

How well do we understand our own societies? Kakonomia again and Kathleen Stock on the perspective of love

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Abstract. How well do we understand our own societies? In this paper, I raise quite obvious puzzles for Diego Gambetta and Gloria Origgi's depiction of Italy as a kakonomy and Kathleen Stock's depiction of ordinary people.

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How well do we understand "our own societies"? I am going to focus on material from Diego Gambetta and Gloria Origgi on Italy, where they don't now live, and how material from Kathleen Stock applies to England, where she perhaps doesn't now live.

Italy as kakonomia. In a paper entitled "The LL game: The curious preference for low quality and its norms," Gambetta and Origgi represent Italy as a "kakonomy" (2013; see also Origgi 2011). What does that mean? It means that there is a pervasive preference for promising to exchange high-quality goods followed by each party delivering low quality goods.

They introduce a model in which goods can only be produced at two levels, a high quality level or a low quality level. And they neatly present a situation they have repeatedly faced (I am largely using their words below):

1. When other Italians promise to exchange high quality goods and each party delivers low quality, nobody seems to complain.
2. When we received a low quality good in return for giving a high quality good and complained, the other party, who promised high quality but delivered low, seemed

more annoyed than apologetic. They seemed to treat this as excessive fussiness.

3. The people who deliver high quality, as promised, do not seem to receive much admiration; quite the contrary, they elicit suspicion. As an Italian university baron once put it, “You don’t understand, Diego, when you are good at your work you must apologize.”¹
4. Italians continue to partake in relationships where each delivers low quality goods, for example they plan to trade with a party who previously promised high quality and delivered low quality.
5. Neither party in this relationship abandons high quality rhetoric. Both keep pretending to perform to high standards.
6. A feeling of familiarity develops amongst those who deliver low quality: they recognize each other as having this disposition and as “friends.”

There is a suggestion that the preference for these low quality exchanges, preceded by promises of high quality, is so that both parties can relax more. That is plausible. It is stressful to produce high quality but it is also stressful to say that one is delivering low quality (2013: 11).

I have various worries about the depiction of Italy that Gambetta and Origgi offer. I shall identify two, but not in order of importance, for me at least. (a) One worry is that they depict a kind of friendship as resulting from exchanges where each party promises high quality and delivers low quality. But here is a proposal: some of these people already regard Gambetta and Origgi as a kind of enemy from the moment of contact, rather than after they complain about receiving low quality, and correspondingly others are regarded as “friends” from first contact. They anticipate already that you are going to deliver high quality and they

¹ The material makes me think of a joke: “What is Maradona’s model called? The visible hand!”

are prepared with responses when you complain about what you got in return!

(b) The main worry I wish to raise is that it is difficult to explain how Italy is a first world country, or developed country (2013: 9), if the dispositions identified by Gambetta and Origgi are pervasive.² I suppose Gambetta and Origgi could argue that societies can be first world countries if they have certain isolated parts which are efficient and high quality, from which wealth spreads, but how ever did such parts arise and how are they maintained? After their experiences at school and university, the lawyers involved, the doctors, the economists, the engineers, etc., would mostly be tentative or skeptical about delivering high quality services.

England, Stock, and love's perspective. In a book review which discusses grieving, Kathleen Stock tells us about ordinary people:

Everyone on the planet is grievable in principle, by some unspecified people, but that doesn't mean they are each potentially grievable by me. Clearly they aren't, since I don't know most of them, and some of those I do know, I won't miss. And if the point is supposed to be that the distinction between those we would actually grieve, and those we wouldn't, is "arbitrary", the obvious answer is: not from the perspective of love, it isn't! And that's the perspective that ordinary people, as opposed to altruistic saints or emotion-free Vulcans, usually take. I love my family and friends because they're them, and irreplaceable to me. (2020)

² Gambetta and Origgi concede that their evidence is mainly from academia and that Italy does deliver some high quality goods, food and hospitality being their examples (2013: 17). Nevertheless, they depict Italy as a kakonomy (2013: 19), which generates a large puzzle. By the way, their article may well come across as something actually written to deter non-Italian academics from going to Italy, with its shameless plagiarism (see 2013: 12), and it includes a kind portrait of Italian fascism (2013: 19).

Some experiences make Stock's conception of ordinary people very plausible. But I think there are various phenomena which pose puzzles for it. Why does that even exist or why did that even happen if this is what ordinary people are like? But I am not entirely sure whom she has in mind by ordinary people.

I am going to focus on one example: immigration. If someone with Stock's conception visited Manchester, or at least near where I live, she might wonder, "Why are all these immigrants here? If ordinary people care much more about their friends and family, then ordinary people in England do, so how did these others or their parents or grandparents make it into the country?" At this point, Stock might say, "I was talking about grieving – we cannot just grieve for anyone³ – and these immigrants are not likely to kill a native family, so this is not a puzzle for me." Let us grant that they are not likely to kill. But potentially they might take a job that your friend or family member would otherwise get, or compete with your friend or family member in other ways. If ordinary people care much more about their friends and family, presumably they do not want them to lose out in some of these competitive relations: they want their family member to get the job, say. Given Stock's conception, there is a puzzle. I suspect that some people who agree with Stock's conception feel this puzzle quite strongly.

A concluding note. Of course, you can find books about how Italy's economy works. And you can find books explaining immigration patterns to a country. What you probably will not find is people who address the puzzles various academics are understandably left with,⁴ with the components of a puzzle identified and solutions considered regarding which component to abandon. (i) We keep experiencing frustrating exchanges of goods in Italy.

³ I suppose a continental philosopher might say that grieving is a ritualized phenomenon and one can turn oneself into a "grieving machine."

⁴ I have also had the relevant experiences and the reactions!

People prefer to promise high quality exchanges and yet deliver low quality. The preference is widespread. So how is Italy a first world country? (ii) This is what ordinary people are like – they care much more for family and friends – so how do multicultural societies even arise and also how do ones without strict segregation arise?

References

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