

The 'Social' as Metaphor and the Case of Cooperatives

A Critique of Economic Individualism



**Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia
and Yair Levi**

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and

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ASHGATE

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: <http://www.ashgate.com>

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Pellegrin-Rescia, Marie L.

The 'social' as metaphor and the case of cooperatives : a critique of economic individualism

1. Cooperation 2. Social psychology 3. Collective settlements
4. Critical discourse analysis 5. Economic history

I. Title II. Levi, Yair

306.3'4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pellegrin-Rescia, Marie L.

The social as metaphor and the case of cooperatives : a critique of economic individualism / by Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia and Yair Levi.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-84014-489-0

1. Economic history. 2. Social psychology. 3. Critical discourse analysis. I. Levi, Yair. II. Title.

HC26.P45 2005

334'.01--dc22

2005011783

ISBN 1-84014-489-0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.

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With Yair Levi, she presided the GIISAM (International and Interdisciplinary Groups of Sociologists of the Mediterranean Area) and founded INCONTRI, an international and interdisciplinary review published in Sicily.

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In the framework of Oasi Città Aperta (Troina, Sicily), Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia and Yair Levi have edited the series *Collana Azioni e Ricerche*, which has published the following books: Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia, *Handicap: valori e categorie*; and Yair Levi (with A.R. Montani) *Cooperative sociali e handicap mentale: un ripensamento dei concetti di cooperazione e di integrazione*; and Yair Levi, *Realtà e Utopia in una Comunità Siciliana* (Troina, Sicily, Oasi Editrice Mediterranea, 1993; 1995).

Acknowledgements

Despite the relative newness of the book – or maybe thanks to it – a number of friends and colleagues were kind enough to comment on it as from the initial stages of writing. The first author thanks all the sceptical and critical friends as well as those in agreement or even enthusiastic. By discussing and taking this book seriously, both categories gave it the honour of life.

The second author is grateful to a few friends who read a first draft of the book. Among these were Peter Davis, Johanan Stryjan, Menachem Topel and Gidon Kressel. A special token of gratitude goes to Thomas Gray and Ian Macpherson, who made valuable criticisms of whole sections of the text. Meaningful suggestions and technical advice were provided by Ido Keren in preparing the manuscript. Thanks are due to Daphna Bar-Ness for her assistance in preparing the bibliography.

We are grateful to the staff of Ashgate for their professional accompaniment, and to our families, who patiently endured the hardships of such a multi-year endeavour.

A special debt of gratitude goes to the Foundation Oasi of Troina, Sicily, and its spiritual head, Don Luigi Ferlauto, for the inspiring effect of the emerging Città Aperta and for funding the travel expenses involved in the work.

Foreword

This book attempts to answer one of the most intriguing questions of our time: should we accept as a *fait accompli* the way our society is conceived and shaped, or can we have a say in this matter and assume the ethical responsibility involved? This suggests substituting an economy based on reciprocity and interdependence for one based on the solipsist self-interested individual.

Our starting point is the *social as a metaphor*, that is to say a set of policy measures aimed to remedy the dysfunctions caused, in particular, by the economic: by this term we refer to an economy that (according to Polanyi) is disembedded from the other instances, mainly the social and political ones. In this context cooperatives function as attempts at alternative, rather than remedial, initiatives. The question is how such issues can be tackled at the global level.

To do this, the authors set out to examine the categories of language we use to conceive and shape our society and the world in which we live, by resorting to two interacting registers: the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*. Are these categories those of the imaginary register that privileges the notions of *completeness*, the accumulation of assets and money and the control over the Other and nature; in brief, the economic created by modern man to achieve his 'independence' and alleged 'freedom'? Or are, rather, these categories those of the symbolic register that privileges the notions of interdependence, reciprocity and debt, hence of *incompleteness* allowing for a situation of lack and loss? At the core of the problem we have two notions of man: on the one hand, the self-interested individual, the solipsist and 'undivided' actor, and on the other, a subject prepared to admit his finitude, hence divided. As the French poet Rimbaud puts it, 'I is the Other'.

