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Boudon's contribution to the objectivity of ethics. Some open methodological problems.

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Introduction

Boudon's intellectual production is wide, complex and offers a quantity of original contributions. A main aspect of this author's scientific work is the objectivist and anti relativist exploration on values, a deepening expressing the perception of fundamental analytical necessities and that, mainly through its implications on method and the same vision of social thought, sooner or later will greatly stimulate innovation.

In modern complex societies, characterized by rapid changes in organizational and ethical foundations and a strong push toward globalization, it becomes more and more evident the necessity to overhaul the axiomatic basis and the genesis of judgement criteria with their implications, mainly the interaction with institutional order and the transition of civilizations. In particular, it is pressing the need to solder, in the context of social integration, individual and collective behaviour to the exigency of rationality. Moreover, it is important to avoid cultural diffusion exogenously forced and to clarify in a stringent way the degenerative characters of some values, such as religious fundamentalism, tyrannies and totalitarian views that have claimed to regenerate man while are some true dead-ends.

The first section of this essay treats the present condition of the theory of values and dedicates some brief note to its role in social research. Section two amplifies such treatment and analyses Boudon's position in that context, mainly expressed by his theory of objective values. Finally, section three treats the way to remedy some omissions that, in our opinion, limit the fecundity of Boudon's proposals and that mainly refer to some axiomatic foundations on method. The essay ends with an exhortation to overcome, through science, the unfruitful contrast between voluntarists and the followers of spontaneous motion.

For space reasons, the paper dedicates only a quick analysis to some delicate questions that we diffusely treated in other studies on Boudon, sending back to them for a major deepening¹.

Keywords: Ethical values in social research; objective and subjective values; voluntary and spontaneity views; institutional order and civilizations; methodological ambiguities on values..

1. The state of the studies on values

The investigation on values is largely characterized by the opposition between 'cultural relativism' and what may be called 'absolutist relativism'. The meaning of the first expression is well known. The second one is referable to religious and fundamentalist thought and the term relativism intends to underline that faith precepts are 'relative' to the religions and philosophies that proclaim them. Boudon strongly argues against cultural relativism, while he forgets absolutist relativism, probably due to the thinking that this one does not pertain to science. We shall see, however, that the

consideration of absolutist relativism helps to shed light on cultural relativism. In fact, the two have a common root: the postulate that values cannot be scientifically explained, which is strongly opposed by Boudon and that displays a dominating role in social thought.

Cultural relativism attributes an equal dignity in principle to all values and civilizations. On the contrary, absolutist relativism is exclusivist; it implies, therefore, an uncompromising opposition among the various precepts of faith. Cultural relativism is flexible in nature and hence open to the variable exigencies of the changing world; but it is unable and reluctant to give indications on what to do. It intends its openness as synonymous of tolerance; but its denial of objective values does not allow to prove the objectivity of the value of tolerance that therefore remains an ethical precept among many others. On the contrary, absolutist relativism imperatively indicates, through the precepts of faith, what to believe and to do; this may give it some attraction in the presence of difficult and confused situations, mainly if afflicted by a profound crisis of values. But its stiffness may forcefully obstruct the development process through dogmatic prescriptions. Moreover, the contrasts among different precepts of faith strongly entangle, in the global world, the human relations and the capacity to collaborate with other people. Briefly, absolutist relativism inclines toward civilization conflicts and to suffocate the fecundating seeds provided by the variety of civilizations. Both the relativisms oppose the birth of a global ethics that the present world strongly needs.² They symmetrically and clearly express the limits and implications of the postulate that values cannot have a scientific explanation and get a reciprocal support from their respective lacks.

For better developing the matter, some reference to M. Weber's thought may be useful. This is mainly characterised by the famous distinction between the 'ethics of conviction' and the 'ethics of responsibility' implying an ethical dualism that legitimates the two-fold moral. But this is a minor lack. It is much more relevant the great Weber's ambiguity on responsibility. The author substantially misses the crucial question of the object and content of responsibility: does this refer to self interest, the desire of glory, faith precepts, some generic notion of common good, or other? What was Ivan Terrible's responsibility? Weber does not care to clarify these crucial questions. *The consequent great indeterminateness of the notion of responsibility* is much more devastating than the Weberian ethical dualism; it *implies a multiplicity of ethics that, with the help of the double moral, allow a diffuse manipulating power on values*. This does not trouble Weber as he is strongly convinced that values have a subjective character, are visions and just points of view.

