

Social Love as an Approach

Notes from the field

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The history of sociology has an ambiguous relationship with social love, considered something as either purely public generating the social (Cataldi, 2020) or as purely private that should be removed from the field of scientific discursivity as something emotional and non-rational. Social love can be best expressed among the primary groups that Max Weber highlighted as kin, friends and neighbors. Yet for the longest time, many sociologists argue that in our post-modern world and late modernity these groups become obsolete. Others contest that arguing that neighbors can best handle immediate emergencies; kin, long term commitments; and friends, heterogeneity (Litwak & Szelenyi, 1969). However, as the work of Gennaro Iorio (2016) and Silvia Cataldi (2020) point out, social love should be understood in a more complex way and go beyond these primary groups. For them, there are four dimensions of social love: overabundance (i.e., love exceeds social expectations and breaks with the exchange logic), care of others, recognition, and finally universalism (i.e. looking at the other beyond in-group). Social actors can have social love toward ethical or religious community and even toward humanity.

In this chapter, I would like to take from my own work to show how my sociology employed social love as a very heuristic approach to understanding communities that I studied in the Arab world and how this approach marks my commitment to these communities. This cannot be understood without unfolding my positionality. I will thus start by talking about my professional trajectory.

I. My Trajectory

I have grown up in a refugee camp and in a country under an authoritarian regime in Syria, haunted by a duality: oppressive Israeli colonial practices and the authoritarianism in Syria. I had first enrolled in Damascus University studying civil engineering, however that did not satisfy me. I was very politicized; I wanted to change the world! Now, of course, I barely understand it. I then enrolled myself into sociology as well.

In 1986, I was marked by my first arrest by the Syrian authority after I demonstrated for the Day of Land in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus. An intelligence officer told me then: “Your entire group fills less than one bus; you can easily be taken to prison!” Authoritarian states have always underestimated the importance of such “bus people” – whether defined as dissident intellectuals or more generally as an enlightened middle class. I took refuge in Foucault’s analysis of the microphysics of power and bio-politics. I went to France to pursue my higher education, as I sought a scientific analysis of the state’s elite, but at the same time, my activism helped me understand sociology not only as a professional and critical enterprise, in Michael Burawoy’s typology, but also as public engagement and policy

advocacy. I was quickly aware of how refugees and citizens in the Arab World were governed—not by the *rule of law* but by the *law of rule*. It is the construction of specific spaces (refugee camps, slums) that haunts my work, but it is also infused with a desire to go beyond. Thus, in July 2008, I organized a regional workshop on “*Governmentality, Resistance and the State of Exception in the Arab World*”. Due to my work in this field, I introduced the work of the prominent political philosopher Giorgio Agamben to Arab readers and wrote an introduction to the Arabic translation of his book *State of Exception*. (Hanafi, 2015)

Clearly, I was very obsessed with the paradigm of domination. However, slowly, I noticed the limitation of such a paradigm and the way it was used in the Arab World and beyond. For instance, I start having critical views on how postcolonialism becomes a discourse focusing on the external factors and establishing a sharp dichotomy between West-East, “us” - “them”, rational-Irrational, transcendental-eminent, religion-secularism, modernity-tradition, etc. Most of the post-colonial discourse in the region has been simplistic, incapable of comprehending changes in the Arab world. Many Arab uprisings so far have failed, not simply because of the imperialism and post-colonial domination but because of deeply rooted and protracted authoritarianism that used torture to political opponents in a systematic way, and because of the lack of trust on the part of people who are in the process of learning values such as pluralism, democracy, freedom, and social justice. The Arab world needs sociological tools to understand social movements, being the official ones or simply the silent, the protracted but pervasive encroachment of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful, in line with the Asef Bayat (2010) analysis.

I don't have a problem with the postcolonial theory however, how this discourse is deployed in different areas in the world undermines unfolding social love, agape and convivial practices among social actors. As a sociologist, my role is to show that there is no pure evil or pure good. Sociology with the sociological imagination reminds us of the complex nature of social phenomena, the importance of the agency of actors and the logic of the gift and love. Power cannot always come from authority and hierarchy (through the domination and competition mechanisms) but through collaboration, overabundance and care.

