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Specificities of the Third Sector: the Relational Approach

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Abstract

The paper considers the recent critical and sceptical perspectives of social sciences on the Third sector. Above all, it reflects on the difficulty in identifying specificities of this supposed sector of contemporary society. Starting from this scenario, the author introduces the perspective of relational sociology as a possible way of defining a specificity of the sector, on the basis of the different 'semantics of social relation'. In the second part of the work, a review of ten years of empirical research on the third sector, conducted in Italy, by a team of relational sociologists, puts the theory to the test finding both confirmations and disconfirmations.

Keywords: Third sector, relational sociology, Social private culture, social capital, civic culture.

1. Rise and fall of non-profit fortune in the social sciences narratives

Despite its ancient origins in social economy, that date back to the early 19th century, the concept of 'Third sector' gained the stage of the public sphere during the second half of the eighties, and enjoyed a golden age during the nineties. This was a period in which it was depicted as a sector of natural non-ideological social participation on a local level, and of pragmatic cooperation in the production of public good, etc. Its quality of being rooted in the local community, its ability to obtain voluntary resources and a special capacity to cooperatively contribute to social innovation, constituted the basis of the extraneousness of the Third sector to the ideological-political debate, and guaranteed it a sort of generalized consensus by the observers (Kendall 2009; Kendall, Knapp, 1995).

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But within a short space of time, political parties were using the concept of Third sector, to promote their ideas about social policies. And the political debate exploited the original image of the sector. According to Jeremy Kendall, the net effect of this debate, is the lost of the political innocence of the Third sector, and in some way, the end of its honeymoon age.

More recently, Peter Alcock (2010) suggested that the Third sector, far from being a real sector of the society, is devoid of a precise identity and a specificity characterizing it. It is, rather, the outcome of a series of tactical demands, exploited by a set of organisations that prefer to appear on the public stage with a specific label so as to interact with political and administrative organisations, in order to obtain legitimisation and financings. That is the reason why Alcock defines the concept of Third sector as a 'strategic unity'. By presenting themselves as a unity, the manifold set of organisations of the Third sector more effectively legitimise their social presence, and it allows such organisations to produce effective and influential discourses that can dominate the debate and create cultural hegemony. By providing an image of a growing reality, which is able to increase its income and number of operators and consumers on a yearly basis, organisations in the sector can obtain legitimisation and social advantages more easily. 'Never before perhaps has the sector felt so strong and been so respected; and these are powerful drivers for strategic unity, which even political change or reduction in financial support may find it difficult to displace' (Alcock, 2010: 20).

An analogous argument but with a more critical judgement towards the Third sector is that of Giovanni Moro (2014) in Italy, who sustains that the Third sector is an invention of Johns Hopkins research group in order to promote the recognition and facilitate the policies of a set of widely differing organisations. However, in Italy at least, the recognition of Third sector organisations produced an improper use of the 'brand'. According to Moro, the Baltimore researchers invented a 'non-something' that collects a patchwork of organisations that promotes the US model of welfare all over the world; and they did so using what Moro calls the ideology of social capital, the narrative of goodness and innocence, and the idea of good economy. Furthermore, Third sector organisations in Italy have actually produced confusion in the social policies, unfair competition and, sometimes, even illegality.

2. New perspectives of research on the Third sector

What reactions are there, in face of this loss of appeal of the image of the Third sector and the growth of an attitude of suspicion towards it among

social scientists themselves? What are the consequences for social research on the Third sector?

On the one hand, there are those (mainly among the umbrella organisations) who continue to invoke the theoretical need to identify a distinctive character of the Third sector, and some of them are referring to the sphere of values in order to provide a basis for this distinctiveness. On the other hand, there is a fringe of scientific literature that urges researchers to give up seeking aspects of specificity in the sector, justifying this attitude on the basis of the fact that 'there is a body of empirical research which, in summary, tends to challenge or otherwise complicate the claim that the Third sector is distinctive' (Macmillan, 2012: 8). Basically, there seems to be a recurrent ambivalence regarding the presence of a distinctive element of the Third sector, which is challenged by some outcomes of empirical research. Macmillan wonders about this ambivalence and about why there is such a focus on the part of commentators and professionals on demonstrating the distinctiveness of the Third sector; the reason why many commentators and practitioners seem to be so keen on distinctiveness to exist and to be demonstrated, when it may be something of a 'holy grail'? (Macmillan, 2012: 10).

