

Volunteerism, solidarity and social capital *Alessio Valastro**

How to cite

Valastro A. (2012). Volunteerism, solidarity and social capital. [Italian Sociological Review, 2 (1), 24-32]

Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v2i1.27>

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v2i1.27]

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3. Article accepted for publication (*data*)

April 2012

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Italian Sociological Review**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on volunteerism, which has been increasingly acknowledged and appreciated in Italy over the last years as a significant expression of solidarity and participation and a promoter of human rights. As Ota De Leonardis puts it, this phenomenon is «blurred, with uncertain boundaries and extremely diversified»¹. (De Leonardis, 1998: 53) The paper, written in the European Year of Volunteering, aims at analyzing the collective system of volunteering with a view to assessing the phenomenon in Italy, as well as its evolutionary dynamics, which have been profoundly affected by the entry into force of the framework law on volunteering in 1991. It is important to underline the public importance of such actions, above all in the perspective of the link between volunteering and social capital. These concept will be analyzed within the framework of some analytical approaches to the concept of social capital in the literature.

Keywords: Volunteerism, social capital, individualism

1. Beyond the wall of egoism and indifference: the voluntary system and perspective of analysis

One of the most representative traits of the late modern, or better, postmodern society is the progressive decay of the social fabric under a continuous pressure of cultural spurs – but not limited to this – causing the loss of the sense of community, as well as the weakening or saturation of the social ties. In this more complex and fragmented context, where the traditional territorial and familiar sense of belonging, along with former expressions of solidarity seem to evaporate, individuals have become more self-centered and isolated, suspicious and distrustful of the others and of institutions and their life style is based on self centredness and on the fulfillment of one's own plans and desires. Contemporary men, strongly focused on self actualization, have lost the sense of some typical values of community life, such as brotherhood, altruism and solidarity which promote processes of exchange and support among individuals, thereby fostering social cohesion. According to the British Scholar Matthew Fforde, we live in a society that comes unstitched like a worn out cloth due to the progressive diffusion of a life style based on an “egoistic individualism”. (Fforde, 2000; It.ed. 2005)

This dangerous trend towards “desocialization”, along with the anthropological changes of postmodern society, which lead individuals to alienate from the others and lose interest in them – in the pursuit of one's own interests and happiness – has been observed and analyzed by several authors, above all from North American schools. The historical sociologist C. Lasch, for example, in his famous book *The Culture of Narcissism* affirms that the narcissistic subject, who lives only for himself and the present, perceives the others as deceitful and untrustworthy, or credible only because of external pressures. (Lasch, 1979; It.ed. 1981) According to Richard Sennett, in the so-called intimist society, characterized by the *homo psychologicus*, interpersonal relationships become painful, fratricidal and asocial (Sennett, 1977; It.ed. 2006). More recently, R. Putnam has put

¹ Translated by Author

forward the theory, summarized in the *Bowling alone* formula, according to which Americans, also due to the negative influence of television and other mass media technologies, are more individualistic, less involved in public organizations and less participative in the life of their community. (Putnam, 2000; It.ed. 2004)

G. Lipovetsky, a famous French social philosopher, maintains that the èra of consumerism implies a general and polymorphic, invisible and miniaturized desocialization. (Lipovetsky, 1993; It.ed. 1995)

In a social system which tends to exclude rather than include, which leaves people alone instead of protecting them, individuals only care about their destiny instead of their close relatives and are more indifferent and uninterested in the events and existential issues of the people living close to them. As opposed, the commitment in volunteerism, which under these circumstances does not behave according to egoistic and instrumental models – since it goes beyond the purely subjective dimension – is addressed to the others, individual citizens, groups or the community in general, with the aim of promoting and supporting the welfare of all individuals. In this perspective, volunteerism is, according to the definition by C. Ranci, «a free and uninterested action, unselfishly oriented towards the benefit of other people, who are not relatives or close friends»². (Ranci, 2006: 17) In other words, volunteerism is an act of devoting, according to P. Donati's definition, since people devote time and resources in favor of a “generalized other” who experiences a condition of discomfort and require social actions that deserve attention and *ad hoc* measures.

