Available online at www.sserr.ro
Social Sciences and Education Research Review

(4) 2 222-231 (2017) ISSN 2392-9683

# Values as an object of study for the American and the French sociology. A review of F. Znaniecki's and R. Boudon's perspectives

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**Abstract**

*Even if the notion of "value" is studied for many disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, management, communication sciences, there is not one unitary perspective on this concept in the social sciences. Why it is important to study values? Because, we are living today in a society where everything is changing rapidly, with permanent changes in the economic, demographic, technological or social level, changes that have a strong effect on the individual (implicitly, his social role) on the family he is part of the work he does (implicitly, his job). It is, therefore, important to analyse the set of values for each generation, because the changes brought by the post-modern society have also been translated into values and there are values that can be found to a person who is a part of the "Millennials" and not to another person who is part of the "Generation X". The article is presenting the most important theoretical perspectives on the concept of value. Even if there are a lot of sociologists who have studied it, this article is presenting, in a comparative way, two perspectives of two important scholars from American and French sociology. Even if Znaniecki and Boudon have lived in different periods of time (the beginning and the end of the XXth century) we may find a lot of similarities in their perspectives, especially on the topic of the "classical debate" between relativism and realism.*

**Keywords:** values, goals; axiology; norms; attitude

## 1 The concept of value in sociology. Definitions

Being used since the nineteenth century, the concept of value can be analysed in two ways: "the value of an object or activity is what it represents for a person or a community; that's the economic significance of value. From a sociological and psychological point of view, value is an abstract and desirable state that people want to have, such as freedom, loyalty or tradition" (Malle, Dickert, 2013, p. 1011). In addition, about this desirable state is speaking also C. Kluckhohn



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who considered that "affective (*desirable*), cognitive (*conception*) and conative (*selection*) elements are all essential to the notion of value" (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). In fact, Claude Kluckhohn is the author who offers to us the first systematic definition of the notion of value: "a value is an explicit or implicit, distinctive conception, of an individual or a desirable characteristic of a group that influences the selection available ways and purposes of action" (Idem).

In other papers, values are defined as "recognized representations of needs that, when developed, provide norms for behaviour, guide people to the desired purposes, and form the basis of the establishment of goals. Values are the main motivator because they are the basis for assigning value to situations and objects. In addition, the values serve as a basis for self-regulatory knowledge and provide the basis for judging the usefulness of external reinforcers" (Brown et Crace, 1996, pp 211-212). "Values not only include cognitive elements, but also they involve a strong emotional component. The stronger the value is firmly rooted, the more central it is in the system of values, and so it is lived more intensively, taken seriously, and it raises a lot of emotions and mobilizes more vehement energies" (Rezsohazy, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, we can say that values are deeply rooted beliefs that have the role of directing individuals towards the world in which they live.

Values are also defined by the Chicago School, such as William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, who in the "*Methodological Note*" of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* defined values as "any data having an empirical content, accessible to the members of a social group and a meaning in relation to which it is or may be an object of activity. Thus, an instrument, a play, a poem, a university, a myth and a scientific theory are social values" (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918, p. 21).

In the understanding of people, values regulate society and interpersonal relationships, and they guide moral behaviour, the distinction between the good and the evil. In this sense, values "are not just reasons, but socially shared concepts that serve a communal function" (Smith, 2013, p. 1011). That means that values create a group link at an abstract level that unifies individual actions into a mental set and group organization. In fact, we meet this idea (which is right, expressed by other concepts) also in the sociological theory of Emile Durkheim (2008), which speaks of "collective effervescence", as an element that confers identity to a community, especially in critical moments.

In the same time, besides giving the identity of a human community and associating individuals more closely with each other, representing the expression of the adaptation of individuals to social reality, values emphasize differences with other social groups that do not share the same system of values like ours. Not often, this leads to the emergence of conflicts between individuals, groups or human communities that are called conflict of values. As an example for this idea, we can mention Samuel Huntington's paper, *The Clash of Civilizations,* in which the



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author is presenting the theory that differences between civilizations are fundamental, and cultural identity is more deeply rooted than other identities. Therefore, in case of conflict, people tend to be relatively inflexible (Huntington, 2012).

## 2 Characteristics and functions of values (Schwarz and Rokeach)

With regard to the characteristics of values, S.H. Schwarz sets out their five characteristics: "(1) values are a set of beliefs that are largely related to affection and feelings; (2) values are desirable goals, goals or behaviours that motivate any action of an individual; (3) values transcend specific actions and situations; (4) values are hierarchized; (5) they are relatively stable, they are built gradually during childhood, evolving slowly after (except in case of *shock*)" (Gros, Wach, 2013, p.2).

In fact, Schwarz analyses 10 primordial values that can be found for every individual, regardless of the type of society, but in different shares and with different degrees of importance: power, security, hedonism, universalism, kindness, tradition, conformism, stimulation, self-direction, and realization (Schwarz, 1994, p.35).

