

Surrender and catch as a methodology for qualitative sociology
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Premise

Surrender and Catch: Experience and Inquiry Today, published by Kurt H. Wolff (1976), was the outcome of a long incubation; it, had been originally “formulated” (Wolff’s term) in 1950 and impregnated, long before that, starting, presumably, with Karl Mannheim’s influential teaching “in the early thirties”.

The present essay intends following and exploring this pathway in an effort to understand the true origin of the “surrender-and-catch” formula, which has evident roots in the classical, philosophical approach of ancient Greek culture, where the idea of *ἐποχή*, implying procrastination and suspension, was an attitude typical of the thinking of the sceptics, later to become the Latin *assensionis retentio* (postponing a decision) of the Romans. Another source cannot, however, be excluded; one might look, for instance, to the culture and literature of the Arabs where a similar idea was widespread. The same may be said of the Jewish culture, to which Kurt H. Wolff’s family belonged. In general, if “surrender” can be defined as a suspension, “catch” is the result of this suspension.

From a sociological perspective the “surrender and catch” expression derives, of course, from the experiential and existential basis of Wolff’s epistemology and hermeneutics. It actually began with a walk, an “initiatory” walk, a common, daily activity that was the starting point from which to “regain meaning for all who are convinced that meaning has been lost” (Wolff 1976, 3).

As a matter of fact Wolff’s book on “surrender and catch” is not an autobiography but, as he himself explains, every statement says something about him and is the result of interaction between subject and object.

“Surrender” is connected, of course, with phenomenology, and Husserl’s (as well as Schütz’s) writings, besides Scheler’s idea of a “relatively natural world view”. Today “phenomenology asks us not to take our received ideas for granted but to call them into question – to call into question our whole culture, our manner of seeing the world and being in the world in the way we have learned it growing up” (Kurt Wolff 1984, 192).

“Surrender and catch” is also a “sociology of understanding” a definition which recuperates the German *verstehende Soziologie* though it makes a distinction between “surrender” and “surrender to”. It is not just a theory, it is a methodology too. It is also viable because it can be practically applied, as a number of scholars have demonstrated through their empirical experiences (Backhaus 2003). Another convincing example comes from a Kurt H. Wolff’s book: *Transformation in the Writing. A Case of Surrender and Catch* (Wolff 1995; Bakan 1998; Zaner 2000).

The notion of “Surrender and Catch” also makes a fruitful contribution (like a new paradigm) to sociology at large. “Surrender” may be declined as love or “cognitive love” or “total involvement” or “faith”, while “catch” may be considered “a new perception, a flash of insight, a new idea, a work of art and so on” (Arlene Goldbard: arlenegoldbard.com/2008/12/13/surrender-and-catch/). It is a pity that George Ritzer’s (2007) *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, published by Blackwell, Oxford, in 11 volumes, does not contain any reference to Kurt H. Wolff’s sociology, namely to the “surrender-and-catch” approach: too innovative for the science or too dangerous (and deviant) for the traditional, classical sociology of quantification?

Theory and concepts

There can be no theory without concepts. Therefore, it is fundamental to define concepts when building up a theory, indicating the chosen methodology, stating whether it be constructionist or otherwise, if it begins from hypotheses or data, is quantitative or qualitative, mono-method or multi-method.

A number of concepts appear seminal because they are particularly fertile, that is, they are more productive than others. This is true of the social-class concept in Marx, of solidarity in Durkheim,

charisma in Weber, gift in Mauss, structure in Lévi-Strauss, system in Luhmann, field in Bourdieu, liquidity in Baumann, risk in Beck and so on.

Referring to the diffusion and use of one or more concepts, I recall the satisfaction with which Edward Shils spoke to me about his “centre-and-periphery” conceptual pair (Shils 1975), adopted on a broad scale all over the world and applied to many different contexts. Kurt Wolff too must have been content with the success of his “surrender and catch” binomial, which entered many sociological approaches on both sides of the Atlantic, as the many essays that cite it prove, despite the fact that some critical observations contained a certain vein of irony when dealing with the figure of the researcher who had, they believed, become the “prisoner” of the social reference-interlocutor. It is for this reason, too, that it is well worth our while to come to terms with this extraordinary bi-conceptual intuition of Wolff’s.

