

Vincenzo Romania

**Danilo Martuccelli, "Sociologia dell'Esistenza".  
Salerno: Orthotes, 2017, 121 pp.**

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## Book review

**Danilo Martuccelli, “Sociologia dell’Esistenza”. Salerno: Orthotes, 2017, 121 pp.**

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For its length and structure, Martuccelli’s book represents a kind of manifesto for the foundation of a new existentialist sociology. The first three chapters analyse the fundamentals of existentialist philosophy, the Sartrean proposal of an existentialist criticism to Marx, and the reasons why a true existentialist sociology has never developed so far. The following four deal with the philosophical shifts needed to overcome the limits of existential philosophy in order to establish a sociological approach.

Existentialist philosophy was primarily concerned with revealing man the authenticity of his project, the sense of his *ex-sistere* in the world, the transcendental character of his consciousness, continually turning to the outside to make sense of one’s interiority. In this sense, an existential stance crosses all the history of philosophy. Its very sense lies in the anguish of experiencing the sense of life, and in the crisis of the subject who experiences his own limits in the mundane sphere.

But, as Martuccelli suggests, existentialism can be used also as heuristic tool to understand human behaviour, focussing on its ontology: “Project, facticity, inauthenticity: here is the analytical heart of existentialism. This ternary structure appears to be the proper condition of the human being, the first irreducible element of the philosophical anthropology that concerns it” [p. 23].

Focussing on the development of existential philosophy in the Twentieth century, in the second chapter of the book Martuccelli explains why the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre can represent a starting point for the construction of a new existentialist sociology. Sartre emancipated Marxism from its materialistic reductionism, enlarged the meaning and breadth of the concept of *praxis*, and proposed a conception of desire as the experience that allows individuals to realize their constitutive faultiness. Experiencing desire, the subjects encounter their own incompleteness, but even their ineluctable dependency from the outside world when defining their own identity. In this sense, Martuccelli’s reading of Sartre recalls the well-known conception of the self by William James. From Pico della Mirandola’s *Oratio de hominis dignitate* [1486] to René Girard’s conception of desire [2008], the transcendental relationship between consciousness and external objects has led, as a speculative reflection, to the admission of the *emptiness* of the self. At the same time, the consciousness of a distress in the individual relationship with the world favours the discovery of a third possibility, over the duality between subject and objects: the creative and performative feature of social action. In this sense, Martuccelli generally seems to “snub” the pragmatic conception of social action, despite the centrality it recognizes to the creative potential of practice. His sociological theory insists rather on the primacy of consciousness as both an emancipating mechanism and the source of a new ontology: “Each of our actions, creating the man we want to be, is at the same time an image of what we think a man must be” [p. 30].

Where the author’s proposal dissociates itself more strongly from Sartre’s philosophy is in the consideration of the ego-alter relationship. In Sartre, this relationship

is totally flattened on the level of conflict, on the wall of incommunicability, and on the reification of the ego produced by the look of the alter. Social, in a Durkheimian sense, does not exist in Sartre's philosophy. It denies its rational possibility. Sartre's is a Cartesian philosophy of the individual who rationally addresses the world. The possibility of a collective agreement does not depend on a teleological motivation to sociality, but rather on the extent of the constraint of fear.

Martuccelli opposes to Sartre's philosophy a sociological approach that sees individuals joined not through negotiation, but through the communality of the existential condition of facing the same historically produced *proves*. It supports a pessimism of existence, rather than a pessimism of reason. It recalls the Simmelian individual-society dialectics and the dialogical phenomenology of Buber, Heidegger and Levinas. As in Alberto Moravia's novels, in Martuccelli's existentialism the alter does not disappear from the horizon of the anguished self, but shares with ego the *lebenswelt* and the unbearable weight of daily life.

In the third chapter, the author conducts a brief analysis of failed past attempts to give life to an existentialist sociology. Almost all of these occurred in the United States, since the 1970s. According to Martuccelli, those authors did not develop the very existential sense of subjective experience in the world. Rather, their works were limited to the depiction of the radical emotional states of certain social groups facing difficulties and sufferings. Martuccelli accuses Kotarba and Fontana's [1984] and Douglas and Johnson's [1977] works of a substantial inauthenticity. They are considered as examples of an existentialist *packaging* of symbolic interactionism. The original sin is to be traced back to George H. Mead's social psychology, which assigned a primacy to inter-subjectivity, preventing a full consideration of the role of consciousness in daily life existence.