Two major approaches are used to analyse our subject matter. The first, from sociology, puts on stage a self-centred individual facing two 'realities', the economic and the social, with the task of 'integrating' them. The second is a linguistic-anthropological approach (AL). No longer seeing language as a means to represent a reality, or to communicate, and rather positing it as an act of enunciation, this approach avoids making the economic and the social two realities and instead questions the very enunciation of what is designated by these terms. This approach shows that the same categories of language, in a view of imaginary completeness, are paradoxically at work in both cases. As a matter of fact, the economic logic, typical of the individual and pursuing the imaginary of the 'full', the 'more', and 'accumulation', avoids all that could menace its completeness. The social, on its part, also doesn't tolerate losses, or risks, and aims to repair in an imaginary way all the slashes caused to the social tissue by the rush for completeness and aims to establish alternative centres of activity to control the economic.

It appears, however, that neither the remedies, nor the alternatives have the means to prevent (at least to date) the course of the economic. The latter, always separated from the other instances, still dominates them.

If so, a major concern of cooperatives is how to fill the classical dichotomy between the social and the economic, as well as how to survive in the imaginary culture of completeness and competition, while professing opposite values.

This makes up a real paradox that affects, at the same time, our societies, where the aspiration to reciprocity and solidarity (informed by the symbolic order of incompleteness) is enunciated by the solipsist individual, the creator of the competitive thought of the economic order. If so, how could this individual conceive and realise reciprocity and solidarity, when he considers the Other as an obstacle to the development of his own freedom? The paradox becomes inevitable.

Beyond their traditional socio-economic dichotomy and tension, the major concern of cooperatives nowadays seems to be how to survive in a culture of competition while preserving their 'cooperative difference'. This suggests that such a specificity be supported by a new approach to the economic issue. The AL approach raises the cooperatives to the status of 'analysers'. Instead of trying to subordinate the economic to the social according to the 'double nature' of cooperation, it suggests recognition of the rules that, as immanent to the cooperative system, are performed by the symbolic order: interdependence, reciprocity (non-symmetrical) and debt. As 'analysers' of a global phenomenon, cooperatives might help us, after all, to realise how such dualities as social/economic, globalisation/anti-globalisation and left/right, remain unresolved, in spite of all the efforts, to the extent that they are enunciated by categories of the imaginary, hence ill-suited, register.

The book comprises two parts and an epilogue. Part I presents the theoretical ground that underpins our approach to the categories of language. Part II analyses a number of cooperative cases in the light of sociological variables, while at the same time advancing the AL approach. In the Epilogue, the experience of South Africa and the creation of an 'Open City' in the mountains of Sicily are taken as references allowing us to go beyond what is designated as 'social'.

This book is the outcome of two authors working separately and together. Pellegrin-Rescia is primarily responsible for the Introduction, Part I and the Epilogue and Levi for Part II. Both authors have written the conclusions. This book is the outcome of the encounter of two different disciplinary backgrounds: philosophy and anthropology, and political science with special emphasis on the sociology of cooperatives, respectively. This explains the difference of approaches in the conclusions.

The authors hope that this diversity will enrich the argument while not making their conclusions too iconoclastic.

The Authors

Preface

Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia

Dis-anchoring and Disembeddedness: the two Avatars of Modernity

As we enter the new millenium, 'economism', industrialism, and similar 'isms' have become a matter of contention. With them, globalisation and the single market are also under investigation. Pressing anxieties are arising, resulting in protectionist policies, sometimes dismissed, sometimes even implemented. Such concerns, however, seem to remain sterile. 'Comfort zones', as a leader of the alternative economy reasonably called them at a recent seminar;¹ always placed, we might add, within an economic framework which proudly and aggressively maintains its dominance.

