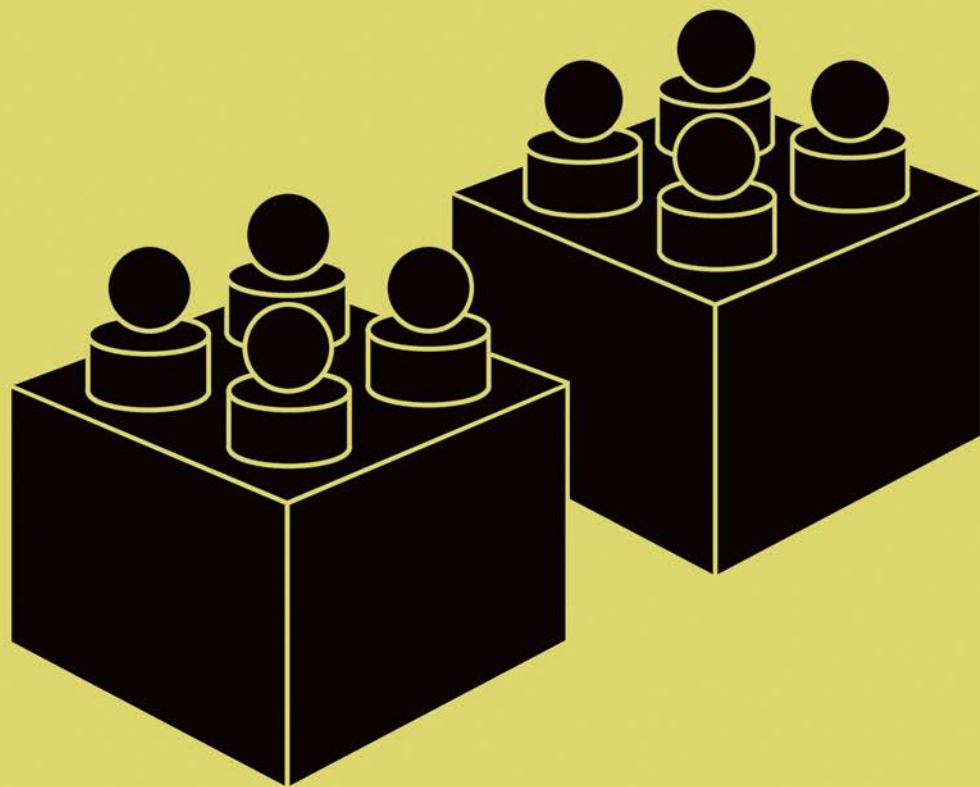


# STATE OF AFFAIRS / 12

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SOCIAL THEORY: CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

STANRZECZY/12 TEORIA SPOŁECZNA. EUROPA ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIA



**/// THE RELATIONAL TURN IN SOCIOLOGY  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIETY,  
CULTURE, AND PERSONS**

**GUEST EDITORS: ELŻBIETA HAŁAS AND PIERPAOLO DONATI**

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# INTRODUCTION: BACK TO RELATIONS IN THEMSELVES

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The category of relation is obviously nothing new in social theory; in a sense, it has been taken for granted for a long time. However, refocusing on social relations, on their constitution and effects, leads to a new way of observing, describing, understanding and explaining social phenomena as relational facts. This novel outlook includes the concept of the human being as *homo relatus*, as articulated in *The Relational Subject*, co-authored by Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret S. Archer. The special issue *The Relational Turn in Sociology: Implications for the Study of Society, Culture, and Persons* serves as an agora for the exposition of the main relational ideas, crucial theses, and concomitant debates.

It is necessary to justify the use of the expression “relational turn.” Obviously, the term “turn” is characteristic for the postmodernist poetics that is replacing the logic of scientific theorizing. Therefore, it must be stipulated that no aspiration to yet another “postmodern turn” comes into play here. On the contrary, the relational turn is associated with a critical standpoint towards postmodernism, an opaque form of cultural cognition which proves subversive in regard to rational scientific knowledge.

Furthermore, the relational turn we have in mind encourages a return to scientific activities rooted in ontological investigations of social and cultural realities in order to deepen the understanding of those realities and to increase our ability to manage the ongoing contemporary changes of the globalized world. This applies both to advancing theories and to building research programmes, as well as to designing their practical applications through relational lenses. Ontological investigations are accompanied by



a honing of relational epistemological consciousness as the background for a new relational theory of society. In other words, metaphorically speaking, the new relational sociology does not participate in the spiral of continually evoked postmodern turns, either linguistic or performative, or any other turns of the postmodern kind, which ultimately lead to a kind of vertigo hampering development of the social and cultural sciences. The relational turn does not ally with the turn understood as a praxis that radicalizes the erosion of all cultural traditions; on the contrary, it focuses on tracking the morphogenetic processes that shape the contours of the after-modern.

Relational sociology overcomes the postmodernist vision to study the emergence of the after-modern in various configurations and the inception of morphogenic society through human agency, and in doing so, highlights the challenge of re-articulating social relations as a task of central importance.

All this does not mean that the collocation “relational turn” in the title of this special issue is being used only to draw attention and to provoke those scholars who rightly point out that the concept of a “turn” has undergone troubling inflation of meaning since it became popularized by such authors as Richard Rorty or Clifford Geertz, and adopted by Jeffrey C. Alexander and others who speak of a cultural turn or other turns.

However, our use of the expression “relational turn” is justified not only by the fact that Pierpaolo Donati, the founder of relational sociology, uses it purposefully (along with such categories as “approach,” “paradigm,” and “theory,” all precisely specified), but also by the actual scope of this endeavour.

Significantly, although the current momentum of relational thinking is particularly impressive and important, in fact the itinerary to the “relational turn” we currently face has been a very long one, and various relational turning points have appeared on this route from antiquity until modernity, when the sciences emancipated themselves from metaphysical thinking in terms of substances. Subsequently, on the shorter sociological stretch of this road, true relational turns have already been executed by Georg Simmel, Alfred Vierkandt, Florian Znaniecki and others who discovered that the relation is the fundamental category of social thought.

“Turn” is obviously a much more ambiguous term than “paradigm,” a notion successfully introduced and discussed by Thomas Kuhn, which has subsequently gained many proponents and many critics. “Turn” refers to a gradual transformation of the field of scientific theories, rather than a scientific revolution. Several characteristic features of a “turn” observed

by, among others, Doris Bachmann-Medick in her book on cultural turns, appear to correspond well with significant traits of the relational turn. We are referring here to what Gaston Bachelard called an epistemological rupture, which is brought about by introducing an innovative vocabulary that opens up new analytic perspectives. Subsequently, an attempt to reconstruct the scientific domains of knowledge under conditions of their growing fragmentation takes place, followed by the introduction of a novel perspective that shows existing knowledge in a new light and draws attention to hitherto ignored aspects of ongoing processes. The final step consists of moving on from the research object to the category of analysis. Thus, the relational turn means not only focusing on social relations as the subject matter; it also involves elaborating new and properly relational categories of analysis, such as the concepts of relational reflexivity and relational goods (or relational evils).

The characteristics listed above are remarkable features of a genuine new intellectual movement that enters into debates and polemics, particularly as regards various ways of understanding relations and relationality in themselves. Pierpaolo Donati argues that most existing approaches, both historical and modern, that take relationality into account cannot be considered relational sociology in a true sense. They are either not explicit enough or mistaken in many aspects, and thus should be regarded merely as **relationistic**. The best example is Mustafa Emirbayer's *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology*, which reduces social relations to mere "transactions," without focusing properly on the internal dynamics and structures of relations as such.

"Relational sociology" denotes the approach initiated in Italy in the 1980s as described in Pierpaolo Donati's *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*. The multitude of various orientations and standpoints that proliferate under the umbrella of relationality serve, at least in part, as material for reflections presented in some papers contained in this volume, albeit the genuine relational theory of society remains at the core.

It should be mentioned at this point that significant connections exist between the relational movement in a broad sense and network theory. Among the creators of the latter is Harrison C. White from Columbia University, whose work *Identity and Control: How Social Formations Emerge* is the landmark of the approach now known as the New York School of relational sociology. It is necessary to hasten the discussion about the merits and shortcomings of network theory with regard to relational sociology in a strict sense. These questions are also mentioned in this special issue.

Symbolic interactionism and social phenomenology, two very important new orientations of the twentieth century, so attractive for the generation of sociologists coming of age in the 1970s, also hold significance for relational sociology, because internal conversation and reflexivity of the self are a crucial part of the relational theory of agency. Questions regarding reflexivity are also discussed in some articles contained in this volume.

As far as the pace of grasping the relational perspective is concerned, one may reflect upon the fact that in the 1980s, despite political obstacles, the interpretative turn was quickly accommodated in Poland. At that time the Internet did not exist yet, and the communist regime limited scholars' opportunities to communicate and exchange ideas with the West. Despite those serious obstacles, the first reception of interpretative approaches in Poland was not delayed. Today, there is no justification for any further postponement of joining new research currents and discussing questions as important as the ones contained in the relational theory of society and the theory of morphogenesis, as well as the cultural version of network theory and their mutual interactions. Incidentally, Polish sociology has a great tradition of theories and research on social and cultural change, based on epistemological and ontological reflection. This includes traditions of relational thinking.

This special issue is the fruit of the first international seminar on relational sociology organized in Poland in September 2016 at the University of Warsaw. Hopefully, our encouragement to take up the relational approach will elicit a response in the sociological milieu and beyond.

It is not the task of the *Introduction* to carry out a comprehensive discussion summing up all contributions to the special issue. It is neither possible nor necessary to summarize in a few words the complex problems analysed by the contributors. However, some preliminary hints to the readers might prove useful.

Twelve articles revolve around three major topics: pivotal issues of the general relational theory of society and culture, relational theory of the subject, and pertinent contemporary questions about the life-world and civil society. The opening article by Pierpaolo Donati highlights the distinctive features of relational sociology, contrasting them with the limitations of relationist theories. The author argues that to understand the increasing complexity of contemporary societies, it is necessary to perceive the social as relational in a true sense and to adopt the premise that the key to solving the problems of contemporary society can be found in the area of social relations.

Aleksander Manterys puts the relational realism of Pierpaolo Donati in a larger context of other approaches, as exemplified by Jan A. Fuhse's communicative approach to relations on the backdrop of Harrison C. White's social networks theory, and François Dépelteau's transactional approach stemming from pragmatism. The analysis presents new theoretical riddles and the advantages of the relationalization of fundamental sociological categories. The critical realist relational approach is further explored by asking pertinent theoretical questions. Marta Bucholc investigates the role of language and communicative situations within the relational paradigm, providing a larger context for discussions and polemics from that angle. Elżbieta Halas, on the other hand, tackles the issue of symbolization within relational sociology while asking about the relational conception of culture. The article exposes the complex nature and central place of culture in relational sociology, and examines the possibilities for introducing a wider notion of cultural reality.

At the volume's core are problems concerning the relational subject. Andrea Maccarini deals with socialization processes and reflexivity in late modernity articulated in morphogenetic terms. He focuses on different identity-building processes and challenges of deep transformations of human reflexivity. Lorenza Gattamorta concentrates on the symbolic We-relation while investigating how subjectivity is formed in the course of interaction with symbols. The problem of social identity presents itself in a new light after the relational turn. Irena Szlachcicowa discusses different concepts of identity within relationally-oriented sociology and compares the narrative and realist approaches. This thematic sequence finds empirical contextualization in the article by Giovanna Rossi, Donatella Bramanti and Stefania G. Meda on the relational sociology approach to active ageing. Focusing on intergenerational relations and other relational networks, the authors explore the ways in which individuals attempt to face ageing actively.

Finally, a number of articles explore interdependencies among the life-world, social system, and civil society. Paolo Terenzi presents the interpretation of everyday life from the perspective of relational sociology, overcoming the dualism between the Marxist perspective of alienation and the phenomenological analysis of meaning production. He searches for a new form of secularism, able to accommodate non-fundamentalist aspects of religious beliefs. Emiliana Mangone examines risk as a dimension of everyday life. She attempts to conceptualize risk following the referential and structural semantics of social relations and the positive or negative

results of risk, which depend on resources and challenges. Víctor Pérez-Díaz discusses the development of civil society in the relational context, as exemplified by the case of Spanish citizenry. By investigating civil forms of doing politics, he takes into consideration vast cultural resources and the strategic capacity of human agency to orient itself in a context of growing uncertainty. Finally, Tomasz Zarycki voices a call for the development of a critical sociology of discourse analysis founded upon a relational perspective. He argues that discourse analysis, including Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is dependent on power relations. He proposes a reflexive and relational programme based on a sociology of knowledge, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's "sociology of sociology."

The reader can also become acquainted with the humanistic message carried by relational sociology, thanks to a report from the seminar "Humanism in an After-Modern Society: The Relational Perspective" (Warsaw, March 2017) and comments by Michał Federowicz and Daniel Sobota, Aleksander Manterys and Tadeusz Szawiel. Reviews written by Fabio Ferrucci, Joanna Bielecka-Prus, Elżbieta Halas, Sławomir Mandes and Mikołaj Pawlak, assessing recent books relevant for the further development of relational theory of society and its applications, complement this special issue.

Breaking away from minimalism, genuine relational sociology attempts to reconstruct a general sociological theory, which is an imperative goal in the age of globalization. The relational theory of morphogenetic social and cultural changes is relevant not only in terms of its analytical and conceptual sophistication, but also because it encompasses a layer of ideas associated with the problems of the common good as a relational good. The emancipatory aspect related to the practical problems of civil society cannot pass unnoticed.

Sociology's task of researching social relations is free from sociologism. As Margaret S. Archer aptly emphasizes, relations with the world can neither be reduced to the social order nor contained within its limits. A particularly significant feature of relational sociology must be accentuated: it liberates itself from inadequate, reductionist models of *homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus* by focusing on the human person and his or her relational constitution.

## **PIVOTAL THEORETICAL ISSUES**



# RELATIONAL VERSUS RELATIONIST SOCIOLOGY: A NEW PARADIGM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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## **/// Introduction: What is Society? And What is a Social Fact? The “Relational Turn”**

Sociology is the science of society. But what is society? What is “the social” and how can it be examined scientifically? This contribution is intended to introduce the answers to these questions given by my relational sociology, which has been developed since 1983. In a nutshell, I will introduce my relational theory of society, which differs from other sociologies that are called “relational” but are in fact “figurational,” “transactional,” and/or in one way or another “reductionist” (I call them “relationist” instead of “relational,” as I will explain below). I object to methodological individualism and methodological holism by proposing a relational methodology (not a methodological relationism).

From my point of view, relational sociology is a way of observing and thinking that starts from the assumption that the problems of society are generated by social relations and aims to understand, and if possible, solve them, not purely on the basis of individual or voluntary actions, nor conversely, purely through collective or structural ones, but via new social relations and a new articulation of these relations. The social is relational in essence. Social facts can be understood and explained by assuming that “in the beginning (of any social fact there) is the relation.” No one can escape the complexity entailed in and by this approach, which aspires to advance a theory and method appropriate to a more complex order of reality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to the meaning of the concepts of approaches, paradigm, theory and method I refer the reader to chapter 1 of Donati (1983). A further development of these concepts and their interdependencies can be found in Donati (2011).



My relational sociology looks at reality from a perspective which is both specific and general—that of relationality.<sup>2</sup> It is both descriptive-explicative and practical, sensitive to normativity, aimed neither at individuals nor at social structures as such, but at social relations—analysing, interpreting and attributing value to them as the precondition of problems arising and the means for their potential solution. To say “sensitive to normativity” does not mean ideological or directive (Halas 2016). In my opinion, the sociologist must avoid any conflation between scientific research and whatever ethical or ideological imperative that may constrain it a priori. When we say that the sociologist has to do science with conscience, this does not mean that sociological research should necessarily be bound to a certain moral nor, of course, that it should take a moral stance of indifference. It must be impartial in the sense of respecting the objectivity of social events, but at the same time, it cannot refrain from pointing out that the social facts analysed have certain moral dimensions and lead to certain moral consequences instead of others, without thereby affecting the analysis with a priori personal ethical choices. In this way, professional sociology can take care of the value orientations that are at stake, for instance, in respect to human rights, without prejudice to scientific work (Brint 2005).

From the applied perspective, which is oriented towards network intervention, it is a question of producing a change that allows the subjects to manage their own significant, actual and potential relations. They do this by bringing their existing human and material resources—both manifest and latent—into play, so they can achieve an adequate level of self-regulation, or at least sufficient to confront their problems, which would otherwise be perceived and classified as problems of individual actors or of abstract collective entities alone.

Relational sociology does not come from nowhere, nor is it determined a priori by a “closed” (self-referential) theory. Historically it presupposes the emergence of a particular form of society that I call “relational society” (Donati 2011: 56–58). In its very mode of being, this society emerges from the phenomena of globalization. It has, as its guiding principle (or motor, if you like), the continual generation of social relations, through processes of differentiation, conflict and integration, both at the intersubjective level (in primary networks) and at a general level (in secondary, impersonal, and

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<sup>2</sup> The perspective is comprehensive in so far as social relations are spread throughout society, as society is made up of social relations, even though we observe such relations, from time to time, as economic, political, juridical, psychological and so on. And it is specific, in so far as the relation is observed not from a logical, economic, political or juridical standpoint, but from a social standpoint which implies it is imbued with meaning by the subjects who are mutually involved.

organisational networks). Such a society calls for a theoretical and applied vision of social reality sufficiently open to itself and about itself to think relationally in a reflexive mode.<sup>3</sup>

In this contribution I present a general outline of this approach in the belief that only a theory with its own specific and widely applicable defining principles can provide the understanding and pragmatic application appropriate to giving sociology its practical character.

The main difficulty encountered is that of distinguishing this approach from other approaches called “relational,” which lay greatest emphasis on the role of relations, but in fact have a reductionist understanding of social relations. I am referring in particular to many versions of functionalism (from Talcott Parsons to Niklas Luhmann), most structuralist conceptions of social networks (as we find in the works of Ronald Burt, Barry Wellman and others), and the relativistic reading of social relations made by neo-pragmatist sociologists (such as Mustafa Emirbayer 1997, François Dépelteau & Chris Powell 2013), who, properly speaking, propose not a relational but a “transactional” sociology.

My approach relies upon a kind of realism that I name analytical, critical and relational, in a word “relational realism” (Donati 1983: 10; further developed in Donati 2011: 97–119). It is intended to be an alternative to those relational approaches that are founded on a constructionist (flat) ontology, but it is not an attempt to unify all sociological approaches around the notion of relationship as a replacement category of other categories (such as system or network). From the very start, I conceived of my relational sociology as a general framework to connect the best of all other theories and not as a *reductio ad unum* (Donati 1983: 11–12). I do not agree with those scholars who, in order to avoid a unifying theory, propose a “plural relational sociology.” While I agree that we must avoid a unifying theory, which would be constrictive and restrictive, I do not think we need to call relational sociology “plural,” given that, if the theory is truly relational, then it should necessarily be pluralistic, provided that it can understand and cope with the essential property of the relation, which is to join the terms that it connects while at the same time promoting their differences (what I have called the “enigma” of the relation: Donati 2015). It is precisely the absence or rejection of the relation that undermines pluralism.

In my view, in order to be really relational, the first move is to assume the social relation as the basic unit of analysis. This does not mean replacing the concept of the individual or the system with that of the rela-

<sup>3</sup> On reflexivity see Archer (2012).

tion. On the contrary, this move is useful for better elucidating what is an individual and a system from the sociological viewpoint. What I am saying is that sociology should observe, think of, and act on the social not as an expression of a system (as methodological holism does), nor as the expression or product of individual action (as methodological individualism does) but as an expression of the relationality generated by human beings. As I will explain below, my approach retains within itself the relevance of the human perspective in a particular way, i.e., by considering the fact that society is made by human beings, but does not consist of human beings. It consists of relationships.<sup>4</sup>

To say that the social relation has a reality of its own not only distinguishes it from systems and action theories, without having to take sides with either of them but, above all, enables us to see in social relations a reality which, although invisible, unspoken, and often uncertain, constitutes the substratum on which society is built and changed, both in its origins and in its search for human solutions to “social problems”—contrary to what is argued by constructionism. In particular I argue against those relational sociologies that reduce social relations to pure communications, and therefore believe that social relations can be built in any way (as Luhmann 1995 maintains). To my mind, relations are certainly contingent, but this does not mean that they can be “always otherwise” as relationists believe.

In short, relational sociology is predicated on the “relational turn” in society, which was effected by modernity but goes beyond it. It carries forward that relational vision of society first stated but only initially explored and interpreted by Marx, Weber, and Simmel, by developing beyond these authors an integral relational theory of society articulated into a *sui generis* ontology, epistemology, methodology resulting in a peculiar social practice.

### **/// The Ontological Premises of “Relational Thinking”**

The emergence of what I call “relational society” is a historical process which embodies and produces a paradigm shift from the simple to the complex. This process can and should be represented as a radical change in the ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological status of social

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<sup>4</sup> In other words, it maintains a humanistic concern, one, however that is no longer understood in classical terms (as the coincidence of the social and human, by which the social was understood as immediately human) but as emergent processes of differentiation of the social from the human (see Donati 2009).

relations in both science and society. To understand this transformation we must furnish ourselves with an approach that (a) enables us to grasp the reality of social relations on their own terms, and (b) that succeeds in defining the object of analysis and of intervention as social relations. These points need to be discussed in more detail. Through them we enter the realm of “relational thinking.”

## 1. Social Relations Are “Real” on Their Own Terms

To say that social relations have a reality of their own means that they are not a simple derivative of something else, but constitute a proper order of reality with its own internal strata, each of which requires particular attention and theoretical and practical treatment. In its turn, this order of reality cannot be reduced to this or that particular factor or variable (such as power or economic utility), because it is the relationality that is the social. Just as in the organic system, a human person cannot exist without oxygen and food, while not being reducible to either, so in the social system, human beings cannot exist without relations with each other. These relations are constitutive of the possibility of being a person, just as oxygen and food are for the body. If one were to suspend the relation with the other, one would suspend the relation with the self. The social sciences are concerned with this and nothing else.

There are two levels on which sociological observation can be placed:

- a) On the first, most elementary level, relations are observed but they are analysed by looking at one factor or variable (so to speak, for example one of the generalized means of exchange such as money, power, or influence, etc.) that runs from A to B and vice versa, in social exchanges;
- b) On the second, reflexive level, what is to be observed are not the single factors **within** the relation but rather the reality (the dynamic structure) **of** the relations as such; as a matter of fact, once relations have been brought into stable existence, they have their own autonomy, so that concrete entities, such as the historical products of society, including institutions, can be observed and interpreted as relational networks stemming from a relationally contested social context.

Certainly we do not see social relations wandering about, so to speak. However, we know that they exist, not only because they materialize in forms, movements, and social institutions, but because we have experience

of them. That they are of a contingent order is not a good reason for saying that they have no reality: eye-colour, for example, is a contingent characteristic but is nevertheless a reality.

What, therefore, is this reality? It is the reality of a relation between us and things, between ourselves and others, that is not a logical relation, nor a merely psychic one. A social relation is distinguished from logical and/or psychic relations in that it:

- a) refers, i.e., makes symbolic references (*refero*);
- b) connects or structurally binds (*religo*);
- c) and in being an emergent stemming from the reciprocal action (in Italian *rel-azione*, in French *rel-ations*) of mutual interaction.<sup>5</sup>

In order to observe social relations, the researcher needs a theory of the observer who observes as a third party<sup>6</sup> and an appropriate methodology (for example the AGIL paradigm as it will be illustrated in its relational version below). The social is a relational matter, not a projection of individuals or a holistic entity, which lies in between the actors, as well as in between the observer and the observed. In contrast to the physical field, in which the relations between material entities are mechanistic, in the social field, the relationship is communicative and interpretive. Social feedbacks are relational, not mechanical (Donati 2013).

Therefore, in adopting the relational perspective, the first assumption is that the observer should situate himself at an invisible but nonetheless real level of reality, for which the relation is a third element. It must always be situated in this frame of reference if one is to avoid epistemic relativity from being transformed into relativism. However hard it is to grasp, relationality exists not only at the social level, but also in the interconnections between the other levels of reality—biological, psychic, ethical, political, and economic.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the meaning of the concept of *Wechselwirkung* (“effect of reciprocity”) put forward by G. Simmel.

<sup>6</sup> To gain a clearer idea of the sense and place of the relation in the theory of self-referential observation, it is worth citing von Foerster: “According to the ‘Principle of Relativity’ that rejects a hypothesis when it does not hold for two instances simultaneously (e.g., the inhabitants of Earth and Venus can both be coherent in affirming that they are the centre of the universe, but their claims fall apart when they are both found making them) the solipsistic affirmation collapses when I find another autonomous organism beyond myself. Therefore, one must note that since the Principle of Relativity is not a logical necessity nor a principle that can be proved as true or false, the crucial point is that I am free to choose to adopt or reject this principle. If I reject it, I am the centre of the universe, my dreams and nightmares are my reality, my language is a monologue, and my logic is monologic. If I adopt it, neither I, nor the other, can be the centre of the universe. As in a heliocentric universe, there must be a third element that is the central reference point. It is the relation You and I, and this relation (i.e., social reality) = community” (1984: 307–308).

## 2. The Social Relation Defines the Object of Sociological Research

The relation is not only a medium of knowledge or a logical concept. It is the viewpoint from which whoever wants to do a sociological analysis, interpret data, or deal with practical social issues, must define his objects. If the social nature of phenomena is to be captured, every social object can, or rather should, be defined in relational terms. Usually I contest the concept that sociology studies “relations among social facts,” but rather insist that it studies “social facts as relations.” Society is—not “has”—relations. It is not a field or a space where relations “happen.” In saying this, I claim that the objects of sociology, and therefore its concepts, must first of all be redefined as relations.

At the start of a research project, when we pose the problem (“How and why does *Y* happen?” with *Y* being a phenomenon without an evident and intuitive explanation) we can never forget that the object of study which grows out of a situation (the *Y* phenomenon) is immersed in a relational context and gives birth to another relational context. The major error of Husserl’s phenomenological approach is to think of social relations as a synonym of mere inter-subjectivity, i.e., as an expression of empathy or sharing of values. A critical realist view of social relations is distinguished from the phenomenological one which sees social relations as an after-thought, emanating from the operations of transcendental consciousness or ego. The Husserlian idea according to which the social relation should be put into brackets (the procedure called *epoché*) and subsequently found as an expression of the transcendental Ego is self-defeating (Toulemont 1962). On the contrary, I claim that relational sociology should maintain that the social relation is the starting point of sociological analysis (“in the beginning is the relation”) and the key way of getting to know the subjects and objects, and not the other way round. Elsewhere I have tried to give some examples of this procedure, applying it to such topics as education, social capital, health, family, chronic illness, citizenship, the welfare state, and social policy (for a general overview of these empirical studies see Terenzi et al. 2016).

## 3. Relationality in the Social Sphere Entails a Symbolic Code of Its Own

In seeking to understand and explain social reality, it is important to make clear the specific symbolic code that is being used or referred to, with

regard to the kind and degree of relationality that it entails. For example, I maintain that binary codes (yes-no, 0-1, inside-outside, etc.) present the most simplified kind and degree of relationality.

To cite one case, the binary code used by Luhmann, although useful in certain respects, is only superficially capable of capturing the relationality of the complex interactive systems to which it is applied. In reality, the binary code is derived from the primacy of the economic sub-system (with its own functional code of efficiency) and from the logic of competition which is a relational form that is not properly interactive. This helps to explain why Luhmann's sociology is so resistant to dealing with concrete social relations. In truth, the binary code is valid only for certain phenomena, of a more logical, biological, or even psychic, rather than sociological kind. For example, one cannot treat the phenomenology of relations between public and private without introducing simplifications that are not appropriate to the object of study. In any case, such reductionism is incompatible with a discipline that does not, and cannot, deal with all social phenomena as if they were binary functions, since many social facts do not fall on one side or the other.

To define an object in relational terms, sociology needs codes of greater complexity than the reductive selection effected by either/or binary codes. Appropriate symbolic codes and models of analysis are required. A "symbolic code" is needed that does not look solely at the *relata* (that which is related) but at the relations themselves, as mediations not reducible to their components. Empirical studies of relations have demonstrated exactly this. The relation is made up of diverse contributions which can be distinguished as follows: the effect of ego on alter (the elements brought by ego towards alter), the effect of alter on ego (the responsiveness of alter to ego), and the effect of their interaction (the combination of the elements brought by alter ego and operated through the dynamics of the relational structure) (see Cook & Dreyer 1984; Tam 1989). These effects can be observed and measured, given suitable methods. The first two effects can be analysed at the level of the individual, the third can only be observed by taking the relation as the unit of analysis. On the other hand, if one carries out the sociological analysis in terms of system theory, since every system is part of a broader system, what happens is that the level of analysis that is chosen is always incomplete (Luhmann 1995). Every system must be defined in relation to the higher order system, but a supreme system of all systems, to which final appeal can be made, does not exist. In this way, the autonomy of every actor/agent, which is always relative (that is, consists in

a given complex of relation in respect to other autonomies within a context), is dissolved. As Richard Rorty (1999: 54) puts it: “Everything that can serve as a term of relation can be dissolved into another set of relations, and so on forever.”

#### **4. Social Relations Entail Network Patterns That Do Not Eliminate Subjectivity or the Importance of Individual Elements, Although Transforming Them**

Network models that reveal the contribution of individual components in interactions, just as much as the resultant effects, are required for social analysis and intervention. In this light, social systems appear as “condensates of social networks” (Donati 1991: chap. 2).

The empirical study of relations allows us to distinguish the contribution of individual subjects from their social conditioning as such. To echo Tam (1989), interdependence is not a circular idea. If the central importance of the elements in a social network is due to their mutual interdependence, how can we claim that part of this is autonomously generated by an individual element, i.e., that it is due to characteristics of the element itself rather than to the relation with others? The reply is that, even if we adopt a vision of the world in which each individual depends on every other, we can still meaningfully separate what it is about the component that is self-generated from that which is derived from the other. In other words, the borderline between an ego and its social context can be drawn quite precisely even in a social system. A fundamental premise of relational sociology does not imply that the Self is lost in the midst of social interdependence.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the logic of networks is based neither on the negation of the subject, nor on the circular logic of phenomenology. It is rather the path of observing, describing, and defining the identity of every social actor by taking into account each one’s subjectivity while avoiding an indeterminate circularity that goes on *ad infinitum*. To put it in terms of social ontology, substance (nature, structure) and relation (relationality) are co-principles of

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<sup>7</sup> As May Sim (2003) rightly points out, habituation into virtue, social relations, and paradigmatic persons are central for both Aristotle and Confucius. Both therefore need a notion of self to support them. But: Aristotle’s individualistic metaphysics cannot account for the thick relations that this requires, and the Confucian self, if entirely relationistic, cannot function as a locus of choice and agency; if fully ritualistic, it cannot function as a source of moral norms that might help assess existing social properties. It is here where my relational approach comes into play, in order to correct both perspectives.



social reality. For critical realists, “it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us” (Bhaskar 1979: 31). Thus, it is the object under investigation and our research questions that determine which method is appropriate to use and why.

As Buch-Hansen (2013) has argued, in the field of social network analysis (SNA) there is a tension between applied and methods-oriented SNA studies, on the one hand, and those addressing the social-theoretical nature and implications of networks on the other. The former, in many cases, exhibits positivist tendencies, whereas the latter incorporate a number of assumptions that are directly compatible with core critical realist views on the nature of social reality and knowledge. I agree with this author in suggesting that SNA could be detached from positivist social science and come to constitute a valuable instrument in the critical realist toolbox.

## 5. Relationality Is Not Relativism but Specific Determinacy

The contemporary social sciences are for the most part relativist, understanding social relations as a way of dissolving the substantive and singular nature of both consciousness and social phenomena. In contrast, I understand the relational approach as a means of distancing oneself from relativism. The most that the currently dominant, relativistic sociological approaches can concede to a non-relativistic position is one or other of the following. Either empirically verifiable “sets of values” exist which are culturally transmitted and constrain possibilities, or interactively established norms exist which generate a procedural rationality that makes self-restraint possible. Self-restraints are generally thought of as the production of *Eigenvalues* (values self-produced by the reiteration of communications) or “natural drifts.”<sup>8</sup> The latter solution prevails on the former as soon as the “persistence (or reproduction) of values” comes to be seen and labelled as a mere survival of backward cultural orientations.

However, both these solutions have very little that is sociological or relational about them and they do not appear very satisfactory: the former appeals to imposed values (echoing the Durkheimian *contrainte sociale*), the latter falls back on spontaneous origins. The former has to appeal to a notion of cultural traditions that brings with it many deficiencies that seriously limit its explanatory force. The latter reduces normativity to a purely

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<sup>8</sup> On the theory of “natural drift” (put forward by H. Maturana and F. Varela) see Etxeberria (2004).

evolutionary interactive affair. In either case, it is not clear how to avoid appealing to normative as opposed to random solutions.

Resorting to a multidimensional schema as Alexander (1996) does can be useful in avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism and conflation. However, multidimensionality is not an adequate approach to solve the problems of indeterminacy when sociological analysis must cope with the issues of the origins and consistency of the “standard values” (or “symbols,” as invoked by Alexander) that are supposed to break the circularity of the multiplicity of the variables involved in the social processes. Social institutions would simply be the outcome of what a culture has, through a myriad of repeated operations and reiterated interactions produced and eventually applied to such institutions themselves. Those who have rejected this type of relativist formulation have looked for structural laws—as did most of nineteenth-century sociology. But the very same modern, and now contemporary, society, is bent on their denial.

Where, then, is the break in this circularity to be found? Perhaps in the structure of a presupposed a priori reality? To my mind, even this answer is sociologically implausible since what makes a social institution (or social relation) is not that it fits into a posited pre-existing structure, as symbolic representation does.

To me, the answer seems to be both simple and complex at the same time: it is rooted in the demands of the relation itself in so far as it is enacted by the subjects who institute it as a determinate relation endowed with its own structure. I am not saying either that the relation is produced by the agents’ mere intentionality or that the relation is a product of mechanical operations. What I am saying is that the determination of the relational structure is the result of a combination of subjective and objective factors that does not correspond to both subjective and objective factors: it is a creation which responds to the “enigma” of the relation which consists in its capacity to unite while differentiating its terms at the same time (Donati 2015). The relation between an employer and worker, or doctor and patient is not the same, for instance, as a couple’s relationship. In responding to these specific demands, there is restricted room for indeterminacy and going back further and further in the causal chain necessarily has its limits. The circularity is broken by the relation itself when it is taken for what it is, as that relation and not as something else, that is, when it is redefined according to its own distinctive character of having to unite two terms within a definite scope. It is an accomplishment of the task of building a We-relation between different agents/actors.

### /// An Example

An example could perhaps help to clarify what is being stated here. It is the problem that is often raised of knowing what the social reality of the family is.

In a certain sense, sociology has lost its way by having adopted many analogies of a spatial, biological, organic, cybernetic-informational, or other kind, or rather taken the family as a place, niche, cell, self-regulated system, and so forth. Today it no longer seems to know what the “family” is. There is a great temptation to subsume it as a generic kind of primary group, despite the existence of a body of theoretical and empirical research that has, for quite a while, made clear that the family cannot be subsumed as a generic form of human co-habitation or as a mere informal primary group missing its own differentiation.

From a relational perspective, if the family were only a communicative arrangement that enables “the orientation of the person to the whole person,” as Luhmann maintains (1988: 75–76), it is not evident why this is so and why it is the only social system (supposed to be of “pure interaction”) to have such a function. We need a much deeper explanation. If the family is so, this happens because the family, as a specific social relation, has a *sui generis* structure with its own symbolic code that enables it to maintain certain relations between the genders and generations. Certainly, I do not doubt that the family has a specific function in enabling personal orientation (or better: the orientation of communication to the individual as a person, i.e., as an individual-in-relation and not as an atom). But one should be very careful in maintaining, firstly, that such a function is exclusive to the family, and secondly, that the family in practice has only that function. The more general question that lies behind this difficult issue is whether the family can be considered the unique social sphere from which a peculiar generalized symbolic medium of interchange stems—be it called trust, reciprocity, or solidarity—that can circulate in the whole societal system, or not.<sup>9</sup>

It is only possible to get away from the current disarray in sociology about what the family is by grasping the autonomous reality of this relation on its own terms. But of what does the “relational reality” of the family

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<sup>9</sup> Luhmann is ambivalent in this regard. The early Luhmann maintained, with Parsons, that love was the generalized symbolic medium of exchange belonging to the family, but in later writings this aspect seems to fade away. Love as passion is certainly not a medium that can circulate in the social system as a recognisable and practicable means used by other sub-systems. In reality, with the communicative turn, Luhmann gives quite another meaning to symbolic media than they had in Parsonian theory. Whether and how such a medium can be understood as reciprocity is an open question.

consist? Perhaps we see “the family” go for a walk? Certainly not. Let us suppose, however banal the example may be, we see a man, a woman, and a child walking in a park. If we already know them as the White family, we will say that is the White family walking there. If we do not know them, we will think of a certain, finite number of possibilities of intersecting biological, psychic, and social relations between the people at whom we are looking: the judgement on whether or not this is a family cannot be decided and is suspended. So, what is “the” family that we can observe? Suppose that another sibling or the granny or another person normally resident under the same roof were missing, what would we say? In reality, we see individuals, but we think through/with relations. In order to say that this is a family or not we have to ascertain what kind of relations exist between the people we observe. Only if we know or presume certain relations between them, do we say that that is the White family which, wholly or in part—is going for a walk. Therefore, the presupposition is the existence of a certain relation that connects the elements we observe. We see individuals but we speak on the supposition of relations. The word “family” indicates relations. The members of the family can be there or not, but all the language that we adopt to describe what we see beyond single individuals is essentially that of relations. The words make sense only if they refer back to relations.

However, this still does not tell us what that relation consists of which we call “family” and attribute to the group of people *X* whom we see. In the first instance, it consists of the fact that the terms symbolically linked through observation are “something” standing for something else. This something is not fixed forever, but is necessary if one wishes there to be, as indeed there is, a relation (if it is not of kinship, it will be of another kind, but this does not prevent us from having to ask ourselves what it could be). One wonders: is this “something” only a subjective interpretation, or even, is it an objectified reality established merely through inter-subjective agreement?

Certainly, I, who see the White family going for a walk, “interpret” it through symbols—signs that stand for something else—in relation to a meaning. This interpretive act is rather complex, as it involves perceptions, image-making and specific evaluations, all acts which are not simple in themselves. But the point is the following: is it “I” (my Self) who attribute meaning to the relation that I call the White family, or is it “We”—I as observer in interpersonal relation with others, including the observed subjects—who define the group before us as a family?

It seems to me that the answer is neither. The meaning is never a private subjective conclusion, nor solely an intersubjective one. The meaning is the work of a whole culture. In its turn, “the family” is precisely a complex tissue (many condensed linkages) of relations that refer back in turn to other symbols, lived experiences, and the like, which are not purely subjective or intersubjective. In saying that “I see the White family going for a walk” I am referring to something that goes beyond myself and the subjects present in that situation. The reference (that which is signified) is to the social structure that actualizes the complicated tissue of relations between culture, personality, social norms, and possibly biological premises. Such an interwoven tissue certainly changes historically, but it is not purely subjective or intersubjective.

Therefore, the relation that I call “family” is not only the product of perceptions, sentiments, and intersubjective mental states more or less empathetic with others, but is both a symbolic fact (“a reference to”) and a structural fact (“a bond between”) which, combined together, generate an emergent: the family as a “We-relation” or a “Relational Subject” (Donati & Archer 2015). As such, it cannot be reduced to the individual subjects (their expectations, representations, ideas, perceptions, etc.) even though it can only come alive through these subjects. It is in them that the relation takes on a peculiar life of its own, but the individualization of the bodily and mental processes of perception, sensation, and imagination, even where creativity is involved, cannot come about except through what we share with others. This is what is meant by the claim that every social relation entails a cultural model in which symbols are embedded (see Halas 1991). After all, a cultural model means a symbolic reference which feeds those feelings, sentiments, and emotions that motivate people to enter and stay in a relationship or avoid it and get out. As Fuhse (2009) rightly points out, it is necessary to conceptualize and to study social networks in conjunction with culture for many reasons. First, because social networks function as the habitat of cultural forms: symbolic forms and styles diffuse in social networks, and they meet and combine at network intersections to form new styles and creativity. Second, because social networks are imprinted with culture; social categories and cultural models for relationships make for a particular ordering of network structure, rather than merely resulting from it. These two points constitute the interplay of culture and network structure: cultural forms are as much formed by networks as they shape them. Third, because networks themselves are not devoid of cultural meaning: relationships build on cultural models like friendship or kinship.

And the identities of the actors involved are constructed in dynamic processes of attribution and negotiation within the network. Thus, structure and culture do not form independent layers of the social but can only be distinguished analytically.

The interweaving of relations that make up a relation is infinitely open: however, that risks leading repeatedly to indeterminacy. Postmodern sociology is not characterized so much by having discovered this fact, as having accepted the challenge of understanding and constructing the social (e.g., the family and its internal social networks) on the basis of this indeterminacy.

So, is the family—in so far as it is a social relation—indeterminate? Or rather as a social relation can it refer back, in a purely contingent way, to other, ever more differentiated relations *ad infinitum*, according to a circular chain of determinants that are just reciprocal interactions? All experience counteracts this conclusion. From the reflexive point of view, if the relation is a complex tissue, there must be mechanisms of determination and their operations that are not purely interactive and circular *ad infinitum*.

But where are these mechanisms and how do these determinants operate? This is where the Achilles' heel of modern and postmodern paradigms is to be found. To modernist and postmodernist eyes, every break in the circularity that comes from outside the interaction seems dogmatic or responding to outdated ways of thinking of the "old Europe," as Luhmann calls it. As a result, they fall back on notions of *Eigenvalues* (self-generated values) to claim that the break in relational circularity takes place within the interactive process which itself establishes a self-generated value that functions as a provisional regulative norm in the interaction, by providing more trust than constraints.

Neo-functionalism insists on the idea that the very strong process of individualization within and between families, realized through the mechanism of re-entry that allows actors to escape its constraints without suppressing or eliminating them, does not allow us to conceptualize the family as a structured relation/interaction, and consequently, to think of the totality of families as a societal sub-system (in the same sense as we speak of the totality of the corporations as an economic sub-system).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "There are only individual families and there is neither an organisation nor a medium (love) that unifies the numerous families. Neither are there, in contrast to segmented societies, institutions that enable a plurality of families to operate, at least under determinate conditions, as a unity" (Luhmann 1988: 89).

The individualization of the family, according to Luhmann, is such as to justify the assertion that the totality of families has no social function as a totality and that families no longer share common cultural patterns, nor a specific medium of communication (love, solidarity), nor are capable of producing them. This contrasts totally with the reality of phenomena, as sociological research on the field has demonstrated in complex societies too, and not only in less functionally differentiated societies.

### **/// The New (Critical Realist) Relational Approach**

By relying upon the above realist ontology, the solution to the aforesaid problems (of situating oneself at the level of the autonomous reality of social relations and defining the object in relational terms) entails an epistemological shift with a matching paradigm and methodology that, together, lead to the adoption of a *sui generis* practice in social work.

#### **1. Relational Epistemology**

The general supposition of sociological thinking could be summed up symbolically as: in the beginning there is the relation. Such a supposition must be understood in the realist, non-relativist sense. Being a possible object of human knowledge belongs to the nature of the real. There is no absolute separation between objective reality and the human intellect. When we turn our gaze onto the world of things, a prior and preceding relationship already exists.

The social process with all its distinctive features proceeds by, from, and through relations. This is what can be said in advance about social reality (phenomenology) just as about theory (from observation of, and reflection on it). Being relational is inherent to the make-up of social reality, just as of thought. It proceeds from relatively autonomous theoretical aspects, including intermediate, methodological ones, to empirical facts and back, in a continuous reflexive process between different passages and phases. By bringing the relation as a general, primary supposition into the meta-physical realm of knowledge, in no way assumes the absolute contingency of the social world—any more than it implies welcoming some ontology that denies the subject. On the contrary, it means assuming that the relation has a non-contingent root (or referent, if one prefers), that takes concrete form in contingent situations. Obviously such a root or referent

stands outside the here and now of any given society, beyond concrete social phenomenology.

From the sociological point of view, only the relation itself is necessary, while the way it is actualized reflects the effective contingency of the social world which is “how it is” but could also be “different.” It could be, but it is not. If it is how it is, it is like that because the relation, while necessary in itself, also necessitates historically specific determinants, which however, outside of our system of reference, are themselves contingent (Morandi 2010, 2011).

In this sense one can say, for example, that the primary forms of social life, in so far as they are social relations, exceed society. In that sense, they overtake or go beyond it in so far as they are not mere contingency (e.g., of a communicative kind). Let us think of the relationality involved in the family as a primary social group and its quality of exceeding society. To claim that the family exceeds society does not mean, as Luhmann maintains, that the family empirically has the greatest “density of communication” that can be detected among all forms of interaction. There can well be other social forms where such density can take place. From the relational sociology standpoint, the family exceeds society because it represents the need (necessity) for a full relationality that urges more and more complex (contingent) forms of arrangements in everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The Network Paradigm

In this approach, society is understood according to a paradigm that is neither that of the whole and the part, nor of system/environment, nor autopoiesis, but that of a network. Society is understood as a network of relations, and, more precisely, not only relations between nodes, but also relations between relations. That is why, for instance, if we want to explain the dynamics of a family of three people as a social network we have to look not only at the networks of the three relations between the three

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<sup>11</sup> The following statement by Huston and Robins helps us understand the concept of “full” relationality: “the reasons why relations function in the way that they do cannot be understood separately from their ecological context, a context which has historical, economic, cultural and physical components. Neither the psychological nor biological characteristics of participants can be ignored” (1982: 923). It is obvious that both theoretical and empirical research must be selective to carry out specific analyses. But one must be aware of the reductions of reality made by the scientific observer. And one should always bear in mind the fact that the more abstract the premise, the more likely that it is self-validating. In my view, the term “fully relational” shares something with what Clifford Geertz (1973) means by “thick description”—that is, the plurality of levels of discourse, the multidimensionality and inexhaustibility of their meanings.



nodes, but we have to take into consideration a network of nine relations of the first, second, and third order. The more we increase the number of nodes, the more they increase dramatically the number of relations up to the third order, according to the formula (lambda function):

$$\sum_1^k F_k(n_k)$$

where  $F_k$  is the number of relations of  $k$  order;  $n$ =number of initial nodes  $\geq 2$ ;  
 $n_k = F_{k-1}(n_{k-1})$ ;  $F_1(n_1) = n(n-1)/2$ .<sup>12</sup>

It is important to understand the relationship between the concept of a network and that of a system. The former is broader than the latter, not vice versa. Systems are a kind of condensation and stable self-organization of networks, as when a vapour or gas converts to a liquid and solidifies. Before becoming systems, social networks conduct (or are conductors of) a much richer reality and possibilities than we can see in terms of systemic characteristics. Here lies the rethinking, precisely in relational terms, of the current split between the structuralist and cultural (or communications) analysis of networks. Their difference lies in the different understanding of social differentiation, which is functional for the structuralists and relational for relational sociology. Simmel’s sociology was a first insight into this difference if we compare his studies on the intersecting social circles (structural analysis) with his writings called fragments of everyday life (where he describes social reality as made of polymorphic and magmatic relations). Today, with the digitalization of everyday life, the phenomenon of social networks has acquired characteristics that require a relational paradigm much more sophisticated than in the past if we want to understand the complex logic of the new forms of networking.

### 3. Relational Practice

The practical implications of relational sociology can be categorized and organized under the approaches to social issues termed “network interventions.”

<sup>12</sup> For example: if  $k=3$  and  $n=3$ , then  $\Sigma_k(3)=9$ ; if  $k=3$  and  $n=4$ , then  $\Sigma_k(4)=126$ . Suppose that we are studying a family: if we pass from a family of 3 members to a family of 4 members, the number of third order relations increases in such a way.

The fundamental guidelines for such practices, as a support for social policy and social services, can be summarized as follows.

- a) Isolated subjects and objects do not exist, but only complex interwoven relations in which subjects and objects are defined relationally, in their capacity to reproduce or change their identities and act relationally; to talk about processes of morphostasis and morphogenesis does not imply relativism, as though everything can be read and modified at will. The problem of relativism is resolved by defining the relations between different systems of reference.
- b) When one intervenes with regard to the subject or object involved in a social issue, one must operate on the interwoven relations in which the observed subject/object is embedded; the intervention should aim at bettering the personal and collective reflexivity of the actors acting in the targeted setting, by observing the network effects that the proposed intervention can entail.
- c) To know that a relationality exists between the observer and the observed, between the actor and acted upon, which has an affinity with a circular hermeneutics, is not an impediment to the steering character of the intervention, given that the hermeneutic circle can be broken through the network dynamics, at least temporarily.<sup>13</sup>

Obviously, there are varying degrees to which all this can be taken into consideration, consciously known, operationalized, and implemented in practice. But it is important not to give legitimacy to selective, a priori reductionism.

### **/// Relational Does Not Mean Systemic**

In reconstructing the history of the paradigms with which sociology has understood society, Luhmann (1995) speaks of three great paradigms of a systemic order.

- a) The paradigm of the part and the whole, based on the organic analogy of the relationship between the body and its organs (e.g., Herbert Spencer).
- b) The paradigm of system and environment, developed by the early theorists of the social system as the relation between institutionalized roles and everything that is not institutionalized (e.g., Talcott Parsons).

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<sup>13</sup> For more details see the ODG (relational “Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance”) systems of social intervention in Donati (1991: 346–356).

- c) The paradigm of autopoiesis, according to which systems are constituted only on the basis of their own structures and operations (Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela).

This is not the place to discuss the evolution of systems theory, and in particular, the ability of one paradigm to substitute for another. I will only say that even the latter autopoietic paradigm, if understood as a radical alternative, is no less problematic than the other two. While a systemic paradigm certainly can no longer be one which links the part to the whole in an organic way, it must nevertheless respond adequately to the problem of the relations between the parts and the whole which compose them, in a way that is other than organic. It remains to be seen whether, in what sense and to what degree, the other two systemic paradigms can satisfy this requirement for adequacy.

My hypothesis is that neither the paradigm of system/environment, nor that of autopoiesis satisfies the requirements of relational thought. The first, because it is a theory of local differentiation. Every system is based on the difference of system/environment at boundary points sensitive to that distinction (“sensitive spots”), but this does not say anything about the relations between the system and its environment. The second is inadequate for the same reason, i.e., because it is a theory of the internal workings of systems. Therefore, we arrive at the following question: does a paradigm exist which elucidates the relations between the system and its environment without without adhering to the logic neither organic nor self-referential? I propose to explore this possibility through the concept of a relational paradigm that conceives the boundaries between system and environment as a network of relations.

The first question to be posed in this line of inquiry is: are social networks, by which we understand society today, social systems?

There are those who think so. Thus we are in the presence of a structuralist and/or neo-functionalist conception (Blau 1982). Those who remain dissatisfied with one or the other explanation seek a theory of “open” systems which makes recourse to some kind of phenomenological framework that appeals to intersubjectivity and empathy (e.g., Ardigò 1988). But here we need to be clear. The metaphor of open systems can be useful for shedding light on the limitations and reductionism of the metaphor of closed systems of a self-referential and self-reproductive kind. However, it is not an acceptable solution if one does not fully take on board the net-like character of society.

The social relation between two actors (whether individual or collective) A and B can only be understood in a reductive way as a “system” and/or part of a system, in an “environment,” if by social system one understands a complex of positions or roles occupied or carried out by actors, who interact through their behaviour in the framework of regulating norms or other types of constraint that limit the range of actions allowed to each subject in relation to the others. The concept of social network goes far beyond this definition of a social system. As Laumann, Marsden, and Prensky state: “There is no sense in which social networks need correspond ‘naturally’ to social systems” (1983: 33). Certainly, there is no correspondence if one adopts the definition of a social system as a plurality of actors who interact on the basis of a common symbolic system. But even adopting a more structuralist definition, it is evident that constraints (regulations, norms) and interdependencies are only some of the features inherent in the production and reproduction of preferential relations typical of social networks.

In other words, the sociological concept of network includes that of system without being reducible to it. Viewed from the perspective of the network, the social system is (a) an analytical aspect of the network that (b) makes manifest its functional interdependencies and (c), at the nodes of connection and disjuncture, retrospectively stabilises the mechanisms and circuits through which the phenomenology of the social manifests itself. But the network is also the conductor, locus, and means by which other aspects and dimensions of the social come to life and are expressed. Society therefore appears as a formal and informal mix that requires a new observational paradigm.

Faced with the fact that the concept of a social system only captures certain of the so-called functional aspects of society, it is easy to feel let down. So someone seeks to generalize the concept of the system and thoughtfully differentiates the elements of it in order to understand the informal, non-functional aspects of communicative interdependence, the “communal,” the “life-world,” and so on. And thus, an open system is theorized, which is characterized by the self-selective, self-directed and self-regulated—rather than mechanical, organic or static—development of its parts, which operates in an environment according to a symbolic code of a higher-order, cybernetic kind (Buckley 1967; Maruyama 1963).

However, with such a solution, the aforementioned informal aspects are necessarily subsumed into the system. No matter how flexible the latter is made out to be, with contingent boundaries capable of dealing with

“fuzzy sets” and even “drift,” the systemic code remains just as dependent on a mechanistic—i.e., cybernetic—reading of the social. This suggests that the non-systemic attributes of social relations are not treated on their own terms, but forced back into the systemic code or transposed, in order to set them apart, to another, necessarily marginal plane—of the irrational, magical, mythical, or “metaphysical.”

On the other hand, it is also evident that social networks are not the product of pure spontaneity or interpersonal contingency. They are identified with the paths over which the human individual is free to roam but, at the same time, is not sovereign, i.e., is not master of what she or he chooses to do.

A study of primary, or informal, social networks of everyday life offers an illuminating viewpoint for observing social relations, as it is neither system nor life-world but the constant, live—in the human sense—interpenetration of one with the other. Through this conceptual itinerary, which envelops the whole of contemporary sociological reflection, I believe one can arrive at a fourth paradigm.

Such a paradigm:

- a) recognizes that the “systemic-normative coherence” of the first two systems paradigms (Durkheim’s structure of the whole and the part, and Parsons’s system/environment) cannot explain the advent of a morphogenic society (Archer 2014); contemporary society is intrinsically characterized by the loosening and fragmentation of social relations, with the ending of socialization through internalization of norms;
- b) rejects autopoiesis as a closed model, while accepting the need to include self-referentiality in the observation of social phenomenology, though together with hetero-referentiality;
- c) recognises that social actors do not and cannot move at random, but they behave along paths that are culturally conditioned;
- d) interprets the new normative order of the morphogenic society as the coming up of social networks run by a situational logic of opportunities (“a relational logic of networks”) which is, at one and the same time, strategic (cognitive and instrumentally-driven), communicative (expressive and dialogical), and normative (based on generalized values).

With these provisos, the concept of network demonstrates its capacity to constitute a sort of meta-symbolic code for the concept of system. This latter must be further generalized and differentiated reflexively. Only in

this way can analysis grasp social networks as a simultaneously formal and informal reality.

### **/// Overcoming Functionalism Through Relational Sociology**

If one really wants to enter the relational way of thinking that I am proposing here, it is necessary to see it as a critical departure from functionalist thought, in particular in the versions running from Durkheim to Luhmann via Parsons.

Throughout the twentieth century, functionalist analysis has been the background, the leitmotif and the paradigmatic infrastructure of theory and empirical research, in sociology and other social sciences. To Kingsley Davis (1959: 758),<sup>14</sup> functionalist analysis simply describes “what any science does.” To him it is erroneous to think of anything other than functionalist analysis. But to my mind just the opposite is true. The reductionism brought about by functionalism has become more and more evident. Let us recall the main phases through which it developed.

1. In the first stage of functionalism, Durkheim reduced social relations to “functions.” Social entities were defined not according to their full reality, but in terms only of the functions they performed in and for society. These functions, seen as social roles corresponding to the division of labour, became synonymous with social relations. From the beginning, this conception of relationality was characterized in a positivistic manner. In his celebrated *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim made certain basic assumptions.

a) He opposed and replaced the notion of function with that of purpose. Finalism had to be banished from sociology. In explaining the rules for the explanation of social facts, he affirms that

we use the word function in preference to end or goal precisely because social phenomena generally do not exist for the usefulness of the result they produce. We must determine whether there is a correspondence between the fact being considered and the

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<sup>14</sup> Davis argues that: “Several lines of analysis show that functionalism is not a special method within sociology or social anthropology. First, the definitions most commonly agreed upon make functionalism synonymous with sociological analysis, and make non-functionalism synonymous with either reductionist theories or pure description. Second, the issues raised with respect to functionalism, except insofar as they spring from the ambiguities of words like ‘function,’ are really the basic issues or questions of sociological theory. Third, historically the rise of functionalism represented a revolt against reductionist theories, anti-theoretical empiricism, and moralistic or ideological views under the name of sociology or social anthropology” (1959: 757).

general needs of the social organism, and in what this correspondence consists, without seeking to know whether it was intentional or not. All such questions of intention are, moreover, too subjective to be dealt with (Durkheim 1982: 137).

The organic analogy had to act as guarantor of the (positive) objectivity of sociological analysis (Durkheim 1984).<sup>15</sup>

b) On this basis, sociological analysis should explain phenomena through two procedures: first, analysis should relate the parts of society to the whole and, second, relate every part to each other, both operations being carried out with respect to the specialized “functions” performed by the parts for the whole.

According to Kingsley Davis, non-functionalism always implies: (a) some sort of reductionism (such as psychologism—which traces the status of individual consciousness back to the social, or biologism—which reduces the social to genetic factors, or to economic and technological determinism, etc., working in the same way) or (b) a rough empiricism, involving nothing but a non-theoretical manipulation of data (whilst systemic-functional analysis implies an interpretative model, not simply statistical relations or historical data). As Davis himself reminds us, physiology has been and remains the constant model of reference for more or less all functionalist authors (such as Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Firth, and Merton, among others).

Apparently, scientific language can easily return to the functionalism of common sense: “[T]o speak of the function of an institution for a society or for another institution in that society is a way of asking what the institution does within the system to which it is relevant” (Davis 1959: 771).<sup>16</sup> Functionalism, in this first version, is the description and explanation of phenomena from the standpoint of a system of reasoning which presumably bars a relation to a corresponding system of nature. In the case of sociology, what is distinctive is the subject, namely—according to Davis—society.

What has become of understanding and where has interpretation gone? Functionalist analysis already shows itself creating great difficulties: not only has the human subject been expelled (along with their internalized

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<sup>15</sup> Later, Merton will say: “social function refers to observable objective consequences, and not to subjective dispositions (aims, motives, purposes)” (1968: 78).

<sup>16</sup> The example given is the following: “[I]f every time one establishes a relationship one has to say ‘the function of such is to do such and such’ the circumlocution becomes tiresome. Why not say simply that the heart pumps blood though the system?” (Davis 1959: 772).

motives and past experiences), but culture is treated as something naturalistic. As is inevitable, society becomes mechanistic. If the moves mentioned above are followed through, the social relation would be reduced to a mere structure with culture appearing as a restricted set of options. These are problems and ambiguities that this first stage of functionalism did not manage to resolve. Although society is depicted as a cultural organism, it is studied as a natural organism in evolution. That generic ambiguity was never to be renounced.

2. The second stage of functionalism refers to Talcott Parsons's theory. With Parsons, functionalism follows in the structural tracks of Durkheim. However, because Parsons intended to incorporate Weber's stress upon intentional agency with the non-rational factors emphasized by Pareto (the famous supposed convergence between Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto on the theory of action), social theory should abandon any claim to be seeking or advancing exact scientific laws.

Parsons's functionalism, at least in its first phase, is characterized by not wishing to lose the human subject as a subject of action and, hence, by conferring greater degrees of freedom upon culture, as well as incorporating "latency" within it (referring to "ultimate values"). Given this, it would seem possible to assert that the relation could be redefined in a non-reductionist way. However, Parsons never took this step. In fact, retaining and upholding the subject and culture within sociological theory proved to be more and more difficult, if not impossible, for the functionalist tradition.

With the adoption of the systemic approach and its redefinition in a biological and, above all, cybernetic manner, functionalism landed on the shores of a more and more markedly structuralist and relationalist relationality. The system takes the place of the subject and culture is reduced to a sub-system.

In comparison with the naive and primitive functionalism of the nineteenth century, Parsons introduced a further relational turn: he effected the transition from the whole/parts paradigm to the system/environment paradigm. With this shift, the social relation became a link between status-roles and an interchange between the system and its environment. At the heart of the relation lay the system.

Social integration and system integration were no longer incorporated in the same theory, but, on the contrary, were opposed one to the other as if they were two almost incompatible theories. Consequently, the social relation was split into the inter-subjective dimension (social integration) and the functional dimension (system integration), which can only confront



and limit each other. To a large extent, classical functionalists remained tied to these difficulties.

3. The third wave of functionalism refers to the work of Luhmann, who took the most important trajectory for dealing with classic functionalism (Parsonian) and its unresolved ambivalences. In carving this out he drew (radical) conclusions from what had characterized functionalism from the beginning.

The main thread of theoretical functionalism, the concept of the system, became the fundamental axiom that Luhmann used to redefine all other concepts in this theoretical approach. The system/environment difference, introduced by Parsons, was raised to the status of the defining feature of the whole theory, as the unity of the distinction between identity and difference. In so doing, he moved to the new functionalist paradigm, which in some ways was already implicit from the beginning: the self-referential autopoietic paradigm.

It should be noted that a certain conception of the relation is found at the source of this change, as it had also been in the passage from Durkheim to Parsons. Now, “theory requires formal concepts established at the level of relating relations” (Luhmann 1995: 10). It was, indeed, unfortunate that Luhmann radicalised a formalistic conception of social relations such that they were treated as logic relations. The implication was that, as in logic, the relation had first of all to be referred to itself (it is assumed to be a primitive concept, and, as such, a self-referent construct instead of being understood as an emergent reality) and consequently treated. In particular this means that, following the Luhmannian sociology, social relations cannot be submitted to an empirical analysis, both explanatory and interpretative, which can view their elements or components and the interactions between them.