For better clarifying the present misunderstandings on ethics, it may be useful to remind the thinking that prevailed in the field some centuries before Weber. At the beginning of modern age, Roman Church abandoned Medieval rationalism, mainly as an effect of her harsh opposition to the methodological developments and achievements of natural sciences. This hostility to scientific thought was congenial to the idea that values are faith precepts. For their part, laic students derived, from the inconsistency of some religious dogma with modern dynamic society, the conviction that the expulsion of ethics from social thought was a methodological and practical necessity. Machiavelli illustrated with many examples that ethics has nothing to do with politics; A. Smith extended such teaching to economics. Mandeville went beyond: his statement that "private vices are public virtues" implies the exclusion of ethics from the whole social thought. All that was in accordance with the methods of inquiry of natural sciences, based on the strict observation of reality and characterised by the absence of prescriptive aspect. Unfortunately, this method is, as we shall see soon, not appropriate to social phenomena.

The expulsion of ethics from social theory was useful to dupe the obstacle to modernity represented by what the secularization movement indicated as clerical obscurantism. Finally, at the beginning of last century, Pareto, Weber, Spengler, just to remember the most important names, intended to clarify and state through deep analyses and many historical references that values cannot receive a scientific explanation; this proposition greatly stimulated the irrationalism that afflicted human societies in the first half of the XX century. But the separation of ethics from the various branches of social thought is senseless; in fact, ethics represents an important (probably the most important) aspect of social reality and it is inseparable from political, economical and all

remaining aspects of social life. This groundless separation has perhaps given the main push to the diffusion of the idea that values cannot be scientifically explained, and hence to cultural and absolutist relativism.

In our time, it appears more and more evident that the secularization movement, after having given an important stimulus to the development of Western countries by setting them free from absurd ethical precepts, must emend itself from the relativist methodological equivocations. For their part, religions should be made aware that the above equivocations on values prevent to clarify the relations between faith and reason and hence to syntonize religious teachings with modern world.

These ambiguities and misunderstandings afflicting social thought make Boudon's innovative insistence on cultural objectivism a beneficial turning point that stimulates some accurate deepening and revisions on values.

2. Subjectivism and objectivism: Boudon's contribution to the theory of values

This section will manage for making evident some main merits and omissions, in our opinion, of Boudon's anti relativism. We shall pay particular attention to the question of rationality and, more in general, to some methodological impasse afflicting social thought. We agree with Boudon's aim to conjugate reality and rationality, positive and normative aspects, tradition and modernity. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the link with Weberian thought damages these aims.

Weber's ethical subjectivism is coherent with the idea that the explanation of reality must limit itself to consider this one as given and hence the object of strict observation. In fact, this positivist notion of science excludes normative (i.e ethical) aspect, just as he does. All the same, Boudon tries to maintain his objectivism and anti relativism in the Weberian track. In doing that, he stresses the question of rationality, that plays a crucial interpretative role in Weber's thought. The reference to rationality is very important not only as a reaction to the diffuse irrationalism of social thinking but, in our opinion, also because it makes evident the great methodological weakness of social theory. It must be underlined, however, that Weber's insistence on rationality is contradicted by his exclusion of values from scientific thought. Boudon does not undergo this contradiction being his objectivist effort directed to overcome it. But the ambiguous Weberian legacy on rationality displays in some other way its influence, mainly through two key notions at the heart of Boudon's theoretical development: the Weberian notion of 'behavioural cognitivism' and that of 'diffuse rationality'.

