

A New Sociality for a Solidarity-based Society: The Altruistic Relationships

*Una nueva socialidad para una sociedad solidaria:
Las relaciones altruistas*

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A NEW SOCIALITY FOR A SOLIDARITY-BASED SOCIETY: THE ALTRUISTIC RELATIONSHIPS*

UNA NUEVA SOCIEDAD PARA UNA SOCIEDAD SOLIDARIA: LAS RELACIONES ALTRUISTAS.

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ABSTRACT

One should not imagine that the social sciences discovered altruism only when Comte coined the term – understood as a powerful impulse to the intellectual and moral development of humanity towards which the latter must tend as its future state. Indeed, since ancient times, scholars have attempted to explain (cause-effect) and understand (sense and meaning) why in certain situations some men behave positively towards others (altruistic behaviour) while similar situations the same men behave differently. While not claiming to be exhaustive either theoretically or temporally, we will present an overview on the theme through the ideas of some sociologists (Comte, Durkheim, Mauss, and Sorokin) who have contributed the most to shed light to this object of study. We will argue that the rediscovery of altruism can be

seen as a new form of sociality between *Ego/Alter for a solidarity-based society*.

KEYWORDS:

Altruism; Sociology; Comte; Durkheim; Mauss; Sorokin; Ego/Alter relationship.

RESUMEN

Las ciencias sociales no descubrieron el altruismo cuando Comte utilizó este término -entendido como un poderoso impulso al desarrollo intelectual y moral de la humanidad que debe apuntar a él como su estado futuro-. Desde la antigüedad los estudiosos trataron de explicar (causa-efecto) y comprender (sentido y significado) las razones por las que en determinadas situaciones algunos hombres ponen en marcha conductas positivas hacia los demás (conducta altruista) y las razones por las que

* Artículo de reflexión.

en situaciones similares los mismos hombres no se comportan de la misma manera. En este sentido, se presentará un marco (no exhaustivo ni temporal ni teóricamente) de este tema a través de las ideas de algunos sociólogos (Comte, Durkheim, Mauss y Sorokin) que, en el panorama de la sociología, más contribuyeron a enfocar sobre de este objeto de estudio, y cómo el redescubrimiento del altruismo se puede asumir como una nueva forma de sociabilidad entre Ego/Alter para una sociedad solidaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Altruismo; Sociología; Comte; Durkheim; Mauss; Sorokin; Relación Ego/Alter

THE SOCIOLOGY REDISCOVER ALTRUISM

As specialists in the field well know, the term altruism was first used by Comte (1851-1854, 1852). This term commonly refers to all actions whose benefits fall on others rather than on the agent (actor): altruism means “*vivre pour autrui*” [*Live for Others*].

The centrality acquired by reason¹ with the Enlightenment – where reason is an “infinite” force that controls and inhabits the world, and that is understood as consciousness, freedom, and the ability to create – gains a new guise with Romanticism. If these are the assumptions and essential concepts that influenced the thought of the 18th and first half of the 19th century, the 1950s saw the early signs of further revision. Positivism transpose in science the Romantic tendency to identify finite and infinite, and to consider the former as the progressive realization of the latter.

Comte stands out as a prophet of a new religion stemming from philosophy and is confident to the point of writing *The*

Catechism of Positive Religion (Comte, 1852), which first introduces the term *altruism*, derived from the Italian word *altrui* (the other person). In other words, for Comte, *Live for Others*, is the simplest summary of the whole moral code of Positivism (Comte, 1851-1854, p. 566).

Of particular importance is Comte’s doctrine of science, since the science of nature has shown that the latter can be governed for the social development of humanity only by knowing its laws. On this basis, Comte argues for the need for a science of society – and here he coins another term, *sociology*, that will become for him the science of society – and for knowing the laws of human conduct to establish authentic social engineering (Comte, 1830-1842) that must tend towards the *religion of humanity*. Science is – or must be – positive knowledge, that is, knowledge which renounces the awareness of causes, restricting itself to the verification of phenomena and their relations, constructing general laws to make science pragmatic for social ends.

Altruism is one of the two terms coined by Comte that became paramount for the development of social sciences². Since the birth of the expression, although with ups and downs, altruism becomes an analytical construct of the social sciences. The numerous attempts at definitions produced over the centuries, after Comte, have not fully clarified the concept, which remains highly ambiguous. Its high degree of relativity is due to various features, among which two are paramount: on the one hand, the processes and common forms of human sociability, and, on the other, their constant and repeated functional correlations in time and social space. Nevertheless, all the definitions of altruism agree on some details, skilfully identified and organised by Simmons: it

(1) seeks to increase another’s welfare, not one’s own; (2) is voluntary; (3) is intentional, meant to help someone else;

1. The term reason has taken on two interpretations: as “feeling” and as “absolute reason”. The former is understood as an activity free from any determination and manifested precisely in those activities more closely connected to feeling, such as religion and art, while the latter moves from one determination to another.

2 The other term being, indeed, “sociology”. Comte also coined others, such as “sociocracy” and “biocracy”, but these did not find proselytes, nor did they catch on like the first two.

and (4) expects no external reward” (1991, p. 3).

These aspects constitute the essential elements of human relationality: *a)* the presence of a variously defined *other*; *b)* the willingness to interact and to relate with the other; *c)* a precise sense and meaning; and finally, *d)* the absence of expectations towards the other.