The passage from the system/environment paradigm to the new self-referential one is precisely marked by a conception of the relation as *causa sui* (relation as the causal explanation of itself).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> According to Luhmann: “Relatively simple theoretical constructions were still possible within the context of system/environment theory. The theory could be interpreted, for example, as a mere extension of causal relations: you had to consider internal as well as external factors in all causal explanations; system and environment would come together in a kind of co-production. The theory of self-referential systems bypasses this causal model. It considers causality (as well as logical deduction and every kind of asymmetrization) as a sort of organization of self-reference, and it ‘explains’ the difference between system and environment by saying that only self-referential systems create for themselves the possibility of ordering causalities by distribution over system and environment” (1995: 9–10).

Here, relationality is subjected to a radical redefinition, which can be summarized as follows:

- a) the constituents of the world (biological, psychic, social) have to be observed and explained through a relational use of the relation in a logical sense; we cannot do without the relation, it is the fabric of everything; in systems based on meaning, the relation practically becomes equivalent to the meaning, or better, the meaning is the relation itself in a logical sense;
- b) the theory had to elaborate concepts possessing a “relational capacity”; for instance, the concept of complexity had to be construed in a complex way within itself and this “complex way” meant, above all, the ability to take into account an indefinite number of relations, as well as their component elements;<sup>18</sup>
- c) at the same time, “the relationship itself becomes the reduction of complexity, this means however that it must be conceptualized as an emergent system” (Luhmann 1995: 108). In other words, it is the relation (in the logical sense) that both reduces and amplifies complexity;
- d) the social relation was no longer the expression of one or more subjects and what they put into their actions; the idea of a reciprocal and mutual action was reduced to communication and only to communication; at the same time, individual people cannot be sure of being understood, because every communication reverberates within self-referential subjectivities that are ever more elusive. It becomes problematic to think of what the unity of a relation could be that would unite a plurality of self-referential systems. Social relations are subjected to a radical temporalization and become circular. The connective sequences they establish become less and less predictable.

With this, functionalism endorses a pervasive “contingentism,” which is only mitigated by the pragmatic necessity of the structuring (temporary and sequential) of the “system.” This latter appears, ultimately, as a systemic-functional relationality of functional relations. Functionalism, now, is based on quicksand.

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<sup>18</sup> Luhmann says: “Every complex state of affairs is based on a selection of relations among its elements, which it uses to constitute and maintain itself. The selection positions and qualifies elements, although other relations would have been possible” (Luhmann 1995: 25). “One should speak of a reduction in complexity if the framework of relations forming a complex nexus is reconstructed by a second nexus having fewer relations” (Luhmann 1995: 26).

Nevertheless, in the social sciences functionalism remains strong. In spite of his criticisms of Parsons for having underestimated the *Lebenswelt*, Habermas has ended up re-evaluating a large part of the Parsonian theory positively. Many versions of current alleged relational theories work with a pragmatic functional conception of the social relation as (network) social transactions (Dépelteau & Powell 2013; Powell & Dépelteau 2013).

It is possible to see in all of this a confirmation of the fact that, for the current social sciences, systemic-functional analysis is not one approach or a method among the others, but still represents—as it were—the weaving frame of scientific discourse. The greater efficacy of Luhmann's theory in comparison with Habermas's is already evident in the fact that Luhmann has aligned himself not against systemic-functional analysis, but within it and on the same wavelength as it, in order to get a new insight of the post-modern, whereas Habermas has attempted to retrieve it or at least to make it compatible with his normative perspective (the “ideal of modernity”).

As both an outlook and a symbolic code, systemic-functional analysis has not only progressively eroded the cultural traditions all over the world, but it has also demonstrated the capacity to regenerate itself continually through more and more sophisticated formulations.

Some believe that cultural traditions are able to recover and to revenge themselves. What hopes do such counter-pressures have to stem the advance of functionalism? It would seem few or none. Functionalism considers them as mere illusions, whilst functional globalization advances almost everywhere. Thus, there is the problem of understanding why and how functionalism, notwithstanding its limitations, continues to be so successful, at least in appearance.

From Durkheim to Parsons, and then to Luhmann, functionalism always takes on new and different guises, but demonstrates a surprising resistance. Many years ago, Alvin Gouldner wrote that functionalism should already be considered dead, and he was not a lone voice. However, this did not happen—why? What is its strength?

A first reason is, without a doubt, the fact that functionalism sets itself apart from value judgments. Theoretically, it assumes a (variable) quantum of epistemological and cultural relativism that implies a certain (variable) degree of (moral) relativism. This is its first strength. Its capacity to be compatible with the most diverse positions is precisely because it does not take a (declared) moral stand, which makes it acceptable to many different approaches. It can also encompass all those concepts and instruments that do not imply taking a stand.

A second order of reasons is the fact that it is a method that makes use of logical categories with a high power of abstraction. The concept of function, analogous to that of mathematics, allows almost unlimited games, extrapolations, and applications.

In the end, it is clear that functional analysis occupies the same role in sociology as mathematics in economics. Seemingly, it is indispensable. However, mathematics is not everything—not even a way to understand and explain economics—but only a means to make it more calculable and predictable in some respects. The same is true of functional analysis in the social sciences.

My realist relational sociology is precisely an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of functionalism in social science. I contend that social relations are supra-functional; they belong to a supra-functional reality.

Although fascinating, the functionalistic solution leaves open the problem of its relation to the non-functional. The problem of interpretation, which is necessary in order to account for the non-functional, cannot be solved within functional analysis. This is the major deficiency of functionalism, because no functionalist to date has been able to show the human sense of what functionalist analysis puts aside. Social functions are not mechanical mechanisms, but relational mechanisms.

The problem is that functionalism leads to non-functionalism, just as mathematics in economics leads us to acknowledge the existence of what in the economic system is not amenable to mathematical quantification. In exactly the same way, functional analysis cannot cope with the non-functional. How could Luhmann explain free giving, any gratuitous act, or the refusal of communication, the implosion of meaning, the need for justice, the utopia of many social movements and their dynamics? How is it possible, whilst remaining on the terrain of self-referential functionalism, to explain human creativity, the onset of combinatory synergy, the outbreak of a new meaning of things? Are these only new connections activated by causal variability?

The task of excluding/including the non-functional order of reality cannot be solved within functionalism. To solve this problem, it has to be possible to observe the working of the functional principles from a more general viewpoint. This viewpoint is that of relational sociology. For it:

- a) meaning has a cultural dimension beyond the material, psychic, and social dimensions; the temporal dimension of meaning traverses and constitutes these four forms of meaning as “other” dimen-

- sions with regard to their contents, whose dynamism is acknowledged (time changes meanings);
- b) action is both an intentional act and an emergent;
  - c) the system is an emergent from a web of relations through processes of morphostasis/morphogenesis;
  - d) complexity is not synonymous with contingency alone, but is a combination of necessity and contingency, of structure and event;
  - e) social relations are **supra**-functional.

Through this more general framing it is perhaps possible to keep the best of functional analysis within a relational analysis that provides a more adequate theory of society.

The solution of the dilemmas unleashed by functionalism does not lie in negating the importance of functional analysis, but in including it into a more general paradigm. The new defining principle becomes the relation. In sociology, observation distinguishes whether an actor, event, structure, or social action “relates or does not relate” and how so.

For the “first functionalism” the equation  $y = f(x_i)$  is valid, where  $x_i$  are variable factors. For the “second functionalism,”  $y = f(x_i, r_j)$  is valid, where the relation between factors (that is  $r_j$ ) is introduced as a further variable. For the “third functionalism,”  $y = f(x_i, r_j, r_n r_j)$  is valid, where the relationality of relations (that is  $r_n r_j$ )<sup>19</sup> is introduced, as a variable.

Relational analysis does not negate the scientific processes that these paradigmatic reformulations have detailed, but instead of “f,” it would put a relation “R” that means a complex reference and also complex bonds that are not necessarily “functional:” i.e.,  $y = R(x_i)$ ;  $y = R(x_i, r_j)$ ;  $y = R(x_i, r_j, r_n r_j)$ . In sociology, the relational operator R is a social relation whose functions are not distinguishable from the overall meaning they have.

Saying that an entity (even if variable)  $y$  (be it a behaviour, a structure, an event, etc.) depends on (is contingent with respect to) other variables ( $x_i$ ) means to analyse the operator R that relates them, in a complex and normally supra-functional manner, through relations among elements ( $r_j$ ) and relating relations ( $r_n r_j$ ). The point is that such relations can be treated as logical only in an abstract formalized way: for the systems formed on the basis of meaning (of a meaning conceptualized as meaningful selection), are primarily cultural patterns interpreted by actors.

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<sup>19</sup> By “relationality” I mean the reality of “being in relationship,” which has a double face: it refers to the fact that the relationship has its own reality (an “act of being,” or *energeia* as Aristotle would call it), and that the two terms which are related (ego and alter) exist in their reciprocal connection (Donati 2015: 96).

The implication of such change of paradigm can be better understood through an example, i.e., the way I propose to redefine the methodological tool called AGIL, initially put forward by Parsons (who described it in various ways, as a “fourfold model” or as an “interchange model”) and used by many other authors (such as Victor Lidz, Jeffrey Alexander, Richard Münch), including Luhmann.

What is AGIL? Here, I wish to specify why and how relational sociology significantly modifies the way the AGIL scheme is conceived. I conceive of AGIL as an instrument for sociological analysis that is useful in analysing social facts as relational and emergent phenomena, rather than as corresponding to a functionalistic logic. Therefore, I reformulate AGIL not only as a scheme for the analysis of social action and of systems of action, but also and above all, as an instrument for the analysis of social relations as emergent phenomena (from which social structures are generated).

### **/// The Reformulation of the AGIL Scheme in a Relational Version**

In Table 1, I propose a synthesis of the principal versions of AGIL, comparing the theories of Parsons and Luhmann, and my relational theory of society.

In my approach, AGIL is understood as the compass of sociology where the four poles (A—means, G—goals, I—norms, L—values) are the components constituting the social fact as a social relation. Therefore AGIL describes the form of the social relation as a *sui generis* order of reality emerging from the reciprocal action of agents/actors.

Let us give a couple of examples. First, the love relationship. If we observe a person caring for her dog, we say that she loves her dog. If we observe the same person as a partner in a loving couple with another person, we say that she loves her partner. Each of these love relations are clearly different in their own structure (value, norms, goal, means). Second example, the free giving relationship. Such a relationship can be found in a family, in the initiative of a charity, in the free gift of a gadget by a seller, or a donation to a poor person by a public institution. As in the former case, all these are relations with different structures, although we call them by the same name, i.e., free giving relationships.<sup>20</sup>

AGIL is useful for understanding and explaining in which direction actors and social facts move within social space, conceived here as a “field” in which we observe social subjects, their actions, and relations within

<sup>20</sup> For more details on how AGIL can be used in analysing free giving see Donati (2003).

a context of social and cultural structures. The term “direction” indicates the “oriented sense” of the social forms emerging in social time and social space. Social structures work through social agents/actors who continually re-orient them through their mediation.

We can pinpoint the differences between the relational approach and those of Parsons and Luhmann. Whereas Parsons’s AGIL is tendentiously of a morphostatic nature (within his inertial conception of the social system: Parsons 1951), Luhmann declared that characterization of the social to be dead and buried and saw in AGIL only the autopoietic mechanism through which social systems become the subject of action.

Instead, I conceive of AGIL as a scheme that allows us both to understand and explain social facts as realities that are emergent from the dynamics of social relations, and are therefore the products of social action (and their internal components). The reality of the “social fact” consists in an “emergent effect” which constitutes another stratum of reality, different from those of the elements and the relations between them that have generated it. The social order is the order of the relation. Social structures are nothing other than the stabilization of this relational order during a certain period of time and in a certain space.

The AGIL of relational sociology can capture not only the morphostasis of Parsons, but also the morphogenesis of social relations themselves. Unlike Luhmann’s, the relational AGIL is not a mechanical scheme through which to identify the self-differentiation of purely self-referential systems, but sees social systems as relational realities which hetero- and self-referentially constitute themselves in relation to their environment. Every element of the relation-AGIL has its own environment (Donati 2015: 43). I distinguish myself from both Parsons and Luhmann by reformulating AGIL to use it as a compass to understand how social facts emerge from social structures (i.e., the initial AGIL) through interactions among the actors who can modify them to varying degrees, although sometimes not at all.<sup>21</sup> Finally, AGIL is used to capture both the morphostasis and the morphogenesis of social facts as structures that have to respond to what people make of them. With this, I abandon functionalism, which I consider to be only a method and not a theory.

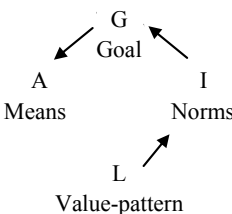
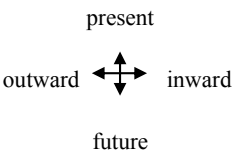
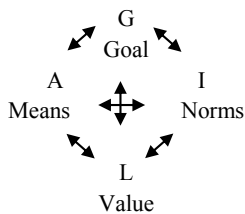
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<sup>21</sup> On the inability of both Parsons and Luhmann to explain emergence see D. Elder-Vass (2007).

T. PARSONS	N. LUHMANN	P. DONATI
1. It is a scheme to describe the structure (synchronic) of the social action (unit act) or of a social structure (institution) as a system	1. It is an autopoietic mechanism of the social system (the social system is conceived as communication and only as communication)	1. It is a methodological compass which serves to orient the investigator in the analysis of the “social facts” (which are actions, relations and structures) as emergent phenomena (AGIL captures both the morphostasis and the morphogenesis of the social facts)
2. It consists in four functions (Adaptation, Goal-attainment, Integration, Latency) that allow the system of action to operate	2. It consists of two axes: space (distinction internal/external = I/A) and time (present/future = G/L) that operate as binary distinctions to realize an indefinite number of functions (not only the four functions A,G,I,L)	2. The four poles A,G,I,L are orientations of meaning (means, goals, norms, values) of the components constituting the social fact: in particular they are the essential dimensions of the social relation (AGIL describes the form of the social relation as a <i>sui generis</i> order of reality emerging from reciprocal action, which has its own AGIL)
3. It operates normatively (both according to the norms of integration = function I and according to the theorems of interdependence and inertia)	3. The internal/external and present/future axis operate mechanically (that is without subjective intention or value-oriented norms)	3. It operates neither in a normative way (it does not necessarily follow the norms of Parsons’s I function) nor in mechanical way (by self-reference and re-entry of Luhmann’s binary distinction), but works through relationality (AGIL emerges through relations among its four dimensions of orientation and among the relations themselves)
4. It is ordered according to the cybernetic hierarchy (maximum control in L that decreases in I,G,A; maximum energy in A that decreases towards G,I,L)	4. It is ordered according to the functional primacy of one of the possible functions (i.e., the functional society is ordered on the primacy of A, which is G.O.D. = generator of diversity)	4. It does not operate as a cybernetic hierarchy because the relations among A,G,I,L are mutual actions; it does not operate mechanically because it emerges from the interactions between the actions and relations proper to the components

Table 1. Three versions of the AGIL scheme (Parsons, Luhmann, Donati).



<p>5. It uses generalized symbolic media of interchange (input-output)</p>	<p>5. It uses generalized symbolic media of communication (there is no exchange of input and output)</p>	<p>5. It uses generalized symbolic means of relationality (not necessarily of exchange, nor only of communication): the symbolic means serve for the mutual orientation of the four components means-goals-norms-values</p>
<p>6. Briefly: AGIL is a structure that operates through the value of functional differentiation guided by an internal normativity</p>	<p>6. Briefly: AGIL is a mechanism which allows the social system to differentiate itself automatically (evolution) in a purely functional way (autopoietic) to adapt itself to complexity through three phases: increase of variability-selection-stabilization of expectations</p>	<p>6. Briefly: AGIL is an analytic scheme that serves as a compass to investigate social facts, hypothesizing that they are emergent phenomena generated by the relational differentiation among the components of the social relation in a context of pre-existing social structures that may be reproduced (morphostasis) or changed (morphogenesis)</p>
<p>Example: a corporation is a normative social organization whose primary goal is to produce profit (other goals being secondarily)</p>	<p>Example: a corporation is an organization that functions as a system maximizing its efficiency (transforming money into money, or monetary equivalents into other monetary equivalents)</p>	<p>Example: a corporation is an organization that has to relate itself to the environment and consequently has to continually modify its own internal relationality among means-goals-norms-values according to processes of relational differentiation with its external environment</p>
<p><b>Cybernetic hierarchy in the control order (LIGA)</b></p> 	<p><b>Autopoietic mechanism operating on the ground of two distinctions (present/future, inward/outward):</b></p> 	<p><b>Relational structure as a combination of four dimensions that interact inside as well as outward</b></p> 

Relational sociology conceives of the AGIL scheme as an analytic tool that retains the four poles A, G, I, L but: first, it interprets them as “orientations of meaning” attributed to these elements or dimensions (constitutive of social phenomena) by the agents/actors who generate and sustain them; second, it stresses the possibilities of relational combinations of these elements/dimensions in a plurality of ways, abandoning the cybernetic hierarchy supposed by Parsons, and clearly criticized by Luhmann.

In empirical reality, the four dimensions of A, G, I, L can all be present or some of them may be absent or in some way inadequate. However, in concrete social dynamics, each of the four dimensions can be a medium or goal or norm or value for the agents involved according to the relations it has with the other three. For instance, money can be a medium or a goal, or a norm or a value according to how it is used and conceived of in the concrete social situation being investigated (money can be the means to buy a dress, the goal of a professional activity, the norm for a banker who wants to transform money into more money, or the monetary value used to establish equivalence between different things). Whether it is one or the other depends on the relations it has with the other dimensions in a given situation. Contrary to functionalism, money does not have an a priori function but can be socially channelled in various ways.

Relational sociology sees the components of AGIL as being relationally generated and, in turn, affecting social relations as such. Relational AGIL describes the form of social relations as a *sui generis* order of reality (having its own properties and causal powers) that emerges from reciprocal actions (which, in their turn, have their own and different AGILs) (see Donati 2011: 227, Fig. 7.2).

In the relational version, AGIL operates neither in a normative way (it does not necessarily follow the norms of the Parsonian central value system or Luhmann’s binary distinctions), but operates by relationality: AGIL emerges through the relations between its four poles or dimensions of orientation and from the relations that exist among these relations. For this reason, society is a relational web of relations.

In the relational version, actions, relations and social systems use the generalized media that are specific to each of the four poles (A, G, I, L), as ones that serve to relate different aspects of actions to each other, to the relation and to the social system. Therefore, the generalized symbolic media are not necessarily exchange media (functional performances according to Parsons) nor are they only media of communication (of information according to Luhmann). The symbolic media serve for the reciprocal orien-

tation of the four components that constitute action (means-goals-norms-values). Equally, they serve for the reciprocal orientation of the four social sub-systems (economical system, political system, civil society, families and informal networks) and, within them, for the reciprocal orientation of the various unities that differentiate themselves on the basis of AGIL (which is a recursive acronym, i.e., each dimension of A, G, I, L can be broken down in a sub-AGIL).

The symbolic media enable relational differentiation to be realized. Relational differentiation is distinguished from functional differentiation because it does not operate through specialization of the parts. Instead, it works by enabling meaningful relations to be established between the differentiated parts (which can have specialized functions, but not be entirely separated). In other words, relational differentiation does not follow the fissiparous logic of the division of cells in biology, but follows the social logic of the double contingency inherent in social relations.

Moreover, it is necessary to introduce “relational exchanges,” as a new conceptual category in sociology. In the relational AGIL, a type of exchange, termed relational, operates in which the symbolic media are used to actualize a specific type of social relation with its own properties and powers, instead of being a simple “transaction.” Let us give some examples of different types of relationships—friendship, doctor-patient, the sale-purchase of a house, teacher-student relations—in order to see how in all of these relations some relational exchanges are realized which are not pure symbolic exchange (in which only symbols are transferred) and differ from pure mercantile exchange (in which monetary equivalents are transferred) and also from pure communicational exchange (in which only information is transferred). Relational exchange concerns the bond with other dimensions (symbolic, economic, informative, etc.); a bond that is different for every type of relation. The strength of this bond is, of course, variable—from very strong to completely absent—but usually it exists to some extent and is characteristic of the empirical AGIL in a concrete situation or social fact. This relational exchange produces a form of differentiation that I call “relational differentiation.”

Briefly, for relational sociology, AGIL is an analytic scheme that serves as a compass to investigate the reality of social facts by hypothesizing that they are phenomena emergent from the relational differentiation among the components of the systems of social action, working within the context of social structures. The latter may simply be reproduced (morphostasis) or modified (morphogenesis). Relational AGIL is an instrument with which

to enter the black box of social processes generating the social fact that the sociologist has to explain and interpret as an “emergent relational effect” (Donati 2006).

It must be underlined that the relational version of AGIL does not claim that there is (or must be) a normative constraint imposing that all the dimensions (A, G, I, L) should be present in all empirical phenomena. On the contrary, what is normal is a lack of such a completeness. The scheme works like a hypothesis against which empirical reality is analysed, by using the same logic of the scientific investigations where empirical frequencies are compared to the expected ones in order to see how the black box works. That is why I represent the relational AGIL as a compass which can tell the researcher in which position the observed factual phenomenon is in respect to the social space (of all possible social configurations) and in which direction it is going when it is observed moving in the course of social time.

Let me give a practical example of how relational sociology makes use of the AGIL scheme in order to understand and explain the relational constitution of the human being.

### **/// How to Understand the Relational Constitution of the Human Being<sup>22</sup>**

The “after”-modern paradigm for the social sciences that I have outlined here aims at providing an original understanding of the human person as a relational subject whose fulfilment depends on the transcendent world (Donati & Archer 2015). Human fulfilment is here conceived as the possibility of generating and living relational goods with significant others, as emergent social relations which can be analysed through the relational version of AGIL (Donati 2017). Let me explain this argument, that someone could feel strange or fancy.

I take the moves from the basic work by Margaret Archer (2000) on the human being in which she deals with the vexatious question of how to conceptualize the human being as a living subject from the viewpoint of the social sciences broadly understood. The main difficulty does not consist in seeing what a human person is made of in herself (i.e., the unity

<sup>22</sup> In my opinion, it is necessary to qualify the person as human (although it seems superfluous) in order to refer to the natural person, because the term “person” may also refer to legal or juridical persons, as is the case with the most sophisticated robots called “electronic persons” (the European Union has approved a document that proposes this recognition to particular robots: recommendations to the Commission on Civil Law Rules on Robotics 2015/2103 INL, May 31, 2016).

of body and mind, the continuity of a “substance” together with its “accidents,” etc.), but what relates the human being to the external world and in what way this happens.

Archer claims that the dilemma lies in the circular loop which links the person to society: the person is “both ‘child’ and ‘parent’ of society,” the generated and the generator at the same time. We need a new scientific paradigm to understand how the human person can be both (a) dependent on society (a supine social product) and (b) autonomous and possessing its own powers (a self-sufficient maker). Classical philosophical thought has coped with this dilemma in a quite simple way: it has reduced the dependence on society to contingency and it has treated autonomy by means of the concept of substance—a solution which refers to a low-complex and “non-relational” society. The idea of classical philosophy, according to which the person is a substance and society is an accidental reality, cannot be sustained any longer if we want to understand the vicissitudes and the destiny of postmodern man.

Relational sociology intervenes here to say that, in what I call the transition to an **after**-modernity, it is not possible to understand social relations basically as a projection of the human being.

Differently from classical thought, which denies the paradox inherent in the sociality of the human being, modernity accepts it and, more than that, generates it. But the question is: how does modernity solve the paradox, granting that it tries to solve it?

Archer rightly claims that modernity looks for possible solutions by adopting conflationary epistemologies. And in this way modern social sciences lose the human being as such. She is undoubtedly right. So we are left with the task of rescuing the singularity of each human being, his or her dignity and irreducibility, and, at the same time, of seeing the embodiment and embeddedness of the person in social reality without confusing or separating the two faces (singularity and sociality). How can this task be accomplished?

Archer proposes a better conception of the human being, from the perspective of critical realism, which grants humankind (a) temporal priority, (b) relative autonomy, and (c) causal efficacy, in relation to the social beings that they become and the powers of transformative reflection and action which they bring to their social context, powers that are independent of social mediation.

These three operations (a, b, c) become likely within a relational theory that, going well beyond modern social sciences, states that:

- reality is stratified: whichever kind of reality we are observing, it is made up of multiple layers, each one possessing its own powers and emergent properties;
- in-between the layers, there exists a temporal relationality, which means that powers and properties are emergent effects;
- all in all, the relationality of the human being is conceivable as a morphostatic/morphogenetic process.

By adopting this social theory, based upon a realist epistemology (which I call critical, analytical, and relational, without being relationist), it becomes possible to perform some operations which otherwise would be impossible.

- a) We can see the **pre**-social and **meta**-social reality of the human person, so that the human person cannot be reduced neither to a social product (conflated with society) nor to an idealistic concept.
- b) We can observe the identity of the Self, its continuity and its ability to mature within and through social interactions, while it faces the various orders of reality (natural, practical, social) in pursuing its ultimate concerns.
- c) We can see how the singularity of the human being is realized in a unique and necessary combination of four orders of reality (natural, practical, social, spiritual or supernatural), so that the contingency turns into a necessity if the person must personalize himself or herself and thus become “more” human.

The challenge of the widespread argument about “the individualization of the individual” is turned into the argument of “the personalization of the person”. How? By resorting to the relational constitution of the human person. Let me provide more details.

The first move is to reformulate Archer’s fundamental view in the following way. I suggest criss-crossing Archer’s scheme concerning the development of the self (Archer 2003: 123–129) with the AGIL scheme as revised in the relational theory of society (Donati 1991: chap. 4) (see Fig. 1).

Standing between the natural world (bio-physical) and transcendence, a human being develops through social interaction. At the start, the person is a subject or potential self (“I”) who, through experience (practice), gets out of nature and becomes a primary agent (“Me”), then a corporate agent (“We”), then an actor (*auctor*) (“You”). To me, it is at this point that the dialectic “I/You” meets the need to cope with the transcendental world. Then the subject returns on to the “I” as a self who, by relating to the

transcendent world, has given a personal animation to his or her role (the “You”) in the immanent world. The exit from nature must always pass through nature again and again. The transcendental reality is treated in the reflexive phase that the subject realizes after having passed through practice and sociality. Through these passages, the subject becomes a more mature self-living in society.

Every mode of being a self (as I, Me, We, You) is a dialogue (an internal conversation) with the subject’s “I.” The battlefields are everywhere. But I would like to emphasize that they are particularly meaningful (a) at the borders between the “I” and the bio-physical nature, (b) in social interactions, and (c) at the borders with the transcendental world (see Fig. 1). This representation makes clear how the human being can get a progressive divinization (*Theosis*) while being in the world.

Figure 1 makes it explicit that the “You” can go out of the social and come back to it without living the circle of practice and experience of the world. That is why the personal identity (PI) emerges as distinct from the social identity (SI) exactly because the former is in constant interaction with the latter.

In Archer’s view, the latter (SI) is subordinated (i.e., is a sub-set) to the former (PI). I agree with the conceptualization of SI as a subset of PI, provided that it is made clear that “subordination” of SI to PI does not mean that PI can reduce SI identity to itself. SI has its own autonomy in respect to PI, which means that the human being should consider the reasons inherent in social relations as something that the person cannot define and manage in a purely subjective way. Since social relations are entities endowed with their reality, which can be good or bad (to put it bluntly), the “I” needs to take these reasons into consideration and be reflexive on to them. That is why I suggest distinguishing more clearly between personal and relational reflexivity.

Archer defines personal reflexivity as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa” (2003: 349). I suggest making more explicit the fact that we should speak of a (different) relational (or social) reflexivity as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, to consider the influence of their [good or bad] relation(s) with relevant others on to themselves and vice versa.” Therefore I suggest distinguishing between those situations in which the SI is subordinated to the PI from those in which there is a veritable interaction between PI and SI, so that the relational constitution of the persons can include the emer-

gent reality of the social relation and, with it, the Other. Being “relationally reflexive” means being able to reflect on social relations as a reality in itself, since they can represent a relational good or a relational evil (Donati 2011: 192–210) for the person, and therefore, in order to achieve a relational good, he or she must change his or her PI because of the influence exerted by other people on the relations they have together.

Society (which is relationality) is surely a contingent reality, but contingency does not mean pure accident. It is in fact the notion of contingency which is in need of new semantics. Contingency can mean “dependency on” (Parsons), or “the chance not to be, and therefore to be potentially

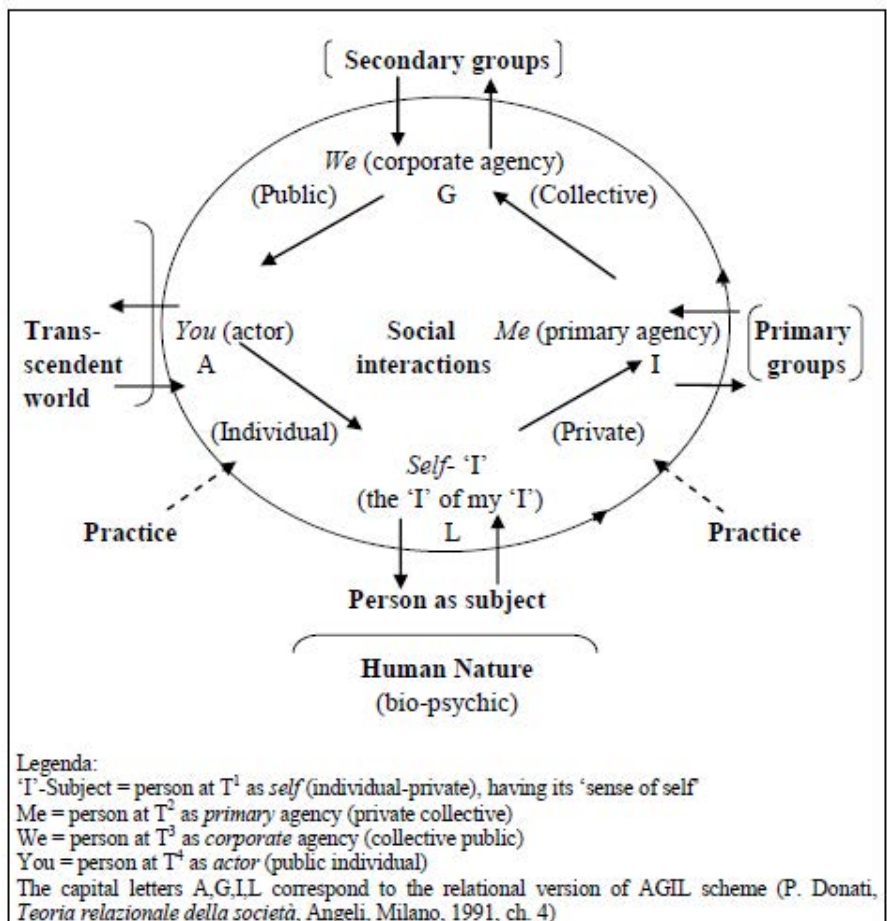


Figure 1. The conceptualization of the human being as someone who develops in-between nature, practice, social interaction and transcendence.



always otherwise” (Luhmann), but it can also mean “the need for personal identity to mature through social identity.” The third position implies that contingency can be monitored by the “sense of self,” and guided through the internal conversation of the subject, provided that the “I” can accommodate the Self within a relational good. Otherwise, the “I” is caring for what runs the risk of putting the Self within a relational evil.

Without this different semantics of contingency, the human being cannot take the steps that are necessary to go from nature to the supernatural world, discovering its transcendence in respect to society. This is the deepest sense of reflexivity as the proper operation of that internal conversation which makes the human being more human. The social relationality is precisely the fuel or food for the reflexivity, which makes the human being effective.

If we apply the AGIL scheme (in the revised, relational version) to the sequence I-Me-We-You, we can see a quite curious thing: the natural world occupies the dimension of latency (L), while the transcendental world occupies the dimension of adaptation (A). Cultural identities are found within the primary (I) and secondary groups (G) where the person spends his or her life. Why so? My interpretation is that the Self is a latent reality rooted in human nature, while the means (A of AGIL) which realize the human being in society do not consist properly of material instruments, nor of practices as such—not to mention socialization due to social constraints (Durkheim’s *contrainte sociale*, i.e., the pressures of primary and secondary groups with their binding identities), but consist of his or her ultimate concerns.

From this perspective we can better understand the meaning of the statement according to which “who we are is what we care about.” Who we are is not a fixed and immovable nature. The human nature exists (in latency L), but its historical dynamics depend on the norms (I) it follows and the goals (G) it pursues, and the latter in turn depends upon the means (A) used to achieve the aims.<sup>23</sup> To my mind Frankfurt’s statement needs a relational explanation and interpretation: it means that our identity as human beings becomes what the “I” can elaborate by reflexively confronting his or her Self with the ultimate concerns he or she *de facto* relates to, through

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<sup>23</sup> It should be clear that, in my scheme, I am reversing the Parsonian AGIL (where L is at the border with the ultimate values and A borders with the instrumental conditions of the physical environment). In my scheme, culture is provided by the primary and secondary groups to which a person belongs during her life course.

his or her interactions with primary and secondary social networks during the life span. This is the “economy of human development.”

The internal work (reflexivity) of a human being must be accomplished in the dialogue that the “I” has with itself, i.e., when the “I” asks who is really its own “I” when confronted with a “Me” (the identity attributed by the family and informal networks), a “We” (the identity linked to belonging to an association, social movement, organization) and a “You” (the identity actively played as expression of personal autonomy in a social role). In all these moments what is crucial is the confrontation with the ultimate concerns that are involved in a situated context.<sup>24</sup> In order to operate the distinctions between the different identities, the ultimate concerns (transcending the given conditions) play a fundamental role. When a person asks herself what is “the true ‘I’ of my ‘I,’” the person can answer by re-entering a self-referential distinction (as Luhmann thinks), but in this case he or she uses a negative freedom (freedom from constraints) and not a positive freedom (freedom for a good thing) and so does not transcend his or herself. The person can be free and transcend his or herself when he or she chooses which environment to refer to on the basis of a meaningful ultimate concern (which is a relational operation where self-reference and hetero-reference are accomplished jointly by the person). When discussing with his or herself and deciding where to bring the “I,” one self has to be both self-referent and hetero-referent (this is where “the social”—the relational constitution of the human person—comes into play).

Many questions, of course, are left open. With reference to my Figure 1, we can envisage the following open issues. They lie (a) at the borders between nature and the person in society, (b) in the relationships between the internal reflexivity of the person and its social networks, and (c) at the boundaries between the human being and transcendence.

a) The border between nature and the person in society (the battlefield of practical experience) becomes more and more problematic in so far as society changes nature continuously. Certainly, nature reacts. But changes produced by science and technology are challenging the ability of the human being to dialogue with nature at its very roots. The question is: will the subject be able to relate itself to nature when society would make nature

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<sup>24</sup> In this sense, I am suggesting the revision of the approach by E. Goffman (1988), who talks of the priority of the “moments over the persons.” In his approach, when acting in social interactions, human beings follow rituals and play games, whilst in my view they confront themselves (their identities) reflexively. This means that they ask their Self which is their ultimate (transcendent) concern and therefore which situated goals they can pursue and which norms can actually be put in practice.

more and more unrecognizable and indistinct? It is evident that changes in the natural world can shift the thresholds within which the experience of the “sense of self” can be adequately managed.

b) The second question concerns the relation between the internal reflexivity of the person and the social networks he or she belongs to. If the person is an emergent (Smith 2010), the argument of the ontological and epistemological impossibility of the reduction of the emergent state is determined by the constitutive feature of consciousness, namely, reflexivity. However, the emphasis on the internal reflexivity of the human being needs to be connected to the properties and powers of the social networks in which people live. Since these networks may have their own “reflexivity” (of a different kind), much remains to understand about the interactions between the inner conversation of the person and the reflexivity of the network to which he or she belongs.

c) The third set of questions concerns the borders between the person and the transcendental world. The ability of the human being to connect him or herself to the transcendental world strongly depends on his or her ability to “symbolize,” i.e., to understand and appropriate the symbolic world (to know reality through symbols). The question is: how is this ability produced in the internal conversation? How is it promoted or endangered by society? Certainly, we must distinguish between different types of symbols: prelinguistic, linguistic, and “appresentative” (in the phenomenological sense). But it seems to me that much effort should be made to understand the importance of symbols—their formation and their use—in getting a person properly involved in the supernatural world. My feeling is that sociology has reduced the symbols to what sociologists call the “media,” i.e., the generalized media of interchange according to Parsons and the generalized means of communication according to Luhmann. It is evident that symbols cannot be reduced to exchange or communicative means when dealing with the transcendent world. These “symbolic means” are to be understood as relations to another order of meta-reality (Bhaskar 2012), or to what I call a theological matrix of society (Donati 2010).

To conclude: the emergentist paradigm of the human being puts the old query of the relation between personal identity and social identity in new terms.

While most sociologies observe the relation “Personal Identity (PI) ↔ Social Identity (SI)” as an antithesis, relational sociology conceives of it as an interactive elaboration which develops over time, provided that the

personal identity side operates it. It can induce humanization only by being asymmetric.

We can therefore go well beyond those scholars who, in the last century, thought of the relation between PI and SI as something necessarily reifying the human being, or making it liquid or fragmented and divided against itself, on the basis of an alleged dualism between the human and the social. The human being must deal with all kinds of social relations. We need not oppose system relations (system integration) and life-world relations (social integration), good and bad relations in themselves, in so far as what is relevant is the reflexivity of the human being in dealing with them, i.e., in coping with relationally contested contexts.

Only this vision can explain why and how the human being can emerge from social interactions, while he or she precedes and goes beyond society. In short, the relation between PI and SI is a dialogue between the life-world (intersubjective relations) and social institutions (role relations), but it must not be conceived as symmetric, because it is acted by the subject (agent and actor) who does not want simply to animate a role, but also to personify it in a singular manner.

This vision, proper to critical realism, allows us to give room to, to think of, and to promote the capabilities of the human being to forge a more human society, notwithstanding the fact that modernity has brought us into an anti-human era. Such a view is grounded on the idea, supported by empirical research, that human fulfilment does not rest primarily on natural, physical, or material means, but on those ultimate concerns that fuel proper social relations.

### **/// Relationality as the Game of Games**

For many sociologists, action-oriented knowledge remains a way of observing or studying relations between “actors” and “facts”—or even between “variables”—such as action, power, money, and class—rather than a way of observing or studying social phenomena as relations or, better still, as relations of relations. Starting from this position, they end up collapsing into relativism (relationism) and thus undermining the very analysis of social relations.

One can say that even where sociology has developed relational thinking, this has often had an idealist or positivist character, but has rarely been realist in the sense of critical, relational realism. This kind of realism is committed to an understanding and explanation of the social world that

neither reifies nor subjectifies it, but sees it as objective in so far as it is previously established with respect to the actors/agents, is constructed in the here and now, and acquires a conditioning reality that rests on a meta-level with respect to the subjective perceptions of the people involved.

In any case, from simply appreciating epistemologically that any object of study is socially constructed, one cannot—and should not—conclude that it is only a social product, since reality is stratified at different levels and is a creation in which the natural, social, practical and transcendental worlds mingle and play with each other relationally. To reduce social relations only at the level of communications or functional performances leads to unjustifiable forms of sociology. In order to get a properly reflexive capacity to critically observe what sociology is construing in/by itself and what “is out there” as a reality in itself, we need an adequate relational epistemology (an observing system that is not purely self-referential, if one wishes to use this language).

In the social sciences, the subject of action cannot be observed, understood or explained in and of itself, except through—inside of, with, and by means of—social relations. The postmodern **relationism** can only be transcended through a careful and comprehensive reading of social relations, one that is multidimensional and supra-functional, in short—relational. Through social relations, the human subject is, or can be seen again as, a meaningful agent, as the normative source of the relation, given that action is normative in so far as it entails interpretation. To claim that action is normative means that it necessarily requires an interpretation of meanings, and in that sense is “hermeneutic,” but one should never forget that social relations exceed the will and the subjective meaning of the actors.

At the end of this paper, I summarize in Table 2 the main differences between what I call relationist and relational sociology.

What we want to know are the social facts in so far as they are real. But we cannot know them other than in and through relations.

- a) The relation is the key to enter into social reality and to come out of it (in so far as knowledge is a relation used by an observer who wants to get into what is observed— insight, involvement—and come out of it—detachment).
- b) The relation does not eliminate the elements that it connects, but rather calls upon them, explores, and expresses them.
- c) The relation is not a pure abstraction (a pure form or communication) but is a “concrete.”

<b>Relationist sociology (M. Emirbayer)</b>	<b>Relational sociology (P. Donati)</b>
Does not see the social relation as an emergent	Sees the social relation as an emergent reality
Claims that relations generate structures that have no proper causal power	Claims that relations (as emergent structures) have peculiar causal powers
Conceives of the Self as entirely relationistic because it is not considered as a locus of free choice and agency due to the fact that it is defined by the relational process, as a transaction or a form of communication	Conceives of the Self as relational in the sense that it is viewed as a locus of free choice and agency in relation to an alter by knowing or interpreting its concerns through the behaviours and choices made by the alter in a relational context

Table 2. Comparing relationist and relational sociologies.

- d) It follows that such a relational entity (emergent), encompassing human thoughts, can be dichotomous or dual only under extreme circumstances; normally, it has a network structure that connects, bonds, and creates interdependencies, along with associated tensions and conflicts.
- e) Norms and rules are a necessary and inevitable way of regulating, under normal conditions, the contingency of situations that are not socially predetermined.

In short, the relation, not duality or absolute ambivalence or anything else, is the supreme game of games. But the social relation is not a pure game. One **cannot** say of it what Wittgenstein (1979) said of the linguistic game in his essay *On Certainty*: “Something unforeseeable... I mean it is not founded, it is not rational, or irrational. It is just there like our life...” That social relations follow vague, fuzzy, or ambiguous rules, forms part of our common everyday experience, as does our tendency to polarize—to think in binary codes: inside–outside, symmetric–asymmetric, which is the easiest way of simplifying reality. But social relations cannot be structurally uncertain, ambiguous, or dichotomous in the long run. Passing through the different temporal phases and their outcomes, relationships take on a structure, which changes along time cycles. Their task is to go beyond ambiguity and dichotomy even if they continuously generate these conditions.

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### /// Abstract

The paper presents a general outline of the author’s relational sociology, showing it to be different from other relational sociologies, which are, in fact, figurational, transactional, or purely communicative. Relational sociology is conceived as a way of observing and thinking that starts from the assumption that the problems of society are generated by social relations and aims to understand, and if possible, solve them, not purely on the basis of individual or voluntary actions, nor conversely, purely through collective or structural ones, but via new configurations of social relations. The social is relational in essence. Social facts can be understood and explained by assuming that “in the beginning (of any social fact there) is the relation.” Ultimately, this approach points to the possibility of highlighting those relational processes that can better realize the humanity of social agents and give them, as relational subjects, the opportunity to achieve a good life in a society that is becoming increasingly complex as the processes of globalization proceed.

Keywords:

relational sociology, relationist sociology, relational subject, social morphogenesis, human person

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# RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY PARADIGMS

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## **/// Introductory Remarks**

The category of paradigms usually appears, apparently contrary to the intentions of Kuhn and his commentators (Kuhn 1970 [1962]; Friedrichs 1970; Ritzer 1975), as a marker of dissimilarities within the discipline's standards, a prop substantiated on the stage, similar to Homans's stimulus from the second social exchange proposition; its presence, in whatever form compatible with the stimulus generalization rule, is concurrent with activity leading to success. Leaving aside the question if any science can be normal (according to Kuhn), the main issue is to decide whether science/the academic discipline creates a common theoretical reference system, a framework organizing the practices of its agents. In the case of sociology we usually speak of its multi-paradigmatic character, which means there are various theoretical-research perspectives achieving paradigm status, with mutually rivaling views of the social world and proper investigative strategies. These views stimulate development, or alternatively, increased creativity within the disciplinary matrix. Adapting a slightly different stylistics, what is important is whether research programmes are being formed that promise not only the codification of knowledge but also positive problem-shifting (see Lakatos 1970), signifying a change in the management of scholarly production (see Collins 1998; Fararo 1989; Fuchs 1992, 2001), or reorganizing the sphere of key issues—both those that are firmly embedded in sociological tradition, and those that are fuelling contemporary theoretical debates.

In this respect, the answer to the question about the paradigmatic character of the intellectual agitation surrounding relational sociology is moderately positive. In foretelling this relational “revolution,” George Ritzer and Pamela Gindoff (1992) saw methodological relationism as a chance

to overcome the dichotomy of methodological individualism and methodological holism. They stated that all explanations of the social world must appear within the category of relations between individuals, groups, and society, and emphasized the need to readdress those arrangements relationally. This transformation not only involves philosophical aspects of the individual and society but also derives from a research tradition marked by the accomplishments of George H. Mead, Hans Geertz and C. Wright Mills, and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) writes explicitly that any analysis of action and interaction is transactional by nature, regardless of whether it is strategic or norm-based. The actors' activity is embedded in a transactional context. Substances are abstractions at best, and they are meaningless beyond society, which is understood as a multitude of linked individuals, as can be deduced from the accomplishments of Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, or even Émile Durkheim, and as is also reflected in contemporary analyses of position, organization, civic society, networks, and agency, or recently in the attempts at a systematic extension of field theory (see Emirbayer & Scheller 1998; Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Emirbayer & Johnson 2008; Liu & Emirbayer 2016). Margaret R. Somers (1994, 1995) firmly rejects structural explanations of phenomena of citizenship, rights, and identity, to demonstrate instead their emergence through the formation of relations on various levels, especially regarding community and public spheres, within categories of institution-related processes that emancipate actors to participate. Daniel Silver and Monica Lee (2012; see also Lee & Silver 2012) “relationalize,” with admirable consequence, all the elements and aspects of social life, beginning with the relation with the self and ending with the forms that organize real interactions—the forms of associations between individuals. These forms are not external to the interactional processes, but they describe the spectrum of possible realizations of the ideal self in the frames of the particular relation and beyond it, precisely by reason of the relational involvement of the self, which is characterized by qualities of authenticity, and respectively, inauthenticity.

Without challenging the heuristic fruitfulness of such—as well as many other— “relationalizing” stories, I would prefer to speak about various alterations or types of generalized discourse about relational sociology. The area of this discourse is distinctive, yet internally diverse. Unity in this diversity is attested by a non-trivial understanding of the core category of a social relation: a problem shift towards relations readdresses the key category of actors/agents and their associations with categories of

role, position, field, network, structure, system, capital, or culture. In other words, an alternative emerges, a relational vision of a theoretical world whose various versions inevitably differ in regard to the ontology of the social world, as well as sociological epistemology. It is noteworthy that the numerous attempts in recent decades to display how relations work have also strengthened the associations between theory and empirical research. Jan A. Fuhse (2015b), in his reconstruction of the relational domain and relational sociology, speaks explicitly of the network of mutual inspirations and associations. So does Riccardo Prandini (2015) in pointing to the main leaders and players whose particular systematic contributions are encouraging imaginative thinking about relational sociology. Nick Crossley (2015: 66–67) proves that consistent presentation of the individual as formed through interactions with others in social surroundings and networks of associations excludes the understanding of human beings as pure abstractions or isolated molecules. Individuals are somehow condemned to relations; they choose paths and evaluations of their own actions and act within or against the frames of multiple relational systems, and yet they cannot be treated as the carriers of those systems, nor omnipotent creators or processors of the relational fabric.

Such ordering procedures are indispensable, as they guide the main orientations, or (if you prefer) cuttings in the jungle of relational sociology, beginning with the search for relational classics, through referring to, or anchoring in, the frames of contemporary sociological positions or schools, and ending with original descriptions of elements of relational ontology, epistemology, and methodology. I am focusing on the three—in my opinion original—attempts to form a programme of relational sociology. The logic behind my choice may seem a bit arbitrary, yet (as I immodestly claim) it describes the genealogy and current state of relational sociology: from its strong bonds with social network analysis through associations with pragmatism and an eternal tendency to build sociological grand theories. I do not claim these are the only programmes or “paradigmatic propositions” present on the market of relational sociology theory, nor am I challenging the relationally crucial components of many important theories in the sociological tradition. Many essential ideas favouring analysis in categories of relations can also be found in sub-disciplines of sociology, as well as in psychology and economics. More importantly, my selection of theories is based on meta-theoretical reflection, and not on a simple registration of testimonies of sociological relationalism.

### **/// Networks/Relations and Fields/Systems as Recognized by Jan A. Fuhse**

The starting point for Jan A. Fuhse's (2009, 2015a, 2015b) programme of relational sociology can be traced to the findings of Harrison C. White (1992, 1995, 2002, 2008), which are part of a wider set of investigations into social networks. In this sense, Fuhse's conception inherits tensions specific to subsequent phases of reflection and research on social networks, with their proper terminology and definitions of areas that can be called authentic black boxes. Such a point of reference, although evident, brings inevident problem shifts. Research on social networks is not clearly unified. Specifically, it reveals at least four essential levels. The first involves perceiving the social relation as an analytical construct, which leads to perception of the social world as an ego-centred arrangement. The following levels, namely those of transaction and actors' expectations, exceed the simple geometry of social relations. They define the nature or characteristics of what happens between actors in terms of cooperation or conflict, or various types of social exchange. Moreover, whatever happens within a relation becomes defined as expectations, and explains in turn why transactions occur. It is not a simple interpersonal dimension, or a matter of expectations towards others (who are usually already present in the pre-existing definitions of situations), but rather it defines such situations within categories pertaining to meaningful associations of networks, and sees those situations as significant types of social relations, whose activation leads to constructing the identity. These ongoing collisions between the interpersonal and the personal and individual create the true mystery box: they cannot be reduced to continuous semantic negotiations, nor to visions of a social world inhabited by "cultural dopes." The chronic fuzziness of this area, which in fact is a paramount social reality, involves a question about how intersubjectivity is constituted, and leads to an attempt to explain factually the dialectic of the reproduction of meanings, structures, and expectations on both the individual and social level. The answer to this question assumes the formation of the fourth level, involving rules of ordering and mechanisms that structurize expectations and transactions (Fuhse 2015a: 52–55). Such an organization of the relational fabric of the social world makes a search for resolutions—or at least their heuristics in various theoretical contexts—possible: both classical (Parsons 1951; Simmel 1955, 1971; or Weber 1947 [1922]), and contemporary (Fine 1992, 2010, 2014; Geertz 1973; Luhmann 1995 [1984]). In essence, the bor-

ders of the previous divisions between traditions, paradigms, or research programmes are becoming meaningless, because, for example, answers to questions about the elementary relations between the ego and the alter can be found in the works of Charles H. Cooley (1902), Anthony Giddens (1984), or Harrison White (1992, 2008), while problems related specifically to networks can be associated directly with problems of action and order, the contingency of action, intersubjectivity, social reproduction, stories and identities, or system dynamics—in other words, they can be formulated in the languages of the key theoretical debates.

In Fuhse's conception (2015a: 55–62; 2015b: 16–19), the links between relational sociology and social networks are being radically redefined, especially due to the decisive attempt to find associations between culture, symbolic forms and styles, and particular orderings of the network structure. Networks, understood as a habitat for cultural forms, are in such a sense inseparably connected to, or even inscribed in, the culture, with both spheres constituting part of the same dialectical equation, while defining a situation is an attribution and negotiation of meanings and identities in the framework of some network system. Culture, generally speaking, is beginning to be recognized as a set of categories describing network structures, denoting and marking distinct areas of activity, and defining areas of tangencies, similarities, and differences between them. This makes it possible to define areas of structural equivalence, which are conceived as positions in a network linked through relations within roles, and through this somehow patterned. Such an understanding can be transferred to the types of bonds in a network, the axes of which are structurally equivalent actors; this is the essential problem shift, because it detects the general patterns within networks and reaches beyond a simple description of individual nodes in a network. In other words, isolating various types of relations and real relational patterns formed by roles creates a theoretical niche indispensable for the category of meaning, as long as particular practices of situation control and finding continuity are being effective in various interactive, institutional, and network settings.

If social networks are temporary arrangements seen as the products of mitigating uncertainty and attempts to control the surroundings, they need stronger cement to bind the meanings of past interactions with the here-and-now—not in terms of direct fiat but rather as some sort of story linking particular identities. The social circulation of these stories, combined into domains containing symbolic forms, is not contingent by nature, but refers to the structure of a network, mapping its areas and characterizing



its semantic value. One can speak of tangles of particular network domains that give regularity to human interactions, combining the acts of transition between various nodes of the network into coherent stories. Moreover, such peregrinations show the stylistic similarities that result from a creative merging of cultural forms. The points of intersection of network systems can even force the emergence of a type of general attribution whose range of power exceeds the particular edition of interaction, combining forms of activity, which are irreducible to each other, in various network domains. The protoform of such a stylistic creation is a direct interaction, when actors affect each other and form *modus vivendi* in high-density social conditions, profiling each other and their respective relation types into articulations of their own personal style. An analogous process occurs in conditions of structural equivalency, when stylistic similarities refer to structurally equivalent positions. If we add to that the often self-fulfilling character of social categories that identify a group from within and through relations with other groups, then a bridge between individual stories and the super-individual is finally mended: fragments of personal stories are constantly filtered through categories of group affiliations and differences, solidarity and competition (Fuhse 2015b: 19–21).

Fuhse (2015b: 23–31) makes an essential contribution to this generalized discourse about network and domains. First of all, he clearly advocates constructivism and anti-essentialism, even if he refers them mainly to science than real structures and processes, identities and relations. Application of this idiosyncratic melange of relational realism and constructionism displays the ambiguity of social reality. As even White (1992) claimed, one aspect of social reality is the phenomenological reality, which is the meaning structure constituting network domains. This describes meaning correlates of a particular network structure: identity, relations, roles, and categories. Differentiating the meaning structure from culture is possible as long as forms of meaning shared by the herd, or population (values, symbols, as well as styles and languages) are not directly included in the context of actors' relations with each other, thus allowing a reasonable narrowing of the definition of culture. Another aspect of social reality is the regularity with which communication events, specifically the necessity of describing whether the source of this regularity lies within group particularities, or is rather of the institutional background. Furthermore, for the described pattern of communication it is necessary to reach the core of this regularity. Both are connected; when applied jointly, they enable deciding about the expectations of actors involved in a given relation.

The structure of communication forms expectations, although this does not signify that there is a strict adequacy between the meaning structure and communicative patterns: these are distinctive attributes of social networks, irreducible one to another, and as different as “obverse” and “reverse.” In the language of social networks this can mean generating the same patterns by various meaning structures, or the compatibility or accordance of different patterns with one particular meaning structure. Communication, which is seen as a self-referencing process, induces switching between consecutive definitions of situations, to which references to the past and actors’ expectations are ascribed. Processing these meanings is not only psychically valuable, but relates above all to the sequence of correlated micro-events and definitions of situations formed as a new “what” and “how” in the communication process—thus, it is a relational quality, and not a pure disposition or the subjective content of actors’ emotions. Social networks, which form a fabric and are communication’s point of reference, become a reservoir of relational expectations. Attributing communicative events to actors, interpreting (even in the form of recognizing with whom and with what one deals), providing indications by actors—all these are not derivatives of their total autonomy; rather, actors’ autonomy can display itself only as an element of relation that is defined beforehand, yet stays open for deliberate alteration. Actors’ dispositions and network locations are important resources, but if isolated from the communicative process they remain an unfulfilled promise, like natural resources that cannot be extracted even though one knows where they are located (Fuhse 2015b: 26–28).

The utility of such a conceptualization is evident: it is mapping the social world through the inclusion of traditional social categories in the sphere of relational insight, which offers not so much ready solutions but rather catalyses the emergence of new theoretical puzzles. It displays the grounding of relations in communication as a self-referent system, embedded in the past and recalled or reactivated by mental processes in the present, not as an immediate configuration or emanation of contingency but in the form of expectations guiding mutual references and defining situations. Uncertainty inscribed in any communication is “pacified,” set in ruts of what is known and expected. This process of defining situations does not usually require specific treatments; it is “economized” through applying cultural models of relationships and frameworks defining “what,” “how,” and “why.” Thus, it becomes a selection from moderately stable elements of interactive, collective, or institutional *emploi*; it is an adaptation,

but also a modification of systems of reference. The inertia of these systems is a function of their elements: communicative networks are simply binding past events with present ones, and social networks define links between actors in the framework of relational expectations; cultural networks, understood as systems of interconnected symbols, are creating meaningful characteristics of communicational events. Attribution and inner motivation, which are visible in the subsequent performances, create stories, which can be seen as trajectories or projects—that is, realized scripts of actions in the framework of certain relations. Furthermore, the concept of actor is not limited to individuals; it can as well refer to corporate actors and collective identities, and through the communicational attribution activity of such actors can attain continuity and autonomous relevance (Fuhse 2015b: 32–33).

Such conceptual distinctions make it possible to define institutions as—simply stated—ways or rules exploiting elements of cultural models in the name of reducing uncertainty and applying known frameworks. Relational institutions also describe identities and network relationships, ways of identification, the categorization of actors and actions, and the nature or characteristics of the relation. They are, in other words, areas or arenas where communication happens. On the other hand, social roles, which are seen as an emergent product of network activation in the process of communication, stabilize or institutionalize cultural models, presenting them as reigning models of definitive elements of events as pertaining to or differing from something, and belonging to processes of progressive differentiation, which state a super-situational “what” and “how” for actors and the relations that bind them (Fuhse 2015b: 34–35).

Understanding social networks as correlated patterns of communication and mutual bundles of expectations, allows for the “subjective addressing” of social networks’ meanings and for observing attribution processes within frameworks of micro-events. This micro-world, because it is defined in categories of culture, possesses a wider, organizational and macro-structural, reference. Describing human activities within various schemes and levels demands determining fields, including “regimes,” “disciplines,” and “realms,” as interpenetrating spheres of activities, which implies the generalization of the media of mutual exchange in practices denoting links between relations and situations, or between positions belonging to various spheres of activities and sequences of communicational events. The turbulences on and between various levels, as well as (if one

prefers) systemic and intra-systemic tensions, rule out smooth reproduction and require actors who not only receive but also continuously shape definitions of situations, activate relational potencies, and exploit the positional advantages of the field, describing themselves within trajectories of shifts through various spheres of action (Fuhse 2015b: 35–37).

### **/// Transactions and Fields: the Conception of François Dépelteau**

François Dépelteau's (2008, 2015) conception is based on an essential reorientation in the sphere of the ontology of the social world. This transformation, inspired by the philosophy of John Dewey (Dewey & Bentley 1949), implies a different understanding of science—more as an art or ability to organize casual experiences than a struggle to determine the truth (understood as adequacy between thought and reality). This ability cannot be absolutized, because science, like all other activities, is a process involving thinking (as well as other psychological processes and structural elements) as a part of acting. Without presenting this position in full, let us analyse the consequences of applying such a concept to investigation of the social world. If the social world is a creation, as well as an environment of action, it is human experiences that constitute what is accessible for analysis. Human experiences collect what is social and what is essential for human beings. Reflexivity is an acquisition of evolution, and it demands an active relationship with reality, a necessity to shape relations with objects. This does not imply, as is commonly thought, a reduction to transaction, but a simple assertion that transactional fields are focal points for relational sociology, and thus they constitute certain modes of arranging problems faced by actors interested in arraying social worldviews. All other orders of reality are important only inasmuch as they are elements of social forms created by transactions and reflexively constituting the environment or the action fields of actors (Dépelteau 2015: 54–55). Transaction, as understood by Dépelteau (2015: 55–56), is not a simple interaction, association, or way of combining elements belonging to different realities, but a “live” relation, or tangle of relations, accompanying the formation of mutual codependence among human beings. In this understanding, reality is “flat,” or rather problematized as a reduction of complexity or the multiplicity of realities on a transactional plane. The mutual codependence of individuals is a quality achieved through experience, the formation of “live” associations creating the fabric for human activities. Neither the features of transactions nor

the agency of actors explain the phenomenon of blending personal stories or narrations with the polymorphous complex of structures and determinants. It is a relational phenomenon, yet at the same time a practical action, as Harold Garfinkel (1996) would say, through which some elements of social phenomena are “qualified” as practically essential for the formation of transactions and as “verified” by actors for their usability or appropriateness in the situational context. Similarities and differences of views and praxis are a function of relations with objects, ways of orientation, and mobility within conglomerates of elements, which are “flattened,” or reduced to a common denominator through an individual’s activity.

These conglomerates, treated as social fields or what in reality captures actors’ attention, are points of reference for their perceptions and actions. Particular strips of human activities are bundles of relations formed by the mutual relatedness of those who are establishing a transaction. Social fields delineate general definitions of situations, patterns of connections and participation, and categorizations of similarity and diversity—but their activation happens only after a transition to the public sphere, or a concretization as a fabric of the life process of forming associations (Dépelteau 2015: 56–58).

Relationality as a feature of the social world concerns both the process of forming experiences and associations, and the consequences of this process. In effect, any human experience, as long as it is conscious, is relational in the sense of selecting the fabric included in social fields, and also generating smaller or larger changes within social fields and modes of referring to them. The mutual orientation of actors is indispensable, yet assertion of its presence is not sufficient to describe the nature of transactional associations. The states of mutual codependence are usually complex; they can be, of course, reduced to descriptions with the use of categories such as variables, roles, positions, etc., yet such actions obliterate the specificity of relations, e.g., in the sense of remembering one’s experiences in the framework of homologically perceived fields, factual reasons, experiences, emotions, assets and liabilities. And not least because of this seemingly trivial circumstance, determinism and cultural conditioning need to be rejected (Dépelteau 2015: 58–60).

The logic behind this reasoning stretches beyond the understanding of social fields. They cover not only other actors (both individual and collective), but also non-human objects and the space of transactions framing actors’ activity—being created, modified, and annihilated by transactions

themselves. Social fields are not external to individuals; they form areas that control the multitude of human experiences and practices. As Erving Goffman would have stated (1967), they require a sort of commitment or involvement, which need not mean uniformity, but being “on the wire” and a sort of control over bits and pieces of fragmented and plural reality. Their elements are not so much determining or co-determining, but called into existence and equipped with meanings as a result of a transactionally constituted selection of what pays off, or what is per se worthy, useful, and valuable in any transactional respect. Relations between codependent individuals do not have to isomorphically reflect the ephemeral character of social fields. An order is established by actors’ transactions and the correlations between the present and the past, which is construed each time and becomes a continuity (occasionally disrupted) of particular chains of transactions. This is an ongoing battle between the known and the unknown, the available and unavailable within the framework of a particular perspective. If a totalizing view of the world of transactions and fields is impossible, the analytical point of reference should be how real actors in particular transactions, framed within particular social fields, create their activity. In academic praxis this requirement signifies transactions between academic and non-academic perceptions of social fields, when the effectiveness or predominance of the former is achievable only when they induce a restructuring change in the latter (Dépelteau 2015: 60–63).

