

RELIGION, VALUES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

Each individual is guided by values that determine his behaviour. Many authors agree on a cognitive dimension of values.

Together with values, interests and social habits have also an outstanding influence on individual action.

A recurrent distinction concerns the difference between applied values and final values, therefore between values concerning individual practices and values which represent real goals to achieve.

Another widespread distinction is between universal values and particular values. The discussion tends to slip onto a juxtaposition of universal values and universal rights, which is to say between human values and human rights.

The issue of universal values is not secondary. As human beings are variable, values as well have a variable stability. In general, it is impossible for a value to change without having other important mutations around it.

There is also religious tolerance as a further value. Values do not seem to be an “all occasion recipe”.

It is not always easy to discern secular values from religious values. The main issue regards those who hold religious and secular values. If religious values are presumably conserved by churches, denominations, confessional organizations, for secular values the State is usually considered to be the main holder.

Social values seem to be required by unavoidable authorities that force individuals to respect them.

Global values and local values can be in conflict, especially when the same individual has to play a number of different rules. It is clear enough now that some “universal” values (nowadays called global values) are actually representative of one social class only, which is the bourgeoisie.

One last individual interpretation of values cannot be forgotten. The idea of value totally vanishing is not convincing, however.

Finally, the very value which is rather difficult to abandon is still the value of existence, even if there are always exceptions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Values and social action

Human action is motivated by many factors. Among these, values have an outstanding role. Each individual is guided by fundamental values that determine his behaviour. Such values are deeply rooted and abstract ideas, even if they are susceptible of empirical validation, and can be considered “objective”.

Values are mostly important, because they are regarded as belonging to a superior level. They cannot be replaced so easily; they are not negotiable, and they are at the same time highly desirable. That is the reason why individuals are prepared to face sacrifices and all sorts of difficulties for them.

From the consideration given to a certain value, we derive every practical element. The evaluation of good and evil, right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate is based on the values organization of each individual. Values can be either a starting point or a target to pursue, an idea to be implemented, a goal to achieve. Therefore, we might say that values always inspire human behaviour either as a goal or as an original inspiration.

If taken as such, values may also become normative rules, some sort of validation criteria. They guide individual choices; therefore they interact with interests and pre-

existent habits (in fact, values are not immune from those interests and habits that are capable of consolidating them, instead of choosing among a wide variety of options or of interests and habits).

However, it is important to maintain a distinction between values as ideals (orienting individual life) and values as real practices (aiming at a certain goal), at least for descriptive reasons. As a matter of fact, both meanings are present in empirical situations, where it is usually impossible to establish which is *prius* and which is *post*. Neither values as ideals nor values as practice are mutually identifiable. To be more precise, we cannot analyse the situation only from a behaviouristic point of view. We will have to go further and consider a wider variety of knowledge, made up by a network of interactions between individuals and society, subjectivity and social structure, attitudes and behaviours.

Nowadays, the ideal construction of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920), which tend to stretch the concept of value to its maximum extent, appears no more valid. Values were considered to be full of meaning, in opposition to attitudes. Thus values would assume a social relevance, whereas attitudes were considered the area of individual behaviour even when acted in a context representing the same values.

At the present time it seems more likely to assume a connection between inspiring value and practical action, that is to say, between value and choice (or refusal to choose). In other words, the implementation of a value, that is to say the preferred behaviour, involves the necessity for a distinction between what is desirable from what is possible, thus reasonably considering actual contingencies.

1.2 Values as cognitive dimension

Many authors agree on a cognitive dimension of values. At first, we have to remember the work of Kluckhohn (1951) who, besides the cognitive dimension (related to judgment, either positive or negative, and to facts and behaviours) includes an affective dimension (regarding acceptance or refusal of those conforming or not conforming to values) and a selective dimension (that highlights the solid influence that values exert on human behaviour). This third dimension remains at an abstract and general level, especially in the case of reference values, but it becomes a normative rule in the case of particular and contextualized actions (Sciolla 1998:751).