The cognitivist statement that there are always some reasons at the basis of human action is certainly true. Unfortunately, this evidence teaches us very little on the rationality of individual behaviour. The reasons of human actions and decisions may include even foolishness. It seems to us that human action, being largely influenced by instincts and sometimes by morally questionable feelings, is a weak and deceiver expression of rational behaviour. *Rationality must be referred to science; as such, it is tightly linked to the question of method*, which is indispensable to put the problem in scientific terms³. Boudon objects to this criticism that rationality must be referred to individual *social* behaviour, i.e. aimed at being approved by the other, not to individual human behaviour. Moreover, it must be added that his notion of 'ordinary rationality' is a very general one, also including scientific rationality. But the point is that a main and urgent need of social thought is to extend as much as possible the role of scientific rationality at the expenses of the other components of ordinary rationality. In fact, those components may be highly misleading while the extension of the role of scientific rationality is strongly opposed, in social thought, by deep methodological equivocations. It is, therefore, absolutely indispensable to remove those equivocations. Some considerations on the other notion that our author derives from Weber's teaching, i.e. the principle of 'diffuse rationality', clearly shows the heavy equivocations that may be associated to the non scientific components of rationality. Let see

The notion of ‘diffuse rationality’ expresses the idea that in the very long run things adjust by themselves, through spontaneous trial and error process. In this way, values would converge towards the ‘right ones’ and this would warrant them a scientific objectivity. Boudon’s statement that “contingency has caused values genesis and diffuse rationalisation their selection”, that gives an efficacious synthesis of his theory, is Darwinian. This landfall is not convincing and does not help daily life through science. It is undeniable that, notwithstanding disasters and catastrophes, the world is obliged to adjust in such a way to allow human species to survive till extinction, as experienced by other species that lived a much longer time than *homo sapiens*’ 30 thousand years. But man is the author of a growing social change, without comparison with the rare accidental mutations and slow selective processes characterizing natural world. For understanding the man’s work of transformation, it is not enough (and may cause growing equivocations with the acceleration of social evolution) some *ex post* judgment, as implied by the assumption of spontaneity of changes. In sum, with reference to the analysis of man’s construction, it is not sufficient to observe what happened; the research must also concern the way to build social reality and set out a science helping this task. Weber is strongly aware of the non repetitive character of social phenomena. But he does not consider that this non repetition, which implies a great difference between social and natural reality, makes the positivist method inappropriate to the first. The principle of ‘diffuse rationality’ is the tool he uses to prove that the observed behaviours are rational.

To sum up, even if the principle of ‘diffuse rationality’ reconciles reality and rationality, just as Boudon is aimed at doing, it derives this reconciliation from Darwinian selection. But it seems to us that this rationality based on spontaneous facts, their observation and the acceptance of what happened cannot give a science of social relations, these being determined by human voluntarist action.

In effect, *even the science of nature largely by passed the principle of diffuse rationality at the beginning of modern age, when some clear methodological procedure and rules were set out.* Before F. Bacon and Galileo’s revolution, technologic and natural knowledge grew according to the above principle: a slow selection of fecund intuitions that often stagnated for a long time in a sort of incubation or got lost and were accidentally rediscovered.⁴ In the absence of a scientific procedure of research and discovery, knowledge advanced slowly and with difficulty across millennia. The discovery, in XIV and XVII centuries, of a method well appropriate to natural reality made exponential the knowledge in the field.

This critical frame can usefully add some reference to two sociologists greatly appreciated by Boudon: E. Durkeim and A. Tocqueville. Our author resumes from Durkeim a notion that strongly weaknesses the question of method and, in a sense, is coherent with the principle of diffuse rationality: the assimilation of scientific research to enchantment in the context of the notion of ‘ordinary rationality’. But even if it is indubitable that the progress of knowledge is, in any case, a result of trial and error, as a consequence of the limits of human skills, it must be underlined that science qualitatively differs from enchantment. Science needs the capacity to compare and select theories on the basis of their contribution to the advancement of knowledge; such capacity requires the sharing, across the scientific community, of basic methodological rules allowing the dialogue among students⁵. The parallelism between science and enchantment may induce to intend as physiological a main drama of social theory: the growing plurality of schools of thought unable to interact each other and hold a dialogue. Moreover, Boudon takes from Durkeim, as a foundation of individualism, the statement that individual has always had a deep feeling of his dignity and interests: an unquestionable statement, but that says very little on interests and dignity since these largely vary with individuals and across civilizations; it seems, therefore, unable to provide values and value judgments with an objective foundation.