Dépelteau’s concept breaks with the view of social fields as possessing universal structure or form, whether understood after Pierre Bourdieu (1990 [1980]) as an objective distribution of capital, or after Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2011) as areas of strategized human action. From the viewpoint of relational sociology as interpreted by Dépelteau, these are just some of many possible attempts to contain the dynamics of social fields in static universals. To paraphrase his reasoning, they are useful or practical as long as one bears in mind that they are the results of transactions within the world of the social sciences, the selection of actors, and types of transactions. What is even more crucial, the social order may not be nested in structures but in practices of actors entering transactions in frames of temporary, various, and variable social fields. The key to understanding the social order is contained in the answer to the question of how they are factually applied to actions performed by actors, while often they help in creating a semblance of continuity and order, as well as the illusion of determination and co-determination.

### **/// Towards a Grand Theory: the Relational Realism of Pierpaolo Donati**

It is not an easy task to characterize the relational sociology of Pierpaolo Donati (2009, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015), as such an undertaking could aim for synthesis and yet be syncretic. To present a historical analogy, we could invoke Talcott Parsons's few decades of theorizing. Such a task requires the incorporation of approaches, threads, and tenets coming from various contexts, which means, firstly—in line with the idea of convergence—finding inspiration in very different ideological and theoretical positions, which are taken as essential contributions to the author's grand theory, and secondly, as a fabric that facilitates widening, explaining, and improving the theory. Niklas Luhmann applies a stylistically identical strategy of theory building. In his case, the theory becomes even more readable in terms of intended inspirations and acquisitions. They are not mere erudite stunts, but create conditions for a dialogue and for selecting from a wide spectrum of solutions. The eclectic or syncretic character of such attempts is sometimes accepted as “costs,” as long as it is possible to address and solve a certain problem in the frame of the theory constructed. In other words, personal preferences for a method of constructing a theory are significant, as they enforce a particular scenario, frame, or theoretical logic, as Jeffrey C. Alexander would have claimed (1982). Yet, what resolves the problem is the possibility of displaying non-trivial explanations of the nature of the social world, and indirectly—avoiding the eternal discrepancies in understanding the archetypal relation between individual and society.

An essential part of this task is working through fundamental categories, both those that refer directly to the so-called founding myth of sociology—order, action, conflict, power, structural and functional differentiation, culture—and the ones that mark the present tensions or paroxysms of this discipline: capital, social networks, fields, habitus, public goods, agency. The category of relation seems to be a good connector between the sociological classics and contemporaries. It is a key to better understanding the main issues, a sort of generalized medium of theoretical exchange that bridges and bonds approaches incommensurate in time and substance, and at the same time gives a promise of their better explanation. It is avoidance, but only in the sense of searching for indications of how to better reshuffle capacities and means. A good example of such practice is reworking the fashionable category of social capital, previous interpretations of which of-

ten sink in the deadfalls of dichotomies such as micro-macro or individual-holistic, considering them as adhering to individuals, or as aspects of social and cultural structures, or as an amalgamate or derivative of those substantially different elements. If we assume a logic behind this resolution, social capital—as well as almost all other social phenomena apart from some insufficiently described agency forces inherent to the level of individuals or the level of social and cultural structures—is ontically dependent, as it seems to be a product of theoretical conflation, and should therefore be reduced to one of those two levels. As far as Durkheim, Marks, or Mead succeeded in displaying the possibilities of society through the progressing onto- and phylogenetic socialization of humankind, today we are left only with faith in the theoretical functionality of James S. Coleman’s “boat” (1990: 8), or rather the mystical coercive cooperation of social “bowling alone” (Putnam 2000). Moreover, it is not enough to simply reactivate the classical solutions in the spirit of a Matrix-like virtualization of the social order—they are coherent, even intellectually gracious and aesthetically thrilling, yet unproductive if applied to the hiatus between theoretical conflation and reduction.

Donati (2015: 89–92) makes a peculiar cut in this meta-narrative. He breaks its connotative string of associations by ascribing agency to both individuals and structures. The two form a society, working in between, and generating social relations. This is not a singular act and its arena is not a purely virtual domain of theoretical thinking. Instead, the historically and situationally variable reality of human life, being the locus for the creation of social relations, is emergent in character, at least in the sense of the arising of individual/collective conscience, trust, social solidarity, sensations of togetherness, or collective action. This leads to the appearance of relatively autonomous relational structures; irreducible to their sources, the structures are usually composed of wheels within wheels, or conditions, or opportunities—as Peter M. Blau (1994) would have said—against which and thanks to which the new sequences of relational structures emerge, and they—to paraphrase Giddens (1984)—simultaneously limit and enable human activity.

If we apply such reasoning to social capital, we shall see that it is a certain type of relation that can come into being on the interpersonal level (intersubjective network), as well as on the level of structural relationships in a network composed of impersonal actors. In any case, this type of relation reproduces trust and availability for participating in collective actions. The relational character of this “good” is not limited to its features but extends



to the possibility of action within dimensions that are different from the source: economical, political, normative, and values-related. In this sense social capital is a reservoir of relational-structural potencies, which can serve to sustain/reinforce trust and cooperation. The word “can” emphasizes that, according to Donati (2014b), associativity is not identical with social capital. This refers to the specific configuration in which it is possible to access the good not present beyond this particular relation. However, there exists a relational order that is irreducible to other levels or tangles of what is individual and structural. It is rather a compound of form and content, being at the same time normatively characterized and individually “calibrated,” as well as connected to interactional and network contexts. Ritualization is unavoidable, at least in the sense of the orientation system and describing the modality of activities. Ritualization designates certain “orbits” of activities, but it does not fully describe factually revealed behaviours, meanings, and expectations. Within the frames of its contextual embedding and network connections it may be neutral, deprived of particular meaning, valued as promoting integration and social cohesion, or serving as the foundation of categorization on the positive–negative axis.

Just like the analogous reflection on society and civic culture, as well as such notions as the nature of goods, morphogenesis, agency, after-modernity, or public politics, a relational analysis of social capital contributes to our understanding of what exists and how to deal with this concept to prevent it from becoming another empty shell. In fact, the goal is to systematically prepare bricks for building a general theory having a vast structure. Particular intellectual journeys are mere tests of strength before the final battle, or, if one prefers, rehearsals polishing particular instruments of the grand orchestra. This theoretical performance becomes intellectually striking when it resonates fully orchestrated as a general theory, which not only eliminates deficits but also becomes a new paradigm. This statement does not imply that Donati’s theory is bulletproof, but it does eliminate or overcome certain current theoretical weaknesses, at least within the frame of what has recently been called “after-modernity”; it also generates new theoretical puzzles related to agency or to understanding social networks (see Donati 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014c).

The key problem shift consists in defining relations in terms of social morphogenesis. This excludes the simple possibility of the reproduction of relations through the eternal enginery of social structures. Structural arrangements are not indifferent, and like the weather, which affects the course of a football game by advancing or blocking the performances of

morphogenetic actors, they do not decide the results of the game, as it is (like all morphogenetic products) an emergent quality. The agency of human beings is in fact the ability to generate relations, which is an activity as natural as breathing. It is relations that constitute what is social; these relations are incessantly put to evaluation by the actors with respect to common utility or moral approval or disapproval. Historically and situationally, relations determine the actors' very existence, and they guide and characterize trajectories and methods of perception and activity, forming the real point of reference for any objects of experience conceived of as related to each other. They form certain "molecules" that cannot be treated as atoms, separated events, or places within the network. Situational context is not a deviation or a problem, nor an accompanying circumstance; it is rather the real arena of morphogenesis. None of its elements, whether it is an actor, structure, or some conglomerate formed from bits and pieces of situations, possesses the driving force to generate relations. Particular "degrees of freedom" are usually defined and meaningful, but they do not inherently realize themselves nor are they "included" or "excluded" by other contextual elements. Situations are given, but they cannot be directly reproduced, as they are concatenations of relations; in other words, as particular forms filled with various contents they generate a multitude of performances and emergent products of morphogenesis (Donati 2015: 90–92; compare Archer 2010a, 2010b).

As a name for Donati's social ontology (2015: 91–92) "relational realism" is a good description of the idea of reaching the core of the social world. The reality of relations does not exclude other "forces" affecting spheres of human activity, but rather transforms these forces into elements of relations, which are relevant inasmuch as they are related with other elements extracted from the interactive protoplasm in an act of constituting events. A human being as a generator of relations does not act as a free ego; and even if one thinks so, it is rather a function of relative self-reliance and social competences or advantages in a particular sphere. In some sense, a human being treats given relations as substances that can be set in motion or whose motion can be joined—modifying, intentionally or not, the arrangement of relations in a particular sphere. Analytically speaking, human creatures keep the distance, or (in Luhmann's words) sustain the border between themselves and the environment, between the "I" and "not-I," anchoring their experiences in relations with objects. Reality constituted in this way becomes autonomous in relation to the forces that created it. It is a reality in itself, with a distinctive structure and features. The reflexive

and creative character of human beings is realized in each act of morphogenesis, which is situationally specific, although not contingent on an arrangement of activated relations. Relations are the effect of a more or less ontically fixed association, and at the same time they are the process of becoming some sort of connection, and its successive transforming through the acts of morphogenesis that follow. Even if this is a contingency, it is due to a correlation emblematic of late modernity, and it is not the result of a mechanical replication of patterns into the modus of the simulacra parade.

Society can be viewed as created in groups of actors sharing areas of activities, entering interactions, and similarly defining events. Actors, who are undoubtedly subjected to various forces or situational pressures, evoke or activate bits and pieces of what is social by channeling currents of the social protoplasm. Social order involves the reality of relations, their personalization and substantiation by the participants of particular spheres of activity. It is imprinted in institutional forms and network connections, or the stages situated on various levels, which are real owing to their specific relations but at the same time they bridge phenomena from different levels. Actors form their sense of belonging to a certain area, and by forming the sense of “we” they define the limits for a given sphere of activity, and at the same time they activate its elements. Any action means coexistence with others, and a concrete form of this coexistence depends on situationally formed relations. In other words, the modality of actions involves particular configurations activated in situational contexts. On the societal level one can speak of a plural subject in the sense of a network of relations forming a social tissue; such a plural subject is morphed through processes of association and dissociation, forming relations, and creating social structures. A morphogenetic “kitchen” serves various “dishes,” which are—to rephrase Durkheim—more or less relatively crystallized social facts. Each of them can be subsumed under a more general form, beginning with relations between lovers, and ending with relations between countries or blocks of countries. They are not mere clones of forms or their isomorphic variations, but rather situationally generated distinctive concretizations (Donati 2015: 92–93).

The humdrum of everyday life excludes the simple repetition of social relations, while the essential difficulty of their characterization has to do with the nature of bonds between relations and human agency. Without agency the everyday life-world would remain a contingent cluster of bits and pieces of the structure, an element of the background, instead of being

a space or field that enables the actors to become interrelated, an environment that affects their closeness and distance, assimilation and differentiation, the co-creation of consensus beyond casual acts and inadvertent points of their life trajectories, but also the creation of relatively permanent bonds and associations within the domain of what lies in between, as well as the selection of action modalities based on pre-existing relations, networks, and structures. The key to understanding agency is in the connection between *refero* and *religo*, motivation and bond co-designed by both ego and alter on the plane of the event and the super-situational connection and structuration. Such an arrangement of the relational fabric closely resembles Parsons's concept of the actor in a situation (compare Parsons 1968 [1937]), and means description of relations as composites, where one can analytically distinguish: target (T), means (M), norms (N), and cultural values (C). Each specific action and specific social relation is a concretization and an attempt to synchronize the elements that are "alive" and are situationally described only when actors define their meaning, beginning with simple research into what is going on, and finishing with decisions about the affectual features of one's own actions within an intimate relationship, or as an aspect of a play of impressions in the framework of a transaction. Social networks are in a sense the reservoirs of combinations of those four elements, and they describe what is possible and under what conditions, yet the selection of any combination lies within the domain of the actors' agency, its protoform (or rather its natural arena of constitution of which) being described by the relation between ego and alter. This relational structure is a true mystery box of sociological theory: on the one hand it is characterized by total contingency and randomness (in the same sense in which determinism or simple constructionism are excluded), on the other hand it is a historically shaped and situationally available solid combination of social relations that limits the spectrum of possibilities, although it contains the potential for as yet unrealized permutations. In other words, not every act of human will is a structurally indifferent selection of the relational fabric.

An analysis of the dynamics of this process requires distinguishing the modalities of connections between the elements of a relation. The inner nature of relational composites, their compatibility, discrepancy, and complementarity, create strings that direct the expected level of reflexivity, and its activation or mitigation. However, reflexivity cannot be simply switched off, as every social relation assumes and realizes mutuality (Donati 2015: 93–97). Reaching the target (end), as was claimed by Parsons (1968), inspired by writings of Weber, demands an effort and activity (which can

also mean refraining from activity): the target is, concisely speaking, the state of affairs that depends on human agency. Does this imply finalism, as Donati claims? Yes, as long as the problem is addressed with the use of the ethical characteristics of human actions; and yes, if it is related to the reality of the *Lebenswelt*.

Functionalism, especially Parsons's approach, has become a significant theoretical tradition for Donati, a method of "coding" reality, structures, and social processes. The set of abstract concepts belonging to the vast family of functionalist schemes is sufficiently elastic so as not to serve utopia or to sustain the status quo; rather, as Donati (2016) observed, the set implies moral relativism, without prejudging the pre-eminence of any moral visions of human beings and social life. The abstract character of functionalist schemes exceeds their ideological limitations, or rather does not judge about possible and meaningful extrapolations, transformations, and applications. In other words, the notion of a function, the emphasis on the intentionality of actions, the deliberate and intentional character of events, and the interpenetration of various social sectors and their links with the environment—all these constitute the essential point of reference. The "relationalization" of functionalism is not so much a cancellation of its universalistic theoretical logic, but rather another attempt to define theoretical puzzles, among which referring to what is not functional or connected with morphogenesis creates a new problem area. If we replace the term "function" with "relation," we shift the direction of analysis towards structured processes of emergence, combining structures and events into relations that are consistent and important for actors. The basis of human activities are patterns of values, yet they should not be understood as mechanical replications but rather as interpretations performed during interactions, involving the selection of meanings, combining them into descriptions of events, with strings of references to relations, and giving power to such associations.

Parsons's AGIL paradigm is, according to Donati (2016), a useful tool enabling not only a thorough description of morphostatic conditions of human actions, but also a strictly morphogenetic view of social relations as emergent phenomena—the real area where social structures are constructed. Four elements of this scheme—A (resources), G (goals), I (norms), and L (values)—are defined in terms of relational categories and create a kind of compass pointing between those four "poles." Such a description allows for emergence to be characterized in categories of cultural drift, or the herd impulses emblematic of enthusiastic crowds, as well as in categories

of rational business practices, or of relying on professional agencies to arrange romantic dates. None of the events, or (as I would prefer to say) no predefined social situations with their relational configuration of resources, goals, norms, and values, completely define the behaviour of ego and alter; they do not liberate ego and alter, nor push them into the abyss of contingency. However, such an approach creates orientation systems for actors, directing their thinking, emotions, and actions, and placing their deeds in the wider context of relational praxis. The space or field of activity is already predefined, and not in the sense of a monumental construction, with corridors and endless rooms which condemn the actors to Kafkaesque peregrinations (or to characteristics in terms of the potential of cultural capital and emotional energy (Collins 2004)), but in the sense of the necessity for self-determination in regard to available strings of relations, or social forms that regulate the “orbits” of actors’ deeds. The movement along those orbits can proceed according to expectations, but if perceived from the perspective of morphogenesis it always implies a transformation of the elements of the social fabric and the creation of new versions or layers of reality. Cybernetic hierarchical control is not needed for that purpose, and nor is the mechanism of autopoiesis: the given social forms, which are described as specific relational locations of their components, are liable to differentiation in the frames of logic of internal interconnections and relations with the external environment. In other words, all processes of construing meaning involve the plurality of possibilities of relational combinations, while the relations between the four poles or dimensions of orientation determine the real property space of action.

Of course, such a statement does not imply a regression to the paradigm of common values, not to mention the multitude of variations of cultural determinism. There exists a sort of isomorphism between social relations and spheres of activity; or rather, these spheres of activity are filled with their proper relations, which determine what is possible. The latter, at different rates and with different dynamics, brings about variability and change in all the environments forming structures of social relations, beginning with the environment of the final reality, through regulations of collective actions and the personal purposes of participants, and finishing with resources and opportunities. Speaking in the language of systems theory, the components of relations are not a random set, but they constantly interpenetrate within the process of internal symmetrical exchange, as well as in the sense of hierarchical arrangements. Transition from one type of society to another implies a change of relational combinations, replacing

the previous rule of integration with a new one, as well as the emergence and activation of new norms and new generalized means of exchange. In this sense, the logic of modern society is based on the primacy of pure functionality and on sustaining compromise-based relations between the state and the market, combining liberal and socialist components, which liberate individuals, yet at the same time condemn them to competing for valuable resources regulated by political powers. Any change in the spirit of after-modernity and building a relational civic society implies the emergence of new relational structures, which sustain the autonomy of individuals while adding capital to their relational, and not individual, aspect through “valorization” of the new social forms, which are usually placed in the “third sector” (Donati 2015: 99–105). In other words, the emergence of a new social formation is at the same time an introduction of a “third actor” and implementation of relational imperatives mitigating the top-down oppression of the authority of the state and the instrumentalism of competing for precious resources, and through this allowing fuller civic participation and the liberty to form symmetrical and non-instrumental relations.

### **/// Conclusion**

Fuhse’s concept overcomes the distinctions between various levels of social life. Methods and rules, which are related to institutions and culturally marked, constitute the main axes along which human perceptions and actions are oriented. Activating network components in the process of communication provides actors/agents with strings of expectations, offering roles to be played in a particular milieu, while at the same time reducing uncertainty by allowing the selection of the leading communication axes. Although such a selection occurs on the micro-level, it is also a reference to other levels of social life, regimes, disciplines, and realms, which are accessible through the generalized media of interchange. Sequences of communicative events are not simply contingent; they are morphed as pulses of particular activations of relational potentials substantiated by blending through various spheres of actions and beyond-situational orientation systems. The continuity of experiences and the autonomy of social actors have their own economy, since they both occur on the relatively solid ground of the pre-existing network connections that define actors, their relations with their surroundings, and the scope of possible meaningful actions.

Dépelteau's approach focuses on the notion of transaction as the space of human experience and agency. It exhibits a world of differently related individuals peregrinating through subsequent situations. On the one hand, such a world is codified—delineated within defined situations offered as fields—and on the other hand, it is not inherently self-made through impersonal processes of social reproduction, being activated through the actors' choices. Being on-line and controlling components of the surroundings are realms of practice not limited to the purely processual present; they also include memory of the past and orientation towards the future, as for example through strategic and/or normative expectations contained in situations designated by the logic of the field. The locus of the social order is constituted by human practices: from the routine and seemingly automatic "pieties" of everyday life, through engagement or involvement in one's role according to expectations, to redefining the field components. Such an order persists not because of structural-cultural inertia—it is not derived from acts of perfectly free will—but it functions because of the sustained continuity of experiences and associations within the field, as well as homological references to other fields, or rather the impression of such continuity being confirmed in successive situational stages. Perhaps a definite turn towards the theory of practice, as advocated by Bourdieu, Schatzki, Swidler or Sewell, will clarify the practical logic of this kind of relational sociology.

Donati's sociology is, in simplification, a consistent attempt at relationally addressing the key sociological categories in terms of social morphogenesis. Relations are effects of actors' agency, but at the same time they constitute the irremovable fabric of their experiences, and real objects of references to the world and other actors. Situations represent the arena of morphogenesis, real "clusters" of relations, without which the autonomy of individuals would be enclosed in solipsistic delusional self-references. The focus of actors centred on those clusters creates circumstances of action, designates its particular spheres, and binds the actors with a situationally particular substantiation of the configuration of relations. Specific dimensions of this relational world: means, aims, norms, and values, are somehow set within the pre-existing social forms, although at the same time they remain the natural nuclei of relational re-compositions. Moreover, such a method of rationalizing allows for a better description of the logic behind the creation of relational structures on the macro-level, as it does for example with the after-modernity phenomenon and the emergence of new types of actors.



In concluding this specific *tour de force* I would like to indicate at least a few characteristic features of thinking about relational sociology that I recognize as heuristically promising.

First of all, the classics are being read again; or rather, new sociological genealogies emerge. This fact may describe the core feature of sociology, whose beneficiaries in moments of crisis or turn look for intellectual (and sometimes political) reinforcement, inspiration, or non-endogenic solutions regarding the current state of the art. This is by no means a weakness or peculiarity, but rather a “normal” practice that often exposes, or sometimes redefines, the overviews around (to use Parsons’s rhetoric) the problem of action and the problem of order. The time horizon of classicization is nonetheless mobile, and becomes a function of the arbitrarily recognized pro-relational character of somebody’s claims; beginning with the obvious (e.g., Simmel, Dewey, Mead, Elias), through that which needs further clarification (e.g., Cassirer, Durkheim), and finishing with what is forgotten and worth “rediscovering” (e.g., Cooley). Moreover, analogous interpretations in terms of relational usefulness are part of contemporary theoretical and research practices. Indeed, this means a progressive selection of forces and resources before conducting the relational battle, and we can state with a pinch of irony that Emirbayer’s slogan “Entities of the World—Relate!” can be traced back to Parsons’s idea of convergence.

Secondly, what counts are not so much social relations, or, pertaining to the (herd-like) network, the effects of such reshuffling of forces and resources, but rather the authentic return to theorizing about the ontology of the social world. The process of “relationization” leads to the emergence of new theoretical puzzles, essential issues, and non-evident challenges. Is social reality “flat,” in the transactional sense *tout court*, or is it rather multi-dimensional and multileveled? In what circumstances do the relations become/lead to the emergence of structures, and why? What is then the ontic status of networks and social fields, domains, and spheres of action? Is it necessary to reject determinism, or respectively, co-determinism? What are the “degrees of freedom” describing actors’ and agents’ agency? When does emergence cease to be a contingent and therefore imperfect reproduction and become an element of the critical mass whose activation leads to a reformulation of the given definitions of situations? And, even if we postpone the challenge of constructing a general theory *ad calendas graecas*, the concentration of efforts toward a “relationalization” of key sociological categories, such as social capital, public goods, transactions, networks, and social fields, still remains useful.

Thirdly—and this might be the most analytically intriguing feature of modern sociological relationism—it is a conception that is definitely anti-reductionist and anti-conflational, encouraging multidimensional and multilevel analyses of social reality. The omnipresence of relations is not a celebrated issue but rather it provides a heuristic clue for searching for an order in various areas of a social plenum, and for finding and defining the nature of relations between elements from various domains, spheres, levels, or dimensions, where the orientation axis remains the actor or agent, and how a multitude of actors form relations with themselves and the environment. The description of the trajectory of their joint action resembles—to invoke Cooley’s credo—the display of the social presence within and beyond human individuals, as both are mere aspects of their presence in the *Lebenswelt*, amidst other people, in various configurations of closeness and distance, in various institutional codependencies, and cultural conditionings. The question of an actor’s agency needs an answer that does not refer to the scope of individual autonomy versus structural/cultural dependency, but rather points to how such individual autonomy acquires a concrete shape through the presence and participation of actors in various domains of action, as well as through the reproduction and creation of particular relational configurations. Reduction is impossible, or rather inadvisable, as the actors who form a part of relational “composites” are able to set them in motion, sometimes with demiurge-like power, sometimes involuntarily. Every actor who is present in them, at the same time puts them outside of his or her self whenever his or her attention is directed to memories and/or expected states of affairs.

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### /// Abstract

This article is an analysis of three original variants of relational sociology. Jan A. Fuhse's conception, which is part of the tradition of social network research, situates network analyses in the context of connections between culture and symbolic forms and styles. Fuhse's idea involves a communicative base of relations, and he perceives institutions as spheres of communication that reduce uncertainty and activate roles in the process of communication. François Dépelteau's approach, which is inspired

by Dewey's pragmatism, recognizes transaction fields as configurations of relations forming interdependency between people. The practices of actors entering transactions within social fields are important, and this makes it possible for an impression of continuity, order, and complexity to be created. Pierpaolo Donati's relational realism is an attempt to describe the relational dimensions of human actions, while at the same time it is a consistent "relationization" of key social categories, and is also useful in understanding after-modernity.

This article emphasizes the fruitfulness of new attempts to demarcate sociological genealogies and to read the classics of relational sociology. The author discusses the creation of new puzzles for sociological theory, the necessity of analysing the ontologies of social life, the phenomena of emergency and agency, and the use of relational theory in regard to categories of the common good and social capital. He encourages multidimensional and multilevel analyses of social reality.

Keywords:

relationism, relational sociology, social relations, paradigm, social ontology, sociological/social theory, meta-theory, Dépelteau François, Donati Pierpaolo, Fuhse Jan A.

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# TRAPPED BY THE MEDIUM: LANGUAGE AND THE SOCIAL IN RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

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Relational sociology is one of the emergent theoretical trends in contemporary social theorizing. While the most quoted authors on the subject on the internet are Mustafa Emirbayer, the author of a manifesto for relational sociology (1997), and Ann Mische (see Prandini 2015), eminent proponents include Margaret Archer, Pierpaolo Donati, and many others (see, e.g., Dépelteau & Powell 2013; Fuhse & Mützel 2013). The question of whether relational sociology should be deemed “a well-defined sociological paradigm or a challenging ‘relational turn’ in sociology” (Prandini 2015: 1) has not been settled. Nevertheless, it seems beyond doubt that the development of relational theorizing is not the isolated achievement of any single scholar or group of scholars but more a broad tendency to look, once again, at society from a different angle in order better to express our *Zeitgeist*. There are two features which I find salient in all projects and varieties of relational sociology.

The first is dissatisfaction with the toolbox of extant sociological options, an essential motive to do something new. In the case of relational sociology, this dissatisfaction is roused by the inability of virtually all competing sociological paradigms to cover the gaps in their respective accounts of society successfully. Realization of an inability to make the bridge between methodological individualism, which focuses on individual voluntary action and envisages society as a grouping of individuals, and a more collectivist social theorizing, with its tendency toward a structural, system-oriented methodological holism, is certainly not a novelty in sociological theory, and Margaret Archer has been addressing this problem continuously since her *Culture and Agency* was published in 1988. If the gap



between these two general optics is regarded as a result of their respective conceptualizations of the social, then relational sociology would be an attempt to use a different description, one that would magically provide a safe ground for sociology to step onto out of the conceptual chasm.

The second trait of relational sociology is its strong drive to attack the old problem of statics and dynamics again (and to better avail) by translating categories of the social structure into a less ossified conceptual framework without losing the obvious methodological benefit of dissecting the vertebrae of social life. Relational sociology's quest is to save the backbone of the social without fossilizing it: a noble mission, though very likely an impossible one.

As a carrier of our *Zeitgeist*, relational sociology is accompanied by a number of other theories, whose family resemblance to relational sociology sometimes calls for a high level of expertise in the narcissism of small differences. Nevertheless, relational sociology not only perceives itself as a novelty capable of succeeding where others failed, but also as an alternative to the sociological mainstream, which is usually aligned with a few classical approaches (see Donati 2013: 2). My particular focus is the variant of relational theory put forward since 1983 by Pierpaolo Donati, which he advances as a “critical realist relational sociology” (Donati 2015: 86–87). I address the problem of language as a social *materia prima* and, in my view, a missing element in relational social ontology. I make my argument by demonstrating that the communicational aspect of social relations calls for linguistic normativity as the basis of all normativity in a society that Archer and Donati call “morphogenic,” with morphogenesis being defined as a “process of destructuring in which contingency, complexity, uncertainty and risk are captured by the trope of liquidity” (Donati & Archer 2015: 5). I commence by a short outline of the context of relational theorizing (for an overview of theoretical affinities see Prandini 2015).

### **/// Robots in a Maelstrom**

The preliminary questions raised by Donati have considerable bearing for our understanding of the human condition in contemporary societies. This is mostly due to the humane hue of his theorizing, which—though he puts it in rather technical language—probably appeals to every sociologist's heart:

From the applied perspective, which is oriented towards network intervention, it is a question of producing a change that allows the subjects to manage their own significant, actual and potential relations. They do this by bringing their existing human and material resources—both manifest and latent—into play, so they can achieve an adequate level of self-regulation, or at least sufficient to confront their problems, which would otherwise be perceived and classified as problems of individual actors or of abstract collective entities alone (Donati 2017: 16).

Although this passage only discusses the applied side of Donati's ideas, its meaning can hardly be misinterpreted: it stipulates an agenda for making human lives better by making sociology more adequate. In yet another programmatic statement, another relationist, François Dépelteau, wrote: "sociological explanations are something else than simple stories, descriptions, or language games, even if they take the form of stories, if they are based on descriptions, and if they are made and diffused through languages. It is a praxis related to social relations, to the life experiences of people" (Dépelteau 2015: 52). The two authors are clearly in accord on that point.

An ethical agenda like this opens a vast field of family resemblances between relational sociology and its many antecedents. Two in particular leap to the eye upon reading the above quote: Norbert Elias's figurational theory and Charles Wright Mills' critical sociology.

Let me start with this one short phrase: "an adequate level of self-regulation." Elias explained the development of complex social networks and institutional settings of modern nation states and international structures as both a result of, and a stimulus to, an increasingly strict regime in human self-control, which he termed "civilization" (see Elias 2010, 2012). The production and maintenance of a habitus viable in a complex and highly interdependent society consisted essentially in the long-term elimination of the need to kill all strangers on sight and to discipline non-strangers by use of direct force. Increasing self-regulation, which is evident in all life-spheres—as demonstrated by Elias's analyses of European manners and standards of politeness evolving throughout the ages toward greater restriction and complication of behaviour—is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a psychological and political one. A new human type is produced as a result of this evolution: one that will insist on using cutlery and handkerchiefs and, as a default rule, on each adult sleeping in a separate bed. All these and similar socially-induced and highly impracti-

cal needs are supported by feelings of shame, embarrassment, and disgust. It so happens that a human being with such a mental setup usually also makes a reliable taxpayer in the costly structure of a centralized welfare state and a passable voter in a democracy, because shame, embarrassment, and disgust work just as well in politics or the economy as they do in the practices of daily hygiene.

Why is it good for humans to live in a society requiring a high level of self-control and restriction? The analogies between Elias and Thomas Hobbes go deep, for Elias too believed that human life would be utterly miserable without the protection of a complex society and an elaborate normative framework supported by a relatively reliable monopoly of violence (see Wickham & Evers 2012). But if insufficient self-regulation is the original sin of mankind it is committed out of ignorance, according to Elias. This pertains both to the causes or determinants of human actions and to their consequences. Lack of self-restraint results in reconstruction and, eventually, degradation of networks of interdependence; it poses a threat to higher levels of integration and indeed frequently leads to decomposition. The history of mankind is not only about civilization, but also about de-civilization. Ignorance of the social embeddedness of human actions is also the usual cause of acting in a relatively under-civilized manner, which usually also turns out to be counterproductive.

The picture of a fisherman in a maelstrom, which is used by Elias to depict the tragedy of the human condition (Elias 2007), could well be moderated by another image—Mill’s “Cheerful Robot.” It is hardly surprising that while a lonesome German Jew who had lived for almost a century came up with the romantic figure of an individual desperately struggling against the hostile elements, a self-proclaimed American Wobbly who only made it to 46 ventured to express the same idea in a metaphor drawing on modern techniques and evoking the nexus of progress, consumerism, and manipulation. A Cheerful Robot is ignorant of its own program, of the algorithms that make it tick, of its interdependence in relations with other robots. But most of all, it is ignorant that whatever problems it may encounter belong to one of two kinds—personal troubles and social issues:

[C]onsider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the individual, his skills and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million people are unemployed, that is an issue, and we

may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed (Mills 1959: 9).

Both Elias and Mills believed, though with varying degrees of optimism, that a proper social science could help foster self-regulation and fight ignorance back, all in service of human well-being. Donati also maintains that his theorizing may contribute to the ability to “confront problems” (instead of just dully hurting and suffering), and to link the “problems of individual actors” to those of “abstract collective entities alone.” Moreover, he shares Elias’s and Mills’s conviction that the right way to theorize to this end involves a readjustment of the theoretical apparatus in order to grasp what has been left out of sociology’s sight, namely, the connections between humans and the demands they make on human psychology, on the institutional setup of society, and on the structure thereof. We are interconnected creatures who constantly relate to each other, and the path from our problems to our emancipation leads through scientifically informed reflection.

I fully sympathize with Donati’s ethical agenda. Elucidating the relational causes of our suffering and inconvenience is a worthy cause. It seems to be a cause particular to a specific type of society, which Donati calls “relational society” and whose emergence is said to have been primarily due to globalization (Donati 2013: 3). Donati claims that relational society is a product of recent social developments, which are unprecedented in human history. This awakens a strong suspicion that a vicious circle is hidden somewhere in his reasoning. If a society is called relational, it stands to reason that relations are very important in this society, but what makes this society more relational than others? The claim needs to be substantiated that it is these relations and nothing else that are very important in the societies covered by Donati’s theory (contemporary Western societies, to judge by the choice of empirical illustrations—the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere, the de-rationalization of labour, virtual communities, or the expansion of free giving, see Donati 2013: 3ff.). Offering a fully fledged elaboration on that point would naturally, inevitably, transform Donati’s sociology into a comparative historical project—which it is not, contrary to the works of authors following similar paths, such as Norbert Elias or Charles Tilly. However, the step of substantiating the uniqueness of a social form exemplifying the use of relational categories was repeatedly made by some of the first generations of social theorists, to whom we usually

refer as classics and who did not develop fully fledged historical projects, such as Émile Durkheim or Georg Simmel. Proffering such substantiations enabled the classics to become great without being grand.

### **/// History as a Remedy against Grand Theorizing**

Aleksander Manterys (Manterys 2017: 78) expressed the view that Donati's theory could be classified as a "Grand Theory" according to Mills. A grand theory was an attempt to cover everything with one huge umbrella hanging high in the air with no visible means of empirical support and irrespective of the weather. I cannot agree that Donati is indeed grand theorizing. Although he certainly strives for universality and generality, I do not see the fault in this as long as the universality and generality are limited to one line of historical societies, not unlike the one in which we happen to be living.

Donati shares some of the concerns of those thinkers whose goal it was to establish sociology as a specialized social knowledge of some consequence. Two in particular seem highly relevant in this respect: Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, though Donati's affinity to Simmel seems more clearly marked. What they all have in common is a focus on the structural effects of what happens between interacting humans, as well as a deep conviction that the societies which they happened to study were both historically unique and informative of the nature of societies in general. For this reason, I believe Durkheim and Simmel may be looked to in searching for what is missing in Donati's writings: a historical reason for the theoretical priority of relations.

Both Durkheim and Simmel were anti-reductionists. The former safeguarded society's status as a *sui generis* reality and thus foreclosed the field of sociological explanations of social facts. The latter, though prone to psychologism, insisted on the role of social forms as the historically stable objects of research of this truly specialized science of sociology of which, according to himself, he was the only representative. Both social facts and social forms were the fabric of social life as such, present in every conceivable society as its defining characteristics. However, both Durkheim and Simmel, though constructing a universal and general theoretical apparatus, also insisted on the need for an overview of social change. Durkheim referred to simple societies in order to explain the complexity he saw around himself. As part of a thought experiment consisting in imagining science, economics, society, art, religion and so on before the crisis, Simmel de-

plored the crisis of European culture. Durkheim's concept of rampant individualization as a new basis for social integration in modern industrial societies was as much a conclusion drawn from a comparison with an imagined pre-industrial society as Simmel's description of a metropolis was an exercise in participant observation.

This heuristic strategy of sociology was best explained by another author, Max Weber, who took a very different path from both Simmel and Durkheim. In an introductory remark to his study of bureaucracy he wrote: "Es wird hier absichtlich von der spezifisch modernen Form der Verwaltung ausgegangen, um nachher die anderen mit ihr kontrastieren zu können" (Weber 1980: 125). What he meant was this: we have to start with a *datum* in order to compare and to generalize. We do know our own society and can apply ideal types based on this knowledge as heuristic instruments to be used in other contexts. Even though this operation is a trick, we should never give it up. Otherwise, the causal links and relations of meaning observed in our empirical material may turn out to be nothing but artifacts of our method: we see what we know, but we fail to know what it is that we see.

Weber, being concerned with the objectivity of the social sciences, suggested a methodological self-alienation: a procedure which I find is admirably—though inadvertently—applied by Durkheim and Simmel, but is absent in Donati's work. Thus Donati certainly manages to avoid being grand in the pejorative sense, but he also unnecessarily narrows the scope of application of his own theory. It would seem that the desire to eliminate certain threats, in particular that of reductionism, makes Donati imperceptive of other issues, and this hampers the universality of his theory by making it more embedded in the *hic et nunc* than most classical theories ever were, and less sensitive to the generalities behind it. Therefore, even though Donati is vocal about the emancipatory potential of his theorizing, its actual critical edge seems less well vetted than it deserves to be.

### /// The Signs of the Unspoken

I will offer but a few examples of those limitations to Donati's theorizing which I find particularly thought-provoking in regard to its scope of application, and with which I am concerned precisely because I share Donati's ethical agenda. They all fall into the class of what I would call "the signs of the social." Donati insists that the reality made **by** interacting humans (not **of** them) is "invisible, unspoken, and often uncertain" (Donati

2017: 18). This “unspoken” is, however, not unspeakable, provided we have a key to decipher its meaning. Much as the god of old in Delphi, it speaks to us through ambivalent signs to which the art of sociological divination must be applied. The social has to be divined out of our social life, where there are signs to be read using the relational methodology.

The first and the most important sign of the social is language. In many instances, Donati uses our manner of speaking about the world as an argument to support his theses. This could be disregarded as an illustration of minor bearing if it was not so ubiquitous in his writing.

Thus when he notices that “we see individuals but we speak on the suppositions of relations” (Donati 2017: 27), he presupposes two things: first, that we indeed do see the individuals, and second, that while relating these perceptions, we suppose the relations between the individuals. Neither of these two presuppositions is unproblematic. On the one hand, it may be argued that the relations are part of our perception—not because they are observable but because our cognitive routine builds them into our perception so as to make them an inextricable part of what we speak. This may well result from our linguistic habits, but there is no reason to assume that these habits tell us anything about the way the world is—without a strong set of additional preconditions being fulfilled, including a correspondence between human mentality and the organization of the world. There are theories which cover these preconditions and account for the correspondence between the world, language, and the human mind; some of them, to mention just John Searle’s, have been subject to Donati’s scrutiny (see Donati & Archer 2015: 43ff). Instead, Donati here quotes the second philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, an important philosopher for relationist theorizing (see Crossley 2015). This reference suggests no correspondence at all between the world and the language, though; it only suggests that language games may exist in which an assumption of such correspondence is part of the rules, just as the assumption of the house not imminently falling on our heads is part of our form of life as house-dwellers.

An equally problematic remark concerns the use of personal pronouns. Donati argues that “every mode of being a self (as I, Me, We, You) is a dialogue (an internal conversation) with the subject’s ‘I’. The battlefields are everywhere.” (Donati 2017: 54). Personal pronouns are of great sociological import, as they are indeed ways of expressing relations to other people that are not concretized, as use of proper names would be, but generalized and indicative of the ways in which these relations are conceived of as modalities of social relations and not as their exemplifications. Similar analy-

ses of the modalities of language have been conducted using a relational paradigm (see Fontdevila & White 2013). If Donati's point were limited to this observation, I would, of course, concur. To name just one classic example: Elias discussed personal pronouns in *What is Sociology?* and insisted that it was their generality and relationality which made them such useful tools for referring to other individuals within the figuration (Elias 2012b: 117ff.). Elias also used the example of the pronouns "I," "you," "he," "she," "we" and "they," correctly insisting that they can be used to represent the individuals' respective positions and articulate their interconnectedness, because each of them (as is the nature of all pronouns) can only be used meaningfully in the context of other positions.

As occasional expressions, the personal pronouns change their referents, which points to their affinity with the dynamic and changeable nature of the figurations. However, if occupying a certain social position were treated as a mode of the "self," and such self were construed dialogically, according to the personalist approach which seems to underpin Donati's argument, then these modes of the self need not necessarily be expressed linguistically as personal pronouns (or, indeed, expressed at all). Furthermore, some modes of the self could be expressed in a different manner altogether. "Is the Relational Subject singular, plural or both?" Donati and Archer once asked (2015: 80), but there are so many other possibilities... For example, to use diverse proper names describing the same individual depending on the typified context is also an option, and a far less confusing if more memory-straining one. Finally, it may be argued that personal pronouns, though undoubtedly facilitating dialogue, at the same time deprive it of the personal element, for they reduce the person to an aspect bearing on the pragmatic context of the pronoun use. Archer and Donati have noted this aspect of personal pronouns in the past: "in ordinary life, we, qua individuals, often speak in the plural referring to a 'We.' (...) Referent remains unspecified and serves only to indicate who was involved in an event: what constitutes a we" (Donati & Archer 2015: 33). But none of us is a "we," even though at times we all happen to be referred to as a "we," or "you," or "her": it is hard to draw a valid argument about interactional reality from the fact that certain occasional expressions in a certain language tend to come in only so many distinct variants in two grammatical numbers.

The strength of Donati's argument depends—contrarily to the arguments of philosophers such as Martin Buber (see Donati & Archer 2015: 69), who also used the terminology of personal pronouns—on the lin-



guistic reality and not on philosophical statements about human nature. To conduct an internal dialogue from which a mode of myself as a “you” emerges, I need to operate the concept of a “you,” which translates into my use of a personal pronoun and is evidenced empirically by the same. If there is no empirical, linguistic “you,” the internal dialogue cannot constitute it, either. To imagine a language without personal pronouns means, according to Wittgenstein’s famous dictum, imagining a form of life (Wittgenstein 1986: par. 241). But it is difficult to state with certainty in what way such other form of life would differ from ours. Even the universality of the “I” and the “me,” as basic self-reference structures for the self and a basic tool to be used in dealing with the world and relating to others, may be challenged for societies marked by a very low level of individuation or individualization. Of course, Donati’s theory pertains, in its core, to societies in which Indo-European languages are predominantly spoken, which makes it difficult to ascertain the level of generality of his statement about the modes of the self and their link to personal pronouns in the ordinary language.

Another of Donati’s arguments concerns the way we use the word “love.” In a passage concerning AGIL, Donati argues by way of supplementary explanation that when formulating statements regarding very different things (such as loving a dog and loving a man) we grasp relational analogies between the apparently diverse situations using similar words (Donati 2017: 45). It is a Simmelian argument, because it essentially consists in extracting the “relational” moment out of our everyday speech, just as Simmel would suggest extracting the religious moment or the secrecy moment out of our daily behaviour. However, while the religious moment was an intrinsic aspect of the situation perceivable to a social thinker who had a preconceived idea of religiosity—a component and not a sign of any substantive religion behind it—Donati seems to suggest that our manner of speaking is indicative of the existence of relations: they must be there, for why else would we mention them? Such reasoning, though forensically persuasive, is not convincing.

A famous quote from Wittgenstein seems fitting here:

One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not? A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?—And what can he not do here?—How do I do it?—How am I supposed to answer this? Can only those hope who can

talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life. (If a concept refers to a character of human handwriting, it has no application to beings that do not write.) (Wittgenstein 1986: 174).

This passage, which is usually called upon by those interested in Wittgenstein's view of the animal mind, also speaks of the limitations of human language. Donati is making a general claim that the way people declare relations to exist by naming them in their speech is a sign of the things relating. But in some languages (or in some imaginable languages) it may not be possible to say that one loves a dog, or indeed, a man. In some languages these relations may be covered by different concepts, designated by different expressions and bearing no resemblance at all. Even though it would be very hard to imagine a language in which some words would not be used as functions (such as "to love") whose arguments are taken from a pool of words designating objects in the real world (such as "a dog" or "a man"), it is not impossible. Moreover, if we compare distinct ethnic languages, the layout of the relations designated by such sentence functions may be surprisingly different. To give but one example: in English one can "destroy" a dog, whereas the latter action in Polish is referred to, literally, as "putting the dog to sleep"—the same expression one would use in a sentence involving a baby. It is risky to read words as signs of relations if we do not wish to narrow our field to a single ethnic language—which is often the case with (predominantly) English-speaking analytical philosophy but which should not be the fate of sociology.

It is not my goal here to offer a simplistic rendition of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. I merely intend to demonstrate that an argument drawing on the way in which we speak, unless treated very lightly, is only limited to those of us who do indeed speak in a certain manner or, in Wittgenstein's parlance, share a "form of life." A good point is made by Thomas Luckmann (1970), among others, that humans can meaningfully relate to things which are not only non-human but also inanimate from the viewpoint of certain other humans, and can represent these relations in their respective languages. We do, indeed, live in many different worlds, despite the fact that, according to John Searle, we all live in one (2010).

I do not mean to say that using an illustration from an ethnic language should be banned from sociology. But it would be more useful, in my opinion, to steer toward those theories of the social that address the problem of

the ontological involvement of language or, better still, the linguistic nature of social reality. I find this approach fruitful as far as it combines three things which Donati fails to interconnect in his rich theoretical imaginary: language, social relations, and normativity.

### **/// The Relational Creation of Normativity**

The problem of normativity, or—more precisely—of norm/rule-making and norm/rule-following in society plays an important role in Donati’s description of relational society. When characterizing the “fourth paradigm” of sociology, which he advocates, Donati writes:

Such a paradigm:

a) recognizes that the ‘systemic-normative coherence’ of the first two systems paradigms (Durkheim’s structure of the whole and the part, and Parsons’s system/environment) cannot explain the advent of a morphogenic society; contemporary society is intrinsically characterized by the loosening and fragmentation of social relations, with the ending of socialization through internalization of norms; (...)

d) interprets the new normative order of the morphogenic society as the coming up of social networks run by a situational logic of opportunities (‘a relational logic of networks’) which is, at one and the same time, strategic (cognitive and instrumentally-driven), communicative (expressive and dialogical), and normative (based on generalized values) (Donati 2017: 36).<sup>1</sup>

A morphogenic society is one in which the societal formation is open-ended due to a “situational logic of opportunities.” This concept of Archer’s refers to the same kind of societies which Donati christened “relational,” therefore it would not be unfair to read the above remarks regarding normativity in a morphogenic society as referring to a relational society. The initial point about the end of socialization through the internalization of norms raises the question of alternative modes of socialization.

First of all, though it does not seem that the old modes of socialization are completely absent from a morphogenic society—at least inso-

<sup>1</sup> References in the original have been omitted.

far as certain old-time institutions such as nunneries, schools, and mafias persist within its framework—the point Archer is making seems accurate inasmuch as it addresses the question of permanent belonging. Archer once wrote that “socialization can no longer be credibly conceptualized as a largely passive process of ‘internalization’ because there is less and less to normalize—that is, to present as being normal and normatively binding” (Donati & Archer 2015: 127). Normality happens less often in a morphogenic society, as a result of the “loosening and fragmentation of social relations.” It could be argued that an individual exposed to the temporary influence of a socialization milieu that is limited upfront and is not exercised throughout all spheres of life is not socialized in the same manner as a person subjected to consistent and continuous socialization pressure in all spheres of life. Surely both modes of socialization are but ideal types and the question is which of them prevails in concrete socialization processes in a particular society. The remark on the normative aspect of the situational logic of opportunities is enlightening in this respect: it rests on “generalized values,” which seem to refer to a form of axiological consensus on the social scale, and, by consequence, on the equation of normality and normativity.

It follows that the less axiological consensus can be found in a society, the weaker will be the normative dimension of the situational logic on which the normative order of the morphogenic society is founded. However, if I read the above-cited passage correctly, it does not necessarily mean that the normative order must be weakened too: the meager normative consensus may be compensated for by its “strategic (cognitive and instrumentally-driven)” and “communicative (expressive and dialogical)” aspects. The three are interrelated, but they need not be equally well developed in any empirical normative order. This brings us to the problem of language in the process of normativity production. The loosening and fragmenting of social relations does not mean that they are less expressive and dialogical—quite the contrary. A morphogenic society is described as displaying greater emancipation potential than its predecessors, which is also evidenced by the fact that individuals are subjected to less socialization pressure and internalize less. That, however, does not explain the conditions for the possibility of communication in such a society. Even though the institutionalized normative orders may not be internalized in a manner typical of previous social forms, the language of communication is still a forced communication medium. Moreover, insofar as communication must make up for the weaknesses of normative consensus, it can be

assumed that more communicational competence on the part of individuals is needed in order to maintain the normative order of a morphogenic society. People in networks need to communicate more in order to relate to one another effectively in the absence of other linkages, including various forms of permanent common belonging which could provide a common base for a normative consensus.

Donati emphasizes networking processes as a self-standing source of socialization and defends sociology against reductionism. However, I believe that a risk of linguistic reductionism is produced as a result of this defense. What is the substance, the *materia prima*, of social relations? If the rules are made situationally and opportunistically, why are they followed? One could use Searle's expression to say that somebody just "gets away with it" and manages to establish the rule because it is followed, and the rule only exists inasmuch as it is actually followed. Rule-following is a fact, which can be detected by observation, but the making of this fact is essentially linguistic. How and why do individuals follow rules which are made as we go along, as Wittgenstein said? Is the opportunistic situational rule-making enough to open the black box of the normative, described by Stephen Turner (2010)? I am not convinced that is the case, but even more do I doubt that normativity can be explained if due attention is not given to linguistic socialization in a morphogenic society.

I would argue that in the networks of a morphogenic society linguistic socialization takes the place of other forms of socialization as a basis for relating to others, and that socialization provides individuals with the basic rule making-competence from which the fact-making capacity of creating the social world by word is derived. The social world resists attempts to change it because of the resistance of the linguistic fabric from which it is made. Such an approach corresponds well with Donati's view on creativity in a relational society, which is connected to the issue of contingency and freedom: "Society (which is relationality) is surely a contingent reality, but contingency does not mean pure accident. It is in fact the notion of contingency which is in need of new semantics" (2017: 55).

The concept of the situational logic of relations allows for free human creativity, which makes the world as it is. The world could be different but is not—somebody got away with it, endowing the actualized world with accidentals which do not belong to its nature but, in the order of our cognition, make it what it is for us. To come back to the scholastic and Aristotelian roots of the notion of contingency: the shape of the world is accidental, and not transcendental and universal, but the notion of accident

(making for a contingent entity) only makes sense if there is also something non-accidental, a foundation on which the accidents can differentiate beings. Unless we can demonstrate or assume that there is something like that somewhere there, we are only contending that everything could be different but is not—which makes the whole social network an accident (or, indeed, a coincidence), on a huge scale, but contingent on nothing. If we wish to avoid some very obscure metaphysics, we had better opt for a very simple candidate for the social *materia prima*. I would argue that the social world as envisaged by relational sociology is contingent on the process of linguistic rule-making: not on any particular rule which may be internalized in any particular manner, but on the making, as a process which Donati describes by referring to the game metaphor.

### **/// Conclusion: Playful Relations**

Donati insists that a social relation is not a pure game:

One **cannot** say of it what Wittgenstein (1979) said of the linguistic game in his essay *On Certainty*: ‘Something unforeseeable... I mean it is not founded, it is not rational, or irrational. It is just there like our life...’ That social relations follow vague, fuzzy, or ambiguous rules, forms part of our common everyday experience, as does our tendency to polarize—to think in binary codes: inside–outside, symmetric–asymmetric, which is the easiest way of simplifying reality. But social relations cannot be structurally uncertain, ambiguous, or dichotomous in the long run (Donati 2017: 61).

Relations are not unforeseeable, because they have structures. Even though they are contingent, they are not arbitrary und volatile, because their structures are rooted in the normativity of language games. It is a particular normativity, for it is at the same time imperative and uncodifiable. It is not solely the way we experience the world that makes it so fuzzy: relations can not be otherwise, because for every rule that has successfully been made, realized, and actualized according to Searle’s prescription of “getting away with it,” there is a vast (indeed infinite) logical continuum of possible yet unrealized alternative rules. Therefore, unless we want to confront the Charybdis of reductionism while avoiding the Scylla of systemic normative coherence, it can safely be said that the structures of social relations are normatively prescribed (even by the opportunistic, situ-

ational logic of rule-making), and maintained linguistically by force of the elementary normativity which underpins the rule-governedness of human language.

I would oppose the contention that “norms and rules are a necessary and inevitable way of regulating, under normal conditions, the contingency of situations that are not socially predetermined” (Donati 2017: 61). Apart from the reservation regarding normal conditions, which may refer to the mental health of the social actors as well as to the pace of social change—to raise just these two possibilities—this latter sentence is in fact a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* explanation. It is inferred here from the existence of the rules that there are contingent situations which are not socially predetermined and need to be regulated, because we see that they display regularities, while it remains our theoretical assumption that they need not do so. And it is a fact that they need not display any particular complex of regularities, but they have to remain rule-governed to the degree necessary to maintain the linguistic fabric of relations. Wittgenstein also said that there are many games, and some of them are more orderly than others, but he never claimed that all human behaviour is rule-governed. Not all regularity and, by consequence, not all normality is normative, however weak a meaning we might wish to assign to the notion of normativity. But without any form of internalized normativity no structure can be maintained.

The communicational competences of individuals, which do not feature much in relational sociology accounts, seem to operate as a toolbox enabling individuals to relate to one another, to be creative, to actualize various potentialities of the social, and to play games, which all rely on the basic skill I once christened the “player’s attitude” (Bucholc 2015). To claim that language is an important determinant of social relations and, by extension, social reality, including relational theorizing, may be yet another instance of what François Dépelteau christened “theoretical co-determinism” (2008). Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to bear in mind that relational subjects are players, and their playfulness stems from the language they are using to maintain the existence of their playground.

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### /// Abstract

This paper discusses the philosophical background and socio-theoretical affinities of Pierpaolo Donati's relational sociology, focusing particularly on language as a missing element in relational social ontology. Following a discussion of Norbert Elias's and Charles Wright Mills's ideas of modernity as a counterpart to Donati's theorizing, the paper criticizes the concept of relational society and the limitations to its applicability. The author argues that the communicational aspect of social relations calls for linguistic normativity as the basis of all normativity in a society that Margaret Archer and Donati call "morphogenic."

#### Keywords:

relational sociology, sociological theory, language, Donati Pierpaolo, Wittgenstein Ludwig

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# THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

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The roots of sociology are relational (Donati 2011: 3), but the modern current of relational sociology either radically transforms classic theories or proposes a new language of social theory in order to tackle the complexity of processes taking place in the domains of culture and society. Distinctions and divisions both among and within American and European variants of relational sociology become apparent. The American orientation has become particularly visible after Mustafa Emirbayer published his *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* (Emirbayer 1997), which publicized certain issues from the agenda of many scholars representing the group known today as the New York School of Relational Sociology (Mische 2011: 81). The place of culture in this current of relational sociology is still debated. The central significance of this issue<sup>1</sup> naturally stems from the radical transformation of social network theory by Harrison C. White, who used it as a framework for his concepts regarding processes of communication, interpretation, and constructing meaning (Halas 2011; White 1992, 2008). The conversion of network theory into relational theory may be justified and desirable, but genuine relational theories of society that originated in Europe deserve particular attention, especially the robust theories of Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati, which have for some time been merging to a degree. Their cultural aspect will be the focus of this article.

The theme introduced here—the place of culture in relational sociology—alludes to the subtitle of Margaret S. Archer's important work *Culture*

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Mische has distinguished four approaches: networks as conduits for culture; networks as shaping culture or vice versa; networks of culture forms (concepts, categories, practices, narratives); networks as culture via interaction (networks as cultural processes of communicative interaction) (Mische 2011).

*and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Archer 1996 [1988]). This book exposed theoretical shortcomings in cultural thought<sup>2</sup> and supplied new tools that helped improve this imperfect state of affairs. It was, in a sense, a visionary step to focus on the theory of immanent cultural change, and thus on transformation; such an approach enables us to address the effect of the postmodern turn that concentrates on cultural praxis (Bauman 1999), where the resignification and deconstruction of the orders of cultural meanings is at stake.

The question “Where is culture?” pertains here to culture’s place in the particular variant of social theory known as relational sociology. The adjective “relational” refers both to the subject of sociological studies and to the epistemological perspective. The first question is followed by another, which can be formulated in Alfred Kroeber’s words: “What is the nature of culture?” (Kroeber 1952). This issue has been studied from many angles by countless thinkers and scholars, from Marcus Tullius Cicero to Thomas S. Eliot and from Matthew Arnold to Margaret S. Archer.

In my attempt to answer both questions posed above, I will initially follow Margaret S. Archer’s line of argumentation. This scholar upholds and extends her model of relational analysis, which she created on the grounds of the ontology and epistemology of critical realism. Thus, culture is treated as a domain or sphere of reality *sui generis*: an emergent entity that possesses specific properties and causal powers. Archer polemicizes with the contemporary standpoints that are defined as “relationist” and are opposed to the critical realist relational approach. Such a dispute is a sign of vigorous intellectual ferment and indicates that relational sociology is a robust scientific movement. Science studies relations rather than substances, as Ernst Cassirer and others have reminded us. Relationality is present in sociological theory in various forms,<sup>3</sup> but contemporary relational sociology configures sociological theory in a new way.

Rather than explain at length the relational theory of society, let us state what this theory is not. It opposes relationism in its many manifestations, i.e., “(...) reduction of the relation to mere lived experience or to process” (Donati 2011: 71). In other words, social reality cannot be reduced to processes without distinguishing between the components of social reality

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret S. Archer still believes (Archer 2015: 157) that the conceptualization of culture is lagging behind the fairly sophisticated conceptual framework relating to social structure. Thus, her critical appraisal indirectly pertains to newer attempts at creating culturally oriented sociological theories. Such attempts have been made by, e.g., Pierre Bourdieu, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Harrison C. White.

<sup>3</sup> Pierpaolo Donati has discussed this topic in detail (Donati 2011: 70–86).

and their relations as emergent phenomena. Relationists do not undertake analysis that comes “(..) from within social relations, their own internal constitution, and ultimately does not deal properly with the ‘nature’ of social relations” (Donati & Archer 2015b: 20).

Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati have developed their anti-relationist relational approaches<sup>4</sup> in sociology independently of each other over the course of four decades. The current merging of these approaches seems to open up new possibilities for the further development of theories and research programmes.<sup>5</sup> It is not my intent here to carry out a detailed exegesis or critique either of Margaret S. Archer’s theory or of Pierpaolo Donati’s. I will merely attempt to identify the most important problems associated with their relational conceptions of culture. I will first examine the concepts of the author of *Culture and Agency*, and then I will search for answers to the same two questions about the place and nature of culture in the theses of the proper creator of relational sociology—Pierpaolo Donati. Assuming, in accordance with these scholars’ declarations, that their approaches are mutually complementary (Donati & Archer 2015b: 16–17), I do not discount the possibility that their conceptions contain inconsistencies or even contradict each other in places. It must be emphasised that questions about the place and nature of culture posed in regard to this branch of realist relational sociology do not pertain to some random modern theory among a multitude of different theories. Rather, they refer to outstanding theoretical achievements that deserve particular attention because of at least four characteristics they exhibit: reconstructive and synthetic social theory, as well as humanistic axiology and transformational application. This theory is not a minimalist one, pursued within its own narrow niche. In the course of my analysis, I will draw attention to issues of symbolisation in the discussion of cultural and social relationality, and thus also to the question of whether analysing the processes of semiosis (Halas 2002) can be included within relational sociology.

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<sup>4</sup> A list of the basic assumptions that distinguish their approach from other versions of relational sociology can be found in Donati and Archer’s work (2015: 13).

<sup>5</sup> The publication, which contains selected papers by Margaret S. Archer, creator of the morphogenetic approach, makes it possible to gain an overview of this British scholar’s extremely prolific output. It also contains the scholar’s autocommentary (Brock et al. 2017). Pierpaolo Donati’s relational theory of society, which emerges from this researcher’s numerous works, has been presented in an unconventional way in a lexicon of relational sociology. This lexicon is a kind of guide, presenting an exposition of relational concepts, their place in Donati’s works, as well as their use and development by other scholars (Terenzi et al. 2016).

### **/// Analytical Dualism and the Relational Model of Culture**

The analytical model of social and cultural morphogenesis as a pivotal process of change activated by human agents is based on the assumption that reality in general is not homogeneous, and thus neither are the social and cultural domains: rather, they consist of layers or strata characterized by specific properties and powers of reciprocal influence that can be conceived as non-determinist causal factors. This model offers an explicit answer to the question “Where is culture?,” but the reply is much less simple than it seems at first glance. Culture is a part of SAC (SAC is an acronym that stands for “Structure,” “Agency,” and “Culture”); thus it is one of the constitutional layers of the social order, next to structure and agency (Archer 2015: 155).

Margaret S. Archer emphasizes that the order of these layers in the SAC acronym says nothing about their primary, secondary, or tertiary character (Archer 2015: 155). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that their order in the acronym is suggestive and that culture comes last of the three. We may also infer that structure, agency, and culture, as the building blocks of social order, are constitutive of phenomena belonging equally to the micro, meso, and macro levels of social reality where networks of social relations are born. Structure, agency, and culture, as units of the social order which are continually being remade through morphogenic cycles in time, are not actually distinct, as Douglas V. Porpora inaccurately states when discussing their ontological status (Porpora 2015: 159), but rather only relatively autonomous, since they are treated as separate only for the epistemological and methodological purposes of analysis.

Several questions come to mind regarding the possible relations between the three elements. First, it might be asked if these relations could be asymmetrical, i.e., if one of the layers could be, illustratively speaking, larger than the other two: when structure constrains and limits the operation of agency and the development of culture, or when agency is excessively exercised and subversive in regard to culture and structure, or when culture limits the properties of agency and determines structure. These rather speculative and yet not very complicated questions arise in regard to the conceptual model of SAC.

