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The Public and Social Character of Love in the History of Sociological Thought

Spoleczny i publiczny charakter miłości w historii myśli socjologicznej

Summary: The starting point of this paper is represented by the research carried out by the study group of Social-One (Iorio, 2014; 2015; Araújo et al., 2015; Araújo et al., 2016; Martins, Cataldi, 2016), which recognised a public dimension and not only the intimate and personal dimension of love in today’s society. Taking as a reference point the work of Luc Boltanski, *L’amour et la justice comme competences* (1990), the research of the study group has proposed to widen the circle of sharing to go beyond the input from classic sociologists with a new conceptual category of love linked to agape. This path has actually already been begun by some well-known scholars – including Simmel (1907; 1921; 1989; 2001), Sorokin (1954), Giddens (1992), Luhman (1987) and Honneth (1990) – on the shoulders of whom it has already been possible to see the historical path of the transformation of the concept. However, the “agape” action brings something new to the social sciences: agape, in fact, introduces emerging characteristics, which at the same time, is

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linked to and transcends the way love is understood as “eros” and “philia”, defining itself as a key to gaining insight into a primarily empirical social reality, based on unconditional love of one’s neighbour. On this basis, the paper traces the path that the concept of love has had in the history of sociological thought, enlightening its public and social characters and proposing a research project based on love as agape.

Keywords: love, agape, sociology, social research, sociological theory.

Streszczenie: Punktem wyjścia niniejszego artykułu są badania przeprowadzone przez grupę badawczą Social-One (Iorio, 2014; 2015; Araújo i in., 2015; Araújo i in., 2016; Martins, Cataldi, 2016), które uznały publiczny, a nie tylko wewnętrzny i osobisty wymiar miłości we współczesnym społeczeństwie. Mające za punkt odniesienia pracę Luca Boltanskiego, *L’amour et la justice comme competences* (1990), badania doprowadziły do wypracowania propozycji poszerzenia kręgu dzielenia się poprzez wskazanie nowej kategorii konceptualnej miłości jako agape, wychodząc tym samym poza ujęcia klasycznych socjologów. Drogę tę wyznaczyli już niektórzy znani uczeni – między innymi: Simmel (1907, 1921, 1989, 2001), Sorokin (1954), Giddens (1992), Luhman (1987) i Honneth (1990) – w odwołaniu do których można dostrzec historyczną ścieżkę transformacji koncepcji. Mimo to miłość jako agape wnosi coś nowego do nauk społecznych: agape wprowadza cechy, które z jednej strony są powiązane, a z drugiej wykraczają poza rozumienie miłości jako „eros” i „philia”, a jej ujęcie staje się kluczem do uzyskania wglądu w poznawaną empirycznie rzeczywistość społeczną, opartą na bezwarunkowej miłości bliźniego. Na tym fundamencie artykuł prezentuje drogę pojęcia miłości w historii myśli socjologicznej, podkreślając jej publiczny i społeczny charakter, a także przedstawiając propozycję projektu badawczego odwołującego się do miłości jako agape.

Słowa kluczowe: miłość; agape; socjologia; badania społeczne; teoria socjologiczna.

Speaking of love in today’s globalised society seems a gamble. The logic of consumption, accounting and commodification seem to have permeated every sphere, to become the true principles of “vital organization for the whole of society”¹. Just think of the works of contemporary authors such

¹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).

as Bauman² – to give a famous example – to understand that artefacts, ideas, spaces and even experiential experiences, relationality and production of subjectivity have been overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of commodification, becoming places of colonisation of uncertainty and consumerism.

In effect, in the contemporary sociological debate, in contrast with the mainstream approach, some concepts that convey gratuitousness and unconditionality are gaining momentum. Love is one of these. In reality, it does not constitute an unpublished: rather it can be represented as a concept that for decades, like a karst trickle, has been passing through the sociological reflection.

In this contribution, we will therefore try to retrace the path of affirmation and definition of love within the history of sociological thought. The last part will present a proposal for a research project on the social dimension of love understood as love-agape.

1. The social bond of love in the classics of sociology

In order to rediscover the social dimension of love, we should first start from the reflections of the founding fathers of the sociological discipline. In classical literature, in fact, love is identified as an important factor of social cohesion.

