



Article

From Utilitarian Exchange to Social Love: Community Bonds and Youth Solidarity

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Abstract

This paper examines whether, and to what extent, social relations can be understood in terms of utilitarian exchange, or whether they are more adequately interpreted through the categories of solidarity and social love. More specifically, the article develops a critical analysis of reductionist theories of exchange by focusing on the relationship between young people, participation, and local communities in the inner areas of Molise, a region in southern Italy that is particularly marked by socio-economic fragility. Within this framework, the study adopts a qualitative research design, based on semi-structured interviews with 62 young people aged 16 to 34, introduced using a photo-elicitation prompt. The findings indicate that, despite experiencing the constraints associated with a limited availability of services, opportunities, and resources, people in these territories cultivate forms of relational well-being that cannot be reduced to a mere cost–benefit calculus. Rather, these relationships generate recognition, mutual support, and orientations towards the common good, through practices of care directed both towards the local territory and towards family ties. From this perspective, the paradigm of social love may provide a particularly successful interpretive framework for understanding youth solidarity and the persistence of community bonds within the contradictions of late modernity.

Keywords: exchange; love; relationship; young people; community; society; solidarity; belonging; care; opportunities

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1. Introduction: Rethinking Social Relations: From Economic Exchange to Social Love

Should human relationships be reduced to mere economic transactions? Since their inception, the social sciences have sought to provide answers to this question. For a long time, exchange was interpreted as a form of economic transaction governed by rational and utility-oriented choices. In particular, within Adam Smith's classical economic theory, individuals enter into relations with one another in order to exchange goods for the purpose of satisfying needs and desires.

Over time, however, this purely economic and utilitarian approach has been widely criticized, giving way to a new line of inquiry that has helped to redefine exchange in properly social and symbolic terms.

A significant turning point in the social sciences is associated with the work of the anthropologist Malinowski (1922). Although some of his distinguished contemporaries, such as James Frazer, still framed exchange within a utilitarian perspective, Malinowski paved the way for a new paradigm by arguing that individuals, through codified patterns of behavior, exchange objects—such as necklaces and armbands—not in order to satisfy economic logics, but in response to principles of social order grounded in symbolic reciprocity. Thus, in his studies of the Kula ring system (1922) in the societies of the Trobriand Islands, the exchange of objects assumed significance primarily in terms of social relations, within which symbolic dimensions proved central.

The importance of exchange is also underscored by Levi-Strauss's (1949) structuralist reflection, according to which structure is a model governed by internal coherence, where the reciprocal relations among its elements give rise to a functionally unified whole. Exchange is therefore conceived as a foundational basis of human sociality. It is governed by rules that operate independently of the objects exchanged and can perform a function of integration within the social structure. In this way, exchange appears as a mechanism regulated by norms and values that transcend individual intentions and can be understood only in relation to the effects it produces on the overall organization of society. Exchange is thus embedded in complex networks that both reflect and help generate patterns of social integration.

Exchange has also constituted one of the fundamental concerns of sociological reflection from its very beginnings. More specifically, the theme of exchange is central to conflict theory as well.

Marx (1867) examined exchange through the lens of power and the unequal distribution of resources, involving capitalists, who control the means of production and material rewards, and proletarians, who possess only their labor power. Since the terms of exchange are dynamic and historically situated, they may be altered through processes of class consciousness and collective organization.

A further contribution to the analysis of exchange was made by Simmel (1900), for whom exchange entails the desire for what one does not possess, the possession of something desired by others, and the reciprocity of the offer, thereby constituting a relation that establishes both value and interdependence. In this framework, money represents the generalized form of exchange, capable of transforming social relations by rendering them more abstract and mediated. In this regard, Simmel emphasizes that exchange is traversed by dynamics of attraction, value, power, and tension, thus highlighting both its intrinsically relational character and its conflictual potential.