As for the values' functions, Schwarz identifies the following: "the function of satisfying the biological needs and requirements of the individual; the function of improving social interaction; the function of strengthening the group's cohesion and ensuring a framework of good functioning for any social group or human community" (Schwarz, 2006, p. 931).

Also, with regard to the functions of values, Milton Rokeach has added to the functions described by Schwarz a longer list, from that we mention the following: "social values provide a basis for a common and trustworthy communication; values are what guides actions and influences the perceptions of certain states of things; values are useful tools for motivating, justifying or criticizing individual behaviours" (Rokeach, 1973, pp. 12-16). For Rokeach, value is "a lasting belief according to which a particular path or goal of existence is socially or personally preferred to an opposite path or goal" (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5).

In fact, it is the same meaning that derives from the definition of values presented by M. Duverger: "it [value] involves a position of social groups or individuals in relation to the categories of good and evil, fair and unfair, beautiful and ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, helpful and harmful" (Duverger, 1961, p. 32).

In addition, Rokeach analyzes not only the characteristics and functions of the values, but also he presents their typology: instrumental values and terminal values, the former representing the "modes of construction" (eg, "independent", "ambitious") and the last ones referring to these desirable states of existence of the individual ("happiness", "freedom", "independence" etc.) (Rokeach, 1973, p. 12).



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The original empirical work in the field of values was the development of Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1973), which influenced Schwartz's current study of values. The two scholars conceptualize values in a similar way, with one notable exception: for Rokeach, the distinction between means (*instrumental values*) and extremities (*terminal values*) is fundamental. However, Schwartz did not found an empirical proof of this distinction and questions its utility; the same values can express motivations for both: means and goals. Both researchers also take different approaches to measuring values. Compared to Rokeach's method of asking respondents to rank values, Schwartz supported an approach based on valuing values, a non-forced-choice approach.

To study values from a national and transnational perspective, the first tools of research were large-scale survey studies, based on representative samples of entire populations (or specific categories, such as highly skilled employees of companies, university teachers or students). Since the 1970s, sociological debates on changes in values have been increasingly dominated by the work of R. Inglehart (especially his works published in 1977, 1997) and European and World Values Surveys thathe has initiated and coordinated.

## 3 Values as object of study of the School of Chicago - the theory of Florian Znaniecki

In 20th century sociological thought, one of the earliest theories of values was that developed in the Chicago School by sociologist Florian Znaniecki, considered one of the most important social science scholars from the American continent, during the period before the Second World War. This theory was mainly presented in the paper *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America,* a work considered by the Social Science Research Council to be one of the most important 6 sociological papers published after the First World War (Bulmer, 1986, pp. 45-46). Znaniecki is the first author who introduced, first in philosophy, then in sociology, the terms of "axiological signification", "axiological order" (House, 1936, pp. 423-424).

The perspective of social values developed by Znaniecki can be considered as the first perspective of American sociology of this concept, not only because it is he who proposed this concept, but also because he developed it, in a theoretical framework by analysing it in relation to the notion of attitude, a notion developed by William I. Thomas. In fact, the two authors have different views on the role of the two concepts: thus, while Znaniecki rejects the term "attitude" and prefers the use of "value", Thomas often uses the term "attitude". Also, Znaniecki believes that the two terms cannot be used together to create a very useful theory in terms of psycho-sociological research.

Znaniecki is combating two perspectives specific to the period in which he lived: the relativism - that thinks that ideas are subjective and the realism - who



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think that ideas are objective. In fact, this view is shared several decades later by Raymond Boudon.

In trying to provide a conceptualization of values, Znaniecki describes them from two characteristics: the content and meaning, in its conception, the meaning of a certain value is determined by the relations it has with other values. As far as the classification of values is concerned, Znaniecki speaks of social, hedonistic, technical, aesthetic, religious, cognitive, symbolic, intellectual, legal values (Znaniecki, 1927, p. 529). In fact, all these values can become social values if they are included in the system of social action. With regard to the rationality of values, Znaniecki declares that, taken as such *(themselves*), they do not exist in an abstract sense, they are neither rational, nor objective. People are the ones who give rationality to values, and so for value to gain rationality and objectivity, they are needed at least three criteria that must be fulfilled: "a) it must be linked by a single relationship with the actor; (b) it must assume a minimum of force (power); (c) it must assume a minimum level of axiological significance" (Znaniecki, 1919, pp. 53-144). A value reaches the maximum level of rationality and objectivity if it has these two characteristics, both in relation to itself and to other values. In other words, we can say that "a value is rational and objective, if there is a link between the subjective level and the systemic level" (Luczewski, 2014, p. 10).

Basically, Znaniecki's theory presents some essential characteristics of values: (1) values develop over time; (2) values do not exist in themselves, but become values; (3) values are both the causes of human actions and their consequences; (3) Values can be considered rational, depending on the relationships they define with other values (Znaniecki, 1919, pp. 53-144). In fact, within the Chicago School of Sociology, several theoretical analyses of values, not just Znaniecki's, have been developed. The interactionist sociology practiced at the University of Chicago promoted the theory of values, as it was formulated by John Dewey, primarily because Dewey had been a professor of philosophy at this University for a short period, from 1894 to 1904 (Cefaï , Joseph, 2002).

