Network Society

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Preface

Paolo de Nardis

What is the network society?

Roberta Iannone provides a complete and articulated definition of the concept of “network” that renders, in a clear and effective way, the descriptive content of the analysis, giving us at the same time a key to depict the contemporaneity. This perspective is enlarged and enriched by the interesting contributions of Cristina Marchetti, Laura Mariottini, Emanuele Ferreri and Manuela Ciprì.

This approach constitutes a way to avoid the traps inherent in an ontological method and to base the analysis of this relevant theme starting from an assumption: the “Network” can be realistically depicted as an element able to shape and define the contemporaneity.

Since last century 70s, I have always considered very interesting the attainment of this conception. It undoubtedly originates from functionalism, but overcomes it by including a strong axiological element based on reciprocity, collaboration and trust.

From a modern epistemological point of view, in my opinion, it is quite important to try to avoid the ontological approach in order to consider the concept of network society merely as a concept: an instrument to explain reality, rather than an instrument pretending to objectify an analytical category presenting it as the exact reality.

So we can say the network society is a powerful instrument to analyze contemporaneity – as demonstrated by the interesting works of the present research –, but without the pretension to exhaust all the ranges of the possible interpretations of reality. This should be read by making use of a large set of concepts, none of which really exclusive. All instru-
ments then must be checked according to the principles of verifiability, replicability and publicity of the results.

That said, the heuristic fecundity of the proposed concept could not be denied because deeply investigated and analytically founded on a large number of sociological literature on the subject, produced during the last quarter of a century both in Italy and abroad. The main contribution of this literature led to a fascinating and important idea: contemporary western societies, developing along the late segment of modernity, do not govern themselves according to the traditional scheme of the state-civil society (of political and business world) and according the mono-regulative top-down model, but they organize themselves according to a horizontal network.

Under this perspective, the horizontal self-organization of the societies plays a role of substitution and supplementation of public powers, whenever they are weak or completely missing in their essential functions of distribution, regulation and control.

This is a conception that gave birth to the “neo-corporative” conception of the social sphere and that redefines it in a neo-functionalist and neo-morphological way. The old social pyramid squeezes and molding a horizontal-retticular society, with the consequent fall of old schemes and hierarchies.

The theoretical sources of this neo-pluralistic morphology of the social sphere, from both an ideological and cultural point of view, are part of the present research that, in identifying the sociological conscience implicit in this interpretation of reality, aims at redefining a snapshot of social life, on the grounds of the major cultural currents. Yet, the latter does not seem always conformed to such a geometrical approach, with quite clear returns to the past models, falling in the misleading vision of the so called autumn of the State and of its regulative function.

If we refer to the pluralistic approach in sociology, we find one of the most important author, Gurvitch. In his work, the organization factor of a social group has a fundamental role for the capacity of generating norms. Forerunners of this ap-
proach could be philosophers and law theorists, like Duguit, Van Gierke, Hariou and others. Moreover, along the lines of a sociological research on education, considered in connection with the organization factor, we can examine some important positions by Sellznick, a sociologist of law, who came from the sociology of organization. Here, it is possible to recognize the same pluralistic approach to the study the late-modern society, closely related to an explicit need to explain how complex organizations can be a vehicle to education and of expectations on justice and law.

In this case, the endo-organisative perspective makes room to a pluralism defined according to the principles of justice of an industrial kind that amounts to the reality of a complex organization.

Hence, reshaping the old vision of the classic pluralism with this new conceptual model, considering pluralism as a system, it seems we can affirm that beyond the absorption of values and norms coming from political power, it is at work the same mechanism of absorption emanating from the centers of economic and social power and from the media.

In this perspective, pluralism meets functionalism, giving birth to a way of modeling characterized by a functionalist neo-morphology of the social sphere.

On the light of these contributions and of the neo-pluralistic framework developed by these authors, in this research the aim is to go “further”, by applying a relational lens (rather than a proper paradigm) to the study of the network. The pluralistic fulcrum of the sociology of law and organization needs to be reconsidered and integrated, rather than contradicted, according to the most recent theoretical achievements on the relational sociology. In this sense, the aim of this work is to investigate the networks and their properties in terms of social capital and governance, with the goal to reconstruct the ideal conscience of the new reticular society in its shades and lights.

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