Editor's Introduction: Altruism, Theory and the Future of Sociology

L. T. Nichols¹

Published online: 4 February 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2022

In this issue we feature a set of five thoughtful essays that engage with Emiliana Mangone's recent book, *Beyond the Dichotomy Between Altruism and Egoism*, from a variety of perspectives. Let me extend a special word of thanks to Professor Mangone and to the participating authors in this symposium who have explored issues that are not only foundational for sociology as a field but are also of great relevance in the context of the current global pandemic. For instance, as readers will be aware, there has been much controversy, sometimes extremely intense, over questions such as whether the decision to be vaccinated or not vaccinated is a purely private and personal matter, or whether it is a matter of public duty. There are also related issues, such as the responsibility of wealthier nations to share vaccines they have developed with poorer nations around the world. Should sharing vaccines with those who would otherwise not have them be regarded as altruistic activity, or might it be simply rational choice or enlightened self-interest and a means of protection against possible external threats? Or should we move beyond this dichotomy?

Ratiba Hadj-Moussa comments on selected portions of the Mangone book and raises a number of questions that seem to require either elaboration or clarification of the analysis. First, how does the lifeworld enable a better understanding of altruism than does the social world? Second, does security, a foundation of trust, necessarily translate into solidarity and empathy toward others, or can it be accompanied by indifference? Finally, should there be more discussion of the recipients of altruism that would supplement the treatment of the subjects who engage in it?

Roberto Cipriani next frames the issues in terms of "pro-social behavior" in different contexts. Cipriani is especially interested in empathy as a fundamental motive for altruistic behavior, drawing on Daniel Batson's analysis of the question of why humans seem inclined toward altruism. Cipriani also suggests that Mangone's

✉ L. T. Nichols
larrytnichols@gmail.com

¹ West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA

approach would benefit from the inclusion of insights from both Paul Ricoeur and Kurt Wolff.

Adrian Scribano proposes a means of overcoming the traditional dichotomy between pure altruism and pure selfishness. Focusing on “the centrality of the other,” Scribano concludes that a key to developing fairer, more egalitarian social orders is to create space for the “elaboration of the common.” Commenting on the historical section of the Mangone book, Scribano suggests the desirability of recognizing early contributions by Harriet Martineau who wrote about hope and love in the work, *Household Education*, and who rejected dichotomous thinking. Scribano also delves into the ideas of “the paradox of giving” and an “ethics of responsibility” that are both central to Mangone’s model.

Estrella Gualda applies the perspective of “committed sociology” with particular reference to humanitarian emergencies such as the present pandemic and the alleged “refugee crisis” in Europe. Addressing the role of science and new technologies with regard to “institutional responsibility” and altruism, Gualda examines their application in “mixed paradigms” that promote pro-social behavior and positive change. In Gualda’s view, a renewed emphasis on “common goods” and on evolutionary sociology, will facilitate a fresh approach that focuses more “on the lights than the shadows.”

Nikolay Zyuzev explores the question of whether the outcomes of altruistic behavior and of behavior rooted in problem-solving rational choice are often quite similar. Noting that Mangone’s analysis recognizes “limited rationality” in altruistic interactions, Zyuzev suggests that the intellectual tension between selfless altruism and self-interested rational choice might be resolved by drawing upon the works of Ann Swidler and Elinor Ostrom, with particular reference to Ostrom’s idea of “the tragedy of the commons.” Zyuzev applies this perspective to recent large-scale movements of political resistance in Russia and Belarus that combined the heroic sacrifices of individuals with the pragmatic pursuit of collective self-interest.

Emiliana Mangone concludes the set of thematic papers by offering a thoughtful response to the foregoing essays. The rejoinder is organized around three focal points: the centrality of relationship as reciprocity among individuals; choice and an ethics of responsibility; and the role of a positively transformed sociology. In closing, Mangone affirms the ideal of “a free, harmonious, humanistic and creative society.”