The importance of altruism in the social sciences can be detected in many classics (Wuthnow, 1993; Bykov, 2017). For example, Durkheim explains the basis of social solidarity in modern society through the contrast between altruism and egoism (Durkheim, 1893). He defines its implications in his well-known work *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1897) by counterposing altruistic and selfish suicide, identifying what will later become the most famous type of suicide.

Despite this interest, since the 1950s, theoretical and empirical studies show the progressive estrangement of social scientists from this object of study. The only exception is Sorokin who, in 1949, founded *The Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism* and whose intellectual heritage was collected in the United States by various scholars (Johnston, 2001; Krotov, 2012; Weinstein, 2000). In recent years, however, studies on these issues seem to slowly regain vigour, especially in the United States, driven by the newly founded section *Altruism, Morality & Social Solidarity* within the American Association of Sociology (Nichols, 2012), established in 2012. These three points (altruism, morality, and social solidarity) are considered a single disciplinary field (Jeffries *et al.*, 2006) as they are significantly interdependent in the sociocultural reality (Jeffries, 2014). In Europe, studies on altruism are being resumed particularly in French-speaking sociology, especially from the numerous retakings on Marcel Mauss' work on the gift (1925) and following the birth of the *Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales* (MAUSS)³. The movement

3. Among the main promoters of MAUSS (the acronym was not accidental to express esteem for Marcell Mauss),

was promoted by Alain Caillé (1988), who laid his foundations on the critical theory of economics, and the studies of Moscovici's school of social representations (2000) which led to the definition of the elementary forms of altruism.

From this renewed vitality of studies on altruism, we will try to sketch, through the intellectual heritage of some classics of sociology, how this rediscovery of altruism can lead to a new configuration of the *Ego/Alter* relationship in contemporary society.

THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY OF SOCIOLOGY

In the following pages, we will try to outline how this rediscovery of altruism can lead to a new configuration of sociological studies, shedding that *modus operandi* that accentuates only negative or pathological phenomena without ever highlighting positive and healthy ones. This work is based on the hypothesis that there is no such thing as altruism or egoism in the behavioural sense, as argued by sociobiologists⁴ or

besides Caillé, were Gérard Berthoud, Jaques T. Godbout, Jean-Louis Laville, Serge Latouche and Guy Nicholas.

4. For sociobiologists, who base their discipline on Darwin's notions of individual selection and survival of the fittest, altruism presents a major theoretical problem. For these scholars, altruism is achieved through either kin or group selection, with the necessary exceptions, such as those identified by Monroe (1994, 1996) of individuals who sacrifice themselves for relatives. It follows that evolutionists and sociobiologists, when they claim to study altruism, refer to statistical trends, in the long-range genetic selection of behaviours, which can fit the common idea of altruism. The sociobiological hypothesis, by extending Darwin's model (Darwin, 1871; 1872), claims that the maximization of their overall identity is the main reason for action for human beings. If this hypothesis holds, it is because natural selection has led to the multiplication of "behaviour-specific" or "cultural-generic" genes that govern human social behaviour. As Durham, an anthropologist, states: "Where the natural selection theories of sociobiology have been right in their prediction or explanation of human behaviour, it has often been for the wrong reasons. The apparent consistency between biological theory and human behaviour suggests *not* that there is necessarily an underlying biological basis that guides, steers, controls, programs, predisposes, or inclines every human activity, but rather that the traditions and customs produced by cultural processes are often adaptive in the 'biological sense'. I believe that these coherences can best be explained by the joint evolution of biology and human culture" (Durham, 1979, p. 41).

behaviourists. There are, instead, “altruistic relationships” and “selfish relationships”. We will try to demonstrate this starting from the intellectual heritage of some classical authors who more than others have concretely contributed to the development of these studies (Comte, Durkheim, Mauss, and Sorokin)⁵. These scholars allow us to deduce references to those conducts whose benefits are directed to other individuals than the actors, thus making it possible to reconfigure the *Ego / Alter* relationship.

The birth of the concept of *altruism*: Auguste Comte

To understand why Comte considered altruism as superior to egoism, it is necessary to frame the surrounding theoretical and social context (Coser, 1977; Pickering, 2009). This concept became then the groundwork on which he built his project of a *Religion of Humanity* (Comte, 1852) that was to direct and accompany the improvement of modern society, free from the influence of religion or the army. The concept of altruism appeared during the transition to modernity as the nascent society needed a new moral guide. Comte leaves open the question of when and to whom to be altruistic but at the same time he points out that individuals can be altruistic or pursue their own interests, thus allowing for the possibility that prosocial altruistic behaviours are motivated by selfish interests.

Comte’s main objective was to create a new science that, along the line of natural sciences, could explain the development of society to predict its future. The new positive science studies the social order and the elements that determine its stability; therefore, the cornerstones of this new system are *social statics* and *social dynamics*:

5. It does not mean that other notable sociologists have not studied this social process but they have done it indirectly, for example, both Weber and Marx, while not using the term altruism as such, refer to it indirectly. The first, when describing the ethics of love of charismatic authority as opposed to legal and rational authority, the second, when raging against Christian charity. The limited space of the present work does not allow to deepen these authors as well, referring to the respective literature the insights.

that is, the study of all the components that produce stability or change for society.