So it seems necessary to give up the search for the distinctiveness of the Third sector in order to follow other goals of research. Substantially, the suspicion of the loss of political innocence opens up the way for an analysis of the stakeholders and the organisations in the Third sector, which is undertaken by some through Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1994). Under this perspective, we could basically observe the Third sector organisations in competition for their strategic positioning inside the sector and within society (Chew, Osborne, 2008, 2009). This perspective has induced researchers to study the Third sector through an analysis of its 'narratives', that is to say, of the contents of the communications about it, searching for the interests that animate it. Social research that uses the methodology of analysis of the narratives of the Third sector (see Needham, 2011; Needham, Glasby, 2014; Taylor, Parry, Alcock, 2012; Macmillan, McLaren, 2012; Teasdale, 2012) can find a valid tool 'to disclose' the hidden interests of the organisations in the Third sector. Nevertheless, at the same time, the use of such a method of analysis constitutes an interpretative frame that is potentially unable to perceive other aspects of reality apart from the interests of the actors. It thus remains caged in a 'monist' perspective with a critical mark which reads phenomena starting from the interests or the material bases of society, without grasping any further aspects.

But for this reason, also considering the period of change and crisis we are living in, it seems inappropriate to give up the idea of specificity in the

Third sector. Who, for instance, can give voice to the disadvantaged people? The media? The political parties? The unions? And why not the Third sector?

This is why, in this paper, I propose to observe another way of theorising and studying the distinctiveness of the Third sector. I refer to the sociological relational way of theorizing the Third sector. In particular, the relational approach under the perspective of Pierpaolo Donati.

The starting point of Donati's theory is the concept of social relationship. According to Donati, the social relationship is the object of analysis of sociology¹, and it is this element which cannot be further divided, that constitutes the fabric of society². Relational theory uses a critical realism approach, according to which, reality is ontologically differentiated. On the one hand, this induces relational sociology to distance itself from nominalism, empiricism and materialism, and on the other, allows it to opt for an ontology which 'attributes to the object of sociology, that is the social relation, a reality on its own account (*sui generis*), without, however, reifying it, or giving it connotations which go beyond its own nature, which philosophically – is that of an accidental way of being' (Donati, 1983: 111; translation by the author). As for reality *sui generis*, the social relationship has two aspects or dimensions that refer to each other: 'I. Relation as "reference to" [...]: in reality, and for the observer, A behaves or acts in reference to B, and there is a *symbolic conditional liberty* in this (*the active aspect of the relationship between A and B, on the part of A who is the observed term or agent*). II. Relationship as a "link between" [...]: in reality and for the observer, the interaction between A and B takes the shape of *tie or reciprocal dependence*, in other words there is a conditioned structural liberty (*passive aspect which involves both A and B in the same measure*)» (Donati, 1983: 204-205, translation and italics by the author).

Donati's relational approach semanticizes these two aspects using two neologisms that refer to the Latin root of the term 'relationship'. From the Latin *relatio*, Donati coins the neologisms *re-fero* and *re-ligo*, from which the referential semantics (*re-fero*) and the structural semantics (*re-ligo*) come. They both represent the social relationship and they can be used to identify the

¹ 'The social relation, not the individual, or the single act *qua talis*, constitutes the cell of the social system. However, this must not entail any reification of the concept of the social relation or of the reality designated by it' (Donati, 2011: 60).

² 'From its beginning the focus of sociology has rested on "social relations" and this continues to be the case. Yet it often appears that social relations are not well understood. Sometimes they are simply "presupposed", sometimes they are treated as "structures" or expressions of actions, sometimes they just happen, sometimes they are "events" or "communications". In most cases, sociologists treat them not as the main focus of analysis, but only as a resultant' (Donati, 2011: 3).

specificity of the Third sector, and to distinguish it from the other sectors of society.

