

Theorising Sociology in the Digital Society

edited by
Linda Lombi and Michele Marzulli

preface by
Deborah Lupton



Laboratorio Sociologico

FRANCOANGELI

Teoria,
Epistemologia,
Metodo

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Preface

Deborah Lupton *

I write this foreword as the world is reeling from the election of Donald Trump as President-Elect of the USA. In trying to make sense of how Trump was supported by some many American, analyse have strong implicated the role of the digital media. Such elements as the spread of fake news on social media sites, particularly Facebook, the role played by ‘filter bubbles’ in protecting people from views and news that challenge their political opinions, and Trump’s bypassing of legacy media outlets by using Twitter, for example, have all been cited as possible contributors to his victory. While it will take the careful work of many scholarly media analysts to uncover the elaborate elements of the Trump victory, one thing is already certain. There is no doubt that digital media play an important role in contributing to viewpoints and sharing information, accurate, distorted, and simply just made up out of thin air to achieve clicks, likes and shares.

The case of the contribution of the digital media to Trump’s election to President is simply one example of their influence in contemporary western societies. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, most areas of everyday life have been changed in some way by the introduction of digital technologies: especially the internet and the World Wide Web, and more recently, mobile devices, social media, Wi-Fi and cloud computing. These technologies and other digital devices and software, have changed the way friends, families and work colleagues communicate with each other, the workplace, healthcare delivery, record-keeping, photography, the ways in which people listen to music and watch television and films... just to name some aspects of everyday lives. More than ever, sociologists need to come to grips with how people are using digital technologies and what their impact are on social relations, concepts of selfhood, embodiment social

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structures and social institutions – all the key preoccupations of sociology. This task requires the efforts of sociologists from all over the globe. Indeed, sociologists who comment on digital technologies from their own corner of the world can provide a much needed counter-point to the voices that are usually heard. This includes not only those from non-English-speaking countries, but sociologists in the Global South who are writing from socioeconomically as well as geographically marginalised positions.

This volume focuses on taking up classic sociological theory and applying it to contemporary digital society. In so doing, the work of many sociological theorists who thus far have not been incorporated in digital sociology is canvassed. The contributors, originally writing in Italian, are all from outside the usual Anglophone sociological established literature. They offer a unique perspective in their chapters, incorporating European sociological theorists whose work has not been fully considered in many areas of digital sociology. This volume, therefore, has much to offer Anglophone as well as continental European sociology, providing fresh perspectives. Taking a topical approach, the chapters outline how classic sociological theory can engender new insights into such areas as the family, religion, community, work, social change, education, health and identity. Anglophone readers will encounter some theorists they may find unfamiliar. This will serve to open up many theoretical spaces, allowing sociology in the English-speaking world to move beyond the well-known continental theorists that have provided so much depth to traditional sociological research and theorising. In these pages, other, less well-known theorists also receive attention and their work taken up to demonstrate its relevance to modern sociology, and in particular, digital sociology.

Returning to the question of how Trump achieved his ascendancy, it is evident that more than ever before, sociological research into digital technologies is vital. All elements of sociological inquiry need to incorporate at least some attention to the role of the digital. This volume is an addition to a growing international literature in which digital sociology is championed, practised and in the process, elaborated and rendered ever more important to contemporary sociology as a discipline. Far from the end of sociological theorising, digital technologies stimulate us to reconsider the classics and take up new perspectives as well.

Introduction

Linda Lombi and Michele Marzulli

For some years now, connecting to the web has no longer meant just sitting down at a computer. It includes the use of technological accessories and gadgets, including wearables, which accompany us during every moment of our day. Utilising new mobile devices and the platforms typical of the Web 2.0 era (social networks, blogs, forum...), we not only access the wealth of information on the net, we also communicate with other social actors in public or private forms, creating digital communities committed to redefining symbolic universes and renewing ways of acting on a daily basis. The connection itself represents a new medium which allows a linking of network structures connecting between themselves with yet other structures (Cipolla, 2015).

While the first phase (Web 1.0, the static or informational web) was characterised by the staticity of the information, the exclusivity of the consultation and the primacy of the documents (the Internet *showcase*), Web 2.0, the dynamic or interactive web, stands out for the dynamic nature of the content and the ability of the user to go beyond simple consultation, contributing in fact to the creation of content. This stage was concurrent with an exponential increase in data offered, storage forms and connection possibilities. A staggering amount of information has become available, giving rise to the so-called *data deluge* (Halford *et al.*, 2012), related primarily to multimedia data published by users. This user-generated content reflects a society that is increasingly geared to telling, sharing and participating, where users became *prosumers*, simultaneously producers and consumers of information (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010).