This is the case for a giant in the history of sociological thought, Georg Simmel (1858–1918). In his unfinished essay “Fragment über die Liebe” published posthumously in 1921, Simmel talks about love in response to one of the most cherished questions: how is society possible and how can it be built based on interaction between men? In fact, the social reality and interpersonal relationships are for Simmel “vita”, which in its flow crystallises and condenses into specific forms³. In this perspective, the themes of life and love find their natural place in the Simmelian reflection.

In particular, for Simmel⁴, Love is the main path for the establishment of relationships, the prince feeling of sociability. Thus, it is the feeling that is most intimate and that allows the transition from the individual to the su-

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love. On the Fragility of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) [in Italian: *Amore liquido. Sulla fragilità dei legami affettivi* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2004)].

³ Adele Bianco, “Georg Simmel: le forme dell’amore”, *Società mutamento politica* 4 (2011): 51.

⁴ Georg Simmel, “Fragment über die Liebe”, *Logos* 9 (1921): 1–54.

pra-individual collective⁵. “Love immanent function”: a formal function of psychic life⁶ and the psychological and affective foundation of the genesis of society that leads spontaneously to common in others⁷.

Therefore, the thought of Simmel on love is fundamental. According to this father of sociology, not only is love the basis of social relations, but it also allows unity in diversity⁸. In fact, love confronts two distinct subjects: the feeling of love is the basis for collective life and, being a way of expressing the *Wechselwirkung*, presents itself as a sociological problem⁹. In Simmel’s words, the specific peculiarity of love concerns the fact that it does not eliminate the being of the ego itself or that of the tu. On the contrary, it makes the presupposition based on which the elimination of distance is accomplished¹⁰. In acting out of love, in fact, “the ego is extended towards the you in an attempt to abolish the distance and to adhere to the you forming the union. The irreducible distinction between two subjects that meet is the presupposition of love that pushes us to overcome this barrier”¹¹. It is therefore only love that allows such a “miracle”¹².

For this reason, for Simmel, love overcomes the dichotomy between selfishness and altruism, but also between rationality and feeling because it is unicum indivisible, “it is a psychic act that cannot be dismembered”¹³. In fact, no dichotomy is able to account for “the incomparable and inderivable relationship, called precisely love, which the subject has with an object”¹⁴. It is founded above all on the recognition of the irreplaceable individuality of the beloved. Rather, the relationship of love in the social sphere is creative and transformative in that it leads to the change of both the one who loves and the one who is loved. In fact, on the one hand, the loved one is determined precisely by love because, thanks to it, she acquires meaning and meaning; on the other hand, the subject who experiences love is transformed

⁵ Gennaro Iorio, *Elementi di sociologia dell’amore. La dimensione agapica nella società* (Roma: Natan, 2014), 45 [In English: *Sociology of Love. The Agapic dimension of Societal Life* (Vernon Press, 2017)].

⁶ Georg Simmel, *Filosofia dell’amore*, a cura di Marco Voza (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), 165.

⁷ Bianco, “Georg”, 52.

⁸ Iorio, *Elementi*.

⁹ Bianco, “Georg Simmel”, 53–54.

¹⁰ Simmel, *Filosofia*, 161.

¹¹ Bianco, “Georg Simmel”, 54.

¹² Simmel, *Filosofia*, 153.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 163.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 165.

in the moment in which he loves, because the whole of the person is taken by a vital force that pushes the subject towards others, towards constructive interaction with his fellowmen, favouring his attachment in the world¹⁵.

In different terms, and yet equally significant, another father of sociology, Max Weber (1864–1920), expresses himself in relation to love. He attributes to love a public role in the analysis of the history of religions. According to Weber, the concept of love is part of the processes of cultural rationalisation and is closely linked to the theme of pain. According to this father of sociology, while in the primitive religious forms pain and suffering were removed from the gods, in the prophecies of redemption the suffering, interior or exterior, common to all, became the “founding principle of their community relationship”¹⁶. The commandments of solidarity and help for the neighbour and those in difficulty arose¹⁷. This is the basis of brotherhood and generalised love for all of humanity.

In particular, according to Weber, “fraternal love” or “brotherhood” is a type of religious love that develops precisely based on a concern for the universality of human suffering.