- a. *The referential semantics*: understands social relations as *refero* (reference) or as referring something to something else' (Donati, 2011: 87) and it underlines the independence and the intentionality of the subject. Semantics centred on the processes of attribution of meaning is prevalent in sociology: comprehensive (Weber), phenomenological (Shutz) and interactionist (Mead, Goffman). It refers, essentially, to the faculty of elaboration of meaning, typical of the human race, which, through symbolic mediation produces specific forms, and generates meanings which are then 'externalised' in interactional processes.
- b. *The structural semantics*: understands social relations as *religo* (tie/link) or as a connection, limitation, reciprocal conditioning or structure, which is simultaneously constraining and enabling' (Donati, 2011: 87) and underlines the dependence of the subject. This second type of semantics is prevalent in holistic and structuralist sociology, like that of Durkheim, and the critical ones of Marxist origin, and functionalism in all its different versions (Parsons, Luhmann, etc.).

According to this perspective, in order to grasp the meaning of social relationship, it is necessary to keep two apparently contradictory aspects/dimensions in mind simultaneously: a) the dimension of *intentionality, autonomy, activity and independence of the subject*; and b) the dimension of the social bond i.e. the dimension of the subject's dependence and passivity. We could say that there is no authentic social relationship if the actors are not free to autonomously attribute a meaning to the relationship and to invest their intentionality and their motivation into it; but at the same time, there cannot be any authentic relationship if the subject that grants his/her meaning to the relationship does not do that by taking into consideration the bond constituted by the relationship and by the intentions and motivations of the other. So, according to the relational approach, we can say that the *sui generis* reality of social relations can be seen as the emergent effect/reality of the interaction between the two apparently contradictory dimensions of *refero* and *religo*. In order to clarify the ontological domain of social relation, Donati writes elsewhere: 'What, therefore, is this reality [of the social relation *ed.note*]?' It is the reality of a relation between us and things, between ourselves and others that is not a logical relation, nor a merely psychic one. A *social* relation is distinguished from logical and/or psychic relations in that it:

- refers, i.e. makes symbolic references,
- connects or structurally binds, and

- in being a reciprocal action (the Italian *rel-azione*), emerges out of mutual interaction' (Donati, 2011: 124).

3. The relational approach to Third sector

If such a semanticization of the relationship has some plausibility, it is possible to hypothesize that social sectors of modern and contemporary society, like Market and State, structured themselves in such a way as to stress and institutionalize individual independence (*re-fero*), while the Third sector should play the role of underlining the bond dimension (*re-ligo*) of the social relationship itself in the public sphere. Fundamentally, the sectors of society would be nothing but concepts worked out in/by modern society. The task of the different sectors is that of institutionalizing the semantics (*re-fero* and *re-ligo*) of the social relationship according to different quotas.

From this point of view, unlike some authors of the 'fall of the Third sector fortune' did, it is not particularly meaningful to sustain that the sector does not have its own distinctiveness, because empirical research shows up ambivalences of the Third sector in realizing its distinctive characters, such as, for instance, the reference to specific values by those who operate in it. Indeed, it does not seem that the empirical evidence provides clearer indications of the distinctiveness of sectors like the Market and modern State. In terms of the promotion of its characteristic values, we cannot say that the organisations of the Market are clear promoters of efficiency and optimal distribution of wealth especially at this time, just as it is not possible to state that public administration always acts to promote equality among citizens. In relation to this, there are frequent individual behaviours that in practice contradict the ideal-typical distinctiveness of sectors like the State and the modern Market.

At the same time, the hypothesis from the bourdieusian perspective whereby the socio-cultural structures made available to (or imposed on) individual actors by the various social subsystems (state, market, third and fourth sectors) are nothing but tools strategically used by individuals to position their interests in the best possible way within the 'field' of social action; and even though it is scientifically legitimate, it does not seem to be endowed with more solid scientific bases than other sociological approaches. Making the pursuit of interest as the presupposition of action is no more solid than using the semantics of *re-ligo* of the social relationship as a characteristic of the Third sector. In any case both are theoretical presuppositions.

Starting from such theoretical premises, Donati's relational sociology works out the theory of the Third sector through the use of another concept, that of the '*Social private*' (Donati, 1978, 1997, 2004). The Social private

concept identifies the relations that are privately established and managed, and guided by pro-social values. Social private furnishes the heuristic tools to observe those social relations where the actors act neither for profit (Market), nor on command (State). Basically it is a ‘third point of view’ on the social relationship, different from the individualistic and the holistic ones. Social private culture is at work when the social actors combine the semantics of *re-fero* (continuous reference of each social actor to the others) with that of *re-ligo* (recognition by the social actors of the social bond intrinsic to each social relation), paying particular attention to enhance the bond aspects of the social relationship.