Here are the words of a young participant who represents, in his 'ordinary language', a situation that sociologist and psychologists enunciate in a so-called 'scholarly' language.²

In our society you are either a wolf or a lamb; you have no choice, you either eat or are eaten. The worst thing is that while everyone condemns the wolf and sometimes tries to pull its teeth, no one wants to be a lamb. This creature was valued formerly, now it only serves to make us cry. Today there are some individuals/lambs that are secure: we always give them something to eat and sometimes house them, but that doesn't change anything about their status as pariahs or virtual pariahs. There are also some people/lambs that are devoured before the tearful eyes of all, who yet can accomplish nothing: whether they stir themselves – and that's rare – or not, the result is the same. The worst thing is that the lambs are not truly lambs, for they only dream of one thing: becoming wolves in their turn, for they are esteemed, while the lambs are even despised, especially when it is left unsaid. They are the weak in a universe where we cry over weakness – sincerely, that gives us a good conscience – but where we have esteem only for the 'strong'; today, I insist, it is the strong that we admire.

An important question to answer is whether we can escape from this 'strong/weak' alternative, leading, in turn, to the 'economic/social' one where 'economic' stands for 'strong' and 'social' means in defence of the weak. Put otherwise, couldn't we, instead of trying to change our society (it is in the process of changing more than

¹ Anthro-psycho-sociology Seminar Jean Stotzel, Paris, Sorbonne 2001.

² This refers to the philosophy or linguistics of the Acts of Language, where a distinction 'common/scientific' language is made with a view to going beyond it, while the enunciation remains the same, although performed at different levels. We may say that the same categories of thought are used in both cases (see in what follows).

we realise) *say/do* it, i.e., shape it, by means of 'felicitous' (Austin, 1962) categories of thought in agreement with the desired changes?

In this work, by 'categories of thought' (mostly in the sense of enunciation), are meant the categories of language we use to put in shape our society, and not 'categories' in the Kantian sense.

At the Earth Summit (Rio, 1992), at the World Summit Against Exclusion (Madrid, 1994), as well as at the Conference of Copenhagen (1996) and the more recent Kyoto (1997), The Hague (2000) Summits, as as the Johannesburg Summit (2001) and the subsequent Social Forums, some decisions were taken to 'protect' nature as well as man: nature from the ravages of man and man from unemployment. These wise decisions have however not been followed up by the necessary actions. It is evident that there can be no effective implementations of the decisions as long as the categories of thought that enunciate them do not change. These categories are those of an 'individual' who sees himself as a subject in opposition to an object 'placed' before him (*ob-jectum* in Latin, *Gegen-stand* in German), on which he acts in order to master it: this object is nature. For the individual, reciprocity and solidarity with the other, far from being obvious, are the concern of the 'social'; we say it is necessary to 'act socially'. Consequently, insofar as nature remains an object, 'our' object, why and how should we decide, for example, to no longer cut down trees in the Amazon? For insofar as the other is regarded as a limitation to one's liberty, to the free flowering of one's individuality, why and how should one limit oneself in its favour? But a change is taking shape: from an object 'placed before' us to act upon it, nature has become an 'environment' which surrounds us: action *on*, from now on, can only be thought of in terms of 'reciprocity'.

This example points to the real paradigmatic change under our eyes, of which we are barely aware. It poses the question whether the categories of our modernity that we used until now, and continue to use, are still 'felicitous' and efficacious as we asked above.

What is at stake is a paradox highlighted by the analysis of cooperatives, by showing that the categories of thought and enunciation of the individualistic order still in use by our modern society, in fact disserve them. The extremely individualistic categories of thought that humanity has used and still uses to give form and actuality to our society, are now found to be in opposition to our ends, namely to an increased desire for solidarity. These criteria appear to be evident to us, even 'universal', for they have created the success of modern industrial society that we are, however, in the process of leaving behind. Thus, the categories of thought typical of a register informed by an *imaginary completeness* that proved efficacious for two centuries are now questioned by those that, issuing from the *symbolic* register are apt to give a meaning to what result, also from *incompleteness*, still seen as a 'weakness'.