Moreover, within the framework of some religions, the ethics of universal brotherhood has come to preach a love that is towards all the next, prescribing the equality of all towards everyone, to become a love at the highest levels of universality. Hence, the concept of *Liebesakosmismus*, or acosmic love, of which Weber speaks in *Intermediate Considerations*¹⁸. On the contrary, of worldly love, which is always love for particular people, it is characterised by the fact of being love for all without distinction, or love for whoever arrives: friends, strangers, even enemies¹⁹. This is why it is a revolutionary love, because it overcomes the community boundaries and breaks with the logic of the group and the out group. For the same reason, however, it is also a love that denies the world, as it requires acosmism devoid of object²⁰. Think of the examples of Buddha, Jesus and St. Francis.

¹⁵ Bianco, “Georg Simmel”, 54–55.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I–III (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), 323.

¹⁷ Alessia Zaretti, *Religione e modernità in Max Weber. Per un’analisi comparata dei sistemi sociali* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2003).

¹⁸ Max Weber, “Zwischenbetrachtung”, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 2 (1916): 335–421.

¹⁹ Robert N. Bellah, “Max Weber and World-Denying Love: A Look at the Historical Sociology of Religion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2 (1999): 277–304.

²⁰ Weber, *Gesammelte*.

This is not the place for further details. Suffice it to say here that this kind of love for Weber is such a foundational bond of the company that, as Bellah²¹, Symonds and Pudsey²² point out, the resulting analysis is complex and defines a typology that traces the boundaries of different empirical forms of the bond of love in social reality²³.

Another classic of sociology that we cannot fail to mention at this juncture is also Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968), who attributes to altruistic love the ability to unleash social energies of creative relationship²⁴. Although opposed by his contemporaries, Sorokin became a courageous pioneer of altruistic love²⁵, so much so that in 1949 he founded the Research Center in Altruistic Integration and Creativity at Harvard. This is the belief that in the twentieth century the struggle between men had assumed such catastrophic proportions as to threaten the survival of humanity²⁶. His goal then became to understand the nature, the forms and the how and why of love, but also to start looking for more efficient techniques for its production²⁷ to start a program of “altruization” of people and institutions. According to Sorokin, the program is not a utopian one (on the contrary, he writes) because in the same anthropological structure of men a “law of love” is inscribed, even if often kept dormant, in which happiness is complete if same in others and through others²⁸. The author’s belief is in fact the possibility of contributing to make a concrete improvement to society. For this reason, he undertook to support the project of re-founding sociology²⁹, a discipline that until then had mainly focused on the

²¹ Bellah, “Max Weber”, 277–304.

²² Michael Symonds, Jason Pudsey, “The Forms of Brotherly Love in Max Weber’s Sociology of Religion”, *Sociological Theory* 2 (2006): 133–149.

²³ Iorio, *Elementi*, 48.

²⁴ Alberto Lo Presti, “Prefazione all’edizione italiana”, in: Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Il potere dell’amore* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2005), 12.

²⁵ Maria L. Paglione, “Dono e Amore Creativo Altruistico. Riflessioni a partire dal pensiero del sociologo Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin”, in: Vera Araújo, *Agire agapico e scienze sociali. Atti del seminario internazionale Castelgandolfo (Roma), 6–7 giugno 2008*, www.social-one.org, 4; Maria L. Paglione, “Per un dialogo tra dono e amore. Alcuni spunti per un’intuizione di natura meta-sociologica”, *Sophia. Ricerche su i fondamenti e la correlazione dei saperi* 1 (2013): 63–72.

²⁶ Paglione, “Dono e Amore”, 4.

²⁷ Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Ways and the Power of Love* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1954), 28 [In Italian: *Il potere dell’amore* (Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 2005)].

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Paglione, “Dono e Amore”, 4.

theme of deviance, giving very little attention to the positive types of human beings, their progress, their actions, heroic and positive relationships³⁰.

His sociology is therefore “critical” but also proactive, i.e. engaged in the construction of a new culture and a new society, defining a method capable of respecting the nature of social and human phenomena, which he saw as a “wonderful being integral”³¹.