An ethical and political dimension can be added to the cognitive one. As such it is more closely connected with structures and organized institutions. It is therefore necessary, in order to strengthen individual positions, to connect them with shared values, in order to avoid explaining each time - on an interpersonal level - attitudes and preferences, habits and behaviours, criteria and proceedings. As a matter of fact, institutions do not often sufficiently support individuals in facing such responsibility; therefore, it is quite usual that a single social actor decides personally to explain, to offer motivations and reasons for some personal evaluations. In this way, he would face a harsh plurality of different values and positions, a clear opposition of points of view, of operational choices and evaluations. The relation between subject and society is also discussed, as well as the connection between citizen and state, social actor and social-political and economical

context.

In such situations the debate on the “crisis” or “end of values” emerges. In fact, there is a tendency in any society towards disorganization, giving up usual cohesion forms, and choosing easy solutions even if not democratic, in the sense that they are not legitimized by an adequate consensus. If the frame of malaise is complicated by a high massification of communication processes and socio-political influence, a utilitarian kind of action prevails over the communicative one, according to Habermas, (Habermas 1984; 1987). Values become therefore obsolete and meaningless.

In the end, individuals work in a complete vacuum of values or in a context that does not take them into consideration, because values, even if commonly shared, have to come out as precise, not negotiable decisions. The possibility to establish criteria, in this connection, is quite hard, because the risk is to give remedies that are not feasible in practical situations.

At this point, among the number of possibilities, one way has to be chosen, either facing the risk of undesirable side effects or clearly going against ideal values.

On the other hand, modernity and post-modernity are compatible with such outcome also: one can go back and start all over again.

Sociologists, and especially sociologists of knowledge, have no doubt about the cognitive content of values. The typically Weberian operation consists in giving sense to every single aspect of reality. Therefore values and meanings either seem to coincide or to be one over the other, in any case they have a very close connection.

Identity is another *Leitmotiv* of the phenomenology of values. It is through values that people identify themselves in a movement, a religion, a political party or an ideological faith. At the same time, historical and sociological dynamics are such that individual characters are taken into consideration, together with a proportional development of freedom and autonomy.

One last constant is the guiding role assumed by social structures, political and law institutions, and collective organizations for social actors. Legitimation and identification processes consolidate a feeling of belonging through rational and affective motivations. The centre of such consolidation of social relations consists in some basic values that specify the feeling of community participation.

Modern and post-modern have destroyed the presumed certainties of the past and have opened the way to “alternative” values, that is to say less predictable and flexible (in contrast with the solidity of traditional values). However, these new values allow unusual research for alternative knowledge based on different certainties, as truth becomes a process to build instead of a word to believe in.

A wide variety of possible outcomes for the research of new non-traditional values is presented, these values are no more vertically transmitted by previous generations, thanks also to consolidated habits, that are the bastion of any pre-existent value.

Contemporary societies have a very original challenge to face: they have to find new and reliable paths through grounded reasoning and solid motivations. This calls for refined knowledge and adequate experiences. Easy way out are not allowed in such a diversified society. The very ways of acting of the social actor are submitted to analysis and they produce new terms of confrontation in order to stimulate a more and more complex, problematic and articulated reflexivity, interacting with values, knowledge and social practices.

2. Values, interests, habits

Together with values, interests and social habits have also an outstanding influence on social and individual action. However, values have a particular position within the sociological dynamics that promotes and funds them. From the very beginning of its life, the individual faces a number of pre-existent social elements, such as: his parents (but sometimes only the mother), his relatives (sisters and brothers, but also more distant relatives), the citizens of the same country (normally speaking the same language or the same dialect), his neighbours (houses or jointly-owned building). All these people surround the newborn, not only physically, but with their way of doing, speaking and acting also. This is how the very first and fundamental communication begins: the newborn receives a variety of messages, without homogeneity, but to a certain extent convergent because they all belong to the same cultural pattern. That is to say, a shared opinion about life, about how to face it and about the convenient social behaviour. Finally, even before he is officially registered, the new social subject is *de facto* an “object”: object of attentions and looking after, affection and worries, with all the content of meanings, emotions and signs to transmit.

