

Reshaping Social Justice: Paul Ricoeur's and Luc Boltanski's Dialectic of Love and Justice in the Age of Globalization

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The concept of social justice is as old as civilization itself. When tracing this notion back to its earliest sources in Greek philosophy and in Roman law, one can observe that there is some close connection between “justice” and “right” as it is apparent in the etymology of these two terms in the ancient languages: *δικαιοσύνη-δίκαιον* and *justitia-jus*. Basically, social justice implies the idea that a just society is one in which individuals and groups are treated equally and receive their just share of benefits, that is, a society where material resources are equally distributed and members are treated regardless of their status. Social justice refers, then, to human flourishing, to freedom and equality. However, in our era of globalization, in which humans are forced as never before to face rapid social changes, the meaning of social justice seems to be obscured. Consequently, its application to social practice has become more challenging than ever. Confronted with several phenomena which exert a constant influence on its rapid transformation, I will argue that contemporary society needs open-ended public dialogues in order to unpack the “conceptual fog”¹ surrounding the sense of social justice. This concern involves at once our immediate present and the future of our social and political systems.

In light of the instability of present societal structure, in which globalization affects national politics and has a transformative impact on the dynamic processes of social life, I claim that giving particular attention to the problem of social justice, as illuminated by Paul Ricoeur's and Luc Boltanski's works, might reorient our critical sense of this problem and ultimately the pursuit of human dignity. A discussion of social justice, as a pressing current concern involving individual and collective life, necessitates a multidisciplinary approach. In particular, Ricoeur's constant task to create new mediations among seemingly opposing positions – which allows us to call him the philosopher for

¹ Bob Johnson, “Exploring Multiple Meanings and Pursuits of Social Justice: a Reflection on the Modern, Interpretative, and Postmodern Possibilities,” *Teacher Development* 12, no. 4 (December 2008): 314.

all dialogues² – fits perfectly with the multidimensional conceptualization of social justice that I want to stress.

By referring to Ricoeur's philosophy and Boltanski's pragmatic sociology, I aim to examine the ambiguity of social justice as a pivotal concept that brings together the teleological idea of goodness and the deontological idea of law. My intention here is to develop a coherent dialogue, formulating it within an anthropological framework,³ between Ricoeur's and Boltanksi's explorations of the meaning of justice and the importance of love in social systems. As a guideline, the main references are Ricoeur's essay *Love and Justice* (1990), and Boltanski's work *Love and Justice as Competences* (1990). More precisely, following Ricoeur's philosophical position and Boltanski's sociological insight, I will attempt to consider the complexity to deal with social justice as a highly complex, nuanced, and ambiguous notion. In doing this, my analysis will refer to the ambiguity of justice in connection with the idea of the good as something desirable, i.e., as a reason for hope, and as the object of obligation. The examination of these terms will lead us to reflect on the anthropological desire to seek justice and goodness both on the economic and social level of justice and in its immemorial dimension, through what I will interpret as the threefold structure of the relation between love and justice. More precisely, the analysis focuses on the complementarity between social justice and love in direct relationships and in institutional settings in which the other is, in turn, the neighbor (*prochain*), the socially mediated relation (*socius*), and the stranger (*étranger*). The following essay will consist of two parts. In the first section, I will state the complexity of the notion of social justice. In the second part, I will consider this concept illustrating its dialectical relation with love.

1 Social Justice: a Complex Challenge and Multifaceted Notion

Over the last 50 years, the term social justice has gained increasing attention among the general population. The enduring strength of the concept is not merely at the core of all social media platforms, but it finds a renewed interest in political philosophy and in critical sociology, namely in disciplines that aim to identify and clarify the foundations of a better shared future and to ground judgment about what is good and bad in a social context. What is more, as a

² Leovino Garcia, "On Paul Ricoeur and the Translation-Interpretation of Cultures," *Thesis Eleven* 64, no. 1 (August 2008): 72.

³ See Johann Michel, "L'anthropologie fondamentale de Paul Ricoeur dans le miroir des sciences sociales," *Social Science Information* 47, no. 1 (March 2008): 31–54.

renewed aspiration, social justice demands today not only the equal distribution of economic resources, but rather it concerns the possibilities for greater satisfaction of identity, gender, and cultural claims. In other words, social justice deals with a “politics of recognition”⁴ and with what the feminist theorist Nancy Fraser describes as the “identity model”⁵ in which recognition means to recognize the multiplicities of intact cultures.⁶ Thus, we need to find ways of adequately engaging with the quest for recognition and redistribution as two intertwined poles characterizing the ideal of social justice. In fact, there is a relation between these three terms in the sense that recognition and redistribution are necessary conditions for social justice which is in turn the *τέλος* of recognition and redistribution.