The new science, therefore, laid its foundations on reasoning and observation as the only legitimate means of acquiring knowledge that was to be translated into social utility for the improvement of human conditions. According to Comte, “the fundamental problem of human nature, [is] the subordination of Egoism to Altruism.” (1851-1854, p. 592).

The social sciences – or rather sociology – play a crucial role in attaining this subordination. The task of sociology is to identify the laws that govern society, as the natural sciences do for nature. According to the French scholar, social actions are neither arbitrary nor fortuitous: individuals tend to pursue their interests in a society based mainly on the Hobbesian principle *Homo homini lupus*, and the identification of laws aid individuals in setting limits to their actions and, at the same time, to understand that they are also able to change the course of social laws for the pursuit of their interests. The new positive science that used observation, experimentation, and comparison as tools to explain the laws and perturbations of society, had, therefore, the task of teaching people to look at things not in absolute but in relative terms. Relativity rejects all-encompassing and universal social solutions, regardless of their characteristics, and lies on the conviction that solutions must adapt to the actual state of the society to which they refer. Sociological comparison is particularly relevant as it allows us to compare the different plight of societies in various parts of the world. It is necessary because, although humanity has substantially planned its development in uniformly, it has not been accomplished similarly or regularly in different parts of the world. Not all societies have reached the same statuses, and, above all, they have not attained them at the same time, so we need a historical vision of this evolution.

And it is precisely on this evolution that Comte conceives his *Law of human progress*

or *Law of three stages*⁶ according to which humanity has evolved through three main consecutive stages, where the next phase is reached only through the destruction of the previous one. The same process affects the organizational system of society, as well as the structure of ideas, alternating “organic” periods (balance) and “critical” periods (imbalance).

Comte’s reflection must be included in what he defines as his “normative theory”, which is also the most relevant for the present considerations. In the eyes of his contemporaries, Comte appears – willingly – as the prophet of a new religion, transforming philosophy (the new positive science represented by sociology) into a creed. He believes it so much as to write *Catéchisme positiviste* (Comte, 1852) in which he described a new society that is being oriented towards – and regulated for – the common good, with great associative spirit and altruistic feeling. The latter also becomes a religious feeling, having Humanity as its new god. In other words, for Comte

The individual must subordinate himself to an Existence outside itself in order to find in it the source of his own stability. And this condition cannot be effectually realised except under the impulse of propensities prompting him to live for others. The being, whether man or animal, who loves nothing outside himself, and really lives for himself alone, is by that very fact condemned to pass his life in a miserable alternation of ignoble torpor and uncontrolled excitement. Evidently the principal feature of Progress in all living things is that the general consensus which we have seen to be the essential attribute of vitality should become more perfect. It follows that happiness and worth, as well

in individuals as in societies, depend on adequate ascendancy of the sympathetic instincts. Thus the expression, *Live for Others*, is the simplest summary of the whole moral code of Positivism (Comte, 1851-1854, Eng. trans. 1875-77, I, pp. 565-566).

An altruist is someone who selflessly aims their actions at other people’s good. According to Comte’s formula, the new positive order has *Love as Principle, Order as Base*, and *Progress as Objective*. In this way, the individuals would be full of love for their fellow human beings.

The evolution of altruism involves the subordination of self-love to that for others and the satisfaction of their needs as a source of well-being for both the individual and the whole of society. Comte believed that some inclinations of human beings – including selfishness and altruism – came from specific areas of the brain. Altruism can be successfully implemented against selfish instinct only if it is exercised together with the rational capacity of human beings to negotiate within the system of needs by mediating between individual and social needs. Following this logic, both intellect and rationality best serve human needs when they do so through the practice of altruism. Combined with rationality and intellect, altruism acknowledges the freedom of others to compete for their existence and fulfilment. Individual freedom is built not *at the expense* but *on* that of the other. To the extent that individuals are limited by the freedom of others, it is imperative to complete individual freedom through dedication to the other. The individual is a pure abstraction if he is not conceived in these terms in the social system. One way to achieve salvation is to act in the spirit of the whole and the feeling of duty.

On this moralistic vision of altruism, that Comte wishes to become universal for humanity, he dwells in all his latest works. *The Religion of Humanity* is not pure worship but aims to coordinate social life. Comte’s establishment of the “Religion of Humanity” had no other purpose than to make the social sphere hallowed, because he firmly believed

6. The three stages are divided into *i*) theological stage, governed by priests and the military (Ancient times); *ii*) metaphysical stage, controlled by clergymen and jurists (Middle Ages and Renaissance); and, finally, *iii*) the positive stage, ruled by industrialists and moral and scientific guides (Modern age). The main factor in this development is what Comte defined as “intellectual evolution”, while acknowledging the influence of many other circumstances in the evolution of humanity.

that only the social man (*homo sociologicus*) could exist. We can state that Comte – whose thought greatly influenced the development of systems of ideas from the Enlightenment onwards in the Western world – speculated that human altruism is an instinct entirely similar to selfishness. They differ in one particular: the latter tends towards the safeguard of the individual, while the former is oriented towards the preservation of the species, sometimes playing a decisive role in the maintenance and social development of mankind.

Organic solidarity vs mechanical solidarity: Émile Durkheim

If with Comte we virtually record the birth of sociology, with the work of Émile Durkheim this discipline reaches a crucial stage. The scholar intended to create a social science that could provide a solid groundwork for public action, albeit he was aware that the progress of sociological research was not such as to allow this new discipline to underpin specific legislation.