I grew up in the Arab region where religion and religiosity are important in the everyday life of people. I read many works of philosophers who are influenced by Christian theology, where the notion of agape is very important. I would like to highlight the work of four Lebanese philosophers Mushir Aoun, Joseph Abu Rizk Bishara, and Saji Rene Habashi. But strikingly, it has not been a topic for social scientists, except a few ones (e.g., Antoine Messarra). Of course, agape was an important theological concept developed by many theological circles but here I am interested in the intersection between theology and social sciences, as in the case of the theology of liberation. My hero here is the Lebanese Bishop Gregoire Haddad who has a lifetime of civic activism. A pioneering figure of anti-sectarianism in Lebanon since the 1960s, he urged the Lebanese to adopt civic activism instead of violence as a means to effect change. The Social Movement (an NGO) he founded was exemplary for spreading agape, as a speech, action, and interaction with poor people. In Islam, the concept that was very important is neighborliness (*aljawar*). Many sayings (*hadith*) of the prophet Mohamad emphasized the ethical importance of keeping

good neighborliness¹ (Ouail, 2019). It is interesting to note that in secular imaginary neighborly relations were less discussed in the social sciences and if it was thought like in the case of Max Weber within his triad kinship-friendship-neighborhood, it was the most contingent relations. Knowing the importance of neighborliness, the German historian Birgit Schäßler organized a conference² about this concept where she went through the history of this concept from Max Weber to Christianity and Islam. (Schäßler, 2019) “Love thy Neighbor as Thyself” (Leviticus 19:9-18) is indeed important for Christianity as well in Islam.

When I produce knowledge in the Arab world, I am alerted in midst of social suffering to observe the acts of giving and agape. Progressively I have been writing against radical criticism and arguing in favor of more situated critique. Situated critique means a critique that can be open to the other, to leave the possibility of dialogue, conversation, and exchange of a gift and agape. Recently Alain Caillé (2021) calls for radical Moderationism or moderationist radicalism to stop the current war between scholars in France and USA and beyond who use labels such as *Islamo-gauchistes*, wokism, cancel culture, etc. In this chapter, I will present two vignettes from my work of how important to account for the logic of social love and the gift.

II. Listening to “enemy”

Between 1999 and 2004 I lived in the Palestinian occupied territories, at the heart of the Second Intifada. At that time, I was very interested in the question of Palestinian refugees, but also in the political sociology of this conflict, and that’s when I forged the concept of *spacio-cide*. For me, the Israeli colonial project is ‘spacio-cidal’ (as opposed to genocidal) in that it targets land for the purpose of rendering the inevitable ‘voluntary’ transfer of the Palestinian population primarily by targeting the space upon which the Palestinian people live. The spacio-cide is a deliberate ideology with a unified rational, albeit dynamic process because it is in constant interaction with the emerging context and the actions of the Palestinian resistance. By describing and questioning different aspects of the military-judicial-civil apparatuses, this article examines how the realization of the spacio-cidal project becomes possible through a regime that deploys three principles, namely: the principle of colonization, the principle of separation, and the state of exception that mediates between these two seemingly contradictory principles.

While my conceptualization of conflict is based on fieldwork among Palestinians living in the West Bank in early 2000, I wanted to be sure that I have the vision of the conflict from both sides. Therefore, I coordinated with a prominent Israeli anti-colonial philosopher, Adi Ophir, a research group composed of Palestinians, Israelis and international scholars to analyze the Israeli colonial practices in the Palestinian territories. With Michal Givoni, we

¹ “Gabriel (*Jibrīl*) was insisting always to pay the tith of the neighbor so much that I thought that he would give him the right of inheritance.”. Muslim Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Abū Qutaiba Nazar Muḥammad al-Fariabi (Riyadh: Dār Tayba, 2006), vol. 1, 1214, ḥadīth number 2625. Cited by (Ouail, 2019)

² This is an Annual Conference of the Max Weber Foundation, co-organized by Orient Institut of Beirut in Cairo on 29.08.2019.

produced an edited book called *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*. (Ophir et al., 2009) Although clearly there is no institutional collaboration with an Israeli institution from my side, I was under a smear campaign because of writing a book with Israeli scholars, and for some, it was not sufficiently critical. One should remember the critical time of the early 2000s as the Palestinian second Intifada had started and simultaneously, the “peace process”, no matter how critical we are of it, it is still ongoing. My thoughts were in line with the International convivialist movement (to which I belong) that we could have a conflict without slaughtering each other. (International convivialiste, 2020) And this is exactly how I can criticize all colonial practices in the Palestinian territories, but at the same time open the space for dialogue, for talking with some Israelis.