TABLE 1. *Dimensions of social relationship and sectors of society.*

Sectors of society	Underlined dimensions of relationship
Market State	<i>Re-fero</i> : independence, intentionality, freedom, rights
Third sector Fourth sector (informal relations, family, groups, community, friends)	<i>Re-ligo</i> : social bond, reciprocity, dependence, cooperation

In short, Social private is a culture of relationship that commits the actors themselves to acting together, according to the principles of reciprocity that imply the assumption of mutual responsibility inside the sphere of Social private dimension and of social responsibility in the public sphere.

Entering social relationships (face to face or mediated social relationships too; primary or secondary social relations) individual actors meet some *re-fero* aspects (culture, language, values, rules, codes, meanings, etc.) and some *re-ligo* aspects (network structures, social structures, etc.), and interacting together, by means of *re-fero* and *re-ligo* aspects of social relations, they experience their relationships and they can evaluate them as a common good³, elaborating a Social private culture, with its specific values, rules, codes, resources, etc. in keeping with the idea of the relation as a common good. In this sense, Social private is a culture that gives value to the social bond starting from the experience of social interaction, and not from the individual point of view, like many modern political theories, or from the action oriented to understanding, like in the perspective of the communicative action theory of Habermas.

³ Considering the social relations as a good, as a value, it is the same thing that considering them as a capital, a social capital (see paragraph 4).

According to Donati, the culture of Social private raises ‘relational’ (2013, cap. 7) ‘social subjectivities’ (2000, paragraph 3.7) that act at the micro and meso level of the social structure. In the field of these social relational subjectivities, the single actors think about their relationship with *Alter*, considering it as a different reality from Self. Thus, it is neither a projection of *Ego* on *Alter* or vice versa, nor a mutual expectation, but it is a ‘We’. It is a work of social reflectivity by the actions, according to which ‘We’ is not to be understood as ‘an external entity that dominates them and to which they belong just for mere identification or even subordination’ (Donati, 2000: 225) – that is what is required for public relations within state and public authorities. It is to be understood as being a *common symbol*. Furthermore, the ‘We’ symbol is communal not because it is understood in the same way by the actors, but because it is ‘represented and perceived as a common task (*communus*), consisting in having and being in a given relationship (the *We*-relation): the common task is about fulfilling the *munus* together, i.e. relationally, referring to each others in the net that binds them’ (Donati, 2013: 230). Social private is a step further from an individualistic conception of the *self* and at the same time goes beyond the functionalist and holistic conception of the *self*, and this is what happens when individual actors experience themselves linked to others through their reciprocal relations (Morandi, 2010: cap. 2), i.e. when they represent (perceive) themselves involved in a ‘We relation’.

When it has to present itself to the outside, in the public sphere, *Social private culture becomes Third sector* (i.e. a set of organisations that in Italy have the legal form of pro-social associations, voluntary bodies, NGOs, foundations and social cooperatives – Donati, 2004: 26). That is when Social private culture has to say what it does and how it does it. It becomes Third sector to be both recognized and legitimized. Basically, in order to act in the public sphere, the Social private culture is ‘forced’ in a sense to be institutionalized and to take on specific organisational forms that make its culture, normativity, operational organisation and societal role evident to the interlocutors. By assuming specific organisational forms of the Third sector, Social private culture becomes an object of observation both by the members inside the Third sector as well as by other sectors of society. On the operational level, however, it can betray its symbolic matrix.

4. Empirical evidence from the Italian Third sector

Following the perspective of the relational approach, some surveys on the Italian Third sector were carried out during the first decade of the century by a specific research team. We can observe the empirical evidence mostly collected from samples of the Italian population.

The first survey conducted by this research team that identifies itself in the relational approach, was carried out in 2001 on a sample of the Italian population (Donati, Colozzi, 2002). This sample was spilt into two sub-samples, made up of 800 interviewed members and 600 non-members of Third sector organisations. The study developed from the hypothesis that Social private culture was mainly present within the sub-sample of interviewees active in Third sector organisations, and that such culture expressed itself through an attitude oriented towards civil society, generalized interpersonal trust and social responsibility.