More particularly, we pose the question of how, for example, to create a society of solidarity, while persisting in using criteria that have now become inefficacious and persisting in thinking in terms of individuals, atoms closed in upon themselves? Here relations with others are inevitably based on power, something that appears to us as 'natural'.

Grice, an Oxford linguist (1979), writes: ‘If I need some sugar for a cake that someone is helping me to make, I certainly hope that he won’t hand me the salt; if I need a spoon I certainly like to think that I won’t receive a trick rubber one’. This supposes that beforehand there is an understanding, cooperation between the two participants, which is not as evident as it might seem, as it is supposed to take place between individuals enclosed in themselves. But what is the source of this possibility of anticipating understanding, of assuming cooperation? Certainly not the fact that people have to cooperate and to understand each other in order to live together, a hypothetical-deductive explanation without persuasive power. This raises questions and interrogations.

What then is to be made of this Other facing me? A possible enemy infringing on my liberty, or the other me whom I fantasise as my double, as an object of love that is constantly eluding me while I run about searching for him in vain? How to catch him, or is the question about catching him?

Interposed between these Others and I, between the world and I, there are words to say them. Are these tools at my disposal to give things a name and, to do that, assess them, measure them, in fact controlling them? If so, are they a means of representing, expressing, or communicating, as people continue to believe? These words, are they ‘instead’ of things, or rather – still and always – in search of them? Words don’t ‘make’ things. Still, isn’t it through them that things exist for us as locutors of the same language? Thus, instead of considering language as a tool, wouldn’t it be better to conceive it as an *act that*, far from ‘representing’ the world, shapes it, performs it (Austin, 1962), categorises it (Benveniste, 1966). Or as a *symbolic field* to which all talking humans belong without having chosen it, something that exists before them and from which they depend and to which development, at the same time, they concur during their lifetime? Yet, in this case, who does this ‘shaping’?

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* Alice wants to know ‘whether you can make words mean different things’. ‘The question is’, said Humpty Dumpty, ‘who is the master? – a point/dot that’s all’ (Carroll, 1865). Posited in these terms, there is no possibility of anchoring.

Modernity, in fact, could be presented as a three-movement story of anchoring and dis-anchoring:

- 1st movement. The anchoring: God; the king as the ‘lieutenant’ (in its literal sense of placeholder) of God; and, dependent on them, the human being;
- 2nd movement. Liberation from anchoring: God and the king have disappeared, only the independent, self-determining individual remains;
- 3rd movement. The new anchoring, the New Age? Certainly not. There is something better – the discovery of language as an *act* and a *symbolic field*. To us, this seems to be a real revolution, which posits language as ‘force’ and not only as signification or sense, as ‘a symbolic field’ and not only as a means or tool. The consequences are meaningful: since dependence on language means in this case anchoring, it is not the same as that which united man to the Gods and the kings. This, however, has not yet been properly understood.

In what follows we shall deal with societies constituted by the exchange of gifts. In such societies, explains Polanyi, the economy is integrated, 'embedded' in other institutions, it has no priority. The frequent references, in this book, to Greece and its myths and history, and to societies analysed by anthropology, should not come as a surprise. They first enable us to accede to the source of our thought system, i.e., to the categories, which still enunciate it. The latter invite us, by means of the symbolic exchange, to take cognizance of a way of thinking rejected by modernity and resurfacing, nowadays, although under different forms. Cooperatives (see Part II) as well as some actual realisations (see Epilogue) bear witness to their relevance.

Then we shall delve into what Max Weber calls a 'disenchanted' world: the modern society, where value depends on price, where individuals are agents whose motives are strictly economic, or actors whose mutual understandings arise from the possibility of a convergence of interests. If we adhere to the analysis of Polanyi and Weber, though, we feel that it does not tell the essential.