More broadly, to me the issue is not simply about rational claims, nor about normative argumentations debating in public space, but it’s also about emotion, about how to understand the emotion of the other, moral sensitivity, the moral enervation of the other, making them senseless towards social suffering. Social love is “loving and generous action not as a minor altruistic value, but as an affective, moral, and political strategy of collective survival, to counteract the psychic isolation that engenders hatred, resentment, and revenge”. (Martins, 2019, p. 18) In other fieldworks, I was guided by the saliency of both paradigms: the gift paradigm and the agape, listening to all the stakeholders of any social phenomenon I am studying. And then, of course, it is a question of normativity, of how you enter into dialogue with them. And here my reflexivity about my committed sociology has guided me.

III. Looking for more convivial neighborliness

The Syrian crisis has caused one of the greatest episodes of forced displacement since World War II and some of the densest refugee-hosting situations in modern history. Lebanon has hosted more than a million Syrian refugees. Based on a large survey of Syrian refugees’ households of localities in Beqaa and North of Lebanon in 2016-2017 that I analyzed³, the most salient three domains of precariousness in the situation of Syrian refugees are education, health and early marriage. These will have a tremendous impact on the future of Syrian refugees. In addition, most of our sample express many challenges related to the hostile environment either by the host community or by the state regulations and Lebanese media. One aspect of this survey deserves discussion here.

The survey shows that many refugee households moved from the city of Aarsal (in Bakaa valley) to camps (which are rather informal tented areas). The declared reasons why these refugee households moved is mainly for financial reasons, whereas a quarter cited security and safety reasons. The in-depth interviews⁴ brought many insights into these reasons and show that what was expressed as “financial reasons” is not really about finances. Let us pull some narratives from my interviewees.

³ The Survey is composed of face-to-face interviews of 1614 households and 6199 individuals.

⁴ I conducted in 2021 10 in-depth interviews from the survey sample, and I did five interviews with social workers working in NGOs operating there. As we noticed from the survey that around 60% of the households had moved from previous locations in Lebanon.

S H, a refugee who moved from the city of Arsal to a tented camp: “before I leave my apartment in Arsal, every morning when my two kids went to school, I felt lonely, I tried many times to talk to my neighbors... I felt they replied by charity ... No interest in interactions ... My wife felt the same with her neighbors... [In the meantime,] I had visited a friend in a tented settlement, I found him less depressed than me. Through him, I and my wife and the two kids found many neighbors there that become friends later on... In addition, I like the charitable association there. They come providing food and other things to my friend with a smile. I felt conviviality [*mu'alafa*]. I decided to move there, even knowing the problem of muddy streets and privacy in the camp”.

Another refugee who also moved to this camp did the same observation and added some comments related to religion: “... This association’ employees never talked about religion but I do remember once, he came to deliver food and found us praying collectively so he joined us... I like when they organize collective iftar [ramadan breakfast] once a week during Ramadan ... and celebrate Prophet’s birthday with all camp dwellers and their kids... I felt safer with these people... this is why, I move to this camp”.

I asked a psychologist who works with one of the organizations, she argued that “Anxiety and the fear of the future in survival in Lebanese environment are a major psychological problem for Syrian refugees... The more collective activities are created in camp the more alleviate anxiety... Associations are excellent in providing such activities... our therapy is often by sending a social worker to spend time with critical cases. They are trained to be nice and smiley and patient. They come always with a gift such as fruits, sweets (cake or chocolate), toys for kids. We found the effect of giving gifts miraculous... We leaned hard that in crowded camps people may feel lonely and we need to address this”. When I asked one female refugee about this last point, she confirmed that social workers often come with gifts and reported that she gives back by offering food or a small, embroidered canvas.

