

Silvia Cataldi*
Andrea Gallelli
Gennaro Iorio**

An interpretative concept for social sciences: Agapic love as a framework for poverty

ABSTRACT

Why sometimes people use their own resources to help unknown others? What drives an entrepreneur to adopt expensive socially responsible behaviours? What prompts a public employee to spend time with a customer outside the working hours?

In every-day life there many social phenomena based on un-conditionality, disinterestedness, over abound. Such phenomena remain outside the field of explanation of approaches such as rational choice theory or neo-utilitarianism, being described as paradoxes of social action. But also solidarity or gift theories do not provide sufficient explanation for phenomena in which group identity or social ties are not the main motivations of action.

Drawing from critical theories, we propose to (re)introduce the sociological concept of agape-love as a theoretical frame for those social mechanisms that elude reification, quantifiability, instrumental thinking. Agape-love, as formerly introduced by Luc Boltanski (1990), is focused on the present, avoiding any consequence calculation, refuses comparison and equivalence, does not involve reciprocity. According to Boltanski, agape must remain unaware for social agents, as any intentionality would lead action away from pure disinterestedness. We propose to reconceptualise agape, integrating it with theoretical insights by dif-

* Correspondence regarding the paper should be sent to: Silvia Cataldi, e-mail: silvia.cataldi1977@gmail.com

** Andrea Gallelli is author of paragraphs 1; Silvia Cataldi is author of paragraph 2 and 3; Gennaro Iorio is author of paragraph 4 and 5.

ferent social scientists (such as Honneth and Sorokin), with new reflexive and institutional accounts, and provide it with empirical foundation (Iorio, 2014).

We present the case of “suspended goods” and read it with the look of agape. It is a relatively recent practice widespread in various fields (examples are suspended groceries, suspended books, suspended holidays) that consists in purchasing goods or services, which will be actually consumed by others who cannot afford them.

This is a case of informal or popular welfare for needy people. Starting from this case study the authors will reflect on poverty, wondering if it is possible an action of aid toward poor which is not based on labelling and submission (Simmel 1908/1965).

We argue that agape is a powerful concept, capable of linking micro and macro levels, useful both to enlighten agents’ motivations in apparent non-rational (choice) situations, but also to describe the aggregate effects of collective behaviours that produce alternative economic regimes or welfare systems.

KEYWORDS: Agapic action, poverty, suspended goods, social interaction, Simmel, Boltanski

1. INTRODUCTION: SIMMEL ON POVERTY

The following contribution starts with a consideration from Georg Simmel and his book *The Poor* (1908/1965) in which there is a fundamental point about the definition of poverty and the conception of concrete actions intended to tackle poverty, with some relevant theoretical consequences.

“Poverty cannot be defined in itself as a quantitative state, but only in terms of the social reaction resulting from a specific situation [...] The poor position is not determined by his fate and condition but by the fact that others – individuals, associations and communities – attempt to correct this condition. Thus what makes one poor is not the lack of means. The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means. The poor person, the poor as a sociological category are not those who suffer specific deficiencies

and deprivations, but those who receive assistance or should receive it according to social norms (Simmel 1965: 138)".

Therefore, considering Simmel's point of view we can say, first, that poverty depends on a social reaction: the assistance. Secondly, every action of assistance contributes itself to generate social distance, producing declassing and social exclusion of poor people. The poor as a social type emerges only when society recognizes poverty as a peculiar status and assigns to that category specific persons who require assistance. In Simmel's view, the fact that someone is poor does not mean that he or she belongs to the specific social category of the 'poor'. It is only from the moment that the poor are subjected to assistance that they symbolically become part of a group characterized by poverty.

In this sense, poverty is a unique sociological phenomenon: a number of individuals who, out of a purely individual fate, occupy a specific organic position within the whole; but this position is not determined by this fate and condition, but rather by the fact that others attempt to correct this condition. So, once the poor accept assistance, they are removed from the preconditions of their previous status, they are declassified, and their private trouble now becomes a public issue. The poor come to be viewed not by what they do – the criteria ordinarily used in social categorization – but by virtue of what is done to them. Society creates the social type of the poor and assigns them a peculiar status that is marked only by negative attributes, by what the status-holders do not have.

In Simmel's words:

"The poor are approximately in the situation of the stranger to the group who finds himself, so to speak, materially outside the group" (Simmel 1965: 124-125).

And moreover:

"Assistance, to which the community is committed in its own interest [...], makes the poor an object of the activity of the group and places him at a distance from the whole, which at times makes

him live as a corpus vile by the mercy of the whole" (Simmel 1965: 142).

The position of the stranger and the poor, as well as Simmel's other types, is socially defined by virtue of specific forms of relations with the whole society. They are societal creations and must act out their assigned roles (Coser 1977). Also on this line, Becker's labelling theory (1963) depicts social groups, which, consequently, to an act of labelling by dominant groups, absorb the social behaviours considered typical of that group, becoming stigmatized and socially excluded.

Considering these problems related to the social meaning of poverty, our contribution aims to answer a key question: Can we conceive help and assistance as social actions, which produce recognition and benefit for the recipients without generating social exclusion?