The inviolability of human being's rights, anthropologically conceived as a vulnerable being endowed with reason and free will, forms the basic leitmotiv for a comprehensive re-treatment of social justice. Although the question of social justice has emerged very clearly at the international level, it requires further explanation essentially from both philosophical and sociological perspectives. Therefore, in order to gain a reasonable understanding of what social justice is, I want to examine this topic by relating Ricoeur's philosophical analysis with Boltanski's sociological-pragmatic approach to justice. This dialogue can be grounded in the anthropological perspective of human being as fallible and capable being as a way of thinking about the structuring features of human conditions. Throughout his writings, Ricoeur's understanding of social justice is informed by appreciation of different paradigm of justice: the Continental debate on the just and the good society, which is marked by the emancipator project of critical theory, and the Anglo-American tradition, characterized by a procedural conception of justice on the conditions of equity required for agents to access the socio-economic space. Boltanski engages instead in a systematic empirical sociological investigation of social justice based on both quantitative and qualitative methods, giving special weight to the critical capacities of human actors, who are aware of multiple forms of social inequality at work in modern capitalist society.⁷ In my view, these two perspectives can be integrated, allowing us to move towards what I would call a *critical socio-philosophical*

4 See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

5 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Identity Politics,” *New Left Review* 3, no. 2 (2000): 109.

6 Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso Books, 2003).

7 See Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

understanding of social justice, that is, an analysis of justice in the social sphere elaborated through the encounter between sociology and critical theory. We must therefore return to these different complementary projects and extend them further.

What does social justice mean, then? In my view, we can characterize this notion with three fundamental features: *complexity* (complex), *nicety* (nuanced), and *ambiguity* (ambiguous). First, the concept of social justice is difficult to define. Contrary to penal justice, which can be defined as the just punishment of crimes, and to civil justice, which consists in the specification of the formal rights of citizens, social justice is more difficult to circumscribe. Arising from the daily public life of individuals, social justice is the level where the claim for equality fully comes into play. Not only do we lack a clear definition of social justice, but it also seems that it is easier to decipher what is wrong, rather than to define how to make it right. It is, then, injustice that firstly sets thought in motion. As Ricoeur writes, “the sense of injustice is not simply more poignant but more perspicacious than the sense of justice, for justice more often is lacking and injustice prevails. And people have a clearer vision of what is missing in human relations than of the right way to organize them.”⁸

Similarly, Boltanski’s sociological approach to justice begins with an analysis of the disputes and the denunciations of injustices that people hurl at one another.⁹ It is through the ordinary practices of public denunciation of injustice that human being’s complaint can de-singularize the injustice he or she had suffered and be heard in the social whole. Boltanski argues that “bringing to light an injustice – that is, a division of material or immaterial goods that does not respect the legitimate value among persons – could entail making explicit the principle of justice to which the critique is linked.”¹⁰ Although the voice of the sense of injustice is individual, the question of social justice has to be collectively considered.

Moreover, Ricoeur and Boltanski think that the exteriorization of negative feeling of injustice must be extended with the exercise of critical reasoning in order to re-establish the social order supposed to be just. Therefore, our sense of social justice is normative because it defines itself against the status-quo, articulating what should be a remedy for the reality of injustice, in order to make a difference. In my opinion, we can find the explanation for the affective precedence of injustice vis-à-vis the idea of justice by referring to Ricoeur’s phenomenological understanding of our bodily existence being the mediation

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1992), 198.

⁹ See Luc Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

between finitude and infinitude.¹¹ It is through our shared embodied existence that we feel outraged at experiencing injustice. More exactly, since human constitutional vulnerability and corporeality are structurally ordered in society, and since the body is the point where social structure cross, a quarrel about the status of social justice arises as something that profoundly touches our embodied condition.¹²

Secondly, social justice is a nuanced notion. The principles of social justice are present in moral and political contexts and they are concretely applied to historical situations. In other words, social justice is always contextual, since it relates to our social position, our lived experience, our time and place. For this reason, the notion is 'fluid', that is, a dynamic and shifting concept depending on life events and on the historical, political, and cultural context. As Boltanski puts it,

when persons present critiques that they want others to find acceptable, even if the opposing arguments are not in harmony with their own, or when they construct justified and legitimate agreements capable of fore-stalling a dispute or bringing one to an end, the critique or agreement will bear on the just or unjust character of the situation.¹³

Along with this sociological perspective, in his hermeneutical approach Ricoeur prefers to draw on what can be called the usual sense of social justice, rather instead of on the formal idea of social justice. The reason for this choice is that there cannot be one single concept of social justice that is applicable to every human situation. More precisely, the sense of social justice might bring together disputes that are quite different, but that always have as their object the order of worth in a situation.

Following Boltanski's line of reasoning, whereas values are not all oriented towards justice since we can speak also of aesthetic values or opinions, worth "always presupposes a reference to an order whose just character can be revealed: a justifiable order."¹⁴ In his sociological analysis, Boltanski further

¹¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: the Voluntary and the Involuntary* trans. Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

¹² See David Kaplan, "Thing Hermeneutics," in Gadamer and Ricoeur Critical Horizons For Contemporary Hermeneutics, ed. Francis Mootz, George Taylor (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 224. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹³ Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 46.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

stresses that worth “in the sense in which I am using the term, is based on general principle of equivalence whose validity transcends the present situation, and they can thus be the basis for agreements that are acceptable to all, agreements oriented towards universality.”¹⁵ In terms of contemporary public life, Ricoeur’s and Boltanski’s incisive contributions reside in the effort to move beyond the opposition between *universalism* and *contextualism*. We find a reflective equilibrium between “the requirement of universality and the recognition of contextual limitations”¹⁶ through the work of practical reason.