This analytical model is not intended to introduce hypostases. Margaret S. Archer rejects such accusations, denying that it reifies structure, agency, and culture, which together constitute an analytical toolkit to be used in research and in building a proper theory of morphogenetic changes

in a historical context. The reality to which the model refers is a reality of persistence or change, of reproduction or transformation, dependent on the forces of agency that act on structure and culture, and not without consequences for the agency itself, since it, too, undergoes changes during those processes.

It is no novelty today to find out that culture constitutes a part of all units of the social order, regardless of their scale: from interpersonal relations through social movements to organizations, states, or global corporations. However, while the presence of culture in all manifestations of social life may seem obvious and commonplace, one should not forget how surprising it once was to discover the existence of culture, to invent its notion, and to apply it to fields such as economics or politics, where no one expected to encounter its significant presence (Hall & Neitz 1993).

Margaret S. Archer's relational approach to structure, agency, and culture, which makes it possible to study their causal interplay, has proved exceptionally inspiring for the modern sociology of culture (Jacobs & Hanrahan 2005: 2) or, more broadly, for cultural sociology. However, the spectrum of this scholar's works that are perceived as most important (Brock et al. 2017) confirms that Archer's conceptualization of culture used to be oriented primarily toward the social theory that had been constructed over the past several decades, with a morphogenic society emerging on the horizon of late modernity (Archer 2013).

Although culture in Margaret S. Archer's theoretical landscape is emancipated and autonomous, not subservient to social structure, the primary aim of this concept is to uncover the mechanisms of social change. Culture does not act alone, automatically, but through the reflexive agency of actors who can articulate the principles of this morphogenic change, because they are conscious of its ideational orientation. The elaboration of the cultural conspectus of ideas is the other face of this process, although cultural morphogenesis and social morphogenesis need not be harmonized or coordinated (Archer 2012: 33).

Having realized that culture accompanies structure and agency in SAC, the question arises of whether it must inevitably always stay within SAC. If so, we would be dealing with a subtle, hidden form of sociology, which has been difficult to eradicate since it appeared so prominently in Émile Durkheim's concept of the social fact that engulfs all cultural phenomena. In other words, it is not without significance whether, like Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism, we define all cultural objects as in essence social



forms,<sup>6</sup> or rather give precedence to cultural reality over the social order, which embeds itself in that reality. Florian Znaniecki, whose viewpoint regarding culture and relationality should be revisited by contemporary sociologists, favoured the latter view in his humanistic sociology<sup>7</sup> (1919, second edition: 1983, 1934, 1952).

Having stated that all the elements of SAC coexist and remain in mutual interplay, resulting in reproduction (morphostasis) or change (morphogenesis) of the social order, one faces the problem of the power of agency with regard to structure, both social and cultural. Margaret S. Archer considers morphogenesis separately on two planes of relations: between social structure and agency and between cultural structure and agency. This is concisely presented as the interplay of structure and agency and that of culture and agency in time sequences. Douglas V. Porpora calls this a parallel analysis (Porpora 2015: 159, 172). Such parallelism in the model is intriguing in that it raises the question of whether social morphogenesis might have a cultural dimension as well, given the meaningful and symbolic constitution of social formations—social identities and boundaries notwithstanding; or whether it can be viewed as a secondary morphogenesis in regard to primary cultural morphogenesis and vice versa. This is an urgent question and the author of the theory has not omitted it. The problem of how to unify the theoretical analysis of structural morphogenesis and analysis of cultural morphogenesis has been a challenge and a goal from the very beginning. “[I]f structure and culture do have relative autonomy from one another, then there is interplay between them which it is necessary to explore theoretically” (Archer 1996: xxvii).

In parallel models of social morphogenesis and cultural morphogenesis, the mediation of these processes by agency certainly constitutes a common link or bridge. As Margaret S. Archer puts it, this should enable us to understand the intricacies of inter-penetration between structure and culture. In the model of the morphogenetic cycle, agency is articulated as socio-cultural interaction in the cultural domain and as social interaction in the social domain (Archer 2013: 7). Such a double conceptualization of agency—whether socio-cultural or just social—in parallel domains may be

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<sup>6</sup> As Margaret S. Archer comments, according to Bhaskar, e.g., books are social forms “and thus have the same ontological status as ‘structures,’ ‘organisations,’ ‘roles’ and so forth” (Archer 2015: 170).

<sup>7</sup> In a discussion regarding the place of culture in relational sociology it may be useful to recall the debate between Florian Znaniecki and Pitirim A. Sorokin regarding the relations between the cultural system and the social system, as well as agency (Znaniecki 1952). This debate serves as a reminder that modern disputes about the place of culture in social theory have their own history.

puzzling, since the interactions appear somehow different here, as the very terminology indicates. This theoretical puzzle could probably be solved if the broader (Weberian) and narrower (Simmelian) concept of social action, and thus also the broader and narrower concept of social interaction, were taken into account, as shown by the example of the cooperation of musicians as members of an orchestra performing a piece of music (socio-cultural interaction), or the cooperation of musicians as members of an orchestra when they organize a charity concert (social interaction) that is oriented to other social subjects.

Despite many advantages of this analytical dualism, which involves studying social morphogenesis and cultural morphogenesis respectively as parallel processes, there remains a problem with the ontology of human reality; in other words, with the essential issue of the relationship between social reality and cultural reality in the human world. We need to ponder whether culture always needs some social form or social organization and whether meanings within the stock of knowledge that constitute and maintain social order are not reason enough to consider social structures a subclass of cultural forms.

We will return to this issue while analysing consecutively some aspects of Pierpaolo Donati's relational theory of society with the fresh concept of meaningful social relations. Now, however, we will attempt to answer the urgent question about the nature of culture, as formulated in Margaret S. Archer's works. For the limited scope of this endeavour, only a general outline of the issue will be presented by reconstructing principal concepts, and pointing out some other puzzles to be tackled.

First of all, let us state what culture is not, as eloquently argued by Margaret S. Archer. This can be extracted quite clearly from the astute polemics she directed years ago at upholders of "the myth of cultural integration" and currently at "relationists" such as Mustafa Emirbayer or Dave Elder-Vass. This is a criticism of various versions of what has aptly been denounced as a variant of the fallacy of conflation. Paradoxically, as Margaret S. Archer has shown, the myth of cultural integration has promoted both downward conflation in functionalist and other theories, and the upward conflation visible in materialist Marxist approaches (cultural or social determination respectively), which turn all that is determined into an epiphenomenon. Generally speaking, the modern social sciences often treat culture as an epiphenomenon; thus, it occupies a much weaker position than social structure in theoretical reflections. The cultural turn and post-modern social theory have changed this optic, bringing culture to the fore

again, but in the mode of social constructionism, which promotes a central conflation. In the light of criticism directed at various modes of conflation, a number of concepts turned out to be flawed: the concept of a regulative culture code, of culture as a central value system, or on the other hand, of culture as an ideological conspectus of the dominant group—in other words, the concept of cultural hegemony, which is essential on an ideological battleground. Thus, despite a long-standing assumption commonly made by social scientists, culture is not a community of shared meanings, beliefs, and practices; it is neither homogeneous nor “consistent” in the ideational layer, nor shared on a consensual basis in the behavioural sphere.<sup>8</sup> More precisely, these are not defining features of culture, but rather, as Margaret S. Archer points out, only a possible, empirically changeable state of affairs. It must be noted here that various social subjects still cultivate ideological beliefs about the inestimable value of a community of shared meanings and practices. Myth and ritual, which forge social bonds, have not yet completely lost their solid status and melted in the postmodern atmosphere.

The integrative concept of culture, or rather of “cultures” (always plural), the symbolic borders of which are determined by common beliefs and practices, was typical for anthropology and has been in use at least since Johann Gottfried Herder, who criticized a universal concept of culture treated as a synonym of European culture (civilization), and who advocated the idea of cultural multiplicity. The myth of cultural integration does not permit adequate study of the dynamics of socio-cultural changes. One might add that it also laid foundations for the problematic politics of multiculturalism as a politics of differences and collective identities, addressed at groups that strive to maintain their cultural core or cultural canon. Up until now, this politics has had ambiguous results in terms of social integration.

Today, the struggle against all faults and limitations of the integrative concept of culture appears to have been already won on the theoretical plane where cultural fragmentation and cultural conflicts predominate, though the idea is not necessarily gone from common consciousness and in the field of politics oriented at cultural communities. This theoretical victory came at a high cost in the form of denying the autonomy of culture and structure by one-sidedly emphasizing agency: actions, practices, interactions, transactions, or performances playing with cultural meanings.

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<sup>8</sup> The integrative concept of culture returns in newer conceptions as well. Elder-Vass defines culture as “a shared set of practices and understandings” (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 108).

This is typical for various forms of radical interpretativism and situationism that appeared after the fall of functionalist Grand Theory, and later on were taken over by postmodern cultural praxis theory.

An attempt to polemicize from the standpoint of critical realism with theories that lead to a “central conflation,” where culture and agency are mutually constitutive, is simultaneously an attempt to polemicize with new forms of nominalism in social ontology. In regard to culture, this is critical cultural realism (culture as reality *sui generis*).<sup>9</sup> Thus, culture is not merely praxis, “culture in action” (or in interaction) situated in a short temporal perspective that is limited to the present.

Having established more or less clearly what culture is not, let us try to answer the question about the nature of culture in Margaret S. Archer’s morphogenetic theory in positive terms. This theory proposes to view culture as a realm of properties and powers that remain in constant interplay; in other words, a realm of cultural dynamics (Archer 1996: 101ff). Thus, the theory of cultural morphogenesis evokes an echo of the monumental orchestration of culture, society, and person by Pitirim A. Sorokin (Sorokin 1937–1941). It is important to emphasize first of all that the problem of cultural dynamics is a central one in the morphogenetic theory, since the nominal forms used in language to categorize reality appear to substantiate or even reify it (Elias 1978: 112). This affects the SAC model too, despite the author’s clarification, and it is necessary to keep in mind that the SAC model is only a toolkit to assist in the study of social and cultural dynamics.

Margaret S. Archer pronounced the relative autonomy of culture in the 1980s, advocating its emancipation from the subordination to social structure analysis. As important as this claim was, one must remember that for this sociologist, the social relevance of culture was of primary interest (Archer 1990), rather than cultural formation as such. In other words, the proposed conceptualization of the cultural domain was supposed to correct mistakes that stemmed from the inadequate treatment of culture in theories about the modern, post-industrial information society (Archer 1990). This conceptualization is supported by the broad implications of assuming the autonomy of agency and structure, both social and cultural. This has been discussed many times as a victory over the fallacies of con-

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret S. Archer has noted that when she first began to construct her theory of culture in 1985, no existing approach could be called “cultural realism” (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 95). It is worth recalling that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Florian Znaniecki discussed cultural reality *sui generis* on the theoretical level (Znaniecki 1919).

flation. In the case of the cultural domain, the proposed model of analysis excluded the downward conflation, upward conflation, and central conflation mentioned above; in other words, it excluded the possibility of a one-sided determinatory power operating either from the level of the ideational system or from the level of socio-cultural interactions, or even the possibility that both levels are co-constitutive (Archer 2015: 161–162).

The categories introduced by Margaret S. Archer to investigate the cultural realm encompass two levels, two types of components, and two kinds of relations on each level, as well as various possible relations between those levels. Analytical dualism consists in distinguishing and defining the Cultural System (CS) and the level of Socio-Cultural interaction (S-C). Their components in the model are, respectively, ideas (CS) and human beings or persons (S-C). The level of the Cultural System is ruled by logical relations and the socio-cultural interactive level by relations of causality rooted in human intentional agency. This analytic distinction enables the morphogenetic approach to culture, which is founded on three propositions:

- Ideas are *sui generis* real.
- The sharing of ideas is contingent.
- The interplay of ideas from the level of the Cultural System and the level of Socio-Cultural interaction leads to a new phase of the morphogenetic cycle, called cultural elaboration (Archer 2015: 163; Archer & Elder-Vass 2012).

Culture in a strong sense, so to speak, is thus described as the Cultural System. As the thinker states, it is approximately the equivalent of Karl R. Popper's "World Three," i.e., the world of objective knowledge, as opposed to material reality ("World One") and to psychical (mental) reality ("World Two").

When Karl R. Popper distinguished the material world, psychical world, and the world of objective knowledge, he described the Third World in the following way:

My main argument will be devoted to the defence of the reality of what I propose to call 'world 3'. By world 3 I mean the world of the products of the human mind, such as languages; tales and stories and religious myths; scientific conjectures or theories, and mathematical constructions; songs and symphonies; paintings and sculptures. But also aeroplanes and airports and other feats of engineering.

It would be easy to distinguish a number of different worlds within what I call world 3. We could distinguish the world of science from the world of fiction; and the world of music and the world of art from the world of engineering. For simplicity's sake I shall speak about one world 3; that is, the world of the products of the human mind (Popper 1978: 144).

In other theories, elements of Popper's World Three are referred to as cultural objects (Znaniecki) or an objectified symbolic universe (Berger, Luckmann). Margaret S. Archer, in turn, refers to elements of World Three, interpreted as the Cultural System, as ideas. Because Karl R. Popper (unlike Florian Znaniecki) did not distinguish the social world, which is so important in interpretative theories stemming from social phenomenology, this concept leads to difficulties when questions about the relationship between the cultural and the social come into play. The exegetic publication by Douglas V. Porpora examining Margaret S. Archer's theory is a telling example of this confusing ontological formulation. In his comparative interpretation of the concepts of Karl R. Popper and Margaret S. Archer, Porpora expands the Cultural System (World Three) to include social actions on the premise that they are also a product of the human mind. In a sense, such an interpretation ultimately subordinates the cultural system to the social system.

It is likewise significant that Popper uses the term 'product' to distinguish what resides in world three. Clearly, to the extent that all our actions are products of our minds, those of our actions that are distinctly social all reside in world three (Porpora 2015: 162).

Margaret S. Archer, who is known both for rigorous logic and for the refined style of her works, occasionally employs metaphors, e.g., when she depicts the Cultural System, or objectified culture, as a library or archive, or more precisely as their contents. Such metaphors bring to mind the concept of the "text," and subsequently also the concept of "reading"; both are of fundamental significance for the semiotics of culture, which employs the semiosphere, and for hermeneutics dealing with *Verstehen*. The analytic distinction between the Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural interaction proposed by the British scholar does not directly involve material culture,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The problem of material culture appears among the questions that create a framework for the discussion between Margaret S. Archer and Dave Elder-Vass about the nature of culture, the

while ideational culture is made prominent. However, the notion of material culture became important and visible after Margaret S. Archer investigated what she calls the practical order of tripartite human reality (three orders of reality)—natural, practical, and social. Interestingly, she rejects the dichotomy of nature and culture; the ranges of these concepts partially overlap, and that is where the practical order differentiates itself (Archer 2000: 162). However, there is no mention of a cultural order of reality outside the social order, the practical order, and the natural order.

Culture in the strong sense (the Cultural System) is ideational, whereas on the socio-cultural level it is used in various ways, since for people it is “a repertoire of ideas for construing the situations in which they find themselves” (Archer 2015: 155); in other words, a set of meanings which becomes part of their definition of the situation. This ideational world does not rest in peace, since in principle it is neither consistent nor free from cultural contradictions, although it may be elaborated in such directions.

Significantly, Margaret S. Archer does not directly address the issue of the binary cultural code (including, above all, the opposition between *sacrum* and *profanum*), which serves as the main frame of reference in the so-called strong programme of cultural sociology, initiated by Jeffrey C. Alexander, which also assumes the autonomy of culture but in its own theoretical mode (Alexander 2006). While some theorists of culture (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu or Alfred Schütz) have focused on classifications or typifications respectively, in the morphogenetic theory the cultural world of ideas<sup>11</sup> is researched from the angle of the logic of propositions, leaving aside such semiotic categories as “code,” “sign,” or “symbol.” In other words, the main focus is on logical relations of complementarity or contradiction between ideas, which represent a kind of “propositional register.”

The logic of culture, and thus the contradictory or non-contradictory nature of belief systems (Archer 1990: 17), which occupies a prominent place in the analytical framework under discussion, indicates the crucial character of the role that is ascribed to a cognitive map. Archer also uses the expression “propositional culture” in regard to the logic of the cultural system, and expands the analytical dualism to the concept of discursive

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autonomy of ideas in regard to human subjects, and cultural causality. That discussion includes a question about the role of material vehicles of cultural meanings that may be extended to the issue of symbolism (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 94).

<sup>11</sup> In discussion with Margaret S. Archer, Dave Elder-Vass has taken up the problem of the relations between representations and ideas; in other words, the problem of symbolism (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 101). He also raises the question of a broad spectrum of understanding in regard to ideas: the degree to which a text is open to interpretation (ibid.: 105).

knowledge, which is the emergent property of the users of an objective corpus of ideas (Archer 2000).

This argumentation pertains not only to propositions in a strict sense, but to any kind of objectified knowledge, which, according to Margaret S. Archer, is a “knowledge of propositions” also understood as the assumptions behind questions or imperatives, as well as in regard to artifacts or events, since such knowledge assumes the existence of relations between them or their parts, expressed by means of language (Archer 1996: 328). However, the main issue of interest is the ideational sphere; in other words, cognitive forms which are independent from knowing subjects, such as theories, doctrines and other forms of objectified knowledge.

At this point, we should consider another important feature of this theorizing, which assumes the rationality of the Cultural System in terms of truth and falsity (Archer 1996: 104) and overshadows the significance of other judgmental orders in the domain of ideas, such as moral (good and evil), religious (holy and secular), aesthetic (beauty and ugliness) and other axionormative criteria.

Another interesting question is the unity of the Cultural System; in other words, whether there is one single cultural system or multiple ones. The perspective can be either a holistic view of the cultural system (a single system) or a pluralistic view of many cultural systems and their continuous differentiation. Following in the footsteps of Florian Znaniecki and those thinkers who, like William James or Alfred Schütz, pointed out the existence of phenomenological plural reality (multiple realities), one might argue for a multitude of cultural systems in World Three (science, religion, art, technology, etc.) and a multitude of subsystems (a multitude of scientific theories, of religions, of aesthetic systems, of technical systems, and so on).

In answer to the pertinent question of whether one or many cultural systems should be taken into consideration, Margaret S. Archer responded firmly that her conceptualization only allows one Cultural System. It is this thinker’s way of addressing the problem of universality, or the possibility of the universal translatability of all ideas. According to this scholar, World Three or the Cultural System excludes the claim that people live in different cultures as in different worlds, without the possibility of translating the concepts inherent in those cultures (Archer 1996: 104). Ideas objectified in World Three of cultural knowledge are, at least potentially, universally accessible and understandable.



However, it seems (especially in the light of the current discussion undertaken by Margaret S. Archer with “relationists”) that apart from, or beyond the Cultural System (CS) and the level of Socio-Cultural interaction (S-C), which is also articulated as socio-cultural relations, a more general category of Cultural Reality appears: culture as a whole (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012: 96). The question remains open whether this culture is only a total sum of CS and S-C, or something more. One could add the acronym CRe (Cultural Reality) to the model (CR is an acronym that already refers to the ontology of Critical Realism, akin to the concepts of Margaret S. Archer). Cultural Reality contains all kinds of intelligibilia—everything that is meaningful and capable of being understood: “any item having the dispositional ability to be understood by someone—whether or not anyone does so at a given time” (Archer & Elder-Vass 2012). It should be noted that in the earlier work *Culture and Agency*, the Cultural System was already described as a system of intelligibilia.

At any given time a Cultural System is constituted by the corpus of existing intelligibilia—by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone (Archer 1996: 104).

It is worth noting that this wording is broader than the definition of a cultural system as a system of ideas ruled by propositional logic. Namely, it opens the possibility of introducing an analysis of the entire complexity of symbolic systems and their hermeneutics.

The systemic character of intelligibilia would stem from the system of language that expresses their significance. Thus, taking all this into consideration, the expression “cultural reality” may suggest a broader meaning for this term than merely the sum of CS and S-C. One might also suppose that intelligibilia, and thus that which is meaningful and understandable, can also include, e.g., signifiers of types of social actions, social relations, personality types or types of social organization. Cultural Reality (CRe) in the broad sense would not simply fit into the SAC, or into the social order. One might even argue that CRe could have a primary character in regard to the social domain, which embeds itself in the cultural domain, being socially meaningful in itself. When polemicizing with “relationists,” Margaret S. Archer clearly makes a stand against sociological reductionism, against the “remorseless exorbitation of our sociality” (Archer 2015: 179). She claims that not all “relations relevant to given sociological explanations are social in kind” (Archer 2015: 179).

The basic reason for directing “cultural reproaches” at “relationists” is the fact that they deny the autonomy of the cultural system. Conversely, Margaret S. Archer claims that the Cultural System is an emergent entity. It is the result of cultural elaboration in a constant historical process of Socio-Cultural interactions, during which, using various methods of action, people influence each other. The Cultural System does not exert a direct causal influence, but acts through reflexive mediations in the form of the ideational projects of human beings.<sup>12</sup> In this context, it is easy to see the importance of relational sociology in explaining the influence of the Cultural System (Archer 2015: 112).

It seems that Margaret S. Archer’s morphogenetic theory, although built with rigorous conceptual precision, remains open to interpretation in many ways. Hence, the question about the range of culture’s autonomy, and whether this autonomy is only an analytical assumption or rather something rooted in the ontology of Cultural Reality (not reducible to social order), remains open as well. Some of this thinker’s deliberations and auto-explications could indicate the second possibility, especially when she refers to culture as an “independent moral vantage point” (Archer 1990: 98).

Having discussed the general outline of the relational model of cultural morphogenesis, which is parallel to social morphogenesis, it is time to turn towards Pierpaolo Donati’s relational theory of society in a further search for the place and nature of culture in relational sociology.

### **/// Humanistic Reality and the Relationality of Culture**

In accordance with the morphogenetic approach presented above, Pierpaolo Donati emphasizes the importance of the relations between culture and agency in relational sociology.

Reclaiming the importance of subjectivity and culture, transmitted and re-elaborated by human action, as autonomous factors of change becomes the task of a relational perspective which reveals itself as more and more essential (...) (Donati 2011: 165).

However, in this approach, neither culture in general nor cultural processes are framed in clear and completely original terminology. Rather,

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<sup>12</sup> There are similarities here to the concept of ideational definitions of situations (Znaniecki 1952: 241–243).

the problems of the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction viewed from the morphogenetic angle are readdressed from the perspective of this thinker's relational sociology. Significantly, however, semiology and axiology—two widely accepted criteria of the cultural domain—permeate the conceptual framework of relational sociology.

Interestingly enough, Margaret S. Archer's cultural critical realism has its counterpart in the humanistic realism of Pierpaolo Donati. In this Italian scholar's approach, the issue of human reality and its full coverage is of central importance. This contrast between humanism and critical realist culturalism is, of course, an oversimplification to a certain degree, since Margaret S. Archer is also an advocate of humanism, as is shown clearly by her impressive work *Being Human*. However, I would like to draw attention to the slightly differing standpoints visible in the founding works for the two above-mentioned approaches: *Culture and Agency* and *Relational Sociology*, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Humanism has been mentioned from the beginning of this article as one of the promising features of relational sociology. An important issue at present is the specificity of a new approach, which Pierpaolo Donati contrasts with the currents known as classical humanism.

It would be a great mistake to believe that the premises of relational sociology are based on a naively optimistic view of humanity and on its simple affirmation. While reading the work of Pierpaolo Donati, one discovers that his standpoint is founded upon a deeply pessimistic interpretation of modern processes infiltrated by functional logic—processes that become reflected in post-human semantics or a trans-human system; new possibilities for the reproduction of the human race, detached from interpersonal relations, are just one example. Thus, relational sociology has to take up new challenges stemming from the relationships between man and society, as well as from a crisis of the old humanism (Donati 2011: 164). As Donati explains, the truly humanistic approach of relational sociology consists in the assumption that social forms differentiate “from the human” (Donati 2011: 122), whereas in the classic humanistic perspective all that is social was also understood as human (coincidence of the social and the human). Thus, Pierpaolo Donati introduces the concepts of human reality and human perspective on the ontological level and, respectively, humanism and the humanistic perspective assumed in relational sociology. The social order starts with the social relation as the molecule. The social relation is

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<sup>13</sup> For Florian Znaniecki, who formulated the concept of the humanistic coefficient, humanism and culturalism were broadly synonymous (Znaniecki 1934).

conceived as a unit of human reality *sui generis* and the relational approach “(..) retains within itself the relevance of the human perspective” (Donati 2011: 122). The social relation cannot be reduced either to the social system (structure) or to agency. Thus, relational sociology proves that the confrontation between humanism and anti-humanism in sociology is not obsolete, by asking: “What is there that is human within the social?” (Donati 2011: 24). In my view, this question can also be phrased differently: “What is there that is cultural within the social?”

Pierpaolo Donati’s relational sociology is strongly polemical—no less than Margaret S. Archer’s works. In particular, it is in definite opposition to the systemic-functional orientation, which has remained a significant presence under various forms ever since nineteenth-century functional organicism—“From Durkheim to Parsons, from Alexander to Luhmann” (Donati 2011: 144), despite opinions voiced in the past that it is obsolete or becoming so. Thus, realistic relational sociology has been constructed primarily as a response to the limitations of functionalism (Donati 2011: 144). Interestingly, Pierpaolo Donati highlights the importance of the problem of that which cannot be framed in functional terms in society but requires interpretation nonetheless (Donati 2011: 144). This resembles a transposed version of the criticism voiced against functionalism by symbolic interactionism. Relational sociology similarly assumes that meanings, which change over time, are a part of the cultural dimension—beyond the material, psychical, and social dimensions of reality (Donati 2011: 145).

Continuing our earlier reflections on the nature of culture and its place in morphogenetic theory, one can attempt at this point to determine, first and foremost, what culture is **not** in relational sociology. Generally speaking, following the criticism raised against functionalism by Pierpaolo Donati, one can say that culture cannot be brought down to a functional subsystem supporting the social edifice and controlling it. At this point, it is necessary to return once again to the issue of humanistic realism, which is a sort of critical realism too, and thus, in ontological terms, to the reality of what is human, specified as actions directed at values.

Critical realist theory leads the sociologist to understand why human people, in spite of anything else, pursue ‘values,’ in the sense that they tend toward given goals (usually a mixture of interests and identities) transcending things already given (Donati 2011: 117).

According to this perspective of humanistic realism, the concept of culture as images, myths, or ideologies merely mystifies human existence if it withholds “the enjoyment of human experience from people” (Donati 2011: 117).

Of course, neither should culture be perceived as a “set of values” that constitute a cultural tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, exerting a regulatory influence on the social order and on the repertoire of actors’ possible identities. Significantly, neither is culture an interactive process of establishing norms, the persistence or reproduction of which would serve to uphold cultural orientations (Donati 2011: 127).

Concepts that refer only to the surface or symptoms of modern processes of globalization, such as cultural homogenization or liquidity (Donati 2011: 211), are also criticized. However, the most striking feature of Pierpaolo Donati’s approach is the distance he maintains towards a long tradition of viewing culture as constraining—from Durkheimian collective representations to the dualistic cultural codes of Jeffrey C. Alexander—since, as he writes, “culture is also a relational matter” (Donati 2011: 5) that deserves further exploration.

Pierpaolo Donati initially analyses the relationality of culture in a different configuration and context than the SAC model and the analytic distinction between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction, although this morphogenetic model should prove relevant as well, when one takes into account the proclaimed complementary character of the discussed approaches on the grounds of critical realism. Like Margaret S. Archer’s Cultural System, culture also has a cognitive connotation for Pierpaolo Donati, but is interpreted differently. It appears in this thinker’s reflections on epistemological issues as the proposition of switching from a model presented in the form of a triangle to a rhombus or a quadrangle. This is obviously criticism directed at cultural constructionism; in other words, at the thesis that observed or observable reality is mediated by a conceptual framework of culture. Culture is not conceptualized in detail, apart from its above-mentioned cognitive function as a cognitive mediator (categories, models, cultural paradigms). Pierpaolo Donati postulates referring to what he calls ontological reality; in other words, to that which exists (**ex-sists**—that is, stands outside) independently of culture and of the observer’s subjective experience (Donati 2011: 101). Thus, the observer, culture, ontological reality, and that which is observed remain in complex relations with each other and can be depicted as the four vertices

of a quadrangle. In this way, culture also ceases to imprison the subject as both observer and actor (Donati 2011: 100).

The complementary premises of relational analyses conducted on the grounds of morphogenetic theory and relational sociology allow us to interpret culture in the epistemological scheme (quadrangle) proposed by Pierpaolo Donati as a cognitive toolkit in structures of morphogenesis that is constantly elaborated anew. Next, the complexity of social relations should be included in the most general epistemological framework of the relation between the cogitator and ontological reality, in which culture occupies such an important place because of its mediatory function.

It is worth noting that relational sociology is also, in a way, an interactional sociology. As Pierpaolo Donati clarifies, interactions between actors are “relations *in actu*” (Donati 2011: 114). They depend on existing socio-cultural structures, and thus on relations that have become stabilized during the previous stages (phases) of morphogenetic processes. These processes can be modified in the course of interactions. Thus, interactions are capable of modifying relations perceived as emergent phenomena.

However, the problem of culture appears as an “open issue” at this point (Donati 2011: 114). Pierpaolo Donati poses extremely important questions regarding the concept of the Cultural System in the morphogenetic scheme proposed by Margaret S. Archer. He remarks that: “To my

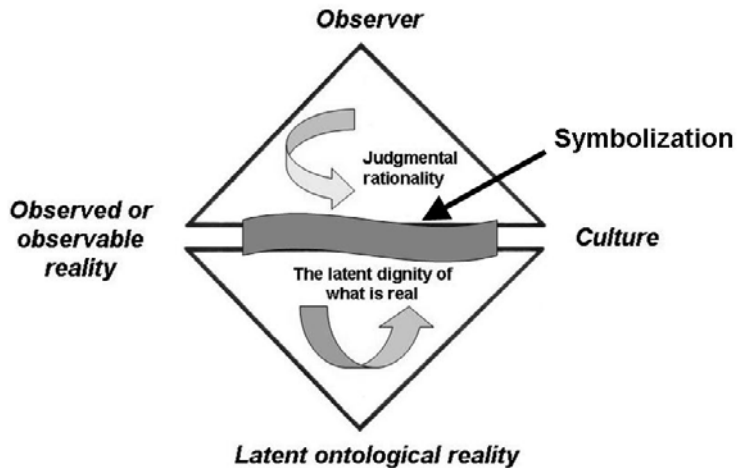


Figure 1. The epistemic quadrangle (observer—culture—observed reality—latent ontological reality) adopted from Donati (2011: 100) and modified by introducing symbolization.

mind, such an approach to culture is not fully adequate to critical realism” (Donati 2011: 114). He justifies this objection in the light of the proposed epistemological scheme—culture, which makes it possible to observe reality, is not just a system that contains more or less coherent concepts (ideas); it should also be viewed in terms of its relation to other vertices of the tetragon. The issue of processes of symbolization is directly raised at this point. Their presence and relevance in relational sociology have been of interest to me ever since the beginning of my reflections on the place of culture in relational sociology. It turns out that this issue is explicitly discussed in Donati’s work: “(..) culture works through complex processes of symbolization, since the observer attaches personal feelings and personal interpretations to symbols” (Donati 2011: 115).

Here, symbolism is by no means a carrier of irrationality. According to Donati, the morphogenetic process involves a process of symbolization in which various forms of actors’ rationality and their social relations become expressed. He postulates including the relational frame of symbolization within the morphogenetic model and interprets symbolization as the connection between two triangles (two parts) that make up the tetragon of epistemological relations.

Finally and fundamentally, we find processes of symbolization as an inherent part of the emergent reality of social relations. Symbols cannot belong solely to Karl R. Popper’s World Three—or the Cultural System. Their relational character cannot be limited to the possible logical (propositional) relations; symbolization is realized in social relations.<sup>14</sup> Drawing upon the ideas of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz, Pierpaolo Donati points out the relevance of appresentative symbolism: one that, unlike representative symbolism, refers to objects that are not fully present for the observer. Thus, it turns out that relational sociology also stimulates the development of the sociology of processes of symbolization (Gattamorta 2005; Halas 2002, 2008).

The analysis, reflections, and comments presented above leave no doubt that culture plays a key role and occupies a central place in rela-

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<sup>14</sup> A critical analysis of the theory of social relations, beginning with the concept of the social relation and its constitutive elements—as well as the changing semantics of social relations, involving cultural assumptions and implications—extends beyond the scope and aims of this text, which concentrates on the problems of the nature and place of culture in relational sociology. It can only be mentioned here that cultural features are immanent in the structure of social relationality and the so-called *refero* semantics of social relations openly evokes its symbolic dimension. “The referential semantic: understands social relations as *refero* (reference) or as referring something else within a frame of reference constructed by the symbolic meanings of different types and degrees of intentionality which are more or less agreed upon by the actors involved” (Donati 2011: 87).

tional sociology, which exposes the immense complexity of the nature of culture in human reality and still contains some puzzles or enigmas to be dealt with. As a concluding remark, it must be emphasized that relational sociology as a sociology of cultural processes should also be a sociology of processes of symbolization, and thus the “relational turn” undoubtedly also means a new conceptual elaboration of the “cultural turn.”

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### /// **Abstract**

Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati have independently developed relational approaches in the social sciences. Combining morphogenetic theory and the relational theory of society opens up new research perspectives. This article attempts to investigate relational conceptions of culture by answering two questions: one related to the nature of culture and the other to the place of culture in relational sociology. Assuming the complementarity of the theories of both sociologists, the possibility that their conceptions may be inconsistent or even contradict each other is not discounted. The article discusses the issue of symbolization and the presence of processes of semiosis within relational sociology. It is argued that apart from the Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural interaction assumed by Archer's analytical dualism, a more general category of Cultural Reality can be introduced. This theme is further discussed in the light of Donati's views on human reality; he postulates including the relational frame of symbolization. Analysis shows that culture occupies a central place in relational sociology. This article exposes the complexity of the nature of culture in human reality.

Keywords:

cultural morphogenesis, cultural reality, relational sociology, symbolisation, Archer Margaret S., Donati Pierpaolo

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**RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY  
AND IDENTITIES**



# REFLEXIVITY, SOCIALIZATION, AND RELATIONS TO THE WORLD: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

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## **/// Human and Social. Developmental Paths and New Relationships**

This article has a twofold aim. First, it sets forth a realist, relational, and morphogenetic approach to socialization as relational reflexivity. The main thesis is that this constitutes a remarkable advance in theoretical rigor compared to most strands of contemporary theory. Then the argument will be made that some cultural trends are currently challenging the very process through which “healthy” personalities are moulded, thereby changing the once established meanings of “integrity” and “maturity” as referred to adult identities. This may lead human formation processes to what may be called “post-human” outcomes.

The essay is organized as follows. First, I will briefly outline the overarching challenge to which socialization theory must respond, namely the increasing separation between human beings and the social world, and the need for new forms of mediation to inhabit this space. Then I will sketch out the key points of modern socialization theory, to demonstrate that a realist and morphogenetic approach is required. Furthermore, drawing on Margaret Archer’s work, I will show how such a theory meets those requirements, spelling out a sound concept of personal reflexivity and focusing attention on the original relation of concern that connects human beings to the various orders of reality. Finally, I will claim that some emergent conditions, cultures, and lifestyles in late modern societies tend to modify such relations with reality, thereby making the property of reflexivity and

the process of becoming fully human epistemologically and ontologically vulnerable. As a consequence, the very core of what it means to be human may go through unprecedented changes. In addition, I will argue that the identity-building practices that anticipate the dawning of a post-human landscape may well find their *organum* in technology, but are the offspring of a whole cultural syndrome of which education and socialization are an essential aspect. A whole new *paideia* may be emerging, with all technical realizations being just instantiations of a more general transformation in human self-understanding—and indeed self-construction. Although in this essay I will only be able to gesture at concrete education/socialization doctrines and practice, this point is central to my overall argument. In the last instance, the underlying thesis of the article is that a realist, relational, morphogenetic approach to socialization represents a watershed between modern theory and the present societal predicament. It also provides an instructive vantage point from which the facts leading to “post-humanistic” forms of identity<sup>1</sup> may be examined, and indeed a benchmark for their evaluation.

One large “social fact” is currently increasingly clear, namely that global society has caused a major crisis in the ways human beings are trying to connect their lives meaningfully with social forms and dynamics. This predicament becomes apparent in the emergence of new lifestyles within economically and technologically advanced societies, as well as in the decline of the integration capacity displayed by social and political systems in various parts of the world. In both cases, what is being witnessed is a crisis of the co-evolution between social systems and human persons, between institutions and structures on the macro level and on the level of interpersonal relations. On the level of lifestyles, intensely wired individualism is a good example, as is the increasing de-synchronization of individual and social (i.e., organizational and institutional) time schedules, with the decline of collectively organized activities and the related coordination problems. On the socio-empirical level, this makes for a dramatic growth in the credibility of those theoretical hypotheses that emphasize the separation between the human and the social domain, simultaneously indicating

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on the “post-human” is now enormously extended. For the sake of clarity, by such an expression I mean identity-building processes that are not guided by humanistic concerns, in either the ethical or anthropological perspective, and may lead to a self-understanding that questions the radical separation between human subjects and other kinds of entities. For an interesting overview of the main approaches in the debate on post-humanism see Sharon (2014). An important approach to human life-formation “after” humanism can be found in Sloterdijk (2013).

the necessity of new forms of mediation between them.<sup>2</sup> Social systems and human beings—which are each endowed with their own emergent properties—are no longer tailored to fit one another. They interfere, make trouble for each other, transform and redefine each other, and follow their own developmental paths, which are somehow inevitably intertwined, but are increasingly hard to bring back to intentional and meaningful coordination. Along the way, both the human and the social domain become involved in complex reflexive processes, which lead them ever farther from the familiar shores of modern culture and society,<sup>3</sup> and thereby undergo profound inner transformations.

On the social side of the human/social distinction, such a change can be aptly described through the concept of “morphogenic society.” Illustrating this whole perspective would require a long systematic treatment, while I can only provide a concise hint. In a nutshell, this type of society is characterized by the prevalence of transformative over reproductive processes, which in turn gives rise to the following tendencies:

- a) The ongoing emergence and continuous combination of contingent possibilities of action and experience—variety producing variety—and the diffusion of a situational logic of opportunity (Archer 1995);
- b) The acceleration of social processes, i.e., the increasing number of actions and experiences occurring within a time unit (Rosa 2013);
- c) The spatial and communicative saturation (Gergen 1991), and the wider, multidimensional problem of excess (Abbott 2016: 122–159).

This societal syndrome has vast and profound implications.<sup>4</sup> The most relevant for the specific purpose of this essay consists in intensifying reflexivity (Archer 2012), and in a more general pressure upon the human being and his or her personal powers, concerning various aspects of action and experience, and contributing to the emergence of new forms of life—both personal and social (Maccarini 2016a).

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<sup>2</sup> As is well known, this insight was systematized by Niklas Luhmann through the system/environment distinction (e.g., 1987). Within a different paradigm, the issue of the human/social distancing and relationship is also present in Donati (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Prandini (2012, especially pp. 7–26) reflects upon a similar issue. While he deals with changing cultural forms—particularly law—my attention will focus on the connection between society and personality, and on the related changes of the latter.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of morphogenic society has been developed in a series of volumes edited by Archer (2013, 2014, 2015c, 2016). For a more extended discussion of the three trends outlined above, and of the relevant consequences, see Maccarini 2016a.



On the human side, descriptions of this sweeping change are usually shaped into culturally pessimistic, mostly ethically oriented diagnoses. For our special purposes, they could be summarized as follows:

- a) A classic line of thought revolves around “values” and their alleged “crisis,” which is usually attributed to younger generations. In this context, the typical issues concern youth’s relativism, moral indifference, and shallow moral utilitarianism. The problem is why young people seem to be scarcely connected with the sources of moral meta-narratives characteristic of modernity;
- b) More particularly, worried analyses are focused upon the growing incapacity to keep long-term commitments, to establish durable bonds and loyalties, and upon the tendency to develop unstable personalities—ones that are inevitably flawed because of contingency and the de-symbolization of relationships in the public as well as in the private domain;
- c) Beside these fully recognizable streams evoking moral loss and decline, there emerges the theme of a change in the deep self-understanding of what it means to be human. This is manifest in the literature about the “post-human,” which deals with the transformative opportunities provided by technology for individuals to pursue their own paths to “enhancement” and “self-transcendence”—in instrumental as well as expressive directions. This can be seen in many quarters and by exploring different research fields. Many examples might be mentioned. One concerns human enhancement devices and their possible consequences. Another has to do with the changes affecting childhood in some of its main psycho-social features, e.g., identity-building, attention, focus, reflexivity, and so forth. Finally, this perspective prompts us to take a fresh look at the long-debated issue of secularization, from a vantage point that does not just examine the weakening of belief or its public relevance, but the crumbling of a whole manner of making sense of human life, experience, and perception of the world. The issue involves the whole grammar of human relationships and basic attachments upon which the beliefs characterizing the historical religions of both East and West must be predicated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Within a Christian theological discourse, this might possibly be understood as a crisis of assumptions that fall into the classic category of *preambula fidei*—an expanding sphere now coming to encompass notions one would not even think of including in that concept in the past, as they were part of a wider, more basic domain of the taken-for-granted.

It is therefore in the context of such a mutual distancing and such inner transformations that the possible relationships between the human and social spheres must be reconceived—in social theory as well as in the everyday experience of regular folks. One crucial problem concerns the emerging tensions between the two domains. What the two systems expect of each other is rather clear. To give only a few examples, humans expect the social structures they inhabit to provide a safe life, technology, freedom, opportunities, and a wide range of choice, while social systems ask people for growing skills and personal effort, energy, and flexibility. But it is not easy to understand how the resulting tensions could be meaningfully settled, and what the prevailing outcome could be. Will the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999), the cultural industry, the biotech complex, and information-communication technology succeed in reconstructing human subjectivity as volatile, totally flexible, and impervious to long-term commitment? And does this result in a “corrosion of character” (Hunter 2000; Sennett 1998)? Will the high-tech gurus, who have long acted as an anthropological avant-garde, break down every humanistic tradition? Is our civilization bound to produce new forms of human identity and a new, unique version of “integrity”—to put it in Erikson’s (1963) classic words? What is already clear is that the current dynamics are transforming human beings, social structures, and processes beyond recognition. My general thesis is that the current changes are affecting fundamentals. That means they are penetrating even the linguistic and symbolical foundations of the social order, reshaping the hierarchy of positive and negative sanctions structuring social life, and reorganizing the very structures of consciousness and character—tapping into fundamental impulses, emotions, and inhibitions. In sum, the human/social disconnection depends only partially on personal will (or the lack thereof), on the values people believe in (or not), or even on socio-structural conditioning alone. The morphogenesis of human/social distancing generates deep transformations in what we may call “anthropological competence”—a provisional label to mean a set of personal qualities emerging from experience of a given form of the world, which in turn affect the self-understanding of human persons and their capacity to orient themselves toward certain goods.

We should now wonder if the social sciences and humanities appear to be adequate to explain and interpret this large change. The investigations mentioned above are of real and relevant trends. However, they still struggle with significant ambiguities in their proposed interpretations of social facts. Problems would seem to lie with the young, but we often witness

astonishing generational inversions, as it is the adult world that prompts the de-normativization of social relations and deprives institutions of their legitimacy. The problem of European youth appears to be moral indifference and lack of commitment,<sup>6</sup> but extremism and radicalization also beg for explanation<sup>7</sup>—expressing themselves in religiously motivated anti-Western attitudes as well as in revived national chauvinism or xenophobic movements. Truth and the meaning of life are often lost, but they also remain an object of desire. In sum, the scope of change is undoubtedly huge, but its interpretation calls for a higher level of abstraction and analytical robustness, which entail a more general theoretical framework. The exceeding complexity of social reality is evoking an unprecedented cross-fertilization among diverse reflections, disciplines, and discourses, including philosophical anthropology, moral philosophy, evolutionary theory, cultural psychology, and the neurosciences.<sup>8</sup> In such an interdisciplinary field the changing structures of consciousness, socio-anthropological experience, and a discourse on the possibilities of a “good life” tend to overlap and interact in original ways.

What does sociology know about all this? To be sure, socialization theory lies at the core of this complex enterprise, in that it has been the main conceptual tool elaborated by the social sciences to examine the human/social connection, and is the very symbol of that relationship. Unsurprisingly, in the present situation such a theory is going through profound tensions and is headed toward a change of paradigm. Its current mainstream is mostly far from the systematic ambition of the classical tradition, from the founding fathers to Parsons. This makes it even more important to identify the emergent innovations in the sociological domain, as they could provide an essential contribution to rethinking the whole subject matter. My ultimate goal in discussing some of these theoretical innovations, and the new socio-cultural fault lines they help us see, is to suggest that European culture is working out a new kind of *paideia*. With this word choice I do not wish to indicate a unified trend but to highlight some crucial dilemmas around which the practice and the social-scientific interpretation

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<sup>6</sup> The research by Donati and Colozzi (1997) is still relevant in its basic approach. For an overview concerning the French context, see Cicchelli and Germain (2014). Much of the work published in the collection on *Youth in a Globalizing World* (Brill) is relevant to this issue.

<sup>7</sup> And it is genuinely bizarre that such attitudes are often interpreted as forms of “excessive” commitment (e.g., Bronner 2009: 11).

<sup>8</sup> That disciplinary boundaries are increasingly crossed is in itself an indicator of the novelty of the situation, and of the way social science and the humanities are reacting to it. See the different contributions by Habermas (2007), Laidlaw (2014), Narvaez (2014), Rosa (2016) and Tomasello (1999). It is beyond the scope of this article to examine their convergence and divergence.

of identity-building processes revolve. In-depth analysis of some particular lines of thought will only be gestured at, while the field research this essay means to inspire will have to be left for further study. Finally, I will leave it for readers to judge if the present approach could be labelled “amateurish,” and if such an intellectual luxury can still be allowed to the current generation of scholars.<sup>9</sup>

### **/// The Inexact Form: Socialization Theory and the Concept of Agency**

In the first place, it is necessary to understand the way socialization theory grasped the social and cultural changes outlined above within its own endogenous development. The latter may be examined through its central elements, namely the socializing factors, the human subject, and the mediation mechanism.<sup>10</sup> Socialization theory was born under the star of an “original constraint” (*Urzwang*). This means that the starting point of human ontogenesis is assumed to consist of actors and social conditions that “penetrate” the human subject, thereby making constraint (bond, interdiction) an essential part of his or her condition.<sup>11</sup> As it is well known, socialization throughout the twentieth century was principally meant to be a mechanism to guarantee intergenerational continuity and cultural reproduction. The “static” features of one generation were connected to “static” features of the next and conceived within a causal relationship. The expected outcome was the conformity of the younger generation to the roles, norms, values, and ideas of the preceding generation (Kuczynski & Parkin 2007: 259). The emphasis falls essentially upon the control of impulses and energies. Since Freud, the concept of internalization has served to portray the crucial mediating mechanism. To quote a contemporary definition mirroring this historical view of the sociological tradition, socialization consists in “the process through which individuals internalize the values, beliefs, and norms of a society and learn to function as its members” (Calhoun 2002: 447).

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am using the words of Luc Boltanski (2004: 9), who claims to belong to the last generation allowed to ask “big” questions and to venture into complex fields of study, before hyper-specialization and professionalization finally takes hold of the sociological discipline. In this respect, my work is completely subject to the fate of my own generation. Accordingly, I am ready to renounce every expectation of indulgence.

<sup>10</sup> These elements are taken from Geulen (2005), who develops a “subject oriented” theory of socialization.

<sup>11</sup> The word *Urzwang* is used by Klaus Gilgenmann (1986a, 1986b), in the framework of an autopoietic theory of psychic systems.

The great Parsonian synthesis represented an attempt to encompass processes and structures of socialization within a complex, systematic model. As everyone knows, its outcome was widely regarded as the utmost expression of an “over-socialized” conception of the human person (Wrong 1961, 1999). Be that as it may, after Parsons socialization theory undoubtedly tended to lose complexity and conceptual rigor.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, “post-Parsonian” studies surely convey and reflect a different vision—both sociological and ideological—of society, but from the specific viewpoint of socialization theory most hardly constitute as deep a change as is claimed. The main streams along which these studies have developed are the following:

- a) The aim of socialization is redefined as the development of a personal, often idiosyncratic personal identity, even though such a concept may be ambiguous, and may be conducive to narcissism and to unfettered expressive individualism. In this context, the critique of the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950) and other similar contributions translated into the field of family relationships, producing some sort of “democratic” theory of “good parenthood.”<sup>13</sup>
- b) The renewed relevance of Piaget, and above all new readings of Mead in the wake of a pragmatist revival, led to a reconsideration of the conditions for constructing a democratic and rational will (Habermas 1981, 1992).<sup>14</sup>
- c) The idea of the individualization and de-institutionalization of the life course produced a vast literature focused on biographies, which emphasized agency and the freedom of choice individuals enjoy while making their way through structural and cultural conditionings (Arnett 2007; Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991; Mayer 2004).

The critique produced within these lines of research has resulted in two main points:

- a) Socialization does not involve linear causality, but must be conceived as a learning process in which children play an active role, reflexively combining the messages they get from different sources. Children’s agency takes centre stage in the theory, emphasizing

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<sup>12</sup> Parsons’s theory of socialization would obviously require a more detailed treatment (see Parsons 1951, 1964; Parsons & Bales 1955).

<sup>13</sup> This context is quickly but effectively reconstructed in Maccoby (2007).

<sup>14</sup> See Maccarini and Prandini (2010) for a discussion of Habermas and of the social constitution of human subjectivity.

a different balance of power and influence in family relationships compared to “traditional” models (Bandura 1986, 2001; Kuczynski et al. 1999).

- b) The reference points in socialization are not only persons but include interactions with symbols and material objects.

These achievements converge to indicate a single direction, synthesized in Bronfenbrenner’s “ecological” approach. Socialization takes place in the meaningful interactions between human persons and their environment, conceived as a space and structured around material, cultural, and social objects (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Grundmann & Lüscher 2000). Thus, the reflections emerging in the field of developmental psychology could be summarized as follows: socialization is

the way in which individuals are assisted in becoming members of one or more social groups. The word ‘assist’ is important because it infers that socialization is not a one-way street but that new members of the social group are active in the socialization process and selective in what they accept from older members (...). In addition, new members may attempt to socialize older members as well (Grusec & Hastings 2007: 1).

Most current definitions, even within sociology, resonate with this.

Two differences between these theoretical “seasons” are apparent. For one thing, in the latter the human subject and his or her agency come to the fore. It has become commonplace to reject the functionalistic notion of socialization as adaptation to the norms of the relevant society or social group, and to maintain that the socialization process may generate a potential of agency that transcends the given social arrangements and institutions. Contemporary social theory still upholds the fundamental insight of any socialization theory, that is, the causal dependence of the structures of consciousness on socio-historical conditions in general, but has now clearly rebutted the idea of socialization as a heteronomous determination, and is placing special emphasis on the human subjects’ autonomy and personal reflexivity. The genesis of personality takes place within specific societal conditions, but people actively participate in the process, which in turn is not determined by particular institutions. On the contrary, socialization proceeds as a lifelong epigenetic process. Second, what is really changing is that the mediation mechanism between human and social is becoming unclear. Reference to internalization is becoming ever fuzzier, but its place

in the theory remains unoccupied. This is the crucial problem of contemporary socialization theory.

In summary, the social sciences have reacted to the changing social and cultural conditions by becoming less and less socio-centric. Emphasis falls more and more on agency and personal freedom. However, the conceptual framework becomes blurry. Empirical data pile up, but theory becomes less rigorous when it comes to specifying the mechanism connecting human beings to social systems. Attempts at theoretical synthesis tend to put forward eclectic views, remaining on a historical rather than systematic level.<sup>15</sup> The crucial point is that all these theoretical reconstructions leave the connecting mechanism between the human and social either untouched or undetermined. As a consequence, theory swings between two poles. On the one hand, some of the “new” models can simply be brought back to the paradigm of internalization, and are just complicating the explanation of the related processes (Grusec & Kuczynski 1997). On the other hand, other models underestimate the social conditionings, either taking on board a new form of neurobiological determinism or optimistically overrating the unlimited free choice individuals are said to enjoy in modern (Western) societies. As a result, in some of the subject-oriented models the human being appears both as *explanans* and as *explanandum*, thereby engendering an inescapable sense of unresolved circularity.

To illustrate this point I will now focus attention on the concept of agency, which comes to the fore in this phase as an essential factor in the currently dominant paradigm of socialization. In contemporary research, agency appears in two fundamental modes:

- a) Bidirectionality. Socialization is described as a bidirectional process of interaction—mostly between generations—which includes the influence of all relevant actors.
- b) Relationships of socialization are interpretive activities, consisting in the construction of meanings on the part of all actors. Innovation (instead of reproduction) is one of the possible outcomes.

In this context, agency appears to be a multidimensional concept, encompassing cognitive, behavioural, and motivational aspects (Bandura 2001). Bidirectionality emphasizes interaction, interdependence, and the complexity of transactions between socializing and socialized actors. However, it should be noted that:

- a) Bidirectionality does not involve agency alone; for example, the impact of children upon their parents’ health and social position-

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<sup>15</sup> In this sense see, e.g., Veith (1995).

ing, marital relationship, participation in community life, future plans, and so forth can not necessarily be attributed to the child's intentional action.

- b) Activities which “go in both directions” (between generations) include participation in everyday practices and routines, which do not necessarily involve reflexive processes.

In sum, children unavoidably mediate all these processes, but their agency is not always involved in such mediation. As regards the two above-mentioned dimensions, the examples in point (a) mostly refer to structural conditioning, while point (b) consists of cultural aspects. In their description of bidirectionality, Kuczynski and Parkin make the following, revealing comment:

the parent's own **internalization** processes remained unexplored. A by-product of unidirectional models of socialization is that parents were implicitly considered to be passive conduits of their own socialization experiences (...). Regarding parents more fully as agents focuses attention on parents' interpretive and constructive activities with regard to their own continuing processes of resocialization and **internalization** (Kuczynski & Parkin 2007: 261) [emphasis added].

Here it becomes quite evident that the concept of bidirectionality does not by any means imply that the notion of internalization is abandoned. Therefore, such approaches as are presented by these authors surely represent important adaptations of the conceptual framework to the conditions in which socialization currently occurs, but their theoretical originality should not be overrated. For as long as the mediation mechanism continues to be conceived as internalization, all research cannot but qualify as honest, perhaps partially innovative, “normal science.” For this reason, the “ecological” approach, when seen in the perspective of the factors spelled out above (socialized subject, socializing actors, mediation mechanism), does not amount to a real paradigm change within socialization theory. Whatever the internalized content of the relational climate, the cultural atmosphere, or the parenting style, socialization is fundamentally still conceived in the same way. Of course, this does not make these models irrelevant, in that they do justice to the fact that different socialization styles are probably conducive to different types of personality. But the levels of discourse should still be carefully distinguished. In the last instance, the human



being—be it a democratic, authoritarian, or libertarian individual—either remains “society’s being” (Archer 2000), or becomes ontogenetically unintelligible. That is to say, what agency may be involved is not examined in its constitutive factors or in its relational components. It is revealed in an absence or in a deviation. It is observed empirically as an “inexact form of conformity and resistance” (Kuczynski & Parkin 2007: 276; Kuczynski & Hildebrandt 1997), as a phenomenon possibly leading the researcher to suspect that something is going on beyond the internalization of norms and values.

	<b>1. Forerunners</b>	<b>2. The structural-functional synthesis</b>	<b>3. Ecologic agency</b>
Socializing Factors	Family and significant others	Family, school, work, citizenship (ordered sequence)	Multiple social influences (de-institutionalized life course)
Socialized Subject	Traditional and/or “authoritarian” personality	Integrated “normal” personality	Post-traditional individual
Mediating mechanism	Imitation and internalization	Internalization (status-role complex)	Selective internalization (individual blend of social sources)
Key concepts	Behaviour, stimuli and responses, role-taking	Identification, societal norms and values	Agency, bidirectionality, life course
Exemplary authors	Skinner, Hull, Cooley, Ross	Durkheim, Parsons, Erikson, Bourdieu	Bronfenbrenner, Bandura, Kuczynski, Goffman, Giddens

Table 1. Socialization theory within the paradigm of internalization.

The presence of an empty space created by the deviation from social norms—what Luhmann described as the failure of socialization, claiming that sociological theory could not explain it—involves the idea that “another force” must be at work. But whether this is some kind of intentional human action or anything else remains to be seen. Going “beyond bidirectionality” (Kuczynski 2003) requires more radical theoretical innovation.

It should be noted that these reflections are often associated with the notion of “self-socialization” (Arnett 2007; Geulen 2002; Heinz 2002), about which the same considerations could be repeated. Such a concept has been frequently employed to maintain that human subjects do not develop their personality just by following the pattern learned by their family, but autonomously combine influences coming from many different sources. Insofar as such sources multiply and tend to include the subject in multiple and overlapping social spheres, the situation seems to call out a strong agential response on the part of individuals, who thereby go through their life courses as “self-socializing” subjects. In this case too, the problem is that inconsistent normative messages and the complexity of relational networks entail some kind of agency, which then remains under-theorized and unexplained. Table 1 above offers a highly simplified but hopefully clear synthesis of the argument developed so far.<sup>16</sup>

The key point is that the break with the idea of internalization and the search for novel forms of relationship between people and society emerges as the turning point leading toward an emergent paradigm of socialization.

In a nutshell, the evolution of socialization theory tends to distance itself from a “sociologistic” vision, i.e., from sociology as a discipline that “dissolves every interiority” (Rieff 2007: 6). At the same time, it breaks with the idea of *Urzwang*, that is of constraint, conditioning, and bond—which also involves interdiction—as the inner core of human ontogenesis, and ultimately of human culture itself. The key to such a turning point, however, remains unknown.

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<sup>16</sup> I can anticipate the scandal of mentioning Bourdieu together with Parsons (*horribile dictu*). I do not ignore the differences between them, but my argument revolves around the concept of habitus and the ontogenetic process involved. This is what justifies my choice.

### **/// After Internalization? Socialization and the Morphogenesis of Reflexivity**

#### **1. Socialization as Relational Reflexivity**

Sociology is in search of a theory that can keep together interaction with a complex environment on the one hand, and the autonomous elaboration of experience by human subjects on the other. In this search, the concept of agency comes to the fore, but remains underdetermined until further theoretical decisions are made and the corresponding problems are solved. It is initially necessary to spell out the basic assumptions required of a theory that adequately conceptualizes the forms of human/social mediation in a morphogenic society. Discussion must here revolve around two pivotal points.

The first concerns the essential decision indicating the shift to a different paradigm of socialization. As anticipated above, such a decision consists in the break with the idea of internalization. This is the real turning point with respect to the “modern” past. Giving up such a notion has vast and deep implications, which we can only begin to explore. In the Parsonian world, in which it was still possible to think that there was a “central value system,” the development of “healthy” and integrated adult personalities could be conceived as the expected outcome of a complex itinerary through various socialization agencies organized around a relatively consistent normative pattern. The resulting model was meant to explain—and to support—the emergence of “normal personalities” that would be fit to function as good citizens and good workers in Western democratic societies. Sociology has been far less successful when it came to distinguishing social differentiation from individualization in the strictest sense. This line of thought can be traced to George H. Mead (Habermas 1992), and brings a profound ambivalence into the theory. On the one hand, individual consciousness and reflexivity are conceived within the usual conceptual framework of internalization. The “Me” of the American pragmatist is a product of social relations. On the other hand, what Mead calls the “I” appears to be an undetermined pre-reflexive entity, open to random, continuous, highly contingent determinations, which is compatible with human freedom but is ontologically empty. This is all there is beyond the socialized “Me.” This Meadian dilemma effectively highlights the puzzle to be solved by contemporary theory. Once the concept of internalization has been dismissed, are we left with a volatile “I” or with an agency which can only be read in the backlight of imperfect socialization? This is prob-

ably one reason why the theme of reflexivity—which Mead did raise—was not adequately developed.<sup>17</sup>

The second relevant point consists in a fundamental insight, namely that the inner operation of consciousness and the forms of symbolization are closely connected.<sup>18</sup> In other words, there is a strong mutual connection between personal reflexivity and ideas of the Self—and indeed, between reflexivity, worldviews, and visions of the “place of human beings” in the world. Such an insight is necessary in order to tap into the depth of cultural change and to develop a suitable theory of the new forms of mediation (internalization, appropriation) between the human and the social.

These premises introduce the most significant theoretical alternative for studying the processes of socialization that sociology has produced in recent years. Margaret Archer’s systematic contribution is now well known. It is articulated in various volumes (2000, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2015a, 2015b) and raises multiple complex issues. My aim in this article is quite specific. I will first summarize its principal points, and then go on to discuss how the present socio-cultural dynamics are challenging this theoretical innovation. In that challenge, the emergence of a “post-human” cultural syndrome is revealed. Such a two-step argument also corresponds to Archer’s treatment of the two crucial issues mentioned above. I will take up the former here, and discuss the second in the following section (2).

First, the “I”/“Me” dilemma is tackled by a fresh way of thinking about the whole of socialization. Socialization is conceived in terms of reflexivity—as a personal emergent property which generates and re-generates the forms of personal and social identity throughout the ontogenetic process and in the continuous morphogenesis of the human person. The notion of internalization is superseded by a “reflexive relationship with the world,” resulting in a reflexively mediated *modus vivendi*. From the perspective of the present essay, the points to be highlighted are the following:

- a) The starting point is provided by the inescapable human condition, which consists in being-in-relation with the world in its natural, practical, and social dimensions. Such an option, of course, entails

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<sup>17</sup> Archer (2015a: 123, 126) could agree with this statement, but her critique of Mead is centred on his concept of “generalized other.” I believe that it is also his underlying personal ontology, as well as his notion of relations with the social and non-social world, that make his view of reflexivity problematic. This is consistent with Archer’s argument in other parts of her work.

