of the warrior class in pre-modern societies and when he opposed the love ethic embodied in charismatic authority with rational, legal, and bureaucratic modes of authority" (Wuthnow 1993).

Moreover, other authors identify how altruism goes through—with its ethical substratum and its projection to social transformation—the thought of the second half of the nineteenth century. Again, the contrast of egoism and altruism characterize many perspectives. Volz (2007), for example, referring to Jonas (1976) and Châtelet (1978), defines this as the "era of altruism," as this construct seems to permeate the various social reform movements of the time. In particular, according to Volz, visions that are very different from each other are actually united by a series of elements. These visions advocate a radical revision of the relationship between individual and society in the direction of overcoming the distinction between individual and collective well-being. In this sense, the contrast with the old world in the process of necessary overcoming appears to be dominated by particularistic, and therefore selfish, sentiments with respect to which it proposes a new vision. This is not a resumption of altruism in its religious meaning; on the contrary, all these visions are strongly anti-Christian in the sense that they are considered necessary to overcome Christian morality and the charitable vision proposed by religion and adoption of a really new ideology capable of transforming the world. Social science, along this line, is not limited to interpreting the world, but takes on a salvific role, able not only to explain events, but also to indicate a path.

The change in the historical and cultural framework, combined with the new role of sociology in the science landscape, will ensure that this approach is overcome by a new perspective. Within this third phase, the attention toward altruism experiences a significant slowdown. In this period, on a philosophical level, the irreducible individualism advocated by Nietzsche will make its way, leaving no room for altruistic action (identified as a projection of the "slave morality") and thus raising a constant suspicion of pro-social and compassionate action. On the other hand, the affirmation of sociology as a science, the new "division of labor" between sciences (why altruism which becomes the subject of philosophy or theology), and the progress of epistemological conceptions based on the avalutativity of science, make any discourse on human altruism irrelevant or completely improper for sociology. We will return to this point—fundamental even in our day—later on. We can now consider how for many years altruism—especially if linked to an ethical orientation of the person—represents a non-problem for sociological science and therefore is not able to become an object of study. An exception, within this panorama, is represented by Parsons (1951) on the "patterns variables." In the first formulation, among the choices that move the social actor, the "orientation towards the ego/orientation towards the community" was present, a dichotomy that entered the dilemma of altruism. In subsequent writings, however, this pair of variables is expunged and the five pattern variables moved to the four functional imperatives of the AGIL scheme (Parsons and Smelser 1956). Altruism, during this period, is substantially removed from the sociological reflection.

Therefore, the debate on altruism will know a new interest only in the fourth phase of the path we are tracing, which started in the second half of the last century, when, in light of theoretical approaches as well as deeply distant, this construct is again sociological analysis.

The historical and theoretical framework has changed again. The rationalistic explanations—informed by the vision of *homo economicus*—show that they cannot explain the complex interpersonal dynamics. Both in the social psychology and in the sociological one,

we try to find explanations that can motivate the development of altruistic behavior that is apparently incomprehensible in terms of individual benefit and even indirect. Traditional explanations struggle to explain help behavior and individual differences with at least apparently similar situations. Altruism, ousted from the sociological reflection, does not delay only to re-emerge as a problem and to seek new interpretations.

In this regard, we can identify, within this period, at least two macro-approaches. A first line of reflections performs a rereading of the theory of rational choice. Homans (1958), for example, has focused on these dynamics emphasizing the fact that altruistic behavior would also be a rational action, since it gives rise to a process of exchange. This not only in the sense that such behavior generates symmetrical reactions on the part of the recipient, but also, more generally, that altruistic action receives, in certain cultural contexts, an appreciation of the social group by the reference group.

Likewise, based on a rationalist approach, is the explanation offered by sociobiology. Also in this case, the advances of experimental investigations make it difficult to confirm the traditional keys of reading. The evolution of the studies of genetics makes altruistic behavior difficult to understand in the light of rigid Darwinian schemes; the "egoism of the genes" (Dawkins 1996) does not reconcile with this form of behavior, which requires new explanations.