On this basis, Sorokin³² understands love in the round: in the religious, ethical, ontological, physical, biological, psychological and even purely social fields. This is why it is aimed at people, groups, institutions and culture, to study how they are contaminated by experiences of daily altruism.

Regarding the social sphere, Sorokin defines altruistic love as an interaction, or relationship, between two or more persons, in which the aspirations and goals of a person are shared and supported in their realisation by other people³³. It therefore represents a kind of interaction and relationship that lives off gratuitousness, in which “everyone is happy to do and give anything for the welfare of the other, there is no bargaining or calculation of profits”³⁴. At the same time, however, the author identifies in mutual love the supreme and vital form of human relationship³⁵.

The identification of five dimensions that help to implement the concept of love in the concrete of interactions and social relations is also very stimulating³⁶. They are:

- 1) The intensity: It is minimal in the person who preaches the agape but not the practice in his acting; and it is nothing when it is used to mask the egoism of actions;
- 2) The extension: It is a dimension that expresses the opening character of the conception of the subject’s good, that is, the possibility of going towards every otherness and of welcoming it as constitutive of one’s own action. It varies between a minimum point (love for oneself), and maximum (love for the cosmos and humanity);

³⁰ Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Altruistic Love: A study of American Good Neighbors and Christian Saints* (Boston: Beacon, 1950).

³¹ Pitirim A. Sorokin, “Integralism Is My Philosophy”, in *This Is My Philosophy*, ed. Whit Burnett (New York: Harper, 1957), 180–189.

³² Sorokin, *The Ways*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*; Paglione, “Dono e Amore”.

³⁶ Iorio, *Elementi*.

- 3) Duration: It can vary from the shortest time to the entire course of a person's or group's life;
- 4) Purity: It can present various gradations and goes from a maximum measure that finds its *raison d'être* in love itself, up to the minimum level characterised by love as a means to reach a utilitarian end or that is within a logic of equivalence and measuring and accounting for what has been given and what has been received;
- 5) The adequacy: It concerns the relationship between subjective intentionality and its objective manifestations and is when the two dimensions coincide.

2. The privatisation and the colonisation of love

As we have seen, the classics of sociology attributed a purely social dimension to love, so much so that it recognised a generative role of the social. However, this position has gradually become lost in contemporary sociological reflection, where the theme of love has increasingly been relegated to the private life of people. It has progressively lost its social meaning or has only taken on its relevance as an indirect and secondary effect³⁷. Thus love, although part of the history of sociological thought, has undergone a long process of marginalisation. It has in fact been attributed a peripheral role in social theory and research, a role that, in some way, has also referred to a certain residuality in the social life of the actors' lives. Exiled in privatism, love for years has been the protagonist of a loss of relevance in the public sphere, falling into the sphere of family interactions, whether friendly or just intimate.

A precursor who explains well the mechanism, according to which love has been relegated to the private, is surely Werner Sombart (1863–1941). In the exploration of modern society, Sombart³⁸ contextualises social changes – starting from the analysis of super-structural factors such as ideas, religion and metaphysics – in the context of economic processes³⁹. In this context,

³⁷ Ibidem, 17.

³⁸ Werner Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (München, Leipzig: 1913).

³⁹ Silvia Fornari, “Amore, lusso e capitalismo. Werner Sombart e la secolarizzazione dell'amore. Come la trasformazione dell'erotismo e del rapporto tra i sessi ha influenzato la nascita del nuovo spirito capitalistico-borghese”, *Dada. Rivista di antropologia globale*, 1 (2015): 73.

Sombart emphasises the importance of relational modalities, especially those deriving from the relationships between the sexes, which – together with the development of voluptuous and hedonistic consumption, of the arts and literature – have changed over the centuries, the idea of love and of loving relationship⁴⁰. Thus, the author analyses the relationship of interdependence that exists between the transformation of the economic system and the modern vision of the world, considering as a result the path of secularisation of love and transformation of the relationship between man and woman.

Another illustrious scholar who shows how love, during the process of civilization, was gradually confined to the private sector as a backstory activity is Norbert Elias (1897–1990). Elias' thesis of civilization holds that

the increase in the division of functions also leads to more and more people, increasingly larger populated areas, to depend on each other; It requires and instills greater control in the individual, a more precise control of his affections and of his behavior, requires a more severe regulation of the drives and – from a particular stage on – a more uniform self-control⁴¹.