The role played by digital technologies in the daily life of individuals and organisations is increasing constantly, such that social life itself is ever more definable as digital (Lupton, 2015). As shown by anthropological studies, the objects we use in our daily lives have much to do with how we relate to the world (Douglas, Isherwood, 1996). These tools also possess a cognitive dimension (perhaps in the form of “tacit knowledge”) that cannot be simply ignored. It is no coincidence that one of the most popular

categories of programmes and applications available on the net is that dedicated to the personal body grooming, care and health (for example, among the apps in the Apple Store) (Maturo, Setiffi, 2016). Nor is it a coincidence that, instead of being sterile and disconnected from social relations, as was predicted some years ago, the net has become a privileged location for the representation of the body and for what we call *social networks*. Places where everyday language takes on very different nuances and shades (one only needs to think of the word ‘friends’ on Facebook where it has assumed a very different meaning to that which it bore only ten years ago), places where they speak a new language defined by some *asfolksonomy*, a neologism based on the fusion of the words *folk* and *tassonomy* (folk taxonomies) to indicate the practice of social network users of creating words based on individual criteria (Halford *et al.*, 2012). Communication is becoming ever faster, more succinct and inevitably paratactic and axiomatic in nature.

Search functions, through the evolution of the web (and in particular thanks to the emergence of the semantic web), have been caught up in a revolution that is allowing particular traits in e-methods to emerge (Corposanto, Lombi, 2014; Rogers, 2013; Hine, 2015). Big Data is rapidly arousing strong interest among sociologists engaged in the development of computational social science. The purpose is to capture, in real time or near real time, the data which users contribute to the net in order to yield a snapshot of the object of study (Lombi, 2015). Referring to these processes, scholars have spoken of a social life of digital methods whereby e-methods are modelled by the social world as well as being modellers of the social world. (Ruppert *et al.*, 2013; Beer & Burrows, 2013; Savage, 2013).

In view of this, sociologists now reflect on the role of the discipline when faced with such an ambivalent scenario (Lupton, 2015). On the one hand, in Italy but not only, sociology is assuming an increasingly marginal role in public debate. Yet it is also constantly referred to (even if not always consciously) when a demand is made for an intervention in public issues (Burawoy, 2005) related to social relationships, to new forms of socializing, risks and “deviance”, wellness and health or in connection with the so-called process of disintermediation, to name just a few areas. And all this because in a new social configuration, one which may also be described as the web society, information is already awareness that becomes action, that is to say, a knowledge that is also a practice (Cipolla, 2013).

The changes are of such magnitude that some authors have spoken of the end of sociological theory (Kitchin, 2014) or consider the keywords of sociology to be zombie concepts (Back, Puwar, 2012). Should we really speak of the “death” of sociology as theorized until now or is it instead time to redefine key concepts?

This editorial initiative is driven by an attempt to understand whether these concepts are changing, how this change is occurring, and what words define this new social configuration. The very definitions of society or community, identity or culture seem to be under constant strain, and authors are often forced to resort to adjectives, to ‘bloating’ expressions, when using these sociological keywords in an effort to adequately reflect how their meaning has evolved since the century in which they were coined.

The goal of this volume is, therefore, to summarize, on the theoretical level, several sociological issues in the light of the transformations caused by the advent of the web society. Through a structuring of lemmas, each author has been asked to reconsider “classic” theories in view of any changes that have occurred, and to outline possible future prospects.

The editors of the volume are aware that the lemmas identified are not exhaustive in relation to sociology as a discipline. Many of the cases merited a more thorough examination, and several terms could not be included in the volume. However, we believe that this contribution, the work of young Italian scholars, may nonetheless contribute to a renewal of the language of the discipline and to draw attention to the problems involved in using terms which were applied very differently before the advent of the web society.

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1. Community

Michele Marzulli

Introduction

A preliminary and necessarily generic attempt to define community is as a social group composed of people who interact with each other (as friends or neighbours), living in a limited territory (a rural village or a city suburb) and, last but not least, whose members share a common cultural trait such as values, beliefs, or behaviours (Neal, 2012).