Data collected in the research demonstrate that social private culture does seem to be more present within the sub-sample of Third sector members. The members of the Third sector organisations, as shown in table 2, display the percentage values recorded from the 'high' level of a series of indices, and reveal greater percentages at the high level of civic sense index (30,9% against 22,2%), generalized trust (36,5% against 23,5%), orientation to civil economy (27,4% against 9,3%), post-materialistic culture (61,8% against 46,3%). Whereas the sub-sample of the non-members of Third sector organisations shows greater percentages at the high level of indices of particularism and individualistic culture.

TABLE 2. Percentages reached by the high levels of different cultural indices in two samples (members and non members of Third sector organisations).

High level in the indices of:	Members	Non Members
Civiness	30.9%	22.2%
Generalized trust	36.5%	23.5%
Culture of particularism	22.8%	31.2%
Culture of individualism	5.8%	11.3%
Orientation towards civil economy	27.4%	9.3%
Post-materialistic culture	61.8%	46.3%
Private solidarity	10.1%	15.8%
Public solidarity	25.2%	19.2%
Subsidiary solidarity	26.5%	16.8%

Source: our analysis of Donati and Colozzi's (2002) data.

Moreover, focusing on the symbolic representation of social solidarity, it is noticeable that some privatistic conception of solidarity prevails among non-members. The index of such a conception was calculated through the level of agreement with the following statements: '1. solidarity is about giving to people who are poor or in state of need; 2. a person of solidarity is

someone who loves those who are close to him above all; 3. in order to reduce poverty in our country, each person should devote himself to producing the maximum amount of wealth possible'. On the contrary, a subsidiary conception of solidarity prevails among the members of the Third sector. Subsidiary solidarity was measured evaluating the degree of agreement with the following statements '1. solidarity is about coming together with others to solve some problems together; 2. a person of solidarity is someone who is committed to the interests of the community to which he belongs; 3. in order to reduce poverty in our country, we need to be people who help each other'.

Further research was carried out in 2003, aiming at a deeper analysis of the cultural orientations of the participants to the Third sector (Donati, Colozzi, 2004a, 2004b). A sample of 2,326 members of Third sector organisations was used to this purpose. The construction of this sample was done in the following manner: 115 Italian towns were randomly selected, classified by geographical area, dimension and urban/rural structure. Then, 588 Third sector organisations were randomly selected from those towns and ranked by organisational typology. This process originated the distribution shown in table 3. Some interviewees were randomly selected from the lists of the members of these organisations, and 5 sub-samples were created (508 members of voluntary organisations; 846 members of associations for social promotion; 433 members of social cooperatives; 234 participants in family associations, and 305 councillors of foundations).

TABLE 3. *Distribution of the different samples.*

5 samples	Organisations	Interviewees
Organisations of volunteers	127	508
Social promotion associations	213	846
Social cooperatives	111	433
Family associations	60	234
Foundations	77	305
Total	588	2326

Source: our analysis of Donati and Colozzi's (2004a) data.

The data analysis confirms a fact observed in 2001, i.e. about 40% of the interviewees favour a subsidiary culture equivalent to the Social private one. Nevertheless, among the associates, a bureaucratic and statist kind of culture prevails. Moreover, data analysis and the distinction between different organisational types brings up a significant internal difference. Thus, a greater presence of statist culture arises among the participants in associations for

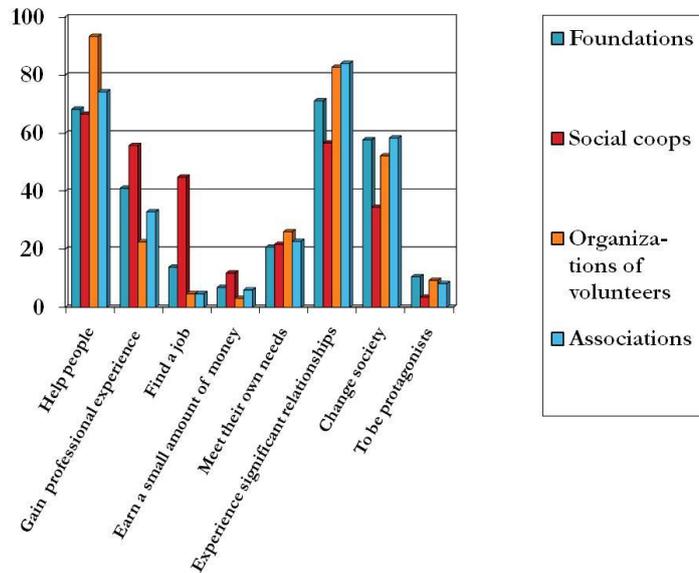
social promotion (54,6%), and, at the same time, a minimal percentage of subsidiary (Social private) culture emerges (36,5%). A similar distribution is observed among social cooperatives. On the contrary, the organisations where subsidiary culture is greater, are those of the volunteers, even though it is combined with high levels of bureaucratic statist culture. In all the samples, liberal culture (Market) is low, with values at around 10%.