This means that love has also undergone a transformation: becoming an object of social control and regulation has gradually been relegated to the privacy of family relationships.

Even Anthony Giddens (1938–) attributes love to a purely intimate space: in the text *The Transformation of Intimacy*⁴², Giddens links the birth of love to the transformations of married life. According to the author, in modernity a great novelty has been established on the binomial bourgeois family and romantic love. This type of love derives from Christian idealisation and the relationship between love and freedom. Giddens⁴³ notes that romantic love has had important effects on social life: first of all it led to the separation of family life from work, with the consequent birth of the home; in addition, the control of births and the establishment of conscious relationships between parents and children has led to the shift from naturalness and the hierarchisation of family relationships to affectivity and maternal love.

⁴⁰ Sombart, *Luxus*.

⁴¹ Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, vol. 2 (Basel: Haus zum Falken, 1939), 429.

⁴² Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

However, according to Giddens⁴⁴ romantic love characterised by sublimation is further undergoing transformation in contemporary society. In fact, it is increasingly accompanied by a new type of love that the author calls “convergent”, based on openness to the other and on the development of both individualities included in the couple. Such love is an active and reciprocal love, it is a special relationship, unique and alone, it is equal between genders and grows to the extent that intimacy grows and approaches the pure relationship, that is, to the extent that each of the two partners he trusts with the other and shows himself sentimentally vulnerable to the other. Convergent love, however, is contingent, as it lives in the present. However, this kind of love – according to Giddens⁴⁵ – implies a democratisation of the personal sphere a reorganisation of social life based on a new personal ethic of happiness, love and respect for others.

Another author who places love exclusively at the basis of intimate relationships is Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), who maintains that in a liquid-modern society even emotional bonds become malleable and love takes on the connotation of ductility. In *Liquid Love*⁴⁶ Bauman focuses on the analysis of affective bonds that are shaped in the image of contemporary society that in individuals causes “fears born of the uncertainties and insecurities of liquid-modern existence”⁴⁷. Bauman notes that the rule is more often that of the pocket report, so called because it can be kept in your pocket and extracted only when necessary, pleasant, but without the risk of being oppressive. The fear of committing – warns Bauman⁴⁸ – is not limited to the emotional sphere but also extends to the social one, undermining values such as solidarity and love for others, which are at the base of civil coexistence. Hence the term “liquid love”⁴⁹ is well suited to ties that sway between the desire for stability and security and, on the other hand, the fear of getting stuck in loops and ties too tight, which have to sacrifice one’s own personality or one’s own freedom, or one’s own life expectations⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Bauman, *Liquid Love*.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 76.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Silvia Cataldi, Anna M. Leonora, “Bibliografia ragionata su amore e agape”, in: Vera Araùjo, *Agire agapico e scienze sociali, Atti del seminario internazionale Castelgandolfo (Roma), 6–7 giugno 2008*, www.social-one.org.

Even Bourdieu speaks of love only in the couple, recognising him, in his pure form, as the only possibility of truth of social domination strategies that aim to attack, chaining, subjugating, lowering or enslaving the other⁵¹.

Another specific example is Luhmann's reflection (1927–1998) that love corresponds to a peculiar communicative code between Ego and Alter. According to Luhmann⁵², love is not a feeling, but a communicative fact that offers a solution to a social problem. Now, society provides mechanisms that simultaneously provide for selection (of Ego) and motivation (of Alter). Love is therefore a particular communication system because it transmits peculiar selections through the orientation and individual understanding of oneself and the vision of another person's world. With the increase of social differentiation and, therefore, also of complexity, the semantics of love have changed, that is, its culture and its meaning attributed to love and falling in love. Therefore, in the contemporary world love has become for Luhmann⁵³ the only place that provides a double confirmation of meaning. In it, there is unconditional confirmation of oneself in the other, as not only does one feel accepted for those who it is, but also for those who would like to be because the expectations of the other converge with self-expectations of the self. Love is therefore the only personal and particular place in the other person's shared world.

Even in the thought of this author, therefore, is a question common to contemporary literature: love is portrayed as a pure social relationship in which self-realisation of the self and the expressiveness of the other merge into one. However, this relationship is not only relegated to the private life of affective life, family or even just a couple, but in fact, it is impromptu, liquid and possible exclusively in the present.