Boudon also reminds Tocqueville’s statement that “future is an illuminated and high minded judge but always arriving too late”. Yes, too late. Man cannot be satisfied with this tardy judgement only able to motivate regret. He must attempt to acquire the skill to judge in advance his building

and transformations of social reality, instead of confining himself to *ex post* judgements, as implied by the principle of diffuse rationality. Tocqueville was an acute observer and developed some precious comparative analyses of important social orders. Unfortunately, comparative analyses only consider being and hence give, as we said, tardy judgements on what happened. It is certainly true that comparison may provide useful teachings and represents the highest level of understanding that strict observation can allow in the social sciences; but it is inadequate to supply suggestions on what to do. Frankly, it seems to us that Boudon professes too much appreciation for Durkheim, Tocqueville and Weber's teachings.

Social thought is today in a condition that does not differ from that of technologic and natural thinking before Galileo; it proceeds according to 'diffuse rationality' and hence very slowly; in addition, such kind of rationality is deeply disturbed, in social life, by mystifications on values mainly due to dominating interests, much more than these influenced pre modern technologic process. The present acceleration of social change, largely as an effect of the growing knowledge on nature, makes untenable this situation and may open the door to disaster. A main necessity of our time is to allow also social thought to grow exponentially, that is select the real contributions to knowledge and give full value to them through a method appropriate to the investigated reality. This aspiration is not exaggerated; in fact, social reality is, under various aspects, easier to understand than the natural one since it is a reality generated by man and hence more understandable than natural phenomena. Unfortunately, a wide and powerful coalition opposes the scientific development of social thought. It is not limited to positivism. Weberian diffuse rationality and idealism, both based on the idea that real means rational, agree with the positivist assumption of the spontaneity of processes.⁶ This coalition has been strengthened by the confluence of Roman Church and other religions that point out the reasonableness, wisdom and good sense warranted to religious doctrines by long lasting elaborations across centuries, just as the principle of diffuse rationality maintains. This is, in effect, the basic weakness of the idea of world ethics expressed by the Chicago Declaration

Boudon rightly opposes to relativists that values have their reasons. But the statement that spontaneous behaviour push, in Darwinian sense, values toward the right ones leaves unsolved the following important question: is it necessary to accept values as they are, putting each of them on the same plan in principle, as relativists do? or does it need, on the contrary, to manage for deriving some criteria allowing to capture the right values in the vortex of spontaneous processes? It seems to us that the second option is nearest than the first to Boudon's aims; but it raises some delicate methodological problems that are absent in the analysis of this author.

3. Some ideas and suggestions on the establishment of ethical objectivism

It may be useful to investigate the way to better carry into effect Boudon's purposes, previously underlined. Differently from this author, we do not make the distinction between cultural and cognitive relativism, being the problem of the method, at the heart of the second term of that distinction, crucial for the criticism of cultural relativism.

The fathers of sociology neglected the key problem and the need of a method of inquiry appropriate to social reality. They were misled, in various ways, by naturalist positivism and evolutionary spontaneism. But, as we said, an important difference distinguishes natural from social reality. The first is given for students; it expresses being and therefore must be investigated such it is or, in other words, as the product of spontaneous behaviour the reason of which is senseless to analyse as the essentialist vainly pretended to do. On the contrary, social reality is a product of human work; this makes possible and sensible to investigate the reasons of its features. In sum, social reality cannot be merely understood as being, since it is for a large part marked by doing. *It follows that the method of inquiry on social reality must care to combine being and doing.* Boudon expresses this exigency when he points out the necessity to reconcile positive and normative

aspects, but he does not consider the methodological implications. It seems evident, however, that the combination of being and doing is *an obliged way for the derivation of scientific values and puts the ethical aspect at the centre stage of the methodological procedure and rules*. The disregard of this development on method obliges to found the objectivity of values on the principle of diffuse rationality, which is inherently hostile to the possibility of governing human society. Let see better.

As we noted, the principle of diffuse rationality sets out the idea of spontaneous Darwinian gravitation towards organizational necessities of social systems. But the fact that the evolution of social organization is the product of man, not a consequence of accidental mutations, makes immediately evident the possibility and the need to clarify those ‘necessities’, so that to may knowingly direct toward them. However, it is important to take present that, in the life of social systems, not all is ‘necessity’. It follows that the analysis of social phenomena needs a basic distinction between:

1. *The aspect of ‘necessity’, that is, concerning what must be done in some fairly determined ways, due to precise features of human nature, other conditions of nature and the character of the general conditions of development marking the various development stages of human societies*; in effect, this is the substance of the derivation of objective, that is, necessary values and hence not liable of free choice.
2. The aspect of ‘choice-possibility-creativity’, expressing subjective values, institutions, etc. that are the object of choice and political mediation and often are nourished by creativity with its unforeseeable character. Of course, choices must be mutually consistent and need coherence in deriving their implications.