Finally, social exchange theory—developed at the micro level by Homans (1958) and at the macro level by Blau (1964)—interprets social relations as the outcome of a balancing of costs and benefits, positing that individuals and groups tend to maintain relationships when the expected benefits outweigh the costs incurred. Although this perspective provides useful analytical tools, it displays evident limitations when applied to contexts in which social bonds cannot be reduced to logics of equivalence or calculation. A substantial portion of social relations—especially those involving care, solidarity, and responsibility towards others—appears, in fact, to exceed the paradigm of exchange, revealing aspects of social ties that cannot be fully interpreted in utilitarian terms. This points to the need to shift the analysis towards categories capable of grasping such forms of relational excess, thereby opening theoretical space for a reflection on solidarity and, more radically, on social love as a generative and transformative principle of collective life.

It is within this framework that the concept of solidarity fills a central place in Émile Durkheim's work, where it assumes a systematic theoretical formulation. His distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity makes it possible to interpret the transformation of modern societies as a shift from forms of cohesion based on "communal similarity" to

forms of integration grounded in the functional interdependence produced by the division of labor (Durkheim 1893). From this perspective, solidarity should not be understood as a vague feeling of exchange or proximity, but rather as both a structural and an ethical principle enabling social cohesion by linking norms, collective consciousness, and social differentiation.

Building on this classical theoretical framework, sociology has progressively shown that solidarity cannot be exhausted by being conceived as a mere systemic effect of the division of labor; rather, it must be understood as a genuinely moral relation, that is, as a practice of mutual recognition and a mode of producing belonging.

In this regard, a significant contribution comes from Marcel Mauss's reflection on gift and reciprocity. Mauss's model highlights that social bonds are constituted and regenerated through circuits of giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Mauss 1925), in which reciprocity does not amount to a simple utilitarian exchange, but activates symbolic obligations, relations of mutual recognition, and forms of cohesion that transcend market logic. Contemporary re-readings of Mauss also insist on this point: the gift constitutes an anti-utilitarian matrix of sociality and allows solidarity to be conceived as a relational chain, including across generations, capable of binding individuals, groups, and collectivities beyond the principle of contractual equivalence (Heins et al. 2018; Ramel 2018; Caillé 2024).

Against this background, contemporary social theory has introduced a further shift, moving attention from the structures of integration alone to the affective and intersubjective conditions of social bonds.

In particular, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) has shown that integration reposes not only to norms and institutions, but also to intersubjective relations that make the constitution of the self possible. From this perspective, love represents the primary sphere of recognition, since it provides the basic self-confidence necessary for the development of autonomy, self-esteem, and relational capacity. It therefore does not remain confined to the private sphere, but possesses a sociological relevance, insofar as it structures the moral preconditions of belonging and social bonding. For the purposes of the present study, this perspective is of particular interest, as it makes it possible to situate solidaristic practices within a broader moral grammar of recognition, in which love, respect, and social esteem constitute complementary conditions of common life (Benjamin 1988; Honneth 1995; Iser 2008).

In continuity with this interpretative framework, solidarity has also been examined within the so-called sociology of emotions. In this field, several studies centered on affective equality (Lynch 2007) have forcefully shown that love, care, and solidarity are not elements confined to the private sphere, but central dimensions of social organization. Their removal from dominant social thought has, indeed, contributed to the naturalization of relations of dependency and care, relegating them to the margins of sociological analysis, whereas they constitute an essential component of the reproduction of social life. Hence the proposal to read love, care, and solidarity as relational practices endowed with moral density and public relevance, through which forms of affective equality and responsibility for others are expressed.

Within this framework, solidarity appears closely connected to relational and affective labor, while love is interpreted as a genuinely social practice capable of generating obligations, moral investments, and prosocial orientations even within contemporary societies (Lynch et al. 2009; Lynch 2014; Lynch et al. 2020), societies marked by risk (Beck 1986) and the liquidity of social ties (Bauman 2000).