Thus, Wilson accepts the challenge and takes up the concept of altruism, removed from sociological theory, and formulates new interpretative paths. It is about explaining a "self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others" (Wilson 1975). According to his profound analysis, there are actually two different forms of altruism: one, which we can consider "hardcore," in which "a set of responses relatively unaffected by social reward or punishment after childhood" (Wilson 1978), and a second typology called "softcore." In this second case, "the capacity for softcore altruism can be expected to have evolved from the vagaries of cultural evolution." This form is, above all, the object of the attention of the sociological analysis: "our altruism is essentially soft." In line with the approach of sociobiology, culture and morality are not sufficient to explain altruism. It is therefore necessary to resort again to a readjusted evolutionary theory. First, it is necessary to extend the gaze from the individual to the parental circles. In light of this key, the altruistic behavior, often directed to individuals close to the social actor, reinforces the survival of the group as a whole. Second, sociobiology recurs to the scheme of reciprocity, according to which the altruistic act corresponds to a similarly benevolent answer: this dynamic would give rise to a profitable circle of virtue useful for the adaptation and survival of the species.

Beyond Rationalist Reductionism: Altruism and the Integral Vision of Society

It has been observed that the mature sociology of the twentieth century has made several attempts to explain altruistic behavior, but it has encountered some difficulties. In the previous ideas presented, we examined two approaches that provide new keys for interpretation, while remaining anchored to a conception of the rational social actor. According to this approach, the irrationality of altruism must be understood, explained, and channeled in a theoretical perspective that can, in any case, consolidate the rationalist architecture that sustains this knowledge.

The approach underlying Sorokin's reasoning is profoundly different. As highlighted by Mangone and Dolgov (2019), at the base of the Sorokinian conception of altruism is his proposal of integral sociology that is of a definitive overcoming of rationalist reductionism.

It is a sociological system developed during the period in which the author was teaching at Harvard in the late 1920s, during which time he moved away from the behaviorist approaches that had marked his youthful scientific production. Rather than a mere theory about sociological knowledge and the basis for a research methodology, integralism represents "simultaneously an epistemology, psychology, sociology of change and theory of history" (Johnston 2006).

Integralism is, above all, a conception of reality: on the basis of Solviev's vision of unity, Sorokin affirms that the integralistic conception considers psycho-social reality as a multifaceted and complex totality in which we can distinguish at least three different aspects: sensory, rational and supersensory, and super-rational (Sorokin 1965).

Thus, while the physical sciences study inorganic phenomena and biology in the organic world, the social sciences investigate what Sorokin, following De Roberty's theory, considers "super-organic phenomena" (Sorokin 1947). While the presence of vital forces distinguishes organic phenomena from inorganic ones, the presence of thought clearly connotes the super-organic world. The social sciences need the other sciences because they come to unavoidable conclusions about the characteristics of man. But, on the basis of these "pre-social" sciences, sociology, and other social sciences can take an even wider look, succeeding in embracing the complexity of socio-cultural phenomena.

In the wake of Comte, sociology stands above other social sciences because it has the ability to observe social phenomena, taking into account the variety of its composition: *homo socius* studied by sociology is simultaneously and inseparably political, religious, ethical, artistic, rational and irrational, and so on.

The social reality is therefore composite and requires a broad look. It consists of an empirical-sensorial, rational, and mystical-irrational nature.

Now, starting from this conception of reality, which therefore assumes an articulated and irreducible nature to the mere objective component, the need arises to proceed through cognitive processes that are also composite and complementary.

From here comes Sorokin's theory of knowledge, which prescribes to sociology the duty to jointly use the empirical analysis, the logical reasoning, and—in contrast with most of the sociological tradition—intuition, which is a different mental procedure from logical reasoning, able to penetrate into the irrational component of human things.

The adoption of an integral sociology is the premise, in the Sorokinian vision, for overcoming the contraposition between science, philosophy, and religion.

Sociology is the science that—through this creative gaze—simultaneously observes society, personality, and culture: "integralistic science affirms that this multifaceted reality can be penetrated not only through the channel of observation—sensory perception, but also through the channel of logical, mathematical thinking, and through supersensory—super-rational intuitions" (Sorokin 1965).