<sup>18</sup> Awareness of this may help to connect the social scientific arguments about identity to the humanistic discourse on cultural forms and to research on the evolution of human consciousness in a systematic, fruitful, and non-reductionistic way. Here I can only point to some potentially interesting contributions to such a perspective. Beside the authors cited in note 6 above, see, e.g., Donald (2012) and Jung (2012).

important meanings, controversial assumptions, and relevant consequences. What must be underscored here is that such a relationship—not just human subjects with their perceptions or representations, and not just social structures with their overwhelming pressure—lies at the origin of the human condition, and it has the specific form of a “relation of concern” (Archer 2000; Sayer 2011). That is to say, it is constituted by the human concern for the world, which embraces the double meaning of what is pressing us (urging, striking, worrying) and what we care about—what is important to us, what we want to devote ourselves to, investing our lifetimes and energies.<sup>19</sup>

- b) The way the world is structured then encounters the human being with his or her own properties and inclinations. The world represents the context in which human beings are involuntarily placed. Nonetheless, it is only through the encounter with human beings and their emotions, concerns, and existential plans that such a context really becomes constraining or enabling. At the same time, most personal properties and powers, despite being rooted in the species’ own potentialities, only fully emerge through relations with the social and non-social world.

These first theoretical moves make it possible to shift from the *Urzwang* to a more comprehensive view. In the beginning there is not (only) an interdiction or a constraint, and also not just the anxious need to reduce complexity. There is a pressing-and-engaging relationship. Thus the social domain is both a limit and an object of attachment—a possibly unpleasant determination of the self as well as a horizon for personal fulfilment.

- c) Reflexivity operates in this relation to the world, initially distinguishing a person’s self within the natural order as an object among other objects, then within the practical sphere as a subject that can act causally upon objects, and finally in the social domain as a subject among other subjects—that is, other entities that can be thought to be endowed with intentionality and with properties and powers similar to one’s own.
- d) Accumulating experience is stratified in a process involving the phases of discernment, deliberation, and dedication. Through that process people identify their concerns, decide upon a personal manner of prioritizing them on the ground of an ultimate concern, and shape a *modus vivendi*, a lifestyle oriented to achieve that con-

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<sup>19</sup> For some considerations about such a theoretical option see Maccarini and Prandini (2010).

stellation of concerns and existential goals. Reflexivity constitutes the medium within which all of this happens, in continuous interchange with the world and in the corresponding, ongoing revision of priorities, and the exchange rates between different goals and life plans.

- e) Therefore, human individuals do not either act upon internalized social norms or swing their way forward between a socialized “Me” and a wildly contingent “I.” Human personhood is ontogenetically stratified. In relation with the world, “I” reflect upon the situation of the “Me,” and through relationships with “Us” come to develop a “You” which articulates my role in society. This in turn entails a changing “I” and a different “Me,” which I examine anew within a new round of personal morphogenesis. “I,” “Me,” “We,” and “You” are constantly changing in the process (Archer 2015b: 101–103).

Archer’s theory effectively articulates ontology and history.<sup>20</sup> In the framework of critical realism and the morphogenetic approach, an ontologically grounded view of the Self is developed. On the other hand, the resulting theory of socialization is not only conceptually sound, but also particularly suitable for studying socialization in the present social conditions. Therefore, it represents a considerable advance compared to the other strands of contemporary theory mentioned in section 2. My following discussion will deal mainly with the social and historical dimension, because the latter is the focus of the challenge I want to illustrate.

## **2. New Forms of Unity? Ontology, Time, and Sociality in Unfettered Morphogenesis**

The keystone of my argument is what Archer calls the “necessity of selection.” As she clarifies, the main features of a morphogenic society—especially the multiplying opportunities of action and experience and the incongruity of the messages coming from less and less consensual socializing agents—involve the necessity for people to select their possible actions, experiences, and life courses in such a way as to prioritize their goals and to establish the related compatibilities. Such a selection results in “giving one’s life a shape” (Archer 2000, 2012, 2015b: 128ff.). Since there is no generally accepted social norm or institutionalized coherence, such a selection

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<sup>20</sup> These two strictly related aspects of Archer’s work appear connected and distinguished with great effectiveness and synthesis in Archer (2015a, 2015b).

and harmonization can only be enacted by persons based on their concerns. Drawing on Charles Taylor's well-known work (1989), Archer explains that the need to shape a life corresponds to a more general "need of unity" in order for life to make sense. Her work may also be understood as a full-blown sociological argument about the forms in which such a unity is generated, through social relationships and the related reflections within, upon, and in regard to them (Archer 2015b: 135–142) on the part of socialized agents who are also "strong evaluators" (ibid.: 126).

The relevant point now is that such a relational reflexivity also unfolds in connection to a cultural repertoire, i.e., symbolical resources that can be appealed to in order to make sense of experience.<sup>21</sup> And these resources can come either from educational doctrines or from the cultural industry, or from other symbolical foci of society. In any case, culturally established ideas of the human individual closely interweave with the morphogenesis of the Self. Archer sheds light precisely on this point when she claims that

the spread of an epistemology of dissolution can have serious repercussions for one of our most distinctive human properties and powers—our reflexivity. Although our continuous sense of self is, I will argue, ontologically inviolable, our personal and social identities are epistemologically vulnerable. (...) Both then can be undermined by a reflexivity which repudiates concern as anything other than ephemeral, and which thus repulses the solidarity of self and its solidarity with others, which is necessary for commitment (Archer 2000: 2).

With this statement Archer is clearly pointing to the need for a cultural theory of socialization<sup>22</sup> (Arnett 1995). Her phrasing is quite effective, although I am more pessimistic (or optimistic, depending on one's anthropological options) about the possibility of crossing the boundary between epistemological and ontological vulnerability on the part of the scientific-technological complex. The thesis I will just begin to lay out here is that the very self-perception and self-understanding of human subjects

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<sup>21</sup> Joas also emphasizes that experience is articulated in the immediate emotions experienced, the subjective interpretation of experience, and the culturally established meanings of various social groups and communities (2009: 47–61).

<sup>22</sup> Although this insight is not systematically developed in her theory, I regard it as fully consistent with her whole theoretical fabric. When Archer mentions an "epistemology of dissolution," she is referring to the postmodernist views that tend to deconstruct any idea of a human subject. The whole book *Being Human* is dedicated to countering such a trend.

may change, involving memory and the deep structures of conscious operations.

From the vantage point of socialization theory some crucial issues can be raised. The essential question is: what is it that could presently “undermine” personal reflexivity, and what would be the consequences? It is here that personal ontology interacts with some special features of the contemporary socio-historical formation. And here the connection between structures of consciousness and forms of symbolization also comes into play. My tentative response starts from the claim that we may be witnessing the emergence of biographies and forms of life that tend to escape the necessity of selection and to reject the idea that life can (and indeed must) have a shape. Is it not possible that the morphogenic society “taken seriously” may disclose “another side” of its constitutive features, one that challenges the concern-oriented type of personal reflexivity? Following Taylor’s theme, it is well known that the transformations of modern identity resulted in a fundamental fragmentation, and in the opposition between experience and identity whereby the idea of a unified Self allegedly comes to an end—fading in an unintegrated flux of expressivity (Taylor 1989: 456–465). Taylor’s famous argument becomes relevant here in two particular respects. Firstly, in the same pages he also hints at “new forms of unity” of the Self, corresponding to new ways of inhabiting time—which are then left fundamentally unexplored. This prompts us to investigate new modes of self-understanding and personal reflexivity, which are not just residual and caused by reflexive failures. It is, of course, true that some features of the morphogenic society may result in agents becoming passive, and in the growth of expressive reflexives or distracted people through digital surfeit. That this whole cultural trend may result in more “casualties” of reflexivity is a possibility by no means to be dismissed. But the real novelty I want to highlight is that beyond the category of the “fractured reflexives” (Archer 2003, 2007)—who are unable to articulate purposeful plans or a real quest for unity of life—a peculiar type of reflexivity may be emerging which underpins genuine “forms of unification of the Self” in their own right.

Secondly, if Taylor’s basic assumptions are accepted, then it also becomes clear that the impulse to reject the selective imperative and the need to shape a life represents no “critique” of Archer’s theory of socialization and identity. The latter provides a sociological conceptualization of those “inescapable frameworks” within which “normal” (or “healthy”) human identities grow. It is the attempt to break out of that symbolical landscape which constitutes an unprecedented cultural and practical challenge—one



that possibly leads human reflexivity and identity toward the unknown land of the post-human.

The task of this essay is to sketch an outline of that challenge. Such a brief outline will revolve around three dimensions, namely, ontology, time, and sociality. The culture of society—the educational doctrines and practices as well as any other symbolical source of the self—can be interpreted with reference to those domains. When a person reflects on his or her identity and on what he or she cares about, he or she is always referring—at least implicitly—to the type of entity he or she believes he or she is, to what other people mean for his or her self-fulfilment, and to how he or she sees her life over time. Being materialistic and utilitarian “middlescents”<sup>23</sup> rather than community-oriented or spiritually sensible persons, and reaching any form of mature integrity, involves specific differences in all those aspects. People interact with the natural, practical, and social layers of reality along those vectors. Therefore, they are also the unavoidable focal points of every discourse on education/socialization that aims to indicate an “ideal” for persons to pursue. Along these axes I would like to pinpoint—although in a still modest and introductory way—a few boundary lines separating the emergent identity-building processes from a concern-oriented type of reflexivity.

## 2.1. Morphogenesis and Personal Ontology

At the level of personal ontology, an emergent and increasing tendency is the “naturalistic” view of the human person. Broadly speaking, such a standpoint is ultimately rooted in various versions of neuroscience and in the profound revision of human self-understanding it has fostered. In particular, it challenges the notion of human reflexivity as the expression of a consciousness endowed with distinctive properties, including free will. In this respect, a useful starting point for discussion is provided by Habermas (2007), who emphasizes that “first person” experience may be very hard to reconcile with the supposed “enlightenment” produced by neuroscience. While the former leads to belief in the irreducibility of one’s personal consciousness, the other sharply denies it. The idea of responsible agency entails the capacity to reflect, distancing oneself from concrete situations, and to deliberate regarding the goods involved. Further, it implies the ubiquitous ability to decide in different ways, be-

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<sup>23</sup> This word is often employed in research on adulthood to indicate a type of personality that presents some features of adolescence in middle-aged persons (“middle-aged adolescents”).

cause no compelling reason acts upon consciousness in the same way as a natural cause does. In the wake of neuroscientific discoveries, such a responsible agency risks being reduced to a mere language game and being deprived of any validity. One example is the increasing spread of naturalistic explanations in the domain of criminal law, which threatens the idea of personal responsibility. If this trend were to lead finally to a paradigm change, the impact would be immense. Habermas notes that such an enlightenment crosses the conceptual threshold into human “self-objectification,” because the shift in the naturalization of the human mind “dissolves the perspective from which alone an increase in knowledge could be experienced as emancipation from constraints” (2007: 24). He is thereby indicating a performative limit of the naturalistic semantics. If the “lights” of new knowledge dissolve the very notion of the human person, they also remove the self-reference to any real Self that could be enlightened. Thus, Habermas wonders whether it would be possible to “adapt one’s normatively molded consciousness to an objectivating self-description, according to which one’s own thoughts, intentions, and actions are not just instantiated by brain processes, but completely determined by them” (ibid.: 23). Would it be possible for subjects to develop the capacity of “harmonization” and “articulation” (*Sagbarkeit*) of what is emerging from unconscious processes, and should be recognized as such, with conscious reasons? Habermas reminds us that Wolf Singer—an accomplished supporter of the new semantics of the human—has employed the term “maturity” to qualify such an awareness, but goes on to ask what this word could mean in the present context (ibid.). To this I would respond that such a form of “maturity” could lead to the embrace of a brand new sense of being human. This would amount to some updated version of Charles Taylor’s famous “Victorian courage”—an attitude that emerged in the West after the devastating revolution in human self-understanding prompted by Darwin’s work. That existential attitude essentially consists in the “heroism of incredulity,” which Taylor describes as “the deep spiritual satisfaction one derives from facing the truth of things, although this may be bleak and discouraging” (Taylor 1989: 404). In the present case, the truth about ourselves would be our non-existence as persons, our being nothing more than “what” (not “who”) we are. The highest performance allowed to our species would be to realize this, and to try to coordinate the unconscious impulses with the “superstructural” reasons that appear to consciousness. As Niklas Luhmann would conclude, we are a close, self-referential, self-reproducing network. “And there is nothing more to

say” (Luhmann 1986: 325).<sup>24</sup> The meaning of such words as maturity and emancipation would then change radically, in that they would refer exclusively to removing the limits of what it is possible to experience.<sup>25</sup>

The Habermasian mention of a “normatively molded” consciousness evokes socialization, which is the fundamental process through which such a “moulding” is achieved. The naturalistic view is not limited to the sphere of the research professions— which would really represent nothing new. Beyond those social groups that we could define as the “anthropological avant-garde,” a similar perspective is beginning to affect the educational discourse as well. Educational doctrines and programmes may already be influenced by the kind of reductionism we have just discussed.<sup>26</sup> The idea of removing the limits to what can be experienced, and thereby developing an original notion of “mature” identity, may be part of the current educational discourse. And the loss of meaning on the part of the young people who should be enlightened by such doctrines could be the related “collateral damage.” The current techniques and practices that might lead to human enhancement—about which a hugely extended literature already exists—must be meaningfully connected to such shifting self-understanding, and to its roots within the educational discourse as well.

The alternative Habermas proposes, despite misgivings and qualifications, would be to conceive of human beings in terms of a layered ontology of emergent properties (2007: 40). In doing this he indicates an important path. But two further steps are necessary to explore it. First, such a model must include personal properties and powers in the strict sense. On the contrary, Habermas thinks in terms of a two-layer model, going from the biological level straight to grammar and communication rules. This is likely to be an insufficiently layered ground to escape reductionism, in that it does not really account for those properties one would want to reassert. Second, as Habermas himself notes, the relationships connecting the various layers must be spelled out. If these are totally contingent, it becomes impossible to avoid self-objectification. All of this calls for a realist view of

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<sup>24</sup> See also Luhmann (1995, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Emancipation would then coincide with “morphological freedom” (Rodotà 2012). For a brief discussion see also Maccarini (2016b).

<sup>26</sup> This occurs in many health education and sexual education programmes (and other programmes that are loosely connected to various aspects of personal or social identity) fostered by the relevant ministries in various European countries. They produce a vast quantity of materials—books, videos, etc.—to be used in actual teaching environments. It is impossible here to present an analysis of this vast array of documents. For examples, one might look at the interesting documents produced by the Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA), Department of Sexuaufklärung, Verhütung und Familienplanung. See also the reflections by Sullivan (2012).

the human being—one, Habermas believes, for which we are left “without representation” (2007: 40).

## 2.2. Morphogenesis and Lifetime

A concern-oriented kind of reflexivity generates and entails a particular way of inhabiting one’s life time. Archer projects the process of morphogenesis of the Self upon this axis, providing an instructive scheme for our argument (see Fig. 1 below). Its rationale can be explained as follows. The “Me” (i.e., the “past selves”) is represented as a sequence of adjacent, higher and higher rectangles, indicating accumulating experience and determinations. The active, dialogical “I” drives the evolution, whereas the “future selves” indicated as “You” are graphically represented as squares of equal dimensions. Archer makes clear that such a “You” changes over time, “be it only because its potential is diminished” (2003: 112). Therefore, the Figure might need to be amended to illustrate how in various ages of life the possible future selves make first an expanding, then shrink-

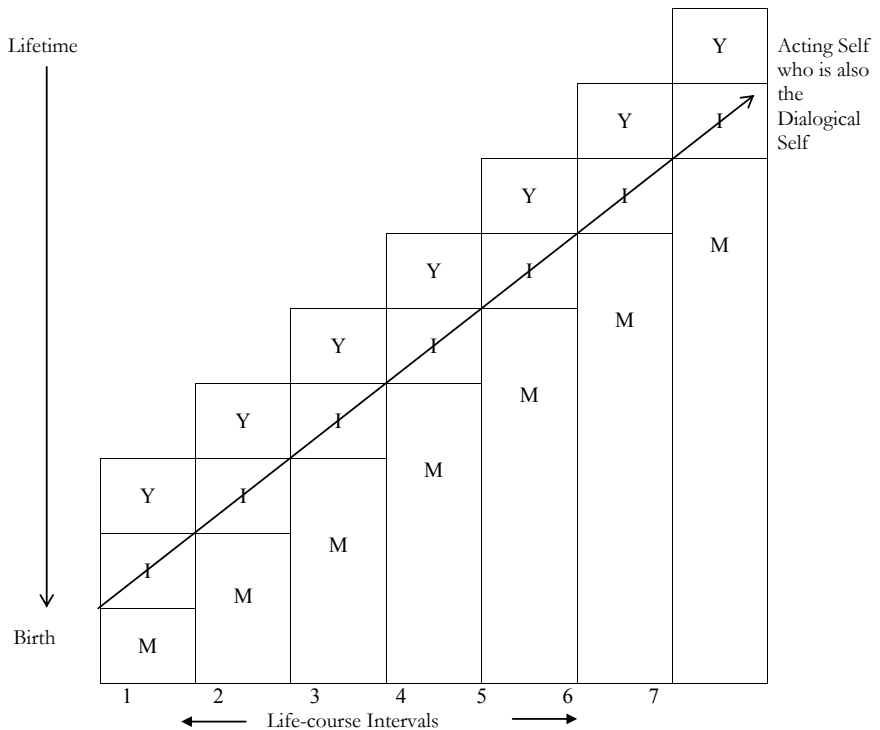


Figure 1. Phases of the Self over time (Archer 2003: 114).

ing, horizon—until the time comes when the human potential to “become other things,” to make choices, to undertake other roles, and to tread new paths diminishes until it is finally nullified. In any case, the scheme mentioned above is quite important, in that it shows a planning, reflexively linear view, which accepts the irreversible character of time, the accumulation of memory, and its relation to the future. The connection of this scheme to Archer’s theoretical bulk consists in the fact that such characteristics of time are contingent upon the two key factors stressed above, the necessity of selection and the need to shape a life. The notions of selection and shape conceptually imply an approach to time such as I have just outlined. In this respect, there is an interesting analogy between this perspective and the well-known argument Erik Erikson made about integrity. Integrity would involve “accepting one’s unique life cycle as what it had to be, which necessarily did not admit of any substitution” (1963: 268). Lack of self-integration is revealed by the “fear of death: the one and only life cycle is not accepted as the last in life. Despair expresses the feeling that time is now short, too short to try to start another life and to try alternative ways to achieve integrity” (ibid.: 269).<sup>27</sup> In Archer’s terms, this could be phrased by saying that despair occurs when one’s *modus vivendi* has been a failure, and by now time is perceived as too short to evaluate new experiences and start a new cycle of discernment, deliberation, and dedication. From a sociological standpoint, Archer’s approach should not be morally overburdened, since the concerns embraced by the subjects can widely differ in moral quality. Concerns should not be confused with “values.” But it is still true that relational reflexivity along the vector of time may lead to personal maturity and integrity, whereas denial of this engagement with the world—characterized by relations of concern and by the orientation to take care of things as well as of other people—is likely to result in a “desperate” self.

Arguably, the morphogenic society nourishes different views and practices, which can be respectively traced to either perspective. An example comes from life-course research. That life courses are contingent and de-institutionalized, and that identities and existential goals may change rapidly, has been known for a long time. All of this is not a new problem. The model of the morphogenesis of the self by no means involves a slow, static, or highly ordered biography. Contingency and personal instability represent nothing but the intensification of the modern identity game. There

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<sup>27</sup> This culminates in the following “generative formula”: “healthy children will not be afraid of life if their parents have sufficient integrity not to be afraid of death” (Erikson 1963: 269).

are, however, three sets of phenomena which could be taken as indicators of the emergence of a substantially different temporal logic.

First of all, social acceleration fosters the accumulation of experience, deceptively translating temporal contingency (e.g., the rapid change in one's identity) into some kind of simultaneous "fullness," whereby identities and experiences appear to be reversible, so that one may "recall" them at any moment. This dismisses sequential temporality and alters the very notion of memory. That social acceleration may be taken as a functional equivalent of transcendence, i.e., as a different way to search for "fullness of life," has been claimed by Rosa (2013), drawing on Blumenberg's work (1986). I would add that this may happen precisely through the accumulation of experience and the effort to keep all options with us, making our life as reversible as possible in terms of choices, decisions, and experiences.

Secondly, field research has revealed a growing indetermination in regard to what "adulthood" really means, making it increasingly hard for society to attribute a clear meaning to this age of life. There are authors who blame this difficulty on the market, which has been accused of reshaping and "selling" again the old myth of eternal youth (Blatterer 2010). Be that as it may, this highlights a clear complication in the time line.

Finally, the field of study that has been known as thanatology is clearly indicating deep cultural changes in the way death and immortality are conceived (Bryant 2003). In this domain, research is showing that the need for immortality continues to lie at the basis of many human attitudes and behaviours—individual and collective—while many of these tend to exceed the symbolical forms typical of the old humanistic cultures.

### **2.3. Morphogenesis and Human Sociability**

In the social dimension of meaning numerous facts should be taken into account. First and foremost, there is a lack of value commitment—which has been made the object of a lot of empirical research, particularly concerning young people.<sup>28</sup> This topic includes political and civic commitment and orientation, as well as a broader emphasis on the inclination to

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<sup>28</sup> Citations would be superfluous, in that their number would be huge, and their results would probably be quite repetitive. Such studies are obviously important, particularly in regard to the future—e.g. the future of democracy, citizenship, or civil society—but if the underlying assumption is that youngsters represent a particularly problematic part of the population, then it would make little sense. It is now clear that the dynamics of commitment do not simply separate the young from older people, but follow more complex paths, along which generations can only be defined in relation to each other, to their cultural heritage, and to their historical context.

assume durable, long-term commitments. Such studies produce relevant outcomes in various domains. One example is the way commitment (and the lack thereof) may affect economic and financial decision-making.<sup>29</sup> Another regards the sphere of intimate relations, where the inclination to establish bonds that transcend individuals' momentary gratification has a profound influence upon reproductive behaviour—with the related consequences at the macro level of demographic trends. Indeed, the whole manner of imagining and experiencing parenthood needs fresh analysis.

Another relevant issue about the social dimension of meaning bears upon formal and informal associations, friendly networks, and the way people experience loneliness in late modern society. Both the structural, objective dimension and the subjective ways in which people make sense of their social bonds should be carefully examined.

To cut a long story short, there are emergent trends within our cultural system which stand in clear contradiction to the necessity of selecting and shaping a life. To the extent that those trends make their way into the educational discourse and practice— and more generally in people's lifestyles—they may result in a profound transformation of the ontological, temporal, and social structures of personal and collective life. If this were to prevail, the logic of opportunity that characterizes the morphogenic society would translate into a deep change in identity-building processes and outcomes.

### **/// Conclusions: Hypotheses on Human (Trans)formation**

Having taken all these things into consideration, it is now time to draw some provisional conclusions about socialization in the morphogenic society.

First, the approach to socialization as relational reflexivity represents an essential theoretical innovation intended to make sense of contemporary social dynamics. It combines two crucially important insights, namely the break with the concept of internalization and the connection between types of conscious processes and forms of symbolization—particularly ideas of the Self. Consequently, it can sustain the complexity that is necessary for a theory to function as the sociological reference point in the context of interdisciplinary reflections upon human transformation. Furthermore, it constitutes a considerable advance not only compared to clas-

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<sup>29</sup> See Richard Sennett's well-known *The dizzy life of Davos man* (1998), which indicates the characteristic human type of the financial elites.

sical socialization theory but also with respect to contemporary ecological approaches and developmental psychology, which emphasize the role of agency and subjectivity.

However, the role of culture must be more systematically integrated in the theory. A cultural theory of socialization involves the study of the emergent symbolical resources that are available within the cultural system to develop concepts of the Self. The latter in turn may well modify the forms of personal reflexivity. From this vantage point it becomes possible to highlight the different socialization processes and types of reflexivity that are likely to coexist within a morphogenic society. Some of these processes differ in that they constitute divergent ways to instantiate and institutionalize the logic of opportunity that characterizes unfettered morphogenesis. The morphogenic society not only fosters a reflexive imperative and nourishes a concern-oriented type of reflexivity, it is also the playground of cultural trends that deviate from the necessity of selecting and shaping a life—two necessary assumptions underlying a reflexive theory of socialization. To the extent that these ideal trends play a role in education/socialization—both in doctrines and practice—and are drawn upon by human subjects in their reflexive deliberations about themselves, they may explain the loss of touch with a whole range of moral emotions and the development of a brand new self-understanding of the human being and experience. Reflexivity is itself called into question in such a situation, and may undergo dramatic change. The whole self-understanding of human beings, down to their deepest emotional, perceptual, and symbolical structures, may alter.

A third conclusion is that the significance of such a transformation cannot be downplayed, even by lumping it in the big bag of postmodern deconstruction. Here I could only provide a quick—and by all means unsatisfactory—outline, organized around a few changes in the framework of human self-representation in the ontological, temporal, and social dimension of meaning. Nevertheless, such allusions have hopefully been sufficient to convey the message that a new, specific meaning of self-fulfilment is emerging—i.e., a particular way of searching for the “fullness of life” and the unity of experience. This is happening “after” deconstruction and, for all the possible connections, cannot be identified with it. Therefore, it is possible to speak of a new *paideia*, insofar as these symbolical features—elaborated by elites and avant-gardes endowed with economic, technological, political, and pedagogical resources—could coalesce and crystallize



new ideals of the Self. What is happening then is not just de-symbolization, but an emergent meta-narrative with its own mythology and symbolism.

Fourth, it is obviously still hard to describe the substantive features of the dawning forms of identity. The model of concern-oriented reflexivity may serve as a useful framework against which those emerging forms could be seen as “deviations.” This does not amount to turning such a model into a normative ideal. But there is an undeniable connection between a particular type of process and the likeliness to tap into certain goods, individual and collective. Indeed, such goods become visible for a given type of person, who has certain skills and capacities. One central element in the emerging self-representation seems to be the rejection of a given shape and definition—which may leave something outside the range of one’s individuality. This could be conducive to a personal ontology entirely determined by the desire of ever-contingent self-definition. In this symbolical landscape, (a) expressive and instrumental traits interweave in unprecedented ways, and (b) the typical conflicts of modern identity and socialization reappear in new guise, in a symbolical catastrophe blending and fusing opposite poles together. For example, individuals may turn out to be radically de-socialized and confused within hugely extended social networks. They may develop into lonely beings who tend to swallow other entities and to appropriate their typical forms of experience, or they may establish original forms of sociality and connectedness.

Fifth, it becomes clear that in the present societal and cultural predicament the struggle for developing “within a human form” will also depend upon capacities and competences that are themselves culturally/epistemologically vulnerable. The capacity to reflect upon oneself in relation to the world (and vice versa), to understand oneself as a unified being, to evaluate one’s emotions, to discern, deliberate and commit oneself to a given lifestyle —although based on universally human dispositions—is not something that just happens, but requires particular competences—particularly within an overall socio-cultural context in which such a process cannot be taken for granted. This once again calls education into question, in that such competences can be taught and learned. Therefore, the integration of Archer’s theory of reflexivity with some strands of competence-oriented thinking about education/socialization must be part of the agenda for future research.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> An example is provided by the tentative connections between the educational discourse on “character” and theories of social and emotional learning. For an introductory discussion see Maccarini (2016a).

Finally, the underlying hypothesis that has inspired my argument is that the emergent semantics of the Self reveal a manifest convergence with the ideological offshoot of the scientific-technological complex. This reflects the fact that human agency is increasingly inscribed within systems of action, communication, and social regulation that are technically shaped and controlled. Such new ways of self-understanding anticipate identity-building processes and outcomes that may be called “post-human.” If I had to choose a single message that I want to convey in the present essay, it would be the need to understand that education and socialization are among the protagonists in the profound anthropological change we are undergoing. To a great extent, and in a more literal sense than in past times, human beings will be what they are taught to desire.

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### **/// Abstract**

This essay deals with reflexivity and socialization processes in late modernity. First, it is argued that within the societal frame of “unbound morphogenesis” socialization theory is most adequately articulated into a realist-morphogenetic approach, which conceives of socialization as a reflexive, concern-oriented, relational process. However, the so-called morphogenic society involves profound cultural change, impinging upon the idea of the self and its fundamental need to “shape a life.” When such changes are integrated within socialization theory, it becomes clear that different identity-building processes co-exist, including ones that would bring about deep transformations of human reflexivity and challenge its “regular” operation. A brief outline of such a challenge is provided, along the dimensions of personal ontology, time, and sociality. Finally, the need is indicated to develop Archer’s model further, and some provisional conclusions are drawn concerning the possible developmental paths of human personhood depending on these dynamic factors.

Keywords:

socialization, reflexivity, identity, concern, morphogenesis

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# REFLEXIVITY AND THE SYMBOLIC WE-RELATION

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Symbols tend, by their nature, to create bonds between different spheres of reality and show the intimate relationality between individuals and society: without others, individuals would not make use of symbols, and at the same time society depends on individuals' capabilities to know, think, and communicate through symbols in order to adapt, cast doubt on, or (attempt to) change society itself. Sociological analysis of symbolic processes has substantially developed along two lines of research: the first prevalently stresses that individuals are conditioned by symbolic processes, hence particular importance is given to the objective side of symbolization; the second line mainly emphasizes that individuals condition symbolic processes and particular importance is thus given to the subjective side of symbolization. The first line has been discussed in particular in the sociology of Durkheim and his successors; the second line has been developed especially in the phenomenological sociology of Schütz and his followers. Durkheim made a fundamental contribution to the study of social symbolism: starting from the premise that the glue of collective consciousness lies in the production and socialization of shared symbols, he came to the reductionist conclusion that there is an overlap between the symbolic and society. In Durkheim there is no lack of reference to the subjective side of symbolization, for instance, when he talks of the individual's integration in the collectivity through a process of symbolic identification. Nevertheless, in the general trend of his sociology, the scales definitely tend to dip towards the structural dimension of the symbolic. On the other hand, in his attempt to found a sociology upon the symbolic "We-relation," it can be observed that Schütz mainly looks at the symbol in an individualizing light. This essay will consider the features constituting the symbolic

We-relation in order to try to discover how the reflexive Self (whose subjectivity emerges in the interaction with verbal and non-verbal symbols) can generate changes to the Self, the You, and the We-relation itself.

According to Schütz,<sup>1</sup> the symbolic We-relation is formed through the attention we pay to the attitude of another person. In a relationship, individuals not only experience themselves and the other, but also the specific relationship itself. Hence, the experienced world is neither the private world of the Self nor the private world of the other, but the “We-world.” While individuals can only grasp their thoughts as belonging to the past through reflection, within the limits in which they can experience the thoughts and acts of the other in the vivid present, they know more about the other and the other knows more about them than they each know about their own consciousness: this present, common to both, is the sphere of “We.”

The We-relation not only provides the basis for intersubjectivity but the very “Thou-experience” itself (see Ivana 2016). In effect, it is true that in the natural attitude the Self can perceive changes in others’ bodies as signs of their experiences of consciousness, that is, “the mere existence of a frame of reference referring to the other, of a system of interpretable signs or symbols, for instance, is sufficient for the belief in the existence of other persons” (Schütz 1942: 345). Nevertheless, the Thou-orientation is not sufficient to constitute the foundation of the Thou-experience because, in it, it is not possible to check that the observer’s interpretation of the sense of the experiences matches the sense meant by the actor. In short, there is no sequence of reciprocal mirroring that allows real access to the modes of attention of the other’s consciousness: “the mirroring of Self in the experience of the stranger (more exactly, in my grasp of the other’s experience of me) is a constitutive element of the We-relation” (Schütz & Luckmann 1975, Eng. transl. 1973: 67).

What has been illustrated thus far does not mean that for Schütz the We-relation equates to an explication of the nexus of subjective sense: the connection between behaviour and the meaning captured from it is in principle opaque, not explicit. To understand the connection between current behaviour and the meaning captured from it, it is necessary to reflect on past experience and exit the We-relation. The moment in which the Self reflects on the “We,” the unity of the flow of experience dissolves,

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<sup>1</sup> In connection with the renewed centrality of social symbolism in Schützian studies, it must be remarked that the third conference of the International Alfred Schütz Circle for Phenomenology and Interpretive Social Science, held at Waseda University in Tokyo in 2016, was entitled “The Symbolic Construction of Reality”.

the Thou- and Self-experiences split, and Thou-meanings are no longer grasped as they are being produced but as products: the explication process consequently does not belong to the We-relation but presupposes it (see Schütz & Luckmann 1975, Eng. transl. 1973: 63).

Schütz further investigates the symbolic characteristics of the We-relation in the essay *Symbol, Reality and Society*, which reads “[the We-relation] belongs to a finite province of meaning other than that of the reality of everyday life and can be grasped only by symbolization” (1972: 318). Schütz claims that in common-sense knowledge, the social world is experienced at two levels of appresentative references: that of individuals and that of social collectivities. Single individuals and their thoughts are grasped through signs, which are systems of appresentative references within the world of everyday life. According to Schütz, it is a matter of “immanent transcendence,” namely, both members of the appresentative relationship through which this transcendence is grasped belong to the same province of meaning, the paramount reality. Social collectivities, however, not being entities that fall within the reality of everyday life but being constructs of common-sense whose reality lies in another sub-universe can only be grasped symbolically. For example, social collectivities or institutionalized social relations can be experienced by meeting individuals who appresent the government, such as a president or a minister. In this case, it is a “great transcendence.” The appresentative element of this second appresentative relationship is the common situation as defined by the participants and the appresented idea is that of association, participation, and society: “the We-relation as such transcends the existence of either consociate within the paramount reality and can be appresented only by symbolization” (Schütz 1972: 353). The idea of partnership symbolizes the We-relation with different degrees of intimacy: We-colleagues, We-friends, We-lovers. In any case, “the symbols [appresenting social collectivities] pertain to the paramount reality and motivate our actions within” (ibid.). In social relations based on the We-relation, it is therefore not (only) pragmatic intention that motivates the action, but a symbolic element, transcending the reality of everyday life. In the end the “We” becomes the experience of Self and Thou as individuality and, at the same time, the constitution of a social relationship that should not be seen as the sum of Self and Thou, but in a certain sense as a new subject.

In its intrinsic tendency towards subjectivization (albeit collective, not of the single individual) the phenomenological approach to social relations may reveal some limits in a macrostructural type of analysis: for example,

according to Donati (2011: 82), in Schütz's view of relations—which has been influenced by psychologism and the pragmatist philosopher William James, and has a certain tendency towards formalistic nominalism—it can be difficult to reconstruct relations from subjects taken individually, even when they are considered in terms of their intersubjective orientation. Donati distances himself from Schütz when Schütz puts the relational dynamic that comes before the subject in *epoché*—something that Schütz himself, albeit with some internal contradictions, criticized at a certain point of his career when he turned Husserl's concept of *epoché* into *epoché* of the natural attitude. It is precisely in this conception of a “We” that takes priority over the transcendental of personal consciousness that Schütz's revision of Husserl's phenomenological method lies. And on this basis, it can be hypothesized that Donati might—at least partially—agree that the symbolic We-relation and the world of others (the *Mitwelt*) is not a secondary but an original phenomenon.

While it is evident that the subject's experience of his own action is theoretically different from the experiences of others' action with the same end, the reciprocity of perspectives allows Schütz to pass from a Self-centred to a socio-centred position and explains why it is possible that the sense of the world is shared even though the sense of individuals' experiences is radically subjective. In an essay on the sociology of music, Schütz further investigates the concept of this common “We” by pointing out that in his operas Mozart gives an exemplary representation of how human beings meet and communicate in a We-relation that does not correspond either to the sum of single individuals that make up the relationship or to an anonymous community that eliminates these same individuals' uniqueness: “In spite of their diversified reaction to the common situation, in spite of their diversified individual characteristics, they act together, feel together, will together as a community, as a We” (1956: 241).

Furthermore, Schütz (1951) in no way denies the fact that its conceptual structure and capacity to typicize make verbal language a preferred tool for transmitting meanings. Nevertheless, he considers that it is not linguistic-verbal communication (which implies a semantic system) that necessarily underlies social relations. In certain cases (such as making music together), verbal communication can presuppose a prelinguistic underlying relationship, a non-conceptual “mutual tuning-in relationship.” Donati's view is similar in certain respects. Despite starting from different epistemological presuppositions in regard to phenomenology, Donati also does not conceive of communication as a necessary foundation for the We-relation, but

the We-relation as the foundation of communication. On the relationship between communication, culture and social relations, Donati's relational approach stands apart both from the structural-functionalist paradigm (for which communication is a product of culture) and the neo-functionalist constructivist paradigm (for which communication is a closed system that produces culture without any communicating subjects being seen): society is not made solely of communications, nor is it a communicating culture, but it is made from social relations that are communications between subjects who interact within a culture and through a culture. Thus, Donati seems more or less consciously to revive some of Schütz's intuitions—to the point of proposing a new sociological hermeneutics capable of grasping the processes conferring sense on the actual web of relations pertaining to our being in the world as subjects:

[the] social relation cannot be reduced to a symbolic mediation, a projection of individuals, or the expression of structures. It is something more and something different. Social relation is an invisible but real entity, which cannot be treated as a thing (as stated by the first rule of Durkheim's method) (Donati 2015: 87);

the We must be symbolized (by ego and alter avowing to being a couple in some way), even if the symbol employed is interpreted through different thoughts and meanings by ego and by alter. The symbol indicates the reality of the relation (We, not-Them), such that whatever the We does (for example, eating a meal together, spending a holiday together) is defined and lived as a relation (reciprocal action) (Archer & Donati 2015: 185–186).

In order to try to overcome the difficulties of phenomenological and structuralist theories, those who deal with the sociology of symbolic processes and in particular with the symbolic We-relation should try to study the symbol by forming and maintaining a relationship between three elements: (a) reality, meant as the life-world, and as the world of the social construction and bond; (b) the symbolic, meant as the sphere of cultural production; (c) the knowing and acting subject. At this point, while making this attempt, in order to investigate the nature of symbolization it is necessary to discuss the Self's rationality in a perspective that seeks to avoid both a hypo-socialized and a hyper-socialized conception of that same Self.

Social symbolization can be defined as a relationship that involves three terms: (a) a signifier (the symbol); (b) a signified (the symbolized) and (c) the subjects (individual and/or social) to whom the symbol refers, and for whom it replaces the symbolized (Gattamorta 2010: chap. 6). There is an intrinsic relationality between objects, signs, and interpretants. The very process of receiving and decoding systems cannot happen in a mechanical and passive way but through the (at least minimal) reflexivity of the interpretant subjects: “the symbol is thus more than a mere substitute stimulus—more than a mere stimulus for a conditioned response or reflex (...) the response to a symbol does and must involve consciousness” (Mead 1934: 125).<sup>2</sup> It could also be said that “symbolic mediation” can be thought of as the “relational space between a reality in itself and the knowing subject (the latter immersed in the culture of collective symbolic representations, at the various levels of common-sense knowledge, institutional knowledge and macrosocial strategic knowledge)” (Donati 2002: 233). In addition, it can be observed that the symbol’s *raison d’être*, its power, seems to come from social conditions and facts external to the symbol itself.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the symbol cannot be conceived in a merely subjective way (as an individual mental process that affects the objects), in the same way as it cannot be imprisoned in the social structure. Instead, it should be observed as an emerging dimension of social relations that presupposes a non-complete reduction of culture to the social.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, one of sociology’s primary objectives should be to “clarify the relationship between the intimate symbolic-relational constitution of the subject (in all I-Me relations) and the relational character of the context and the other variables (and levels) at play. The social relation is at the same time a container of symbolization and itself the producer of symbolization” (Donati 2009: 396).

On the one hand, a sociology of symbolic processes should share Jeffrey Alexander’s (1987: 206) assumption (after Mead) that objects cannot

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<sup>2</sup> Also owing to this affirmation, Habermas deems that the symbol-led behaviour of which Mead speaks is an intentional action since “the meaning content of symbols is defined by the behavioural expectations and not by the modes of behaviour themselves. For this reason, the use of symbols cannot be reduced to mere behaviour” (1988: 65).

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu (1991: 109–115) proposes an evocative analogy between the power of the symbol and the power of the *skēptron* offered in Homer to the orator to take the podium. The latter does not receive authority from the *skēptron* itself but from the social role of orator, from the characteristics of the institution that legitimizes him to speak, and from the interlocutors who are listening (on the concept of symbolic politics, see Halas 2002a).

<sup>4</sup> The thesis which does not totally reduce the symbol to the social has a parallel—and it could not be otherwise seeing the affinity of the topics—in the rethinking of the relationship between the social and culture in the last two decades, with the affirmation of the so-called cultural turn in the human and social sciences (see Alexander & Smith 2002).

exist except for the context of social relations within which the symbolization takes place; on the other hand, it should place attention on not reducing objects to their mere symbolization in order not to repeat the errors made by Durkheim (whom Alexander himself defines as an idealist). The symbol is not merely subjective, nor is it, in itself, merely irrational even though it has unfortunately often become so in ideological systems. In the various forms of positivism, the symbolic tends to be confined to the sphere of the irrational. Sperber effectively summed up the positivist position on the symbol as follows: “the symbolic mechanism has as its input the defective output of the conceptual mechanism” (1975: 141).<sup>5</sup> The line of argument commonly made to support the thesis of a gap between the conceptual and symbolic can also be described as follows:

since the individual feels a cognitive deficit in his experience of the world, namely he lacks suitable rational concepts to explain and understand the world (the others, etc.), he has to turn to something that motivates him to act. And so the rational-cognitive deficit is filled by symbolic experience which in reality is a sort of sublimation of an object of little value that is given a charismatic charge (Donati 2008: 99).

The asserted non-rationality of the symbol seems to have historically taken two fundamental directions. Those with links to an evolutionist cultural anthropology think that the symbolic is connatural to a primordial phase of humankind and can only have a marginal role in rationalized modern societies. On the other hand, more than a few people think that despite the historical constant joint presence of the symbolic and rationality the symbolic is confined to spheres of social life outside conceptual representations. Durkheim indirectly goes against the first of these two reductions when he shows that symbols are at the centre of the social and cultural life not only of tribal societies but also modern societies; Mauss fought against the second, attributing a fundamental role to symbols by placing the “total social fact” (meant as the interrelation between the biological, psychic, social and symbolic) at the centre of the sociological investigation. Mauss thus tried to shift away from the trend—present in the sociology of culture and inherited by philosophy—of thinking of the symbolic as a peculiar

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<sup>5</sup> On the fact that an over-rationalized conception of society tends to ignore important phenomena such as those belonging to the symbolic domain see also Halas (2002b).



form of knowledge that has to be made to fit or extrinsically relate to other forms of more codified knowledge.

The true wager for a sociology of symbolic processes is to recognize that, even though there are forms of knowledge and expressivity with a predominant symbolic component—to think of art or religion suffices—the symbolic is a basic ingredient of every form of human knowledge and practice, as Schütz showed in his studies on the symbol, multiple realities, and everyday life. The symbol is not situated before or alongside knowledge and action, but forms the terrain in which they set their roots. By this, the intention is certainly not to deny that in many cases the symbol has been used as a screen to hide countless forms of irrationalism. This happened when the symbol was presented not as a tool of the hermeneutics of reality but simply as its negation or concealment. For example, for structuralism, the meaning of symbols substantially results from the relationship between signs and not from the relationship between signs, the world, and interpretants. In structuralism, the symbol seems to free the sign from its servitude to reality (Hawkes 1977). In an even more radical manner, Baudrillard claimed that “the symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a structure, but an act of exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary” (1993: 133). Instead, in a critical realist relational perspective the fact that knowledge is always “symbolically mediated” means that “between the subject and the object (reality) of knowledge there operate perhaps even paradoxical principles of symbolic analogy and co-relation, which are based *in re* and are not simple mental states or representations” (Donati 2002: 46). An affirmation that could belong to relational realism is that of Alexander (1987: 269–272), according to whom if language breaks the nexus between signifier and signified, this dissolves the relationship between individual actions and collective order.

To overcome the contrast between symbol and rationality it is necessary to recognize that “reasoning processes take symbolic inputs and deliver symbolic outputs” (Simon 1990: 5). In this sense, the symbolic is not, first of all, an annulment of the real or its dissimulation, but the depth of the real; that is, the symbolic is an essential dimension of the real, it is the not-perceived in immediate objects of perception, without which we cannot gain access to the empirical reality (see Iser 1978). Symbols refer to provinces of meaning that transcend the experience of everyday life, but the task of the sociology of symbolic processes is to highlight that, thanks to symbols, these provinces are not, as Schütz had it, completely “finite” and “separate,” since

in every symbol the appresented element transcends everyday life whereas the appresenting element is part of everyday life, thus also becoming the condition enabling human communication. Despite being characterized by a rich semantic pluralism, when symbols transcend the practice of everyday life, they do indeed “leap” into other spheres to everyday life. However, they do not lose their roots (attested to by the appresenting reference) in everyday life itself, otherwise they would lose one of their essential characteristics, that is, their being public and therefore socially recognizable and sharable. It could also be said that symbols do not constitute an “autistic” reality (Wagner 1986: 6); they are not necessarily contained in an autonomous semiotic-linguistic system completely separate from the reality it refers to and from the social. In a relational perspective, “the symbolic (...) can have its own rationality (symbolic rationality), which is by no means the instrumental rationality of utility, but is neither that of an irrational myth separate from its relational contents” (Donati 2008: 101). The symbolic can be situated within a certain canon of rationality only if rationality is conceived of in relational terms by overcoming the glitches that postmodern culture ran into—at the mercy on the one hand of utilitarian functionalism and on the other hand of a mythical thought based on relativism and without any more bonds with history. A wide-ranging concept of reason includes a rationality of means and resources (instrumental rationality), a rationality of value as a situated purpose (rationality aimed at the purpose), a rationality of the relationship (relational rationality), and a rationality of value as an asset in itself (symbolic rationality) (see Donati 2008: 103–114).

After having investigated the nature of the symbolic We-relation and the type of rationality involved in symbolization, the possibility finally emerges of newly examining the relationship between the symbolic We-relation and Self-reflexivity. If reason is conceived of as:

the human being’s reflexive faculty, consisting of the capacity of the Self to converse with itself about itself and the world, then to expand reason is to expand this reflexive capacity (which chooses purposes, means, standards and values) through the relations that it implies with the Self and with the world through its own Self. This enables individuals to root their cultural identity in their human nature and in (natural and social) practices, while expanding outside them, into culture, and then interacting with them in the various spheres of life, where the Self becomes a Me, a We, a You (Donati 2008: 111).

In other words, it is necessary to re-examine reflexivity as “a meaningful and consistent way for an entity to refer to itself through/with/within the relationship to the other” (Donati 2011: 193). In order not to fall into hypo-socialized or hyper-socialized conceptions of Self-reflexivity it is necessary to try to point out the immanence and at the same time excess of the reflexive Self with respect to the discourse of society and its symbols.

This enlargement of rationality, set out by relational theory, seems to be able to enter fruitfully into the debate underway in contemporary social theory on the need to draw up a social theory of the reflexive Self that combines Mead’s “I-Me” model with Peirce’s “I-You” model (see in particular Archer 2003; Gattamorta 2010: chap. 3; Wiley 1994). To describe the semiotic Self in the light of Peirce’s view that the Self is a sign, Wiley hypothesizes that the Self is the union of three triads: the dialogic triad (“I-Me-You”); the temporal triad (present-past-future) and the semiotic (sign-object-interpretant). Human beings are the three triads together, including both the individual elements and the relations between them: “I-present-sign;” “Me-past-object;” “You-future-interpretant.” On the semiotic level, the “I-present” functions as the sign, the “Me-past” as the object and the “You-future” as the interpretant; direct conversation between “I” and “You” is also the interaction between sign and interpretant and between present and future and involves the present Self (“I”) speaking to the future Self (“You”) of the past Self (“Me”). For Wiley, “human beings that are being shaped by culture have natures of their own, independently of culture. This nature or structure is the semiotic I, viewed, not as a process, but as the structure that engages in the process” (1994: 219).

The “Me” or historical phase of the Self in Mead could be compared with the “critical Self” in Peirce, understood as awareness of the individual and seat of the inner inclinations matured in the course of life and turned into habits of responding in a particular way in certain circumstances. However, the former is a socialized deposit, whereas the latter is a personalized sediment (see Archer 2003: 73). The dialogue, and in some cases the diatribe, between the “I” and the critical Self of Peirce begins when the “I” seeks to convince the critical Self, inclined to routine action, that it is worth undertaking a new course of action different from the habitual one: “When one reasons, it is that critical Self that one is trying to persuade” (Peirce 1931–1958, vol. 5, par. 421).

Peirce rejects Cartesian subjectivism and James’ “absolute insulation” and argues that the mind is a theatre where “the deliberations that really and sincerely agitate our breasts always assume a dialogic form” (Peirce

MS 318: 13d). But if “thinking always proceeds in the form of a dialogue, a dialogue between different phases of the ego” (Peirce 1931–1958, vol. 4, par. 6), then it becomes necessary to use signs and symbols that are accessible to all in the public sphere and that comprehend not only verbal but also non-verbal language.<sup>6</sup>

Correcting in part the marked externalism present in his early thought and synthesized by the statement “my language is the sum total of myself” (1931–1958, vol. 5, par. 314), Peirce considers that language and the system of semiosis are indispensable instruments for bringing the internal personal world into view and that they can be utilized in an active and innovative way: as Colapietro interprets Peirce, “language is not simply something to which I conform myself; it is something by which I transform myself” (1989: 110; see Peirce MS 290: 58–63). Peirce does not annul interiority, but rather claims that it emerges from the external world and that subjectivity is constituted through the objective means of language forming part of the public sphere. For Peirce it is the public sphere that comprehends language, the point from which human beings start in order to acquire a private sphere for themselves. Thought depends on the use of intersubjective symbols (such as visual forms, verbal and non-verbal language, etc.) also because none of us—as Peirce notes in a lapidary affirmation—is “shut up in a box of flesh and blood,” we have instead an “outreaching identity” (as words have) which emerges through communication with others (1931–1958, vol. 7, par. 591).

Only from the relationship between reflexivity and interpersonal dialogue can a relative Self-autonomy emerge. If in interior dialogue subjects do not speak to society but about society, we then need to ask how and to what extent the properties and powers of social networks influence the interior dialogue. A reflexive Self is relatively autonomous when it seeks a mediation between the objective power of the social structure over action and the subjective power that we all have to make resolutions and pursue projects in light of circumstances and social relations that do not determine us completely. In particular, while investigating how subjectivity is formed and emerges in the interaction with symbols (which include not only the public linguistic medium, but also the interior verbal and non-verbal lan-

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<sup>6</sup> If Peirce underlines the importance of those indispensable symbols, such as linguistic ones, linked to a sensorial imaginary for human thought to dialogically and reflexively make its resolutions, even more radically Archer upholds that human thought emerges and is expressed through embodied practice, therefore underlining that temporally pre-verbal practice precedes verbal practice: “pre-verbal practical action is the source of basic principles of logical reasoning which are prior to and necessary for discursive socialisation” (Archer 2000: 152).

guage, practical actions, and visual messages), a sociology of symbolic processes should try to avoid both subjectivism and the relationism according to which the relation has the ontological priority over the existence of consciousness. Investigating how subjectivity is formed and emerges in the interaction with symbols does not imply that symbols determine consciousness, it means that consciousness relates with itself and at the same time with something other than itself and that it can only develop through these relations.

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### /// Abstract

This essay considers the features constituting the symbolic We-relation to seek how the reflexive Self can generate changes to the Self, the You, and the We-relation itself. While critically dialoguing with phenomenological and pragmatist social theories, the essay investigates how subjectivity emerges in the interaction with (verbal and non-verbal) symbols and tries to avoid both subjectivism and the relationism.

Keywords:

reflexive Self, We-relation, rationality, sociology of symbolic processes

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# AFTER THE RELATIONAL TURN: THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

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Social scientists have been attracted to the problem of identity for a long time. The question of identity, with its inevitability and simultaneously problematic nature, is considered to be a sign of the times in which we live. The discourse regarding new forms of identity has dominated most theoretical debates held in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Scholars' increased interest in these issues is associated with the social changes that have noticeably transformed the contemporary world. Identity, and the various forms of its metamorphosis, have been treated as a litmus paper for grasping changes in mentality caused by the transition from a modern to a postmodern society.

Sociologists have made many theoretical and empirical studies of the notion of both individual and social identity. Conceptual studies and research projects have not only enriched our knowledge in this sphere but also demonstrated the problems troubling sociologists. Treating identity as a research object stimulates us to pose again questions about the nature of social reality and the relation between individuals and society. Identity is described as a process and its occurrence and existence require reference to other people and the world. These two features—processual and relational nature—prove to be especially useful in rendering the specificity of the phenomenon of identity. They are also considered to define the relational approach, which solves the theoretical dilemma between the individual and society by choosing a third path, exposing relations as the main constituent of social reality.



### **/// The Relational Turn: Old Questions, New Prospecting**

Twenty years ago, Mustafa Emirbayer published his manifesto of relational sociology. Looking back, we see a path of theoretical inquiry that makes us realize aporias and the recurring questions about the nature of the social world. The relational turn seen in sociology in recent years is worth being treated not only as another turn taking place in the humanities but also as an expression of theoretical self-awareness and the search for sociology's identity. The relational nature of reality is increasingly recognized by sociology, which therefore acknowledges what the substance and subject of its research has been for a long time, if not always.

Relational thinking is an alternative attitude to both functional structuralism and strongly individualistic theories (self-action theory), and as such, questions the theoretical schemes dominant in sociology and the resulting models of research practice. Relational sociology emphasizes the processual and emergent nature of reality. As a result, social phenomena and patterns of action can only be recognized in the process of it happening, and not by a static and simplified cause-and-effect scheme. Actions—individual and collective—appear as successive stages of the specific process of events, and are the result of the configuration of relations and the social interactions constituting a particular situation. Relational theory rejects substantialism and focuses its attention on the complexity and dynamics of all forms of social life, the mutual relation between reality and the knowledge acquired from it, and the subjective character of action.

The relational approach aims to move beyond the dichotomy between the individual and society, which has been over-exposed in sociology, rejects all forms of social determinism, and essentially redefines the very concept of the individual. Analytical development of the relation between the cultural and structural dimension and human agency provides a new concept of the individual as a reflective acting subject. Relational thinking about individuals and their activity is based on the concept of a dialogic self. A dialogical self is seen as a specific and necessary condition for action. The ability to act is shaped by internal conversations on the cognitive, moral, and social levels.

### **/// The Dialogical Self**

The genesis of the dialogical self can be found in pragmatism. Using the distinction proposed by George H. Mead, we can point to two ways

of describing the self in pragmatic theory. In the first approach, represented primarily by William James and Charles H. Cooley, the self is treated as a special kind of emotion (“self-feeling”). In the second approach, described as reflective and developed by Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, and Mead, the self is cognition, the main focus here is on self-consciousness as the basis of self (Wiley 2006: 6).

A pragmatically oriented sociological theory of the self accepts the concept of man as an acting subject. The dialogic character of the self is perceived as a specific and necessary condition of action; the internal conversation gives the actions desired direction and allows for their monitoring. In Mead’s concept, the self is a dialogue between “I” and “Me” in which the individual adopts the attitude of “generalized other” to himself. The dual nature of the self that manifests itself in the structural relationship of “I” and “Me” reflects the union of individual and society. “Me” is the self seen as the object of the immediate past, which Mead referred to as the earlier form of “I.” “Me” represents a reference to society; it is a set of determinants and expectations stemming from social relationships and group identification. “I” represents the individual’s response to socially imposed conditions. It expresses the individual capacity for creative and spontaneous action, and reveals the aspect of the individual self that escapes social determination and remains indeterminate.

The concept of a dialogical self was interestingly developed in Peirce’s semiotic theory. Peirce addresses the issues of human subjectivity by explaining both mind and selfhood in terms of semiosis—“sign-activity.” The reality in which man lives is a reality of significance; the world of signs thus constitutes all forms of human thought and action. In the deepest layers of his self, man is a form of semiosis. In Peirce’s concept the inner conversation takes the form of a dialogue between the different phases of the ego. Self as a process of character activity goes through three phases and corresponding temporal references (Archer 2003: 71). “Me” has a reference to the past; “I” is a self located in the present time, which takes up the dialogue with the future “You” as the projected mind. Peirce defines “You” as “that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time” (Wiley 2010: 18). The pre-existing self is indispensably preceded by the (dialogical) activity that transforms it, and the new form of self is necessarily later than that activity. None of them interfere with the continuity of time. Past-related “Me,” which is referred to by Peirce as a critical self, is essentially composed of habits—of predispositions to react in certain ways under certain circumstances (Archer 2003: 72). Ability to act is the result

of a mediation between the present “I” and the projected, future “You,” which is manifested in the inner dialogue.

### **/// The Human Being as Relational Subject**

For many years, Margaret S. Archer has been developing and improving the theory of social morphogenesis. The conception of a person as an agent constitutes a significant part of this project. The individual’s subjectivity is presented as the answer to both structural factors and the agency attributed to the individual. In conceptualizing the person, Archer adopts as a starting point the thesis that “our sense of self, as part of our humanity, is prior and primitive to our sociality” (2000: 121). According to Archer, referring in the first place to the category of humanity and not to socialization plays a key role in explaining human agency and the theoretical study of relations between the individual and society. Humanity, understood as the features and strengths that are characteristic of people, was presented as prior and autonomous in regard to society. The features distinguishing human beings are universal, emergent, and remain in relation with the world.

They are relational: stemming from the way our species is constituted, the way the world is and the necessity of their mutual interaction. The relations between the two, being universal, supply the anchor which moors our elaborated human forms as Selves, Persons, Agents and Actors, and thus sets limits to their variability (Archer 2000: 17).

Hence, a human being is not reduced to a social being, and the effect of socialization is always derivative in regard to what is *sui generis* human. The self, as emergent and relational, is formed in interaction with the world. Importantly, human presence in the world is not defined solely by the social. A person interacts with three orders: natural, practical, and social. Archer attributes special meaning to the social praxis, because it contains the source of the human sense of self. The ability to think, self-awareness, and the continuity of the sense of self emerge from embodied practical actions. The continuous sense of self, being an effect of an individual’s practical experiences, has a pre-discursive character and as such does not depend on participation in social conversation. The embodied self, created in interaction with the material environment, constitutes the basis for

human personality and enables the development of an individual identity, which in turn precedes the creation of a social identity. The condition for the formation of an individual identity is thus the feeling of a continuity of identity: seeing oneself from a biographical perspective always as the same person with the simultaneous feeling of one's distinctiveness from others. The conception presented by Archer treats a human being, like reality, as being layered in the ontological dimension. The process of identity-forming and human subjectivity is emergent; it takes place through revealing subsequent layers—self, person, agent, and social actor.

The shaping of personal identity is strictly dependant on reflexivity as an inseparable attribute of human beings. The innate predisposition to reflect upon oneself and the external world distinguishes and defines human beings. The dialogical self constitutes a personal, characteristic feature, which has emerged in the evolution of the human species. It depends on—even though it is not reducible to—the biological existence of a person. The silent posing of questions to oneself and looking for answers, wondering about oneself and different aspects of the social environment in their mutual relations, are decisive for reflective internal dialogue (Archer 2007: 63). Reflexivity is a universal feature: as a specific mental activity it occurs in all people, but in individualized shape. Its form depends on individually experienced concerns and interactions, in the broad sense, with the world. The mechanism of human reflexivity is practically expressed in internal conversation. The internal dialogue reflects the range of human concerns resulting from references to the natural, practical, and social order, and the emotional commentary on them. The ability to develop the concerns emotionally has been particularly emphasized here. According to Archer, this dimension of human existence—which theoreticians had for many years erased from reflection on human actions—constitutes a necessary element of the formation of individual identity. Emotions as an irremovable element of humanity constitute the core part of people's internal life because they are the driving force of internal conversations (Archer 2000: 194). Human presence in the world is marked by concerns, which result from humans' relation to the world, other people, and plans and actions, and which enable them to define who they are, what they want, and what they hold dear. Only the hierarchization of objects to which we refer, from the perspective of what is important to us, reveals our ultimate concerns and accompanying emotions. Reflective development in internal dialogue of what we see in life as important and what we care about determines the crea-

tion of identity, “our reflexivity, which is part and parcel of our human consciousness, defined our personal identities by reference to what is of ultimate concern to us in the world” (Archer 2003: 33).

Personal identity, being logically and ontologically prior to social identity, conditions its occurrence but also remains in dialectical relation with it. In order to form a social identity an individual must first have a personal identity, which is not only prior but also more extensive than a social identity since the former activates the latter and defines its role in respect to other dimensions of life. Personal identity, understood as a reflexively developed constellation of ultimate concerns, intertwines in dialectical relation with the social identity, that is, the ability to be a social actor, performing specific roles. Thus what is external (social) is connected with what is internal (subjective).

Internally, it is through self-talk that we define our ultimate concerns and thus our personal identities, since our singularity as persons is constituted by our particular constellation of concerns. Externally, we first seek to realise these concerns in society through further inner dialogue which identifies those roles through which they can be expressed. Afterwards, we seek to acquire the roles in question. Finally, our social identities arise from the manner in which we personify such roles in line with our concerns. In other words, internal conversation is not “idle”; one of its most important causal powers is reflexively to conceive and to conduct those courses of action by which we navigate our way through the social world (Archer 2007: 64).

Becoming a social actor, able to take specific actions within social roles, is a complex process of interactions between the human self and activity, which leads to the emergent social identity. The motive power of this process is the reflexivity of active subjects, which demonstrates itself in the ongoing internal conversation. The internal dialogue shows how the social context and cultural context, with the objective circumstances of action imposed by it, are confronted with the subjective conceptions and aspirations of an individual. The self, and the personal self constructed on its basis, constitute the human powers that lead—next to the emergent structural and cultural features—to the emergence of agents and social actors.

The formation of social identity conditions not only the fact of taking on a specific social role but its personifying through a given individual’s

involvement and specific way of performing it. The personifying of a role means more than the performing or acting of the role since it has personal reference. For that reason, social identity may be seen as derivative from personal identity. The formation of a personal identity determines the emergence of a social identity, which in turn influences the shape of the personal identity. The mutual influence of social and personal identities leads, according to Archer, to a synthesis within which both forms of identity are emergent and distinct but at the same time “contributed to one another’s emergence and distinctiveness” (2000: 288). The process of acquiring social identity is presented by Archer as progressive individuation based on the emergence of individual self-awareness. This means that the activating element of social identity is the formation of a continuous sense of self (“I”). While the self-as-object (“Me”), which refers to the past, is a self unintentionally located within the social distribution of resources as the Primary Agent. In turn,

The “We” represents the collective action in which the self engaged as part of Corporate Agency’s attempt to bring about social transformation, which simultaneously transformed society’s extant role array as well as transforming Corporate Agency itself. This then created the positions which the “You” could acquire, accept and personify, thus becoming an Actor possessing strict social identity (Archer 2000: 294–295).