From these excerpts, it’s worth noting that not kin nor friendship were important but neighborliness. More generally, care, love, smiles and hospitality look like an efficient remedy to the challenging Lebanese environment, something that is often missed in the bureaucratized humanitarian agents’ behavior. In the case of Beqaa-based Syrian refugees, Faith-Based organizations (FBOs) look so instrumental in addressing agape, care, neighborliness and conviviality needs. Of course, these (often local) associations cannot be operating without the major role of UNHCR or other international and regional “secular” donors, but they understood that they can provide refugees with convivial practices that can convince some to leave their concrete rooms to a tented shelter but in a convivial setting. Many studies about the conviviality of the Palestinian refugee camps and how refugees prefer to live in their setting more than off camps. (Hanafi, 2010; Knudsen & Hanafi, 2011; Petti et al., 2013)⁵

As this chapter showed, some of the Syrian refugees preferred to move from an urban setting to a camp setting as it can ensure what Birgit Schäßler and Chafika Ouail called [good] “neighborliness” (*aljawar*). The camp’s conviviality ensures better neighborliness

⁵ In the case of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, this attitude has changed as soon as the camps became materially so miserable.

than an urban setting. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, both material and psychological needs are important in different degrees, yet this chapter tries to argue that this pyramid should be problematized, as it is completely egocentric insofar as it considers the esteem that a person seeks is primarily aimed at satisfying his or her own psychological well-being and that self-actualization only makes sense for oneself. (See the criticism of (Etzioni, 2017) Understanding the needs of Syrian refugees and their moral struggle to live in a convivial environment, calls for increased collaboration between social and moral philosophy and the social sciences. (Hanafi, 2021) Marcel Mauss' economy of the gift of giving, receiving, and giving back and the logic of social love are particularly important for the population of refugees.

Religion, how it is perceived by some of them, is important because of its potentiality to cultivate social love, but also gift-giving practices as an anthropological foundation innate within social relationships. This form of exchange is a complex of altruistic and self-interested behavior that was obligated and obligating as much as it was free and voluntary. (Gauthier, 2020) In this chapter, I am pushing an anti-utilitarian hypothesis, where the desire of human beings to be valued as givers, means that our relationships are not solely based on interest alone, but on pleasure, moral duty, and spontaneity. (Caillé 2008) Social science historically focused on the black side of religion and developed the concept of group-focused enmity. More generally, religion has played some role in helping migrants in their new home or host society to welcoming migrants. About the last role, the majority's religion may be a source of xenophobia or xenophobia. A recent research in Germany (Streib & Klein, 2018) goes beyond the pathogenic model that accounts for outcomes such as xenophobia, Islamophobia and other forms of (inter-religious) prejudice, toward a salutogenic model that entails xenophilia: the wisdom, creativity and inspiration that emerges from the encounter with the stranger and the strange religion. More strikingly, the results clearly demonstrate that the *centrality of religiosity* has positive effects on the welcoming of war refugees, the appreciation of religious diversity, and the view that Islam fits in the Western world. (Streib et al. 2018, 372) Forthcoming research also confirms the importance of the role of the German FBOs, particularly Caritas, in the absorption of Syrian refugees there. (Mansour & Pappe, forthcoming)

Let me be clear here while I think religion as spirituality, institution, and ideology produced contradictory effects within a given time-space frame, I seek here to show a face that was neglected by the social sciences. In Europe, Pope Francis (March 24, 2016) performed an annual Easter season ritual, kneeling in front of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian refugees and washing and kissing their feet at a shelter in Castelnuovo di Porto (Italy)⁶, he asked each Christian family to receive refugees. This strong message was very contested by the right-wing party in Poland whose supporters have a high religiosity. This shows the complexity of the religious message: religion and religiosity cannot be understood without connecting them to the other societal factors. They can be bridge or barrier to the social integration. There are different types of gifts fostered by religion/humanism from givers in host societies to refugees: free gifts or reciprocal exchanged gifts. Because of this bond between giver and gift, Marcel Maus insists that the act of giving creates a social bond with an

⁶ <https://qz.com/647532/photos-pope-francis-washes-and-kisses-the-feet-of-muslim-hindu-and-christian-refugees/>.

obligation to reciprocate on the part of the recipient. The better the behavior of refugees and the more integrated they are, the more they reciprocate the advanced gift. In other words, religion/humanism may generate compassion and agape among individuals in host societies toward refugees, but the social bonds need effort in everyday behavior that refugees need to reciprocate.