What is essential? The categories that are at work, those enunciating thoughts and deeds throughout history. In this way, by avoiding to take as 'objective' reality what in fact is the way *we* 'shape' our society, we question the means i.e., the categories of thought used for that purpose by both ordinary and scientific language. To do so, we highlight the *imaginary* and *symbolic* registers whose categories shape the *real* and whose usage here is different from the usual one. This articulation is epistemologically interesting, as it serves to analyse how the ordinary and the scientific languages shape our society (at the macro level) as well as cooperatives (at the micro level).

Cooperatives, in fact, epitomise a society where reciprocity is valued, where value is not the 'price' and the 'weak' is not opposed to the 'strong' but are placed, albeit the difference, on the same plane. It is a society where the 'the economic' has to ally to 'the social', to use the words of the cooperative literature. However, to apply the embembeddedness of the economic to the social (as per Polanyi) it seems that cooperatives resort to categories of ill-suited thought, with reciprocity, for instance, more often than not, being enunciated by the categories of the solipsist individual.

Thus, cooperatives interest us less as institutional structures and more on account of the paradoxes they highlight and which we find in our actual society. This is why, as will be stressed later, we consider them as the 'analysers' of society. In fact, how can we think and create solidarity cooperatives by means of criteria of imaginary completeness that, being typical of the undivided individual, are at odds with reciprocity and in contradiction with the very ideals of cooperation informed by the symbolic register? This explains the resort to the *social* as an instance expected to counter the imaginary of completeness represented by the economic. Is this at the root of the fact that cooperatives did not manage to go beyond the secondary role they play vis-à-vis what is called 'the economic'? The latter is always dominant and increasingly dis-anchored, despite all the efforts to put it 'at the service of man'. In fact, the cooperatives have only one fault, that of belonging to their time. Born to counter 'the economic' at its birth, cooperatives were inevitably exposed to the categories of thought of industrial modernity, those that are proper to the individual who thinks himself free, independent, self-determined,

self-sufficient, and dis-anchored. It is by these categories that we define here 'modernity' and its paradox, to be further illustrated by cooperatives. It will be argued that from the moment that a view of completeness, always imaginary, becomes dominant, what emerges is a state of disembeddedness of the economic from the other institutions (moral, political, juridical, etc.). As a consequence, the supremacy of the economy which, turned into 'the economic' as a dis-anchored institution, enables the individual to conceptualise himself as unanchored (Pellegrin-Rescia, 1993).

What is the fault of modernity? Obstinance in defining freedom as 'dis-anchoring', and the consequent inability to acknowledge the 'anchorage', prevents the understanding of how freedom is not opposed to what is wrongly called 'dependence': the subject is free to the extent that he/she is 'anchored'. In this case relations with others are not necessarily conceived of in terms of force but rather of 'place'. Relations are established according to the *place* the subject occupies in the symbolic field shared with others through language as a common field and no longer in terms of relations of power as a solipsist individual.

In the epilogue we shall attempt to highlight some outcomes of our reasoning, as for example in South Africa and Sicily. Using the categories of symbolic incompleteness – without harming the liberty of the individual but rather placing it in a more 'felicitous' context – should enable us to go beyond the metaphor of the 'social' and beyond the paradoxes of cooperatives. In this way the 'social' will again find a significance in accord with its etymology (the Latin '*socius*'), actually lost. It can be easily shown that resort to the 'social' is made when the 'social bond' fails to take place, or is faultily established. When it is based on the categories of thought of autonomy and independence typical of the *indivisible individual*, the bond needs to be re-created.

Once enunciated by adequate categories, will the social assume again its association with society, thus no longer standing for the problems arising from it? In this case it will cease to be the metaphor of the disembeddedness of the economy whose origin is the dis-anchoring of the modern individual who suffers the consequences but, paradoxically, hasn't yet equipped himself with the means to overcome them.

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EPILOGUE: BEYOND THE 'SOCIAL' AS METAPHOR*Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia*

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PART I: THE ‘SOCIAL’ AS METAPHOR

Marie L. Pellegrin-Rescia