In order to find elements for an answer we present a case study: the suspended goods. The case can be considered an example of "civil welfare", with the main characteristics of being based on the recognition of the recipient, the production of social ties, and the orientation to social inclusion.

2. THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

This research is part of a broader research programme on the social dimension of love, carried out by an international study group of sociologists and experts of social work called *Social-One* (see Araújo *et al.* 2015).

The starting point of the research programme is love as a fundamental daily dimension of life. In sociology, many concepts are used to express similar elements, such as gift, solidarity, altruism, reciprocity, and so on. Such phenomena remain outside the field of explanation of approaches such as rational choice theory or neo-utilitarianism, being described as "paradoxes" of social action.

Within this framework, the research program has been carried out with the following aims:

- stimulate reflection on certain characteristics of social action, such as unconditionality, disinterestedness, selflessness and overabundance.
- lead to conceptual clarification on certain key-concepts related to love, such as gift, solidarity, altruism, justice, reciprocity, agape.

The case of suspended goods, with a focus on poverty issues, is illustrative of social practices intended to create social inclusion through acts of help and assistance.

For the empirical research we adopted the case study approach (Simons 2009; Hammersley, Gomm, 2000; Hamel 1992; Swanborn 2010), with qualitative methods. Such a methodology is particularly useful when the phenomenon under observation is real and still present, or cannot be clearly distinguished from its context and therefore needs to be studied as a whole. In other words, this method can be used when it is necessary to consider all the variables of which the phenomenon is composed or which influence its occurrence from the external context (Yin 2014: 16; Cataldi, Sena 2015).

The empirical material has been gathered through multiple techniques: observation, especially shadowing and observing participants in certain social contexts; interviews with key informants and key witnesses; document collection and literature review, including websites, newspaper articles, television reports.

Through our investigation we privileged a micro perspective, rather than a macro level perspective, focusing on daily practices and informal aid actions (rather than formal programs, such as national policies on poverty). In particular, we assumed that daily life logic is based on practical knowledge before than interpretative constructs (Bourdieu 1972).

3. THE CASE STUDY

The study draws from Boltanski's (1990) theory of *agape*, which in the framework of the theories of action, points out social actions in which the agent refuses any comparison or equivalence, do not involve expectation of return or reciprocity, are rooted in the present moment and do not expect social recognition for the agent (Iorio 2014).

The case study is in line with the idea of *agape* and we believe that might be an example of effective social action, rooted in the everyday life, with an impact on situations of poverty and social exclusion, also with relevant theoretical consequences on institutional actions and welfare strategies.

The case of suspended goods allows you to see the re-emergence of some elements of a Neapolitan tradition of almost two centuries ago: the suspended coffee. Suspended coffee is a tradition which died down with the economic boom of the 1970s and which reactivated during the recent economic crisis. What is a suspended coffee? Some clients of the *café-bar*, in addition to consuming a cup of coffee for themselves, pay in advance a coffee for a needy person who they don't know and will not meet.

During the XIX century the "suspended" was a coffee offered to the poor of the city from the most generous to also give to disadvantaged people the chance to enjoy a coffee in the full respect of the Neapolitan tradition. The rite continued until after World War II. At that period for many people having a coffee in the bar was a luxury. Until today, when, with the economic crisis, the custom of paying a *café* to those who cannot afford has shown again.

What is mostly important is the symbolic value of the coffee. Coffee is not just a drink, but it is an expression of a social bond. Saying to someone: 'Let's have a coffee', means "good morning dear friend" (De Crescenzo 2009, p.11). The interviews show that this gesture was never considered charity, rather, a small sign of sociability towards a stranger in difficulty: the "next", in every

sense, someone who would shortly thereafter pass in the same bar. Coffee in Naples means consolation, comfort, commonality, gratification, alleviation. In short, it is a ritual that creates sociability. The Grand Coffee Gambrinus serves more than 3000 suspended coffees per year, while 7Bello Café serves about 1000/1500 suspended coffees per year. Who are the recipients of suspended coffees?

From the observation it is clear that who benefits of suspended coffee are especially elderly people, homeless and immigrants¹.

What is interesting about the case is the diffusion of the phenomenon, which became viral. This ancient Neapolitan tradition has even crossed its original borders towards Northern Europe, the United States and Brazil. Moreover, the tradition has reached the web, giving birth to a dedicated network: today 'the network of the suspended coffee' (www.retedelcaffesospeso.com) counts about 60 bars, festivals and associations who have taken up the cause all over Italy with about 260,000 followers. In Ireland the Suspended Coffee idea already has 280,000 fans in the world. What are the guiding principles of this network? We read on the site: the encounter with the other, immigration, exchange of best practices, environmental issues, social issues, recovery of historical memory. Similarly, in France there is the 'Café suspendu' and in Sweden the 'Uppskjuten'.

More over the phenomenon of suspended coffee extended to different suspended assets. So, in Italy there are now suspended pizza and suspended bread initiatives² as well as suspended note-

¹ The mechanism of selection need to be further investigated. But at the moment two elements seem clear: the beneficiary is anonymous for the donor; the staff of the bar selects the beneficiaries on the base of community criteria, so often needy persons are known in the neighbourhood and the selection is based on social trust.