It seems important to stress that *the definition of ‘necessity’ should be based on a methodological procedure and rules that, starting from realistic postulates concerning important aspect of the nature and the general conditions of development, lead to deduct their implications (in terms of institutional and ethical necessities) that an efficient and sagacious organization of human societies should not disregard*. It must be noted, for clearness, that the above statement implies that choice-possibility must not contrast necessity and hence objective values, since all implications must be coherently derived from them.

The suggested procedure tightly combines reality (realistic postulates) and rationality (coherent derivation, from those postulates, of all implications in terms of values, etc.); just as Boudon proposes. Moreover, the procedure also meets well another main exigency that our author underlines: the reconciliation between modernity and tradition. In fact, this is implied by the necessity to take into account and do not violate the general conditions of development, that are long lasting, not at the mercy of social change.

Some basic characters of human nature allow to derive “ontological imperatives”, that is *organizational and ethical forms indispensable to the expression of human evolutionary potential*. Besides, from the general conditions of development we can derive “functional imperatives”⁷, that is, *institutional and ethical forms imposed by reasons of organizational coherence and efficiency of social systems*. Ontological imperatives, notwithstanding their great importance, do not represent inescapable necessities; they can be trampled over centuries, as happened in all ancient societies and with a special firmness in some great civilizations. *Therefore, ontological imperatives do not follow the principle of diffuse rationality*. On the contrary, functional imperatives, as dictated by reasons of organizational efficiency and coherence, oblige societies to gravitate toward them through trial and error if man ignores them, exactly as the principle of diffuse rationality maintains.

It could be objected that, if the advent of functional imperatives is warranted by spontaneous gravitation, their preventive knowledge, on which we insist, is practically irrelevant. But let us repeat that such knowledge is essential for avoiding the great sufferings that a spontaneous gravitation can inflict, and usually inflicts, to man. If social thought had clarified betimes that real socialism, self proclaimed ‘scientific’, represented a social organization appropriate to stationary

societies, a lot of countries would have escaped the great suffering inflicted to them by the birth, life and death of those social systems that affirmed to be the road toward Future (and fascinated many people even in Western countries) while, on the contrary, were real dead-ends.

Some example may be useful to clarify these abstract formulations. The limitation of cognitive skills is a general feature of human nature and implies that a full unfolding of human potentialities requires attention for the opinions and contributions of all people, to select among them those really profitable. Therefore, the advancement of human knowledge and realizations requires to give importance to individual differences. If all men had identical skills these, even if very high, would be much lower than those deriving from the sum of a lot of skills strongly differentiated. It follows that the respect of human person and tolerance are indispensable to the operation of human evolutionary potentialities, what makes them ontological imperatives. This explanation of the value of individuality seems more general and pertinent than an explanation of individualism derived from Durkeim's reference to the general sentiment, over time, of human dignity and interests. In fact, that sentiment can be dictated by closed civilizations that suffocate individual and condemn society to a total immobility. The two above ethical principles and ontological imperatives have been ignored for very long historical periods and in the most evident way by ancient and recent great centralised empires, that consequently finished in a dead-end. *In the modern dynamic society, the beginning of which was promoted in Western Medieval Europe by very special historical coincidences, the above ontological imperatives also became functional imperatives, being their fulfilment strictly required by the existence of this kind of society; they were made indispensable by the new general conditions of development.*

The synthesized methodological categories seem to provide with a useful tool for the interpretation of social processes and history. *Historical road is pushed or obstructed by the respect or denial of ontological imperatives; besides, it is forced to gravitate towards functional imperatives.* Moreover, civilizations, representing the main aspect of 'choice-possibility', must be consistent with functional imperatives, to avoid heavy inefficiencies and contradictions; this implies that the changes in functional imperatives across historical stages, dictated by the variations of the general conditions of development, will oblige civilizations to change, so that to restore the consistency with functional imperatives. *It emerges, therefore, a causal chain going from ontological imperatives to functional imperatives, to civilizations, with the choice of civilizations open to creativity fuelling the whole process.*

The above notions seem to be useful not only to the interpretation of the past. They may also explain, through the durability of functional and ontological imperatives, some aspects of what will happen. One way to show their usefulness can be a comparison with other theoretical distinctions, for instance, the Marxian one between structure and superstructure that has allowed important contribution to the interpretation of capitalism notwithstanding the equivocal character that such distinction derived from its idealistic roots and expressed, in particular, by the ambiguous mixing between 'necessity' and 'choice-possibility'⁸, which T. Parsons replicated in a different theoretical context.