It is precisely on the basis of these developments that, in recent years, a strand of sociological scholarship focusing on social love has consolidated, treating it as an autonomous theoretical category (Iorio 2014; Cataldi and Iorio 2022). This approach is grounded in the conviction that love cannot be reduced to a mere private feeling, an intimate experience, or

an exclusively familial dimension, but must instead be treated as a generative relational form (Donati 2011) capable of producing social goods, reciprocity, social bonds, and transformation. Within this perspective, social love is defined as an action, relation, or interaction in which subjects exceed what is strictly required by the situation, offering more than is due and thereby generating benefit for others and for the relation itself.

The crucial theoretical point is that such excess is neither irrational or residual; rather, it constitutes a fundamental component of social life, especially where institutions, markets, and instrumental rationality reveal their limits in producing cohesion, trust, and belonging (Donati 2011; Iorio 2014; Cataldi and Iorio 2022; Montagna 2023). The notion of social love thus makes it possible to perform a significant analytical operation, namely, to show that social bonds are nourished not only by norms, exchanges, or interests, but also by practices of gift, care, gratuitousness, responsibility, and recognition.

From this analytical standpoint, solidarity may be interpreted as one of the principal public manifestations of social love: not a mere compassionate reaction or an episodic disposition, but a relational orientation that produces inclusion, mutual support, and the capacity to act for the common good. Moreover, recent reflection on the subject insists that social love should not be conceived as an edifying or purely normative category, but rather as an analytical device useful for reading the concrete ways in which social actors construct generative relations even in contexts marked by fragmentation, crisis, and social vulnerability. It is in this sense that the literature speaks of social love as a critical and transformative resource, capable of reactivating the sociological imagination, participation, and the production of social bonds in everyday practices and in contexts of proximity (Cataldi and Iorio 2022; Montagna 2023; Palmieri et al. 2024).

A further element of interest concerns attempts to empirically operationalize the concept of social love. In this regard, the work on the World Love Index (Cataldi et al. 2024) marks a shift from exclusively theoretical reflection towards a broader research agenda aimed at the comparative measurement of practices and attitudes attributable to social love. The significance of this shift lies not so much in the full stabilization of an indicator as in the fact that it testifies to the growing reflexive maturation of the topic and to the willingness to treat social love as a legitimate object of sociological inquiry, capable of engaging with studies on well-being, cohesion, and transformations of the social bond (Palmieri et al. 2024), including within small local communities.

It is within this epistemological framework that the present study is situated. It seeks to analyze the relationship between young people, social participation, and local communities. While a substantial portion of sociological analyses of contemporary society insists on the fragmentation of social bonds (Bauman 2003), individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), and the crisis of collective belonging (Touraine 2010), the literature discussed here suggests that such processes should not be read in linear terms. More precisely, it invites us to investigate whether, and in what forms, relational practices oriented towards reciprocity, care for place, responsibility towards others, and participation continue to persist or are renewed within contexts of proximity.

From this perspective, the concept of social love emerges as a particularly prolific category for interpreting youth solidarity not as a mere altruistic disposition, but as a situated relational practice, anchored in life-worlds, intergenerational memories, and processes of constructing the common good.

Its relevance is therefore both theoretical and empirical, insofar as it allows one to place under analysis the nexus linking affectivity, public morality, and social participation, thereby offering an appropriate interpretative key for understanding the persistence of community bonds even within the contradictions of late modernity (Lynch 2014; Blatterer 2022).

Considering these premises, the present contribution aims to analyze the representations through which young people in Molise understand their communities of belonging,

interrogating the persistence of solidaristic orientations and forms of social love within a context marked by depopulation, territorial marginality, and a reduction in life opportunities.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was carried out in local settings within the inner areas of Molise, which are characterized by depopulation and a progressive reduction in socio-economic opportunities. The empirical corpus consists of 62 interviews with young people aged between 16 and 34, including 19 young men and 43 young women.

Given the use of snowball sampling, participants were not selected according to pre-determined criteria. The first participants were selected by students attending the Social Research Methodology course, who had been trained as field interviewers. Recruitment initially relied on informal contacts, primarily with fellow students. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed, with participants recommending other eligible individuals from their social networks. All participants were approached directly by the interviewers, informed about the study, and invited to participate voluntarily.