The differentiation between personal and social identity plays a significant role here, since it enables us to build arguments against the diluting of humanity in social theory. On the one hand, by defending humanity, Archer opposes the sociological imperialism that reduces the individual to what is social, as well as the modern idea of man, promoting individualism and instrumental rationality. Both approaches, in her opinion, cannot meet the task of creating a social theory that explains the problem of human agency. According to Archer, the only chance for the revival of social theory is a new conception of human beings—one that will fully render the autonomy of human motive powers but at the same time will not completely reject structural and cultural factors.

Pierpaolo Donati continues and at the same time extends the concept of the human being as a subject presented by Archer. All the things the two authors share can best be seen in their joint work *The Relational Subject*. Both Archer and Donati develop their theories based on the assumptions of

critical realism. The perspective of critical realism plays with the relational perception of social reality. The social structure and individual actions are two interactive and co-dependent but ontologically different levels of social reality. Social ontology, according to critical realism, is based on the reality of social structures, which are defined “as relations between social subjects as the effect of social positions which they occupy. The structures have causal effect, both enabling the actions which otherwise would not be possible (...) and limiting them” (Benton & Craib 2003: 154). The structural factors have their own reverse in the form of the dependency of the social structures on individual and social agency, which means the ability to individually transform the existing structures. Critical realists aim at circumventing reductionist tendencies which conceal both methodological individualism and structural determinism.

By naming his theoretical stance “relational sociology,” Donati unambiguously underlines that he does not see relations as prior to human consciousness (see Donati 2011). He clearly dissociates himself from both subjectivism and the theories labelled as objectivist, which include also relationalism.<sup>1</sup> He thinks that human consciousness and relations are ontologically separate and autonomous entities, mutually creating each other. The nature of consciousness, as of all other phenomena, is relational. This means that a man is a subject who has the ability to choose who and what he cares for, but at the same time he can do so only through relations with others (Donati 2016: 353). Awareness of man’s relational nature emerges in the process of mutual influence between the individual consciousness and external environment at various moments of time. Human beings, which are understood by Donati as “relational subjects,” may be recognized and understood thanks to the fact that they remain in relation to others and the world. Their identity and ability to act stems from their relations, which in turn are reflexively processed by them.

The term “relational subject” indicates individual and social subjects in that they are “relationally constituted,” that is, in as much as they acquire qualities and powers through their internal and external social relations. The term “relational subject” refers to both the individual subject and the collective (social) subject as

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<sup>1</sup> Donati makes a clear distinction between the European relational sociology that grew out of critical realism and the relational approach represented by H. White or M. Emirbayer, whose genesis is to be found in network theory. That is why Donati distinguishes between relational sociology and relationalism, which he considers to be a reductionist approach that recognizes the ontological priority of relation to consciousness.

regards the role that the relation with the Other plays in defining and redefining one's own identity, whether personal (the identity that the I has of itself) or social (the identity that the I has for Others) (Donati 2016: 355).

The notion of relational subject introduced by Donati has its individual and collective reference. The individual relational subject is reflected in the process of constructing the internal self-definition of a person, since the individual self is shaped in relation to itself and to the world. The relational recognition of collective subjects is more problematic. Here the introduction of the "We-relation" as a reflexive reference to others proves to be helpful. Recalling the assumptions of relational realism, Donati modifies the definition of reflexivity suggested by Archer. And the relational reflexivity of the collective entity means "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, to consider the influence of their relation(s) with relevant others on to themselves and vice versa" (ibid.). The condition for the occurrence of the relational subjectivity of an individual or collective is individual identity, shaped in the network of social relations and defined reflexively through the involvement of individuals.

Individual identity, which is relational in essence, has temporal and spatial location. Space means here not only the possibility of referring to a specific place but primarily the social and cultural context, which defines the awareness and acts of an individual. The relational subject comes from the network of relations as the effect of actions completed in a specific social context. In the actions taken, social and cultural structures are activated and reflexively embedded in life by agents. Thus identity, both personal and social, is recognized in relation to its social environment. Social relations as *sui generis* reality are defined by Donati in the optics of realism, by their ontological distinctiveness from the individual and the social structure. Relational reality, which emerges from actions and human agency (as distinct and having its own causal powers and specific properties), "is activity-dependent, but has its own structure, the exercise of whose causal powers acts back upon the constituents (ego and alter) of the relation itself" (Donati & Archer 2015: 55–56).

In accepting the morphogenetic theory developed by Archer, Donati suggests some modifications. He uses the concept of self-development proposed by Archer as a starting point, and suggests the intersection of its model of self-forming with the Parsons AGIL scheme. To put it briefly, in existing between nature and transcendence, in the process of self-devel-



opment a human being progresses through the following phases: a subject or potential self (“I”), through the experience gained in social practice, becomes a primary agent (“Me”), then a corporate agent (“We”), to eventually become a social actor (“You”).<sup>2</sup> The maturation of the self, as a dialectical relation between the first and last phase (“I”/”You”), is a cyclic process of transition from phase to phase and is accomplished through an internal dialogue at each stage. As a result, the formation of the human self is determined not only by the experience gained in the practical sphere, but also by the ability to cope with the transcendent dimension. Because of the transcendent dimension, the individual surpasses the natural order and becomes a social actor capable of personifying his roles. The overcoming of the natural and social order occurs in moments of reflection, in the inner dialogue of the self. A relational view of identity and its ability to act subjectively at all levels of social reality requires perception of the individual as a reflective being. Reflectivity, which takes the form of internal and external conversations about interpersonal relationships, generates the ability to initiate joint actions.

### **/// The Relational Self by Kenneth Gergen**

Kenneth J. Gergen takes a completely different stance. The different perception of the problem is connected in the first place with the adoption of different ontological assumptions. Here we are dealing with clear support for social constructionism. Socially created reality occurs as a result of individual and collective actions which constitute it and give it meaning. Adopting this constructionist attitude Gergen states that all claims toward truth and rightness are mere social constructions. Social constructionism assumes that as much as there is no single—essentially objective—reality, there is also no single, true reproduction of such a reality. Finding reality and how it functions is possible solely from some socially specific perspective. In consequence, the researcher’s attention is focused not on the correct presentation of reality, showing or rather revealing its true face, but on the process of the social construction of its image. The object of cognition thus is not the reality as such but how it is perceived in the social conscience.

Gergen promotes a discursive perception of the human self, developed on constructionist assumptions, while at the same time questioning the individualistically oriented modern theories that emphasize the intentional

<sup>2</sup> Donati’s self-development cycle is analogous to that described by Archer.

nature of human actions. The form of self he assumes—which is dialogical and discursive in its essence—is a result of a broadly understood process of individual socialization. In the most general terms, the human self is shaped by socialization, within which an introduction to the sphere of language takes place, i.e., appropriate structures of meaning. Learning how to use language as the basic form of communicative action is a condition for the creation of the self. The self—contemplative self-awareness—manifests itself in the ability to define itself in conversation with others. The dialogical nature of the self is expressed in narrative, which always has subjective and contextual references. Identity, as a phase of individual self-awareness, is constructed and reconstructed in language. Hence, Gergen's identity comes down to language construction, which is situationally created and manifested. Narrative identity is the process of getting to know, name, and feel oneself, which takes place through the ability to tell stories about oneself and others. Importantly, the self as a narrative told by an individual may assume different shapes in different social contexts. The process of creating identity depends on the one hand on semiotic patterns imposed on the individual by the language and on the other constitutes a reflection of the wide context in which the conversation takes place. The conversation—including its specific form, the internal dialogue—is always of a relational character.

The condition of the postmodern world is described by Gergen in the context of cultural changes, the rapid development of technology, and the exceeding saturation of social relations. Postmodern culture, by setting the individual free from the normative limitations of effective socialization and the requirements of the social order, treats it to uncertainty, reflexivity, and an excess of doubt. The world, demystified of modernist assumptions about man, community, and ethos, ceases to be a real one. Reality is superseded by a construction of reality, and as everything else, becomes a language artefact. The feeling of self, inconsistent and problematized, continues to multiply new questions about identity instead of creating it. When faith in reality and the objective nature of reality is undermined and doubt is cast on the integral image of the individual, “then daily existence as an objectively given self is threatened” (Gergen 1991: 137). The multiple perspectives from which we see reality shows us its relative nature and blurs the identity of both people and things. In *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, Gergen analyses the impact of the saturation of human contacts on the perception of individual identity and the way it is conceptualized. As he emphasizes, what largely stimulated the direction of

this theoretical interest was his “admiration for the contribution of social saturation to democratic expression” (Gergen 2000: xvi). The ongoing increase of social saturation changes the individual’s self-awareness and the character of social relations. Social saturation means the intensification of possible identifications and, due to the blurred borders, the awareness of their constructed character.

The changes taking place in postmodern reality force us to renounce the earlier patterns of perceiving the human self.<sup>3</sup> They make us realize that notions and previous ways of perceiving the individual self are not valid anymore. The transition from modern to postmodern society is defined by Gergen as abandoning the concept of an individual “I,” which can be identified and perceived as an autonomous whole. Earlier conceptions of the self, both romantic and modernist, treated the individual as an autonomous subject. Redefinition of assumptions about the individual self shows, in the first place, the blurring of its internal, individual character in a vast network of social contacts. Caught in a constantly expanding network of social relations, an individual spends his or her entire time and energy on the creation and maintenance of social relations. The individual self becomes partial and incomplete since it is constantly filled with inconsistent conceptions about itself. Identity cannot be treated as stable and existing in a given shape anymore; in consequence, our identity is not given but “is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships” (Gergen 1991: 139). This causes abandoning individualistically oriented thinking for the conception of relational identity.

Gergen presents the blurring of the individual self as a two-stage process from which the relational “I” emerges. The modernist faith in the self becomes weaker under the influence of a stronger awareness of dramatic identity-creation practices. Due to our possible diverse identifications of ourselves, our identity is no longer in the centre but is replaced by the way it is created. Thanks to the awareness of self-construction, the conception of an authentic “I” is much weakened. Identity is treated instrumentally as a correctly chosen mask for expressing oneself at a given time. Gergen calls this stage “strategic manipulation.” The game in which we construct our

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<sup>3</sup> Gergen distinguished three stages in the conceptualization of the human self: the romantic “I,” modernist “I,” and postmodernist “I.” The romantic self is characterized by the tendency to full, emotional involvement in relations with others and the world. The modernist “I” is rational; an individual’s actions are predictable, honest, and just. In contrast to the earlier conceptions, the postmodernist “I” is chaotic and inconsistent (1991: 6–7).

numerous identities results from social saturation and leads to the creation of a “pastiche personality.”

The pastiche personality is a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation (Gergen 1991: 150).

As a result of the ongoing change, identity comes down to self-presentation and stylization of oneself. This is another stage of constructing the relational self. When identity is in the first place an advertising effect, it becomes more and more liquid, and the border between the authentic “I” and the constructed image disappears. Then the individual self is replaced by a relational reality in which “I” is transformed into “us” (ibid.: 156). When the sense of the self as a synonym of the autonomous individual becomes completely blurred, the self becomes a manifestation of numerous forms of co-dependence and social interactions.

As the self as a serious reality is laid to rest and the self is constructed and reconstructed in multiple contexts, one enters finally the stage of the relational self. One’s sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self (Gergen 1991: 147).

The process of individual identity construction reflects much more the impact of social surroundings than its inside. Identity—its shape and whether it will be recognized—constitutes an element of a social game in which the individual participates. This happens mainly through the intersubjective and relational character of language. The construction of “I” takes place not so much through the language but within the limitations set by it. Language cannot be seen as an instrument that enables us to show internal reality.

Thus, individuals are not the intentional agents of their own words, creatively and privately converting thoughts to sounds or inscriptions. Rather, they gain their status as selves by taking a position within a preexisting form of language (ibid.: 110).

People experience reality thanks to their existence in language. Seeing the world and oneself is always language-mediated and requires entering the discourse. The ability to use language not only determines human interactions but also constitutes an indicator of the existence of the human self. Identity is a narrative and nothing more. It is wrong thus to assume that language solely expresses our internal “I” since we—when speaking—create the self. Hence, Gergen refers directly to notions of discourse when characterizing the process of self-construction. He presents three ways of seeing the self: firstly, the self as discursive action; secondly, discourse of the self as performance; and thirdly, discursive action as relationally embedded (see Gergen 2011).

Relational theory, in order to get rid of the troublesome burden of essentialism in understanding the human self, emphasizes the processual nature of reality. Gergen, recalling the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, believes that words of a given language gain their meaning by their use in human interactions. He emphasizes that re-conceptualization of the self as emergent and relational requires a different language perspective. Observing the difference between the action itself and the acting subject, he claims that in interpretation we should make an effort to unearth actions from the domination of a person: “it is a difficult task to eliminate the doer behind the deeds” (Gergen 2011: 112). Only the emphasis placed on the demonstration of actions taken by an individual when acting makes the relational context visible, both of actions taken and of the self emerging from them.

### **/// Narrative Identity**

In the 1990s Margaret R. Somers also perceived the need to introduce changes in the theoretical recognition of identity. She sees the problem of redefining identity in combination with a politics of identity—which is more and more often included in the scholarly discourse—and increased interest in social constructionism. As she emphasizes, analysing identity currently plays a crucial role in explaining the problems of human agency. Despite noticeable differences between what Somers suggests and Gergen’s stance, both approaches understand the question of identity in a way that is relational and clearly connected with narrative. It is the narrative nature of identity that is decisive for Somers. The attractiveness of the narrative conception of identity results, in her opinion, from the fact that it enables the limitations of narrativism and previous ways of conceptualizing identity to

be overcome. The most common weakness of existing identity theories, according to her, is researchers' tendency to over-favour the substantialist approach to the object of their research. Often, an unintended tendency to define identity by single, strict categories, such as race, class, or gender, threatens us with falling into the essentialist perception of reality. This is a recurring cognitive limitation, which gives us a deceptive certainty and leads to unnecessary simplifications. An effective way to avoid these mistakes is to define identity as a complex system of identifications, which has clear situational and temporal reference.

One way to avoid the hazards of rigidifying aspects of identity into a misleading categorical entity is to incorporate into the core conception of identity the categorically destabilizing dimensions of time, space, and relationality (Somers 1994: 606).

The concept of identity presented by Somers, combining the relational character of human actions with narrative, offers a new perception of the ontological and epistemological dimension. Narrative is not seen here solely as a different research method but is considered to be a factor constituting the human self. Only analysis of identity in the narrative approach enables us to grasp the process of its construction in the historical and empirical aspect. Thanks to the ability to create narratives about the world and oneself, people find sense in what they do and discover who they are, "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (ibid.). The assumption that both reality and knowledge about reality have a relational character leads to an understanding of identity as deeply rooted in the network of intertwining social relations, which change in time and space.

The process of identity-construction in the narrative perspective shows the merger of biographical stories with life itself on the ontological level: "social life is itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life" (Somers 1994: 613–614). The creation of identity and the awarding of meaning to what is experienced are always narratively mediated. This equation of identity and narrative means that people identify themselves and objects of the surrounding world, thus creating a repertoire of private and public narratives. Narratively created identities place people in the discourse, which imposes a certain "causal emplotment" of life experiences and their understanding, while at the same time setting

the direction of human actions. Narrativity shows human agency not as “universal agency,” but as the effect of an individual’s participation in discourse. The reference to a person and the narrative created by this person makes it possible to avoid treating human actions as conventional, and makes it more difficult to use reifying categories, in the form of unambiguous cultural and gender identifications, to define individual identity. The narrative as a configuration of relations set in the context of time and space is a fictionalized story connecting individual events in a meaningful whole. The plot of the story shows a set of mutually related events—an arrangement in which certain events result from others, constituting their obvious or presumptive reason. The relation does not render a chronological order of events; the bonding element of the story, which makes it consistent and comprehensible, is the plot. The fictionalization of the story determines its narrative potential, “turns ‘events’ into episodes” (ibid.: 616), gives meaning to individual events, and merges and changes their character. Thanks to this, understanding of social actions does not take place through their categorization but in a way emerges from the context of the episodes told. This happens because the story, in its background, shows events in their historical and relational references.

Narrativity manifests itself in four forms: as ontological narratives, public narratives, conceptual narrativity, and meta-narrativity. “Ontological narrative” affects human consciousness, opinions, and actions but at the same time is itself influenced by them. Through it, people recognize sense in their existence. People’s setting in discourse shows them how they define themselves and their existence in the world:

Ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do. This ‘doing’ will in turn produce new narratives and hence, new actions; the relationship between narrative and ontology is processual and mutually constitutive. Both are conditions of the other; neither are a priori (Somers 1994: 618).

At the level of ontological narrative, the events become episodes, which are the material for narrative. Hence, the narrative about life does not come down to a set of separate events but is one narrative about somebody in relation to what is beyond this person. Ontological narratives, which are social and interpersonal in their character “can only exist interpersonally in the course of social and structural interactions over time” (ibid.). Social ac-

tors entangled in networks of mutual relations adjust the narratives to their identities just as they adjust the reality to their narratives. “Public narrativity” includes narratives (micro- and macro-stories) related to the cultural and institutional dimension of social communities. “Meta-narrativity” signifies narratives referring to the main social discourses and processes in which we participate both as members of contemporary societies and as sociologists. “Conceptual narrativity” includes notions and explanations created by sociologists in their research. It is aimed at the creation of a new theoretical language, which will enable us to reconstruct ontological and public narratives created by specific social actors, including their historical nature and set of relations with broadly understood surroundings. Conceptual narrativity is understood by Somers as a merger of narrative identity with a relational setting, and she sees this dimension of analysis as decisive. She justifies it with the necessity to make a significant notional change at the level of defining the object of research. Due to the assumption that social reality is created by narratives, the goal of cognition becomes “to capture the narrativity through which agency is negotiated, identities are constructed, and social action mediated” (Somers 1994: 620).

The concept of narrative identity integrated with the relational setting enables us, according to Somers, to abandon dualist, “subject-object” thinking, which is hampering the development of social theory. Identity defined as the effect of a network of social relations constitutes the transformation of this dichotomy in numerous matrixes of relations correlated with the impact of political power, social practice, and public discourse. Somers emphasizes that the claim for a re-conceptualization of the option of identity matches “identity politics,” which have been much discussed in recent years. The question of identity’s involvement in politics, which is particularly visible in relation to groups that are marginalized in the political and social sphere, reveals new forms of political activity. This involvement shows the aspiration of different groups for social recognition of their identities—as is being increasingly clearly articulated in the public discourse. The political involvement of identity groups related to gender, religion, culture, ethnicity, or any other dimension of social reality, is the expression of an attempt to recover suppressed subjectivity. The politicization of identity, by generating new research questions, stimulates us to revise the theories and interpretative patterns developed in this area of research. The previously used conceptual apparatus is currently seen as oppressive and thus inappropriate for an adequate description of reality. This leads to the need to develop a new theoretical language: “new words”



able to eliminate the limitations of the prevailing discourse. Having been introduced to the political game, the notion of identity may easily become distorted. Group identity is articulated thus in defence of identity and in confrontation with otherness. As practice shows, this often leads to the creation of totalizing fictions and risks the production of a categorical description of group identity (*ibid.*: 610). These new theoretical challenges are seen by Somers as a breakthrough, since they make it possible to abandon essentialism, which is still present in identity theory, and to introduce a relational and historical conception of identity in place of rigid attributive categories.

### **/// Conclusion**

In the achievements of sociological theory we can easily find numerous examples of reference to the notion of relations, so it is by no means a new concept, previously absent in academic discourse. A rich research tradition, together with the dominance of substantial optics in the exploration of social life, has caused the notion of relationship to be undervalued in the field of sociology. Consequently, the relational nature of reality has not been sufficiently perceived. Modernist heritage, in the form of the idea of an autonomous entity or as an opposition to this idea—the vision of society as a spontaneous entity determining human activity—has clearly defined the subject of cognition in the social sciences. However, the weakness and limited exploratory power of thinking in terms of subject-object, micro-macro, or agency-structure dichotomies has been shown. The main dilemma faced by contemporary sociological theory has been reduced to a choice between two perspectives: substantialist and relational. The relational turn, which is currently taking place in social theory, leads to the redefinition of the subject of cognition. Reality ceases to be understood in a static and reified manner, in turn revealing itself in the weave of dynamic relations. Relationality as the fundamental dimension of reality has come to be situated at the centre of theoretical and research interests. Adoption of the thesis on the inherently processual and relational nature of reality has important cognitive consequences. The emphasis placed on the relational and processual nature of all dimensions of social life is perceived as a chance to transcend the individual–society dualism, which previously caused a theoretical impasse.

The postulate of abandoning the substantive conception of reality is clearly formulated in all varieties of the relational turn. The relational ap-

proach, in all its diversity, pushes for a new way of defining reality, recognizing relationships as its foundation. Recognition that each entity arises from relations all beings emerge from a relationship means adopting a new ontology, and consequently leads to specifying new epistemological theses. Ontological questions play a leading role in sociological debates announcing the arrival of a new paradigm. In the context of the questions posed, there is a clear disagreement between social constructivism and critical realism, which generates serious divisions among supporters of the relational approach.<sup>4</sup> Different ontological assumptions make society appear either as an objective and emergent layer of reality, or as a negotiable social construct. Opposition to the substantial understanding of the human self and the emphasis placed on its relativity can equally well lead to affirmation of constructionism, as well as to defense of a realistic ontology. The conceptions of identity that have been presented, and that provide different ways of describing an individual, illustrate the lack of agreement in this regard.

The internal diversification of relational sociology shows how relations can be differently conceptualized and is a good reflection of the divergence in the role they play in the creation of identity. The general difference comes down to how the human being and its self are understood in the context of socialization. The origin of the human self is embedded in the social praxis but also in various forms of social conversation. In the first case, the human consciousness and sense of self is born in social practice and is pre-discursive, whereas in the second, the self is a discursive effect of socialization. Language as a product of socialization competes with experience gained in practical action. We are therefore faced with two very different approaches. This raises the question of the role of language in the creation of the human self. Are linguistic competences acquired in the process of socialization a necessary condition for the development of the human self? Or is it rather the opposite, since the ability to use language presupposes the existence of the self? Although in the field of relational sociology theories answering both versions of this question have been developed, it must be emphasized that the effects of this research may be differently assessed. It seems premature in this context to downplay social practice in favour of discursive consciousness; moreover, prioritizing language goes

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<sup>4</sup> In a relatively new study on relational sociology, François Dépelteau points to the existence of three major divisions as a result of accepting a different ontology: deterministic (or structuralist) relational sociology, co-deterministic (or dialectical) relational sociology, and “deep” relational ontology (Powell & Dépelteau 2013).

hand in hand with underestimation of the role of emotions in the process of identity-formation.

Affirmation of the relational perspective also leads to reflection on the adequacy of the methodological assumptions and procedures adopted in sociological research. In this case, the subjects of research are not the objects of the social world but the networks of their interconnections and dependencies. In seeking to understand the dynamic aspect of social reality, relationally-oriented sociology tries to capture the subject of its research in action. As a result, reflection on reality is a judgment about the processes that constitute it, and cognition of reality is based on showing its social relations, which are variable in time and space. Therefore the task of sociology is not to determine or challenge the existing state of things, nor even to give an answer as to why it is as it is, but reflexively to monitor what is happening, and to recognize the processes that make up the matter of the social world. Such a research attitude encounters considerable difficulties, because the concepts by which we describe reality are much more suited to naming states than processes.

Relational sociology breaks up the schemes of theoretical thinking that in a highly individuated way conceptualize the human being as an autonomous self. Gergen's social constructivism leads to the complete abolition of this optics, identifying the human self as a network of social relationships. The multiphrenic self reveals only its inner contradiction and appearance. The individual disappears in a world of relationships that it has lost control of. If we agree with this statement, the notion of identity as a derivative of the human self loses its legitimacy and becomes, according to the terminology of Ulrich Beck, an unnecessary "zombie" concept. People become the tales they are making for the moment, and their identity is only a linguistic construct, a cultural artifact. Both Archer and Donati strongly oppose Gergen's views. For them, the relational approach to the individual does not lead to the blurring of the human self, and consciousness, as prior to social relations, is not reduced only to them. The reflexivity that manifests itself in the inner conversation, defined as the *differentia specifica* of humanity, is a counterbalance to the immensity of participation in social relations. This is an attempt to restore the category of subject, which has been heavily undermined by anti-humanist postmodernist theories. In the approach Archer and Donati propose, a human being, treated as a relational subject, gains the capacity for creative, subjective action through a relationally formed identity, both personal and social.

The relational approach to identity research emphasizes the role of reflexivity as a distinguishing feature of the human person. Reflexivity has a relational basis, both internally as a dialogical self and externally, through contact with the wider environment in which the individual lives. It is stimulated by the actual experience of the individual—a network of relationships and social practices, all of which interact mutually and play a major role in the formation of identity. Reflexivity, as the basic material of the human self, allows for the narrative formation of oneself and the world (Gergen, Somers), or, in the form of inner conversation, is the medium between human agency and the structural context (Archer, Donati). The fundamental difference between these two ways of describing the human self is a different perception of the role of language in the process of shaping the human self. A relational approach defining identity as narration assumes the primacy of language over experience. On the other hand, Archer and Donati, as critical realists, accept the opposite thesis, that people build their sense of self in the social praxis. Although emphasizing that the narrative character of identity is not doubted, it is worth remembering that the textualization of reality brings a lot of limitations and does not constitute a solution to the ontological disputes. Naming and categorizing reality has its price and brings social consequences, but the real world resists language and cannot be reduced to words. Moreover, respect for social practice also allows us to appreciate the importance of non-discursive knowledge in the process of knowing social reality. Differences between these two distinguished positions reflect well the tension associated with the theoretical debate about the role of social practices and language in the process of shaping the human subject. Furthermore, they make us realize that the way the late modern human condition is understood depends largely on the ontological theses adopted, and the resulting knowledge is not free from normative implications.

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### /// Abstract

Relational sociology rejects substantialism and focuses its attention on the complexity and dynamics of all forms of social life and the subjective nature of action. Relational thinking is an alternative attitude to both functional structuralism and strongly individualistic-oriented theories. Relationality emphasizes the processual and emergent nature of reality. Actions—individual and collective—appear as successive stages of a specific process of events, and result from the configuration of relations and social interactions constituting a particular situation. Different conceptions of identity have been developed within relationally oriented sociology. The aim of the article is to summarize the narrative and realistic approaches, and to present how much they differ in their ontological assumptions. The constructionist concept of narrative identity presented by Margaret R. Somers, and Kenneth J. Gergen's project of a "relational self," illustrate the narrative approach. Pierpaolo Donati's concept of the relational subject and the theory of agency developed by Margaret S. Archer exemplify the position of critical realism.

Keywords:

relational sociology, dialogical self, identity, narrative, relational subject

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# A RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ACTIVE AGEING: THE ROLE OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL GENERATIVITY

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## **/// Defining Active Ageing**

“Active ageing” indicates an attitude toward ageing that promotes lifestyles able to maintain acceptable levels of well-being, satisfaction, and social participation in later life. “Active ageing” is a recent concept developed by the European Commission and also used in Human Resources management, and it evokes the idea of a longer period of activity.

In the concept of “activity” applied to the condition of the elderly there is both an individual and a social component. The origin of the propensity for activity is therefore to be sought in the individual motivations and personal resources resulting from the experiences of a lifetime. This personal choice assumes, however, a specific social significance because, through activity, it is possible for the individual to experience an inter-subjective and associative dimension that contributes to the perception of playing a satisfactory social role. In this perspective, the past, the expertise, and the experience of the elderly shed light on the social dimension of activity, becoming actual resources for everyone.

Both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Union (EU)<sup>1</sup> have been emphasizing the importance of being active. However,

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<sup>1</sup> See Decision No. 940/2011/UE of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2011 on the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations (2012) [www.eur-lex.europa.eu](http://www.eur-lex.europa.eu).



there are limits to both approaches. The WHO conceives active ageing as a process of optimizing the opportunities for health, social participation, and security, with the aim of increasing the quality of life and pursuing the ideals of autonomy and independence to which a person of a certain age should aspire. On the other hand, the EU aims at the creation of new openings and forms of employment for older workers, both to promote their productive activity and to increase interaction and exchange with the younger generations. Both approaches seem to miss an important aspect, which is relational, a fundamental need of every human being.

In 2012, the European Commission's General Directorate for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and the European Centre Vienna funded the Active Ageing Index (AAI) research project. The project was undertaken in connection with the tenth anniversary of the Second World Assembly on Ageing, the second cycle of review and appraisal of the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing/Regional Implementation Strategy, and the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012. The aim was to develop an Active Ageing Index (AAI) which will help to measure the untapped potential of senior people across the 27 EU Member States and beyond. The index measures the extent to which older people can realize their full potential in terms of employment, participation in social and cultural life, and independent living. It also measures to what extent the environment in which seniors live enables them to lead an active life. The index makes it possible to measure and monitor active ageing outcomes at the country level with a breakdown by gender. The 2014 edition of the AAI was based on four macro-indicators relating to four thematic areas: work, social participation, self-sufficiency, and the ability to be active<sup>2</sup> (see Zaidi & Stanton 2015).

Moreover, Active Theory (Boudiny & Mortelmans 2011) gives dignity to elderly people through knowledge and the power to act. In this perspective, the active potential of seniors is not measured purely by economic and working productivity (Sánchez & Hatton-Yeo 2012), because they have by now left the labour market. The potential of seniors can also be expressed in terms of concrete assistance to the family (care), or through engagement

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<sup>2</sup> Those four areas refer to: contributions through paid activities—employment; contributions through unpaid productive activities—participation in society; independent, healthy, and secure living; capability to age actively; capacity and an enabling environment for active ageing. This index provides both a synthetic and an analytical comparison between EU countries as regards the condition of active seniors.

in voluntary work or other activities, such as sports, cultural consumption, or involvement in social networks.

### **/// Active Ageing Through the Lens of Relational Sociology**

This paper is meant to frame the widespread phenomenon of active ageing in a sociological relational perspective (Donati 2011), which enhances the role played by intergenerational relationships and social generativity (Rossi et al. 2014) in shaping identities and generating well-being.

According to the relational perspective, every social phenomenon can be conceived as a social relationship. Consequently, active ageing can be studied as a social relation, and particularly as the emerging effect of relating the four pivotal dimensions that drive the agency of the subjects, according to the relational AGIL scheme.<sup>3</sup> In the relational AGIL scheme, the four “poles,” A, G, I, L, represent respectively resources/constraints (A), goals (G), norms (I), and values (L). Such poles indicate the elements constitutive of every social phenomenon, and are in reciprocal relation to one another.

Therefore, ageing is conceived as the generative or de-generative outcome of combining resources/constraints, goals, norms, and values, by a number of subjects inserted into networks of meaningful relationships, at the level of the family and society. Furthermore, people are constantly exposed to double contingency, i.e., they act selectively according to their intentions and needs, but also taking into account other people’s reactions. It is a reflexive function, which of course may vary from subject to subject. The relational AGIL scheme helps in the difficult task of making explicit what is often implicit in individual actions. In this perspective, ageing actively (or not) is the combination of a series of simple elements that may contribute to meeting the needs of the subject, within a network of family and social relationships that are to be taken into account.

Moreover, ageing is produced inside a delicate balance between referential and structural dimensions. The referential dimension, which is produced on the G-L axis, is related to the symbolic aspects of the relation, as well as its degree of intentionality; while the structural dimension, which is produced on the A-I axis, is related to the connection, limitation, and re-

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<sup>3</sup> Relational AGIL is an analytical tool re-interpreted by P. Donati in a relational way, while the original version was elaborated by T. Parsons in his action theory to depict systematically the societal functions—Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, Latency—that every society must meet to be able to maintain a stable social life.

<b>Family/inter-generational solidarity index</b>	<b>Religious practice</b>	<b>Generalized social capital index</b>	<b>Pro-intergenerational orientation index</b>
Parents feel responsible towards their children; children feel responsible towards their parents	Religious functions attendance; religious belief	People are trustworthy; I do favours for my neighbours. Interest in/for: the people of my region; the people from my country; Europeans; mankind; elderly people in Italy; unemployed people in Italy; immigrants in Italy; sick and disabled people in Italy; children and low income families	The elderly do not think of the young; the young and the elderly are two separate worlds; it is not possible to avoid intergenerational conflict; generations cannot learn from each other; the young and the elderly get along

Table 1. Variables and indices used to operationalize the value dimension (L).

ciprocal conditioning that simultaneously constrain and enable the relation itself. The effect that emerges from relating these two axes and these two dimensions is the subjective quality of each individual’s ageing process.

In a recent study titled *Non mi ritiro: l’allungamento della vita, una sfida per le generazioni, un’opportunità per la società*<sup>4</sup> (I’m Not Withdrawing: The Lengthening of Life, a Challenge for the Generations, an Opportunity for Society; <http://anzianiinrete.wordpress.com>, 2013–2014), the concept of active ageing was operationalized according to the four analytical components of the relational version of the AGIL scheme (Bramanti et al. 2016), i.e., values, goals, norms, and resources.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A wide-ranging questionnaire administered to 900 people aged 65–74 in Italy, with a rigorous sampling method (Lanzetti 2011: 347–363), has enabled the collection of information concerning: family and intergenerational relationships, state of health, use of free time, use of new technology, work, participation in voluntary and socio-political activity, welfare in crisis situations, social capital, social solidarity, the network of family and friends, orientation between generations, gratitude-equity, values, representation of the elderly condition, economic situation, structural data of the person interviewed and his or her family.

<sup>5</sup> This attempt to operationalize relationally the concept of active ageing was done working on single variables and indices. Indices were constructed by assigning scores to the various indicators; by calculating the mean value, each elderly person was placed on a scale ranging from low to high. The

<b>Index of physical activity</b>	<b>Index of personal satisfaction</b>	<b>Index of relational satisfaction</b>	<b>Index of confidence worry</b>
Swimming; gym; dance; trekking; cycling; gardening; horticulture; angling; soccer; tennis; golf; bowling; other physical activities; disco/ ballroom (frequency); daytrips (frequency); Italian travel with overnight stays (frequency); travel abroad with overnight stays (frequency)	Income satisfaction; health satisfaction; job satisfaction; housing satisfaction; spiritual life satisfaction	Family satisfaction; satisfaction with friends; satisfaction with one's neighbourhood	Worries—loneliness; worries—health problems; worries—no interest; worries—economic hardship; worries—can't help family; worries—being a burden to the family; worries—hospitalization; worries—who will look after me

Table 2. Variables and indices used to operationalize the goal dimension (G).

In the value dimension (L) we referred to the symbolic and cultural aspects that play a key role in keeping older people active, e.g., the importance that they give to religious practice, the value attributed to the generations in the family and in society, and the propensity to trust others, even strangers (see Table 1).

In the (G) dimension we sought to identify the goals that impact active ageing, particularly the multiplicity of activities that promote and maintain physical performance, a positive vision of the future, and satisfaction with one's individual and relational life in old age.

In (I) we considered the norms regulating the achievement of objectives that have an impact on active ageing. How are they consistent with the values that sustain being active in later life? To investigate this area we focused on: (a) the practice of giving help to significant others, (b) participation in Church activities, non-profit associations, and civil/political

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advantage of this type of index is that the resulting information is concise and thus more revealing than that given by individual indicators; it is also more balanced, as it is obtained from the sum of scores, which may be, for the same person, higher as to some indicators than to others.

<b>Index of support given</b>	<b>Index of engagement in the activities of one's religious community</b>	<b>Index of associational engagement</b>	<b>Index of PC and Internet surfing</b>
Practical help to: child/grandchild; spouse/partner; other relatives; friend/neighbour. Help with paperwork for: child/grandchild; spouse/partner; other relatives. Financial transfer to: child/grandchild; spouse/partner; other relatives; friend/neighbour. Emotional support to child/grandchild; spouse/partner; other relatives; friend/neighbour. Personal assistance to child/grandchild; spouse/partner; other relatives; friend/neighbour.	Recreational activities; educational activities; solidaristic activities; administrative and representative functions and decision-making activities; other activities	Social/health associations/groups; educational/cultural associations/groups; human rights associations/groups; sports associations/groups; parish associations/groups; religious associations/groups; nature associations/groups; professional associations/groups; other associations/groups	Internet surfing frequency; PC use frequency; ICT literacy

Table 3. Variables and indices used to operationalize the norm dimension (I).

<b>Status index</b>	<b>Health index</b>	<b>Structure of the primary networks index</b>	<b>Income</b>
Interviewee's job; partner's job; father's job; interviewee's educational qualification; partner's educational qualification; father's educational qualification	Limitations in carrying out activities; health conditions	Number of relatives; number of friends; number of neighbours	Income

Table 4. Variables and indices used to operationalize the resources dimension (A).

commitments, (c) ICT literacy and, in particular, on presence within social networks.

In (A) we focused on resources and constraints connected with being active in later life. This thematic area is explored using variables of status, health, income, and the structure of the primary networks.

Using the survey's data we were able to describe different profiles of elderly Italian people in relation to active ageing (Bramanti et al. 2016). Particularly, we analysed how the sample is distributed on the four AGIL dimensions. We performed a cluster analysis (with SPAD and we used 22 variables, associated with 81 categories) and have identified three clusters, corresponding to three different ways the four AGIL components relate to one another and the weight that each indicator has in profiling activity in later life. The three different clusters are:

- stalled (20.5%)
- protagonist (46.7%)
- engaged but with little consciousness (20.5%)

The cluster called “stalled” identifies a generation of elderly Italian people with low values on all four of the AGIL's relational dimensions. In particular, the integrative dimension of access to relational networks (I) is low and potentially places these seniors in a situation of withdrawal. In contrast, the cluster called “protagonist” profiles seniors who are extremely active in their family and social roles, while the last cluster shows a more ambiguous positioning, in which high levels of resources (A) and relational commitment (I) are associated with low levels in the areas of values (L) and objectives (G).

Bramanti and Boccacin (2015) did a similar operationalization of the concept of active ageing using the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), as illustrated in Figure 1.

The authors also performed a cluster analysis (they used SPAD and 31 variables) and found that the surveyed Europeans aged 65–74 years can be clustered in three groups: (a) optimistic (37.87%), (b) uncertain (38.15%), and (c) discouraged (21.96%). The “optimistic” cluster has a mostly positive view of life and sees it as full of opportunities (“future looks good”; “feel full of energy”; “feel full of opportunities”), this perception of life is correlated with good health, high socio-economic status, high family support, and high trust in people. The second cluster, called “uncertain,” shows a state of total uncertainty about life (does not receive help from anyone, and does not give any to others). The last cluster is formed by the “discouraged” elderly; these are especially women in at-risk situa-

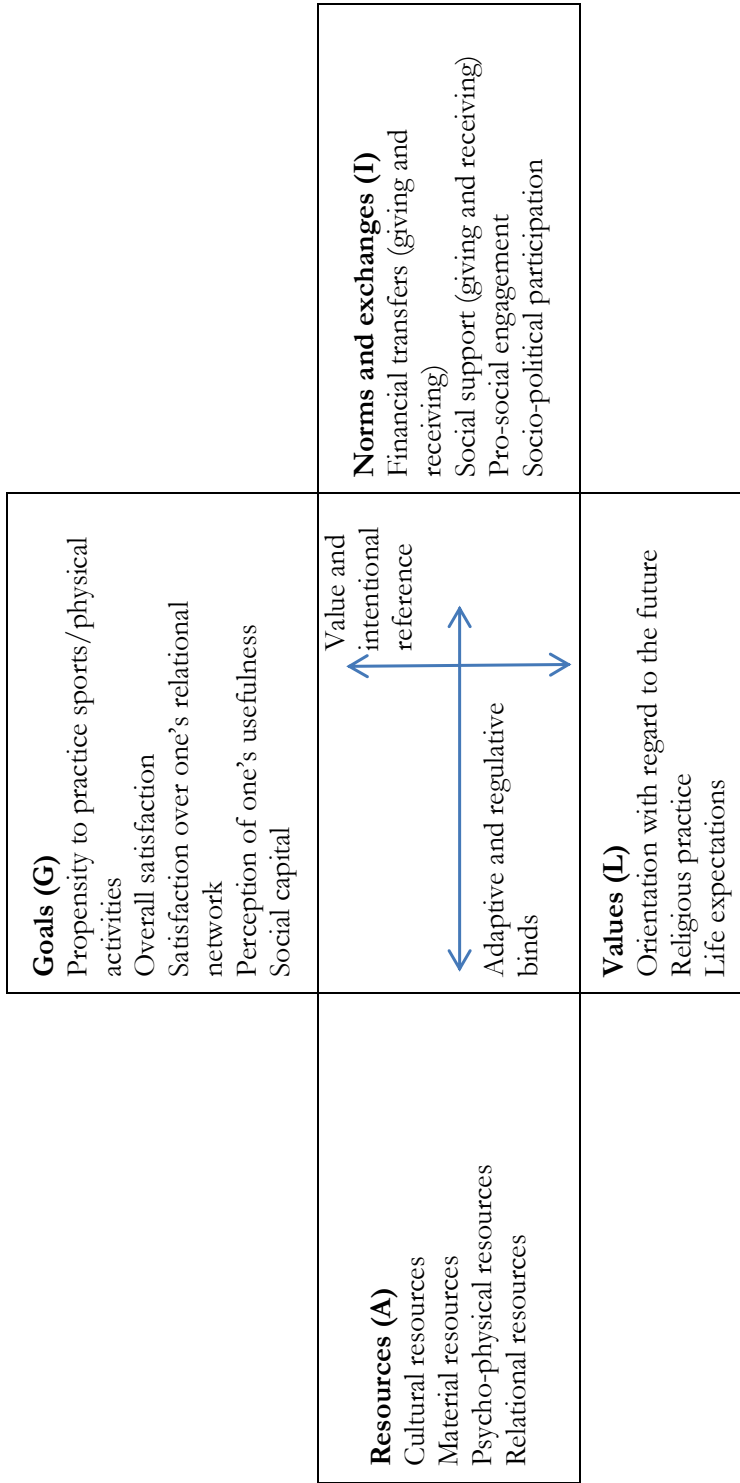


Figure 1. A relational understanding of active ageing (Bramanti & Boccacin 2015).

tions, with low resources and low expectations from life. Even if some forms of aid from other people are present, the picture is depressive: these subjects are trapped in conditions where they are unable to see any positive element.

### **/// Ageing in a Network of Relationships**

Since in the perspective of relational sociology (Donati 2011) individuals are conceived as being included in networks of significant relationships, the ageing process can be analysed from the viewpoint of the family, which is the basic social relation. Active ageing can be also looked at from the viewpoint of pro-social relations, which are voluntary and intentional relations intended to benefit other people. A positive attitude towards pro-social behaviour is usually developed in the family.

The family is also a relational entity and thus can be conceived in terms of referential, structural, and generative components. Therefore, the family relationship should be viewed as an area enclosed within what Donati calls “referential, structural and generative semantics” (2006). According to Donati (2006), the family embodies a relation of full reciprocity between genders and generations, and has always been the privileged place of encounter/conflict between generations (Donati 2014). This paves the way to looking at active ageing from an intergenerational perspective (Scabini & Rossi 2016).

Framing active ageing in terms of intergenerational thinking makes it possible to go beyond both the individualistic and the social vision, while focussing specifically on the relation. As stated by Sánchez and Hatton-Yeo (2012: 290): “an intergenerational lens would suggest the following: relate to other people and, because of that, a being me and a being together will emerge.” From the viewpoint of empirical analysis, the objective is to understand what it means to give, receive, and reciprocate within networks between the generations in families and in society.

If the relational perspective frames the active ageing process as a relationship that takes place between generations, we also need to take into consideration the ambivalence that characterizes these relationships. Ambivalence is a complex quality of relationships: this category, applied to intergenerational relationships, allows the aspect of risk inherent in them to be identified. Ambivalence is generated by the remarkable plurality and fragmentation of the elements involved in intergenerational relationships, which combine according to opposing strategies (Lüscher



2000). This aspect of risk, which is sometimes inherent in intergenerational relationships, seems to find no room in most postmodern reflections, which tend to flatten on a unique and deterministic conception of intergenerational relationships, regardless of focussing on their ambivalence.

The intergenerational perspective, despite its ambivalence, allows us to see the unravelling of relationships over time. Living longer may be an opportunity for at least three generations (grandparents, grown-up children, and grandchildren) to experience a longer period of coexistence (real or “at a distance”): this may enable mutual relational exchanges, whose presence or absence, together with the subjective perception of their quality (positive or problematic), have an impact on the lives of older people, as well as on the lives of all other generations (Angelini et al. 2012; Dykstra & Fokkema 2011; Rossi 2012; Silverstein et al. 2006).

On this premise, we decided to carry out a thematic study on active ageing in three types of “young” seniors: grandparents who care for grandchildren, seniors who take care of other people over seventy-five years of age, and those who are active in volunteering.

## 1. Grandparents

Attias-Donfut and Segalen (2002), as pioneer researchers of this topic, assert that grandparents have a fundamental role in the lives of their grandchildren, because they contribute to the building of the child’s personal identity, forming for them what is known as a pillar identity. It is crucial for children or young people to have a relationship with their grandparents, and to form a different relationship from that created with and by their parents—a link where it is possible to experience new, different parts of oneself, where the rules can change and imagination can take various shapes. In the French context, with studies on “new grandparents,” Attias-Donfut and Segalen (2002) offer a significant cross-section of the transformations of the generation born around the ‘40s and ‘50s, who have been through the experience of 1968 and have been strongly influenced by it in their lifestyle and relationship values.

In Italy significant transformations emerge compared with the past: beanpole families (multigenerational families) are becoming common (Bengtson 2001; Dykstra 2010); people have grandchildren when they are still in good health, perhaps still actively engaged in the labour market, and this constitutes an important resource, but also a new complexity

in terms of the organization of daily life. Some present-day grandparents have been through the experience of separation, which easily gives rise to a greater complexity of intergenerational relationship frameworks; others may have an experience of migration behind them, which places them in a situation of isolation and geographical distance from a part of their family.

The grandparent/grandchild relationship can be understood and described today by referring to the approach to intergenerational solidarity of Bengtson (2001) and to ambivalence of Lüscher (2012). Starting from these approaches, Albert and Ferring (2013) in particular suggest we consider some crucial factors responsible for change in the role of grandparents: socio-demographic events, including the younger age, greater activity, and longer life expectancy of grandparents; structural aspects of the nearness or proximity of homes; and sex, age and state of health. All this could in fact affect the grandparent/grandchild relationship, which is based substantially on an equilibrium of exchanges of care and attention. Moreover, sources of tension and possible conflict should not be underestimated. The phenomenon occurs of grandparents distancing themselves from the upbringing of their grandchildren, or on the contrary, the parents or grandparents may be excessively present, which may either discourage the grandparents in their guiding function or exclude the parents from their irreplaceable task.

In any case, the phenomenon of the presence of grandparents on the family scene exists to a fairly similar degree in all European countries. In the countries covered by the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), a strong investment by the grandparents in their grandchildren has been documented. The proportion of men and women who looked after their grandchildren on a regular basis over the last 12 months (from the date of the survey) in the absence of the parents is around 43% in the 16 European countries included in the survey. In particular, in all countries about half of grandmothers are involved in the care of their grandchildren on a regular or occasional basis. These figures are slightly higher in the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and France, due to the high number of single or separated parents, who therefore need extra support in looking after their children and in the difficult task of reconciling work and family (Attias-Donfut et al. 2005). Although the various countries do not exhibit significant differences in the amount of time grandparents spend taking care of their grandchildren, on closer observation of the regularity of support offered, we can note very different situations. In particular, it seems

that Southern European countries have higher estimates of care provided on a regular (weekly) basis compared with Nordic countries. Italian, Greek, and Swiss grandmothers are involved in the intensive care of their grandchildren more than twice as much as the others.

Brugiavini, Buia, Pasini, and Zantomio (2013), using SHARE longitudinal data, investigated the presence and intensity of reciprocity in the provision of informal assistance in eleven European countries of the Mediterranean, Central and Nordic areas. They found that while people's willingness to give help to their grandchildren or receive help from their children is similar in all European countries, the average frequency of care is greater in the Mediterranean countries (number of days: 19 in Italy, 16 in Spain, 8 in Germany, 6 in France). Neither cultural orientation nor national differences appear significant, while the results show that custody of the children by the grandparents leads to a greater probability that as adults the grandchildren will be willing to reciprocate, providing assistance to their elderly grandparents. Therefore one of the strongest motivations is the need to balance the give-and-take between generations. The altruistic action sets in motion a willingness to reciprocate, giving rise to a virtuous circle, according to the give-receive-reciprocate schema (Godbout & Caillé 1992).

## **2. Younger Seniors Taking Care of Older Seniors**

Despite increasing individualism and difficulty in taking on responsibilities, our society retains a growing submerged solidarity between families, which has been well documented, moreover, by the ISTAT surveys of family behaviour (2012).

As evidenced in studies conducted in Italy (Facchini 2009) and in other European countries (e.g., SHARE), families continue, even amid many difficulties, to carry out the function of care for their own members, in particular the weak members, especially older seniors, and this role is beginning to be taken on not only by women. Dykstra (2010; Dykstra et al. 2013) highlights the concept of family obligations as a moral spur to filial responsibility, based on indebtedness towards one's parents, who have provided all the care necessary up to young adulthood and sometimes beyond. It is on this system of give and take that the motivation takes shape for adult offspring to support and care for their elderly parents (Lang & Schütze 2002)—in relation with personal needs for autonomy and perceptions of filial responsibility. In particular, Silverstein, Gans, and Yang (2006: 1069)

refer to family obligations in terms of a “latent resource,” part of intra-family social capital.

The dimension of the obligatory nature of the bond between elderly parents and adult sons and daughters, in addition to being mediated in an evident manner by the different respective subcultures of the families, is negotiated within the family. Levels of excessive expectations prove to be inadequate to the consolidation of a satisfactory link between generations.

Indeed, even in healthy family networks, the burden of looking after an elderly person can lead to discomfort and unease, and then to the burn out of the caregiver, with a resulting need to find new solutions and support, including the possible transfer of the elderly person to a nursing home, which may be experienced with a sense of defeat and guilt by family members. Families are in fact challenged by the need to deal with a person who is in a state of dependence because he or she is very old, disabled, or ill (Scabini & Cigoli 2006).

Taking care of someone means first of all establishing a relationship by taking charge of the needs of another person, who, as a part of our own universe of significances, is able to give back to us the sense of our own acting (according to the code of reciprocity).

In addition, precisely because the last phase of life is a long, complex, non-uniform period in which both the time of well-being and good health and the time of psycho-physical decay are tending to increase, it can also be considered a time for memory and gratitude between generations. From a recent study (Regalia & Manzi 2016) we see that feelings of gratitude are able to mediate the relationship between help received and help given, both in the family setting and in the contexts of friendship and the neighbourhood. Regalia and Manzi (2016) found that the experience of gratitude adds a specific value to the reciprocal tie between generations. In particular it can be said that the help received from family members and other people belonging to their informal network makes people grateful for these gifts and this experience contributes directly and uniquely to further actions of support and help towards these people. But the data also suggest that gratitude has the effect of stimulating a person to help people who have not been the direct source of the support received. They suggest ultimately that gratitude favours a positive social protagonism, which goes beyond the customary expression of social norms that regulate interpersonal exchanges. This is what is experienced in the voluntary action that we shall discuss in the next paragraph.

### 3. Pro-social Behaviour and Volunteering in Later Life

Relationality is a fundamental criterion for interpreting pro-social behaviour and participation in third-sector organizations of the elderly. By associating (i.e., getting together voluntarily with a common goal), seniors respond to a strong solidaristic thrust that gives rise to networks of mutual assistance. Relationships of an associative type, which can be experienced within the different organizations of the voluntary sector, allow the seniors involved in them to gain a certain level of personal well-being.

The belief that well-being implies a relational dimension and that it can be pursued through participation in associative areas is corroborated by many researchers (Bramanti & Boccacin 2015). In this perspective, the relational processes, which take place within specific organizational contexts, become fundamental for understanding emerging social phenomena, such as the associationism of seniors.

In pro-social associationism, relational ties are created that enable the formation of inter- and intra-generational exchanges. In modern contexts there are few social spheres where intergenerational relations can be experienced; for this reason, the intergenerational ties that occur in voluntary sector organizations between senior and younger generations are particularly significant.

The voluntary action of younger seniors has been the subject of numerous surveys and studies carried out internationally and nationally and of comparative-type research, which identifies the specificities of the voluntary involvement of young seniors in different countries of the European Union (Boccacin 2016). The recent ISTAT Census of Non-Profit Institutions (2014) offers some indications about older volunteers and Italian voluntary organizations and the non-profit sector in which they are active. Overall the senior volunteers represent a significant component among those involved in voluntary work in Italy.

This personal option takes on a specific social importance because through activity it is possible for the individual to experience the intersubjective and associative dimension that has a large part in the perception of playing a satisfying social role. In this perspective, the skills, and experience of seniors provide substance to the social dimension of the activity, becoming true resources for society.

From the above-mentioned study *Io non mi ritiro* (“I’m Not Withdrawing”), some distinctive features of the elderly people involved in pro-social activity are highlighted. In particular, the youngest seniors (between 65

and 69 years of age) have a higher educational level and a greater propensity to adapt to technological and cultural change (by an ability to relate to younger generations), while those of a more advanced age (between 70 and 74) appear less well equipped in terms of technological means and the articulation of the relational circuits to which they belong, especially the primary ones. However, they are able to carry out important solidarity actions towards those who are in a situation of need due to sickness or solitude (Boccacin 2016). The social inclusion of this part of the population therefore becomes increasingly important, as does the refinement of strategies and policies to support solidarity activities carried out by seniors (Walker & Maltby 2012).

If we concentrate on the topic of exchanges between generations—in reference to the research by Regalia and Manzi (2016)—we find that the value of gratitude is manifested also at the level of adopting pro-social behaviour, because this proves to be an important predictor of civil and political commitment. In addition, there is confirmation of what emerges from the literature as to the importance of positive emotions in promoting a condition of personal well-being that can be expressed in a pro-social perspective. The results show, in fact, that grateful people involve themselves more in social work because their feeling of gratitude makes them more satisfied with their lives.

### **/// Grandparents, Senior Caregivers, and Volunteers in Later Life: Ageing Actively Across Generations in Italy**

Let us see now, in the light of the empirical data, what these three different profiles of activity connote in Italy. We shall refer again to the research project *Non mi ritiro*. From the original sample of 900 respondents aged 65–74, who are representative of the Italian population for that cohort, we drew the following groups on the basis of structural variables:<sup>6</sup>

- a) Grandparents actively looking after their grandchildren (114);
- b) Seniors caring for older people (over 75) (98);
- c) Seniors engaged in voluntary work (117).

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<sup>6</sup> Group (a) of grandparents was drawn out of the total sample of 900 by selecting those respondents who have underage grandchildren that they look after often, but who do not provide care to other elderly people, and do not do voluntary work. Group (b) of senior caregivers of older seniors was drawn by selecting those respondents who often take care of someone over 75 but do not look after their grandchildren or do voluntary work. Group (c) of later life volunteers are persons who are engaged in voluntary activities but who do not take care of grandchildren or older adults.

<b>(min. 1 – max. 3)</b>	<b>Grand- parents (114)</b>	<b>Care- givers (98)</b>	<b>Volun- teers (117)</b>	<b>Whole sample (900)</b>
Index of perceived ageing	1.49	1.45	1.47	1.57
Index of orientation to intergenerationality	2.36	2.50	2.60	2.39
Index of gratitude	2.70	2.52	2.68	2.57
Index of overall satisfaction	2.32	2.26	2.30	2.20

Table 5. Perceived ageing, intergenerational orientation, gratitude, satisfaction (average values).

The group of grandparents (a) live mainly in the south, the caregivers of older seniors are prevalent in the north-east, and the voluntary workers in the north-west. The grandparents who look after grandchildren are mainly women (58.3%), while there is a slight predominance of men among caregivers and voluntary workers (52.5% and 51.1% respectively). Caregivers and volunteers are slightly younger than the grandparents of group (a): 71.1% of the respondents engaged in care for seniors over 75 are aged 65–69, as were 61.4% of those active in voluntary work. The percentage of separated or divorced persons is slightly higher among the volunteers, and they are comparatively better off in terms of health (presence of chronic illness—grandparents 39.4%; caregivers 40.2%; volunteers 29.4%; in the whole sample of 900 people 41.2%) and socio-economic status<sup>7</sup> (range: min. 1 – max. 3: volunteers 2.13; caregivers 2.03; and grandparents 1.74).

In regard to perceiving themselves as old, the three profiles of seniors show an average value lower than the total (i.e., they feel less old). The index of gratitude is high particularly for the grandparents' group (they feel grateful for life, their children, and grandchildren, and for their experiences in general), while the index of intergenerational orientation is higher for the volunteers, and the index of overall satisfaction is almost the same across the three groups (Table 5).

Overall, the three groups have good levels of relational networks both as regards the more expressive dimension of leisure, and in terms of support. The three groups report higher levels than the whole sample of 900 respondents (Table 6).

<sup>7</sup> The status index consists of: interviewee's job, partner's job, father's job, interviewee's level of education, partner's level of education, father's level of education.

<b>(min. 1 – max. 3)</b>	<b>Grand- parents (114)</b>	<b>Care- givers (98)</b>	<b>Volun- teers (117)</b>	<b>Whole sample (900)</b>
Width of frequentation network	2.83	2.63	2.84	2.57
Width of support network	1.95	1.93	1.94	1.85

Table 6. Relational networks (average values).

<b>(min. 1 – max. 3)</b>	<b>Grand- parents (114)</b>	<b>Care- givers (98)</b>	<b>Volun- teers (117)</b>	<b>Whole sample (900)</b>
Index of primary social capital	2.35	2.29	2.44	2.28
Index of secondary social capital	1.22	1.14	2.41	1.70
Index of generalized social capital	2.07	1.93	2.25	1.92

Table 7. Social capital (average values).

Research has evidenced the relevance of social capital (SC) to the health and well-being of older people (Bramanti et al. 2016; Gray 2009; Nyqvist & Forsman 2015). In our study we operationalized relational social capital (SC),<sup>8</sup> distinguishing three components: (a) primary SC, typical of primary relations such as the family; (b) secondary SC, typical of associative relationships, and (c) generalized SC, defined by generalized interpersonal trust and a collaborative orientation towards other people in general. All three profiles of active seniors (Table 7) show levels of primary SC in line with the average of the total sample (N=900). The measurement of secondary social capital (associative) is more differentiated, being high for the voluntary workers, while weaker for the grandparents of group (a) and the caregivers of group (b). Generalized social capital, trust, and interest in strangers is differently distributed; while it is above the general average overall, it has higher peaks for the senior volunteers. Among the three groups, the profile with a deficit of social capital compared with the others is the caregivers' group; this probably results from the caregivers' being

<sup>8</sup> In the relational perspective social capital is a relationship that is at the same time reticular, reciprocal, trustworthy, and collaboratively oriented. The phrase "at the same time" underlines that these four dimensions are indispensable for speaking of social capital in a relational sense (Donati 2007).



(min. 1 – max. 7; 4=balanced)	Grandparents (114)	Caregivers (98)	Volunteers (117)	Whole sample (900)
Received/given affection	4.08	4.07	4.24	4.12
Received/given economic help	5.32	5.44	5.52	5.37
Received/given emotional support	4.33	4.28	4.67	4.38
Received/given assistance and care	4.04	4.02	4.57	4.18
Received/given respect	4.20	4.10	4.20	4.14
Received/given confidence	4.09	4.15	4.22	4.15

Table 8. Giving and receiving (average values).

	Grandparents (114)	Caregivers (98)	Volunteers (117)
Index of gratitude	0.994	0.816	0.405
Index of relational satisfaction	0.792	1.486	2.810
Index of generalised social capital	0.022	0.313	1.014
Extent of support network	0.321	0.659	-0.775
Index of perceived ageing	0.652	-1.977	-1.102

Table 9. Predictors of reciprocity (coefficient  $\beta$ ).

overburdened, which drains energy and discourages a trusting outlook towards others.

The circuit of reciprocity is not always perfectly in equilibrium. It sometimes happens that one generation gives more than another, or the rhythm of giving may alternate in the course of the life cycle. The important thing is to avoid a protracted and massive imbalance involving the risk of a dwindling of the vital resources, material or immaterial, of a generation. However, there is empirical evidence that would suggest a positive association between helping the members of one's own network (adopting an active attitude) and well-being (Chen & Silverstein 2000). On the other hand, being helped would seem to be correlated to lower levels of well-being (Reinhardt et al. 2006; Rossi et al. 2016). All the elderly people considered, on average, that they gave a little more than they received from their children, although the values are very near to 4, which is the measure

of balanced exchange (Table 8). Comparatively it can be remarked that the most balanced exchanges are economic and emotional support; the group that is perceived as most generous to their children is that of the voluntary workers.

We also performed a multiple linear regression (Table 9) in order to identify the weight of some predictors in connoting a given variable selected as a dependent variable.<sup>9</sup>

For the grandparents, the index of gratitude is in first place, followed to a weaker degree by a low perception of ageing and the index of relational satisfaction. The weakness of the latter probably reveals some aspects of ambivalence in relationships, in particular with sons and daughters, which could contain tensions and conflict. For the caregivers the most significant predictor of reciprocity is above all a low perception of ageing; compared with the grandparents group they show that relational satisfaction is more important in promoting reciprocity, gratitude somewhat less. For the voluntary workers, reciprocity appears present mainly among those who experience high levels of relational satisfaction (Exp (B) 2.810) and a high reserve of generalized social capital, while the index of gratitude is much less significant.