Hence, since there is no unifying approach, social justice demands a continuing reflexive process. More exactly, social justice has to do with the singularizing function of *phronesis* as judgment applied to particular contexts. In contemporary society, in which we are involved with new widespread and persistent social justice challenges (e.g., the problems of communal health, environmental and economic justice, political and workers’ rights), the maintenance of a public space requires the cultivation of differences and the search for a shared juridical framework, namely an overlapping consensus on the sense of social justice.¹⁷ This common consent can be achieved through interactive dialogue and contestation. Boltanski’s sociology of critique suggests that laypersons are capable of engaging in discursive and insightful processes of reflection and justification which permit them to elaborate rationally guided and morally defensible parameters for their actions and the sense of justice expressed through them.¹⁸ Therefore, it is possible to argue that the sense of social justice is crafted in a community by a group of people and necessarily reflects a multiplicity of perspectives. In short, social justice is a nuanced notion because it has a contextual, multiple and mutable sense representing a collective and ongoing project.

Thirdly, social justice turns out to be strongly ambiguous, that is, it is characterized by an antinomic nature. This is, I think, the most complex feature, but also the main object of interest in the present work on the new perspectives on Ricoeur’s approach to justice. Following Ricoeur, the term justice can be sought from two different perspectives: the ethical and the legal one. Put differently, justice points in two directions: towards the good as part of our desire to live well together with the others, and towards the legal systems of laws,

¹⁵ Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 48.

¹⁶ Fred Dallmayr, “Ethics and Public Life: A Critical Tribute to Paul Ricoeur,” in *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, ed. John Wall, William Schweiker, David Hall (New York: Routledge, 2002), 220.

¹⁷ See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ See Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*.

rights, and constraints. The ethical analysis deals with the first facet of justice, whereas the legal and institutional plane refers to universal moral obligations, the juridical system and the legal field. Ricoeur insists that both dimensions of justice are correlated, but absolutely independent, affirming that “the dialectic of the ‘good’ and the ‘legal’ are inherent to the role of regulative idea that could be assigned to the idea of justice in relation to the social practice that is reflected in it.”¹⁹

How should we interpret this dialectical structure of justice in terms of the good and the legal, so as to understand its contribution to the contemporary challenges of social justice? Here we can find the major ambiguity of Ricoeur’s analysis on justice, an ambiguity that is productive since it might provide the starting point for further researches affecting social justice issues. Pursuing Ricoeur’s line of thought, social justice deals not only with the teleological level of the good or the deontological level of obligation, but also with situational decisions, i.e., with what he calls the equitable. He writes that “the equitable is the figure that clothes the idea of the just in institutions of incertitude and of conflict, or, to put it a better way, in the ordinary – or extraordinary – realm of the tragic dimension of action.”²⁰ On the one hand social justice can be described as having an operational sense since it is a way of giving unity to a multiplicity, as the expression of a lived practical wisdom. In this sense, social justice is what makes human cooperation possible, as it tries to establish the conditions of social peace.

Quoting a passage of Simone Weil’s discussion of Thucydides,²¹ Boltanski stresses that “justice is understood as an alternative to violence.”²² On the other hand, though, social justice stands in a paradoxical relation to violence, because, as Geoffrey Dierckxsens rightly argues, justice relates to power over others in three ways:

- (1.) institutional justice implies punishment as compensation for violence against others, but punishment is itself an institutionalized form of violence and the expression of violent moral feelings (e.g., vengeance and blame).
- (2.) Justice’s rationality aims at the equality necessary for the recognition of others, but this implies a reduction of the singularity of the other and possibly the exclusion of others.
- (3.) Institutional justice systems relate to ideologies that are the defenders of one set of rules of

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures I: Autour du Politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 178.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *The Just* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2000), xxiv.

²¹ See Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 89.

²² Ibid.

justice, which exercise power over those who embrace different mores, values and norms.²³

In sum, social justice inevitably implies some violence over others, even if minimal, and given that justice essentially aims at social peace, in its relation to punishment, authority, and the struggle for values, leads often to forms of discrimination towards minority groups. The ambiguous sense of social justice arises, then, on a perilously thin line that brings together teleology and deontology, desire and obligation, peace and violence, moving from anthropology to the practical and normative fields.

2 The “Who” of Social Justice: Seeking Social Justice through *Philia*, *Eros*, and *Agape*

What social justice is, can be appropriately understood if we define its pertinence in the concrete reality of human social relations. Since social justice should be understood within the context of the social world, which finds expression in law, I would like us to turn attention to the interplay between familiarity and strangeness, namely between the near and the far experiences that originally characterize all forms of social life. This part of my essay focuses on Ricoeur’s and Boltanski’s works on the dialectic between love and justice, and looks for the connection and the structural tension between these two fundamental notions in direct relations, in institutional relations, and in the encounter with the stranger. My contention is that by interpreting social justice in this threefold anthropological-sociological dynamic perspective, we may be able to find elements that allow us to reconsider this notion in human social interactions, distinguishing its extent in intersubjective relations and institutions. Social justice arises as the problem of living together in relation to others. Despite our fallibility and without denying the possibility of violence in encounters, my overall analysis is based upon the original predisposition of human being towards the good. More precisely, the ambiguity of social justice will be linked to the paradoxical nature of good as *desire*, *obligation*, and *eschatological reality*. I want to propose, then, a substantial conception of social justice that might take up and update the normative foundation and the quest for the good life in our contemporary pluralistic society. Yet, in the concept of good we