The qualitative significance of surrender and catch

Kurt Wolff devoted as many as four publications to the binding connection he saw between “surrender and catch”. The first book, dating from 1972, was called *Surrender and Catch: A Palimpsest Story* (Wolff 1972). The second (Wolff 1976) was published as one of a series devoted to the philosophy of science. The third (Wolff 1978) was a paperback re-edition of the previous book. The fourth (Wolff 1995) resumed the theme of “surrender and catch” ending 23 years of revisions carried out between 1972 and 1995, and which saw the author involved in a number of disciplinary areas. In actual fact, Wolff had been engaged with the topic years before, seeing that his early essays on the issue date back to the 1960’s (Wolff 1962, 1962a, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1965a) if not before (Wolff n. d.). In the 1960’s, ‘70’s, 80’s and 90’s a further 13 articles containing in-depth discussions of a number of the features of the rapport existing between “surrender and catch” appeared, not to mention a number of translations and reprints. The idea of “surrender and catch” is applied even to poetry, for example, in his “first love” (Wolff 1986; Ward 1993). It is above all in articles published in reviews and magazines that he dwells specifically on the topic of surrender from a number of angles: phenomenological (Wolff 1972a, 1984), corporeal (Wolff 1974), radical (Wolff 1977; Ludes 1977), philosophical (Wolff 1979), cognitive (Wolff 1982, 1982a, 1983; Feher 1984), theoretical-critical (Wolff 1983a), hermeneutical (Wolff 1984a), methodological (Wolff 1978a), anthropological (Wolff 1994) and Mannheimian (Wolff 1988, 1995a). It is difficult to find an area where Kurt Wolff did not try to apply his theoretical tool, which consisted principally in a willingness to surrender, to trust the other and have faith in his/her substantial otherness (Wolff 1994). It follows that his main epistemological and methodological slant consists, in fact, in surrendering any expression of personal views as a researcher, up-stream, save, obviously one’s initial operative choice, an option which appears basically a declaredly qualitative one (Corradi 1987). This is amply documented in the *Kurt Wolff Papers, Robert D. Farber University Archives* of the Brandeis University of Waltham (Massachusetts), which contain a box entitled *Surrender as a Response to Our Crisis*, dating 1962, and another called *Surrender and Catch, Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, Critical Theory*, which bears no date.

Examining Kurt Wolff’s own life, it appears clear that it too moved along the coordinates of surrender, on the one hand, of catch on the other (Stehr 1981) and that, therefore, Wolff’s existential sociology sought surrender first, catch later, but with a view to escaping, mirrorwise, reversed positions, at the risk of unconditioned surrender to ideological and political enemies and, therefore, of being caught, that is, of being deprived of freedom of thought and action. All this for Wolff meant making an epistemological and methodological choice close to that concerning his own life: a continual surrender to every possible form of knowledge in order to catch it later, be it a foreign language, history, philosophy, poetry and, last but not least, sociology and, as a result, the thinking of Mannheim – whose attentive and assiduous student he was (Wolff 1991, 57-79) -, Simmel and Durkheim.

How the idea of surrender was born

It is not easy to find the original roots of a thought, of the formulation of a concept. It is likely that not even the author himself would have been able to trace the exact way the idea he called surrender was conceived (Ostrow 1990, 365; 1993, 301; Moon 1993, 305; Wolff 1993, 353-355; Wolff 2004, 353); he did provide a fictitious account of it (on the 27th. September 1973, in Florence), although in at least 9 of his previous essays he had already used the term.

Here is an account of the background story:

“Perhaps this book on surrender-and-catch begins thus (or even: thus begins). After this walk. After this — so it might seem — initiatory walk. For it is to walk, between the stones and the walls between which the walking goes, to communicate with the gates and the houses, the ochre paint, or the outrageous red, on the walls around the olive gardens, to greet the forbidding fort, whose walls preclude the view of our cupola, our campanile, our civic tower. And the cypresses: black brush slips in the towering sky — for the weather is not good. The olive trees shimmer, shivering in their own mean colour of graygreen against the dark-gray lumpiness of a sky. And yet: nothing can happen because one returns home, out of the wind that makes itself known as possibly not joking, and there it is still and warming, and soon expectant. Expectant? These words. I can wait a while.” (Wolff 1976, 3). This *incipit* of the first chapter of *Surrender and catch*, called “There is a beginning”, appears more like the beginning of a rather poetic literary work, than of a scientific essay on sociology. And yet it was this basically poetic moment, akin to a Mertonian instance of *serendipity* (Merton 1948), that gave birth to a new, eminently qualitative research style, where adjectives and adverbs prevail over numbers making depth and thoroughness hard to deny and/or contest.

It is no coincidence maybe, that it was Florence, the city of the Medici family, patrons of the sciences and of Michelangelo, that great artist, investigator of the human body and poet, that had such an incisive impact on this great emeritus professor from the Brandeis University. Further Florentine references spring to mind: from the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore by Filippo Brunelleschi, the bell tower of the cathedral by Giotto di Bondone, the municipal tower by Arnolfo di Cambio and the Belvedere bastion by Bernardo Buontalenti.