## 4 Contribution of the French sociology: Raymond Boudon on the meaning of values and the classification of theories of values

Because he claims that the individual is the one who gives rationality to values, Znaniecki invites us to the practice of a methodological individualism, principle promoted also by Raymond Boudon, a few decades later. However, Boudon's definition of values is slightly different. First of all, Boudon considers values as something given and, therefore, is not concerned with identifying their nature, but rather whether they are rational or not.



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In his opinion, "people believe in norms and values because they make sense to them, and more precisely because they have reasons to endorse them" (Boudon, 2001, p. 32).

There is a set of general values and norms that people tend to have (Vlăduț escu, Smarandache, Gîfu, Tenescu, 2014); in other words, one can speak, in terms of R. Boudon, of an "axiological irreversibility" (Boudon, 1995).

In the paper entitled *Le sens des valeurs*, Boudon argues that all theories, regardless of their nature, philosophical, psychological or sociological, have attempted to describe the meaning of values, either by reference to "ultimate principles (*rational theories*) or ultimate causes (*irrational theories*)" (Boudon, 1999, p.12).

Using the Münchhausen trilemma in the application of norms and values, Boudon (1999) classifies the theories of values into three categories:

(1) The *fideist theories* - which give priority to belief in science, promoting the idea that norms and values are based on absolutely valid principles and should not be demonstrated. One of these theories is Max Scheler's theory, which supports the idea that people perceive values in a specific sense, similar to the meaning of colours.

(2) The *skeptical theories* - which advance the idea that a theory of values cannot be founded. These theories are of two types: a) ones that insist that norms and values of individuals have their source in a sovereign decision and not necessarily of certain causes or motives (decisionism) and b) others that consider that the axiological certainties of states of things are generated by certain causes, of a material nature, and not for certain reasons).

In philosophy, the most illustrative example of theories of decisionism is Jean Paul Sartre's theory, which speaks about the absurdity of choice according to a certain value. Also another theoretical perspective, Boudon tells us, was also presented by Max Weber in the conference *La science comme vocation*, which he has given, in 1917, at the University of Munich. In this conference, Weber states that science can never answer the fundamental questions of life, such as directing people on how to live their lives and what to value. The value he is contesting can only be derived from personal beliefs such as religion. In this context, Weber discusses the "polytheism of values", which characterizes very well the very different world in which we live today, a world in which common values have disappeared. Summarizing, we can say that, in Max Weber's opinion, values are objective and positive data, determining certain types of behaviour distinct from those rationally oriented towards a well-established goal, or emotional or traditional actions. In fact, Max Weber is the one who has made the famous distinctions between value judgments and attitudes on value, a distinction he largely presents in his work, *Le savant et la politique* (Weber, 1959 [1919]).



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As for the causalist theories, according to them, the normative beliefs are unfounded but caused, and the reasons (justifications) that the individual adds to his beliefs are simple illusions, of the type of "false consciousness". With regard to the causes that generated the formation of normative beliefs, there were theorists who analysed the following types of causes: affective causes (Freud - with his theory of instincts or Pareto - with his theory of derivations); biological causes (J. Wilson - with the theory that states that the moral sense is an effect of natural selection); socio-functional causes (K. Marx - with his theory of the function of beliefs, namely to promote the social interests of those who support them); social and cultural causes (M. Montaigne's point of view, which claims that values are the products of culture, that they reveal from "cultural arbitrariness" and they are transmitted by the process of socialization.

(3) *The rationalist theories* - which we encounter both in philosophy and sociology, and which claim that individuals support certain axiological beliefs because they have strong interests in doing this. In this third category of theories, Boudon includes the following: a) the utilitarian theories (which advance the idea that individuals adopt certain values or norms because they produce effects that they consider to be favourable to themselves); b) the functionalist theories (which support the idea that some social systems cannot function if certain rules or values are not adopted by all individuals who are part of them); c) the cognitive theories (which support the idea that individuals adopt certain values and norms because they consider them irrelevant, tautological, intuitive, *a priori* (Kant's theory) (Boudon, 1999).

Moreover, the role and importance of values (particularly family, educational, professional or political values) for individuals have undergone changes in recent decades, as Boudon even mentions in some of his works (*Les sens des valeurs; Le déclin de la morale*). Thus, as the French sociologist asserts, family authority is a value that has lost importance in recent decades, while other values, such as independence and autonomy of children, have become more and more important. In terms of school, one finds it, says Boudon, "a disappearance of the efficiency of the school in the matter of transfer of knowledge on the human and the values" (Boudon, 2006, p. 27). In terms of work, it is no longer considered as a means of personal development of the individual, a development that remains more in the private sphere. Thus, in this area, we are witnessing an affirmation of individualistic values. However, the current world is characterized by a paradox: a tendency to develop individualism, but at the same time, an increase in associative initiatives based on the feeling of altruism and sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others.



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