²³ Geoffrey Dierckxsens, “The Ambiguity of Justice: Paul Ricoeur on Universalism and Evil,” *Études Ricoeurianes/Ricoeur Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015), 32.

can already find the idea of *regula*, i.e., a sense of order that should be critically maintained or achieved without erasing the various conceptions of it within different traditions. This conclusion leads to some perplexing questions. How can we come to use differences to enrich our vision of social justice? How can we discover a shared notion of social justice and good while understanding the differences differently? We will address these questions directly within what I interpret as a three-fold structure of the dialectic between love and justice.

3 Good as Desire: *Philia, Eros*, and the Ethical Demand of Social Justice

First, we should focus on the interplay between love and justice in direct relationships. This is a proto-social level. Direct bonds can be described as horizontal ties having to do with the other as one's neighbor. More precisely, this is the realm of the "I-thou" relationships. These are characterized by shared experiences, memories, and expectations. In this framework, *friendship (philia)* is the paradigmatic example. The analysis of friendship holds a central role in Ricoeur's "little ethics" in *Oneself as Another* and in Boltanski's sociological analysis of justice. Specifically, they both turn to Aristotle's account of *philia* in books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Generally speaking, friendship is a matter of choice. Following Aristotle's lead, there are three different types of friendship. The first kind is based on the advantage two individuals can gain from their relationship. In this first form, friendship occurs for the sake of utility, that is, it is connected to something out of the relationship itself, something that is understood as useful. More directly, in utility-friendship one loves another due to the expected benefits he or she can receive. The second sort of friendship is based on a certain kind of shared pleasure. Friendship for the sake of pleasure continues insofar as the thing that gives the pleasure exists between those involved. Aristotle sees that these two forms of friendship are fundamentally unstable, stressing that they can be "easily dissolved, if the parties become different; for if they are no longer pleasant or useful, they cease loving each other."²⁴ Yet, he adds that such friends "do not love by reference the way the person loved is, but to his being useful or pleasant."²⁵ Yet, there is also a third form of friendship based on mutual esteem. In this kind of friendship, friends reciprocally desire the good of the other. Here the good as desire is not

²⁴ Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1155a, 20–21.

²⁵ Ibid., 1156a, 16–18.

something material or external, but rather an ethical desire of the good, even to the point of sacrificing one's own self for the other.

It is this third form of friendship that inspires Ricoeur's and Boltanski's philosophical and sociological revival of this topic in connection with love and justice. In this relation, friends are attracted to one another as virtuous beings who reciprocally love each other. As Aristotle puts it, "friendship between these lasts so long as they are good, and excellence is something lasting. Again, each party is good without qualification, and is good for his friend: for the good are both good without qualification and of benefit to one another."²⁶ Friendship as the sake of the good is rooted in a common shared mutuality resulting from the activity of living together. According to Boltanski, *philia* is thus "a term that extends from 'friendship between two people' to the 'cardinal virtue of political morality' and that, as a 'principle of every community, can [...] designate sociability,' [and] is an interactionist notion based on the recognition of reciprocal merit."²⁷

However, in contrast to Aristotle, for Ricoeur and Boltanski friendship cannot be simply considered as the greatest of external goods,²⁸ but rather it is something that goes far beyond the pure instrumental. In fact, friendship is an intrinsic component of *eudaimonia*, namely it is a necessary component of what Ricoeur calls the "aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions."²⁹ Since human beings are ontologically relational beings, the mutuality experienced through friendship and, more originally, the reciprocity within family relationships, allow us to feel appreciated, loved, and worthy of existing. As Boltanski clearly sums it up: "if a friendship is to be established, the partners first of all have to be meritorious; both have to be 'worthy of being loved'."³⁰ Therefore, both self-esteem and approval that others give to us are necessary to build the basic structure of the social framework, since we are not merely self-centered and highly independent subjects, "but vulnerable people, who exist thanks to and as part of an interweaving of relationships that we as fragile human beings have with others, relationships that help us endure insecurity and build our stories."³¹

²⁶ Ibid., 1156b, 7–14.

²⁷ Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 105.

²⁸ Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," 1169b, 8–10.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

³⁰ Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 105.

³¹ Annalisa Caputo, "Paul Ricoeur, Martha Nussbaum, and the Incapability Approach," in *Paul Ricoeur in the Age of Hermeneutical Reason: Poetics, Praxis, and Critique*, ed. Roger Savage (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 57.

