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ABSTRACT

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SESSION V: FAMILY VALUE AS AN INSTITUTION

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IS THE ITALIAN FAMILY STILL AN INSTITUTION? FINDINGS FROM THE
EUROPEAN VALUES STUDY

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Description of the theoretical framework

The concept of institution, one of the main issues in the social sciences, has been developed in a
number of anthropological, economic, juridical, political, and sociological institutional theories.
There is no overarching theory, however, to explain what institutions are for, how they are formed
and why they change. These multiple theories can actually be divided into two groups according
to their individualistic or holistic approach. Nevertheless, even scholars using the same approach can
differ sharply from one another, to the extent that the institutional issue has been defined a “Tower
of Babel”. Despite the different approaches and their many contentious aspects, at least two points
in the debate on institutions have attracted wide consensus:

1. the modernisation of society coincides with the progressive decline of its institutions;
2. increasingly sharp differentiation processes in modern/contemporary society cause conflict
between institutions which, instead of producing integration, contribute to accelerating social
disruption (Baumann, 2003).

By using a historical and sociological analysis, relational sociology (Donati 2011) has entered this
debate, with the proviso that assessing the extent of the institutional crisis can have different
applications according to the institutions considered. This set, the following conclusions have been
reached:
1. the mutual distancing of reference values and ensuing norms produces fragmentation on the one hand and new relationships on the other;  
2. societies cannot eliminate institutions, not only because social order and cooperation would become impossible or at least difficult and extremely costly but also because human beings could not develop to their full potential and individuality.  

Relational sociology, in fact, defines social institutions as social relationships developing structurally, as restraints to action or regular patterns of behaviour, culturally, as cognitive conventions, and as value-related behavioural norms. Thus institutions are the main focal points in social organisation, as they exist in all societies and relate to the universal issues upon which social life is ordered.  

As to the peculiar institution represented by the family, the need for a comprehensive approach to it is acutely felt in the contemporary, globalised scenario, characterised by heterogeneous cultural models and diverse family forms. Such pluralism stems from two sets of reasons: a progressive differentiation in the dimensions that make up the family (inter-gender and inter-generational relationships) and an increasing complexity in the underlying relational networks.  

In the last few years, some major sociology scholars have stressed different aspects of the fact that, with the weakening of a shared value system on which to base one’s life, individuals are forced to rely on themselves in directing their choices: even family bonds lose their reference to tradition and the forms they assume find their sole justification in the individual: self-fulfilment becomes the individual’s primary goal, to which all relationships are instrumental. Thus family bonds are notably weakened, in the conviction that they belong to an obsolete past. This cultural model is the so-called “individualisation”.  

Growing numbers of scholars, however, have expressed scepticism about individualisation as an interpretative criterion. The need for a change of perspective seems justified by empirical longitudinal studies showing the persistence of marriage and the family (Widmer, Jallinoia 2011). On the basis of these empirical data, some contemporary family sociologists (Smart, Widmer, Jallinoja) have attempted to outline a more thorough and sophisticated way of conceptualising and representing family life, whilst seeking new ways of identifying the multidimensionality of relationships; this has led them to use the concept of relationality as a basis for developing a theoretical approach to counter the dominant individualisation hypothesis.  

**Research hypotheses**  
The research questions we want to address are:  
1. Is the (marriage-based) family still considered a valid institution by Italians and Europeans?  
2. Is it possible to identify specific elements linked to a strong idea of the family? Which elements?  
The research hypotheses prompted by these questions are the following:  
1. we expect the (marriage-based) family to be still considered a valid institution by Italians and Europeans;  
2. we can identify specific structural and cultural elements associated with a strong idea of the family. In particular, we expect the presence of children and the stability of the marriage bond experienced in the family of origin to be the decisive structural elements, with strong religiosity and value attributed to the couple relationship (as oppose to individual satisfaction) as the crucial cultural elements.  

**Description of the data and the research methods**  
This contribution is based on data from the European Values Study (EVS), a transnational, longitudinal research program on human values in Europe, conducted in 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2008 to investigates the moral, religious, societal, political, occupational and family values of Europeans.
The EVS considers value orientations, i.e., the deep-seated criteria underlying individual and collective actions and referring to what is ultimately regarded as true and fair, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, rather than considering prejudices, stereotypes and unconscious beliefs. The EVS’ fourth wave (2008), considered here, covers 47 European Countries/Regions. It is based on representative multi-stage or stratified random samples of the over-18 population of each country, totalling 67,492 interviewees. The Italian sample includes 1,519 people (for further details visit http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu evs surveys survey-2008.html).

We have adopted a European perspective, focusing on the 28 members of the EU (1 July 2013): Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Holland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia.

Moreover, an index to measure (as high, medium, low) the importance attributed to the family as a social institution was devised together with clusters correlated to it, in order to check the importance of the family as a social institution and its structural and cultural characteristics in both Italy and Europe 28. The index was devised according to the following variables:

- *How important is the Family?* (mode: very important)
- *Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “marriage is an out-dated institution?”* (mode: disagree)
- *Do you agree or disagree with those who say that, in order to grow into a happy adult a child needs a family with both parents?* (mode: tend to agree).

**Most important findings**

*Family Values between Persistence and Change*

The survey in question (EVS 2009) follows those carried out in 1981, 1990 and 1999, thus allowing a diachronic comparison in order to identify the transformation in time of value orientations affecting the family, work, friends networks and the religious sphere.

*The Importance of the Family*

To Italians, the family represents the fundamental value: 91% of them give it great importance, a trend unchanged since 1999 and slightly above the ratio recorded in 1990. Moreover, compared to the other European Countries, Italy stands above average (84%) in attributing “great importance” to the family(Pollini G., Pretto A., Rovati G. 2012).

*The Validity of Marriage as an Institution*

In 2009, 76% of Italians (one percentage point above the European average of 75%) considered marriage still valid as an institution, an opinion shared especially by women and the oldest section of the population. Conversely, in Europe, particularly in France (35%), Luxembourg (34%) and Belgium (33.5), marriage was often considered an out-dated institution. Besides, 62% of Italians generally agreed on marriage, or a stable relationship, as essential to happiness.

*Importance of the Family as an Institution*

The index measuring the importance of the family as an institution shows that 65.6% (i.e., more than half the number) of Italians are set on a high value, 26.1% on a low value and the remaining 8.3% on a medium value. Compared with Italy, Europe has a higher percentage of people in the lower index (37.8%), fewer in the higher (51.6%), and slightly more (10.6%) in the medium. Through the analysis of clusters correlated to the HIGH and the LOW values of the index, it is possible to detect the structural and cultural characteristics defining the two groups.

Those acknowledging the importance of the family as an institution (HIGH index) tend to be very religious people, married, with children, convinced of the importance and the resilience of the marriage pact (they do not justify divorce), pensioners aged 66+ and, especially, women.
counterparts (LOW index) tend to be men, non-religious persons, inclined towards cohabitation, justifying abortion and separation, homosexual behaviours, considering the presence of children irrelevant to the couple relationship; besides, this group is characterised by a larger number of separated/divorced and unmarried people who usually work. No particular differences have emerged between Italy and Europe.

Conclusions / discussion

To conclude, the results of the analysis confirm the initial hypothesis, in line with some sociological theories (Halman, 1995; Pollini, 2012). The marriage-based family is still considered a relevant institution by Europeans and especially Italians. The presence of children, the institutionalisation of the marriage bond (matrimony) and a strong religiosity define the great importance attributed to the family as an institution.

References