TABLE 4. Percentages reached by the high levels of different cultural indices in five samples of members of Third sector organisations.

High level in the index of	Foundations	Family Ass.	Social coops	Org. Volunteers	Associations
Bureaucratic Culture	48.3%	48.3%	47.6%	46.0%	54.6%
Liberal Culture	9.6%	9.4%	12.5%	10.1%	8.9%
Subsidiary Culture	42.1%	42.3%	39.9%	44.0%	36.5%

Source: our analysis of Donati and Colozzi's (2004) data.

FIGURE 1. – In your opinion, why do people engage in Third sector organisations?



Source: our analysis of Donati and Colozzi's (2004) data.

In addition, the analysis of the representation of the Third sector by the members of the different organisational typologies shows a certain cultural differentiation within the Third sector (Figure 1). Members of voluntary organisations actually think that those working in the Third sector are mainly motivated by the desire to help people and experience significant relationships. Whereas high percentages of associate-workers of social coops think that people join Third sector organisations in order to find a job or obtain professional experience. On the contrary, members of foundations and pro-social associations prevalently believe that those who engage in the Third sector aim at changing society and experiencing significant relationships.

Internal differentiation inside the Third sector could be an index of evolution of the sector itself, but at the same time, it could be an indication of the loss of identity and specificity (if any). From this perspective, research warned against the risk of loss of identity of the Third sector. This, indeed, does not necessarily mean that the organisational form of the Third sector automatically produces the culture of Social private.

For the above mentioned reasons, the following work of the Italian research team that uses a relational approach focused on the role that the Third sector plays in enhancing social capital as a factor of social cohesion. Studies tried to investigate the conditions in which Third sector organisations can produce social capital for their members, users and society in general, hence increasing the orientation towards trust, cooperation, reciprocity, and compliance with norms. Trust, cooperation, and reciprocity are all concepts concerned with recognizing social relationship as a value in itself. These notions can be considered as proxy variables of the culture of Social private.

One of the first pieces of research carried out in this perspective (Donati, Colozzi, 2006) defined social capital as neither an individual nor a collective property, but as a property of social relationships; property not of all of them, but of those which attribute value (capital) to social relationships themselves and enhance them as if they were relational goods. Starting from this definition, social capital was measured keeping the different levels separated: primary and secondary capital, that is, social capital of primary face-to-face relations on the one hand, and secondary relations on the other hand. In turn, these two levels are split into: family and kinship (primary social capital), broader community, and generalised social capital (secondary social capital). Two dimensions were used to measure the different levels of social capital. Trust and mutual help (reciprocity).

Data analysis demonstrated that members of Third sector organisations have a greater level of social capital than non-members, as for all the kinds of social capital (family, kinship, broader community, and generalised).

Nevertheless, statistics regarding association among the analysed variables do not show any particular high values (cf. V of Cramèr).

TABLE 5. Percentages reached by the medium and high levels of different indices of social capital in the cross-tabulation with the variable Third sector organisation membership.

Medium and high levels in the indices of:	Members of Third sector organisations		
	Non Members	Members of 1 organisations	Members of more than 1 organisations
Family social capital ^{4*}	88,2%	92,5%	93,3%
Kinship social capital ^{5**}	67,3%	76,5%	75,0%
Social capital of the broader community ^{6***}	46,1%	58,8%	55,7%
Generalized social capital ^{7****}	47,7%	56,0%	55,2%

* Chi-squared = 9,18; df = 2; $p = 0,01$; V of Cramèr = 0,068.

** Chi- squared = 13,87; df = 2; $p = 0,01$; V of Cramèr = 0,084.

***Chi- squared = 20,00; df = 2; $p < 0,001$; V of Cramèr = 0,105.

**** Chi- squared = 10,02; df = 2; $p = 0,007$; V of Cramèr = 0,071.

Source: our analysis of Donati and Colozzi (2006) data.