Juan Pedro Blois’s paper on “sociologists and dirty work in Argentina” provides an intriguing discussion of tensions between types and expressions of sociology within academic and commercial settings. Using interview data, Blois examines the internal struggles and adaptive strategies of sociologists trained in critical political theory who take positions in the private sector. As they seek to overcome a sense of guilty complicity in oppression, most eventually define their new activity positively and come to feel that they are acting to build a better world through such efforts as serving as the voice of consumers. Some see their applied work as actually more beneficial than academic sociology that never moves beyond critique.

Peter Kivisto provides an original interpretation of the landmark textbook by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, *An Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, that was written on the occasion of the work’s centennial. In Kivisto’s view, the

Introduction offers an unrecognized vision of increasing inclusiveness, especially in its treatment of the process of assimilation. Contrary to the generally accepted interpretation that Park and Burgess described and endorsed a one-sided process of absorption, Kivisto believes that the authors recognized and indeed advocated a two-sided dynamic in which the dominant culture is also modified by those of newer groups. The envisioned result of this dual dynamic is both increasing inclusiveness and greater democracy.

Richard Swedberg, finally, traces Robert K. Merton's pedagogical approach in coursework on selected sociological "classics," including readings, lectures and student assignments. Although Merton is remembered primarily for such ideas as "unintended consequences," "latent functions" and "self-fulfilling prophecies," there is much evidence that he was among the most effective and memorable teachers of sociology in the United States. Moreover, Merton did not see a sharp division between research and teaching, speaking of lectures as "oral publications" that sometimes preceded their written counterparts by quite a few years (as happened with "latent functions"). Drawing on interviews with a former student (Harriet Zuckerman) and a former teaching assistant (Jonathan Cole), Swedberg artfully conveys a sense of what it would have been like to be a student in this popular and influential course.

The study of altruism has long been of interest to me personally, and it was one of the reasons I was drawn to the works of Pitirim A. Sorokin, especially *The Ways and Power of Love*. Indeed, years ago I once taught a course on the topic under the auspices of the Peace Institute at Boston College, using Sorokin's altruism books as the core material. Altruism was a major theme in the writings of Auguste Comte in the mid-nineteenth century, but its study has remained largely a "road not taken" by sociologists from then until the present. Psychologists launched a "positive psychology" initiative a quarter-century ago. Is there room now for a "positive sociology"? The creation of an ASA section on altruism, morality and social solidarity would seem to be a step in this direction, as was the earlier development of a "communitarian" approach by Amitai Etzioni and others. Janine Schipper also published an article in this journal that envisions a Buddhist sociology rooted in universal compassion.

In recent decades, the themes of "inequality" and the political struggle against inequality have pervaded sociological discourse. Presidents of the American Sociological Association, as well as other professional associations in the field, have regularly called for "engaged" or "activist" or "public" or "liberation" sociology. But, as far as I know, their addresses have rarely featured such words as "altruism" or "compassion" or "goodness" or "love." The emphasis has been, rather, on opposed group interests, on winner and losers, and on identifying with, and advocating for, victim groups. They are trying to fight the good fight, to make a difference, to build a better world. But what would justice or equality be without altruism, compassion and loving kindness? Is justice, moreover, the only criterion of "the good society," or does this need to be combined with other ideals? Recent work on "flourishing" points to one possibility. Much traditional teaching, in various cultures, has spoken of basic values as inseparable—as in "the true, the beautiful and the good" or "justice tempered with mercy." Might sociologists now focus again on the "neighborly relation" described by Jane Addams, or make a greater effort to understand others

with differing political orientations, as Arlie Hochschild did in the book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*? Can activist or engaged sociology mean building bridges and promoting reconciliation? A blending of critical and positive sociology, along with more analytical or “purely scientific” sociology, would accord with Sorokin’s vision of “Integralism,” and I believe this is the best path forward for our field.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.