

Pierpaolo Donati

University of Bologna

### **The Good Society Is One that Creates Relational Goods**

The basic argument of this paper is that a good society is one that is organized according to a logic of life opportunities that is capable of producing relational goods. But what are relational goods? Some years ago, the social sciences ‘discovered’ a type of goods that are neither material things nor ideas nor services, but consist of social relations and, for this reason, are called ‘relational goods’. The present contribution proposes to clarify this concept, which is used by various disciplines, and to specify what contribution relational goods can make to a ‘good society’ and, in particular, to a mature democracy. Two sociological streams, one based on rational choice theory and one on relational sociology, agree that relational goods are different from strictly private goods, which are enjoyed alone, and from standard public goods, which are enjoyed impersonally by any number. However, they differ profoundly in conceiving the social nature of these goods. For the theory of rational choice, they derive from the fact that individuals find gratification in sharing a certain relationship with other people, so that the aggregation of these propensities generates a local public good. According to relational sociology, instead, these goods are not aggregated effects of individual choices, but emergent *sui generis* relationships that are sought for their intrinsic value, as bearers of good life for those who share them. The paper compares these different approaches, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. It concludes by claiming that, in any case, relational goods have their own ontological status. They are produced by subjects who reflexively orient one towards the other to generate a relationship from which benefits are derived for all those who participate in it.