In Wolff’s case, the experience seems to have been triggered by a simple walk through Florence, amid walls and gates, stones and houses, ochres and reds, olive groves and cypresses. Even the wind seems to have played an almost human role by appearing to wait. Await what? In the words of the book, the author emphasizes the idea of waiting itself, at least for a while.

And is that all? Yes, but as someone (Kelly Dean Jolley, il 23 maggio 2012:

kellydeanjolley.com/2012/05/23/immortal-openings-9-kurt-h-wolff-surrender-and-catch/) wrote, here we are talking about an immortal overture, harbinger of extraordinary developments. In actual fact Wolff’s relationship with Florence is a metaphor come true because the city “offered” itself to him and he accepted it willingly and made it “his” in a sole process where there is no fracture between offering and accepting; they are distinguished in order to try and grasp, *a posteriori*, what actually happened in reality (Wolff 1975, 4).

Defining surrender

Wolff was a multi-faceted scholar and this affected his conceptualizations. Furthermore, his surrender is something one experiences existentially in a number of fields, from the nature of empirical research to the art of theoretical reflection, from politics to poetry, from philosophy to history to sociology. In the author’s own words, “to surrender means to take as fully, to meet as immediately as possible whatever the occasion may be. It means *not* to select, *not* to believe that one can know quickly what one’s experience means, hence, what it is to be understood and acted on: thus it means *not* to suppose that one can do justice to the experience with one’s received notions, with one’s received feeling and thinking, even with the received *structure* of that feeling and thinking it means to meet, whatever it may be, as much as possible in its originariness, its itself-ness” (Wolff 1976, 20).

From a strictly methodological point of view this excerpt indicates a precise pathway to follow, that of non-selection of the situations and materials to be investigated, prior to investigation. Data should be accepted for what they are, an almost natural fact, given, to which to entrust oneself without qualms. At the same time one must renounce drawing up preventive, anticipatory hypotheses of any kind. The only expectation is that of awaiting developments, triggered by the dynamics of the situation. Otherness is not grasped at first glance. One cannot expect to understand, to “catch” the other during the first explorative encounter. Otherwise the experiences of the scholar prevail over those of the interviewee, who, on his/her part only allows him/herself to be captured slowly, in any case only partially, very partially, actually. It is not licit and there is no point in making suppositions regarding the nature, the profile of others.

Capture (catch) occurs much later, when the dialogue established is such as to permit the interviewer and the interviewee to share knowledge and experience, in a new vision of reciprocation which looks like a new beginning, a new way of existing in the world. Wolff, for the sake of completeness, goes so far as to say that catch is not necessarily a concept, because it can turn out to be much more, from an option to a work of art, from a change of attitude to a clarification, even an encounter with surrender, from which to seek escape (Bennett 1992).

The rapport between surrender and catch is actually highly complex, because it is an endless, limitless process. In fact, as Wolff (1994a, 371) himself admitted, the initial prompt came from Mannheim’s distinction between ideological and sociological interpretation (Mannheim 1926) to become, respectively, for Wolff, intrinsic interpretation, availing of the terms of what is to be interpreted, without recourse to external resources, and extrinsic interpretation which seeks help from the socio-historical context.

Later, developments in Wolff’s thinking came up with the five characteristics of surrender. The first requires maximum suspension of acquired socialization, in an effort to understand someone or something, as in the case of students who delve down deep into their disciplines utmost, laying aside, completely, what they already know.

The second feature is that the understanding of even a sole, unique experience can never exhaust the entire experience, which still remains to be acquired.

The third point refers to the double nature of truth: scientific and existential. The latter is the truth of surrender, in line with rigorous examination of the most important experiences.

Existential truth is related to ecstasy, the fourth aspect of surrender, which soars above everyday life in a spirit not very unlike that of poetry, as it too leads beyond reality.

The fifth characteristic of surrender is, finally, respect for mystery, in a dialectical rapport between the uncertainty of analysis and recognition of the indefectible nature of the mysterious. This is due to labilization, that is, a weakening or even a disappearance of norms, principles, guidelines or traditions that have become, in fact, labile. From this stems the need to start the quest for what to believe in anew, having laid aside one’s previous cultural heritage. But one cannot surrender to investigation without first accepting the idea that mystery is inexhaustible. Therefore, catch cannot place limits on the cognitive process, as it is catch that actually leads to further surrender and so on. In short, surrender and catch are indissolubly inter-chained with each other.