The Frenchman is widely considered the natural father of sociology and his approach presents elements of sharp innovation compared to the field of moral statistics, which represented at the time the positivist mainstream. According to Durkheim, the social order (structure or system) constitutes the essential prerequisite for individual and collective action: the whole explains the parts. Individuals regulate their behaviour in groups and society according to a complex system of rules that are consciously or unconsciously internalised, *i.e.* they become an integral part of them. Consequently, the structure (or system) always comes before the individuals, as it precedes them and assumes for them a legitimate explanatory value.

This difference between individual and social is outlined in stark dualistic contrasts: organic solidarity vs mechanical solidarity, altruism vs egoism, social fact vs psychic fact, collective representation vs individual representation, sacred vs profane, social order vs anomie. The theme of social

solidarity permeates all of Durkheim's work, as it is considered the element that binds and integrates individuals *to* and *in* society. The social prevails over the individual, the organic solidarity over the mechanical one, the collective representations over the individual ones, acquiring meaning through the institutions, where the latter are a constant compared to the variability of individuals. Society cannot be explained through individual actions and motivations, but through the external and constricting social facts that creep into the individual consciousness (substratum of individual representation) constituting the collective consciousness (substratum of collective representations).

The emphasis is on the origin of regulatory power. For example, in the context of altruistic and egoistic suicide (Durkheim, 1897), it is considered internal to the individual as it originates from their process of socialization. Regulatory power arises mainly in the phase of the internalization of norms by each individual; it then differentiates in collective content (*collective consciousness*) and individual content (*individual consciousness*). But how is this regulating power – which can be identified in the consciousness – defined? According to Durkheim, the *collective consciousness*

No doubt, it has not a specific organ as a substratum; it is, by definition, diffuse in every reach of society. Nevertheless, it has specific characteristics which make it a distinct reality. It is, in effect, independent of the particular conditions in which individuals are placed; they pass on and it remains. [...] it does not change with each generation, but, on the contrary, it connects successive generations with one another. It is, thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them. It is the psychical type of society, a type which has its properties, its conditions of existence, its mode of development, just as individual types, although in a different way (Durkheim, 1893, Eng. trans. 1960, pp. 79-80).

It follows that the collective consciousness is thoroughly autonomous from individuals, it is almost a form of external coercion for the subjects, to the point of attributing negative definition to the action that imperils the integrity of the consciousness of a given collective. Nevertheless, collective consciousness should not be confused with social consciousness:

As the, terms, collective and social, are often considered synonymous, one is inclined to belief that the collective conscience is the total social conscience, that is, extend it to include more than the psychic life of society, although, particularly in advanced societies, it is only a very restricted part (*Ibid.*, p. 80).

The collective consciousness represents the life force of a community; therefore, anything that tends to weaken or diminish it disturbs the individuals. In the same work, the French sociologist uses the term *representation*, which will not replace the idea of *collective consciousness*, even though it is similarly defined. The first, being a phenomenon, affects consciousness: a representation

is not simply a mere image of reality, an inert shadow projected by things upon us, but it is a force which raises around itself a turbulence of organic and psychical phenomena. [...] Thus, the representation of a sentiment contrary to ours acts in us in the same sense and in the same manner as the sentiment for which it is a substitute. It is as if it had itself become part of our conscience (*Ibid.*: 97).

Durkheim, however, chose not to accentuate this analogy. He will continue to consider the collective consciousness as the primary form of glue that holds individuals together within society, as well as the preeminent explanation of social cohesion (an element that produces integration). So much so as to mark the *mechanical solidarity* typical of traditional societies, in which individuals are similar to each other and share rules and values. Furthermore,

representations are considered, at least in this first study, as a negative element because they almost always contrast with consciousness. In any case, they are considered less important than the problem of meaning in social life.

Mechanical solidarity

can be strong only if the ideas and tendencies common to all the members of the society are greater in number and intensity than those which pertain personally to each member. It is as much stronger as the excess is more considerable. [...] Solidarity which comes from likenesses is at its maximum when the collective conscience completely envelops our whole conscience and coincides in all points with it. But, at that moment, our individuality is nil (*Ibid.*, pp. 129-130).

The establishment of the principle of the division of labour promotes the development of a new type of solidarity (*organic solidarity*), based on the recognition of differences and with less emphasis on norms and values.

The collective conscience leaves open a part of the individual conscience in order that special functions may be established there, functions which it cannot regulate. The more this region is extended, the stronger is the cohesion which results from this solidarity. [...] the individuality of all grows at the same time as that of its parts. Society becomes more capable of collective movement, at the same time that each of its elements has more freedom of movement. (*Ibid.*, p. 131).

As the division of labour progresses, the collective consciousness becomes weaker and the division of labour itself becomes the source of solidarity. Although this is as Durkheim's position, at least in his youth, he already speculates that the division of labour may not be a normal phenomenon in a society where the relations of its organs are unregulated because of an anomic state. By affirming that society has a higher

value than the individual, Durkheim wants to make it clear that society can only be explained through social facts. Men become an integral part of the social – the organs of an organism – only after they have overcome their individualistic nature. The collective consciousness so conceived transcends social divisions to form the main glue of the community and ensure its continuity over time. Although spiritual, it imposes modes of thought and action on individuals, unfolding in institutions through social, moral, juridical, or political rules, as well as in religious visions, through collective beliefs or rituals.