The gender composition of the sample therefore reflects participants' availability and willingness to take part in the study. Nevertheless, the overrepresentation of women should be considered when interpreting the findings, as it may have increased the prominence of themes such as care, family responsibility, emotional attachment, relational commitment, and solidarity. The findings may therefore reflect women's experiences and modes of narration more strongly than those of men and should not be interpreted as equally representative of all young people living in the inner areas of Molise.

In line with the theoretical framework adopted—moving from social exchange theory towards its reformulation in terms of social love—the research instrument was designed to detect not only the utilitarian dimensions of social relations, but also those that exceed the logic of calculation. More specifically, the dimensions of social love—such as helping strangers, engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors, and supporting those in one's immediate surroundings, particularly vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals, in order to discover their resources and promote their well-being—guided the subsequent interpretation of the data.

Accordingly, the study employed a qualitative methodology, consistent with the theoretical need to move beyond an exclusively utilitarian reading of social relationships. The interviews, conducted face-to-face and organized in a semi-structured format, encouraged free narration and the co-construction of meaning, thereby making it possible to observe how social actors organize their lived experiences within local communities across the tension between logics of exchange and forms of social love.

Moreover, the data collection was guided by the principle of thematic saturation. The final number of interviews was considered adequate when recurring patterns, meanings, and interpretative categories became sufficiently stable across participants and no substantially new elements emerged from subsequent interviews.

The interview guide was organized around two principal methodological strategies: (a) a photo-stimulus and (b) a set of thematic areas defined in advance. The photo-stimulus, produced by the researchers in a little village in Molise region based on the research hypotheses, was used at the outset of each interview with a dual function: on the one hand, it facilitated the establishment of rapport between interviewer and interviewee; on the other hand, it enabled emotional experiences, senses of belonging, and affective representations of the territory to emerge. In line with the methodological insights offered by photo-elicitation, the image acted as a mediator between the concrete and the symbolic dimensions, making observable the shift from construction of meaning centered on the evaluation of objects to an intersubjective construction of meanings (Ciampi 2007).

The thematic areas of the interview guide—individual aspirations, perceptions of the community, the quality of social ties, and representations of the territory—were selected in order to capture this dual dimension: on the one hand, evaluations in terms of opportunities and constraints; on the other hand, forms of attachment grounded in care, belonging, and non-calculative reciprocity. These thematic areas deductively informed the subsequent lexical analysis and thematic interpretation of the data.

Moreover, the administration of the photo-stimulus at the beginning of the interview made it possible to activate an initial level of interpretation, revealing, through a lexical analysis of the corpus, the recurrence of terms such as “sadness”, “emptiness”, “loneliness”, “tranquillity”, and “abandonment”. The entire textual corpus was subsequently subjected to qualitative analysis integrated with lexical analysis tools, with the aim of identifying the principal linguistic occurrences and the main emerging thematic nuclei. Using the software Iramuteq 0.7, the entire textual corpus, which had been cleaned with ChatGPT-5, was divided into text segments and subsequently classified according to lexical similarity through descending hierarchical classification.

Based on the preliminary analytical results, the findings were organized around four dimensions: (1) geography and care for the territory; (2) community and institutions; (3) social ties; and (4) aspirations and life opportunities.

Overall, the methodology adopted proved well suited to capturing empirically capturing the theoretical shift from social exchange to social love, making it possible to observe how, even in contexts marked by marginality, social relations are configured as spaces of recognition and as sites for the generation of social bonds, beyond mere utility.

3. Results

The analysis of the textual corpus made it possible to identify a set of thematic nuclei that provides an articulated representation of the relationship between young people, communities, and territories in the inner areas of Molise. In line with the theoretical framework adopted, the findings reveal the coexistence of dynamics attributable to the logic of social exchange and of relational practices that can be interpreted through the lens of social love (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964; Donati, 2011; Cataldi and Iorio, 2022). This coexistence is illustrated by the following excerpt from Interview 44: “If I had had the opportunity to stay, I would have remained in my region [...] mainly to be closer to my family and to the friends I care about [laughs]”.

