

# HUMANISM IN AN AFTER-MODERN SOCIETY: THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE SEMINAR REPORT

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The eponymous seminar was held on March 6, 2017 at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw. It gathered participants from several academic and research centres in Poland. For the most part, the seminar consisted of two lectures by Pierpaolo Donati, a longtime professor of the University of Bologna and the founder of the new relational paradigm in contemporary sociology. The lectures—“The Possibility of Humanism After Modernity: The Relational Perspective” and “Human Fulfilment in a Morphogenic Society: Challenges and Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint”—were focused on the humanistic dimension of the relational approach. The topic of the seminar was introduced by Elżbieta Halas and comments were provided by Michał Federowicz, Aleksander Manterys (both from the Polish Academy of Sciences), and Tadeusz Szawiel (from the University of Warsaw). The lectures and comments were followed by a general discussion.

Pierpaolo Donati is perhaps one of the most prominent contemporary thinkers. His scientific output is enormous and impressive: dozens of books written as sole author or co-author, more than fifty edited monographs, and several hundred articles. Pierpaolo Donati’s book *Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale* (1983) has been a seminal work in the orientation known as the Italian relational turn, and his publications in English—such as *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (2011) and *The Relational Subject* (co-authored with Margaret S. Archer, 2015)—have effectively brought this orientation into the world of international scholarship. This is

significant not only for the reconstruction and further development of the social sciences as human sciences, but above all for our efforts to face the problems of our time, which require us to focus on the transformations of social relations and to utilize the relational epistemological perspective offered by the relational theory of society.

The uniqueness of Pierpaolo Donati's creative output lies in the fact that it is a combination of theoretical achievements with extensive empirical research on topics such as family, generations, health, non-governmental organizations, citizenship and, more broadly, the issues of freedom and control amid complex cultural and social processes. His analyses have allowed him to work out new concepts and give new meanings to terms already functioning in the social sciences, e.g., relational goods and relational identity.

Professor Donati has served as president of the Italian Sociological Association and as a member of the board of the International Institute of Sociology. The awards and distinctions he has received include a United Nations Organization acknowledgment, an Honoris Causa Doctorate of the Pontifical Lateran University, and election to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. Founder of the Centre for Social Policy Studies and subsequently the Centre of Studies on Social Innovation at the University of Bologna, Pierpaolo Donati has contributed immensely to the development of the social sciences, and to the understanding of specific social and cultural processes in what he calls the *dopo-moderno*.

### **/// The After-Modern**

The term "dopo-moderno" ("after-modern") differs in meaning from the term "postmodern" introduced by Jean-François Lyotard; the latter has become a designator of the specific cultural changes of our time, accumulating since the 1960s. Unlike the ambiguity of the prefix "post" in terms which have proliferated in discourse on postmodernity, to mention only post-truth and post-memory, the term "after-modern" indicates a complete break of continuity both in regard to modernity and to postmodernity. (In recent years, the term "trans-modern society" has also appeared in Pierpaolo Donati's works.)

Pierpaolo Donati takes a different position as compared to the interpretations that dominated the social theory of such critics of modernity as Alain Touraine, Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck, or Anthony Giddens. He goes beyond the concepts of postmodernity as the climax of modernity

and beyond the concept of the unfinished project of modernity. Thus, the term “after-modern” should not be confused with the term “postmodern” and with Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, since the leitmotif of both is cultural relativity, coupled with the destabilization of social institutions.

Pierpaolo Donati attempts to overcome the limitations of two rigid conceptual frameworks within which interpretations of contemporary changes have been performed: the collectivist and the individualist one. According to the first standpoint, postmodernism manifests itself as the destruction of normativity in society. According to the second, postmodernism is the affirmation of differences and of the culture of expressive, unrestricted individualism.

The concept of the after-modern refers to the new possibilities and alternatives which are revealed when modern cultural and social processes are perceived from a relational perspective.

### **/// Humanistic Sociology in a New Sense**

One feels compelled to ask whether the diagnoses and prognoses formulated by Pierpaolo Donati and summarized in the concept of *dopo-moderno* actually allow us to better understand ongoing processes, and whether the fragmentation of the modern order of institutions and culture is really accompanied by the emergence of new social forms, new networks of solidarity and non-utilitarian social exchanges—in other words, a new culture of relations. Hence, the transformation of social relations is a crucial matter when discussing after-modern relations, which, according to Pierpaolo Donati, should generate relational goods, strengthen relational identities, realize the norm of meta-reflexivity, and refer to values.

A special challenge is associated with the concept of a new cultural model, or a new cultural matrix, and the concept of transcendence in relations. A trans-modern social configuration would have the following five characteristic features:

- the relational character of the person;
- a relationally defined common good;
- a positive dialectic of relational identity;
- an assessment of relations according to their significance and ethical value;
- the distinguishing of every social relation from other relations on the basis of their purpose (Terenzi et al. 2016: 77).

The emergence of such a configuration and semantics of relations is a matter for debate.