The author is well aware that his ontological and epistemological conceptions are profoundly far from the current sociology, considered tired, "neurotic and much less productive" (Sorokin 1965). In explicit polemics with the sociological naturalism (Allodi 2006), he links his vision of the social system to a specific conception of history. In the flow of social dynamics, the three components mentioned above give rise to as many socio-cultural conformations (considered as provisional states of equilibrium), which alternate incessantly. In a cyclical conception of history, Sorokin (1957) describes three types of socio-cultural structures, in which truth systems, cultural forms, and dominant values change. Each type has its own mentality, its own system of values and norms, a vision of the world, a religious system, its own political and economic organization, a typical conformation of artistic forms, and a characteristic set of behaviors and social relations.

The first type considered is defined ideational, the other sensory. These are ideal-types—as the author underlines—and are therefore never completely fulfilled in the historical forms of cultural systems that, from time to time, have seen the prevalence of one or the other or original forms of combination. Cultures that have a balance between the two ideal types considered form a third type of cultural system and are defined as idealistic.

The ideational system is characterized by a system of truth inspired by God and a particular attention on spiritual needs. On the contrary, the sensate mentality is wary of non-material interpretations of reality. The needs pursued are eminently physical. The sensate era characterizes the periods of decadence of civilizations, in which individuals dedicate themselves to the satisfaction of selfish needs and in which social solidarity tends to loosen.

In terms of the compositions between the two types considered, the idealistic cultural mentality appears as the better balanced one, which manages to synthesize the fundamental aspects of the two systems indicated above.

The current crisis of sociology is not an episode within the academy, the scientific community, or a system of knowledge; it is linked to the crisis of the Western world and, still broadening our gaze, to the crisis of the sensate system that has been imposed—in culture, science, art, and social relations—for about five centuries.

Sociology, therefore, has the task of emerging from this torpor, from this "sterile and stagnant" state (Sorokin 1965). Science is at a crossroads: it must choose between remaining in its analyticity, in its researches anchored to single unrelated facts and moving toward a new macro explanation, as did the great classics of sociological thought. Sorokin's proposal is clear: Sociology is called to this challenge and, in doing so, can contribute to overcoming the "sensate" phase and to the achievement of a new "ideational" phase, in which the principles of the common good and altruism can govern human relations.

In a Tolstoyan faith in love, in evident discontinuity with the figure of the academic sociologist, Sorokin, with his original style and heartfelt tones, poses two relevant and ultimately relevant questions for sociological knowledge: the assumption of a systematic perspective, which does not dispel knowledge in the thousands of rivulets of specialized research and the introduction—uncomfortable, removed, opposed—of values even within the scientific discourse.

The study and, even more, the promotion of altruistic behavior becomes a natural outlet for this approach. Amitology, defined by the author as "The applied science or art of developing friendship" (Sorokin 1954), more than a form of knowledge, is a work program. Thus, in 1949, Sorokin founded, thanks to the conspicuous donation by Eli Lilly, the Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism, a scientific proposal and action. The altruism, difficult to define according to the same author, can be considered as "the action that produces and maintains the physical and/or the good of others. It is formed by love and empathy, and its extreme form may require the free sacrifice of self for another." (Sorokin 1948).

In this context, it is possible to combine it with an approach that is certainly different, but in some ways confluent to that of Sorokin.

The reflections carried out in the wake of the famous essay by MAUSS on the gift, which gave rise to a real movement of thought in the social sciences, can in some ways be compared to what was elaborated by Sorokin.

As is well known, authors such as Godbout (1992) and Caillé (1998) elaborate a complex gift theory as a peculiar form of social relation not based on utilitarianism. In an original theory of action, Caillé considers four dimensions: self-interest, moral obligation, freedom and, using a neologism, the *aimance*. With it, the author indicates the peculiar characteristic of individuals to open itself to the other and to perform reciprocal actions. In the *aimance* we can include

friendship, philia, agape, caritas, piety, solidarity, cooperation, alliance, association, and, precisely, altruism. The act of giving exemplifies this openness. The gift is configured as a particular form of reciprocity; in the incessant alternation between gift and counter-gift, it allows the interweaving of social relationships that escape the logic of immediate satisfaction. The gift act involves three orders of obligations: that of giving, that of accepting, and that of reciprocating. By virtue of the relational nature of these obligations, the gift establishes a plot of reciprocal relationships that characterize the contexts of ancient societies in a very peculiar way, some contexts of contemporary societies. Certainly, several authors (Pulcini 2005) have tended to mark the difference between gift and altruism. While the first, as we have seen, connotes as an essentially relational act, able to establish reciprocal relationships (and in this sense, according to some commentators we do not necessarily find ourselves outside an anti-utilitarian paradigm), the second, generally understood, is characterized by being a unilateral act of a philanthropic nature. Indeed, an economist like Zamagni, interested in exploring the mechanisms of reciprocity and comparing them with the theme of gratuitousness, underlines how we can imagine, as a kind of perverse effect of philanthropy, an "altruism without the other" (Zamagni 2001), in which the altruistic act is completely disarticulated from the social relation.