This pathway is a perfect backdrop to Mannheim’s thinking, emerging also in the idea of *Sich-Haben*, self-possession which takes place in surrender and which may be equally conjugated with loss of the self, seeing that possessing and losing oneself are part of the self-same process. This way, thanks to the experience, it is possible to establish norms.

Conceptualisation itself, that is, the establishment of concepts is a sort of catching of surrender. Catch is never final, definitive, however, because it may, in turn, become surrender. Analysis is carried out fearlessly, endlessly without any dread even of mystery. All told, possession of the self is not a static condition.

It must also be pointed out that surrender and catch are a form of protest against the *status quo*, at attempt at surpassing and turning the past on its head, to the total advantage of social beings. Surrender has, therefore, a critical, polemical, radical value.

Arlene Goldbard (arlenegoldbard.com/2008/12/13/surrender-and-catch/) appropriately defined Wolff's proposal for a new paradigm as the work of a scholar who practices what he preaches. In her opinion surrender is art, innovation, aimed at understanding and integration. It is, above all, an instance of "cognitive love, which enables one to see, does not blind", according to an expression used by Wolff himself, who outlined its five features: 1) total involvement, because whoever loves feels totally at one with the addressee of his/her love, in a situation totally similar to that experienced during surrender, and which creates a state of tension, or, in any case, of concentration; 2) surpassing what has been learnt to date; 3) the pertinence of every aspect that strikes the researcher's attention, whereby the person who loves takes an interest in everything regarding his/her beloved/lover; 4) identification, whereby those who love lose themselves in love to find themselves again; 5) the risk of causing damage, because those who proceed through surrender seek change, which is not devoid of consequences at relational, inter-subject level (including esteem) so, with surrender one must take into account having to face hurts and affronts of all kinds. Recourse to surrender is stressful and goes against the current of tradition and convention, imposed by those who have power over them. Surrender, according to Wolff (1977) is "human reason's most radical exercise", rebellion at the service of love for a more humane human society. After all, a love of knowledge is the continuation of the multi-millennial action of philosophers down through the ages.

A methodology for qualitative analysis

The experience of surrender and catch is totalizing, also in the sense that it embraces numerous dimensions, from the philosophical to the psychological, from the phenomenological to the existential, from radical criticism to existentialism and, last but not least, essentially qualitative methodology.

The food for thought provided by Wolff is abundant and manifold; although not all of his ideas are suited, however, to the field of sociological analysis as such, yet all are useful in that they provide an aura, an atmosphere, a basic attitude capable of acting as the mainstay, the keystone of an approach to investigating people and things. It is possible, therefore, to adopt some of the prompts, some of the operative suggestions as true and veritable investigational tools. Thus, for example, the mode of writing about the objects analysed cannot but represent a prodrome, an anticipation of what was to become a salient characteristic of qualitative analysis, like writing *memos* referring to research data in such a way as to make them the ulterior object of research, veritable data requiring further, full, in-depth investigation. Even diary-entries become, and rightly so, the object of examination, an often indispensable reference capable of yielding fruitful results, as shown by the success in Italy, of the creation of the diarists' archives, an initiative first undertaken by Saverio Tutino, later by Duccio Demetrio (1996) and now housed at Anghiari, at the Libera Università dell'Autobiografia [Free University of Autobiography], and at Pieve Santo Stefano, at the Fondazione Archivio Diaristico [The Diarists Archives Foundation]. The study of letters, personal documents, belongs to classical qualitative sociology, which began in 1918-1920 with Thomas and Znaniecki's seminal work on the Polish peasant in Europe and America. But the most emblematic reference and that most charged with convergence is the methodological line and research style contained in Glaser and Strauss's *Grounded Theory* (1967), whose surrender to data is as total as that of Wolff.

To tell the truth, the slant adopted by Wolff in his writings is mainly philosophical, though it is also sociological in an unconventional way. It is, in fact, this basic choice of his that foregrounds the spirit with which the author addresses the issue of gaining knowledge of inter-subjective otherness; he avails of a literary, almost rhetorical exposition to provide convincing proof of the practicability and trustworthiness of his primal option, that of suspending all preventive judgements, of relinquishing all references rooted in acquired culture and principles, in order to obtain the best possible grasp of the other and the surrounding social world. Even had Wolff not provided any indication of method, which he evidently did, his message would have been clear just the same; it

was that one had to reset, completely, one's usual way of proceeding (as well as the criteria underscoring it), in order to become available to receiving whatever indications might come from the area of research, from people and things, from nature and the environment, from social relations and phenomena. Furthermore, the form chosen by Wolff to enter into communication with his readers, as with his pupils before that, is evocative rather than explicative, existential rather than academic, colloquial rather than regulated, open rather than dogmatic.

If Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) in their work on the social construction of reality systematically analysed the influence of socialization processes, Kurt Wolff (1976) stigmatized the way they impeded an adequate knowledge of the social reality. Both the former and the latter made contributions to approaches regarding qualitative-sociological strategies now considered classics, in such a way that the consideration attributed to Berger and Luckmann in no way jeopardizes the attention paid to Wolff. However, it is necessary to distribute reference to both currents wisely so as to find a proper balance between equally valid and acceptable formulae. When necessary, it can prove useful to recall the, by no means secondary, fact that all three scholars referred to the masterly thinking of Alfred Schütz (1962-1966, 1996), to his basic phenomenology, which referred clearly to relations with what is presented or, rather, what "appresents" itself (*Appräsentation*) to the researcher-scholar (Schütz 1932).

The main route remains that traced by the German school of the sociology of understanding (*verstehende Soziologie*) with all its significant variations. On the one hand, Berger and Luckmann showed a tendency to "think as usual" while, on the other hand, Wolff sought to avoid this very same tendency, to provide for a more ample understanding of otherness, especially through shared discussion; so, it is no chance, that this has become a characteristic of another qualitative-type methodology, based on the hermeneutic approach of Oevermann (1979). It all fits; the virtuous circle of a certain central-European sociological tradition is completed and continues to provide resources essential to sociological analyses founded on qualitative principles.

One might say that when Wolff thought of another person he implemented his surrender to catch, in that he departed from the presumption that sufficient understanding may be reached only and if one overcomes, at least, initially (for a while and up to a certain point) one's own frame of reference. However, once the aim of understanding through catch has been achieved it must be considered simply as a further stage in a persistent, never-ending journey, standing out, as it must, against the inscrutable backdrop of mystery.

This surrender process is accompanied closely by a kind of "cognitive love" which helps one overcome the initial difficulties of surrender and allows one to reach, grasp and understand thanks to results that are at once cognitive and existential. In other words, surrender is also a conversion (which entails ecstasy, besides), as well as a rebellion against the past and tradition, in order to look, instead, to the future, in a creative mode bent on acquisition of further knowledge and know-how. One might also go as far as to say that it is the naïveté required to accede to unforeseeable results. The "loss of self" typical of surrender is a prelude to the salvation of the moment of catch, even if this, in turn, is simply one step on a very long pathway.

Surrender is almost artistic and religious in character, given the love and attention towards the other implied in this cognitive procedure. Little by little, in a maieutic manner experience is made to yield concepts useful to understanding (one cannot fail to notice in this a process belonging *also* to other methodological procedures: Glaser and Strauss's *Grounded Theory* and Oevermann's objective hermeneutics, for example). The alternative yields approximate results, while Wolff "claims" reaching what is ineluctably true, or at least, in the opinion of other scholars, more trustworthy findings than those produced by the classical tools of statistical-quantitative approaches. As beneath the surrender-and-catch approach there lies a desire to change the *status quo*, surrender is active not static.

Furthermore, the distinction between offering and accepting a given situation is fictitious, as it is simply instrumental to understanding the event. In actual fact, the distinction is the outcome of what has occurred, and one becomes aware of it only afterwards.

Finally, one might attribute to Wolff the definition used by David Kettler (1967, 402) to describe Mannheim and his scientific activity, that is, a “style of thought”, an expression coined by Mannheim himself (1953, 75, 165). One might, after due consideration, also hold that we are in the presence of a “moral-philosophical syndrome” (Kettler 1967, 402), which seems to connect the master Mannheim to the disciple Wolff, who has become a *maître à penser* in his own right.

The methodological connotations

A number of anticipations regarding the dialectics of surrender and catch (or capture) are to be found here and there in some of the publications dating before 1976, in particular, in the volume entitled *Trying Sociology* (Wolff 1974b, 44-45) which acts as a prelude to the book that followed (Wolff 1976), devoted entirely to the theme of surrender and catch, an expansion of a particularly Mannheimian conception of the sociology of knowledge.

The mirror term of surrender is catch, a concept Wolff (1976, 20) defined as follows: “By ‘catch’ I mean the cognitive or existential result, yield, harvest, *Fang* (catch), *Begriff* (concept, from *con-cipio*) of surrender, the beginning (*Anfang*), new conceiving or new conceptualizing which it is. What is caught (comprehended, conceived), what catching (‘conceiving’) means cannot be anticipated – otherwise surrender would not be as unconditional as it is, and the catch would be no beginning”.