As stated by the coordinators of the research on social capital and the Third sector, ‘people who devote themselves to civic associations are endowed with a higher social capital than the control sample has, even though data do not always confirm the correlation between associative and civic or generalised social capital’ (Donati, Colozzi, 2006: 282, translated by the author). This does not necessarily mean that experiencing the Third sector is a variable that socialises individuals to develop generalised interpersonal trust,

⁴The index of family social capital was created by using a series of almost cardinal variables (scale 0-10): trust in cohabitants’ relatives; help received by cohabitants’ relatives; trust in relatives’ friends; help received by relatives’ friends.

⁵The index of kinship social capital was created by using a series of almost cardinal variables (scale 0-10): trust in relatives; help received by relatives.

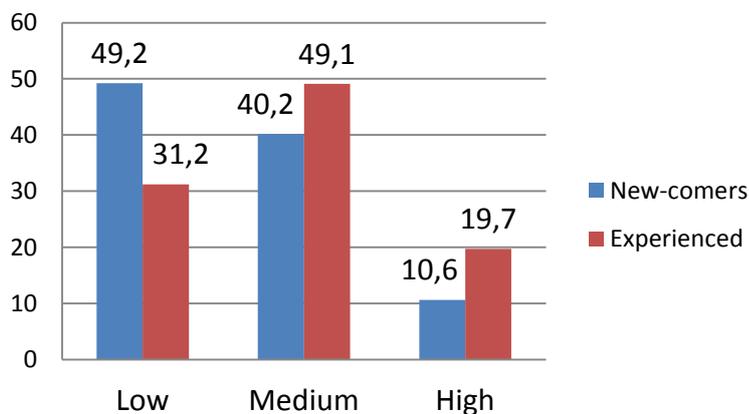
⁶The index of broader community social capital was created by using a series of almost cardinal variables (scale 0-10): help received by friends, help received by neighbourhoods; help received by colleagues; help received from people suggested by friends, neighbourhoods, and colleagues.

⁷The index of generalised social capital was created by using a series of almost cardinal variables (scale 0-10): generalised interpersonal trust; help from authorities in developing mutual interpersonal trust (‘In your opinion, do public authorities help people to have mutual trust? Please answer using a scale from 0 to 10 ...’).

cooperation, reciprocity, and civil culture. Data essentially confirm that the Third sector is not automatically a generator of civil culture and social cohesion, but rather, its capacity to act, depends to a greater extent on the degree of organizational interiorization of culture of Social private and on the ability to understand social relations as a value, a resource itself, that is to say, as social capital.

In a more recent work on volunteers involved in Expo Milano 2015, which was not done by the team using the relational sociology approach (Ambrosini, 2016), we had further confirmation of the perspective which has just been described. The research divided the respondents into two categories: experienced volunteers, i.e. volunteers who had already worked as volunteers, and new-comers, i.e. volunteers who had no previous experience of volunteering. The sample of the first wave of data collection counted 2.376 respondents who voluntarily responded to the questionnaires sent to about 6.000 expo volunteers. 66% of the sample was composed of females, and 65% were students, the mean age was 27.6 years. It was, therefore, a very specific sample, composed of 59% experienced volunteers and 41% new-comers.

FIGURE 2. Civic participation index (% values).



Source: Morgano and Stanzani 2016

Data analysis has shown that experienced volunteers have a higher level in the index of civic participation (see figure 2), while there is a slight difference between the two kinds of volunteers in the means of generalized trust (table 6). So data show a relation between volunteering and civic culture, while there is not a clear and marked relation between volunteering and social capital.

TABLE 6. Means of the level of trust in different kinds of people and institutions.

	Volunteers	
	Experienced	New-comers
Interpersonal generalized trust	7,3	6,9
Trust in public institutions	6,3	6,0
Trust in for-profit organizations	6,9	6,8
Trust in religious institutions	6,0	5,5
Trust in nonprofit organisations	7,8	7,5
Trust in political parties	4,0	3,8
Trust in unions	4,7	4,6

Summarising we can say that research confirms that in some way the experience in volunteering is linked to civic culture, but the relations (volunteering, civic culture and social trust) are not so clear, and, above all, as we have shown previously, empirical evidence did not succeed in demonstrating if it is the experience in Third sector organisations that produces social capital and civic culture, or if there is an auto-selection process that influences volunteers, who already have a greater civic culture (or also Social private culture), when they enter Third sector organisations.