However, the question is probably more complex and the two terms actually seem to have more common elements than they do at first glance. As Merlo (2011) points out, in the phenomena of contemporary voluntary service (take the emblematic theme of blood donation in Cipolla and Agnoletti (2012) as an example), the recipient of the action is often unknown: it is a "generalized other" with which no direct and symmetrical relationships are established, but the action of the gift helps to build a network of fiduciary relationships.

Sorokin, whose conception of altruistic love is something very different from egocentric altruism, comes to the rescue to further clarify the question. Sorokin speaks for this purpose of "ego-transcendental altruism," not only in terms of individual sacrifice, but in the sense that the social actor is projected into a relational dimension.

Aware of the need to overcome the reductionist individualism that clearly characterizes the late-sensate phase of human history, and also aware of the previously observed paradoxes of altruism, Sorokin emphasizes that altruistic love is the supreme and vital form of human relationships (Sorokin 1954), which allows us to "inaugurate a life cycle [...] of self-recreation through the creation of bonds." Altruism, so conceived, is not a disguised form of selfishness, or a mechanism of narcissistic self-satisfaction that hinders the establishment of bonds, rather than nurturing them. Sorokinian altruism presupposes a relational ego capable of building meaningful relationships even outside of the social circles closest to him. In this sense, as Paglione (2008) argues, the points in common between altruistic love and gift described by anthropology are multiple and not secondary.

Among the elements that strongly characterize the altruistic love we observe, even here on a par with the gift described by the sociologists of MAUSS, a tendency toward universalism. Love, so as not to close oneself in a selfish attitude or not to arouse what we could consider as bonding dynamics, extends to all of humanity and transcends ties of kinship, clan, or ethnicity. The altruistic love crosses the boundaries and refers to a belonging of the person to the same human community.

Moreover, the Sorokinian conception of love is strongly influenced by the cultural climate of its formation and, therefore, its Russian roots (Abbottoni 2004; Cimagalli 2017). References to Soloviev's ontological and gnoseological conception are repeated and explicit throughout his work. Soloviev presents a peculiar vision of the world and of history that derives from the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ: "Finally the God – man or the Living Reason (Logos) not only abstractly

understands but actively realizes the meaning of everything, or the perfect moral order, as he embraces and connects all things from the living personal power of love" (Soloviev 1918). This conjunction between divine nature and human affairs is condensed in the concept of uni-totality, which is the fulcrum of his thought. It is the perfect union between divine and human, which was realized in Christ and is perpetuated in history by Christian humanity.

Along this path and consistently with this ontological and gnoseological vision, the altruistic love described by Sorokin incorporates and synthesizes the three forms of love formulated by the Western cultural tradition: agape, philia, and eros. While agape, as the supreme form of love, stands as a one—sided attitude that transcends the relationship with the other, the form described by Sorokin finds its fulfillment precisely in the reciprocal relationship with the other, and extends to an all—encompassing form that transcends the individual himself. Love is not only an emotional act, but an "ontological energy" (Sorokin 1954) able to reach the whole universe as the only harmonious cosmos.

Along this reasoning, it is possible to draw a further link with a contemporary author, Monroe (1996), who focused her attention on the theme of altruism, linking it to "consciousness of a common humanity," i.e., the ability of the subject to operate an assessment of the situation in universalistic terms and the perception of a common belonging. Monroe also feels the need to move away from the rational-choice perspective, which does not seem able to explain the complexity of the altruistic phenomenon, and therefore focuses on a cognitive orientation that orients the action.