First of all, it is important to point out that Wolff might have done better had he referred to the precise Latin core of the word “concept”, which has as its root the infinitive of the verb *cum capere*, which literally means “take with”, “take together”, which conveys the Wolffian term even better, as it alludes directly to a joint capture of the interlocutor, of the encounter, of the interview; but the reaping, collecting, harvesting are also joint actions, which implies and means pooling the results obtained thanks to the initial option of surrender, a veritable window opening onto the world of the other, the other’s point of view, the different mind-sets operating in society. Comprehension represents a kind of syntony established between an I and a you, between two generalizations placed face to face and responding to each other through their reactions, perceptions, attitudes, answers, deductions. The novel conceptions, of continuous *cum capere* set in motion through an inter-personal relationship, is amply justified by the initial (somewhat initiatory) decision to embrace surrender, trust, disinterested acceptance, devoid of any kind of blackmail whether economic, affective or any other type. The final outcome cannot but be followed by a positive appreciation of the route taken, despite being basically unforeseeable and lack of expectedly previous reassuring experiences. Prevision is not a part of this both epistemological and methodological perspective, otherwise much would turn out to be as obvious as it was useless, because it would simply confirm the already known, making it even more impervious to all talk of change, transformation and improvement of the existing.

On the other hand, even the choice of “surrender” as a noun capable of conveying fully what Wolff meant is not devoid of contradiction. Nonetheless, for the Brandeis University scholar “‘surrender’ itself seems best. It is a rich word, implying some of the meanings to be reviewed and some others, including, precisely in its military ring, a fine ironical one that has to do with politics and with some aspects of our moment in history. I begin with this and other connotations. The irony of ‘surrender’ is its opposition to the official Western, and now potentially worldwide, consciousness in which the relation to the world, both natural and human, is not surrender but mastery, control, efficiency, handling, manipulation” (Wolff 1976, 21). Indeed, adds Wolff (1976, 31), “surrender – to broaden our discussion – is extraordinary, not routine”. It is therefore a decided and decisive intervention, which answers the need arising from a given situation, even one of crisis, where surrendering also means catch, that is a coming to terms, due to awareness, which in turn reveals a new beginning, that is, the end of the crisis. All this is possible thanks to the fact that a human being is free to ask (Wolff 1976, 31): “when am I, when is man, in the fullest exercise of his reason and freedom?, and he may find his answer in surrender, finding it as he surrenders and finding further meanings in his answer as he examines his experience. Thus, ‘surrender as a response to our crisis’”.

This leads, at this stage, to a scenario related to religion (Wolff 1976, 37): “religion may well appear as the mood embraced in an effort to come to terms with two unanswerable questions – it is the phase in our history in which we know that these questions *are* unanswerable. The first is: ‘What am I doing, anyway?’ And its trouble leads to the second: ‘Who am I, anyway?’ In *one* question: what can I truly believe about my fate?” Wolff means (and the reader agrees with him) that the answers provided by common sense and science are not totally satisfying, because they do not go beyond a certain limit. It follows that common sense and science, in the face of fundamental questions, are useless. “‘What is the meaning of what I’m doing? What is the meaning of my being the person that common sense and science can so well describe and explain?’ And in trying to answer, we may recall what tradition in religion, philosophy, art has to offer, and rest content”. And the issue does not end here, as, traditionally, one problem opens up fresh ones, when no satisfactory answers are forthcoming. So, religion may be taken up, invented, reinvented, exploited, performing a function similar to that enucleated by Niklas Luhmann in his systemic analysis of society (Luhmann 1977): “‘Invention’ comes from *in-venire*: as soon as I recall and affirm the meaning of this world, I have recalled and affirmed an element of tradition, gotten hold of a thread that connects this, until a moment ago, discontinuous time with a past time – and a past enormous. I have come upon this past, our past. Religion as the invention of the search for the invention: religion as that which has come upon the search, the search for the path that comes upon whatever it may be that allows us to come to terms with those unanswerable questions” (Wolff 1976, 38). The quest for answers in religion is linked with the key-theme of Wolff’s sociology which takes up again the Mannheimian concept of labilizing, that is making the relevance of reference points and values labile through reduction, so that the dearth created by labilization is tantamount to an absence of values (Wolff 1976, 49). At this point Wolff establishes a close connection between labilization and surrender (Wolff 1976, 50) in that thinking, feeling, suffering and groping while looking for answers are all actions that connote both experiences and find a concrete answer, at least at empirical level, in what has been defined as the “diffused religion of values” or the “religion of diffused values” (Cipriani 2001).