What are the reasons why a young, adult or old individual should act to the advantage of other people he/she does not even know, without any personal interest? The reasons behind the action of volunteerism seem complex, diversified and are not easy to define; a significant amount of psychological literature deals with this topic, such as the famous contribution by the American psychologist J.L. Pearce (Pearce, 1993; It.ed. 1994), while empirical researches carried out on the motivational substrate leading to the choice of volunteering are limited and scanty. Surely, the original drive, which always needs be fostered, originates from several reasons of psychological, cultural, religious and political nature, overlapping and intertwining among each other. To serve as volunteers is a personal choice not only related to certain ethical and religious choices – which are supported and strengthened through volunteerism itself – but it is also based on inner drives orienting the individual towards an extra-individual commitment. Therefore, who works as a volunteer feels he/she has to act for the others, so as to implement and put into practice the values of altruism and solidarity: values in which he/she deeply believes.

At a closer glance, besides the altruistic attitude, there are more egoistic reasons underlying the choice of volunteering, since it is an opportunity to increase one's own self esteem, to socialize or to better employ free time, as well as to acquire competencies and skills that could be applied to several other fields. No doubt that volunteering is inspired by good intentions and by the desire to help other people, however giving one's contribution to the provision of a social service or the carrying out of a social activity is also an opportunity to satisfy personal needs and expectations, such as the feeling of being useful and socially proactive. Actually who serves in voluntary activities, that are perceived by the others as useful and advantageous for the community, gains a credit of esteem and gratitude putting this person in a condition of consensus and social respectability.

To sum up, along with the purity of self esteem manifested in the sacrifice made, other more opportunistic and egoistic interest arise which are connected to the fulfilment of non-economic needs. The words of the sociologist Ranci are enlightening in this perspective: «volunteerism, therefore, is not a “sacrificial” activity totally devoted to others. It is a social action generating personal enrichment for those who perform such action»³. (Ranci, 2006: 63)

2. The phenomenon of volunteerism in contemporary Italian society

Volunteerism, a fundamental pillar of the third sector, is a social phenomenon of increasing importance both due to its dimension and to its non marginal role in the new Italian welfare system.

² Translated by Author

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With the welfare state crisis of the nineties a new phase, promoting the establishment of a model of solidarity based on the pluralization of actors and the synergy between the private and public model in the implementation and management of welfare policies, has started.

The entry “volunteerism” indicates a category of people who, individually or in groups, commit themselves freely and spontaneously in non-profit and solidarity-based initiatives and activities. In the perspective of such definition, the distinctive features of the voluntary activity clearly emerge: the gratuitousness of the action according to which the persons who serve as volunteers cannot receive – directly or indirectly – any remuneration, neither by the organization they belong to, nor by the beneficiary of their actions; the freedom of choice, since with the imposition of working as such, there would be no voluntary action; and the altruistic and solidal nature of volunteerism given that the needs of other people are fulfilled, generally of alien people living in a condition of social and economic discomfort.

As for the gratuitous nature of voluntary work, this implies the non remuneration and the lack of any contract obligation, without barring the possibility of receiving other forms of rewards such as the gratitude of the beneficiaries. It is worth reminding that volunteerism is a beneficial and satisfactory experience not only for a third person but also for ourselves; along with the benefits for the others, the feeling of self accomplishment is higher, the greater the efficiency of the action planned by the organization we belong to. The involvement in volunteering very often originates from the desire to experience something new and exceptional; this commitment is energy and time consuming, although its burden is not excessive. Therefore, it is important for the volunteer that the time spent in voluntary activities is matched with other professional or familiar commitments and is well balanced with rest and leisure. The lack of this balance partially explains why some volunteers drop out their activities after starting them, thereby making the voluntary work more fluctuating and unstable, as compared to professional work.

The choice to commit oneself is personal and free and can be encouraged and supported but not imposed by external subjects; very often it is an extremely personal decision generated by a variety of conscious or unconscious, transient or permanent reasons. Without the expectation of money reward, the investment of time and resources in activities in favor of the society, stems from a certain sensitivity towards the social issues, which is very often flanked by less ideal and more instrumental reasons.

Voluntary and gratis work can be either individual, that is when a citizen autonomously decides to act in favor of the others, or collective *i.e.* through the aggregation and coordination of more people aiming at a common goal. In this perspective, volunteerism is an associative phenomenon, in so far as some people choose to gather by joining an entity or an association, given that they share the association's values and mission.

It is important to highlight that the Italian framework is complex and extremely differentiated; if – from an historical point of view – classical forms of volunteerism were charity-based and supportive activities of religious inspiration, still today voluntary associations mainly work in the social and healthcare fields. However, along with this dominant model, the so called “civic” volunteering, according to the definition of F. Garelli (Arcidiacono, 2004) has also emerged. By means of this new approach, alternative forms of social revindication and participation are implemented.

