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Book Review

Massimo Rosati, “The Making of a Postsecular Society. A Durkheimian Approach to Memory, Pluralism, and Religion in Turkey.” Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 318 pp.

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This posthumous book by Massimo Rosati is, right from its title, programmatically Durkheimian. Truth be told, there is an excess of Durkheimianism, which can be looked at as both a major strength and a major weakness of Rosati’s own, highly talented, cultural sociology of the huge transformations that Turkey has undergone in these first years of the Twenty-First century. The Durkheimian framework is visible from the outset, and it features the usual repertoire of social classifications, sacred and profane symbols and rituals, tradition and – in a vein heavily inspired by Edward Shils – the idea that “society has a center” of values, symbols, and institutions. Rosati’s work is thus an analysis not only of how this symbolic dimension of politics and identity has changed, but also of how it can act as an agent of social change and transformation. From this perspective, Turkey is an exemplar case, because it has been a State in which a key, sacred narrative has been built mostly from above (from Kemal Ataturk and his followers, the military, and nationalist parties), and in which this narrative has been threatened with the rise, in the past two decades, of a particular version of political islamism that is often misunderstood in the West (in the years of the War on Terror) as “moderate” Islam.

In this regard, Rosati’s goal is ambitious: to provide a cultural explanation of Turkey’s move towards a postsecular society, and to do so in terms of an updated version of Durkheim “religious” sociology able to take into the analytical picture both religiosity proper and secular, civil religion [p. 11]. This is a highly selective reading, that takes place on a line of sociological theorizing that connects the late Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs, William Lloyd Warner, Edward Shils, and Jeffrey Alexander’s best work.

Indeed, Rosati is usually very explicit when it comes to support his call for a cultural macrosociology of post-secularism, and this work is in line with his previous works like *Solidarietà e Sacro*, and *Ritual and the Sacred*, where he explicitly explored what – in my eyes – was his explicitly neo-Shilsian research program. The analysis of Turkey, and of post secularism in general, could indeed gain from this perspective, that clearly stated its systemic and macrosociological framework rather than watering it down for the sake of sociological fashion or micro-political babbling. Like Rosati wrote

Micro-sociological post secular practices deeply affect society within a bottom up process, but are slow in producing change at the macro-sociological level of the symbolic value systems. Such a change is, in my view, the outcome of more visible and mediated post secular practices that take place in post-secular sanctuaries [p. 9].

A clear Durkheimian program, and one to which Rosati contributed with great intellectual rigor.

Such rigor required – seemingly – an outdated, out-fashioned, and anachronistic theory. And part one of the book (significantly titled “*A Sociological Theory of Postsecular*

Society”) reads like one of the best examples of neo-Durkheimian sociology that I have read since first putting my hands on Alexander’s Durkheimian sociology: *Cultural Studies*. With all its merits and flaws, Rosati’s work is a valuable addition to that literature.

By reworking Shils’s idea of the centre, chapter one connects this notion to the fundamental ambiguity of the sacred that is present in Durkheim’s theory of classification. Whereas Shils always understood the sacred in positive terms, Rosati – building on Alexander’s work on the discourse of civil society – is interested in the definition of the centre’s internal symbolic pluralism, in which central value symbolic systems always imply the presence of “symbols of transgression, disorder, pollution” [p. 18]. While the book reconstructs correctly the idea that the sacred is dual, Rosati’s insistence on the homology between the profane and the periphery seems less problematized than it should be, as is the idea of ritual as an interface of communication between the center and the periphery. By playing the arch-Durkheimian, Rosati ends up in the same conundrum that affected Alexander’s work on ritual, one that would lead in time to the development of a more contingent notion of performance, as manifest in the latter’s work on cultural pragmatics.

Chapter two investigates the key conceptual characteristics of postsecular societies, characterized by the co-presence of “secular and religious world-views,” “de-privatized religious movements,” and “religious pluralism,” which construct a plural space in which genuinely Axial visions can emerge [p. 43].

If these conditions are sufficiently present - writes Rosati - then in principle new postsecular transformative practices could generate hybrid forms of life, both on the social and on the political level [p. 43].

These practices have a micro-sociological, interactional ground, as well as a macro-sociological one. This would have called for a deeper clarification of meaning mechanisms on the micro-macro level and on their macro aggregation, which, unfortunately, is not always clear in the book.

Chapter three (on “*The Sacredness of Sacred Places*”) and four (on “*Memory, Trauma, and the Work of Rituals*”) bridge the first two dense conceptual chapters to the second part on Turkey as a laboratory of post-secularism. Two typical Durkheimian themes, which Rosati develops in a “grammar of sacred places,” thus reinforcing the notion of Durkheimian sociology as a predominantly structuralist enterprise, and in a reconstruction of “collective memory” and its link to a loosely defined category of “trauma.” This seems to be the weakest part of his attempt to theory construction. Not only, in fact, the notion of “cultural trauma” has been deeply criticized, but it is the very reading of the notion of “collective memory” that seems problematic. Rosati resolves the puzzle of commemoration without much attention both to the processuality and the multidimensionality of remembering and mnemonic practices, and the result is not always convincing, especially for scholars who, in the past two decades, have tried to move well beyond the limitations of a “new structural memory.” But this literature, which includes some of the most original ideas that have been developed in the field of cultural sociology, is surprisingly absent, while it could have provided a very dynamic understanding of some of the key dimensions of the kind of Axial post-secularism that Rosati sought out to analyze.

The second part, which considers some aspects of contemporary Turkey (the role of Atatürk's figure, museification, the trauma of Hrant Dink's assassination, the relations between center and periphery in Republican Turkey), is meant as a "thick description" on the basis of the models outlined in the previous chapters. Rosati's reliance on Turkish sources in English (a caveat he put forward in the preface) affects this description, since a good number of sources are irremediably left out (not last, religious literature for the Turkish lower and lower-middle classes) and results in a focus on texts and practices that have already been filtered by local elites.

The bottom line. For a scholar interested in transformations of the public sphere, the first part of the book is a very important reading, one that tries to revive a sociological tradition that has been sidelined in the search for fashionable trends in cultural sociology and in the sociology of religion. Its flaws, even its gaps in the literature, are the result of an explicit research strategy, and we should give Rosati credit for pushing it so boldly. Too much, probably. By looking at the center-periphery model and at his neo-Shilsian framework as if it were self-sufficient, the complexity of the case study, and the complexity of cultural explanation, have been sidelined. Yet, there is still need for cultural macro-sociology and explanation, and Rosati's intellectual legacy lies in the fact that he can be read and criticized even harshly, but not ignored.

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