We can state, then, that friendship belongs to a basic ethics of social reciprocity. More precisely, friendship is a relationship built on a fundamental reciprocity between human beings who love one another and reciprocally interpret the other as a mirror of his or her character and as a confirmation of their self-esteem. However, the other appears also as someone exterior, separate from and unequal to me. This means that the other summons us to responsibility as someone commanding justice, as a subject demanding solicitude or caring. As Ricoeur stresses, solicitude “is not something added on to self-esteem from outside but it unfolds the dialogic dimension of self-esteem.”³² Self-esteem relates to solicitude in the sense that in relations of solicitude we experience the irreplaceable and singular value of our existence, a value that concerns dialogically the other’s life, as well as one’s own. On the basis of solicitude as a *benevolent spontaneity*, “receiving is on an equal footing with the summons to responsibility, in the guise of the self’s recognition of the superiority of the authority enjoying it to act in accordance with justice.”³³

The aim of solicitude – as David Kaplan explains – is an ethical aim. It “is to spontaneously feel and act benevolently toward others whether I am summoned to responsibility, moved by compassion, or guided by the sense of equality shared with my friends.”³⁴ Similarly to Ricoeur, Boltanski is also foremost concerned “with the strongly marked connection between friendship and reciprocity.”³⁵ It is in this connection that, according to Boltanski, “brings the theory of friendship into association with the theory of justice; [...] the two are not completely separate.”³⁶

At this point, it is possible to argue that friendship always presupposes a sort of pre-existing principle of equivalence which allows “friends first to evaluate their reciprocal merits, and then to control the reciprocity of their dealings and maintain the equality of exchanges between them. For, in friendship, reciprocity is not exercised blindly. It is an object of expectation in the part of each partner.”³⁷ As Ricoeur concludes, friendship finds its place on the path of justice “where the life together shared by few people gives way to the distribution of shares in a plurality on the scale of a historical, political community.”³⁸

³² Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 180.

³³ Ibid., 190..

³⁴ David Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 105.

³⁵ Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 105.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 188.

Therefore, the relation of friendship is a fiduciary bond of trust and intimacy cemented by the equal self-disclosure and sharing. It is clear, for instance, that in the mutual bond of friendship we can find the nascent and the most elementary form of social justice in a context of a situated, practice based, and reciprocal relation. There is, thus, an anthropological sense of social justice that has a primacy over the level of obligation.

The desire for the other expressed by *philia* as a form of love concerning the “inter-human participation in the various forms of a ‘We’”³⁹ should be distinguished from *eros*, defined by Ricoeur as the “participation in tasks of supra-personal works that are ‘ideas’”⁴⁰ Ricoeur sees a structural conflict in the heart of human being between the vital desire (*epithumia*) and *eros* as desire for the totality, i.e. as a strive toward happiness. For Ricoeur *Eros* is a spiritual desire that can master the vital impulse, opening up human being’s life towards its fulfillment, namely to its highest destination. Also Boltanski claims that among the features of *eros*, we should highlight “the omnipotence of desire and the role desire plays.”⁴¹

However, in our contemporary culture, *eros* has lost its cosmic force and it has assumed the form of a “restless desire.” Indeed, Ricoeur argues that *Eros* can only be “symbolically represented by means of whatever mythical element remains in us.”⁴² As Richard Kearney points out further, “*eros* cannot be re-absorbed either in an ‘ethics’ (like marriage) or a ‘technique’ (like pornography).”⁴³ Confronted with rationality, *eros* lets us experience that “life is unique, universal, everything in everyone, and that sexual joy makes us participate in this mystery.”⁴⁴ Thus, erotic love is entirely capable of “signifying more than itself.”⁴⁵ Let us briefly consider this constitutive tension. On the one hand, *eros* is a force, a desire for enjoying the other, which is inclined towards the beauty of bodies. This first inclination can be defined as its “terrestrial state.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, though, as Boltanski argues, “*eros* can go in the opposite direction: it can rise up towards its celestial state and renounce the immediate possession.”⁴⁷ Experiencing *eros* in our flesh as the place where we exist as acting

39 Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1965), 103.

40 Ibid.

41 Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 106.

42 Paul Ricoeur, “Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, eds. James Nelson and Sandra Longfellow (Louisville: John Know Press, 1994), 140.

43 Richard Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), ix.

44 Ricoeur, “Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma,” 141.

45 Ricoeur, “Love and Justice,” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 28.

46 Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 107.

47 Ibid.

and suffering beings, as embodied resistance and effort, we are profoundly touched by the dualism between senses and ideas, particularity and generality.

Eros is a desire that goes from the lower to the highest, from the individual attachment to particular beings to a higher common principle of love that establishes equivalence among them. Following Boltanski's work, I think that there is a circularity of *eros* that moves from individuality to the higher generality of love without which the first inclination would be impossible. In this circularity, as Boltanski writes, "the theory of *eros* connects with the political theory of justice, since the orientation towards the contemplation of the most general form is also the disposition that the leaders of a polity must inspire."⁴⁸ *Eros* and social justice are, then, intermingled in the configuration of inclusive communities in which the concepts of social equality and social dignity are crucial. Aligned with justice, *eros* becomes the management of possessive desires, away from erotic desire and self-giving. In conclusion, as two different forms of exchange between individuals, i.e., as expressions of the desire of goodness in exchange and practical engagement, *philia* and *eros* make an anthropological sense of social justice arise in which we can already find important elements implied in theories of morality and legal justice.