From secondary to primary sociality: Marcell Mauss

If the one above was Durkheim's idea of society, as Steiner (2016) pointed out, Mauss's contribution extends Durkheim's thought by easing the passage from a stark altruism/egoism juxtaposition to gifts and counter-gifts. Indeed, studies on altruism must combine the system with individuals through forms of relationships.

Following this logic, we will now reflect on an aspect of society – and above all the relationships between individuals – which recalls altruism but has its own definition: the gift. We will refer to Marcel Mauss' classic work: *Essai sur le don* (1925). In this work, Mauss describes the sociality of the gift in archaic society by mentioning two rituals: the *potlatch* (ceremony of some Native American tribes of the Northwest Pacific coast of the United States and Canada) and the *kula* (symbolic exchange of gifts in the Trobriand islands between the indigenous populations). The reader may now be wondering why we mention the gift when talking about positive pro-social relations (hetero-directed), but the following section will dispel his perplexity. Gift-giving no longer pertains only to archaic societies: these practices exist also in modern society with forms and ways most often linked to organizations, which makes these exchanges more complex closer to those taking place in the market. Gift-giving produces exchanges that are not governed by a contract;

therefore, it allows for more initiative by encouraging creativity and it strengthens social ties. The differences from a contract are at least three: *i)* gift-giving is free, done by choice. There is no constraint prompting individuals to donate or reciprocate (the obligation to reciprocate is purely moral and the lack of reciprocation is not sanctioned); *ii)* there is no guarantee of return; the exchange is based on trust and therefore on the evaluation that is made of the other individual (the recipient of the gift):

The key point is that “giver” and “receiver” are in a very complex relationship, which is located in a relational network characterized by increasing changes in all its elements; moreover, it is too often believed that any asymmetry in this type of relationship is due to the communicative behaviour of the “giver,” who highlights his dominance. Actually, the differences are more due to cultural factors and identity construction than to factors intrinsic to the relationship: the distance between “giver” and “receiver” forms a model of rational organization, which codifies and finalizes the relationship and that could be defined as Taylorist-utilitarian (Mangone, 2019, p. 37).

But if, in general terms, trust and distrust can be considered an expectation of the individual's experiences (the former with a positive value and the latter with a negative one), the former entails a cognitive and/or emotional burden that allows one to overcome the threshold of mere hope and therefore consider a relationship in a positive sense; *iii)* gift-giving requires reciprocity, there is no abolition of debt (unlike trade contracts). It is, in fact, exactly the opposite: the gift induces indebtedness towards the other and the longer the period of repayment the more active the bond between the two parties. In this way, the approach shifts from reducing individual actions to mere exchange (*do ut des*) to focusing on the overall interactions between exchange aspects and all other relevant social and cultural variables. Mauss summarises these aspects as follows:

The gift is therefore at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond (Mauss, 1925, Eng. trans. 2002, p. 76).

The paradigm of the gift, therefore, underlines the positive and normative, sociological, economic, ethical, political, and philosophical importance of this type of action.

But what did Mauss envision with his essay? He points out some fundamental aspects of the nature of the gift that can also be transposed to Western societies.

The first of these aspects is the *obligatory sociality* of the gift, which is represented by the cycle *give / receive / reciprocate* strongly present in the primitive societies studied: one must *give* to show their power and wealth. The obligation to gift-giving stems from community and honour bonds: those who cannot find and own objects to introduce into the gifting cycle are excluded from the community. Furthermore, one must receive to guarantee a peaceful relationship (refusing the gift is an offence to the giver). Finally, one must *reciprocate* by offering a return gift of equal or higher value, or else they will, once again, offend the giver. But what determines the last form of obligation (reciprocation)?

According to Mauss, the objects donated and received have symbolic, mythical, and religious characteristics that bind and influence the individual who gives or receives them. He referred to the Maori *hau*, which designates, like the Latin *spiritus*, both the wind and the soul – more precisely, at least in some cases, the soul and power within inanimate and vegetable things, reserving the word *mana* for men and spirits. When the object received has a soul, its *hau* tends to return to its place of origin; therefore, the receiver must get rid of it through a return gift. If this does not happen, the spirit contained in the object becomes evil.

Mauss also stresses how in primitive communities the *thing (res)* had a higher value than in modern society. The difference is that for primitive societies the cycle “give/receive/reciprocate” was useful, not in the utilitarian economic sense, but because giving and receiving benefited both giver and receiver. The individual who shuns the gift is marginalised from society. Similarly, the receiver who does not accept, or who does not reciprocate, offends the giver, and undermines his ties with the community. The gift described by Mauss in primitive societies is therefore not gratuitous and selfless: it sets up a perpetual cycle of exchanges so that everyone is engaged – and has an interest – in its closure. Not only does the gift determine a form of “credit”, an expectation of reciprocation, but it also determines the “power” of the giver towards the receiver.

A further aspect is that the gift strengthens and preserves social and community bonds between individuals, between individuals and the community, and between communities. The obligation to close the gifting cycle promotes and intensifies a dense network of social and community relationships within primitive tribes. Gift-giving is a social ritual that strengthens cohesion as it reinforces the relationships of all parts of society. Finally, Mauss defines the gift as a *total social fact*. According to Mauss, these are a powerful tool for the scholar: a basic structure through which it was possible to resolve and interpret complex dynamics such as gift-giving.