Actually, those who worry after the newborn have experienced themselves the same situation, when they were newborn. That is how ideas, habits, attitudes and behaviours are transmitted from generation to generations, building up some sort of continuous chain (except from rare cases). There is no other explanation for such a continuity, that is too often taken for granted, and therefore not quite considered in its essential influence on reality, and in this way on a certain *Weltanschauung*. This is taken as a natural event.

The world “naturally” considered is accepted as it is, it does not represent a problem, and it enters daily life becoming as a habit where nothing is to be discussed. A typical *Leitmotiv* is “that’s the way it goes”. Therefore, mothers usually feed their newborns or take care of them, as well as fathers mostly take care of material and economic goods for a living, and elderly people provide a link with the past, representing the continuity of existence. However, we must also consider that values fit in an already fixed frame. History has shown how to accumulate experiences, institutional organizations have developed and a solid knowledge has been acquired. This is the place where the new social actor is deemed to live and develop.

Spring water follows the grove traced by former water passing by, as well as socializing individuals follow an already signed path, a sort of compulsory way with no possibilities of choosing other alternatives – especially in the very beginning. Only later, with the years, there will be the possibility of following a non regular path. Only

when the age of reason and full autonomy are reached, unusual paths, original ways and unpredictable solutions will be made possible.

Constitution of interests precedes any proposals of values. Interests of newborns, besides some primary needs which are common to all newborn children, do not seem to be innate. Essential needs as self-preservation, protection, maintenance, search for pleasure, capacity of avoiding any unpleasant situation and especially physical arm (or affective arm, linked to the loss of something beloved or something judged essential for living). As a matter of fact, values proposed by external stimuli are likely to work upon already defined interests, or well known for the destination subject.

The same thing can be said for some social deep rooted habits. They become a sort of *habitus* for all subjects who tend to conform to existing attitudes, or make use of common sense solutions in order to be accepted by others. Finally, even before their own values, social actors have to face external habits, likely to become their own and with the same basic interests, that will be of great influence when they will have to make a choice.

According to Ronald Inglehart, who has been developing systematic empirical research on values in America and Europe, abilities and structures are to be considered the prior independent variables that influence social change. When Inglehart talks of “abilities” (1977: *Introduction*), he refers to the tendency of people to be interested in politics, to understand it and to participate in it, as an attitude of “challenge to *élites*”. When referring to structures, Inglehart means economical, social and political structures of the countries of his comparative studies: France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Denmark, Ireland and Great Britain.

The same point of view is used by Inglehart (1997) also in the following research on 43 countries. This research is focused more precisely on modern and post-modern processes, which have highlighted a greater attention on quality of life and self realization, together with more individualization. The new finding is reflexivity that induces to take the distance from absolute values and directs them within a more subjective context, based on individual preferences.

This would take place with a degree of uncertainties, hesitations and inconveniences, as well as long waiting, contradictions and disappointments. However, the final outcome elaborated by the individual would be the production of new rules, a law more coherent with the problems of social actors, especially the young ones.

As such, the primary socialization process remains in the background, while the secondary socialization process intervenes in a more decisive way. It enhances a horizontal movement, among generations, ready to substitute the former one, characterized by an inter-generational profile (from older generations to younger ones). The sociological consequence of this dynamic change is a “polytheism of values”, as well as of reasons and motivations of values, therefore of all the actions deriving from it, as Bontempi underlined (2001).

Within the diversity of considered variables, there is an essential agreement about the

sociological discourse applied to values, because empirical findings confirm the interpretation that we have here offered. While Inglehart mainly emphasized the role of education, we here suggest a preference for the phase that precedes school socialization. The secondary phase seems obviously less important than the primary one of the family socialization, which also have a long lasting period of introduction to life, a sort of initiation that cannot be ignored.

3. Human values

Values can be independent variables, those at the origin of interests, habits, identity processes and social solidarity, but they can also be dependent variables, those deriving from other social factors. In both cases values have a central position. On a general consideration we might call them human values because they are linked with human subjects and their fundamental tendencies, and with their fundamental beliefs and evaluations, oriented to assume decisions.

The variety of human values is very wide. It is almost all-pervading. It embraces many fields: from knowledge to communication, from law to ethic and moral, from policy to economics, from education to medical and sanitary, from religion to secular, from daily life to general living.