4 Good as Obligation: the Non-Repeatability of Love, Distributive and Economic Justice

We need to take a step further in settling the relation between social justice and love in relation to morality, i.e. in relation to norms and obligations. What is the relation between social justice, love, and morality? The answer to this question is founded on a basic premise: since all interpersonal relationships happen in a wider social setting, we have to widen the analysis of the ethical understanding of social justice to the question of institutions and morality. As Peter Kemp argues, all interpersonal relationships are structured within the society where "everybody in different ways must take on benefits and burdens for the sake of the whole."⁴⁹ There are, then, either nearer or farther relationships depending on whether the other is the neighbor, with whom one has a direct relation of care, or is the distant other with whom I communicate through institutions. Drawing on Ricoeur's work, we can state that institutions are the various structures of living together and belonging to a historical

48 Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 108.

49 Peter Kemp, "Ricoeur and Education: Ricoeur's implied Philosophy of Education," in *Ricoeur Across the Disciplines*, ed. Scott Davidson (New York: Bloomsbury 2010), 190.

community. Within these structures, which shape the social field, the other is the third person calling for justice. Nevertheless, the opposition between I-Thou face-to-face direct relationships (community) and I-Third indirect relationships in institutions (society) are not radically opposed one to another. The value of the other conceived as a subject of right is always seen “through a labyrinth of social situations in which it becomes fragmented into incomensurable values: equality and hierarchy, justice and order, etc.”⁵⁰ Hence, examining the parable of the *Good Samaritan*, Ricoeur claims that there is no clear opposition between charity for the neighbor and charity for distant others. As he concludes, “it is the same charity which gives meaning to the social institution and to the event of the encounter. The brutal opposition between community and society, between personal and administrative or institutional relationships, can only be one stage of reflection.”⁵¹ Indeed, regardless of the apparent discrepancy between these two forms of encounters, they are two kinds of the same human history and the same charity. Similarly, Boltanski argues that “feeling oneself in one’s fellow man” implies recognition in “a gesture of humanity the common interest which links the one it touches to other.”⁵² More precisely, there is an intentional unity of individuality and wholeness behind all human relationships, behind personal direct encounters and those mediated by social institutions.

Specifically, social justice in institutions has a distributive and an economic sense. This recalls John Rawls’s theory of justice. This kind of social justice is highly complex. On the one hand, it requires a focus on procedures, while, on the other hand, it is concentrated on outcomes. Briefly stated, the demand of distributive justice concerns the equal distribution of social egalitarian principles, namely it deals with the distribution of social primary goods such as human rights, liberties, opportunities, wealth and income, which are the social bases of self-respect. Specifically, the equality in health and income is motivated by aiming for equal opportunities to flourish. Social egalitarian principles have strong implications on the second form of justice within institution, namely on economic justice, on its efficiency and equity. Economic justice concerns the economic goods and the criteria for determining who should obtain these goods. The proportional distribution of these goods is a crucial mark for the moral status and the basic values of any society. Yet, economic justice

⁵⁰ Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 129.

⁵¹ Ricoeur, “The Socius and the Neighbor,” in *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 103.

⁵² Boltanski, *Distant Suffering. Politics, Morality and the Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 92.

is a normative concept concerning the material sense of how wealth and income ought to be distributed. In this economic form, social justice aims to the maximization of preference satisfactions, seeking to include even the least affluent members of a society in greater socially shared equality. Especially in the light of increasing globalization, economic justice poses a first-order challenge. Nevertheless, social justice requires more than meeting the demands for equal economic redistribution or political representation. It calls for the establishment of the necessary social conditions for the flourishing of human being, i.e., for the conditions that allow the development of our self-esteem as well as of our confidence in our ability to think and assert our needs.

The principle of proportional equality, which governs just institutions, regulates what is fair to each human being as a member of a society. In contrast to the debate on the opposition between individualism and collectivism, Ricoeur demonstrates that there is a connection between the sense of justice in institutions, the notion of equality, and solicitude in interpersonal relationships. As Ricoeur observes, the sense of institutional justice presupposes solicitude “to the extent that it holds persons to be irreplaceable. Justice in turn adds to solicitude, to the extent that the field of application is all of humanity.”⁵³ This means that we are bound to respect the others as ends in themselves, as free equal members of society. Living in just institutions implies the obligation to pursue this “kingdom of ends” as manifested in the three formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative.

In order to ensure equality, it is necessary to move from the sense of justice proper to the good as desire and interpersonal relationships, to the formal conception of the good as obligation. The formal level of the rule of justice closely relates to the teleological aim of justice towards the good as desire for justice. In this context, love as the concern for the uniqueness and irreplaceability of every single person has to be included in the rule of justice. Thus, love has to challenge the deontological level of social justice to take on board the plurality of subjects without forgetting the meaningfulness of their singularity. As Ricoeur writes,

to each his own, to each his or her just portion, with a validity even to unequal distribution. One is anonymous: he or she congeals into an indistinct mass. Does it not fall to love’s imagination, then, and to its singularizing glance, to extend the privilege of the one-on-one, face-to-face, to all relationships, even to those with the faceless other or others? The case

53 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 202.

is like that of live for enemies, which denies the validity of the political difference between friends and enemies.⁵⁴