Our refugees and these social workers in the local associations clearly understand the ultimate moral aim as Paul Ricoeur formulates as follows: "The aim of a good life with and for others in just institutions," i.e., an ethic of love, hospitality, care, and solicitude with and for others within the framework of institutions that ensure and reinforce social justice. This position does not imply ignoring the historical, social, and cultural preconditions of the good life and assuming that the Aristotelian good life is possible without the appropriate structures that social welfare can provide.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue in favor of a sociology that is sensitive to intersubjectivity and subjectivity of social actors as a relational process, in the way Elena Pulcini did. The notion of care, for instance, was conceived by Pulcini (2021) like the gift, simultaneously involves autonomy and dependency, freedom and vulnerability. This is sociology that embarrasses ethics and particularly ethics of social suffering. Suffering, like pain and love, is transmittable from one subject to another but also from subject to a researcher. (Pesquet, 2021; Perdigon, 2010) This sociology is sensitive not only to how people ethically justify their actions, but how sociologists and anthropologists could take seriously this suffering and approach it as a hermeneutics of presence. (Cataldi, 2020)

Because of his sensitivity to the dominated people and their suffering, Michael Burawoy (2005) has often insisted that the task of sociology is to stand with civil society against both state and market dominations. This is absolutely crucial, but I would add to this task another two:

The first one is to extend the sociological mission beyond civil society, to the civil sphere in the sense of Jeffrey Alexander (2008). He reminds us that civil society is only one sphere among others within a broader social system, in which the family, religious groups, scientific and corporate associations, and geographically bounded regional communities, should be incorporated, as they all produce goods and organize their social relations according to different ideals and constraints. This extension of our mission is very important if we are to keep looking at ourselves as guardians of this civil sphere and of liberal democratic ideals.

The second task is to mediate with different noncivil spheres, engage in dialogue with them, and demand certain kinds of reforms. What are the means of mediation? It is carried out basically through providing cognitive validity claims and normative argumentation to the public sphere. But is this sufficient? We know from the brilliant work of Hans Joas (2021) on values, that we need to account for value commitments of social actors – and this includes emotions. Which means it is not enough to simply support those who have liberal democratic

ideals. We also need to listen attentively to those who refuse to embrace, partially or totally, these ideals. Let us remember the excellent work of Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) about rural white Americans in Louisiana. They have turned into Trump supporters, expressing their discontent vis-a-vis globalization and their vision of social inequalities. Before judging them, let us listen, for example, to those who have fears of Syrian and African migrants coming to Europe. With our normative methods, presuppositions, and explicit commitments, I would like here to emphasize our capacity of dialoguing and mediating with noncivil spheres. Against a radical critical social theory, I called in this chapter for a situated critical one. One that, while criticizing powers, is also able to simultaneously open up a dialogue with the very forces it critiques.

As we talk about ethics, in the Arab region, where we have immense religiosity, religion is one of the sources of ethics. This is the big elephant in the room that is deliberately or unconsciously unseen in the sociological literature, unless when it is related to political violence. This is not only the case in the Arab world, the Middle East, Israel, but also religion is becoming more and more important in Latin America (e.g., the new Pentecostalism in Brazil) and beyond. So, I think we need, as sociologists, to be modest and to think about how to acknowledge that there are different elite formations which include religious people who don't converse with anti-clericalist social scientists.

We need a sociology that always thinks about how to dialogue with people and how to acknowledge people's cultural heritage, in order to sensitize people to ethics and moral philosophy. I call thus for connecting our social science to moral philosophy. Needless to say, many of our thoughts (take for instance the Anthony Giddens's celebration of new intimate relationship of our late modernity) become self-fulfillment prophesies. This is why we have a social responsibility (in addition of intellectual integrity) of what we are talking about.

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