Starting from these considerations, this report aims at analyzing and assessing the organized voluntary work, a sort of archipelago of associations, with reference to the framework law No. 266 of 1991 establishing its social value and its functions in terms of expression of participation, solidarity and pluralism. The above mentioned framework law, whose process of approval has been long and complex, represents the action of Italian legislature on the social regulation of an increasingly complex and widespread phenomenon of our contemporary society.

According to some foreign scholars, Italy is characterized by the culture of the so-called “amoral familism”, see E. Banfield (1958; It.ed. 1976), and by the lack of strong civic traditions, see R. Putnam (1993); in this perspective, volunteerism is an ever growing and dynamic phenomenon, as some important surveys have shown, and in particular the Istat survey, carried out every two years, and the FIVOL survey, carried out every five years. As for the size of organized volunteerism, as already indicated by M. Caselli in 2009 (Caselli, 2009), there is a lack of updated information on this phenomenon.

The last FIVOL survey (Frisanco, 2007), carried out at the end of 2006, and observing a sample group of over 12 thousand organizations (from now on defined as *OdV*) from among a number of over 35 thousand registered and non-registered *OdVs*, allows us to outline the phenomenon and to focus on its dynamics of stability and transformation.

Some of the most “resilient” characteristics of this phenomenon are listed below: the extreme variety of the sectors of action and an increase in the non-traditional sectors; the prevalence of small and medium-sized associations over larger ones; the difference between northern and southern Italy, in terms of active *OdVs*, even if this aspect has been lessened by growth differentials; the optimal balance between the male and female members in voluntary groups; the prevalence of adults, in particular of individuals between the age of 30 and 45 years, over young people, below the age of 30, and of elderly people, above the threshold of 65 years.

The last datum concerning the age of activists, supports R. Putnam’s assumptions, according to which public commitment, in its various expressions, blooms towards the middle age. (Putnam, 2000; It.ed. 2004)

Besides its size, this phenomenon takes different shapes in the north and the south of Italy, with reference to some structural aspects: operative groups in southern regions are younger on average; given the lowest number of volunteers for single unit, they register a massive presence of young people working as volunteers on a continuous basis both in the civil service and of religious.

As regards the alterations of this phenomenon, it is important to pinpoint some new trends in this specific area of non-profit organizations; firstly, the sector of volunteering increases with the creation of new realities, however its development rate is lower than in the past. There is an increase of independent organizations, *i.e.* promoted by groups of citizens not belonging to the national acknowledged groups as local units, with 8% increase as compared to 2001. The increase in the number of lay and non-sectarian members is a related occurrence of this phenomenon. Multi-sectoral organizations, that is organizations committed on several sectors are those offering a wide range of social security services and performances are the majority. Among new trends, we can consider the emergency of new groups with a few founders on one side, and on the other the progressive simplification of voluntary associations, which – in the majority of cases (54,3%) – do not exceed the number of 20 operators. The sum of both factors leads to the evident result of fragmentation.

As for groups composition, the number of non active members and paid workers has increased, along with the number of women appointed to lead their organizations. The datum concerning the decrease in the number of groups exclusively made up of volunteers, which is parallel to the progressive employment of several remunerated professional figures, indicates a process towards greater professionalization of groups and their activities. This trend, which partially originated from the need to comply with the guidelines set forth by the increasing numbers of conventions drawn up with public entities, on one side provides greater safety in terms of continuity and qualitative standards of supplied services, and on the other, it implies the risk for *OdVs* to become entrepreneurial and managerial. Another example of an ongoing evolution is the increase in the number of registered *OdVs* (82,2%) and their more formal nature, as a consequence, several *OdVs* possess registered or certified articles of association and/or internal regulations. As for the enrollment in registers there is an evident unbalance across our country: the rate of registered organization varies from 87,6% in the north east and 73,5% in the south of Italy.

Moreover, voluntary groups increasingly tend to use new communication and connection systems, in particular emails and websites: only 30% of the investigated organizations in 2006 did not possess such communication technology; they were 61,3% in 2001.

Now we are going to briefly outline a specific aspect, *i.e.* youth participation in the voluntary service. Collected data indicate that young volunteers under the age of 30 are 21,5% of the total and they provide their contribution in almost half of the *OdVs* (47,1%): in 12,5% of the cases they are numerically prevalent (over half of the volunteers).

As several researches suggest, the voluntary experience – very often previous to any working experience – has more than a positive outcome: it is a sort of personal test to assess one’s skills; it is an opportunity to be part of an organization and to take on greater responsibilities; transversal skills acquired through practice can facilitate the involvement of volunteers in the employment market.