Wolff also posits a parallel between the concept of rebellion as used by Camus (1956) in *The Rebel* and that of surrender. The act of rebellion is to everyday life what the Cartesian doubt is to the intellectual. The one and the other bring the individual out of seclusion. The same may be said of surrender, which is a voluntary act of liberation from the *status quo*, an effort to find different, innovative answers, explanations unlike those accumulated through tradition and socialization. Camus’s and Wolff’s writings are, to a large extent, inspired by a rather similar logic from which emerges a specific meaning of life.

The empirical basis of the new methodology: the Loma research project

The same meaning of life is to be found in Wolff’s long frequentation of Loma, a community in the north of the State of New Mexico, which he studied on several occasions over a period of decades, beginning from 1940, but always at intervals of no more than two years. Emblematically, Kurt H. Wolff surrendered to Loma in order to understand it, capture its broadest sense. His continuous returns meant that every catch brought about a subsequent surrender, in a chain bestowing empirical substance on a discourse which risked, otherwise, remaining a mere theoretical-philosophical abstraction. Thanks to this direct experience at Loma Wolff was able, without interrupting the train of his thought, to verify on several occasions the progress of his – sociological philosophical and methodological concepts. Loma (Wolff 1964, 1989; Bennett 1992; Bakan 1996; Hinkle 1996) is, in short, like an inexhaustible source on which to draw or an anchor, an inextricable link between surrender and catch. It is here in Loma too that another reversals of perspective, like the many to which Wolff accustoms us, takes place: the important thing is not to define a community, to depend on field notes, on extemporaneous reflections, but to look at the context, the kind of countryside surrounding Loma, the problems that Loma created, asking the questions that being in that place

provoked, about what should be done, the type of research to carry out, in short, the overall significance of the entire investigation of the community.

The countryside in Loma inspired and provoked Wolff just as it had in Florence; there “the cypresses: black brush slips in the towering sky – for the weather is not good. The olive trees shimmer, shivering in their own mean color of graygreen against the dark-gray lumpiness of a sky” (Wolff 1976, 3) here “high, calm, yet exciting, with sagebrush rolling wide, rolling up to hills, mesas razed flat, shaking their green brown hues into nothingness buzzing with flowers purple, blue, lemon tufts in the gray circled by rocky tables” (Wolff 1976, 71). In both places one remarks the connotative presence of “hills” and “walls”. Florence and Loma are, therefore, almost on the same plane, as a clearly perceptible connection exists between the contexts, although Wolff himself does not say so explicitly when he speaks of the Medicean city he refers to Loma (Wolff 1976, 4). Wolff is strongly impressed by the relations between the inhabitants of Loma, by the respect existing between them and the wisdom that prevails. So he surrenders, but to tell the truth it is the inhabitants of the community that capture him in actual fact, surrendering to his presence, thus, creating an endless virtuous circle, alternating between “surrender and catch”.

When all comes to all, this is an important first lesson in methodology referred to the spirit of welcome and acceptance among interlocutors who are initially all strangers among themselves and to one another. Can one forget the clear influence that Simmel (1908) and Schütz (1944) had on Wolff, at least as far as their work concerning strangers is concerned?

The crucial phase of the work on Loma coincides with Wolff’s longest stay there, in 1944, when, tracing “culture patterns” Wolff (1976, 72) devoted himself to an almost ruthless investigation of the terrain, his hyper-attentive gaze searching spasmodically for every possible element relating to further knowledge of community life. He followed the traditional rules of sociology, he did not verify hypotheses, was not selective, gathered everything, took note of everything, added notes to notes. His aim was that of reaching truth, something we might call known and not simply presumed. In other words there were no statistical calculations of probability regarding a sample or a result. Probability guaranteed nothing, did not appear scientific and requires supports of a completely different kind. So, all the old implements from the researcher’s toolbox had to be discarded. New explorative horizons had to be sought, or better still, other perspectives were required to examine the social picture. This tendency is also prompted by the kind of attitude that the researcher Wolff avails of during investigation: a love so strong that it pushed him beyond appearances. One could not apply to Loma what had been learnt elsewhere, in Frankfurt or Florence, in Ohio or Massachusetts, in Michigan or Texas.

Loma was Loma and could not be other than itself. What conceptual cogency was unable to achieve the heart could. In the end Wolff realized that what had been tested before did not represent the route to follow. The narration which follows, as a form of self-quotation, may be considered obsolete, even if it represents a new surrender and, therefore, a new kind of catch. “I had at once begun to observe and to record my observation, and without any attempt at order or selection. My field notes thus resembled a diary, expanding page by page, immediately typed from short notes, memory, or dictation. As writing accumulated, however, some sort of structuring became imperative. I proceeded to break down my notes by topics. I started with this only after having produced about 80 single-spaced pages of typescript; but once I had completed the classification (at a point when the pages had increased to approximately 140 – I had continued to write down notes even while going on with breakdown), I kept it up to date”.