For this reason, in contemporary literature there are authors who give a sociological relevance of love as a sphere colonised by risk, consumerism and uncertainty. Examples of this are the studies on the interactive ritual of Randall Collins⁵⁴, those aimed at analysing the marketing processes of love by Arlie Russell Hochschild⁵⁵, the studies of Michel Foucault⁵⁶ on the link

⁵¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 127.

⁵² Niklas Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion. Zur Codierung von Intimität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁵⁵ Arlie R. Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life. Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2003).

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

between sexuality and bio power, and the studies of Jean-Claude Kaufmann⁵⁷ that analyse the volatility and pragmatism of the practices of encounter between man and woman, which has as an epilogue the “awakening the morning after”.

The result of this collapse of love locked up in the erotic microcosm is even the loss of the meaning of real people. People, their actions, the sense attributed to acting, observation, disappear in a path of abstraction of representations of love: people are replaced by characters⁵⁸.

Along this line there are also the studies of the spouses Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Ulrich Beck, in the famous text *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe*⁵⁹ they make love fall back into that process of individualisation typical of the society of risk, in which the reality of the couple and of the restricted family becomes more and more an empty form. The normal chaos of love is that which arises from the contradiction between the overwhelming weight that the discourse has on love and the difficulty that everyone has found – normal, indeed – to love. This difficulty is ultimately attributable to that process of individualisation of which Beck speaks in the society of risk⁶⁰, that is, of that process, which has placed individuals outside the social framework within which, even in the early modernity, they configured their life choices. Now, even in the field of relationships of love, men and women, the integrative structures of family and kinship are dissolved, they are forced to give themselves the rules of their life, to make judgments of their own failures, to erase the guilt and to dissolve the knots that bind to the past, but also to avenge the wounds suffered.

In the face of the overvaluation, the omnipresence of love in public discourse made largely of publicity and entertainment, in the reality of the couple and the restricted family it becomes increasingly an empty form⁶¹.

⁵⁷ Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Premier matin. Comment naît une histoire d'amour* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002).

⁵⁸ Iorio, *Elementi*, 16.

⁵⁹ Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

⁶⁰ Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).

⁶¹ Cataldi, Leonora, “Bibliografia”.

3. The public reappraisal of love in critical sociology

However, there are authors who, instead, considered love as a force capable of generating social bonds between concrete and historical people, a love that is rooted in the public action of the subjects, which pervade the civil cohabitation of groups and communities⁶².

It is particularly thanks to the contemporary critical tradition to have re-established the discourse on love in the vein of political and moral reflection. In Germany, this merit goes to Axel Honneth (1949–), a third-generation exponent of the Frankfurt school. Starting from the Hegelian conception of love as “being oneself in a stranger”, Honneth shows how love can represent a first stage of the theory of recognition⁶³. In this regard, the author says, “the experience of being loved represents for every subject a necessary prerequisite for participating in the public life of a community”⁶⁴. Therefore, love represents the original nucleus of all ethics and it is therefore only starting from this form of relationship that the spheres of law and solidarity are founded⁶⁵.

In particular, Honneth⁶⁶ proposes three forms of recognition, interpretable in decreasing order: love, law and solidarity. As far as love is concerned, Honneth understands it as all interpersonal relationships based on sympathy, unconditionality and the renouncement of calculation, which constitute forms of approval and encouragement aimed at favouring ways without anxiety in the relationship with oneself, and with others, giving people the ability to be alone with themselves without fear, or to realise their autonomy, rejecting the symbiotic dependence on the other and the blows that derive from the definitions of absolute identity⁶⁷. This intersubjective recognition is understood as a prerequisite for individual autonomy. Recognising the relationship with others as constitutive of their being and their identity means that the self-re-

⁶² Iorio, *Elementi*, 16.

⁶³ Nicola Marcucci, “Lotta per il riconoscimento, Recensioni”, *Jura Gentium, Rivista di filosofia del diritto internazionale e della politica globale* (2005), www.juragentium.org/books/it/honneth.htm, 2.