The gift, therefore, falls within what Mauss defines as the total services system⁷ [*système des prestations totales*] which, involving all social classes and all forms of community life, is both a social and economic system. It shows that in archaic societies, unlike modern ones, there is no separation between the economic and the social-affective sphere. In line with his

⁷ We espouse the translation choices made in the 2002 edition of “The Gift”, published by Taylor & Francis and use, for brevity’s sake, “total services” to translate the French term “prestations totales”, which has no direct English equivalent. In Mauss’ text, it represents the actual act of exchange of gifts and rendering of services.

demonstration that all sociality based on gift-giving has as its foundation the search for interest and profit, Mauss concludes his essay with a compelling interpretation of *Homo oeconomicus*. According to Mauss, the distinctive character of modern *Homo oeconomicus* is not his search for profit and interest (already existing in primitive societies) but the rationalization and technicalization of this research.

The Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism: Pitirim A. Sorokin

Research has too often neglected the positive aspects of everyday life – such as altruism, solidarity, etc. – since these are not considered a problematic (negative) facet of society but rather a regular aspect of human and social events. To counter this, we will present Sorokin's theories on altruism by examining the characteristics, dimensions, and aims of altruism (Mangone and Dolgov, 2020; Mangone, 2020). Pitirim A. Sorokin's theories are deeply rooted in a continuous search for an integration of the points of view and methodologies of the various human and social sciences. We aim to underline how his arguments – especially those on positive actions such as altruism – are still relevant today (Mangone, 2018). In one of his last works, Sorokin stated,

At the present juncture of human history, a notable increase of an unselfish, creative love (goodness) in the superorganic world is the paramount need of humanity” (Sorokin, 1958a, p. 184).

This arduous task belongs to humanity as a whole. Sorokin is so convinced of this that in 1949 he founded the *Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism*, thanks to an endowment from Eli Lilly and the Lilly Endowment to the Harvard University that lasted for about eight years. It enabled him to continue the research already underway on altruism. The centre aimed to study – in an interdisciplinary way, through the promotion of research and symposia – the theme of altruism, investigating its various types, aspects, and dimensions, as well as its effects

on the individual, social and biological life. It is possible to reconstruct its activities quite analytically following the reports published by Sorokin himself (1955, 1963 chap. 15, 1995).

Two assumptions underpinned the Centre's research activities: 1) no intervention, including international ones, had succeeded in eliminating or reducing conflicts or bloody struggles between peoples; 2) creative love, of which little is still known, is virtually a power – the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The activities of the Centre can easily be divided into two phases. The first one aimed mainly at outlining and formulating an operational definition of creative love and confirming the state of the art in the contemporary sciences. This validated the assumptions underpinning the birth of the Centre, leading to the second phase of its activities, focused on investigating the procedures and factors of formation and transformation of altruism (Sorokin, 1954b), and to test (where possible) the effectiveness of the approaches of altruistic education starting from Yoga ancient techniques.

The above-mentioned researches yielded substantially four lines of results: *a)* the first states that there are three types of altruists⁸; *b)* the second confirms the *law of polarization* previously formulated (Sorokin, 1942/2010), according to which many individuals in a community hit by a catastrophe transform their behaviour egoistically (*carpe diem*) or, conversely, altruistically; *c)* the third leads to the revision of the prevailing theory of the structure and integration of the personality (Sorokin, 1962); and, finally, *d)* the fourth brought out, through the detailed study of the

8. Sorokin's threefold typology is based on self-identification and distinguished into «the early-fortunate», «the late-matured» or «late-catastrophic», and finally «the intermediary». The first type of altruist identifies himself from early childhood with the value system and is born in or belongs to environments that encourage altruistic development. In the second type, the behaviour modification is due to a sudden change in the life of the individual (an event that divides life into pre-altruistic and altruistic), which can be long- or short-lasting and reintegrates the value system. The last type, as the name suggests, lies mid-way between the previous two, accentuating the characteristics of one or the other.

ways of achieving altruistic transformation in group affiliations, as well as of the values and actions of the individual, the strategies to accomplish this task.

It is worth noting that these studies could only originate from a profound knowledge of the society, culture and value system in which individuals live and act. With Sorokin's retirement as Emeritus at the end of 1959, the Centre's activities also officially ceased. The centre allowed Sorokin to call the attention of the researchers on themes such as love and altruism, previously disregarded by the social sciences, too keen to seek negative values instead of positive ones. According to Sorokin, change must start from the rediscovery of man's positive values, and science arises as a guide by overcoming strictly sensate models of knowledge.

The idea of love fits into this theoretical framework as "the supreme and vital form of human relationship" (love relationship) and as such the ways, forms, and power of this energy (love energy) are to be studied. This force is likened, for their similarities, to an iceberg: «Love is like an iceberg: only a small part of it is visible, and even this visible part is little known. Still less known is love's transempirical part, its religious and ontological forms. For the reasons subsequently given, love appears to be a universe inexhaustible qualitatively and quantitatively. Of its many forms of being the following can be differentiated: religious, ethical, ontological, physical, biological, psychological, and social» (Sorokin, 1954, p. 3). These forms refer to the very aspects of love: (a) religious love, refers to the experience of love for God or the Absolute; (b) ethical love,

is identified with goodness itself. Love is viewed as the essence of goodness inseparable from truth and beauty» (Sorokin, 1954, p. 6);