Conclusion

The synthesized methodological approach insists on *ex ante* rationality, as stronger and more enlightening for the understanding of social systems than the *ex post* rationality expressed by the Weberian principle of diffuse rationality. The approach also distinguishes objective and subjective-relative values, thus avoiding to make the error and levity of intending the last as objective ones; in fact, the above distinction is not possible if we rely upon the spontaneist objectivity of what happened. Our development on method makes it evident that it is mistaken to discuss values, that concern *doing*, on the base of the mere observation of *being* as the principle of diffuse rationality does. In effect, there exists a great difference between the Darwinian tendency towards rationality, based on evolutionary struggle, and the skill of operating with rationality. This skill needs some

methodological procedure and rules appropriate to the basic character of social reality, that is a reality generated by human action and hence intertwining evolutionary and constructive aspects. Social reality is deeply ploughed by doing. The attempt to derive values simply through its observation is contradictory since this erases from method the role of doing.

In our opinion, it is a great merit of Boudon's objectivism and anti relativism to imply, from a logical point of view, the above exigencies of deepening on method; and it is a students' duty to bring on the scene and develop them. The great importance of the matter and the dominating opposition to cultural objectivism suggest to the defenders of this line of thought to develop a common and profound reflection on the methodological problems that it implies, *postponing the contrasts of vision between spontaneists and constructivists to the reasons and needs of science*. This is indispensable not only to demolish the reasons of the supporters of cultural relativism and absolutist dogmatism, but also for opposing convincing arguments to the notion and analysis of values implied by evolutionary spontaneism, idealism and the idea of 'reasonableness' of ancient values, typical of religions. It is our opinion that a deep confrontation of different objectivist approaches should allow some important theoretical advancement. The Groupe d'étude des methods de l'analyse sociologique (GEMAS), that has very much benefited Boudon's stirring impulse, should profitably direct a part of his research toward the questions here considered; this seems indispensable to give full value and accomplish the insistence on values objectivity of the author whose festschrift we celebrate.

Notes

- ¹ See, in particular, A. Fusari (2007a), (2007b) and (2007c)
- ² It must be recognized, however, that the Chicago declaration of 1993 by some religions and religious movements has represented the only endeavour to set up a global ethics. Unfortunately, this attempt intends to build a world ethics on some moral precepts present in various religions, irrespectively of the assessment of their scientific foundation, i.e. the appropriateness to the basic character of reality. The same limiting idea is at the basis of the research on values promoted by the United Nations the results of which were published on a document entitled ‘*Crossing the divide; dialogue among civilizations*’ (2001). This point will be better clarified in section 2 that discusses the principle of ‘diffuse rationality’.
- ³ Le Roy Ladurie explained the Languedoc look-out for witches in XVI century through false beliefs and mass raving. Skinner replied that it is possible to adopt a false belief in a rational way. This dispute can be solved only by referring rationality to science.
- ⁴ It would be interesting an history of pre modern science based on such view.
- ⁵ J. Schumpeter wrote that only by accepting the term of ‘science’ as indicating any area of knowledge utilizing specialised techniques and staffs, it is possible, in principle, to include enchantment in science, since the first uses techniques that are in general not accessible and transmitted in the context of a circle of professional sorcerers.
- ⁶ Liberal doctrine is consistent with this attitude that distrusts voluntarism. But the idealist identification of reality with reason has deprived the variegated group of the heirs of idealism of the skill to manage social reality, condemning them to clamorous failures in the cases they have conquered political power and attempted to carry out revolutionary experiments.
- ⁷ But not in the sense of T. Parsons’ imperatives, that ambiguously mixe necessity and choice-possibility
- ⁸ See A. Fusari (1996)

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