In order to overcome the limitations of existentialist philosophy and to construct an existential sociology, Martuccelli proposes four philosophical *shifts*: historicizing the existentialist question; enlarging its perimeter; defining the varying historical character of existential questions; considering the social-existential dynamics of contemporary society. In other words, he calls for a strong historical problematization of existential issues, as existentialist philosophy never did before. Heidegger's *dasein* helped social scientists to understand the inseparability of the subject and the object of scientific knowledge. But existential philosophy did never understand thoroughly how "the idea or the experience of being ex-posed to an inhospitable and homeless world is not a universal state of nature, but, on the contrary, a totally historical experience" [p. 56].

In our opinion, this lack of historical problematization of social problems does not involve simply existentialism, but it also regards a large part of sociological theory. Indeed, the recent attempts of applying historical methods to the sociological analysis, as in the so-called *narrative approach*, question the relationship between sociology and history in similar terms.

Narrowing the focus, Martuccelli argues that the modern matrix of existentialist issues lies in the modern times' omnipresence of ambivalence. Recalling Simmel's sociology, he suggests that it is only with modernity that the dialectic between freedom and dependency becomes unresolvable. Nevertheless, the existential consequences of modernity on individual lives have been largely overlooked by classical sociology, which, as a science of modernity, has come to hypostatize the modern way of living, without thor-

oroughly analysing the effects of modernity on subjective consciousness and on the relationship between the individual and the world: “By favouring the idea of modern society as the basis of its historical representation [...] much of sociology has closed its doors to a discussion with the philosophy of existence [...] Modernity is not simply a type of society (“industrial society” or “computer science”), a model of change (“modernization”), a cultural movement (“modernism”), an historical period (the “modern times”), or an intellectual spirit (The “Enlightenment”). It is also an unprecedented experience” [p. 58].

Concerning the intersection between existential and social issues, Martuccelli describes their convergence as a typical feature of the present age. On one hand, society is becoming more and more existentially-oriented, in the governance of fields such as life, death, love, anguish, anxiety which have become crucial in the experience of people. On the other hand, social issues are increasingly assuming existentialist aspects. The consequences of social policies are not limited to the structural aspect of inequality. They entail the *total* existence of people.

In brief, Martuccelli defines present age as the age of the existentialization of the social and of the socialization of existence. This process concerns a variety of social problems: from bioethical issues, to the organization of social times, and to the migration crisis. From an existentialist point of view, for instance, the issue of refugees landing in Europe is conceived as a conflict over the redistribution of happiness and over the sharing of a common existential horizon.

Finally, considering contemporary society, according to Martuccelli, “the central issue is no longer that of a senseless world [...] but that of the unbearable character of daily life. This seems to us the main existential diagnosis of our time” [p. 78].

□ Present society no longer cares about the sense of existence. Rather, the very *enjeux* is represented by the supports and energies individuals need in order to deal with their daily life – and to bear its unbearable character.

In conclusion, Martuccelli proposes a new kind of articulation between micro and macro social phenomena. Inverting the classical sociological stance of studying how structures produce the individual, Martuccelli invites us to problematize social structures through the prism of the particular existential consequences they produce: “Analysis is never conducted at the level of the actor’s traits [...] *The aim is to propose a problematization of the structures, starting from one’s experiences*” [p. 72, emphasis in the original].

Certainly, he does not propose a socio-genetic approach. He does not explain the origins of the social, nor the conditions that allow it to be produced and reproduced. *Sociologia dell’Esistenza* is rather a manifesto for the *renaissance of the subject*. Existentialism thus resumes the oblivion caused by French structuralism and by all the theories that relegated the subjective question to a corner.

Martuccelli’s existentialist sociology questions different issues, such as the gap between projected identity and virtual identity; the experience of contingency; the ongoing problem of inauthenticity and conformism; the existential analysis of the infinite discomfort of modernity. In different regards, all these questions interested also the theorizations of Sartre, Freud, Simmel, Goffman, Rorty and other exponents of neopragmatism. Nevertheless, Martuccelli seems to overlook the possible convergence with other social theoretical approaches.

We regard his proposal as particularly stimulating for a wider epistemological debate about the relationship between self-determination, interiority, subjectivation and social facts. This kind of approach has been largely discussed, over fifty years ago, by Edward Tiryakian's seminal work on *Sociologism and Existentialism* [1962], which connected existentialism and phenomenology. Reading back Tiryakian's contribution nowadays, we think that existentialism can converge with other microsociological approaches on the situational analysis of social action. The existentialist concept of *project de vie* when faced with a situational point of view is certainly less problematic than the naive and increasingly common use of the concept of *agency*. This is a *detournement* – if not, let say, a *latournement* – of social theory, which is the result of a widespread *impasse* in the conceptualization of large theoretical systems that characterizes contemporary social theory, save for a few remarkable attempts, such as Alexander's, Collins's, Abbott's and Bourdieu's ones. The real challenge, now and ever, is to conciliate the social and the subjective, the predictability of social action with the possibility of contingency and creativity.

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