(c) ontological love, is considered the highest form of unifying, integrating, and harmonizing creative power or energy. This is the "core" of love because it makes the world go round and without it, the

physical, biological, and social world would collapse; (d) physical love, refers to love expressed through the unifying, integrative, and ordinating energies of the universe; (e) «The biological counterpart of love energy manifests itself in the very nature and basic processes of life. This energy, still little known, and often called the 'vital energy' that mysteriously unites various inorganic energies into a startling unity of a living – unicellular or multicellular – organism» (Sorokin, 1954, p. 9); (f) psychological love includes all the intellectual aspects of emotional, affective and desire experiences. For its very nature, psychological love is an "altruistic" experience; (g) social love is the last of the forms identified by Sorokin «on the social plane love is meaningful interaction – or relationship – between two or more persons where the aspirations and aims of one person are shared and helped in their realization by other persons» (1954, p. 13). It follows that love not only has many aspects and forms, but it also has various dimensions, of which Sorokin identifies five: intensity, extensity, purity, adequacy, and duration.

Sorokin avoids any psychometric analysis for these dimensions, given that they have both scalar and non-scalar characteristics. However, he believes that it is empirically possible to find evidence or proofs. It should be noted that the words "love" and "altruism" had been interchangeable during all the activities of the Centre, as well as in the book *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (1948), in which, incidentally, he also describes the various types of altruism.

Sorokin does not just describe the aspects and dimensions of altruistic creative love but considers it an energy that can be produced, accumulated and distributed by individuals and institutions:

If love can be viewed as one of the highest energies known, then theoretically, at least, we can talk about the production or generation, the accumulation (or loss), the channelling, transmission, and distribution of this particular energy (Sorokin, 1954, p. 36).

He identifies five steps through which to produce and improve the love energy: (1) *The Increase of Creative Heroes of Love*, meaning the great creators and thinkers (e.g., Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Mozart, etc.) and the heroes or apostles of love (e.g., Buddha, Christ, Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, etc.); (2) *The Increase of Creative Heroes of Truth and Beauty*, thinkers and creators in different fields of science and the arts are great forges for some of the components (truth and beauty) of the highest value (love energy). Sorokin himself, in subsequent works, clarifies that these elements are inseparable and together represent the *summum bonum* of mankind:

Among all the meaningful values of the superorganic world there is the supreme integral value – the veritable *summum bonum*. It is the indivisible unity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Though each member of this supreme Trinity has distinct individually, all three are inseparable from one another [...]. These greatest values are not only inseparable from one another, but they are transformable into one another» (Sorokin, 1958a, p. 184).

What is needed is a growth in the love of parts of society: What is necessary, therefore, is a growth in love in certain social spheres: (3) *The Increase of Love by the Rank and File*, (4) *An Increase in the Production of Love by Groups and Institutions*, and finally (5) *The Increase Love-Production by Culture and the Total Culture*.

If this is how love energy can be generated or increased, it is no utopia to think that it can also be accumulated and distributed (King, 2004). Chapter IV in *The Ways and Power of Love* describes the benefits of the power of creative love in the social life and activities of human beings through numerous findings. This chapter concludes the description of the aspects, dimensions, production and management of love, as well as its power. The remaining two-thirds of the book is left to a detailed description of the types of altruism, the growth of altruism and the means to transform individuals and

groups into altruists. The over five hundred pages end with the chapter *From Tribal Egoism to Universal Altruism* in which, using a medical metaphor, Sorokin states that sick humanity can find a cure in the affirmation of universal altruism.

Love acted as an antidote. Its force created little islands of health amid great sickness. It is this that gives me hope for today [...]. Some day – perhaps soon – mankind will learn what individuals have always known: that love is the only truly creative force in the world (Sorokin, 1958b, p. 17).

In *The mysterious energy of love* (published in 1959, the year in which the Harvard Centre closed its doors) Sorokin argues that, although little is known of this energy and of how it is produced and used, it is enough to justify the hypothesis that the “grace of love” is one of the three highest energies known to man (along with truth and beauty). These are the peculiarities that make creative altruistic love a powerful tool for the reconstruction of humanity, which was falling into a marked sensism due to the transformations of its cultural mentality.

ALTRUISTIC RELATIONSHIPS FOR A NEW SOCIALITY FOR A SOLIDARITY-BASED SOCIETY

Over the last two centuries, societies have reached an increasingly higher degree of complexity –in both relationships and processes – with gradual unfolding depending on geographical areas and above all on the socio-cultural contexts of reference. Three processes are at work here: secularization (loss of relevance of religion in social life), rationalization (predominance of purposive rationality) and, finally, individualization (*Gemeinschaft vs Gesellschaft* with the replacement of Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity). All these have transformed both the social representations and the beliefs through which individuals interpret the surrounding society. Furthermore, they changed the values by which they orientate themselves

within it, and on which they base their relations. In light of this, and considering the brief literature review above, it follows that studies on altruism must combine the system with individuals. They must be able to combine objective and subjective aspects considering all the dimensions, levels and factors involved in the expression of altruism. Its analysis must take into account the multidimensionality and multifactoriality characterising it as derived from human relationships. This way privileges the spaces of social relations within social processes, including those relating to altruism, since all social phenomena, attitudes, and actions are built in an environment that has its own places, times and symbols, which are fundamental in the cognitive processes of self-signification activated by individuals for the construction of social realities in their everyday relational experience.