There is a huge amount of literature around this theme. Starting from the works of Robert Putnam (1993; 2000; Putnam, Feldstein, Cohen, 2003), there is a stream of social research that on the one hand, considers Third sector organisations to be an agency that re-produces – by means of socialisation processes – social capital. The process of socialization works by means of the communal work done by members of different cultures and social classes inside the grass root organizations of the Third sector. On the other hand, other authors (Rothstein, Stolle, 2002, 2003, 2008; Rothstein, Uslaner, 2005; Stolle, 1998, 2001, 2003) refuse this hypothesis, sustaining – in favour of public institutions – that experiencing the relation with civil servants (who work respecting the laws, and are guided by the principles of efficacy, efficiency and a universalistic attitude towards citizens) can re-produce (socialise) trust and a sense of safeness in citizens. While people who experience particularistic attitudes of civil servants, in a patronage system, generate a sense of mistrust and insecurity, that leads them to look for a psychological climate of confidence in small particularistic groups.

A third approach to the role of Third sector organisations is that of Wollebaek and Selle (2002, 2004, 2008), that on the basis of empirical evidence, sustain that instead of the good performance of public organizations, is the good professional performance of Third sector

organizations (above all the big, the umbrella and the top level ones) that re-produce generalized trust and social capital. Finally there is also the hypothesis of Mark Hooge (2003, 2008; Hooge, Quintelier, 2013), who agrees with those who sustain the auto-selection position. Contra Putnam, these authors say that when people enter Third sector organizations they already dispose of a civic culture and a certain rate of social capital. So it is not possible to sustain that Third sector organizations re-produce social capital. However, contra Rothstein, Hooge sustains that upon entering Third sector organizations, people who already dispose of a good level of civic culture and social capital, find a context that helps them to reinforce their cultural identity and attitudes towards other people and society.

So we can say that looking at the different Italian research analysed, and at the literature on the socialising effect of Third sector organisations, we can find confirmation that Social private culture is not an exclusive prerogative of the Third sector, which indeed seems to be characterised by a variety of cultural orientations and lack of a common symbolic nucleus. Another piece of research of the relational approach Italian network offers further confirmation of this perspective and proposes a step further in the reflection on the Third sector. In their quantitative research on a sample of 230 managers of the Third sector, Colozzi and Prandini (2008) analyse leadership styles and then propose to consider the Third sector as a *multi-verse* whose name seems to play a role in reducing complexity, but lacks the ability to define a common cultural identity. Whereas the opposite could be true, i.e. the Social private culture can be the common cultural identity that informs the action of some of the Third sector organisations.

5. Discussions and conclusions

In face of the recent appearance of a critical and skeptical perspective towards the Third sector, relational sociology suggests a theory that allows one to hypothesize the existence of its specificity. Nevertheless, this specificity does not strictly depend on the organizational structure of the sector. That is to say, the bond of non-profit, the duty to use a certain minimum number of voluntary workers, or to perform one's own activities in the fields of social utility and solidarity does not necessarily produce an (ethical) specificity of the Third sector. It is rather the cultural orientations of the participants in the sector organisations that foster an operative specificity, without, however, guaranteeing it.

Studies performed in Italy by the research group using a relational approach confirmed the existence of a cultural orientation, mainly inclined towards civiness, generalised interpersonal trust, or post-materialistic values,

among the members of the Third sector organisations. However, a process of internal cultural differentiation arose, which prevented the Third sector being seen as an independent universe, but rather, as a ‘multi-verse’ instead, populated by different cultural orientations.

This proves that those who have a skeptical approach to the Third sector and highlight the lack of specificity, pointing out its contradictions, precariousness, noncompliance to norms etc. are right. Nevertheless, the presence of such critical elements risks the incurrance of excessively skeptical judgements, along with a defeatist and discrediting attitude towards non-profit organisations, that ends up overshadowing its animating cultural dimension. This cultural orientation stresses the bond aspects of social relationship and balances the role played by some sectors of society such as Market and State, which mainly emphasize the independence dimension of people involved in these social relationships.

That is why it is reasonable to propose the idea of *re-ligo* specificity for future research on the Third sector. The problem, however, is how to treat the Third sector in social policies, given its specificity and ambivalence, and how to empirically recognize and foster its relational distinctiveness.

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