Monroe's studies of altruism insist precisely on the tendency of altruists to see in the other a common belonging. The author considers, for example, the fact that many of those who saved Jews during the Nazi persecutions did not know those people at all. This is not a simple empathy, but the perception of a shared humanity. So when the interviewer asks the person who has saved so many Jews, "Was there anything in common about the people you helped?" the interviewee simply replies "No. They were just people." And this is not a choice or a rational deliberation, but a sort of instinct; altruism as a reflex: "I never made a moral decision to rescue Jews. I just got mad. I felt I had to do it."

As Weinstein notes (2008), Monroe's reflections are placed along the trail left by Sorokin, reinforcing the theoretical contribution. Sorokin, moreover, identified, among the five fundamental characteristics of altruistic love, its extension: altruistic love has the ability to address outside the in—group to reach, potentially, all of humanity. In *Altruistic Love* (Sorokin 1950), he considers the "good neighbors" through a peculiar trait: "A quest for sympathy, understanding, and encouragement—the desire to find a co-sympathizer in either despair or loneliness—is just as strong in human beings as the need for food or clothing."

Altruism and Values: Out of Sociology?

It is possible to understand the role that altruism plays in the thinking of Sorokin only considering his "integralist" vision. As is evident in many of his writings, he draws a unifying link between the vision of the world and history with the task and role of sociology. Altruism is not only an object of sociological study, useful to investigate the behaviors of help and, more generally, understand the motivations that originate them, but becomes a proposal for the regeneration of humanity. In other words, altruism is grafted onto the peculiar vision of Sorokin's sociology: science is not called a passive contemplation of reality, but has the tools and the historical role of modifying it.

Thus, the natural outlet of the Sorokinian integral theory is to become an engine for action. Note on this subject Johnston (2006): "First a theory of social change, evolving into an explanatory principle for the crises of modernity, and culminating in a sociological axion for the reconstruction of society."

The author is well aware that his ontological and epistemological conceptions are profoundly far from the current sociology, considered tired, neurotic, and much less productive. Contemporary social science appears to Sorokin mediocre and uselessly ambitious, rich in formulations as high-sounding as they are scientifically inconsistent (Sorokin 1956). The multiplication of technical tools, tests, factorial statistical procedures, and the diffusion of what Sorokin calls "quantophrenia" is nothing but the exemplification of a progressive impoverishment of sociological knowledge. But such poverty of contemporary science, lost in multitudes of meticulous and useless research, is not accidental. It is the product of the decay of the sensate era. In the current phase, notes Sorokin, the sensism amplifies its negativistic and destructive capacity. The interpretative keys used by social scientists are inspired by this cultural climate and sociology, like other sciences, has actually ceased to really address society.

For this reason, Sorokin does not limit himself to denouncing with unusual force this crisis of sociology, but indicates with a heartfelt commitment the need for an overall reconstruction—of science as of society. Sociology, within this program, plays a crucial role. As has been noted (Nichols 2007; Cimagalli 2017), that of Sorokin is a "public sociology" *ante litteram*, projected toward an active role in social change. If, as Burawoy states, sociology is called to play the role of "angel of history," and if the path that is traced is inscribed in the wake of Lynd, C. Wright Mills, Lee, and the many who assign to the discipline an orientation role in the general choices made by the company at a given historical moment, its approach cannot be said to be aseptically neutral. The sociologist enters the issues that shake society, becomes a "partisan," and embraces a project of social justice and solidarity, to make a better world. The theme of values, in this framework, cannot be removed as antiscientific.

In this sense, in Sorokin the contradiction that, as we have noted above, has led to the fact that for a long time sociology has kept away from considering altruism as its object of study. In the division of scientific work that allowed to the sociology of emerging as a science, the ethical and political plan appear deeply disjointed from it. Therefore, sociology has preferred to remove the problem of altruism, considering it imbued with ethical traits and therefore not graspable through the categories of scientific understanding. For a long time, sociology has abandoned the track of altruism because it was not easy to separate it from the ethical subjective of the social actor and, more so, because a reflection on this theme would have led the reflection on the level of social desirability.

It is no coincidence that the most severe criticisms that Sorokin received have been anchored around the non-scientificity of his latest works, on the prophetic character of his writings, considered bizarre and irrational: the foundation of the Research Center in Creative Altruism has been considered by the sociology of time as the last slap of a heretical author (Nichols 1996). But, beyond these aspects, what we want to emphasize here, however, is that these criticisms, more often than not, have not only focused on the more marked and sometimes extravagant aspects of his writings or the preacher-teacher attitude, but on the possibility, in itself, of welcoming the theme of values, within scientific reflection.