A first level of analysis emerges precisely from the photo-elicitation task. The principal lexical occurrences associated with the viewing of the photograph—“sadness”, “emptiness”, “loneliness”, “tranquillity”, and “abandonment”—convey an image of the territory marked by a thinning of opportunities and visible social ties. This representation appears consistent with an interpretation in terms of social exchange, insofar as the context is perceived as poor in resources and possibilities, thus configuring itself as a space in which the balance between costs and benefits is often unfavorable (Homans 1958; Blau 1964).

However, even at this initial stage of the interview, elements emerge that go beyond such a logic: these representations do not merely describe an objective condition but are invested with affective and symbolic meanings. For example, the interviewees’ reference to “tranquillity” points to an ambivalent relationship with the territory, evoking dimensions of attachment and belonging that are difficult to reduce to a utilitarian assessment (Giuliani 2003; Lewicka 2011). This affective investment is stated explicitly in Interview 6: “I was born here; it is part of me and it always will be”. Interview 1 similarly frames belonging as mutual recognition: “For me, belonging means recognizing yourself and knowing that you are recognized in something”.

A similar line of reasoning can be applied to the thematic analysis structured around the four principal dimensions already identified.

Regarding the first dimension, namely geography and care for the territory, there emerges a marked perception of a lack of essential services—healthcare, education, and transport—as well as poor maintenance of spaces and infrastructure. These elements appear to reinforce an interpretation in terms of social exchange, contributing to the construction of a context perceived as offering limited advantages for individual self-realization (Blau 1964). At the same time, however, the recurrent references to care for the territory indicate that it is not considered only in functional terms, but also as an object of responsibility and relational investment. This aspect points to a logic that transcends individual calculation, drawing closer to the dimension of gift and responsibility towards the common good (Mauss 1925; Donati 2011). Interview 1 connects attachment directly to collective care: “In my village, people care deeply about it. Everyone has an innate patriotism for it; it is a very close-knit community [...]. This certainly encourages the community to take care of the village [...]. In the oldest area, where there are abandoned houses, murals have been created, partly offsetting the abandonment of those parts of the village”. Care is therefore narrated not only as an evaluation of public maintenance, but also as a collective disposition to repair and symbolically regenerate neglected space.

With reference to the second dimension of community and institutions, the data reveal a widespread perception of distance from, and limited participation in, community life. Many interviewees state that they feel excluded or unrepresented, thereby highlighting a weakness in the mechanisms of social integration. In terms of social exchange, this may be interpreted as a reduced perception of the benefits associated with participation (Homans 1958). Yet, even here, alongside this tendency there also emerge minority but significant experiences of active involvement, in which participation is not motivated by immediate return, but rather by a sense of responsibility towards the community and by the desire to make an impact on the territory. Interview 9 provides a concrete example: “I am part of the association [...] because I am happy to contribute and to organize festivals and fairs for my village [...]. I participate actively in making these traditions happen”. Such practices belong to a logic that recalls social love, understood as action oriented towards relational and collective benefit (Cataldi and Iorio 2022). This orientation also emerges in Interview 27, where participation is justified in openly solidaristic terms: “For me it has always been something worthwhile to do, above all because in this way you can help a lot of people who may be going through a difficult time”.

The third dimension, relating to social ties, brings the tension between the two logics into especially sharp focus: on the one hand, there emerges a widespread perception of cultural closure and difficulties of integration, particularly in intergenerational relations, which may hinder the construction of meaningful ties; on the other hand, however, the persistence of strong relationships, especially within the family, also becomes evident, and these represent a decisive factor in the choice to remain in the territory. Such ties do not appear reducible to a logic of exchange, but are grounded precisely in dynamics of affection, belonging, and unconditional reciprocity (Mauss 1925; Simmel 1900). The family-like vocabulary used in Interview 7 makes this relational density explicit: “We are like a family. I can even go out alone because anyone I meet is like being with a member of my family”. Solidarity also appears as an allocation of time and life choices to others. Interview 12 states: “I do it gladly to help my family, although it is certainly not what I want for my future [...]. For now, as long as my family needs a hand, I will stay here; then I will certainly move elsewhere”. Similarly, festivities and ritual practices emerge as moments of “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1912), in which social cohesion is reinforced, and forms of solidarity are produced that exceed the instrumental dimension. Interview 24 further reinforces this point by linking tradition and belonging: “Traditions allow you to

feel part of something shared"; indeed, belonging is defined there as "To me, it means feeling part of the community in every respect".