Therefore, studies on altruism must focus on the individual who is capable of significant interactions in a cultural context (see, Mauss' give/receive/reciprocate cycle or Sorokin's love relationship). These relationships are influenced on the one hand, by culture and, on the other, by the indissoluble bond with everyday life and context. Consequently, in the study of social phenomena, it is possible to transition from an approach aimed at searching for a cause (causality) to one focusing on the overall significant interactions. This passage outlines the reciprocity between life-world and social system and represents the pivotal moment in which attention is paid not only to the individual as the recipient of decisions but to the individual as "subject" and active participant in relational processes.

In his essay *Les formes élémentaires de l'altruisme* (2000), Moscovici states two fundamental assumptions for the study of altruism. First, that both altruism and egoism can be problematic behaviours depending on their interpretation, which in turn is based on the social and cultural expectations of the reference society. Second, that altruism is linked to the relationship between individuals (intensity and duration) as well as to the situation they live in.

This suggests that the renewed interest of the social sciences in altruism can be considered as an attempt to reconfigure the *Ego/Alter* relationship starting from the transformations of society and the "doings and beings" of human beings. As mentioned above, the second aspect identified by Moscovici was examined by both Mauss (2002) and Sorokin (1954). The former referred to the need to close the gifting cycle (give/receive/reciprocate), while the latter discussed the elementary forms of altruism. Both highlight how these actions hang on the relationality of individuals. Sorokin, moreover, in his last years of research fully dedicated to the activities of *The Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism* focuses his attention on the transformation of human solidarity that would be replaced by the *love relationship* that the Russian-American sociologist considered as *the supreme and vital form of human relationship*.

What should be investigated, therefore, is neither altruism nor egoism, but the relationship. This procedural and methodological order overcomes the altruism/egoism dichotomy since these two static terms are replaced by processes: "altruistic relationships", for society (pro-social or hetero-directed) and *selfish relationships*, for oneself (anti-social or self-directed).

To synthesise, we can state that altruism and selfishness, in contemporary society, disconnected from the elements that linked them only or almost exclusively to human nature or purely economic aspects, play a role in the daily life of individuals and their subjectivity that needs further investigation to better explain and understand both its dynamics and outcomes. Nevertheless, neither individuals nor communities are always able to activate the ability to respond (reflection) to situations requiring *altruistic relationships*. The term activation stresses the active role of the subject in determining the causes or the premises of events that affect behaviour, while pro-action means recognising that also the possibilities of action offered by the social context fall under individual responsibility. Individuals,

therefore, tend to adopt a position of re-action rather than pro-action. The former is typical when those social relations that give rise to the processes of reflexivity that, in turn, allow for conscious and responsible decision-making are absent or scarce.

For this reason, we cannot speak of altruism or selfishness, but *altruistic or selfish* relationships. Every form of sociality fluctuates between the exchange of information and symbolic action on the other, thus embodying some ambiguity. The interactions implemented and experienced by individuals are, therefore, a problematic action that most often does not allow for reciprocity and recognition of the subjects, paramount for the consolidation of modes of action linked to primary sociality. And it is precisely this recognition that can direct sociality towards altruism or selfishness: the lower the anonymity of the other, the more we tend towards an altruistic relationship. In this way, the *Ego/Alter* relationship is no longer based on aspects of inequality (in what) but aspects of differentiation (for whom). Attention should be paid to *Ego's* attitudes, who perceives himself as equal to/different from *Alter* in a given symbolic sphere, as well as to *Alter's* responses within a relational framework built on expectations that can play a role on determining closeness/distance and openness/closure. The reference to anonymity introduces the topic of remote and face-to-face social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966): the more anonymous the contact with the Other (remote interaction) the more difficult it is to find common elements allowing for civil cohabitation – e.g. discrimination against minorities or weaker parts of society). Analysing this process further, it emerges that the recognition of otherness refers to a wider and more complex process

of categorisation that unearths both the *Ego/Alter* nexus (the basis of social identification) and the near/far dimension. The *Ego* strengthens and unfolds positively by defining the *Alter* negatively. This process is particularly significant when individuals are already *defending their world*. The opposite happens, instead, in a primary relationship based on trust and what Moscovici (2000) defined as *participatory altruism*. This form of altruism gives rise to an *Us* that connects and binds together the members of the group, community, or society, and it is for this *Us* that individuals are ready to sacrifice themselves. Individuals still defend *their world*, but this is no longer individualized and refers instead to the collective: humanity. In this case, the altruistic relationship is aimed at supporting that bond that must be maintained for the survival of the group (humanity), regardless of its form. In a way, *Ego* connects with *Alter* in the *Us*, becoming almost interchangeable, to such an extent that we can no longer distinguish when we are doing something for the other or for *Us*.

It is, therefore, necessary to activate the transformation of the perceptive and cognitive system of individuals, so that their experience unfolds as a synthetic re-interpretative experience of the *Ego/Alter* relationship. A widespread idea in contemporary society is that globalization hindered the *humanitarian ethos* aimed at the communicative interaction for two acting subjects to *understand* each other, where the subjects refer to each other and act taking into account their reciprocal intentions, motivations, and expectations. And yet this ethos should be considered as a precious opportunity for individual growth, in the perspective of changing everything that hampers the construction of a new civil and solidaristic coexistence.

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