3. Volunteerism and social capital: what is their relationship?

This section of the paper deals with the relationship between volunteerism and social capital (from now SC), with the aim to explain if and to what extent there is a link between volunteering and SC. SC is a «new, complex and articulated concept»⁴ (Di Nicola, 2006: 7), debated at a national and international level and finding its application in a multi-disciplinary frame which ranges from sociology to political sciences and economics.

Besides the multiple definitions and the several theoretical and empirical approaches, the importance of the concept lies, as pointed out by P. Donati, «in the fact that it very concisely highlights a new problem of contemporary societies: the erosion of the reliable and cooperative social fabric supporting the actions of social stakeholders»⁵. (Donati, Colozzi, 2006: 9)

It is evident that the notion of SC refers to the two categories of social relations and relational networks, and as underlined by P. Di Nicola «for the majority of researchers, social capital lies in the social relationships, it is the product of the same, it is indeed a social relationship»⁶. (Di Nicola, Stanzani, Tronca, 2008: 14) Illuminating is also Robert Putnam's assumption according to whom: while the physical capital refers to objects and the human capital refers to the characteristics of the individuals, the social capital refers to the relationships among individuals, social networks and the reciprocity and reliability regulations originating from them. (Putnam, 2000; It.ed. 2004)

It is therefore worth wondering if all social relations generate SC. According to A. Pizzorno, it is important to «consider as SC generating relations only those where the more or less durable identity of participants is recognized, provided that it hypothesizes forms of solidarity and reciprocity»⁷. (Bagnasco *et al.*, 2001: 23)

The value of community relations and ties is also underlined by L.J. Hanifan, the first to employ the expression SC, who affirmed that when individuals come in contact with their neighbors and the latter – in turn – come in contact with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of “social capital” able to fulfill their needs and display a social potential which can improve the living conditions of the whole community. (Hanifan, 1916, 1920)

There are several divergent theoretical and empirical approaches to SC in the literature and they can be referred to three lines of research: olistic, individualistic and relational.

According to P. Di Nicola, the concept has been introduced in the context of Italian social sciences in its complexity and in its threefold levels: the macro, micro and meso levels. (Di Nicola, 2006)

The studies by Robert Putnam have started an interesting and lively discussion on the concept of SC in Italy; in particular, in the perspective of a twenty-year research carried out on several Italian regions, he supports the idea that the functioning of institutions and, therefore, the performance of regional administrations, is influenced by the social framework they operate in and by the SC entity of each area. (Putnam, 1993)

Putnam takes into consideration a collectivist approach where the SC is regarded as a “moral” resource circulating throughout the community; it is strategic in so far as it produces positive benefits that are important for single individuals, but also for the whole community. In other words, if the context of daily life is characterized by intersubjective trust and cooperation-based, as well as reliable relations, this implies remarkable advantages for the stakeholder and improves the efficiency of the social organization. In brief, the SC is a collective resource, which anyone can benefit from without taking possession of it. It is a macro approach, considering the SC as a community based and non particularistic resource made up of shared rules and values, of the network of associations and of generalized trust, which fosters a mutual and synergistic approach whose aim is to reach common and generalized goals. (Putnam, 1993, 2000)

Pierre Bourdieu, one of the pioneers in promoting this concept, supports a completely different approach; he assumes an individualistic approach of the SC, which is complementary and non independent from other forms of capital, such as the economic and the human capital. Bourdieu spec-

⁴ Translated by Author

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ifies its peculiarity by defining it as an aggregation of actual or potential resources, related to the belonging to a network of more or less institutionalized or durable relationships, that individuals can employ in the pursuit of their aims. (Bourdieu, 1980, 1986) In this perspective, the SC is an individual feature and the amount of SC possessed by any stakeholder depends on the volume of contacts and the amount of other capitals possessed by other stakeholders they are in contact with.

Nan Lin has provided an important contribution to the globalized debate on the SC. The Author proposes a complex theory of the SC in the perspective of a wider framework of theories on capital; the theory is based on the idea that the network of relations which is neither built or established once and forever, is the outcome of an investment done by individuals with the expectation to benefit from it, thanks to the resources embedded in the network and circulating across the same. The Author indicates the resources embedded in the social network which can be accessed by individuals – according to their status in the structure – who can employ them to implement aim-based actions. (Lin, 1999, 2001)