⁶⁴ Axel Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung. Grammatik sozialer Konflikte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 51.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ Iorio, *Elementi*, 63–64.

alisation of each cannot be separated from the self-realisation of the other, that their autonomy cannot be promoted without promoting the autonomy of other. Therefore, when identity is built against the other, in principle one is working against one's own identity, because one destroys the possibility of seeing it recognised by the other as absolutised⁶⁸.

Another important aspect is the multiplication of recognition spheres. From this point of view, Honneth differs from his teacher: according to Honneth, normative theory should not construct a neutral point of view from which the principles of justice can be identified and extrapolated. Rather, it should rebuild those principles based on historical recognition processes in which they are already effective as rules for mutual respect and recognition. Significantly, Honneth argues that this theory can have "trust in historical reality" because the socialised subjects already have, as a guide, the principles that the theory must only explain. This point of view helps not only to a necessary historicisation of the debate on normative principles, but also serves to overturn the epistemological point of view of critical theory.

Another contribution from critical sociology comes from France and in particular from Luc Boltanski (1940–). A pupil of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), Boltanski wants to depart from his teacher by re-evaluating the size of the subject with respect to the structure.

To this end he identifies various action regimes, each of which has elaborated its own procedures of justification, therefore, specific rules and competences through which the meaning of an action is constructed and its identification by the agent and the recipient. In an attempt to re-establish a "moral sociology" of the Durkheimian tradition, Boltanski⁶⁹ shows that, in different contexts, the practices of justification of actions confer centrality on the subject. In particular, in the state of peace, people give up utilitarian action based on exchange and action, giving more than what the situation requires. To define this state of peace analytically, Boltanski⁷⁰ reasons on three forms of social bonds built by love, as they have been traditionally described, the theory of Aristotelian love (*philia*), the Platonic one (*eros*) and the Christian one (*agape*). According to the author, to enter a state of peace it is therefore necessary to turn to love understood as *agape*.

⁶⁸ Iorio, *Elementi*, 64.

⁶⁹ Luc Boltanski, *L'Amour et la Justice comme compétences. Trois essais de sociologie de l'action* (Paris: Métailié, 1990).

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

Boltanski recovers the term *agape* from the theological tradition, as an expression of “aspiration of the world to unity”⁷¹. On the sociological level, the *agapic* action, unlike *eros*, is not dictated by desire, nor by transcendence, since it does not pose the problem of the object to which it is addressed. The *agape* towards the neighbour has nothing in common with an idea of abstract humanity because “the people he addresses are those he meets on his path and whose eyes he crosses”⁷². Likewise, unlike *philia*, *agape* breaks with the interactionist relational foundation. Being a free gift, it does not wait for return or counter-gift. For this reason, it cannot be approached either to instinctive love, or to the classical notions of proximity of naturalistic origin. This is because it is divorced from the principle of equivalence and does not use a measure of value.

In this sense the law of love comes to “abolish justice” in the Aristotelian meaning. Another characteristic of *agape* is the lack of computational capacity, from which derive at least two important consequences. The first is the neglect: the *agape* forgives because it is not able to gather, to remember and entertain; it has a fundamental non-consequentiality that allows it to “let go”, as Arendt would say. Secondly, it is of the present, in the sense that the present *agapic* is temporalised. Moreover, *agapic* love is limitless, because – quoting Kiekegaard – those in love see “the immeasurable in every manifestation of the other”⁷³. Finally, *agapic* love is eminently practical: it has an involvement in immediate action and in this sense; it is both the annihilation of the law in that it replaces fulfilment of the need, and is devoid of justification because it does not respond to language with language, but it is incarnation.

In Boltanski, there is therefore an element of great novelty: the attestation of love-*agape* as a possibility of enlarging the typological gallery of social action. This theoretical element makes it possible to construct a “secular” approach to the theme of *agape*, considering it as a possibility of social interaction that exists with dignity alongside other possibilities of action, such as instrumental, expressive, functional and symbolic, etc.

⁷¹ Luc Boltanski, *Stati di pace. Per una sociologia dell'amore* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2005), 73.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 75.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 85.

4. For a project of sociological research on love-agape

As we have seen, great merit of the contemporary critical schools of French and German origin has been to reintroduce the theme of love within the framework of sociological reflection of a political and moral nature. This has brought with it two important consequences: on the one hand the revaluation of the public dimension of love to the foundation of civil and social life and, on the other, a new epistemological sensitivity.