The question is not new. It is not just about Sorokin and it has been moving epistemological discussions for many years. The theme of values is twice removed from mainstream sociology of the last century: on one side, as Boltanski (1990) notes, structuralism and Marxism have expelled morals from sociological reasoning, preferring to root the scientific nature of the

discipline on other presuppositions; on the other hand, values do not seem to have to guide the sociologist's reasoning.

The debate runs longitudinally throughout the sociology of the last century, starting from Weber's reflections, variously interpreted, in terms of axiological neutrality of the social sciences. In fact, the question is not easy to schematize and the Weberian position itself is more complex than it might appear at a superficial reading; Weberian avalutativity does not involve a removal of values from the scientist's horizon, positivistically excluded: as Mannheim (1936) acutely notes, the researcher is placed in a horizon of meaning and is endowed with his own inclinations and his own value orientations, which inevitably guide the researcher in the choice and in the conceptualization of his object of study. These guidelines should not, however, be used in the internal phases of the research process, which are subject to the constraints of the scientific process, rigorous in the procedures, but inevitably unpredictable and open.

Moreover, Statera (1997) notes that "Weber does not intend to abandon the supreme values; but the discourse on them is neither a scientific nor a methodological problem: in any case, it is not methodologically correct to postulate a normativity of that kind for scientific propositions." In confirmation of this position, Volonté (2001) also stresses that in the context of Weber's theory, there is no incompatibility between the rationality and the idea of a universal ethic, given that the universalistic conception of ethics is not *a priori* more irrational than the polytheistic one, and therefore the values cannot be expelled, so to speak ontologically, from the scenario of science.

It is necessary here to point out how Weberian reflections on the relationship between science and values have given rise to different perspectives. Some authors have preferred to defend the epistemological and methodological rigor from the presumed interventions of value, and therefore have embraced an extensive, and perhaps partial, interpretation of the Weberian avalutativity; other authors instead read Weber's writings with greater detachment and underlined the role of sociology as a subject within the social contexts in which it operates.

A classic like Parsons can be considered as a representative of a more literal interpretation of Weberian avalutativity; nevertheless, it should be noted that in his case he does not defend a naive and one-dimensional position. He himself remembers, for example, that science is obviously oriented according to whole system of values of society and culture of its time and therefore dependent on it (Parsons 1971).

Likewise, a clever author like Elias (1956) takes a clear stand against his contemporaries "professors of the chair," emphasizing the need for a clear distinction between political role and scientific activity, but he stresses the need to identify an appropriate point between "detachment and involvement."

Precisely in the direction of avoiding a rigid interpretation of the theme of values, an author like Marcuse (1964) underlines the risk of immobilizing the sociological reflection in the defense of the *status quo*. He points out that if it is impossible to make a choice, connected to a vision of the world and therefore a value option, sociology condemns itself to a mere description of the present and historical irrelevance.

Continuing along this line, which struggles to accept perfect axiological neutrality in sociology, we can certainly remember the North American tradition of critical sociology: from Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), which expresses the impossibility for the researcher to transcend the culture of time, to Lynd's emphasis on the effects of sociological knowledge, White and the emphasis he placed on the ability to change things by telling them, to Wright Mills, and many others, including Gouldner, who emphasized the risks of an American sociology ensign of the great society.

After all, a vein of moral tension, variously declined, has, however, also gone through recent sociological reflection. Take into account the studies that consider particular objects of study, for example, related to the negative aspects mentioned by Mangone and Dolgov (2019). Corradi (2009), for example, proposes the question if it is appropriate for the researcher—while studying controversial aspects of social life, like violence—to remain detached, careful not to enter the ethical dimension.

This does not mean to suggest a political role for the researcher and a "militant" sociology, which considers a position of value considered unquestionable and absolute origin and motor of sociological knowledge.

From the point of view of our reasoning, the position totally *wertfrei* does not seem to be correct. It would make the entrance of altruism impossible, with its semantic complexity and its indispensable link to the world of values, within scientific knowledge. Nor does it seem sufficient to consider altruism, as has been done for long periods of the history of the discipline, in the light of instrumental rationality, anchored to a conscious or unconscious cost-benefit calculation.