P. Donati opts for the relational perspective in the analysis of the SC (Donati, 2003, 2007), according to him, in fact, the SC is «intended as a feature of the relationships not among single individuals or of social structures as such»⁸. (Donati, Colozzi, 2006: 24) In this sense, the SC refers to the social relationships which foster actions based on trust and reciprocity, or better, it refers to the relations enhancing the primary or secondary relational goods. Based on this assumption, as maintained by L. Tronca (Tronca, 2007), the SC can be divided into primary SC, that concern family, neighbors or friendship relations and producing primary relational goods; and a secondary SC, that refers to associative relations or addressed to a “generalized other”, producing secondary relational goods. Both the primary SC (which can be factorised in family SC and enlarged community SC), and the secondary SC (which can be divided into association SC and generalized SC) are bidimensional, in so far as it is possible to identify two separate dimensions, *i.e.* trust and reciprocity, in either type. In the perspective of relational approach, non-profit organization – given their peculiar regulations and the symbolic codes guiding them – implement and manage performances and services under the form of “relational goods”, *i.e.* goods based on relations; as pointed out by P. Donati such organizations do not limit themselves to the «creation of goods and services which cannot be generated by the State or the market, because of their internal limits»⁹. (Donati, Colozzi, 2007: 12)

After having outlined some examples of the multi-faceted approaches to define the concept of SC, our analysis focuses on the specific ability of organized voluntary sector to generate/reinforce the SC, besides their well known and appreciated capacity to fulfill emerging social needs; in particular, voluntary associations create a network of non-contingent and continuous relations, based on mutual recognition and interchange, allowing its members to operate to achieve non individual and socially relevant goals on a collective basis. If the SC is considered as a network of durable relations over time, based on trust and on reciprocity and intended as a system of relations with peculiar characteristics providing an important resource for the single member and also for the whole community, it is evident that the voluntary organization produces SC and, therefore, constitutes the link between the latter and this specific area of the third sector. The importance of belonging to groups or associations for the creation and accumulation of SC has also been outlined by the politologist R. Putnam, who revisits the assumptions by Alexis de Tocqueville, who considered the formation of associations as a valid strategy to reinforce the intersubjective links in a social environment that is torn and disaggregated as a result of a dangerous trend towards atomization. More precisely, Putnam believes that the experience of association – of any kind and intensity – teaches participants not to be distrustful towards the others and, therefore, it makes trust circulate and it allows participants to experience open and cooperative relationships, as well as to enhance their community-based skills.

To sum up, to act as volunteers in associations (“to act with”) – and in this perspective the connection with the SC is evident – differs from philanthropy, that is to help others, such as to give alms (“to act for”). In this sense, voluntary associations are a formal and elective social network, which differs from the family and parental network, whose nature is informal and ascriptive, link-

⁸ Translated by Author

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ing together and connecting more people driven by diversified motivations and whose key elements are the culture of donation and solidarity.

Given the fact that voluntary associations generate and maintain a network of relations among the members, it is useful to identify the form and configuration of SC, by making reference to the Putnamian distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. As opposed to groups that close the ranks and exclude all those who are different for any kind of reason, voluntary groups are open towards anyone is willing to provide their support by linking people that are not socially and culturally homogeneous (bridging social capital).

As for the capacity to go beyond their own group and to interact and collaborate with other social organizations, voluntary associations or non-profit entities, in several cases a self-referential and self-promotional logic prevails and it causes isolation.

Some Authors have formulated and discussed the following hypothesis which must be confirmed or confuted with empirical data: there is a circular and interdependent relationship between volunteerism and SC, as a consequence such phenomena are mutually supported and encouraged. In other words, the SC, *i.e.* the fabric of connections among individuals, fosters the practice of volunteerism which, in turn, is able to generate SC and increase it in a given community.

Several researches have demonstrated that the SC identified in the networks of relationships built across the various social spheres, is positively correlated with the civil commitment of its members and their level of interest towards other people's welfare: an individual who is socially isolated is less prone to commit himself/herself for the others. By following this approach, the higher the SC the more widespread volunteering organized or informal and philanthropic practices. As Putnam affirms altruism is encouraged – under any aspect – by social and community involvement. (Putnam, 2000; It.ed. 2004) This is obviously one of the several positive mechanisms triggered by the existence of SC in a given community. The sociologist Ranci, in turn, observes that the subjective availability to act as volunteers «is generated and spread above all through intersubjective liaisons, friendship and relationships of trust»¹⁰. (Ranci, 2006: 80)

To conclude, the actors of voluntary system play a relevant social role, besides providing supplementary and complementary actions flanking the measures taken by institutions or by for profit organizations; their role lies in the diffusion of interpersonal trust and the enhancement of reciprocity and solidarity forms, thereby fostering the building, or better, the reconstruction of those social liaisons that have been eroded by the dynamics of the second modernity society.

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