From an epistemological point of view, this sensitivity came from an event: the meeting between Luc Boltanski's moral and political sociology with the social philosophy of Axel Honneth, which took place during the Adorno Lectures in Frankfurt in November 2008. From this meeting a great novelty for critical theory arose: the understanding of the need to renounce the claim to criticise the contemporary social world by putting itself on a level of cognitive superiority. Rather – Boltanski and Honneth argue – the critical capacity must be found in the social reality and in the possibilities of social action of the members of those same societies.

This tells sociologists something important: reality overcomes sociological imagination and this can be considered a real turning point for the social sciences. Taking this premise seriously means a transformation in the way in which science and the social profession conceive their objects. They must be considered protagonists with power of action, criticism and social transformation. This means recognising that the possibilities for criticism and change are in people and also in their small daily gestures.

This is why love represents a category made for contemporary social reality. Because love is also a small gesture, which, falling within the register of excess and unconditional actions, has the ability to put itself in a critical and transformative manner with respect to consumerism, utilitarianism and accounting that pervade social life in actuality.

In this perspective the research project of the Social-One research network should be read⁷⁴. It stems from the need to support a rehabilitation process of love in public space to attribute to it the ability to grasp those facts,

⁷⁴ Vera Araújo, Silvia Cataldi, Gennaro Iorio, *L'amore al tempo della globalizzazione. Verso un nuovo concetto sociologico* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2015); Vera Araújo, Silvia Cataldi, Gennaro Iorio, *Culture of Peace. The Social Dimension of Love* (Torino/Paris: Harmattan, 2016); Iorio, *Elementi*; Michele Colasanto, Gennaro Iorio, "Sette proposizione sull'Homo Agapicus", *Nuova Umanità* 182 (2009): 252–278.

those ways of acting and those relationships that relate to gratuity, surplus and unconditionality in order to free them from the condition of residuals to which they are subjected in contemporary society and return to them, at the same time, scientific dignity and transformative force.

This is based on the authors' proposal⁷⁵ which, following the reflection of Boltanski and Honneth, redefined love in its agapic connotation as "action, relationship or social interaction in the which subjects exceed all their antecedents, and therefore offer more than what the situation requires"⁷⁶.

In this sense love-agape, defining itself starting from itself and for itself without interest, without return, accounting or justification, identifies a regime of action, relationship and social interaction that is first shown in its practice. The agape therefore takes on a public space that can be identified through its concrete manifestations and can be recognised by the typical method of sociological investigation: analysing peculiar social phenomena through empirical and historical investigation.

In this sense, love-agape is proposed as an interpretative tool. Founded on acts that break with the logic of instrumentality and calculation to enter into a surplus regime, the concept of agape makes it possible not to absolutise cultural elaboration and, at the same time, to unveil the contradictions, disclaimers and abuses of the world⁷⁷. In contrast with the mainstream utilitarian logic, the concept of love-agape is also proposed as an instrument for unmasking those processes of objectification and naturalisation that are manifested not only in social life, but also in the context of the same sociological research⁷⁸.

In this sense, research scientists Social-One – paraphrasing Alvin Ward Gouldner⁷⁹ believe that it is impossible to emancipate men and build a new society on a human basis without promoting a counterculture that includes new social theories; and it is impossible to do this without a critique of the social theories that prevail today.

⁷⁵ Araújo, Cataldi, Iorio, *L'amore*; Gennaro Iorio, "L'amore agape. Uno strumento di analisi", in: Vera Araújo, Silvia Cataldi, Gennaro Iorio, *L'amore al tempo della globalizzazione. Verso un nuovo concetto sociologico* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2015), 23–46.

⁷⁶ Iorio, *Elementi*, 32.

⁷⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Minima moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1951).

⁷⁸ Alberto Melucci, *Verso una sociologia riflessiva. Ricerca qualitativa e cultura* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).

⁷⁹ Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of the Western Sociology* (New York: Basic books, 1970), 71.

In this perspective, the concept of love is proposed here not only as an interpretative tool, but also as a critical tool in the perspective of a possible transformation of social reality.

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