A recurrent distinction concerns the difference between applied values and final values (Rokeac 1973), therefore between values concerning individual practices and values which represent real goals to achieve.

Another distinction quite widespread is between universal values and particular values. But the discussion is still open on which are the universal values. In particular the discussion tends to slip onto a juxtaposition of universal values and universal rights, which is to say between human values and human rights.

During the last Century the development of human rights has kept pace with the “scientification” process. An important increase of social and practical relevance of scientific and academic studies. Especially by the end of World War II, authority and influence of scientific research have been taken more into consideration, particularly in medical, economical and management fields (Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, Schofer 2003).

However, democratization dynamics, although growing, have not reached the level of human rights at the top of the scale. They passed from an interest with a few nations and organizations at the beginning of the 20th Century, to a number of more than three hundred organizations and nations directly involved by the end of the same Century. In this regard, the role of the so called high education has been decisive (Schofer, Meyer 2005).

We can say that human rights widespread have become a world event. Therefore, it represents a significant modality in the more recent globalization processes.

Problems of equality and exclusion, for instance, are a constant issue at the present time. They are a must in the international socio-political agenda. By now, the lack of

participation of some groups – especially minorities, rural and of a low social-economical *status* – to higher education levels represents a strong call for attention and sensitivity for governments and international organizations.

Due to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights published by the United Nations, a strong interest for equality among individuals and for democratic participation values has been increasing for years. We shall now ask: “Are there other universal human rights?”

As a matter of fact, what makes universal a human right is not a commonly shared opinion among nations. At most the Declaration can represent a valid reference, even if it has not been signed and fostered by all nations worldwide.

In absence of a commonly shared opinion among sociologists about the existence of values, sociological research can only give empirical surveys about the presence of average widespread values in each culture or socio-geographical and political context. Only a worldwide survey, using an appropriate and significant methodology, based on a comparative interpretation could provide general indications about the existence of meta-values, that is to say, values empirically found in various society that, when compared on a larger scale, may be indicated as universal.

In other words, values such as freedom, democracy, respect for individuals, “sacredness” of life, equality among individuals and others are not necessarily to be considered universal, just because they are prevailing in a certain part of the world. There are situations and conditions of various natures in the world which do not recognize such values, thus clearly showing that only a certain part of the world sustains and claims them as universal.

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Biographical Sketch

Roberto Cipriani was born in Rovato (Brescia), Italy, on March 2nd, 1945. He has a degree in Literature (1968), in Philosophy (1971) and a specialization in Social Sciences (1972) from the University of Rome "La Sapienza". His fields of study are: sociology of religion and qualitative methodology.

He has been Full Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University "D'Annunzio" in Chieti, Visiting Scholar at the University of Berkeley, Lecturer in biographical methodology at the University of San Paulo in Brazil, Lecturer in Political Science at the Laval University in Québec, Visiting Professor and Lecturer in qualitative methodology at the Faculty of Social Science, University of Buenos Aires. He is Full Professor of Sociology at the University of Rome 3. His main publications are *The Sociology of Religion. An Historical Introduction*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000, translated into Spanish, Portuguese, French, Chinese; "Religions sans frontières?" *Present and Future Trends of Migration, Culture, and Communication*, Roma: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri-Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'Editoria, 1994; *The Sociology of Legitimation*, London: Sage Publications, 1987 (*Current Sociology*, vol. 35, Summer 1987). He is author of more than 600 publications, and 40 books (as author, co-author, main editor, in collaboration, or as editor) in Italian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, and Russian.

Current and previous research interests concern diffused religion, popular religiosity, life histories, computer-assisted qualitative analysis, sociological theory, visual sociology. His empirical and theoretical research has been done in several countries (Mexico, Greece, Spain, France, England, United States and

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Prof. Cipriani has been member of the Executive Committees of AISLF (International Association of French Speaking Sociologist), ISA (International Sociological Association, as Editor-in-Chief of ISA official journal, *International Sociology*), IIS (International Institute of Sociology), ISSR (International Society for the Sociology of Religion). He is the President of the Italian Sociological Association.

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