Finally, regarding the fourth dimension, namely aspirations and life opportunities, the young people interviewed express a widespread perception of limited possibilities for personal and professional development. In this sphere, the logic of social exchange appears particularly evident: the decision to leave territory is often motivated by the search for contexts in which the relationship between opportunities and resources is more favorable (Blau 1964). Yet even here, positions emerge that move beyond such rationality, as in the case of those who express a willingness to remain in order to contribute actively to the enhancement of the territory. Interview 62 formulates this commitment in explicitly generational terms: "In the future, I think I could stay, so as not to abandon my territory. We young people should try not to leave it; rather, we should commit ourselves to reactivating it and making it flourish again". It is precisely in these choices that a form of attachment becomes visible which is not grounded in mere utilitarian calculation, but in a sense of belonging, responsibility, and commitment towards the community, and is therefore attributable to the logic of social love (Donati 2011; Cataldi and Iorio 2022).

Overall, the findings show that the experiences of young people in the inner areas of Molise region cannot be fully understood through the only paradigm of social exchange alone. While structural conditions undoubtedly shape evaluations in terms of opportunities and constraints, forms of relationship grounded in care, reciprocity, and recognition nevertheless persist and are renewed. It is precisely within this coexistence that the tension between different interpretative frameworks becomes empirically visible. At the same time, the findings point to the emergence of practices that can be interpreted through the lens of social love, a perspective capable of accounting for the complexity of contemporary relational dynamics. In particular, the young respondents' distance themselves from considerations based on self-interest and personal gain, thereby challenging a strictly utilitarian interpretation of social action. This orientation is evident in the account provided by Interviewee 36: "We are deeply attached to our local area [...] because our desire to make a difference here stems from a set of values [...] aimed at fostering active citizens—people who take action, become involved, and may ultimately help others".

A similar orientation emerges from Interview 47: "We are currently devoting ourselves primarily to social activities, rather than exclusively to cultural ones. You know, our association often focuses much more on culture than on social relations, but we believe that promoting sociality within our community is equally important [smiles]. It is a rewarding form of action, but also a demanding one [laughs], because you often feel alone, as not everyone is willing to participate [...]. In fact, I also see myself as someone who actively promotes social integration [laughs]. I feel strongly inclined towards social engagement; whenever something is organized in the community, I am always there [laughs], and I intend to continue being involved. Above all, I always try to include everyone, even those who may not initially be inclined to feel part of something".

4. Discussion

The findings of this study make it possible to return to the theoretical question that guided the analysis: does social love still exist in contexts where opportunities are limited and the process of individualization is particularly strong?

Overall, the empirical evidence does not support a reductionist reading based exclusively on the calculation of costs and benefits, as proposed by part of social exchange theory and discussed in the introduction (Homans 1958; Blau 1964). On the contrary, it shows that the relational practices identified empirically are frequently oriented by logics that exceed the utilitarian paradigm, thereby highlighting the presence of symbolic, moral, and

affective dimensions that contribute significantly to the construction and maintenance of social bonds.

