

INTRODUCTION

Vera Araújo*

Without any doubt, “social relationships” is a very current topic in the analysis of social sciences. The increasing interest for the relational dimension and the challenges arising with globalisation demand an understanding of the complex and multiple interconnections found in our contemporary world, even through the use of theoretic models, strategies of empirical research and applied schemes which point out and support the diffusion of positive and constructive social relationships. Is it possible to say that social sciences, starting from sociology, can be founded on a paradigm of reference capable of fulfilling both the achievement of scientific knowledge as well as the axiological orientation to which they are called to?

This is in fact the challenge which has been taken up by SOCIAL-ONE, a group of sociologists, scientists and social workers who have answered to the invitation made to them by Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement.

The International Meeting entitled “Social Relations and Fraternity: a paradox or a sustainable model? A prospective starting from social sciences” held at Castelgandolfo (Rome) from the 11th to the 13th of February 2005, was an achievement and, at the same time, a starting point. The meeting was attended by 300 sociologists and researchers of social work coming from different countries: Africa, South America, Europe, India, Japan, the Philippines, the United States and Canada.

The theme of the Congress was a reflection on social relationships, but it also proved to be a very intense experience. Every talk was shared amongst the speakers and discussed in an atmosphere of intense participation before being delivered. This participation arose from the belief that every contribution has its own originality, due to the unique cultural background of each speaker. Yet there was also the desire and will to create, even at an embryonic state, a culture of unity in which differences are considered to build an authentic, human society.

We are aware, in fact, that every scientific paradigm is also based on a “community of scholars”, that is a community of people who not only share an outlook of research, but also a direction, a “vision of the world”, a time in history, as well as an organisational structure of the intellectual challenge.

The contents presented in this publication is a topic which is still at its initial stages; its development still needs to be defined, and we are aware that we are still at our very first steps, just like a child who has just started to learn a language with phonemes and morphemes in order to finally speak out words, sentences and concepts. Everyone’s wish and ambition is that through the work which has started we may arrive to the definition of a new social paradigm.

There are, however two warnings which, as “reflective sociologists”, we wish to suggest to those who we will be meeting throughout the course of our work. The first is the awareness that a new theoretic approach never emerged historically from the thoughts of solitary minds. Only a collectively organised history has brought the development of new interpretative instruments. The second warning concerns our relation to those who have preceded us in the sociological adventure, with their “tradition”. In going back to their debate from this new point of view we have encountered great intuitions spread here and there which are very useful to our work. We consider all those who came before us, including their dreams, hopes and theoretical elaboration as “friends” with whom we can build a relationship and dialogue.

The reflection on fraternity is surely an incipient subject when compared to the reflection of the other values of the French Revolution of 1789, namely freedom and equality. This, however, is another reason which makes us aim to achieve what seems to us to be the most authentic project of modern days.

* Sociologist, instructor of sociology at “Sophia” Institute for cultural studies; co-ordinator of “Social-One”.