Drawing on the connection between justice as a rule of equity and love for human beings as persons, we are led to a reflection on the interplay between the center and the margins where the figure of the other as stranger becomes crucial. In our highly multicultural society characterized by times of troubles and socio-political uncertainty, the problem of how to get rid of the stranger as a potential wanderer who comes closer to us trying to be fixed in our social framework, challenges our social field as never before. While in the past the stranger was observed from within the privileged viewpoint of national boundaries and the collective identity of a nation, in our society of social, political, and economic globalization, we do not have this perspective anymore since we live in a context of externalization of boundaries, i.e., in a situation in which boundaries are mobilized, internazionalized, and transcended. Therefore, social justice as *mesotes* (equality) and *ratio proportionis*, oriented by love as recognition of the universal humanity and personal singularity, has to maintain the fragile equilibrium between nearness and remoteness. Social justice has to give specific consideration to marginality, in order to pursue the maintenance of what can be termed as the richness of a differentiated-unity, against the sterile ideal of a totalitarian undifferentiated framework. Otherwise put, social justice has to aim at unity, at the preservation of a sense of shared identity, but also it has to recognize the growing appreciation for plurality and difference.

It follows that it is important that law as that which structures the whole social-world historically and politically, should always be moved by a loving creativity. The ambiguity of social justice is still there. If law is something written within the center of our society, and if it has to simultaneously control the margins of society, the margins are brought to the center, leaving new margins outside or aside. Social justice shows a fragile balance that goes from the center and the margins, but also from the margins to the center, if the society exercises a model of integration based on the principles of democracy, freedom and solidarity, i.e., a society in which the horizontal dimension of wanting to live together is connected to the hierarchical dimension of power and law that allows the concrete existence of social cohesion. This remaining task of correctly balancing the horizontal and the vertical dimensions is one that is destined to remain structurally unfinished. Because of the fragility of this system, as

54 Paul Ricoeur, "Theonomy and/or Autonomy," in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg and Thomas Kucharz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 295.

a necessary condition for integration and realization of the capable human being's power social justice should be constantly redeemed by the critical vigilance of subjects participating in the institutional setting of which political authority is the pinnacle.

5 Good as Hope-Filling: Social Justice, Equivalence and Super-Abundance

Let us now turn to the consideration of how love in the sense of *agape*, namely as superabundance of giving without any expectation of return, can be intertwined with social justice. *Agape* cannot be understood separately from justice since, as Ricoeur argues, "it is first in contrast to justice that *agape* presents its credentials."⁵⁵ In short, the credibility to talk about *agape* lies in the dialectic between love and justice. Moreover, as Boltanski rightly puts it, the main features of *agape* can be outlined by distinguishing it not only from justice, but rather from *philia*, *eros*, and from love in a moral context.⁵⁶ Unlike other conception of love, Boltanski stresses that "*agape* possesses singular properties, such as preference for the present, the rejection of comparison and equivalence, the silence of desires, and the absence of anticipation in interactions, all of which set it apart from the models on which social disciplines [...] customarily rely."⁵⁷ I would add that *agape* can acquire its significance in connection with the conception of good as hope-filling, i.e., an eschatological good that stands in a relation to continuity and in contrast with the idea of the good as desire and the good as obligation. The appeal to the notion of *agape* provides further confirmation of the anthropological origin of social justice.

The language of *agape* is common to religion, anthropology, sociology and philosophy. Basically, *agape* can be defined as the humble recognition of what has been received. First, in order to attempt reshaping the notion of social justice, we have to explain the meaning of the poetics of *agape* and the experience of love as a gift. Ricoeur emphasizes the disproportion between two logics: the logic of the equivalence of justice and the excessive logic of *agape*. As a starting point in developing the incommensurability between these terms, Ricoeur contrasts the "Golden Rule" with the "New Commandment."⁵⁸ Whereas the former consists in not treating others in a way we would not wish to be treated,

55 Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 220.

56 See Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 106.

57 Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 145.

58 See Ricoeur, "Love and Justice," 35.

the latter finds its most extreme expression in Luke's Gospel in the variant that reads "love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (6: 32–35). Although the commandment is supra-ethical and exceeds all usual norms of reciprocity, the logic of superabundance which is incarnated in it does not imply a disapproval of the idea of justice.

On the one hand, reconciliation is impossible if the Golden Rule is linked to the *jus talionis* or law of retribution, and if the New Commandment is seen exclusively deriving from the ungraspable otherness of the other in a radical asymmetry, as it is in some of the discussion triggered by the rise of the new phenomenology? Theological turn? in Europe (Lévinas, Marion, Derrida). Rather than sacrifice one logic in favor of another, Ricoeur is mainly concerned to find a third path between equivalence and generosity, between self-love and self-surrender. It is necessary to save the Golden Rule from utilitarianism and to protect the logic of superabundance from a socially detached ethics of intention. Hence, the Golden Rule can be interpreted either in the utilitarian sense as a maxim whose formula is *do ut des*, or in the sense of a social ethics that through respecting reciprocity can make room for superabundance.⁵⁹ Only this second interpretation opens up an understanding of the continuity between reciprocity and generosity gratuitousness. The economy of the gift does not imply the abandonment of social justice and social responsibility, but instead it allows to strengthen and to reinforce their demands.