### **/// Conclusions**

In this paper we have tried to summarize the long process of the operationalization of a theoretical approach. Shifting from theory to applied research was challenging and yet very stimulating. Despite all the limitations of our empirical investigations, studying the ageing process through the lens of relational sociology has allowed us to cast light on the complexity and high differentiation of ageing in contemporary societies. Thinking in relational terms took us beyond the structural differences among the elderly (household composition, socio-economic status, education, etc.) to consider how orientations and the significance of the relational dimensions sustain or fail to support a process of active ageing and well-being. In addition, keeping the focus on intergenerational relations, both in the

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<sup>9</sup> In the specific case the selected dependent variable is the index of intergenerational exchange and the predictors are: the Index of Relational Satisfaction, the Index of Health, the Generalized Social Capital Index, the Perceived Ageing Index, the extent of the support network (RETESUPP), and the Index of Gratitude. The Multiple Linear Regression, performed on the three groups and in the overall sample, can be positive (as the values of one variable increase, there is an increase in the other as well) or negative (as one increases, the other decreases). This relationship is indicated by the sign of the coefficient  $\beta$ .  $\beta$  is the coefficient of dependence/coefficient of regression and indicates how much  $y$  (dependent variable) changes when  $x$  (independent variable) increases by one unit.

family and in society at large, allowed us to explore the transformations and standstills (in other words, morphogenesis and morphostasis) taking place and to show their consequences over time.

Finally, the type of material produced by doing research from an intergenerational relational perspective—because it goes beyond the structural dimension—can become a source of valuable information for policy-makers and persons devising interventions to support active ageing.

Paragraph attribution:

Despite this paper being the product of the joint effort of the three authors, paragraphs 1, 2, 5 can be specifically attributed to S.G. Meda, paragraph 3 to G. Rossi, and paragraph 4 to D. Bramanti.

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### /// Abstract

This paper considers the concept of active ageing from the perspective of relational sociology. Active ageing is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. Ageing occurs in a relational network (the family, society), with a whole range of reciprocal mutual interactions (support, care, etc.). Starting from an operationalization of the relational components (Donati 2011) of the active ageing process, SHARE data were considered, as well as data collected for the Italian survey *Non mi ritiro: l'allungamento della vita, una sfida per le generazioni, un'opportunità per la società* (“I’m Not Withdrawing: The Lengthening of Life, a Challenge for the Generations, an Opportunity for Society”, 2013–2014, N=900), in which the way Italians and other Europeans face ageing was explored. Finally, the focus was on

a sub-sample of older adults active in various relational networks, such as their families (grandparents and caregivers aged 65+ of the older generation) and third-sector organizations. By embracing a relational (intergenerational) lens it was possible to grasp the differentiation that characterizes the ageing process, the transformations and standstills of individuals, as well as different orientations and ideas that facilitate or hinder the path to active ageing.

Keywords:

active ageing, intergenerational relationships, family, pro-social behaviour, relational sociology

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**RELATIONAL INTERPRETATIONS  
AND CRITICISM**



# **SOCIOLOGIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE: FROM ALIENATION TO THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING**

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## **/// The Dualist Character of Everyday Life**

In recent years there appears to have been a “new turn” in the sociology of contemporary culture, towards an increasingly explicit, systematic focus on “everyday life” as a fundamental subject of social analysis (Gardiner 2000; Sztompka 2008). This shift in focus is clear from the fact that in the last ten years a number of important, much-discussed essays have been published on the subject (Hurdley 2016; Johnson 2008; Kalekin-Fishman 2013; Neal & Murji 2015). In sociology, there are three approaches to the study of “everyday life”: as a concept, as an avenue of research, and as an area of study in itself. In the first case, studying everyday life means questioning what specifically defines it and what relationship exists between everyday life and other areas of social experience. Pursuant to this approach, everyday life is one of the problems dealt with by the sociology of knowledge. In the second case, everyday life is analysed as a specific avenue of research, where the focus is very much on what is considered of marginal importance in society, and for this reason falls outside of the scope of “grand theories.” Finally, everyday life can be seen as an area of study that focuses on material culture, that is, on the cultural significance of living, of eating, of objects, of forms of transport, and other similar subjects. This paper intends to focus on the first of these three spheres of study, and begins by highlighting the dualistic, oscillatory nature of the idea of everyday life that has characterized Western culture since classical times. The two paradigmatic notions of everyday life formulated in sociol-

ogy will be identified and analysed, and it will be shown that these notions also contain this original dualism, albeit expressed in other terms. Finally, we shall try to deal with the contradictions that emerge, considering them within a broader analytical framework.

This essay starts from a work by Gouldner (1975), which Donati (2002b) mentions and whose method of historical analysis he shares. In Gouldner's view, a dualistic, oscillatory understanding of everyday life runs through the development of Western culture, and in certain phases the composition of this dualism is provisional. What Arendt (1978: 23ff.) defined as the "theory of the two worlds" had already been codified in ancient Greek culture. The everyday is the realm of appearance and material needs, and as such contrasts with the world of ideas. This distinction established a binary code that was to have profound, lasting repercussions on European civilization and that subordinate the values of everyday life to the values of true life. Work is considered of less importance than philosophy, and is deemed of purely instrumental value. The time of manual labour is the inauthentic time of necessity and of the satisfaction of the basic needs of life. In this framework, whoever manages to avoid working, by cultivating the more noble faculties of the spirit (the intellectual faculties) is considered superior to other men. Euripides's tragedies are an exceptional case in ancient Greek culture. In Euripides's works, the heroes are people who were generally relegated to a marginal role in society (women, the elderly, anonymous individuals). Euripides's promotion of the everyday, of the prosaic, of the contingent and its fragility, is certainly important; however, it is not representative of Greek society as a whole (Nussbaum 2001). On closer examination this contrast between two notions of everyday life can also be found in early Christianity, where everyday life is not only the place of earthly concerns and affections, from which people must detach themselves, but also the place where religious faith can be experienced and demonstrated (the *Epistle to Diognetus* is a case in point). Work is still chiefly considered as a means with which to procure the material means of sustenance; work is extraneous to any fully human purpose. The contrast between the ascetic separation from the sphere of labour, and its full acceptance as part of human existence, was also evident in medieval culture. The monasteries, in particular those founded by the Benedictine Order, made a vital contribution to the organization of life along precise temporal lines: this regularity and this order symbolize the attempt to find a living unity between immanence and transcendence, manual labour and spiritual activity, working days and feast days. The everyday is organized

in accordance with set practices, each of which has its own specific time (Zerubavel 1985), but all of this is confined to places—monasteries—that are separated from the everyday lives of the majority of people. In medieval culture, a gradual increase in appreciation for the value of labour can be seen: people use both manual abilities and rational capacities in their work. Both work and involvement in civic and economic life begin to be considered things that are not contrary to religious life (Chafuen 2003). Late medieval culture tries, without fully succeeding, to reconcile the active life and the contemplative life; instrumental activity and rational activity; material needs and ideal requirements. As Weber has shown, the Reformation exalted commitment to earthly activities and seems to have given a new impetus to everyday life; however, on closer inspection this exaltation is merely apparent, since it transforms the world without transforming the meaning of the world (Donati 2002b). The religious notion of labour is not seen in relation to the virtues, and to a finalism inherent in human beings, but rather is perceived from the functional viewpoint. In Enlightenment culture, the “inner-worldly asceticism” analysed by Weber is gradually transformed into the emptying of transcendentalism in favour of immanence. The “world” becomes the only sphere of life in which Man’s needs are met, and in which Man can attain happiness. This gradual rendering absolute of the earthly dimension of everyday life was challenged by Romantic culture, which could not accept that the everyday should be considered a pacifying, all-engaging horizon. Everyday life could no longer be enlightened by the relationship with the sacred; the repetitiveness of technical rationality cannot be overcome by the expectation of a transcendental future. On the one hand, therefore, we have the ordinary, gray, meaningless lives of the majority, who are forced to abide by the logics of instrumental and bureaucratic rationality: “in daily life individuals experience the division between the human and the social as lack of meaning, as an absence of ends, as disorder, and as dramas of reality” (Donati 2012: 24); on the other hand, there is the opportunity, reserved for the select few, to render everyday life meaningful through the creativity of the human spirit and/or grand exploits.

Anti-heroes, alienation, and black-and-white lives, on the one hand. Heroes, meaning, and colourful lives on the other. These appear to be the terms of the dialectics of everyday life (Featherstone 1992). Western culture appears to be wavering between the debasement of everyday life and its exaltation. This dialectic, as we have seen, derives from Greek culture, and after various alternations it finds itself in the historical period marking the

advent of sociology, and subsequently in the frame of sociological enquiry itself. Having outlined the historical-cultural framework within which the “problem” of everyday life arose for the first time, we shall now see that sociological thought is also characterized by a dualistic, dialectical notion of the everyday.

### **/// The Sociology of Everyday Life: From Alienation to the Production of Meaning**

The two principal sociological schools of thought concerned with the study of everyday life are Marxism and the phenomenological sociology of culture (Donati 2002b). The first school of thought criticizes the alienating, inauthentic character of everyday life, while the other perceives and analyses the everyday as the context in which, within the bounds of common sense, cultural meaning is produced. Numerous other subsequent developments may be traced, directly or indirectly, to these two models (the one critical, the other descriptive). Of course, it is not possible here to reconstruct the complex, detailed reflection on everyday life to be found in Marxism (for an introduction to this topic, see, e.g., Maycroft 1996) and in phenomenological sociology: instead, we simply offer a brief overview of relational sociology’s new interpretation of the role of everyday life in these two schools of thought. According to Marx, “everyday life” proceeds within the bounds of commodity fetishism: everyday life goes on between the two opposing poles of science and reality on the one hand, and appearance and ideology on the other. Everyday life is the inauthentic life of the subordinate social classes, of non-heroic cultures and their battle against oppression and alienation. The focus is clearly on the economic structures that determine the socio-cultural conditions of alienation, rather than on everyday life conceived abstractly. In Marx and the Marxist tradition, overcoming the dualism of everyday life by means of political revolution is not the only possible solution. There are Marxist scholars of everyday life who, although referring to the original paradigm, have nevertheless tried to formulate an original perspective and, at least in part, a certain independence from mainstream thought (Heller 2016; Lefebvre 2014). The most systematic, relevant analysis from a sociological viewpoint is that of Lefebvre, whose writings were highly influential not only in the field of sociology, but also in the historiography of the “Annales.” Everyday life is examined in the light of the dialectical relationship between authenticity and inauthenticity, a question that Lefebvre associates not only with Marx, but

also with Heidegger. The German philosopher and Lefebvre both viewed everyday life as the starting point for their reflections, and as the necessary link between Man and nature, and between Men, as well as being the inauthentic mode of this relationship. While in Heidegger's view, everyday life is the time of forgetting about death, Lefebvre saw it as the time in which our understanding of the essence of social relations eludes us. The French scholar's critique does not so much focus on any abstract condition of the spirit, as on the fundamental problem of Western industrialized societies, namely, alienation. Lefebvre believes his critique to be in keeping with the ideals of Marx, seen as the person who wanted more than anything to change everyday life, real life (Lefebvre 2014). The French sociologist wanted to overcome the economic reading of Marx, and was interested in recovering Marx's early works, in which the term "production"—the mediation between the natural and the human spheres—is given a broad meaning. In Lefebvre's view, the term "production" not only refers to the manufacture of objects, but also to "spiritual" production and the production of social relations (which in turn implies the reproduction of those social relations). The chance to escape the social mechanisms perpetuating the aforementioned state of alienation is to be found in revolution: a revolution conceived not so much as the conquest of political power, as pursued by early Marxism, or as the victory of sexual freedom as conceived by psychoanalytical Marxism, but rather as a change in everyday life—a revolution that delivers everyday life from the grip of the products of capitalism—manipulation, consumerism, advertising and industrial culture. Thus in Lefebvre's view, everyday life is a dialectic experience in which false consciousness and the processes leading to the overcoming of false consciousness, face up to one another. The critique proposed by Lefebvre aims to show how everyday life (perceived in micro-sociological terms) can become a place where human values are recovered and alienation overcome after the phase of (economic and cultural) production, in which what has been produced takes on an independent status from that of the producer. The analysis of everyday life conducted by Heller (2016), on the other hand, is based on three thematic areas: everyday knowledge; the concept of social reproduction; and the distinction between everyday life as an historical experience, and everyday life as an analytical category. Heller investigated the "contents" and the "anthropological character" of everyday knowledge. The former term referred to the sum of our knowledge of reality that we actually use in everyday life. This knowledge varies from one historical epoch to another, and depends on the social posi-



tions of the persons in question. It takes two forms: “knowing what” and “knowing how,” with the former generally leading to the latter, except in the case of religion. Conveying everyday knowledge is the task of the adult generations, even though each society assigns this role to specific persons and institutions. The process of conveying this knowledge is always a dynamic one in which any superfluous knowledge is cast aside, while new knowledge is introduced in the light of a changing social environment. In Agnes Heller’s view, “if individuals are to reproduce society, they must reproduce themselves as individuals. We may define ‘everyday life’ as the aggregate of those individual reproduction factors which, *pari passu*, make social reproduction possible” (ibid.: 3). This understanding differs from the existentialist interpretation, whereby everyday life comprises the conventions that are repeated each day in a cheerless manner, and from that of Lefebvre, who perceives everyday life as mediation between nature and society. Despite the fact that as a rule everyday life is spoken of as if it had its own ontology, Heller points out that apart from the recurrent aspects of that life, societies know various ways of interpreting and experiencing the everyday. In capitalist societies, everyday life is basically the alienated life of individuals who pursue their self-preservation and who tend to submit to society’s demands. Pending the advent of a non-alienated society, Heller argues that even in capitalist societies, certain individuals are capable of a personal revolt whereby they declare war on the alienating aspects of everyday life. This revolt occurs when an individual is capable of channelling his or her energy into a specific sphere of activity outside of everyday life and removed from everyday concerns (for a critical view of this approach, see Gardiner 2006). From this point of view, the question of the pursuit of beauty plays a key role in Heller’s work (2012). The anthropological emphasis and the insistence on the individual represent the work’s originality, which distances her from Marx’s position, and is why her thought is still influential today.

In the phenomenological sociology of culture, everyday life is the sphere in which a world of meaningful relations is created that transcends the purely material. It is in the sphere of the everyday that people give meaning to their experiences and to society. When Alfred Schütz (1972) reflects on the inter-subjective world of everyday life, he starts by attempting to understand how adult people relate to this reality and how they act with their fellow men. His reflections on everyday life gave significant impetus to the phenomenological school, and led to a number of original developments in the sociology of knowledge. Individuals live in diverse

realities he calls “finite provinces of meaning”: at any one time, only one such province comes to the fore, while interest in the existence of other provinces is suspended. Each finite province of meaning possesses something by means of which it is temporarily capable of considering itself as reality; but only everyday life (also called the “natural attitude”), constituted by a specific form of *epoché*, represents a world taken for granted, where all doubt regarding the existence of such is suspended. According to the phenomenological viewpoint, the formal nature of people’s conduct in everyday life is typified by the certainties of common sense. From the pragmatic point of view, a series of abstraction procedures are utilized in everyday life that permit people to implicitly, and repeatedly, adopt the “and so forth” formula, thus reducing the complexity of society (this aspect has subsequently been developed in particular by ethnomethodology). From the ontological point of view, it is taken for granted that the world and other individuals exist independently. The world perceived by common sense existed before we were born, and our predecessors gained experience of it, interpreting it as an organized world.

Schütz’s position is based on two beliefs: firstly, the belief that the common sense governing everyday life relies on the “solidity” and certainty of reality (when manipulating the reachable objects in the world, an individual realizes that they offer resistance); secondly, common-sense knowledge perceives reality as a whole that is ordered to a certain degree. In virtue of these two characteristics, the reality of everyday life is familiar and pre-acquired, and as such is taken for granted. The world known through an individual’s common sense is not only “solid” and ordered, but also appears originally as an inter-subjective world: we live as people among other people, linked by reciprocal ties and influenced by our understanding of others and others’ understanding of us. This inter-subjectivity manifests itself in three ways. It involves the reciprocity of perspectives, the social origins of knowledge, and the social distribution of knowledge. A reciprocity of perspectives means that in the natural attitude of common-sense knowledge, in everyday life, everyone takes it for granted that all people can know the world. According to Schütz, the reciprocity of perspectives enables a generalization to be made, namely that everyone takes it for granted and presumes that the others do likewise, and that despite starting from a different point of observing reality, it is nevertheless possible to adopt the perspective of another to a certain degree. In everyday life, only a small part of what we know is the result of our personal experi-

ence. The majority of what we know and remember has been conveyed to us by others: by our parents, teachers, friends, and ancestors. In everyday life, overall knowledge differs from one person to another: each is an expert in a limited field of knowledge, and knows little or nothing about the majority of other fields; this is another reason why a certain degree of faith is called for in social life. It would be impossible to individually re-tread the path leading to a certain type of knowledge each time such knowledge was called for. The theories regarding the link between common sense and everyday life were the point of departure for the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), in which everyday life became the object itself of the sociology of knowledge: this area of sociology deals with what people recognize as real in everyday life. Everyday life is a collection of routines, in relation to which people act and reflect for the best part of their time; it is their habitat. The reality of everyday life is a world taken for granted; a world that is spatially and temporally ordered and inter-subjective. In Berger and Luckmann's view "common sense contains innumerable pre- and quasi-scientific interpretations about everyday reality, which it takes for granted" (1966: 34). In common-sense knowledge, reality is taken for granted. Berger and Luckmann, as well, believe that the reality of everyday life possesses an order that is not bestowed upon it by the single individual, because everyone already has a place within that order. The reality of the everyday world existed before the birth of individual men and women, and shall remain after they die. Everyone lives in a finite state. The everyday world is constituted by numerous realities that also include phenomenon not present here and now. The world is shared with others: we are born, we grow, we learn, we do things together with others who are important for us, people who are different from us but in certain respects share the world with us. They differ from us because they have aspirations, interests, and plans that are different from ours (and this may give rise to conflict), but at the same time they have something that unites them to us because in any case we can understand them and be understood by them; we can put ourselves in their shoes and live with them in a shared world. The common-sense knowledge present in the everyday world is taken for granted until something happens that forces people to question their acquired certainties and try to find a meaning. This questioning of common sense was developed in particular by Garfinkel and the ethnomethodology that investigates everyday life, beginning from the separation between the world of everyday experience and the global social structure produced by modernization and rationalization. The development of communication in

everyday life starts from taking an innumerable series of implicit clauses for granted which entail a whole series of implicit “and so on.” The knowledge required in everyday life is addressed more to “how” than to “what”; it is a form of knowledge consisting in a series of methods of use, of techniques, of ad hoc procedures, that people utilize in an attempt to establish an agreement about the meaning of what is happening and what is said in everyday life. Therefore, expertise does not consist in shared knowledge, as Berger and Luckmann argued, but rather in the capacity to use, in a constant, methodical way, interpretative procedures or basic rules with which to attribute a rational, normative character to everyday actions and experience. Garfinkel’s approach to reality is more radical than that of Berger and Luckmann: he believes that reality appears the result of the cognitive processes that in everyday life attempt to comprehend that reality. Melvin Pollner placed the concept of “mundane reason” at the centre of the sociology of everyday life. In order to grasp social phenomena, mundane reason produces idealizations of reality (it creates limits, such as the principle of non-contradiction) which in each individual inference are considered unarguable: mundane reason “provides its practitioners with a wide range of explanations which preserve mundane reason’s stipulation that reality is coherent, determinate and intersubjectively accessible” (2010: 47). Pollner, using numerous examples taken from court hearings, tries to show that “the in-itself,” the “truth,” the “reality” that mundane reason pursues, is only knowable within certain categories established by mundane reason itself. Thanks to mundane reason, which Pollner also calls “common sense” (ibid.: 48), sociology and the practices of the actors in everyday life share a series of assumptions regarding the nature of society seen as a real, intersubjective sphere. Social practices presuppose a kind of collection of mundane inquiry, according to which “objects, events and processes in the outer world and the world as a general context are determinate, coherent and non-contradictory” (ibid.: 17). Sharing these fundamental assumptions has its advantages, not only at the epistemological level, but also in practical terms. Social life and the interaction of people may be based, in fact, on the belief that descriptions of the real world are going to be basically coherent and compatible. Should different explanations be given for the same fact, this means that one of the interpreting subjects is lying or has given a rushed judgement. What is precluded, a priori, is an inherent contradiction in reality itself. When he asserts that “the phenomenon par excellence is not the world per se but worlding, the work whereby a world per se and the attendant concerns which derive from a world per se—

truth and error, to mention two—are constructed and sustained” (Pollner 2010: 7), Pollner radicalizes the concept of social construction and applies it to the common-sense knowledge operating in everyday life. In this way, what we consider “reality” should be understood as a fiction constructed through the language used in everyday life.

We started by saying that in the phenomenological sociology of culture, everyday life refers to a common world, a sphere in which the experiences of individuals and social groups acquire meaning. The phenomenological sociology of culture tries to extend Husserl’s original aim of “Zurück zu den Sachen selbst” to the study of everyday life and culture; however, paradoxically it appears to also open the way to developments like those of the radical ethnomethodology, which go in a very different direction. The world of common sense and of “mundane reason” end up being something that needs exposing; they become a kind of second nature in which there is little room for any form of reflection that is not closed in itself.

Thus in sociological terms, the notion of “everyday life” is associated with a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, the expression brings to mind a common sense that is taken for granted, that is, a pre-scientific knowledge that has yet to be critically endorsed, or indeed an ideological form of knowledge. Everyday life evokes repetitive, prosaic, tiring aspects of existence, such as work and events of a mundane nature that characterize life in society. On the other hand, everyday life is conceived and experienced as the place and time that eludes systemic logic, as the sphere of affection and expressivity, and thus may become a kind of “Haven in a Heartless World,” to put it in the words of Christopher Lasch (1995) when describing the family’s social role in contemporary society. The risk of a unilateral reading of everyday life is implicit in sociological discourse, leaving a fundamental aspect thereof very much in the shade: this is evident from the overview of the various positions adopted by Marxist and phenomenological observers of everyday life. On the one hand, there are those who criticize everyday life immersed in the contradictions, in the social reproduction and in the alienating mechanisms of industrial (and post-industrial) society. On the other hand, there are those who describe everyday life as evolving on the basis of common-sense knowledge, and as representing the source of those meanings that individuals attribute to their own actions. In the former case, the contradiction may be overcome by reference to utopias, a theme that has recently attracted the renewed interest of the social sciences (Bregman 2017; Chrostowska & Ingram 2017); or by looking for extraordinary experiences that enable people to escape their gray, meaningless everyday

lives, at least for a while. On the other hand, while it is true that everyday life is shaped by the common-sense knowledge that has been consolidated in each community, and that constitutes the primary source of meaning for that community (Geertz 1983), it is also true that common sense may feed forms of social conformism, as the Marxist tradition—Gramsci in particular (Krehan 2016)—has argued; or it may be seen as a hermetic, ultimately illusory, horizon of daily practices, as shown by the ethnomethodological developments in Pollner’s work.

### **/// Can Gouldner’s Relational Approach Surmount the Dualism of Everyday Life?**

Alvin Gouldner tries to overcome the dualism inherent in the analysis of everyday life, by combining the Marxian and ethnomethodological approaches. In the essay mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Gouldner offers an historical reconstruction, and sees the concept of “everyday life” as a criticism of extraordinary lives: both those of the saints, as narrated and taken as a model in religious writings, and those of the heroes, as declaimed in secular visions of the world. The everyday is interwoven with official histories of political life and with the systemic logic of economic life, and yet it maintains an otherness in relation to such spheres, as it recalls the repetition of daily habits and practices. Gouldner’s interpretation of everyday life operates at both the critical-reflective and historical levels, in a reworking of the analyses offered by Lefebvre and Garfinkel. The former, in highlighting the contradictions of everyday life and the alienation looming over it, adopts a critical perspective: the latter, on the other hand, in emphasizing the importance of common language and of the practical logic of everyday activities, offers a more descriptive vision: everyday life is the framework of meaning in which our knowledge and practices are enmeshed. In Gouldner’s view, everyday life is the life that is witnessed but not acknowledged (as ethnomethodology argues)—life that ought to be rid, at the same time, of its alienating and religious aspects (as Marxists argue). Gouldner’s vision is not the only way of analysing and overcoming the dualisms in question. The relational sociology of Donati tries to deal with the same problems as Gouldner: Donati suggests that we interpret everyday life by trying to go beyond the sociological tradition’s recurrent polarizations and dualisms, but his reading of the everyday is very different from that of Gouldner. In the relational approach, everyday life may

also be the space and time of the relationship between immanence and transcendence, of the critical need and desire for meaning. Reflection on everyday life is incorporated into the relational theory of the social registers of time, which are the different ways of stating the difference before/after in the sequences or transitions from one condition to another of a given social being. The “time register” (Donati 2012: 180–181) may be interactional (micro), symbolic (macro) or historical-social (meso). The first of the three registers—the time of communication—refers to time as an event; the second—the time of social relations—is a lasting time, the time of memory (subjective, moral, and historical); the third register is time that goes beyond time, which according to many scholars is the time of the sacred. This classification shows that social time is experienced in different, complementary modes. In contemporary Western societies, the time of everyday life tends to be identified with the interactional register. Instead of a relationship between the three registers, what is witnessed today is the emergence of everyday life with no history, that is, everyday life based purely on interaction, where the social and cultural aspects (memory and meaning) of the relation are somewhat obscured. Time loses its link with the things and the symbols that give meaning to life, and becomes a time of mere communication. In everyday life, actions and social relations seem to have been replaced by an interactive mode which, as such, is contingent, instantaneous, and incapable of generating history (ibid.: 95ff.). Modern society increasingly tends to confer a purely superficial, impersonal character to everyday life, whereby meaningful relations tend to be revoked or fragmented, to be replaced by social relations based exclusively on a communicative dynamic: individuals find themselves increasingly alone despite being increasingly interconnected (Turkle 2011). The theorists of the postmodern age argue that the period of large-scale narration is over. Events happen now, not history: there are plenty of stories, but no “one” history. People no longer feel connected to the past, or to the future. The time of everyday life in which the interactional register prevails thus expresses the exaltation of the present, which has become detached from the past and is devoid of any future direction. The “history-less” everyday has replaced a linear conception of time with a cyclical one. In the former case, the time-frame of existence, both personal and collective, was characterized by a starting point and a meaningful life path designed to lead to a point of arrival. As a number of other well-known writers have shown, the roots of

this dynamics lie in the Christian ethos; modernity has maintained this underlying scheme of things, albeit secularizing its contents. In post-modern society, time does not unfold in accordance with any linearity or finality, either religious or secular, but on the contrary appears to implode: events repeat themselves each day without leading anywhere in particular. Time thus becomes a hypertrophied aspect of everyday life in which everything is programmed, recorded, stored (time is made absolute), without the chance of it becoming an integral part of any personal history (worldliness appears nullified).

In a society characterized by the abandonment of a linear conception of time and by the prevalence of purely interactional registers, increasingly uncertain, fragmented everyday life is in danger of appearing to be a time of alienation, of meaningless suffering, of toil and contradiction. One possible way out of this situation is represented by the frantic attempts made to break out of this gray, repetitive everyday existence. Particularly in the case of young people, the most significant example of this attitude is the pursuit of “elaborate” and/or extreme risks (Le Breton 2013). The hope of achieving radical change is linked to vitalistic experience that always goes beyond, and against, everyday life: the space and time of “life” never appear to coincide with those of everyday existence. Where there is the everyday, there is no life, and where there is life there is no everyday. However, it is the very awareness of the inauthenticity of everyday life in contemporary society that could lend plausibility once again to a “religious option” (Joas 2014). The differences between everyday life and “real life,” between immanence and transcendence, between private life and public life, are resolved in various ways. Two opposing ways of resolving this dilemma appear paradigmatic, insofar as they express common trends in the most coherent manner. On the one hand, there are those who, in an attempt to live their everyday lives in accordance with religious ideals, try to create communities that voluntarily choose to cut themselves off from public life. One example of this trend is a social phenomenon emerging in the USA that has been called the “Benedict option” (Dreher 2017): individuals, families, and groups, in an attempt to re-establish Christianity as the focal point of everyday life (not subject to mediation), withdraw from public life and create parallel communities based on the Benedictine model. In order to shape everyday life, religion thus separates itself from the public sphere. On the other hand, there are those who try to merge everyday life, religion, and the public sphere. This is what is happening with the growing phenomena of extremism (Bronner 2016), where the



religious option is utilized, often in an instrumental manner, to create totalizing social and political projects. To give shape to everyday life, religion takes over from the public sphere completely. In both cases, despite their being at opposite extremes, the dualisms and tensions inherent in everyday life are in fact resolved, but in a reductionist manner. From a relational viewpoint, the most commonly proffered interpretations and proposals regarding the return of religions and their influence on the everyday lives of individuals and on the public sphere would appear unsatisfactory. The theory of a clash of civilizations, the proposal to limit religion to the private sphere, and the attempt to create a polytheistic culture in the form of a global civil religion, are invariably reductionist. In a relational approach, on the other hand, the focus is on creating a public sphere where different world views and different ways of living everyday life may be expressed in accordance with the rules of reciprocity, and may peacefully co-exist (Donati 2002a). The relationship between different cultures of everyday life can lead to the improved awareness of the processes of alienation that characterize contemporary society as well, while at the same time permitting the establishment of a “common sense” which may serve as the basis for civil co-existence (Boudon 2007). Everyday life is the focal point for the fundamental problems in the lives of individuals and of social structures. The interaction between the relational model and the two classical models of analysis—the Marxist model and the phenomenological model—appears to offer ways of dealing with the aporias present in sociological discourse, while at the same time suggesting new ideas for further study that can lead to further developments in this area of sociological inquiry.

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### /// Abstract

This paper analyses the concept of everyday life as formulated in relational sociology. It shows that Pierpaolo Donati's historical analysis of the

dualist nature of everyday life is similar to that of Alvin Gouldner but that the two authors' approaches differ in terms of the possibility of overcoming this dualism. From the perspective of relational sociology, sociological interpretations of everyday life can be traced to two paradigms. The first is the Marxist paradigm, in which everyday life is primarily characterized by forms of alienation. The second is the phenomenological paradigm, in which everyday life primarily consists of producing meaning. The first paradigm examines stories and cultures of subordinate social groups, and denounces domination and alienation in everyday life. The second paradigm examines the common-sense world, and how it is taken for granted, structured, and inter-subjective. Relational sociology seeks to overcome these two paradigms by highlighting their aporias, and considers alienation to be the outcome of a deep division between the ultimate meaning of life and the culture of everyday life. While in order to overcome this dualism, Gouldner offers an immanent reading of everyday life, relational sociology tries to show how in everyday life the relationship between social practices and culture may give rise to a new form of secularism that is accepting of non-fundamentalist aspects of religious belief.

Keywords:

meaning, dualism, everyday life, common sense, relational sociology

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# RISK ACCORDING TO THE RELATIONAL THEORY OF SOCIETY

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## **/// Risk As a Symbolic-Cultural Reality: A Theoretical Overview**

When talking about risk, we usually refer to situations affecting individuals. However, a more detailed analysis shows that, in everyday life, risk is actually closely linked to social and cultural aspects of existence (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983). The latter dimension in particular is often overlooked in risk studies: it is not considered a problematic aspect of society but rather an “accident” in the regular course of social events.

There is no unequivocal definition of risk, nor is there a single approach to analysing it (Barbieri & Mangone 2015). Several disciplines have dealt with this issue, each basing its contribution on its own theoretical foundations. On deciding to study the concept of “risk,” three authors come to the mind of researchers, and especially of sociologists: Luhmann (1991), Beck (1986), and Giddens (1990). To the names of these scholars, whose approaches are more focused on socio-cultural dimensions and context, the name of Douglas (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983) can also be added. These are reputed to be the key authors for the development of the analysis of this concept.

The various definitions coined over the last few decades have not managed to make the concept clear, and it still remains very ambiguous. On the one hand, people are attracted by risk or even fascinated by it; on the other hand, they are wary and feel fear. One reason is that this concept is highly dependent: two features stand out—the influence of culture and context on risk, and its inextricable ties with other concepts (uncertainty, confidence, security, modernity, globalization, etc.). This indissoluble bond with other concepts underpins the reflections of contemporary sociologists on

this theme, starting with Luhmann (1991), who compellingly links risk to the ideas of probability and uncertainty, and differentiates it from the concept of danger. It is not possible to talk about risk when the result of an act is certain. Therefore, primitive cultures had no knowledge of this concept. Hence the idea of risk is typical of modernity and should not be confused with hazard or peril. Rather, it indicates risky choices that are actively pursued in view of future possibilities (Giddens 1990). Obviously, what is considered risky (behaviour, practices, environments, etc.) depends on what Beck (1986) called “relations of definitions.” This means that every society, at a given time, determines its risk hierarchy; however, the perceptions underpinning the construction of that hierarchy do not always correspond to objectively measurable risks, nor are they generated by individual decisions. This is mainly because the attention of the public, due to the influence of mass media and the overall increase in wealth, has shifted toward needs related to the quality of life. A step of this nature indicates the reciprocity between the life-world and the social system and represents a step in which the individual is considered as a “subject” in relational processes (Donati & Archer 2015). We thus shift from an approach reducing risk to its mere economic aspects to one considering the overall interactions between these and other important social and cultural variables.

In such a complex scenario as contemporary society, where relations (at different levels) play a dominant role in social phenomena, and therefore also in the social construal of risk—meaning the way in which people perceive, understand, and interpret the world around them (Douglas 1997)—it is necessary to distinguish the various sociological dimensions of analysis (Collins 1988). The first one is the macro dimension, pertaining to social systems and their organization forms; in this case, the object of study is the structure and its systems. The second dimension is the micro one, dealing with the relationship between individual and society and with social actions; in this case, the person and his action are the object of study. Finally, there is the meso dimension, focused on relationships between the social system and life-world, where the latter is understood as the set of meanings and representations of culture. It is this dimension that will henceforth characterize the path we are about to describe.

From what has been said thus far, it is easy to understand how the concept of risk has changed (and is still changing) in contemporary society, following the latter’s transformations. The transition from local to global has generated the idea of “global risks,” which in turn has prompted the statement that this is a “risk society” (Beck 1986). We have thus adopted

the idea that risk factors are no longer hidden only in nature, but also in humans, in their behaviours, their freedom, their relations, their association, and in society (Ewald 1993). In the following pages, our attention will be focused on two key elements of everyday life that must be considered when dealing with processes of constructing, identifying, and selecting risks: culture and social relations. Supported by meso-range theories which were developed in recent decades and which studied the relations between the social system and life-world, we will try to describe the links between risk, culture, and social relations.

Broadly speaking, culture should be understood as “the expression of the totality of man’s social life. It is characterized by its collective dimension. In the end, culture is acquired and therefore does not depend on biological heredity. However, although culture is acquired, its origin and its characteristics are predominantly unconscious” (Cuche 1996: 16). In other words, culture is constituted by both objective elements (tools, capabilities, etc.) and subjective ones (beliefs, roles, values, etc.) and it represents one of the principal factors when evaluating individuals’ sense of belonging to a society. All activities and institutions are “cultural,” because they require meanings in order to operate. With the above, we are not backing the idea that social life is connected to cultural determinism. Rather, we support the claim that culture is the key component for individual actions: “every social practice depends on and relates to meaning; consequently, that culture is one of the constitutive conditions of existence of that practice, that every social practice has a cultural dimension” (Hall 1997: 225–226). Cultural objects have meaning among the people living in a given social world and the latter, in turn, has meaning only by way of the culture (Griswold 1994) through which it is observed.

Culture, therefore, is a fundamental dimension of everyday life and as such it is necessary to understand it in relation to the various situations of the social world, including those defined as “risky.” In this way, we can theorize new paths aimed at improving the relations and forms deriving from culture, through which we express the interactions between people as well as between people and other elements of the system.

This interpretation of the relationship between risk and culture draws a complex scenario, in which the world and the people in it constitute an endless web of relationships based on events that intersect, overlap, and influence each other—and that can also often be discordant (Festinger 1962). The everyday sequence of events, through definition and elaboration, allows for the reproduction of “meaning” through “symbolic mediation,”



which favours the interpretation and, more importantly, the very construction of reality. Social reality—and, therefore, also the construction, identification, and selection of risk—stems not only from the social meanings attributed to a certain phenomenon (cultural object) but also from the products of the subjective world of people. People's patterns of action and relationships are built according to the meaning that they attribute to daily existence. In other words, individuals are faced with a world of meanings and events that become real for them as conscious and perceiving "social beings."

Risk is therefore a reality for people, deriving from the relations that people establish with others and that are manifested through their everyday roles. In general, risk can be considered a social problem because it is a relationship between "fact" and "structure"; it is the result of interpretation and therefore it is a cultural object. And precisely because risk is interpreted as a culturally defined social problem, over time we witness an increase or decrease in its shared forms of representation. In such a scenario, risk representations express both the subjective sense attributed to this category and the cultural and social framework of reference available in a given time and space (Schütz 1932): construction and representations of risk exist both in the micro-everyday scene and in the macro-institutional one.

On these premises Mary Douglas (1985) argues that culture is a "mnemonic system" that helps people in the calculation of risk and consequences, and shifts the focus from the idea of individual risk to that of collective risk. Of course, Douglas's cultural theory of risk should be seen in the broader context of her studies on primitive thought and taboos (Douglas 1966), some of which she links with modern human behaviour in risky and dangerous situations. This interpretation is based on the principle that in every place and age the universe is interpreted in moral and political terms (Douglas 1992) and the concept of risk becomes of paramount importance in this sense. In modern societies, however, risk does not perform the same function as danger in pre-modern ones. Contemporary societies typically replace "sin" with "risk," because globalization has helped to establish cultural systems that are able to integrate ever larger communities—whose vulnerability, however, has increased precisely because they have become "world systems." Douglas's cultural-symbolic analysis is not limited to an attempt to explain the influence of culture on the concept of risk: in her book *Risk and Culture*, co-authored with political scientist Aaron Wildavsky (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983), she also deals with the issue of knowledge,

particularly by highlighting the fact that knowledge of risk(s) is never exhaustive.<sup>1</sup>

Although it appears static, the cultural-symbolic approach allows us to define, through general cultural theory, the conceptual boundaries (Tansey & O’Riordan 1999) within which we can then review and redefine processes of social construal. By doing so, we can add new tiles to the mosaic describing and interpreting the reality of the social dynamics connected with risk. However, the four issues raised by Douglas (1992) as the starting point for a comparative study of risk perception remain of primary importance. These are: (a) the influence of risk on the goals of the person perceiving it; (b) whether the original community is part (integral or not) of the person’s goals; (c) understanding the influence on the individual or collective good of the risk depending on the type of community; and finally, (d) classifying various communities on the basis of the support, commitment, organization, and boundaries defined by their members.

In summary, we can state that the cultural approach helps us to understand non-experts’ perception of risk by offering a systematic view of the range of objectives that an individual may try to reach. In other words, risk should not be considered a technical problem but rather a problem of everyday life involving political implications and people’s positions in relation to both individual and collective objectives.

### **/// Risk According to the Relational Theory of Society**

We can intuitively appreciate how people’s attitudes and actions in regard to risk are influenced, on the one hand, by culture and, on the other, by an indissoluble link with context and everyday life. In doing so, we pay attention to the “person” not only as an entity performing an action, but as a “subject” and active part of social processes. Consequently, it is possible to transition from an approach to social phenomena aimed at searching for a cause (causality) to one focusing on the overall interaction between individual, social, and environmental variables (relationality). In this paper, starting from Archer’s morphogenesis cycle (1995), we will examine risk from the perspective of relational sociology or the “relational theory of society” (Donati 1991, 1993, 2011a), i.e., by reading social risk in a way that considers social relations to be the starting point (Terenzi et al. 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> The scholar highlights four risk-related issues emerging from the interplay between the degree of knowledge (certain/uncertain) and consensus (complete/contested).

We have chosen to commence our discussion of risk from the relational perspective with Archer's morphogenesis cycle (1995) because Archer was perhaps the first scholar who, despite some criticism, strongly advocated the overcoming of certain strong dichotomies that had existed throughout the history of sociology and that had developed further in relational sociology (individualism/holism, structure/agency, micro/macro). The author claimed that several factors and levels co-exist simultaneously in the process of defining the goals actualized by social systems. Archer argued that

the crucial linkage to make and to maintain is not between the "micro" and the "macro," conceived of as the small and interpersonal in contrast to the large and impersonal, but rather between the "social" and the "systemic." In other words, systemic properties are always the ("micro") context confronted by ("macro") social interaction, whilst social activities between people ("micro") represent the environment in which the ("macro") features of systems are either reproduced or transformed (...) Two implications follow from this. Firstly, that the central theoretical task is one of linking two qualitatively different aspects of society (the "social" and the "systemic," or if preferred "action" and its "environment") rather than two quantitatively different features, the big and the small or macro and micro. (...) The second implication is that if the misleading preoccupation with size is abandoned, then the linkages which need forging to account for the vexatious fact of society are those between the "people" and the "parts" of social reality (Archer 1995: 11–12).

In this way, the relationship between individual and society assumes a multidimensional connotation that is highlighted in the morphogenetic cycle,<sup>2</sup> macro stems from micro, and conditions it by retro-acting on it. The two elements cannot be studied separately, nor can one be given precedence over the other, since structure and action are different levels of a stratified social reality, each with specific and non-reducible characteristics. In morphogenesis, processes depend on the interaction with the life-world. Society must therefore be studied as it is, rather than as we would like it to be. Starting from the assumption that cultural systems result from human action and that, once they reach their autonomy, they influence

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<sup>2</sup> The morphogenetic cycle, in its general form, is characterized by social conditioning, by socio-cultural interaction, and by structural elaboration.

future generations, we emphasize the importance (within the morphogenetic cycle) of the interactions between subjects, who are interconnected by both cultural conditioning (the structural setting of the cultural system) and the resulting elaboration. The latter may be oriented toward either confirmation (reproduction) or change (innovation). This shows that the results of a process—in the present case, the results of a faced risk—can lead to expected or unexpected outcomes, and that interaction processes, proceeding in several directions, similarly produce emerging effects in several directions. Applying this multidimensional approach to risk means observing both institutions and people—but above all the relations between them—and overcoming the traditional views that separated these levels as well as the various elements involved in the processes of the social construal of risk.

Risk studies should therefore combine systems (the objective dimension) and people (the subjective dimension). In other words, they should be able to combine objective aspects with subjective ones, taking into account all the dimensions, levels, and factors involved in the social process of construction, identification, and selection of risks. These processes are knowledge-oriented work that is not limited to implementing actions: it is not imperative to represent a risk, to know it, to make hypotheses and speculate, to redirect the course of action *en route*, because the relationship with reality is never given and at all times new possibilities may open up and ask for exploration. These definitions and reflections on risk prompt us to state that its analysis should take into account its characteristic multidimensional and multifactorial nature. In this way, we pay more attention to the sphere of social relations within the processes that develop in society. Those regarding risk are included in this trend, since all social phenomena, attitudes, behaviours, and actions concerning them are built in an area that has its own places, times, and symbols, which are fundamental for the cognitive processes of self-active signification implemented by individuals for the construction of social reality in their daily life experience.

For this reason, we propose the relational perspective (Donati 1991, 1993, 2011a) as an additional key to understanding the concept of risk. Indeed, social relations are not a constraint for the person, but rather the main element advancing the subject's self-determination based on reflexivity (Donati 2011b). Taking social relations into account allows us to consider both life-world and social system. The relation should be intended as an emergent phenomenon (generative semantics) of a mutual act (rela[c]tion) with an autonomous connotation that goes beyond those who imple-

ment it, but that at the same time is due to referential semantics (*refero*). It is embodied within a framework of symbolic meanings (culture) as well as structural semantics (*religo*), given that it is at the same time both a resource and constraint for the social system.

These are the general foundations of the relational theory of society. According to this perspective, risk, intended as a descriptive model, has some distinguishing features. For example, as a dimension of everyday life, it is a “neutral category” (Donati 1990), because it is based on Bauman’s (1999) “insecure security.” The positive or negative outcomes of this “insecure security” will depend on the kind of balance established between “resources and challenges” (Carrà 1992) or, in other words, between “goals and means.” To elucidate our arguments, we will apply to risk what Merton (1968) said about anomie: risk is a “normal” fact, a consequence of the pressures exerted by social structures over their members. If we consider the two elements that form social systems in Merton’s theory, we can better understand the origin and direction of these pressures: the first is the cultural structure, the second is the social structure, formed by statuses and their role functions. Both these structures have institutionalized values: the “goals,” which are nothing more than the objectives, aspirations, and interests of the members of society, organized in a priority scale characterizing the social system of reference; and the “means” or rules, which determine how to achieve the goals. Goals and rules do not always have the same emphasis, much less a constant relationship, despite the efforts by social institutions to maintain a balance between these two institutionalized values.

In this situation, people obviously adopt individual adaptation schemes (Merton proposes a typology), which vary according to their position in the social structure—social status is the element on which the possibility of reaching a goal by legitimate means is based. This suggests that the potential for a risky situation is inversely proportional to the legitimate opportunities of reaching the proposed goal. Adjustment takes different forms depending on how the contradiction between the “goals” set by the culture and the “means” employed to achieve them is resolved. Borrowing the terminology of cultural-symbolic theory, we can talk about a contradiction between knowledge (certain/uncertain) and consensus (complete/disputed).

In other words, being in a risky situation means testing the limits of our knowledge and skills, the difficulty in finding “meaning” in what happens, and the feeling that the choice is a leap in the dark anyway, as it is basically impossible to untangle its elements (Carrà et al. 2006). Donati (1990)

suggests breaking risky situations down into three main areas: the area of needs, corresponding to “challenges” or “goals,” where all that concerns their satisfaction is related to “resources” or “means.” Within this area, we must distinguish material and primary goals from secondary and relational ones: for the former, resources or means are well defined, while for the latter there may be several combinations given the many elements involved. The second area, that of transaction, is characterized by the presence of an “exchange situation” between people through their relations and the deployment of the mutual expectations of demand and response capability. Finally, the transition area includes all those situations that are particularly important for people’s lives; every transition is a goal to be achieved by leveraging the resources of the primary network of relationships in order to find a new balance.

### **/// A Model for Reading Social Risk Through a Relational Lens**

Based on the above theoretical foundations, we offer a key to understanding social phenomena and risk by focusing our attention on the interplay of social relationships that people weave into their everyday life, starting from their primary group of belonging. Since taking a risk means not only finding a balanced combination between “goals” and “means,” but also selecting both “goals” and “means,” this also allows people to plan actions promoting the achievement of this very balance.

We will now advance some observations to help outline what we have argued to this point. First of all, in contemporary society, risk—separated from the elements that used to connect it solely to nature—assumes a central role in peoples’ daily lives and in their subjectivity, as well as in the policy agendas of many nations. Despite this centrality, however, neither people nor institutions show an active response capacity (reflection) to situations producing anxiety and fear. When dealing with risky situations, people seldom adopt a pro-active position, preferring a re-active one. This also applies to political institutions, which often find themselves responding to emergency situations rather than seeking to avoid and/or prevent such situations. This is a common propensity in situations characterized by little or no communication and by an absence or scarcity of social relations networks. Indeed, these networks are precisely what kindle the reflexivity processes that in turn allow for conscious and responsible decisions.

In proposing an interpretation of risk, we should therefore adopt a model (Fig. 1) derived from the relational approach but also containing

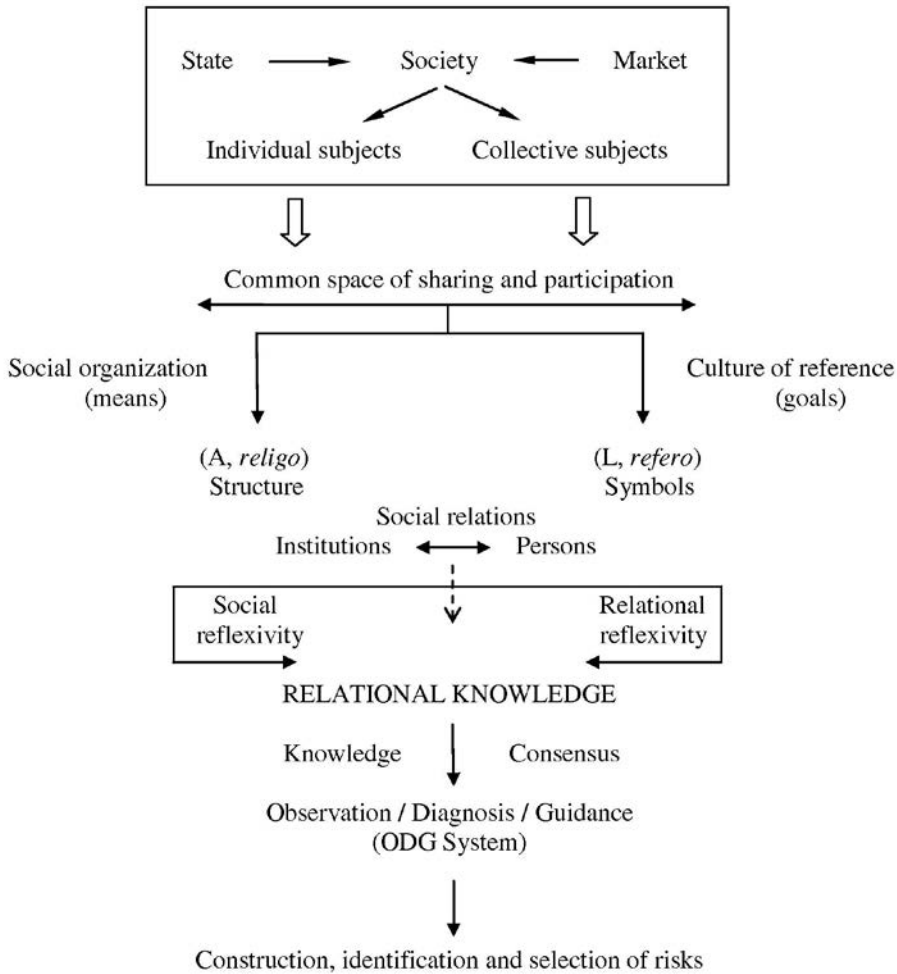


Figure 1. Interpretation of risk based on the relational approach.

elements of the cultural-symbolic approach. Use of the relational theory of society is due to its specific quality of connecting real life and the social system, which promotes the interaction between institutions and individuals, because it is based on a communicative process implementing knowledge and consent. This reflection is typical of relations, and it is what Donati (2011c) calls “social reflection,” i.e., the reflection (neither subjective nor structural) correlated to the order of reality of social relations. However, social reflexivity is not enough to produce “relational knowledge”—the knowledge concerning what one does, thinks, and experiences in a rela-

tional context that emerges from the interaction between individuals' specific forms of acting and being (Mangone 2013), in this case, apropos of risk.

For “relational knowledge” to emerge from the interaction between the deciding parties (institutions/people), social reflexivity must become relational reflexivity<sup>3</sup> (Donati 2011b, 2011c). Reflexivity processes (both social and relational) thus promote the creation of “relational knowledge,” i.e., a shared knowledge and consensus that directs the processes of construction, identification, and selection of risks by basing them on the relational observation-diagnosis-guidance system—ODG system (Donati 1991). This system can produce: (a) an observation that acknowledges the interaction between the “creators” and the “receivers” (Griswold 1994) of risk as a cultural object; (b) a diagnosis that distinguishes risk as a social problem from its possible resolution; (c) a method of intervention **on** and **in** the context where risk as a social problem is generated before spreading to the entire system.

In order to make this model easier to understand and in order not to restrict it to being a mere graphic and descriptive exercise, we will now advance two examples: one concerns a health risk and the other an environmental risk.

The first concerns the construction, identification, and selection of health risks associated (or not) with vaccines. The current debate on the use or non-use of vaccines by people in countries where such practice is not mandatory (Haverkate et al. 2012) is indeed quite intense. In this example, vaccines are a means of reaching the goal, which is people's health (well-being). Applying the proposed model would lead us to the construction, identification, and selection of the health risk connected with the “non-use of vaccines” and hence the following choice of actions. This is easy to explain: between healthcare institutions—or their representatives, such as family physicians—and people, an “emergent effect” develops. It is a “relational knowledge” consisting of shared knowledge constructed precisely by the relationship between the experts (doctors) and the non-specialists. The construction of this knowledge is achieved through the ODG system: (a) epidemiological and statistical evidence is collected on the use of vaccines and the incidence of certain pathologies (observation); (b) analysis of

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<sup>3</sup> Relational reflexivity means that “the subjects orient themselves in the reality emerging from their interactions by taking into consideration the way in which said reality (by virtue of its own powers) can rebound on the same subjects (agents/actors), since it surpasses their personal and aggregated powers” (Donati 2011c: 31).



the evidence shows that non-use of vaccines results in an epidemic increase in already eradicated diseases such as measles (diagnosis); and (c) information campaigns are implemented not only for the expansion of knowledge about the risk of vaccinating versus not vaccinating one's children, but also for building the necessary consensus for the promotion of positive and responsible actions for the promotion and safeguarding of people's health (intervention-guidance).

The second example concerns the environmental risk associated with the use of pesticides. This example differs from the previous one not only in its scope but also because the process of constructing "relational knowledge" is more complex, given the multiplicity of relationships involved. This is because the institutions concerned are represented by two parties—government that is responsible for the welfare of present and future generations, and farmers' associations, which are safeguarding their own economic interests—while the people are represented by the totality of consumers. In addition, there is no single means or end: pesticides are the means to guarantee or increase crop yields (from cereals to vegetables), which is the farmers' goal, but to this we must add the governments' goal of protecting the health of the population by means of economic policies.

Through the ODG system, the use of pesticides is identified and selected as an environmental hazard (Lerche & Glaesser 2006). In reaching this definition, the "relational knowledge" produced is the result of a balance between farmers' goals (profit) and governments' goals (public health) through greater reflexivity coming from and involving all the parties involved: (a) collection of data on the effects of agricultural pesticide use on the land and on consumers, and collection of data concerning agricultural production (observation); (b) analysis and interpretation of data, showing the emergence of pathologies in consumers, pro-aggressive soil pollution, and the extinction of some seeds, but also a lack of profit if the quantity of harvested products is reduced (diagnosis); and (c) implementation of economic policies and incentives supporting organic farming to ensure the profitability of farming, but at the same time to ensure the protection of the population's health—a balance between farmers' and governments' goals (intervention-guidance).

Finally, we emphasize that what we proposed here was a model for interpreting the dynamics of the social construal or collective construct of risk, overcoming the economic and probabilistic approaches that have always characterized the study of this phenomenon. However, this is possible only when the application of the ODG system (relational observation/

diagnosis/guidance) goes hand in hand with the idea that people's intervention can be determining (doing something!) and responsible (choice and blame attribution). In other words, in order to avoid an excessively rigid interpretation model, there must be a structure that guarantees accountability, evidence-based practice, and long-term action to achieve the balance between "goals" and "means." These are fundamental issues, as the "relational knowledge" of people that is generated through social relations is fundamentally based on the trust and consensus that the community, as opposed to the political system, can still claim to have within itself.

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### /// **Abstract**

Taking social relations into consideration allows us to be mindful of the life-world and the social system. A social relation should be intended as an emergent phenomenon of a mutual act, with an autonomous connotation that goes beyond those who implement it. At the same time, it can be traced back to referential semantics, as it exists within a framework of symbolic meaning, and to structural semantics, because it is at the same time a resource and a constraint for the social system. If these are the general foundations of the relational theory of society, adding risk to this perspective as a descriptive model has some distinguishing features. For example, as a dimension of everyday life it is a "neutral category." It is based on that "insecure security" whose results, positive or negative, will derive from the kind of balance established between "resources and challenges" or, as we claim in this paper, between "goals and means."

Keywords:

culture, morphogenesis, relational sociology, risk society

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# THE VOICE OF SOCIETY AND THE CRISIS: THE POTENTIAL AND LIMITS OF REFLEXIVITY AND CIVILITY

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## /// Introduction

The year that symbolically marks the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium is 1989. For some, the triumph of the free world augured an end to history, but in reality it has led to an unstable *modus vivendi*, a “new normality” characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. This situation has placed history and the capacity of human agency to guide it at the centre of public debate and politics. This article has been written under the impact of the sensation of uncertainty, and is influenced by two key ideas: the central importance of human agency and the voice of society, of the common people, in contrast to the (frequent) overestimation of structure and the (habitual) overestimation of the protagonism of elites and counter-elites. History, this intertwining of agency and structure, is like an open drama. A group of actors—in particular, the political class—act on a stage in front of an audience. But the audience is active (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971) and does not limit itself to applauding or booing the actors. It speaks and acts on its own; it intervenes in the drama.

Today’s debate seems dominated by a generalized sensation of global crisis, affecting not only the economy and politics, but society and culture as well. In reality, society’s current restlessness has existed since well before 1989 but is now becoming increasingly palpable. Some sociologists see the period from the end of the 1960s to the early 1980s as a transition from a world dominated by processes of morphostasis (which assure continuity in the fundamental aspects of the structure and culture of a society),

to one characterized by morphogenetic processes, through which society enters a path of continuous generation and regeneration of new forms of organization and orientation in the world: a path of deep discontinuities (Archer 2007). This transition from morphostasis to morphogenesis places the focus on the strategic capacity of human agency to orient itself in a context of growing uncertainty and complexity. This capacity, in turn, depends on the degree and quality of the reflexivity and relationality of the agency in question, as well as the civic impulse that emerges from the connection between both dimensions. Reflexivity, relationality, and civic impulse define the capacity of agency to grow or improve in situations of disorder. I refer to reflexivity (Archer 2007, 2010) as the exercise of agents' capacity in considering their bidirectional relationship with their social context, and the resulting quality and degree of their self-awareness. Here I insist on the limits, degrees, ambiguities, and ambivalence of that reflexivity. Relationality (Donati 2011) refers to a system of social relations in which agents are involved, with special attention to common goods, such as community building and civil forms of politics.<sup>1</sup>

Both liberal democracy and the market economy seem greatly impacted by the current crisis, in different ways and to different degrees across countries. The prospects for globalization and technological change, growing inequality, disaffection with the political class among wide layers of society, migratory flows, terrorism, and the contrast between the exponentially growing volume of information and the sensation that “noise” and uncertainty are also growing—all converge in the perception of this moment as one of deep, prolonged crisis that may even worsen.

In this paper I explore the strategic capacity of human agency in such times by presenting and analysing an opinion survey carried out in May 2016,<sup>2</sup> and I develop an argument about a given collective agent, the Spanish citizenry at the time, whose will is articulated in a set of attitudes and opinions. I adopt the perspective of an interpretive social science, in which the meaning of action for agency itself, understood in its context, has crucial importance (Gadamer 1996; Pérez-Díaz 1980), and in which the strength of the argument depends on the plausibility of the reconstruction of this action and of the situation to which it responds. This is a perspective attentive to the cognitive and moral potential and limits of the agents

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<sup>1</sup> This essay combines both *problématiques* (reflexivity and relationality) as one step more in the development of the issue of the intensity of agency (Pérez-Díaz 2015). It is a revised and much shortened version of Pérez-Díaz (2017).

<sup>2</sup> This survey was sponsored by the Funcas Foundation, with a sample size of 1,210 respondents. Details in Pérez-Díaz (2017).

involved. In this case, I present the voice of the audience in the form of responses to a questionnaire, weaving together the questions, the responses, and my commentary. This is a tentative reconstruction of the voice of the citizenry and applies what Davidson (1974) called the “principle of charity,” understanding what is said by addressing what they plausibly want to say, its coherence and its context. In this case, the voice presents a significant degree of coherence and of correspondence with reality.

Of course, human agents, whether elites or common people, have a limited capacity for coherence and for understanding reality, and our capacity for deliberation with others and with ourselves is also limited. Nevertheless, we think and act against the backdrop of internal deliberation, weighing arguments for and against different positions, so that our mental processes and our actions are dialogic (Bakhtine 1970: 284, 298). In addition, they are situated within the sphere of a relationship with others; they are approaches and responses to the solicitations of others. This relationality (Donati 2011), which is carved into our experience, means that our attitudes and opinions are inscribed in a conversation with a multiplicity of actors. The end result of this combination of reflexivity and relationality is a changing complexity in the voice of the agent in question—in this case, the voice of the audience in a public sphere. This voice is not only not exempt from ambiguity and ambivalence, but to a certain extent is characterized by them (Smelser 1998). It tends to reflect not rigid but relatively fluent positions, which incorporate different degrees of uncertainty and internal deliberation, but which, in this case, allow for a crucial modicum of self-awareness and of civility (Hall 2013; March & Olsen 1995; Smith 2002).

In fact, the Spanish citizens send three main messages. First, they opt for a European course for the country, and, on issues of substantive policy, for a range of positions that are consistent with the experience of recent Spanish and European generations in terms of a convergence (and debate) between the traditions of social democracy and conservative liberalism. Second, they are rather careful and attentive in regard to the task of recreating a political community. Third, and most emphatically, they support and ask for civil forms of doing politics. In sending these messages the citizens draw on socio-cultural resources, and on forms of reflexivity and of their relational world (whose potential and limits I explore). In particular, I address the nature of society’s relation with the political class and with itself, and certain cultural resources (economic knowledge, historical narratives) that map these relationships in space and time, the global context, and



the past. In this way, I set out to consider the current moment as an open drama.

### **/// Messages: Europe as the Horizon, and a Range of Moderate European-style Public Policies**

The Spaniards have felt themselves to be in a situation of deep unease for years, and this has formed an alert and distrustful society. Yet they think they know the general direction their country should go and to which world they belong: Europe, the euro, European kinds of politics and policies. What countries do the Spanish consider proper models for Spain? When asked about a country that “could be a model for the Spanish economy,” the respondents’ positions are unmistakable. The models are European countries: more specifically, those of central and northern Europe: Germany (24.2%), Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark (21.1%), as well as France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (14.5%). In the Spanish imagination, these countries are market economies open to global capitalism, which forms an inseparable part of the countries’ social and political contexts. They are states capable of managing the current economic crisis or limiting its worst effects, and with strong welfare systems; they operate within a framework where social tensions over public policies appear not as radical conflicts that question the system but as the normal conflicts of liberal democracies and plural societies. These countries are neighbours and are familiar to the Spanish, in the sense that they belong, as does Spain, to the European family.