The empirical basis for this interpretation lies in the convergence of several narrative registers. Attachment is voiced as an enduring identification with place and as mutual recognition (Interviews 1 and 6); care becomes collective maintenance and symbolic regeneration of neglected spaces (Interview 1); civic responsibility appears in voluntary association work and in the commitment to reactivate the territory (Interviews 9 and 62); and solidarity is expressed through family-like community relations and the postponement of personal plans in order to support one's family (Interviews 7 and 12). These excerpts are not treated as participants' direct self-definitions of "social love". Rather, they constitute empirical indicators of the analytical dimensions—recognition, care, non-equivalent reciprocity, responsibility, and orientation towards the common good—through which social love is interpreted in this study. This is captured particularly well in Interview 23, where belonging is described as "feeling bound both by affection and by the place itself, by all the experiences lived in that place".

More specifically, the qualitative data collected through the interviews are consistent with the Maussian paradigm of the gift, in which the value of interactions cannot be reduced to immediate or symmetrical return. Rather, social actors describe relationships characterized by availability, trust, and relational investment that do not appear to be exhausted by the logic of balanced exchange. In this sense, exchange is configured as a relational process that generates moral obligations, mutual recognition, and belonging, rather than as a simple economic transaction (Mauss 1925). The findings therefore reinforce the interpretation of exchange as a "total social fact", in which economic, symbolic, and normative dimensions are tightly intertwined and mutually constitutive (Mauss 1925).

At the same time, the empirical evidence shows that the relationships observed are traversed by dynamics of interdependence and value construction that recall Simmel's perspective on exchange as a fundamental form of sociality (Simmel 1900). Even where elements of evaluation or expectation emerge—for instance, in terms of reliability or expected reciprocity—these appear to be embedded within a broader relational horizon in which trust, recognition, and the quality of the bond assume particular importance. The empirical evidence thus shows that exchange does not present itself as a purely instrumental mechanism; rather, it is configured as a relation that contributes to establishing value and interdependence among subjects, thereby confirming its intrinsically social character (Simmel 1900).

Despite this, the findings also reveal the limits of exclusively structural or systemic interpretations of exchange. Although the practices analyzed are indeed situated within normative networks and contribute to social integration, as suggested by the structuralist tradition (Levi-Strauss 1949), this level of analysis is not sufficient to explain the qualitative dimension of the relationships observed. In particular, where affective involvement, a disposition to care, and responsibility towards others emerge, it becomes necessary to integrate the analysis with categories capable of grasping the experiential and relational dimension of the social bond. It is precisely in this theoretical space that the notion of social love proves particularly effective at the interpretative level.

Within this framework, several practices documented in the interviews are characterized by forms of excess with respect to what is strictly required by the immediate situation. The decision to remain while one's family needs support (Interview 12), the voluntary organization of community events (Interview 9), the effort to include those who may not initially feel part of the community (Interview 47), and the commitment to reactivate the territory (Interview 62) involve costs in time, effort, or postponed opportunities without a clearly specified equivalent return. These dynamics are difficult to understand in terms of rational calculation and suggest, instead, the existence of generative logics of the

social bond (Donati 2011), in keeping with the literature on social love (Iorio 2014; Cataldi and Iorio 2022). In this sense, social love does not appear as a secondary dimension, but rather as a constitutive element of relational practices themselves.

This reading is also consistent with recognition theory, insofar as the relationships identified empirically in the study seem to foster precisely that construction of intersubjective trust and individual identity theorized by Honneth (1995). Interview 1's definition of belonging as both recognizing oneself and being recognized makes this intersubjective structure particularly explicit. More broadly, the qualitative analysis of the interviews highlights how feeling recognized, supported, and valued within relationships constitutes a fundamental condition for the activation and maintenance of social ties. From this perspective, love and care do not appear as private or marginal dimensions, but as sociologically relevant conditions for the reproduction of the social bond and for the development of individuals' relational capacities (Honneth 1995; Iser 2008).

Similarly, the findings indicate the need to reinterpret solidarity not merely as a structural principle in the Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1893), but rather as a situated practice, deeply rooted in contexts of proximity and sustained by concrete relations based on reciprocity and responsibility. This interpretation is grounded in the family-like community described in Interview 7, the associative participation documented in Interview 9, the family support prioritized in Interview 12, and the inclusive engagement reported in Interview 47. In these narratives, solidarity appears less as an abstract normative value than as an everyday practice constructed through concrete interactions and sustained by relations of trust and mutual acquaintance characteristic of small local communities. Within this framework, solidarity may be interpreted as a genuine manifestation of social love, through which inclusion, mutual support, and orientation towards the common good are produced (Lynch 2014; Cataldi and Iorio 2022). As Interview 22 puts it, communal rituals matter because "they make people feel part of the same community and therefore foster unity among fellow citizens".