To Conclude: Sociology for Altruism?

The reflection presented here arose from the question about the existence of a place for altruism in sociological knowledge. As we have seen, for a long time, sociology has denied that altruism could have one, or, at least, strove to restrict the extension of the concept within the framework of rationalist reductionism. According to this view, altruism is basically an optical illusion, a subjective deformation that sees altruistic motivations where there are none, because human action is oriented by maximizing individual advantage.

The impossibility of identifying a space for altruism in sociological knowledge therefore finds a first ontological motivation.

Then, there is an epistemological problem: the values, with which altruism is intertwined, have not found much space in sociological analysis. The altruistic behavior (when altruism is defined precisely on the ethical level) seems to be too elusive of an object to be grasped with scientific instruments. When then the studies around altruism are themselves characterized by an attitude full of values, for an orientation that, describing a particular type of action, enhances its scope, they seem to confirm these hesitations. In a more or less explicit way, many authors who have dealt with altruism have underlined the usefulness and the social desirability comparing the help action with the selfish one; many authors, even later than Sorokin, point out that in the current phase, altruism appears as outmoded or even as a deviant behavior (Weinstein 2003). This impulse that leads many authors to "side" with altruism seems to be ill-suited to the epistemological prudence mentioned above: there is a danger of trespassing from the fence of science.

Still, other perplexities can be moved on the methodological level, due to the great difficulty—experienced by authors as important and original as Monroe—in translating on the empirical level the complexity of the concept. How can we observe altruism, how can we derive useful indicators for its empirical observation?

Sorokin, in the research *Altruistic Love: A Study of American Good Neighbors and Christian Saints* (1950), tries to answer this question and to show that the concept of altruistic love, apparently evanescent and unobservable in the light of the sociological method, can become a domain of empirical research. The study reports two researches that, although they

focus on different topics, have many points in common. The first concerns a sample of over a thousand individuals in the case of "good neighbors," as reported to a radio broadcast and by Harvard students; the second concerns over three thousand saints of Christianity, as listed in the text of *Butler's Lives of the Saints*(1756-1759). Sorokin and his collaborators recorded a series of descriptive variables (sex, age, family of origin, occupation, etc.) and related them to behavior. In the first case the scholar resorted to a standardized questionnaire, in the second to biographical information.

Ordinary people, even if they are particular because of their appreciated behavior, together with exceptional people, have succeeded in uniting love for others with the creative genius and whose life becomes an example and a warning to believers. All united by the fact of operating as heroes of altruistic love, for the fact of being able to entertain positive social relations and to witness solid and constructive values.

For both samples, Sorokin is interested in exploring how to expound altruistic behavior and the reasons for its manifestation. Obviously, while in the case of the "good neighbors" the survey is carried out through a specific questionnaire with mainly open questions, in the case of the saints the reconstruction is carried out *a posteriori*, based on the reconstruction of their experience, which is not complete in each of the dimensions considered.

In his work, Sorokin considered, as did Comte, that sociology should take a leading role in the difficult work of rebuilding humanity, and by doing so it brought sociological knowledge to the limits of scientific knowledge. However, we believe this effort—undertaken with the taste for provocation and the courage of a solitary explorer—has not led sociology to cross over into areas that are not its own. Despite the prophetic tones, the sometimes mystical arguments and a conscious visionary effort of some of his works, his remains a sociology of love and does not become anything else (Sorgi 1985).

Sorokin, as well as other authors of classical and contemporary sociology, identifies a space for the study of altruism by sociology. This space lies precisely in the proposal—"scandalous" for the sociology of the time, and perhaps also for the current one—to embrace, in a single "integralist" view, also the plane of values in sociological knowledge. Precisely because they are inextricably connected with the other components that underpin human personality, these cannot be excluded by sociological analysis if it intends to understand the complexity of human action. Altruism, in other words, is not understandable from a sociological knowledge that limits one's gaze of observation to rational action alone: only by extending the analysis to what our author calls "superconscious" can altruistic behavior be interpreted.

In this light, altruism is something more than a pro-social or generally solidaristic behavior, found also in other living species. It is linked to a deliberately operated moral choice. In this sense, the deep and irreducible humanity of altruism make it a topic of great interest, we believe, also for contemporary sociological reflection.

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