² An initiative promoted by Padua University psychology students.

books, suspended books³. In Paris there is suspended baguette and in Thailand the suspended main meal based on rice.

Furthermore, the suspended coffee has given rise to forms of “generative or common welfare”, including suspended shopping, the Food Bank initiative and suspended holiday or work permits, which show how this practice may undertake forms of institutionalization.

The first case of “suspended wok permits” took place in a French company in 2008, where the employees were allowed to donate some of their vacation days to a colleague for permitting him to assist his son who had cancer and needed continuous assistance. Today in France this practice has become allowed by law, under the name of Mathys’ law, and also Italy inserted the same option in 2014 labour reform.

4. HOW CAN WE INTERPRET THE PHENOMENON OF SUSPENDED GOODS?

The suspension has some specific characteristics. Firstly, it is a voluntary action: paying a coffee, a book, some bread etc. The act is not due or necessary. The act makes benefits to some recipients. Suspending is addressed toward an anonymous: the recipient is unknown and is proximate (someone who passes in the coffee next). Eventually, the act produces no benefit to be claimed or deserved, making the agent renounce to direct reciprocity. For this reason the act of suspension inherently differs from other traditional forms of donation. Gift, for example, provides a reciprocal exchange in a circle of giving-receiving-giving back, so that it is a typical form of relationship based on reciprocal structure

³ In Italy promoted by a big bookshop enterprise, but largely diffused in many countries at international level.

(Pulcini 2005; Godbout 1992). Instead, the suspension is entirely without expectation of reciprocity, interest, return, justification.

Suspending cannot be a traditional form of solidarity either. Solidarity in fact, is considered a form of coordination and mutual assistance between members of the *same* group (Rosati 2001). In the case of suspended coffee, there is not a precise recipient but there is an open form of solidarity, towards any possible person in need. The gesture is not addressed to the in-group but it is open to the anonymous, which maybe can be ungrateful or even hostile.

Finally, suspending cannot be a general form of altruism. Altruism is the disposition to be interested to the others and to put what is good for others as the aim of one's own actions (Castelfranchi 1991). Suspended action, rather, is not only a disposition: it is a practical action, with empirical relevance and observable practices.

Over-abundance is a further key feature of suspended actions: they are neither due nor necessary; there is no benefit to be claimed or deserved. It is the action of subjects that 'exceeds' (an act of helping someone anonymously, not out of duty, utility or exchange) which provides benefit (notebooks, bread, shopping etc.) Above all, it is expressed as social tie (the extensivity of agape), without waiting for reciprocity, without interest, return or justification. To 'suspend' a purchased asset (coffee, food, school books, books and more) means not keeping it for oneself but assigning it to someone even before knowing their identity, a gesture towards an anonymous person, who may even be ungrateful or an enemy.

For this reasons, following Boltanski (1990), we can label this action as an agapic action.

Agapic action is a new type (regime) of action which:

- is not heroic because it is a minimum gesture rooted in the everyday life,
- is based on the renunciation of equivalence and anticipation of consequences: is regardless of merits-demerits, without calculation and measurement method, indifferent.

- it is generative of new solidarity. Because the gesture of offering an asset to an anonymous highlights a capacity to direct one's love towards humanity, it has the ability to internalize positive attitudes towards every neighbour. Maybe at the end, the beneficiary can become himself or herself a promoter of suspended practices and a multiplier of agapic gestures.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The case of suspended goods, read within the framework of agapic action, may suggest innovative insights on the general principles and values of the social work. It is not rare a performance oriented approach to the social services today, that revolves around rational, economically-based welfare, in which even "well-being" is produced and consumed in the material form of "goods" to be distributed. In this perspective, both the performance and the reception of services by client-users, equates to nothing more than the supply, more or less standardized, of material benefits, increasingly in the form of services or advice. This way of performing and receiving services, in the current crisis of the welfare era, appears increasingly inadequate and frustrating, both for operators and for users.

In this sense the presented case study allows us to say that in our society there are informal types of welfare actions, which at the same time can help the others and can create benefits without creating subordination. These kinds of "common welfare" systems can elevate the poor because the recipient is recognized as a part of the society.

Concluding, the case study offers further food for thoughts on deprivation.

First of all, standing from Simmel's point of view we can recognise that poor people are part of the social body, and they are not treated as strangers. While, the majority of the approaches on

poverty does not consider this interactional point, welfare policies can be revolutionized only considering the poor as protagonist and a resource, not just a beneficiary of actions.

The practice of suspension is somehow related to the act of overabounding. Thus, agapic actions are able to exceed the dialectic donor-receiver, on which traditional assistance is based. Rather, agapic help is grounded on the recognition of a common existential condition. In this sense, helping anonymous people means the recognition of suffering and means taking it in charge in a process where all the social members are recognized in a common condition of life

In conclusion, we can say that the social dynamic created by suspending goods is based on dignity and egalitarianism, with the positive effect of generating inclusive assistance

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