A further element of interest concerns the relationship between these relational practices and the contemporary social context. The empirical evidence contributes to problematizing linear readings of contemporary society in terms of crisis or erosion of the social bond (Blatterer 2022). Even within a context characterized by processes of individualization, precarization, and social fragmentation, the data reveal the persistence—and, in some cases, even the reactivation—of relational practices oriented towards cooperation, care, and responsibility for others. This does not preclude recognition of the transformations currently under way, as emphasized by a substantial body of sociological literature; rather, it underscores the need to employ analytical categories capable of grasping such dynamics without relegating them to the status of mere exceptions.

Overall, therefore, the findings confirm the importance of social love as an analytical category capable of both integrating and moving beyond utilitarian and merely structural interpretations of exchange. Social love makes it possible to bring into focus the generative character (Donati 2011) of social relations, showing that the social bond is constructed not only through exchanges and norms, but also through practices of gratuitousness, recognition, and responsibility. From this perspective, social love emerges not only as an interpretative tool, but also as a fundamental dimension for understanding the contemporary transformations of collective life (Cataldi and Iorio 2022; Montagna 2023).

Despite the contribution it makes, the research presented here is not without limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the research design, while allowing for an in-depth analysis of practices and of the meanings attributed by social actors, limits the generalizability of the findings. The evidence that emerged is closely tied to the specific context under analysis and cannot automatically be extended to other social or cultural settings. Second, although the theoretical framework adopted made it possible to orient the analysis,

the empirical translation of these categories inevitably entails a degree of simplification that does not exhaust their full semantic richness in strictly operationalizable terms.

Considering these limitations, however, a number of implications for future research also emerge. First, there is a need to develop comparative studies capable of analyzing how practices of social love and solidarity are articulated across different socio-cultural contexts, thereby helping to clarify the relationship between local dimensions and global processes (Grignoli and Bortoletto 2019). Second, it would be useful to complement qualitative analysis with quantitative approaches able to test the diffusion and variability of the observed practices across broader samples, including through the use of methodological tools such as the World Love Index (Cataldi et al. 2024). A further avenue for development concerns the longitudinal dimension: future studies could investigate the stability and evolution of relational practices over time, in order to understand whether and how forms of social love are transformed in relation to the social and economic changes affecting local communities, where the dynamics described in this article appear to manifest themselves with particular intensity.

5. Conclusions

This study has shown, through its findings, that social exchange cannot be understood only in terms of economic transactions. On the contrary, the empirical evidence demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, social relations can transcend the utilitarian paradigm: rather than merely balancing costs and benefits, they generate bonds, obligations, and meanings that cannot be reduced to a logic of equivalence. In this sense, the findings call into question those interpretations that continue to treat exchange as a fundamentally instrumental mechanism.

The contribution of the article therefore lies, at the theoretical level, in demonstrating that recognition, care, memory, belonging, and responsibility towards the common good are configured as structural components of sociality. By drawing on the anti-utilitarian tradition of the gift and integrating it with recognition theory, the sociology of emotions, and the paradigm of social love, the paper highlights the fact that youth solidarity in some small communities has not disappeared; rather, it assumes forms that are often ambivalent, at times conflictual, yet still oriented towards reciprocity and the generation of social bonds.

At the empirical level, the article provides evidence that runs counter to dominant diagnoses of the crisis of the social bond. Far from being simply eroded by processes of individualization, social relations instead display a capacity for regeneration through everyday practices oriented towards cooperation and the common good. This suggests that the transformation of the social bond should not be read exclusively in terms of decline, but also as a re-organization of relational forms that elude traditional analytical categories.

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