The notion of community, however, has a long tradition in sociology as a term to define a *sui generis* social space, quite distinct from that conventionally termed *society*. In fact, this last concept originated in direct opposition to the community as a social configuration which historically precedes society. And sociology, in accord with its specific quality as the “science of society”, in turn originated and established itself as a way of overcoming the historical phase in which community prevailed.

The community, from the very beginning of its history, has therefore seemed to be part of a dyad, strongly dichotomous, within which no other form of society may exist. For this reason, the community has been considered, not only by classical sociology, to be a residual form of social gathering, destined to disappear with the advent of a process of social change defined as modernisation. Smelser, for example, questioned during the 1990s whether communities existed, convinced as he was that they had been simply cancelled by modernity. Describing his experience in a small farming village in Ireland, he asked «How long (...) could the village survive as a community?» (Smelser, 1991, p. 144). That type of world, tied as it was to traditional forms of sociality, would not be able to “survive” modernisation, the prevalence of “foreign people, foreign money, foreign media, foreign ideas”. The only communities that could continue to exist, according to the author, were those which were identifiable not because of their location but for possessing some or other “status or characteristic in common”, such as the “professional community” or the “gay community”. Despite this, Smelser continues to define communities as social groups “rooted in a place”, the other features of a community being the daily

exchange of relationships and the performance of activities that meet economic and social needs (Ibidem).

Today, the prophecy of a rapid eclipse of communities does not seem confirmed by observation. Instead, the importance of an analytical distinction between communities tied to a specific place and communities of interest appears to be confirmed. The world of the web, with its virtual locations which allow the exchange of information, the meeting of individuals and sharing processes to take place, was created and has developed above all through the aggregation of what have become known as “virtual communities”¹. The entire Internet world is inhabited by communities which continuously appear, and sometimes disappear, as their common interests arise and wane. To note is that this phenomenon is not a recent one. It pre-dates Web 2.0, for example in the community of scholars who shared information in the far 70s through virtual communities such as Usenet and BBS, the Bulletin Board System (Kendall, 2003, pp. 1454-1455).

It seems therefore that an idea has recently developed of community not as opposed to society but rather as *transcendent* to it, existing contemporaneously in an ideal and real time (virtual and real, offline and online, so to speak), an idea whereby society and community may also be understood as *interchangeable* and not as mutually exclusive (Delanty, 2010). Understood in this light, a definitive and simple definition of community is not possible.

The renewed interest in the community on socio-political levels beyond the digital world should also be remembered. An example is the neo-community proposal rising from the work of experts such as Amitai Etzioni (1993) and Robert Nisbet.

Much of the reorientation of moral and social philosophy is the consequence of the impact of the rediscovery of community in historical and sociological thought (Nisbet, 2004 (1967), p. 53).

In this political interpretation, the community may embody a form of resistance and opposition to the phenomenon of globalisation and individualism (the “resistance identity” coined by Manuel Castells, 2004, for example). Bauman considers these attempts to resuscitate the community to be a waste of effort, doomed to failure, and that they could at most represent a political ideal, perhaps a nostalgia for an age long gone, rather than a reachable objective.

¹ This article uses the term virtual communities to include phenomena described under a variety of labels such as on-line community, computer-mediated community, electronic community or distributed community.

We miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to a happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise (Bauman, 2001, p. 144).

Finally, the community survives in empirical research as an expression of a *particular*, as opposed to the universalism of a globalised society. In this sense, the expression “local community” (and methodologically in “studies of communities”, Arensberg, 1954) is understood as a territorially restricted configuration, an object of policy intervention or advocacy, or simply of study. However, the term survives, including in specific disciplines, for example in *social work* as “community action”, in pedagogy as family community or the “educating community”, in health as in community medicine. In national and international law, community is used in local government issues or in political and commercial agreements within a limited territorial context².

It is therefore important to try to understand to what extent the community has survived as a group and the extinction which sociology predicted for it until WWII, and the type of social configuration represented by the form of interaction mediated by the technology defining virtual communities.

For this reason, this paper will begin with a description, necessarily brief, of the beginnings and fortunes of the term community in the sociological tradition, before exploring the phenomenon of the rediscovery of social community bonds and their appearance in the world of virtual communities that populate the web.

1. Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: the birth of a sociological distinction

It was noted in the introduction that there is today no consensus in the social sciences regarding the distinction between community and society. It seems therefore important to analyse the concept of community and how it has been proposed in the sociological tradition, above all in order to be able to identify its characteristics more accurately.