In short, according to Ricoeur's reading, the Golden Rule and the New Commandment are joined together. As he puts it, "the new love command does not abolish the Golden Rule, but rather construes the latter in the direction of generosity."⁶⁰ Due to its super-ethical status, the commandment of love penetrates social ethics "only at the price of paradoxical and seemingly extreme modes of conduct."⁶¹ Clearly, Ricoeur's point is to reconcile the higher love command with social reciprocity, social justice, and mutual respect. Thus, he stresses that if it is not to degenerate into immorality, superabundance must accord with the kind of morality that is announced in the Golden Rule and formalized in the idea of justice.

But how can the commandment of love, which is based on a principle of inequality, be transformed into a general principle of social justice as a rule that is equally valid for all? Indeed, the horrors of the 20th and the 21st century, from the concentration camps to the Parisian terrorist attacks in 2015, have proven how difficult and challenging it might be to take as an ethical norm to love

59 See Ibid., 36.

60 Ibid., 35.

61 Ibid.

and to forgive our enemies. However, love and forgiveness are not so much unworkable ideals, but in the first place super-ethical modes of conduct, practical ways of living, which do not collide or coincide with social justice. In fact, the very goal of justice is to care for everyone equally. This is justice's challenge and ideal, but it is also the basis for its principle of generality. In this perspective, the rules of social justice have to remain open to the commandment of love; they should be available to be interpreted in the light of generosity.

There is thus a close relation between the commandment of agape and justice, because both agape and justice are built on the same principle of generosity, which finds its roots in our collective stories, histories, and ideologies. Therefore, Ricoeur concludes: "I would say that the effort to introduce step-wise, but persistently additional degrees of compassion and generosity onto all our legal codes – from penal to welfare codes – constitutes an entirely reasonable task, though one that is difficult and interminable."⁶² The relation between agape and justice functions, I believe, within the horizon of hope, namely within a context of finding a creative tension between generosity and obligation in which the struggle for social justice and social recognition perhaps remains endless. As Boltanski writes, it is only in this structural tension with justice that agape "can carve out a path towards expression."⁶³ The demand of agape is not presented as a vacuous dream without orientation, but rather as productive infinity in the sense that although we will never be able to institutionalize it, agape arises as a utopian demand imposed on ourselves that might enable us to reshape our social space. Agape introduces, then, a view from "nowhere"; it is a mode in which we can rethink our experience and our social reality. Yet, agape is a challenge to the "what-is" of social justice. Thus, Boltanski calls for a fresh start by insisting on the shift from agape to justice, identifying justice with the moment of justification that "reopens access to the resource of a discursive and even argumentative use of language."⁶⁴

6 Conclusion: the in-between Space of Social Justice

In this article I have investigated the possibility of reshaping the conception of social justice through an interdisciplinary reading of Ricoeur's thought in connection with Boltanski's sociological approach. My interest was primarily focused on the complexity of the notion of social justice founded on an

62 Ricoeur, "Love and Justice," 37.

63 Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences*, 150.

64 Ibid., 155.

ontic-anthropology which recognizes the situatedness and the partiality of human being's existence. The anthropology of the acting and suffering being offered a valuable signpost that helps us on our way to a better understanding of the ambiguity of social justice. Therefore, the concern with the relation between the self and other, and the tension between, contextuality and universality, constituted the basic condition for a reflection on social justice within a dialogue between philosophy and sociology. In respect for the paradoxical structure and the fluidity of social justice, I assessed the anthropological roots of social justice within a threefold relation with love moving from a teleological to a deontological level, culminating with the eschatological level. Let me offer now a few concluding remarks.

By insisting on the recovery of the relation between justice and love, Ricoeur and Boltanski's theories of justice can serve as a useful tool for some of the social justice quests challenging our age. Indeed, they insist on human being's capability of judgment within situations, on the creativity of interpretation, and on the need for innovation within tradition, helping us understand how social justice evolves and needs to keep evolving, if it is to meaningfully accommodate the challenges of today's large scale structure by cultural, ethnic, sexual, and gender differences. Ricoeur and Boltanski invite us to think social justice through a symbolic mutual recognition supported by a loving creativity.

Furthermore, we can say that Ricoeur's and Boltanski's reflections on the social symbolic order are important for making sense of social justice as a notion surrounded by a fog of doubt. By providing an anthropologically comprehensive framework for social justice, I believe that Ricoeur's philosophy and Boltanski's pragmatic sociology significantly clarify social justice's goals and values. A discourse on social justice entails a long effort with a range of possibilities that needs our constant will to save the essential value of our social cohabitation. Finally, we can conclude that Ricoeur's and Boltanski's analyses of love and justice invite us to move toward a critical socio-philosophical understanding of social justice in which humans are considered in their original relationality with alterity within a fragile framework between identity and diversity, capability and fragility, and peace and violence. In the end, the in-between space of social justice is a place where a difficult balancing occurs between openness and maintenance of differences, between comprehension without assimilation and critical distance without refusal. Social justice, violence, and loving creativity are dimensions of the same history.⁶⁵

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