Pierpaolo Donati's relational sociology is a humanistic sociology in a new sense of the word. Thus, it necessarily draws the attention of those who have observed the disappearance of humanistic sociology—a sociology to which the so-called interpretative turn has contributed—along with a kind of amputation of the vital problems of culture and values. Polish sociology once used to focus on relations and was distinguished by the humanistic approach in its different variants, to mention only Florian Znaniecki, Stanisław Ossowski and Maria Ossowska, as well as Paweł Rybicki. Interest in the humanistic relational sociology of Pierpaolo Donati may also create a chance for the regeneration of this tradition of Polish sociology.

Pierpaolo Donati proposes a new humanism, or neo-humanism, the assumptions and implications of which deserve thorough consideration and critical debate. At this point, it is necessary to specify the hallmarks of classic humanism. Florian Znaniecki drew an opposition between the humanistic current begun by Renaissance thinkers and the dogmatic scholastic thought, which—as Pierpaolo Donati notes—constituted an important cultural matrix for Western societies. In the modern discussion about reconstructing sociology after postmodernism, criticism is directed against the current of anti-humanism, which expresses itself in the negation of the Cartesian *cogito*, or the self as the centre of consciousness. The new humanistic approaches, including Pierpaolo Donati's relational sociology, postulate a concept of the person as a moral agent and a relational subject. This concept must be proven in analyses of ongoing social and cultural changes as important for reflections on the *dopo-moderno*.

### **/// Leading Ideas of the Lectures**

In his first lecture during the seminar, Pierpaolo Donati discussed the contemporary challenges to traditional European humanism posed in Western culture by the so-called death of the human subject. He observed that due to the processes of modernization, and due to the celebrations of the alleged advent of the post-human and trans-human era, the human person is presently deemed to be too fragile, and thus to be in need of transcendence. Yet in Donati's view, this transcendence should not be sought primarily in the enhancement of individuals, or in the introduction of still new technologies, but in the sphere of interpersonal relationships.

Human beings are exceptional in their relational constitution, which has an internal dimension (the personal body/mind relationship) as well as an external one (the relationships with others and with the world). Only through that particular constitution are we able to exercise the specific causal powers necessary to generate relational goods, such as love or trust. It is this understanding that Donati submitted as a way to comprehend the human capability for transcendence and flourishing, and a way to preserve and renew European humanism.

The second lecture offered an analysis of the good life, human fulfillment, or human happiness, in a morphogenic society (that is to say, a society in which morphogenetic mechanisms—the ones that drive structural change—prevail over morphostatic mechanisms, or the ones that reinforce structural stability). Donati defined happiness in the current fluctuating social conditions as the possibility to enjoy opportunities that present themselves in contingent situations. He distinguished between three main sources of opportunities, which are driven by, respectively, bound, unbound, and relational morphogenesis:

- the “lib/lab” system (the market regulated by the state);
- the anonymous communication matrix (the matrix of new social networks that—while escaping the logic of the lib/lab system—have a chaotic, situational nature and are not oriented toward any moral order);
- the networks working through relational steering (the ones that—in addition to escaping the lib/lab logic—are directly concerned with the goal of achieving a good life).

The first two sources are more likely to generate relational evils than relational goods. It is only the third source that has the potential to create a realist utopia of “the society of the human.”

### **/// In Conclusion: The Problem of the Human in Contemporary Society**

The theoretical articulations, diagnoses, and prognoses offered by Pierpaolo Donati stimulate critical reflection on the sociology of modernity and postmodernity. They are also provocative, but they certainly show that “a sociology worthy of the new millennium” requires reflection on the difference between the human and non-human. Such a sociology also requires a non-trivial approach to the concepts of the “human” and “social,” an approach going beyond the distinction between the “life-world”

and the “social system.” In Pierpaolo Donati’s work, this approach is based on the assumption that “the social is human insofar as and whilst ever it is relational” (2011: 42); in other words, it exists only in relations, as opposed to all that is “non-human.”

The distinction between “human society” and a “society of the human” (in Italian: *società umana* and *società dell’umano*) is an interesting leading idea in the face of the problems experienced by technologically advanced society, in which the human and the social appear to be increasingly separate and divergent. The concept of a “society of the human” means that the “human society” is no longer directly given in active human experience. We might say it no longer contains a humanistic coefficient as given, or rather, to quote Pierpaolo Donati, it “must be produced reflexively, through a new assignment of meaning to the links in the interplay between the human and the non-human—in contradistinction to both ‘animal society’ and ‘technical society’ *inter alia*” (2011: 41).

“The problem of the human” has been just one of the issues raised in seminar lectures and discussions. Fortunately, the meeting has not been the only opportunity for interested scholars to enter into direct conversation with Pierpaolo Donati in Poland. He was also present at an earlier international seminar on relational sociology, which took place in September 2016 at the Warsaw University Library. The seminar in March 2017, therefore, can be considered a further step forward for Polish researchers joining the international movement of relational sociology.

#### Bibliography:

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