The clearest definition of the difference in the terms was expressed by the German intellectual Ferdinand Tönnies (1863/1887) through the use of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society)³. Community is

² For example, as in the *Comunidad Autonoma de Madrid* to denote the administrative organ of the Spanish capital, or the *European Community*.

³ Strictly speaking, the words *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* do not mean community and society, but “communal society” and “associational society”. However, community and society remain the terms with which sociology has in practice translated and interpreted the German originals.

described in his work as characterised by the type of social relationships typical of traditional social models or “primary” groups:

- it is a natural body;
- common desires and collective interests prevail;
- the members are poorly individualized;
- the moral orientation is guided by religious beliefs and traditional customs;
- solidarity between members of the social group is spontaneous;
- property is held in common (Gallino, 1988).

In contrast, the opposite characteristics prevail in society: individualism, contractual solidarity forms, regulation of social relations through positive law, economic exchange of goods and services, a dominance of privately owned property. Unlike man’s “natural” ambient, the community, society is abstract and artificial (Ricciardi, 2011).

In addition to highlighting the debt this vision owes to the ideal world of German romanticism (Fichte and Hegel), we should also note the similarities with modern communitarianism, not always explicit and conscious. A further reference also seems clear, that of the idea of a spontaneity of community which originates in the critical reading of capitalist society by the supporters of scientific socialism. In fact, Marx and Engels believed that the only social form for humanity was the primitive community, the *Urgemeinschaft*, or a communism as achieved through the revolutionary process (Gallino, 1988).

The first author to take up Tönnies’ line of argument is Emile Durkheim. In *De la division du travail social* (1893), he confirms Tönnies within the sociological community⁴ in his use of the symmetry between society and the community to describe organic and mechanical solidarity. This same dichotomic scheme, according to a common interpretation (see Luhmann, Ricciardi, 2011), would be used by Talcott Parsons as the basis for the construction of pattern variables, the contrasting values to which individuals orient themselves in social interaction. These variables appear to be based on the community/society dichotomy, namely affectivity/affective neutrality, diffuseness/specificity, particularism/universalism, ascription/achievement, collectivity orientation/self orientation. A community is characterised by being:

- oriented towards affectivity, that is, the enhancement of emotions;
- leaning towards specialised, relatively simple roles (diffuseness) in which private and public life are not strictly separated;
- founded on qualities ascribed at or present at the birth of an individual, and not acquired through merit during their lives;

⁴ It must be specified that Durkheim did not explicitly legitimise Tönnies as the father of sociology as his work did not mention Tönnies’ influence. Unlike Durkheim, Max Weber would recognise his debt to the German scholar.

- oriented to the collective rather than the individual.

The versatility of this distinction and the importance of Parsons in the history of sociology are our most obvious demonstrations of the enduring influence of Tönnies' thought within the discipline.

2. Beyond the dichotomy: Boudon re-reads Weber

Max Weber was the second author of classical sociology to take up the ideas of Tönnies. However, Weber took two very significant intellectual steps relevant for our attention. On the one hand, Weber explicitly, and conversely to Durkheim, acknowledges his debt to Tönnies. But at the same time, he also deviates from a strictly dichotomous reading of the distinction between community and society. Weber's reading interprets the two as social configurations which are intertwined. Seen as such, Weber offers an observation which appears better able to interpret the mutations in progress when it is difficult to sustain the complete separation between community and society. A rereading of Weber makes it possible to support the idea that there may be communities where there is also a society (Delanty, 2010), eliminating any nostalgia for a perhaps too idealised idea of a communitarian and a pre-societal past (Nisbet, 2004).

As Raymond Boudon notes, sociology tends to support a vision of the community which is *realist* in the Platonic sense, community as an essence or substance (*ousia* in Greek), and ontologically different from the society. The notion of community may instead be interpreted differently, recuperating the Aristotelian vision of *koinonía* (community or communion) where a system of *attributes* and *relationships* are the social bonds providing the unity for the group (Boudon, Bourricaud, 1986). This is not a case of ontologically different essences as much as forms of association with different characteristics (attributes) and a different view of relationships between the subjects.

A "community of interest", when interpreted in this sense, need not be tied to a physical location (Smelser defines this as being "rooted in a place"). It may also exist in a virtual space such as the Internet.