So much work for nothing? To be abandoned then? Certainly not. It may be considered as an instructive introduction to the much more promising balance between surrender and catch. Surrender in itself, according to Wolff (1976, 96), is a state of extreme attention, concentration waiting for something to happen.

The very writing of the present article bears witness to this fact. To undertake the task, I have had to renounce my own vision of the issue of methodology to gain deeper insight into and comprehension of Kurt Heinrich Wolff’s essential perspective. This has involved not simply surrendering, but

surrendering to. In other words, to discern the prodromes and consequences of this by no means easy thinking, with its simple and enveloping rhetoric, its scrupulous choice of terms, substantives, adjectives, verbs and adverbs, the choice has been that of assuming a stance neither in favour nor against it. At the same time, however, an attempt has been made to seek a rather unstable equilibrium between agreement and understanding, in order to accept, while working, this or that suggestion, while following one's personal scientific guidelines, which can neither be hemmed in between parenthesis nor totally banished from the mind. All told, the writing of this essay has followed an advance/retreat pattern, drawing close to gain strength and lymph before retiring again, a kind of "trial and retrial" process typical of scientific procedural protocols.

To avoid all misunderstanding, Wolff states clearly that surrender cannot be qualified as aesthetic or artistic, not even as religious, moral or cognitive. One must not forget that, above all, the basic characteristic of surrender to, is veritable attention and no vague glance at the objects and subjects of investigation (Wolff 1976, 96).

Conclusion

The kind of relationship Kurt Wolff envisaged, hoped for, between the social researcher and the interlocutory subject, is a kind of cordial intimacy, which refers directly to a word in Arabic relating to the heart (*Qalb*) (قلب) as a syntonic relational reference-point, a shared and accepted view, devoid of discrepancies and, if possible, of harmful rifts, often lethal to cordial agreement.

In the Arabic culture *al-Qalb*, relates to the heart, which is not, obviously, the same as the intellect although there is a synergy, a syntony between them that is not simply physical. Applied to the surrender/catch nexus, discourse presents a similar profile. Availing of the river metaphor: it is said that it runs, but it is really the water that runs. Yet we commonly refer to the river rather than to the water it contains. One understands the parallel between heart and surrender, between intellect and catch – it is the case to say so – if the one and the other factor confront each other continually, realising that they belong to the same ambit.

Transposing the issue onto the methodological plane of social science, not only is there no reason for presumed superiority of quality over quantity or vice versa; not even in more explicit terms is there any basis for the claim that numbers prevail over data from continual in-depth dialectic exchange between Wolffian surrender and catch. The truth, providing that one may speak of it, is not the exclusive patrimony of either the quantitativists or qualitativists. From a convergence between them, more convincing indications and more persuasive proof may stem.

In Arabic *Qalb* indicates something that rotates both clock- and anticlockwise, with an inversion of direction, therefore corresponding to the reversal associated with the connection between surrender and catch, interviewer and interviewee, observer and the observed.

Much more is required to achieve purity of heart (*Tasfiya-e-Qalb*); sixteen characteristics are necessary, many of which recall the spirit of Wolff's surrender and catch: abstention from wickedness, avoidance of evil, contentment with any and everything, having patience, showing gratitude, seeking happiness, cultivating hope, concentration and recollection (all peculiarly Wolffian themes, especially the last two).

One should add that the stem of *Qalb* also includes a notion of rapid, frequent change. When all comes to all, Wolff's proposal aims at innovation, revolt in the Camusian sense, overcoming the *status quo*. The upturning caused by the inversion of surrender and catch ushers in a transformation of society itself and indicates, in any case, a methodological alternative to the ordinary canon of sociological research. It also involves a change of mentality, which means abandoning previous conceptions. The surrender-catch pair is also like a wind bringing freedom and purification, toppling inveterate prejudices and throwing new horizons wide open, even, for example as far as relations between Jews and Muslims are concerned. Recourse to the peaceful solution of surrender and catch might prove, among other things, to be a positive kind of political proposal.

Furthermore, both the written (Koran) and oral (Sunni) texts agree on the meaning of *qalb*: something appertaining to the mind (*Quloob*, often pronounced *Qalb*, of which it is the plural), the

psyche, the intellect, mental processes, thinking, reasoning, awareness, intentionality, assumption of responsibility, decision making, long-term vision. So, in the end, Wolff's surrender and catch goes a long way, far beyond the original context.

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