Echoing Weber (*Economy and Society*), the French sociologist stresses the importance of the "emotional communities" (*Gemeinde*) or congregations of great value in the sociology of religion. The disciples of Jesus or Buddha, for example, form communities based on particularly strong and close social relationships through a double process of organisation and institutionalisation. The resulting community is divided between those who already possess spiritual virtues and others who seek out the community in order to request salvation. But the community as

Gemeinde is also an institution. It is a system based on rituals and beliefs that make the members of a group part of the same emotional community.

In stark contrast to the dichotomous vision of community, Boudon, through his reading of Weber, recalls that the concept of Gemeine may be an understanding of community applicable also on an economic level, and not solely for the definition of primary or charismatic groupings. The family, a prototype of the basic unit of society, may in fact be described both as an affective unit, and thus as community in the Parsonsian sense, and also as a unit of economic solidarity involving production, consumption and the transmission of a common heritage. It is also possible to view business organisations as complex aggregates which do not limit their function to a rationalist and utilitarian logic, qualifying as a community. This is especially relevant when the survival of the enterprise becomes the common goal of all group members, overriding even strictly individual interests⁵.

Even the scientific community is far from being guided exclusively by universal principles and the need to spread knowledge. Rather, it is based on a system of values and a code of ethics which operates by applying social approval or disapproval of members who may or may not respect the rules and rituals of the group. It is a model constructed according to an etiquette operating not only according to impersonal but also unwritten rules which act as constraints.

If online communities and the written and unwritten rules that govern them (netiquette or network etiquette) are considered in this light, this articulated and complex argument would allow us to problematise and update the classic idea of community.

3. The rediscovery of the community and the liquidity of social relations

Three approaches to community taken by sociology have been noted above. In the first place, there is the view that community is destined to disappear, or already has done so with the rise of the societal model. Secondly, there is the view that where there is society there can be no community. And finally, a third hypothesis that sees these two types of social configuration as cohabiting within the same historical period.

Since the 1980s a line of socio-political thought has emerged, supported principally by Amitai Etzioni (1993) and Nisbet as cited above, which rejects the affirmation of the community's disappearance as a result of

⁵ An example is the widespread practice between Western Europe companies and their workforces of signing solidarity agreements which aim to socialise the profits, avoid labour dismissals and reduce the wage conflicts.

modernization. Etzioni claims not only that the community exists, but also that it is the best alternative to individualism on the one hand and a homogenising globalisation on the other. The polemical goal of communitarianism is embodied in liberalism and its conviction of the priority of releasing individuals from government controls and increasing personal autonomy. In fact, the development of an economic globalisation has been accompanied by the emergence of a train of thought which focuses quite clearly on the idea of the development of individual skills, particularly in economic terms, through a liberation from social norms and constraints experienced as too stringent, if not oppressive. This line of thought is defined as neo-liberalism in order to distinguish it from classic liberalism⁶.

Against the danger that these policy trends may tend to disrupt social bonds and over-emphasise the individual, communitarians theorise the persistence of the community, including politically (Ehrenhalt, 1995). Its clear focus on common goods, sharing and responsibility represents for them the most appropriate response to neo-liberalism and the massification of society. In Etzioni's interpretation, in fact, the community is assessed as responsive due to its capacity to strengthen social capital and civil society's political institutions. This vision of community differs from the original, the *Gemeinschaft* of Tönnies. Here the community is much less dense in terms of links and less homogeneous, it is not a primary community, one creating so-called social capital *bonding*. Instead it contains elements of relationships with each other located beyond strictly neighbourhood relations, producing a social capital *bridging*⁷. The second form is capable of building a consensus between different interests, and is therefore not oriented towards a confirmation of a community identity.

Criticisms of communitarian thought are based on elements rooted in the crisis of the social bond that permeates Western society. The most relevant analysis related to this view is that provided by Robert Putnam when he demonstrates the plunge of all indicators of civiness, beginning with those organised by civil society (Putnam, 2000). The crises in citizens' associative forms leads inevitably to crises in bonds and a weakening of social capital, the very fabric of our relations with others, where family, friend and neighbourhood networks shrink and the very structure of democracy is affected. This disintegration, for supporters of the community approach, is due substantially to the process of disintermediation imposed

⁶ The deregulation policies of President Ronald Reagan in the United States and those of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain are examples.

⁷ The distinction relates to Robert Putnam's claim that social capital bonding may in fact lead to the non-homogeneous marginalisation within a particular community, and that the bridging form, in contrast, generates social bonds between identities which are not necessarily homogeneous (Putnam, 2000).