Other questions also reflect the great importance the European Union has for Spain: 72.6% of the Spanish believe that “Spain should remain in the euro zone.” This is not expressing a mere duty, convenience, or interest; it is also the manifestation of the durable state of being part of a complex reality. As of now, a Europe of nations, a Europe with a story, is perhaps a bit unclear in our explicit memory, but alive in innumerable “places in memory” (Nora 1997). It is the story of a Europe that has functioned from time immemorial as a world of nations in rivalry, imitating each other *ad nauseam* and existing in the permanent tension of each living in the shadow of the others, always a mutual reference for each other. Today, their rivalries have been pacified and their reciprocal imitation has grown more intense. So far, a destination point has emerged as Europe has tried to respond to the civil wars and totalitarian phenomena of the twentieth century with the institutional framework that characterizes it today. Regarding more recent

times, we are talking about a collective subject that is engaged in a political debate about the best way to manage the crisis and other important matters (migrations, geopolitical tensions, terrorism, etc.). Thus, we may assume a fundamental attachment by Spaniards to the idea of Europe, and a commitment to it as part of “a natural order of things” (Pérez-Díaz 2013).

At the same time, there are gaps in the Spaniards’ installation in Europe, a touch of fragility when the time comes to pinning down their opinions regarding European public policies and current challenges. Thus, 46.5% think that “to resolve the economic problems of EU countries it is better that each country recuperates greater control over its economic policies,” in comparison to 36.6% who prefer “that the EU plays a more fundamental role in the economic policy of member states.” On the contrary, 64.7% think that “European countries acting together will effectively confront the problem of jihadist or Islamic terrorism in the near future.” Yet the percentages are more equal in the case of welcoming refugees, with 46.1% agreeing that “each country should decide on its own the number of refugees it wants to accept,” and 47.6% preferring “the majority of EU governments deciding” on that number.

In any case, Spanish society’s fundamental commitment to a Europe that sets the course clearly reveals a preference for a certain type of social, economic, and political system. This preference is, again, not without some ambivalence, which is crucial, in particular at a moment when the apparent need to make corrections to capitalism is being intensely debated. *Grosso modo*, Spanish society’s vision of capitalism, or the market economy, seems clearly positive. A wide majority (59.5%) prefer a “free market economy” and not “an economy run by the government” (24.7%). Moreover, there is a certain underlying optimism regarding the possibility of long-term growth, which is assumed to be inherent to capitalism. In a 2010 survey, which presented respondents with the fact that per capita income in Spain had quintupled in the last fifty years, and asked if they would ascribe this increase to either the spontaneous development of Spanish and international markets or to the effectiveness of Spanish governments’ policies, 74.5% clearly opted for the former (Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez 2010: 98). Moreover, a majority tend to accept key aspects of the policies habitually associated with a liberal and conservative attempt to save capitalism in a period of crisis. Thus, 62.1% accept fiscal equilibrium and support the 2011 reform of the Spanish constitution, which was based on a consensus between the Socialists and the Popular Party to guarantee a balanced public budget across the business cycle.

However, it is necessary to temper this conclusion by placing it in a broader context that underlines the importance of politics. Several questions reflect ambivalence toward capitalism. On the one hand, there is resistance to excessive criticism of capitalism. This was revealed in a 2009 survey (Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez 2010: 98) in which 35.6% attributed responsibility for the crisis to the failure of capitalism, but 58.9% attributed it to “abuses” within capitalism. On the other hand, there is a clear refusal to give capitalism an overall positive evaluation, as can be seen, for example, when issues of poverty are discussed. Thus, 39.1% believe that “the market economy is the economic system that has been shown to be most capable of eradicating world poverty,” but 53.9% think that “it often causes poverty for the majority of the population.”

Behind these assessments there is a moral, emotional, and cognitive disposition toward strengthening the protective state, responsible for the welfare of the people. We asked a relatively standard question in this sense and 71.9% of respondents chose the option that “the state is responsible for all citizens and should take care of those persons that have problems,” and only 17.6% chose that “citizens are responsible for their own welfare and they must take care of the situation themselves when they have problems.” At the same time, regarding a guaranteed income, with the state providing all Spanish citizens “a minimum income, just for being citizens and independent of age and economic situation,” respondents for and against split by half: 50.8% and 47.8% respectively.

The Spaniards’ positions on these issues must be understood, at least in part, as based on the moral idea of the economy as *oikos*, as the domestic economy of a family writ large, or of a nation understood as a sort of shared home, with its distinct and common parts, whose accounts must be balanced for its survival in a context of limited goods (and limited inequalities). This contrasts with the vision of the economy as an open and expanding order in which people are above all attentive to their own interests, the vision that prevails in the business world and even (to a lesser extent) among academics and politicians: in other words, in a great part of the establishment. For them (those “above”), the connection between capitalism and growth seems very strong and common sensical; but for much of society (those “below”), that connection may seem more fragile, as if remnants of the moral economy of times past remain. The establishment may be projecting its own conception on society, believing that that conception is shared and in so doing misunderstanding society, and therefore,

over-interpreting data such as those regarding the acceptance of the policy of fiscal equilibrium.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, behind the answers given by the respondents there seems to be a vision of a society that differs in important ways from the imagining of a part of the establishment, which, *grasso modo*, tends to repeat with futuristic flourishes François Guizot's exhortation in the French Chamber of Deputies in 1843: "Enrichissez-vous!" In its simplest version, these elites seem to say that the task of politicians is to achieve a triumphant society, with high levels of growth, high per capita income, and world influence. But we should place this simple version of things in its immediate semantic context. The complete phrase from Guizot was: "Éclairez-vous, enrichissez-vous, améliorez la condition morale et matérielle de notre France!" The task of enriching oneself was situated in the context of several moral tasks, referring to an appeal to community and to a sense of solidarity. Perhaps this context was already problematic at that time, even in the culture of contemporary elites (and Balzac could be a witness of this); or perhaps it has become even more problematic over time, and the culture of the elites has possibly been relatively degraded.

The truth is that the complexity of the original expression can be lost in today's debates. To somehow recover that complexity, we asked the survey participants some naive questions about the proper goals for Spanish society and polity. Their responses point in a direction that has certain affinities with the moral reading of the economy alluded to before. They were asked "What should be more important in politics: that a country gains wealth and influence in the world, or that its population has a better life and more free time?": 11.6% preferred the former and 84.1% the latter. They were also asked "What should the politicians in a country focus their attention on above all: on increasing per capita income and the influence of the country in international affairs, or on increasing the population's free time and level of education?" In this case, 35.9% preferred the former, and 57% the latter.

These responses suggest that a traditional moral and apparently pre-capitalist and even pre-modern language is widespread. It is only apparently pre-capitalist because, in reality, a reasonable reading of modernity might be akin to that of Karl Polanyi's regarding the embeddedness of the economy in the totality of practices and institutions of social life

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<sup>3</sup> On the moral economy of the past see Thompson (1971), and on the differences in the vision of everyday citizens and economists, see Caplan (2002).

(Granovetter 1985; Polanyi 2001 [1944]; Smelser & Swedberg 2005; Streeck 2014), thus questioning the factors of production to be characterized as mere commodities or fictitious commodities. In such a case, we would need to look for the meaning of the data, and specifically the economic opinions expressed, as embedded in the totality of the experiences of the social groups in question. We might speculate here that a “little tradition” (Foster 1967; Pérez-Díaz 1991)—a basic alternative culture of the common people, anchored in the experiences of past generations, many of them of a rural character—has remained (Morris & Manning 2005). But it is still there, perhaps not in its totality, perhaps not completely coherent, perhaps doubtfully, but clearly recognizable.

To reinforce this image of the complexity and ambiguity of the setting that we find, and of the collective imagination of the society in question, we can look at an additional question and the responses. Participants were asked: “Please imagine two types of society, one more innovative but less egalitarian, and another more egalitarian but less innovative, in which would you prefer to live?” A great majority would prefer the second, more egalitarian society (67.5%) than the first, more innovative one (30%).

In short, this narrative refuses to be neatly located within a black or white alternative, and leaves the door open to various possibilities. We find a nuanced acceptance of capitalism, with fuzzy cultural foundations. This qualified acceptance suggests a willingness to demand or accept changes within a range of possibilities, in a process of continual corrections to the capitalist economy and the welfare state.

### **/// Messages: The Spanish Political Community as the Main Frame of Reference in the Political Life of The Spanish**

To talk of a course assumes that someone follows it: a specific ship or vessel, with a name, a memory, its own identity. This would be the main “community of reference” for the political life of the population. For the great majority of this survey’s respondents, the main frame of reference for their public concerns seems to be not Europe, nor Spain’s autonomous regions, but rather the Spanish political community, the Spanish state as a whole.

Again, things are not black or white; collective identities can be diverse and there is an ongoing debate on the distribution of powers between the central government and the regions. Yet the centrality of the Spanish state

is supported by a large majority (81.8%), which does not want “a state in which the possibility of autonomous regions becoming independent states is recognized.” The centrality of the Spanish state is also supported by the fact that 90.8% of the respondents feel Spanish, at least to some degree, and only 6.4% don’t feel Spanish at all. (Of course, these sentiments are somewhat different in regions such as Catalonia, in which 14.7% identify only as Catalans.)

The questions raised here were in regard to whether the Spanish have the impression that Spain as a political community, as a state, will increase, remain the same, or decline as the main reference of political life. Will Spain be capable of resolving collective problems and reflecting the opinions and interests of its people, while maintaining the country’s unity, which is now under challenge by Catalan secessionists?

Respondents were asked: “Thinking of the next ten years and taking into account that political life for the Spanish can have three frames of reference (Spain, the autonomous region of residency, and Europe), do you think that Spain will be the main reference in the political life of the Spanish more than it is now, the same as it is now, or less than it is now.” More than half (53.1%) answered that it would be the same as now, 20.4% responded “more than now” and 22.2%, “less.” Now, identifying Spain as the principal reference in political life implies the centrality of the Spanish state understood in its broad sense, as the whole of both central and regional governments, as it is related to the perception that the Spanish state has the strategic capacities which define its substantive legitimacy, which in turn rests on its capacity to resolve problems, to guarantee the permanency of the community, and to represent its citizens (Pérez-Díaz 2008).

In this regard, the first question was: “Do you believe that the capacity of the Spanish state, that is, the totality of central and regional governments, to resolve the country’s problems will have increased, will be the same, or will have declined in the next five years?” The questions that followed this are repetitions of it but with reference, in one case, to the capacity of the state “to guarantee the unity of the Spanish,” and in another, “to reflect the opinions and interests of the great majority of Spanish citizens.” Looking at the responses, 73.1% believe that the state’s capacity to resolve problems will continue to be the same or will increase; 69.2% think its capacity to guarantee unity will remain the same or will increase; and 75.1% believe that its capacity to represent the opinions and interests of society will remain the same or will increase.

### **/// Messages About Political Manners: The Civil Forms of Citizens and the Bellicose Forms of Politicians**

Let's make no mistake: in politics "forms are contents." To continually recreate the political community (e.g., by responding adequately to the unease resulting from the economic crisis or the risks of territorial fragmentation) requires managing social relations within it in a specific manner: civil forms foster this recreation, and uncivil forms hinder it.

I have used the image of a ship at sea that follows or searches for a course. But this ship needs to be rebuilt and repaired over and over again if it is to navigate without sinking. And this ship is always at sea, always having to be steered (formulating and implementing public policies, adjusting its internal mechanisms, the division of its powers). In other words, it is always afloat in the agitated environment of the high seas, not in the tranquillity of the port. Repairing it, reconstructing it, must be done, as Otto Neurath suggests, based on our vision of reality at the same time as we are immersed in it, or, according to Quine, such a holistic verification can be done, perhaps entirely, but only through a gradual reconstruction (Quine 1960). The image suggests that the continual recreation of the community in the middle of the open and rough sea requires certain forms of relating onboard. Excluding the possibility of the captain having omnipotent powers, it requires a mix of conversation and coordination, a climate of deliberation and a search for approaches, experiments, and life experiences: what I consider civil forms of politics.

However, an alternative interpretive framework fosters a voluntarist reading of politics as a confrontation between ideas and interests, between friends and enemies, around which every crucial decision is to be made. History becomes then a setting for deploying a will to power. Social recognition and knowledge itself are the result of a Hegelian fight to the death among diverse forms of consciousness, particularly in the interpretation of Kojève (1947). This impulse can easily extend to a conception of the nation (or the people) as a result of the construction of the imaginary, an invention whose creation only awaits a fiat, overflowing with resolution and defiance. All of this leads to a cultural bias that inhibits the development of civil forms, which, with their emphasis on deliberation and exploration, on listening to arguments and addressing diverse experiences, would appear, from a decisionist perspective, to be linked to a problematic and passive attitude toward managing the ongoing crucial problems.

The image of a ship at sea that requires civility in its forms may be implicit in, and consistent with, a good part of the opinions of the common people. We have seen that, in reference to the substance of public policies, the citizenry sends a message revealing its commitment to a free order open to debate and rectifications, and to a political community that requires effective communication among its members. Regarding the forms of doing politics, the message is even more robust and clear; it questions the manners of the politicians and includes a proposal in favour of civil forms of public debate.

The fact is, 71.4% of those surveyed believe that “in relation to the controversies over autonomy, nationalisms, etc., the majority of the people would tend to reach agreement, but political leaders tend to promote conflict.” In more general terms, 83% agree with the statement that “many politicians, of all tendencies, tend to discredit their adversaries to divert the public’s attention from the fact that, in reality, they are not capable of resolving the country’s problems.” There is a certain suspicion of deliberate manipulation, which perhaps can be better understood by looking at the responses to other questions. Thus, 63.2% agree with the statement that “many politicians try to intensify the feelings of hostility of their social base against opposition parties to make compromise between them impossible.” Furthermore, 89.1% believe that “when politicians listen to the points of view of politicians from other parties, they listen to them to refute their arguments rather than being open to incorporating their most reasonable ideas.” Note that these opinions do not criticize the diversity of political positions nor the relevancy, for example, of the use of a left/right schema: 53.3% think that “the notions of right and left are still valid for evaluating the positions taken by the parties and politicians,” while 39.1% do not agree with that. People do not object to the existence of differences in opinion. Rather, they object to how these differences are expressed.

This objection reflects certain basic attitudes toward political life, and a normative and emotional disposition in favour of political practices of deliberation leading to reasonable compromise. So, 83.8% believe that “public debate should function as a discussion in which everyone has the opportunity to contribute something and to learn,” in contrast to 14.2% who support “a discussion in which different perspectives can be clearly distinguished.” In the same sense, 72.3% think that “what should be most important in political life is that the political parties deliberate, negotiate, and compromise,” versus 26% who think that “the political parties should



obtain the majority necessary to make decisions as quickly as possible.” A wide majority, therefore, is in favour of a deliberative rather than decisionist citizenry. There is a clear message in favour of deliberation and, we may infer, in favour of a sort of collective learning process based on mutual listening and, eventually, the consideration of accumulated experiences.

All this culminates in what seems to be an appeal to a fundamental ontological question, with cognitive, moral and emotional dimensions, concerning the manner in which reality is confronted. I am referring to what can be inferred from the responses to the question: “In current conditions, if you had to choose between two types of politics, which would you prefer?” In choosing between the options that “they have a moral sense and common sense or they have great vision and energy,” 77.2% chose the former and 18.6% the latter. These and other responses suggest the outlines of a “good society,” a society with a good sense which would include common sense (a sense of reality) and a moral sense, and would emphasize a balance between private interests and care of others, solidarity, and even altruism. And we might add, in an aside: when respondents were asked to respond to the following question, “Which of these two options is closer to what you think? : The most important thing in life is to carry out a personal project, although in the process you may ignore to some extent the well-being of others, or, it often makes sense to renounce our personal projects for the good of others,” 76% chose the second option, and 20.7% chose the first.

The general tenor of the responses suggests that we are encountering two somewhat different moral political languages: that of many politicians (and certain media and experts), and that of many citizens. Many politicians imagine political communication in terms of a supply and demand for policies, and perhaps as a result, they become infected by an abstract, impersonal language that they believe predominates in the markets. Yet political communication is not an issue of marketing; it is a two-way street, with the danger that one or both parties will be confused, leading to misunderstanding or to dead ends. Realist spirits can think that the respondents, in making the above statements theirs, place themselves on an idealistic plane, and entertain themselves with a sort of celestial music. However, underneath this ironic expression may pulsate a deep misunderstanding of politics, because politics involves not only the management of practical problems, but also the celebration and affirmation of a political community. This is what Pericles does in his funeral oration: by enacting a ritual of remembering, he activates a feeling of being together, fighting together, and honouring the dead of the homeland, along with the meaning of the

legacy that would consequently be transmitted to future generations. In fact, politics is a collective civil performance that is both prosaic and poetic, a moment of reflection and exhortation, of celebration and mourning.

Besides, there are also reasons for thinking that the respondents' idealism can be combined with a sharp sense of reality. This is expressed not only in terms of criticism and even a touch of suspicion of politicians, but also (as we will see in what follows) through their attitudes toward society itself, that is, toward themselves.

### **/// Socio-cultural Resources: Ambiguity in Political Disaffection**

We have seen that the messages of the citizenry seem to be relatively consistent and constitute a sort of common-sense culture or a sense of what is commonly shared. Now I will address the socio-cultural resources the citizenry have to project these messages in public spaces and to be involved in civic action. I focus on resources related to two interconnected dimensions of the lived culture of the Spanish: relationality and reflexivity. First, I analyse the ambivalent relationship between society and the political class. Then I address the potential and limits of the narrative, and the respondents' understanding of the economy and history—their awareness, say, of the spatial and temporal frame of their common experience. I end by considering some key aspects of the, again, somehow ambivalent relationship of society with itself.

Beginning with what citizens expect from their elites, there is quite a lot of evidence of political disaffection. Clearly, recent swings in the electoral panorama and the decline in the fortunes of the parties that have dominated the Spanish scene for three decades (broadly speaking, the socialists and liberal-conservatives between 1982 and 2015) indicate a notable level of political disaffection; an important factor in this has been the social anxiety caused by the crisis. Disaffection is clear in the results of the survey.

Politicians are seen as not concerned with people like the respondents: 77.3% agree with the statement that “politicians do not worry much about what people like me think” (a proportion that has increased in the last 35 years—*Analistas Socio-Políticos* 2016). As found in the 2010 survey, there is a belief that politicians “are different” both because of their personal distance from the crisis and because of what it means for them to belong to a political party. In fact, 76.5% of respondents thought that it was not true that “many politicians of all tendencies are motivated to resolve the crisis because they suffer its consequences in their personal lives” (Pérez-Díaz

& Rodríguez 2010: 165). Politicians are also seen as different because their essential experience as politicians leads the common people to consider them as part of an apparatus. Thus, when asked about “the behaviour of politicians from the party respondents are closest to, regarding debates within the party,” 69.2% thought that “they tend to accept the directives of their leaders, almost without discussion.”

Being different, it seems logical that their ways of doing politics would also be different, particularly their way of engaging in public debate (as we have seen concerning the nationalist question and other matters). Furthermore, it may seem also quite logical that politicians are seen as trying to shape the public’s attitudes in conformity to their own. In fact, 63.2% of respondents agree that “many politicians try to intensify the feelings of hostility of their social base toward opposition parties to make a compromise with them impossible.”

However, there is also evidence that relativizes the intensity of political disaffection, and suggests an attitude of ambivalence. First, a large majority of Spanish voters have voted for the same or very similar parties over three decades. Only very recently have we begun to observe some electoral tremors. Second, although citizens may have doubts, they support a repertoire of substantive policies that are not very different from those the major political parties offer. Moreover, when the two major parties reach agreement, the public tends to support this compromise, as happened during the democratic transition and has continued to happen: for example, with the above-mentioned introduction of a constitutional clause requiring fiscal balance.

We may add that the vast majority of citizens place themselves on the left-right scale with no apparent problems, which would be almost unthinkable without some kind of attachment to the parties, which are assumed to be the protagonists in the processes through which these symbolic spaces are constructed and reconstructed over and over. Lastly, let’s remember that the strategic capacity of the Spanish state is assumed to be to resolve problems, to guarantee the unity of the territory, and to represent citizens. Obviously, this supposedly capable Spanish state is led by ... politicians.

As a corollary, I propose that we understand the issue of political disaffection avoiding a dichotomous position. Political disaffection tends to be an issue of degree, and to grow or to diminish as a consequence of learning processes. Even unfulfilled promises can be at the origin of such processes, sometimes feeding the distrust of certain parties and an excess

of trust in their opponents. For example, the level of disaffection could rise if voters feel that the two parties that promoted the above-mentioned constitutional clause are failing to fulfil their promises to overcome the crisis, although the same experience could induce voters naively to trust new parties that are all promise (as with the current populisms).

### **/// Socio-cultural Resources: A Limited Narrative and Understanding**

Now I will explore the potential and limits of society's self-awareness as it places itself in a larger spatial and temporal frame. I address the issue of citizens' knowledge in three areas: the economy, Europe, and Spanish history.

To begin with, most citizens' economic knowledge is limited, and they know it. A clear majority (62.9%) think "that the level of knowledge of the Spanish population regarding how the Spanish economy functions is quite low" or very low (versus 15.3% who think it is quite high or very high). However, a slight majority also believe that they essentially understand the economy well enough. Respondents were asked: "Do you believe that the complexity of the economy is increasing and becoming more difficult to understand, or that, in reality, although it may be more complex, with common sense and some information, the essential can be understood?" In this case, 52.7% believe that what is essential about the economy is understood, versus 44.6% who do not believe that. On the other hand, to put things in context, we may remember that in regard to uncertainty in applying knowledge to practice, citizens are actually in the same position as the economic elites, politicians, and experts—whom citizens might assume have greater mastery of economics than is actually the case. In fact, as has been pointed out many times, the economic crisis is incomprehensible without taking into account the errors and lack of awareness of central banks, banks in general, real estate firms, and others institutions, which engaged in practices that were opaque not only to the public but also often to themselves (Friedman 2009). At the same time, events can leave the political elites behind, as was revealed, for example, by the failure of both the Democratic and Republican candidates for the White House, Barack Obama and John McCain, to anticipate the impending financial crisis in the summer and fall of 2008. As for the experts themselves, the studies of Tetlock (2005) and others have revealed that their modest capacity for anticipating the movements of markets is very similar to that which the *dilettanti* might have.

This said, if knowledge of the economy may help people to understand their situation in the world order here and now, history may provide a narrative that places them in a time frame and gives them a sense of identity. The Spanish say they know little of Europe today and of its history, but they must have a diffuse and tacit knowledge of what Europe was and is—enough for that knowledge to have an influence on Spain’s course, and for the citizens to hold certain European countries as models and to remember parallel experiences that have had a deep impact on both European and Spanish political and economic institutions. In fact, respondents see themselves as not very informed about the workings of European institutions: 75.3% confess “they know little or nothing about the deliberations and decisions of European leaders in institutions such as the European Council or European Commission.” In addition, 77% believe that “the level of knowledge the Spanish have in general of the history of Europe” is low or very low. If this is the case, the results are disquieting because it would thus be difficult to understand the meaning and consequently the strategies and underlying stories behind what other European countries do and say. Lacking familiarity with these narratives would seem to favour an attitude of ignorance in regard to the task of understanding other Europeans. In addition, not sharing their historical memories, it would not be possible to develop a sense of familiarity with them.

Should we interpret this confession of ignorance literally? My initial discussion of the general direction Spain follows would seem to suggest that Europe is quite present in the Spanish collective imagination. Spanish people must have an implicit and diffuse knowledge of European history, based on the history learned as part of their general education and on their experience of the European space—replete with a past that has become familiar—as migrants, tourists, and students. And there must be an even richer knowledge of the European history of the past century, with its events that were of concern to everyone—a dramatic history marked by civil wars, both European and Spanish, and the spread of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. From these, Europe and Spain have emerged with the institutional fabric of liberal democracy, the market economy, and the plural society that now characterize them.

Two-thirds (66.4%) of respondents say that “the level of knowledge that the Spanish have of the history of Spain” is quite low or very low, and only 21.9% say that it is quite high or very high. If this were the case, the poverty of the historical imagination of the people, lacking the thread of an argument and specific details, could be reinforced by a tendency towards

presentism in the rhetoric of politicians and in the information disseminated by the media.

Again, is this all that needs to be said regarding the Spanish and their sense of history? Probably not, as memory of that which is closest in history must also be taken into account, in particular the democratic transition, understood as a response to the dramatic events of the preceding decades. This is not just a detail, but rather a fundamental event in the narrative of the past as it concerns the present life of the political community. Indeed, it is the defining event that has marked, and still marks, the course of Spain. In fact, when the respondents were asked whether they were proud or not “of the stage of history in Spain from the democratic transition to today,” 52.3% said they feel very or quite proud. Yet, without an adequate narrative, one that is sufficiently persuasive to interest people in public issues, they would lack motivation and a civic impulse. The key to civic passion in ancient societies was fidelity to the memory of ancestors, and, to a lesser extent, to forthcoming generations, as well as (and implicit in the anterior) fidelity to a land consecrated by the gods, whether local or distant. These evocations gave sense to the sacrifices necessary when the health or survival of the *res publica* was in danger. This happened in the Greece of Pericles, but also in the Roman republic, in late-medieval times, in more-or-less-revolutionary full modernity, in relation to the nationalist drives of the last two-and-a-half centuries (Greenfeld 2006), and on until the present.

Without a “lived” history and narrative, people lack some significant component of the motivation necessary to generate a public interest, not to mention a civic passion that would imply the sacrifice of private interests—the forgetting or trivialization of history being an indicator of the superficial character of contemporary civic commitment. Ultimately, without a narrative there is no identity, on either a personal or a collective level (Lamont 2000; MacIntyre 2006; Wuthnow 2005). And this afflicts all those without a historical memory, whether ordinary citizens or the elites of the moment.

### **/// Socio-cultural Resources: Society’s Ambivalence Towards Itself, and the Potential and Limits of Civic Commitment**

It is not enough to address citizens’ attitudes to, and relation with, the political class, nor to look at the cognitive dimensions, narratives, and understanding that shape citizens’ grasp of politics and policies. We have to look into their capacity to transform their messages into effective political

influence by means of their engagement in civic action. From this perspective, I will now focus my attention on a series of issues related to the civic commitment of the Spanish, such as their interest in politics, their willingness to speak in a certain way about political matters, their experience with and attitudes towards associations, and last but not least the grounding of this combination of reflexivity and relationality in their resources of social trust, and their degree and quality of self-confidence.

I begin by presenting a few positive pieces of evidence. Half (50.6%) of those surveyed say that they have a lot or quite a bit of interest in politics, versus 48.9% who say they have little or no interest in politics. The percentage interested in politics is probably the highest since the beginning of the 1980s (Analistas Socio-Políticos 2016). (It may be added that while respondents turn to the media to keep informed about public affairs, they do so from a critical perspective. The great majority, 72.2%, think that “the media informs them about political affairs in a disorderly and confusing manner,” versus 24.1% who believe the media does so in “a clear and orderly manner.”)

We can go a step further and consider the associative experience of the respondents. Such experience provides training in the capacity to participate in collective action, with a common interest: first, by participating in discussion and then by undertaking the joint activity. Collective action may itself be aimed at a civic objective, or it may prepare the way, form the dispositions, and provide the necessary instruments for its attainment (Putnam 2000). According to the survey, 23.3% belong to and are very active in an association, 16.8% belong to an association but are not very active in it, 13.7% only pay the fees, and 46.1% say they do not belong to any association. The attraction of associationism is not only expressed in belonging to associations, but also by the influence people think associations should have in solving the country’s problems. When asked about that, 81.7% believe it should be higher than it is.

We should look at the potential for civic action inscribed in this experience of associationism and in the interest in politics against the backdrop of a society with a critical attitude toward itself. Here we find that, in terms of mentality and life experience, citizens have doubts about their own capacity to act in a coordinated manner. Perhaps the necessary self-confidence and self-esteem to maintain a civic impulse are not at adequate levels. This can be inferred from the responses to questions on generalized social trust, on the frequency of work well done, and on recognizing the merit of doing things well. First, generalized social trust seems lacking: 62.2% think that

“you can never be too careful when dealing with others,” versus 36% who believe that “you can trust the majority of people.” These levels of generalized trust have remained quite stable over the last four decades (Analistas Socio-Políticos 2016). Second, in choosing an option from the statement “the majority of people in Spain try to do their job very well or they just try to comply,” 61.5% opted for the latter and 33.4% for the former. Thus, the idea is very widespread that the Spanish are not very trustworthy in terms of doing things well—which is fundamental, as we depend on others to meet our expectations. Third, respondents were asked to choose which of two descriptions “better describes what occurs in Spain: a job well done tends to be recognized or rewarded or a job well done tends to meet with silence or indifference?” Most (75.8%) chose the second alternative and only 18.5% the first.

This portrays a relatively untrustworthy society, whose members are careless about their own work and indifferent or silent towards those who do it right. This does not accord with a high propensity to get involved in civic action. If society does not have great trust in its politicians or in itself, it may tend toward despondency or irritation, leading to indolence and/or explosions of indignation. Yet the possibility remains that society could develop its ability to use its common sense and moral sense, of which the survey has left many indications. Once more, what we are referring to is not a predetermined story, but rather an open and contradictory drama.

### **/// Conclusion: An Open and Dramatic Process**

This article is written from the perspective of interpretive sociology. It is based on a social theory that attempts to integrate the dimensions of structure and agency in an open and dramatic temporal process, and locates culture and meaning at its centre. Relationality, reflexivity, and civic impulse are interconnected. Relationality refers to agents being in relationship with each other in such a way that their decisions and choices (their projects, their voices) can only be understood as proposals and responses to other agents. What I have referred to in this study as “the voice of the audience” is exactly that: a sort of proposal and response of the common people, the citizens seen as spectators, to other voices, in particular, to the proposals and responses of “the actors on the stage,” the elites and counter-elites of the moment. Reflexivity is common to all these agents. It is their capacity to be conscious of the meaning they attribute to their acts, and to their capacity to understand the meaning that others attribute to



them. But it is also their capacity to learn from the consequences of their actions. Of course, this learning process is problematic, because it is possible to extract both correct and incorrect conclusions from experiences. In other words, the learning process can be affected by an increase in entropy, a risk that exists in all social processes, without the proper inputs of intelligence and moral sentiment.

In the case that concerns us, I have stressed the core of reasonableness (the sense of reality, the common sense) and decency (the moral sense) of the majority of the common people in Spain in the current crisis situation. I have done so by understanding, analysing, and explaining their voice, but also by situating it among a chorus of voices involved in managing the crisis. The voice of the Spanish citizens differs from the voices of the elites and their milieus, both those of the establishment and the anti-establishment. I also defend this voice, that is, I favour the historical possibility of a reasonable and reconciled (but not homogeneous) society, with the hope that this facilitates discussion and strengthens the plausibility of the interpretation. The approximate realization of such a society seems to me possible under the current historical conditions, and preferable as well, as it is relatively better than the available alternatives. Such support, being relative, leaves the door open for rectifications of greater or lesser scope. Ultimately, it is the support for a “civil society” *sensu lato* (Pérez-Díaz 2014).

I will not reiterate the main points and findings of my study by considering society’s messages and socio-cultural resources. Instead, I conclude with two observations.

First, the key to developing the potential of society’s civic impulse is perhaps in coming to terms with the starting point of all the agents involved, namely the sense of their limits, which could, along with a sufficient dose of civic passion, transform the meaning of the political experience. The message of our audience could be interpreted as calling into question the way many politicians do politics. It seems based on an appreciable dose of good sense, and, to a point, sounds like an echo of ancient wisdom, which might prepare us to manage these coming intoxicating times soberly. As pointed out by Perelman and Olrechts-Tyteca (1971; see also Jaeger 1986), the ultimate effort of Demosthenes was to appeal to the people so that he himself could improve, as a way of improving his politics; hoping that their reasonable and virtuous voice could educate their leaders. We ought to imagine that in today’s Spain we have something like an audience that, in an exercise of pedagogy and a colloquial key, would tell its politicians the following:

“Do not imagine that you are going to set us on a course, adopting a prophetic air (we say this without disdain for the authentic prophets that emerge from time to time). We are all already set on our course, and have been for some time, after many vicissitudes, and through a network of decisions, institutional pressures, and external influences. We accept it; we do not essentially question it. It is not a course toward the ideal city, but perhaps it is the best course possible, given the circumstances. Nor is it necessary that you adopt a radical position that questions the framework of political and economic life, or that you defend and maintain it at all costs; we prefer relative moderation, continual reforms—although sometimes quite deep—and reasonable adjustments. Nor is it necessary that you overdramatize the issue of collective identity, with such anger or disdain toward your adversaries of the moment: we are showing you a predisposition to accept and live with complex identities. In general, do not engage in so much fighting among yourselves; it is not necessary that you affirm your leadership in that way: we are telling you, both actively and passively, that we prefer more civil forms of political relationships. Our disaffection with you is clear, but it only exists up to a point. You should not be indignant about it, or be overwhelmed by it, or deny it. Notice that we do not feel hostile to you, but rather ambivalent: this could change and might diminish if you react with good sense. And yes, we recognize that our weakness, apart from a deficit in our knowledge, is a lack of trust in ourselves and of civic impulse. Perhaps this is an issue where, realistically, we should not expect much from you. In any case, in this respect, it is our own responsibility that is at stake.”

Yet, clearly, to be fair, and as corresponds to the open character of the ongoing drama, a second observation must be added to the audience’s discourse. Namely, that a potential exists not only for the best from the citizenry, but also for the worst. The potential for the best is not a result of the development of the capacity for adaptation, which, by itself, might be a form of mere survival, of resignation to indefinitely maintaining a variant of the status quo. Instead, it is the potential for a more noble, more reasonable and just form of doing politics. The citizenry can aspire to more if their reflexivity, the quality of their social relations, and their civic impulse substantially improves. At the same time, the potential for the worst implies the common people’s further steps toward achieving their own self-centred interests at whatever cost, and of their being carried away by a mix of irritability and passivity concerning common affairs, and perhaps, in following this path, of ending up in a state of more or less conscious and

voluntary servitude to the oligarchs or demagogues of the moment. Or of relapsing into such a state again and again.

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### /// Abstract

The strategic capacity of human agency to orient itself in a context of growing uncertainty and complexity depends on the degree and quality of its reflexivity and relationality, and of the civic impulse arising from the connection between both. The present article explores this capacity by

analysing the results of an opinion survey carried out in May 2016, and by developing an argument about one collective agent: the Spanish citizenry. Spanish citizens send three main messages. First, they opt for a European course and for a range of policies consistent with convergence (and debate) between the traditions of social democracy and conservative liberalism. Second, they are attentive to the task of recreating a political community. Third, they ask for civil forms of doing politics. To send these messages they draw on socio-cultural resources, and forms of reflexivity and relationality. The article addresses society's relations with the political class and with itself and the cultural resources (economic knowledge, historical narratives) that map these relationships within their global context and their past.

Keywords:

ambivalence, reflexivity, relationality, civility, Spain

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# FOR A RELATIONAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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## /// Four Discourse Analyses

This paper provides a relational sociological perspective on contemporary linguistics, with particular emphasis on discourse analysis and so-called “Critical Discourse Analysis” (CDA). In other words, it is an attempt to expose what are considered to be serious limitations of the critical approach in discourse analysis. As it will be argued, critical discourse analysis, which has also become a popular approach in sociological studies, can be seen as largely involved in a non-reflexive naturalization and reproduction of the power relations underlying dominant discourses, in spite of its declared ambition to be involved in their deconstruction. This could also be said about most other schools of discourse analysis and probably about most branches of linguistics. However, this text will focus particularly on CDA and its forms of involvement in the reproduction of social relations, because the case of CDA seems to offer the most striking example of discourse analysis’ inability to challenge its own premises despite its clearly expressed intentions to tackle the problem of power relations in which all social actions are involved.

In order to expose the paradoxical role of CDA, I would like to draw on Michael Burawoy’s typology of schools of sociology (Burawoy 2005). Let me remind the reader that Burawoy has proposed that we distinguish four types of sociology: professional sociology, public sociology, policy sociology, and critical sociology. His two criteria of this “division of sociological labor” were based on the questions of “for whom” and “for what” sociology is pursued. These two questions defined two dimensions of his typology. The first distinguishes sociology for an academic audience (“pro-



essional” and “critical” sociologies) from sociology for a non-academic audience (“policy” and “public” sociologies). The second dimension is based on the opposition between the production of instrumental knowledge (“professional” and “policy” sociologies) and production of reflexive knowledge (“public” and “critical” sociologies). Policy sociology, as Burawoy argued, “is sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client. Policy sociology’s *raison d’être* is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached” (Burawoy 2005: 9). “Public sociology, by contrast, strikes up a dialogic relation between the sociologist and the public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table and each adjusts to the other. In public sociology, discussion often involves values or goals that are not automatically shared by both sides” (Burawoy 2005: 9). Professional sociology supplies “true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks,” while critical sociology “examines the foundations—both the explicit and the implicit, both normative and descriptive—of the research programmes of professional sociology” (Burawoy 2005: 10). Burawoy’s scheme can be easily applied to contemporary discourse analysis. Thus, first, we have “professional discourse analysis” dealing with the systematic study and description of discourse types and their uses. Second, we have “policy discourse analysis,” which is best represented by branches dedicated to language and discourse standardization, education, or language testing. What is currently known as “critical linguistics,” in particular under the rubric of CDA, can be considered an equivalent to “public sociology” rather than “critical sociology.” This may be because of its overt political commitment to addressing issues defined in terms of broader social or political problems. In other words, CDA openly presents itself as involved in the solution of social issues: addressing, to a large extent, non-academic audiences. As Teun van Dijk argued, for example, CDA is “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality” (van Dijk 2001: 352). Theo van Leeuwen, in turn, has defined CDA’s goal as the critique of the hegemonic discourses and genres that effect in inequalities, injustices, and oppression in contemporary society (van Leeuwen 2009).

The last category from the above-proposed two-dimensional typology of “division of discourse analysis’ labor” would be critical discourse analy-

sis defined along the lines of Burawoy's understanding of critical sociology. As I argue in this text, however, such an approach does not yet exist as a coherent school of discourse analysis, although several attempts at developing such a mode of reflection have already been made, in particular within the discipline of linguistic anthropology (e.g., Bucholtz 2001, Slembrouck 2001) or communication studies (e.g., Jones 2007). This paper is an effort to propose some of the possible ways this school of thought could develop, relying primarily on sociological inspiration. I am tentatively calling the proposed model a relational critical discourse analysis. Thus this will be a discipline focused on analysing the foundations of discourse analysis and its social functions, with its embeddedness in relations of power, while critically oriented towards its own field rather than the external social world. Defined in this way, such a field could be seen as a "discourse analysis of discourse analysis" to allude to Bourdieu's call for the development of a "sociology of sociology" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). It could also be imagined as a critical sociology of discourse analysis. The proposed approach, as will be suggested in more detail below, would combine the tools and frameworks of both critical sociology and CDA to focus on the discourse of discourse analysis itself.

### **/// Relational Critical Discourse Analysis as a Contextual Approach**

A relational and critical approach to discourse analysis can be understood as one fully recognizing its relational or social nature. Such an approach to discourse analysis could be defined as a next step in the development of the understanding of contextuality. The development of linguistics over the last century can be interpreted as a process involving the gradual contextualization of its objects of study, which can also be seen as a process of gradually recognizing their relational nature. Step by step the contextual, relational character of such notions as the meaning of words, sentences, texts, and finally notions of discourse and context itself, has been recognized. Among the first stages of this process was recognition of the contextual nature of the meaning of particular words. In writing on the development of the notion of context, Charles Goodwin and Alessandro Duranti (Goodwin & Duranti 1992) pointed to the seminal essay *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages* by Bronislaw Malinowski, who is often considered an ethnographic precursor of contemporary contextualism. As Goodwin and Duranti explain, Malinowski was probably the first to note

that language is embedded within a situational context, and words only become comprehensible when the larger socio-cultural frameworks within which they are embedded are taken into account. Another important moment in the development of the contextual awareness of linguistic theory was Ludwig Wittgenstein's work, in which he famously declared that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953). Almost at the same time Yehoshua Bar-Hillel coined the notion of "indexical expressions" (Bar-Hillel 1954), marking an important step in the theoretical linkage between language and the context of its use. Another step in the development of linguistics was the recognition of contextuality in the function of words in a sentence (Sgall et al. 1986), which has been called the informative structure of sentences, or alternatively the topic-comment structure (Firbas 1992). Speech acts (Searle 1969) contextualized the rules for dividing text into units. This implied the gradual recognition of the contextual character of the criteria of textuality. The definition of text underwent gradual contextualization, which resulted in the emergence of the modern notion of discourse. Discourse, with its relational rules—including such structures as genres, registers, or styles—started to be considered a context for particular texts. Soon, however, the arbitrariness of the way in which discourses were defined became more and more obvious. The next stage of this development was the questioning of the objectivity of the distinction between text and context. This was followed by a recognition of the social construction of context itself (e.g., Akman 2000). This process could be seen in terms of a gradual transition from "textual analysis" to "contextual analysis" and eventually to what could be called, after Jorge Ruiz Ruiz (2009), a "sociological interpretation." However, this recognition of the contextual or relational nature of context itself should not be considered the ultimate frontier of the process of deconstructing the social nature of the language world. What is, in fact, still not fully contextualized by discourse analysis is the discipline itself. In other words, while language use, discourse meaning, and other aspects of discourse games "outside" the realm of discourse analysis (as an academic field) are increasingly viewed as social and relational in their nature and involved in power relations, such a contextual perspective has not yet been systematically adapted to analysing the discourse of discourse analysis itself.

As I would like to propose in this text, the next step in the process of contextualizing its tools should be the recognition and systematic analysis of the relational character of discourse analysis itself. This would imply recognition of the relational but also arbitrary character of the distinction

between discourse analysis on the one hand and the remaining social world on the other. The need for such an extension of contextualization is, however, not yet fully recognized and much of discourse analysis is still done in the old framework based on the assumption of the objective or neutral nature of the social science tools. Full recognition of the relational character of discourse analysis, and, in particular, of its tools, can be seen as a challenge that would imply the deconstruction of the still naturalized distinction between the discourse of discourse analysis itself and the remaining social world, including its discursive aspects. In other words, the distinction is still in place between social actions being the objects of discourse analysis' study and discourse analysis as an academic field not seen as part of the wider social world. It can be identified with the fundamental difference between a criticism of social relations, which are reflected in language forms, and a critical analysis of discourse analysis itself.

### **/// Toward a New Relational Pragmatics**

The above-discussed gradual transition from non-contextual to contextual approaches may be related to the paradigmatic shift from semiotics to pragmatics (Levinson 1983). Its key aspect was the replacement of the criteria of truth by the criteria of efficacy/efficiency and the gradual redefinition of phenomena earlier considered to be purely linguistic acts of transmitting information into a wider category of social acts transforming states of the social world. This transition has been accompanied by the gradual replacement of ambitions to establish language norms by ambitions to study and reconstruct the existing, socially constructed norms of acceptability. The next stage of this process could also involve the recognition of these socially constructed norms and their reproduction, legitimized by the representatives of academia, as aspects of power relations. From the pragmatic perspective, norms of efficiency and of acceptability are both contextual. They can be seen as part of a larger set of social norms and relations of power in which a given social situation is embedded.

The development of a relational critical discourse analysis as opposed to what could be labelled the "public discourse analysis" of CDA, using Burawoy's term, can be seen as a reflection of a more general move forward in the process of the growing relational awareness of the social sciences (e.g., Emirbayer 1997 or Donati & Archer 2015). In other words, this can be seen as an aspect of a new transition from the traditional pragmatics to a new, contextualized or relational pragmatics (Spencer-Oatey 2011). Such

an approach can be imagined as a pragmatics recognizing, at least partly, its own immersion in the wider social world, particularly its embeddedness in wider relations of power relations. We can speak about a new pragmatics as a basis of discourse analysis and making such analysis aware of its own social, relational, and political nature. Such an approach would have a strong component of a critical sociology of discourse analysis. It would first of all adapt insights of what could be called Foucaultian discourse analysis (Diaz-Bone et al. 2007), which should at the same time be contextualized itself, bearing in mind its teleology largely focused on critique rather than description or explanation. As Gary Wickham and Gavin Kendall (2007) convincingly argue, the broadly understood Foucaultian discourse analysis in turning to critique inappropriately conflates description, explanation, and identification of causes with political criticisms. Wickham and Gavin (2007) suggest Max Weber's sociology as a possible empirical supplement to a mature discourse analysis. Reiner Keller's "sociology of knowledge approach to discourse" (*Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse*) in turn points to the importance of socially constituted actors in the social production and circulation of knowledge. Furthermore, it combines research questions related to the concept of "discourse" with the methodological toolbox of qualitative social research and addresses sociological interests, the analyses of social relations, and the politics of knowledge, as well as the discursive construction of reality as an empirical ("material") process (Keller 2005). In this context the "discourse-historical approach" proposed by Ruth Wodak, which attempts to integrate different approaches multi-methodologically and relies on a variety of empirical data and background information (Wodak 2001), could also be mentioned. In the sociological contextualization of discourse analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's apparatus seems equally helpful. Development of a sociologically informed critical perspective relying on the above-mentioned insights and schools could include analysis of the relations of discourse analysis (and its sub-fields) to other fields, in particular to what Bourdieu calls the "field of power" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993). One direction of such an approach could be historical studies of institutional dependencies in the academic field of the study of language—in particular, discourse analysis—in the political and wider contexts of specific periods and countries. Among the most tangible aspects of such a dependency of discourse analysis on the logic of political power is the role it plays in the educational system, particularly in language instruction at all levels of schooling, which always includes larger or smaller amounts of linguistic theory. This is, of course, only one and probably the most vis-

ible aspect of discourse analysis' direct role as a fundamental institution of a modern nation state, for which it provides both a legitimization system and the fundamental structure of the dominant culture. Other elements of that system are formal bodies aimed at the normalization of language, which are good examples of the role discourse analysts play in the implementation of such nation-state aims as cultural homogenization and political control over directions of language evolution. Their workings are usually backed by particular theories of language, which are also known as "language ideologies" (Gal 2009).

Critical discourse analysts may, of course, take the side of more or less marginalized groups, or at least try not to get directly involved in clearly politically oriented undertakings of hegemonic institutions. A relational engagement with such causes would require awareness of a person's own location within a wider social space. As Jan Blommaert (2005) argued, modern discourse analysts should be much more aware of their location in the hierarchically structured space of the world system—to use the term coined by Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein 1974)—than most of them currently are. Their positioning near the central—or alternatively, peripheral—nodes of the global system may strongly impact the nature of their theories and interpretations and determine, above all else, their visibility and impact. A good example of these dependencies was provided by Elena Tarasheva, who scrutinized the publication patterns of Eastern European linguists (Tarasheva 2011). As she demonstrated, their articles rarely appeared in leading international journals. If this happens, Eastern Europeans mostly discuss case studies from their own countries using theoretical frameworks developed by their Western colleagues. Similar dependencies have been observed in other disciplines, such as geography (Timar 2004). Another aspect of discourse analysis' dependency on the field of power is the involvement of academics as experts in such structures as the media, the juridical system, and other public institutions. Such roles appear to be among the most extreme forms of the transformation of seemingly neutral academics into explicit members of the power establishment. Their scholarly status makes them useful to state institutions looking for additional legitimization of their decisions, which always have a more or less political nature. Using Burawoy's terms, such academics could be classified as partaking in forms of involvement in "policy discourse analysis" and "public discourse analysis." Blommaert quotes his own personal experience of serving as an expert for the Belgian migration authorities, for which he had been judging the "quality" of refugees' stories—in particular writ-

ten texts (Blommaert 2005). As legal experts, discourse analysts are also involved in highly politicized trials all over the world. They have a crucial role, for example, in cases of “insult,” “slander,” or “hate-speech,” given that their legitimizing function allows them to present sentences in “objective” academic terms. To justify their opinions they often refer to language and discourse theory. A good example of a systematic study of interaction between the academic field of linguistics and government is the work by Vincent Dubois (2014) reconstructing the role of French scholars in developing state language policies in the period 1960–1990. As he has demonstrated, representatives of academia tended to distance themselves from an overtly normative approach to language regulation, which may be seen as a form of emphasizing the autonomy of their academic sub-field. However, they engage much more actively in indirect forms of government intervention, such as campaigns for “language sensibility” (Dubois 2013: 5). These are among the most obvious forms of the involvement of academics studying language in the political field. Other less visible forms of such dependence are abundant and could be even more interesting as objects of study, given the much less evident nature of their politicization. In particular, a study could be made of how central research questions, theoretical notions and categories, and discourse analyses in given periods and regions of the world are linked to political interests of specific political actors and how they are inscribed within wider networks of relations of power. We can ask what their role is in the naturalization of these relations and hierarchies in line with other academic disciplines. A good example of such a context-induced transformation of research priorities in linguistics could be the switch of attention of discourse analysis from class categories (e.g., Labov 1966) to gender or racial categories (e.g., van Dijk 1993) as aspects of social inequalities reproduced and reinforced by language. An interesting contextual interpretation of the emergence of CDA as an intellectual response to the Thatcherite political project has been presented by Stef Slembrouck (2001). The development of institutional structures of discourse analysis could be similarly studied, taking into account the way state, political, and private actors are supporting the development of new research centres and their particular intellectual schools and individual researchers. These are, of course, only select examples of possible avenues for the development of this type of research. These questions can also be summarized as a call for the study of discourse analysis’ contribution to the reproduction of different aspects of the *doxa* or “dominant ideology” (Bourdieu & Boltanski 2008) in particular societies. I would like this arti-

cle to be considered as a proposal for possible avenues for the development of a relational critical sociology of discourse analysis; critical sociology is defined here as following Loïc Wacquant's "questioning, in a continuous, active, and radical manner, both established forms of thought and established forms of collective life—'common sense' or *doxa* (including the *doxa* of the critical tradition) along with the social and political relations that obtain at a particular moment in a particular society" (Wacquant 2004: 97).

### **/// Discourse Analysis in the Legitimization of Relations of Power**

What I propose is the development of a relational critical discourse analysis based on the idea of turning the tools of critical discourse analysis toward the analysis itself. As has been mentioned above, it can be argued that the discipline has so far been excluding itself in defining the social context of the phenomena it has been analysing. The new approach should involve identifying unequal access to the field of discourse analysis as an institutional field. We have to be aware that the discourse of discourse analysis can be seen as a social tool with a certain power to define, describe, and, in this way, change the social world. The ability to use it may be regulated by criteria that are either formal (e.g., academic degrees) or informal (recognition of competencies). In this context, hierarchies in the field of discourse analysis could be pointed out, particularly hierarchies of academic texts and of actors (authors, interpreters) enjoying different degrees of qualification that enable them to offer recognized interpretations of language behaviour. Bourdieu argued that "the autonomy of the 'purely' linguistic order, which is asserted by the privilege granted to the internal logic of language, at the expense of the social conditions and correlates of its social usage" is an illusion (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). This suggests that discourse analysis itself asserts its own autonomy from the wider social world. At the same time, Bourdieu argued that

linguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power through which relations of force between the speakers and their respective groups are actualized in a transfigured form. Consequently, it is impossible to elucidate any act of communication within the compass of linguistic analysis alone. Even the simplest linguistic exchange brings into play a complex and ramifying web of historical power relations between the speaker, endowed with a specific social authority, and an audience, which recognizes this authority



to varying degrees, as well as between the groups to which they respectively belong (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 142–3).

In adopting this view, we can also look at the relations between the academic sub-field of discourse analysis and the outside social world as power-relations games, in which discourse analysts cannot pretend to be neutral observers of social situations.

Thus I would suggest that, in contrast to traditional “discourse analysis,” which can be seen as a good example of what Bourdieu called the “semiological vision of the world” (Bourdieu 2004), this new relational branch should focus on the social conditions of its own discourse production. Sociology, in particular its critical branch, has already studied several disciplines of the social sciences in more or less detail, including economics, political science and sociology itself; or at least it has reflected on their dependences on the field of power. In this context, the sociology of linguistics and, in particular, the sociology of discourse analysis, seems a relatively neglected direction of research. This does not mean that there have not been any previous contacts between sociology and linguistics. Among the first authors to propose such a critical sociological approach was James W. Marchand, who self-critically noted that “we linguists are not the free thinkers we wish to be and frequently present ourselves as. Our thought is ‘socially’ conditioned” (Marchand 1975). His work, however, had few suggestions regarding the specific methods of developing a sociology of linguistics. He barely pointed out the sociological mechanisms of the development of schools in linguistics—in particular, the crucial role of academic journals and conferences in molding the discipline. What I would propose, following in Marchand’s steps, is the development of a relational sociology of discourse analysis understood as a reconstruction of its political functions and their evolution. It would include an analysis of relations between particular schools of discourse analysis within a wider field of linguistics and their relations to fields of power. These factors should be taken into account in all attempts at a relational analysis of the tools of discourse analysis. Here we perceive the rules of the function of language as rules of power; hence the study of language has to involve the study of power relations. We can note that the above proposition is based on the idea presented by Pierre Bourdieu: in particular, his view that the field of power is always dominant over all other fields, which can only be understood if their relation to the field of power is established. Moreover, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) suggests, there is always a homology—some

degree of similarity of structures—between any academic field and the field of power. This implies that any academic field may be divided into sections that have relations with particular parts of the field of power. At the same time, an academic field can be divided according to the criterion of generalized distance to the field of power, which produces a split between autonomous and heteronomous parts.

Adoption of such assumptions implies that any instances of discourse analysis can be interpreted as more or less directly related to divisions and stakes in the field of power and, in particular, involved in the fight over the very structure of the field of power. On the other hand, tensions in the field of power may become more or less directly reflected in all academic fields, including that of discourse analysis. The assumption of the superiority of the field of power implies a dependence of all other fields on the power relations the field of power generates and regulates. In effect, language rules codified—or at least reconstructed—by linguistics can be seen as having aspects of the political rules that regulate power relations in societies. The task of relational critical discourse analysis, in such a context, would be to identify the non-obvious political dimensions of the language rules codified by discourse analysts. A useful perspective is one proposed by Michiel Leezenberg, who recommends that we look at social contracts, with a focus on language rules as having a dominating and not cooperative character (Leezenberg 2002).

We can refer here to a basic opposition between two ways of modeling the social world. Following Martti Siisiäinen, we could distinguish between the universalistic paradigm of social integration and the antagonistic paradigm, which assumes the central role of conflict in social life (Siisiäinen 2003). The universalistic approach is best represented in discourse studies by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1984) with his “ideal speech situation” and claims of ideally cooperative speech exchange as a regulative ideal for all “communicative action.” A good incarnation of this paradigm in sociology is Robert Putnam’s (Putnam 1993) vision of “social capital” as a common resource, equally accessible to all members of a given community. Classic antagonistic paradigms were created by Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 2005). Pierre Bourdieu is also an influential representative; his theory excludes even the idea of a “genuine” consensus and universal values, the central function of which is to maintain such a paradigm in everyday practices. Such a conflict-based view of language usage, as Michiel Leezenberg argued, would be “one that systematically tries to account for the articulation of power relations in communication

and signification, and abstracts away from questions of legitimacy. Such a conception would not imply a reduction of all communication to matters of power, but rather treat power as an irreducible aspect of all communication” (Leezenberg 2002: 906). Leezenberg also noted that “for Bourdieu, the efficacy of ritual speech acts cannot be separated from the existence of institutions conferring a legitimate authority on utterances. He argues that Austin and his followers mistakenly locate the power of words, in particular a speech act’s illocutionary force, in the symbols used rather than in the language users conferring this authority on words” (Leezenberg 1999: 2). Leezenberg reminds us also that, according to Bourdieu, it is typical of symbolic power that it masks itself and is essentially mistaken for cooperation or mutual consent; it can only continue to function unproblematically under the condition of being misrecognized in this way (Leezenberg 1999). Looked at in the terms outlined above, the allegedly neutral status of discourse analysis as a “rational” apparatus for the analysis of social communication can be challenged. From such a perspective, the outcomes of discourse analysis can be seen as descriptions of legitimate and unchallenged forms of symbolic power.

### **/// A Relational Critique of Selected Concepts of Discourse Analysis**

Besides looking at more or less direct institutional relations between discourse analysis and the field of power, we can also attempt to deconstruct specific basic tools employed by the discipline. These tools could also be seen as inscribed in the wider context of the power relations of a given society. It is through the social embeddedness of these categories that discourse analysis can be seen as an effective tool for reproducing and naturalizing the social order. One of the basic social functions of discourse analysis, in this perspective, could be defined as the hierarchization of texts. Intentionally or not, all acts of discourse analysis can be seen as having aspects of hierarchization, because any act of interpreting a text implies its direct or indirect assessment and its relative positioning in relation to other texts on different scales, which may include syntactic, stylistic, ideological, or other criteria of worth. This unavoidable normative outcome of any act of discourse analysis can be seen as an aspect of a more general social function of the social sciences, namely, the maintenance and legitimization of the social order. However, in some instances these mechanisms may serve to reinforce dominant social forces, while in others they may pertain only

to some specific and relatively autonomous social fields, which are sometimes independent from or even opposed to the hierarchies of the core of a given society's field of power. Discourse analysis and its tools, as I would argue, should always be seen as part of a wider social system. The interpretation of a text, from this perspective, should be seen as an act of legitimate social appraisal. This function of discourse analysis is, however, difficult to identify in its traditional approaches. The naturalization of such social functions is largely based on framing interpretations through discourse analysis in terms of the assignment of specific characteristics to texts (or other language forms) and states of mind of individuals involved in their production or reception. The alternative approach, which I am proposing here, should see all characteristics of texts as socially produced, thus not as their innate features but as aspects of the wider social context in which they appear. Tools of discourse analysis should be seen, at the same time, as charged with normative mechanisms. We should be aware that they reflect a specific consensus reached in academic fields, but their origin stems from a confrontation over the definition and status of tools for the hierarchization of texts. Below I will try to offer a critical perspective on selected concepts of discourse analysis. First is the notion of context.

## 1. Context

Context, in its traditional understanding, which is still dominant in discourse analysis, is defined subjectively as those features of a social situation that speakers and/or interpreters consider relevant. Thus, for instance, Goodwin and Duranti (1992), referring to Ochs (1979), propose to distinguish the following: "dimensions of context" of linguistic behaviour, "setting," the "behavioural component," "language as context," and the "extra-situational context." Harris (1988) distinguishes seven dimensions of context: the world-knowledge dimension, the knowledge-of-language dimension, the authorial dimension, the generic dimension, the collective dimension, the specific dimension, and the textual dimension. As Bauman and Briggs point out, "all such definitions of context are overtly inclusive, there being no way to know when an adequate range of contextual factors has been encompassed. The seemingly simple task of describing 'the context' of a performance can accordingly become an infinite regress" (Bauman & Briggs 1990). Another form of such an approach to context is based on its cognitive models, as developed, for example, by Teun van Dijk (e.g., van Dijk 1999). It could be argued that this understanding of context

appears to be highly arbitrary. In van Dijk's view, context is defined by components such as domain and situation, which in turn are divided into scenes and events. Events comprise such categories as participants, actions, cognition, etc. This manner of defining context can be called psychological, as its components are defined through the reconstruction of individual cognitive models of a situation. Context, here, is largely dependent on individual will and rests on individual cognitive structures. This approach can be seen as reflecting the paradigm that is still dominant in discourse analysis—one that Jacob Mey called a tendency to concentrate on “the language user as an autonomous agent, a kind of linguistic Robinson Crusoe, always reinventing the linguistic wheel” (Mey 1999: 598).

This paradigm can be contrasted to what can be called the sociological or relational approach, in which context is defined as an objectively existing social situation embedded in the wider web of power relations in a given society. Here context is independent from individual cognition and remains external in relation to the human brain. It is not seen as a feature of texts or as an internal mental state of an utterer, as such an approach naturalizes the power relations that produce the key structures of social contexts. We have to recognize that contexts may be influenced or co-produced by some specific discourses or texts as forms of social action, but they are above all independent of them. Contexts are overarching relational social constructs which can be operationalized in terms of Bourdieu's notion of field. As Bourdieu has suggested, any field enjoys some degree of autonomy, but none is fully autonomous, and to some degree all fields remain dependent on what he called the field of power. From this perspective, a relational critical discourse analysis must not restrict itself to the study of the linguistic world. It has to rely on a systematic sociological reconstruction of relations of social context in which both the texts studied and the discipline itself are involved. These contexts can be formally reconstructed as fields or networks (Bottero & Crossley 2011), but they must be seen as socially constructed, relational and imbued with power relations which have to be exposed in a relational discourse analysis. Given that the autonomy of any social field is always restricted, no context can be reduced to a specific situation. What I would like to propose, therefore, is that a relational critical discourse analysis should recognize its dependence on other social sciences, in particular sociology, as such sciences study configurations of the non-linguistic aspects of social context. In such an approach, references to relations of power may not be simply perfunctory, as is the case in many instances of discourse analysis where the impor-

tance of “power relations” is rhetorically recognized without a systematic reconstruction of specific social fields. A good example of such a study, which can be seen as an instance of what Blommaert calls a “reductive theory of power,” is the analysis by Teun van Dijk, in particular his reference to specific debates in the House of Commons (e.g., van Dijk 2006). This study lacks any deeper insight into the configuration of the British field of power and the political scene, which should be seen as crucial contexts for the parliamentary speeches used as case studies by van Dijk. It seems that such a context is largely considered by the author to be self-evident, or inferable from the analysed texts themselves. The opposite approach I am advocating here could be seen as an attempt to take into account the consequences of recognizing the arbitrariness of the border between linguistic and non-linguistics aspects of the social world. This would imply recognition of the fact that the relatively narrow focus of the dominant schools of discourse analysis on linguistic phenomena results in a naturalization of the power relations within which they exist. It can, of course, be noted that this naturalization of hierarchies of power, which all academic disciplines are entangled in to some extent, may be one of the key reasons for the wider social relevance of discourse analysis. By decontextualizing acts of language use from their wider context, linguists are able to reinforce dominant social relations while at the same time naturalizing the political context of their emergence. Entirely rejecting this role would probably move discourse analysis to the margins of social interest. However, lack of awareness of it makes discourse analysts simple puppets in the hands of more powerful actors. In any case, a fully relational critical discourse analysis would be a discipline almost entirely integrated with other social sciences, preferably also in their relational incarnations. This could lead to questioning the need for the separate existence of linguistics, but some effort in this direction seems highly justified. The dialectical-relational approach to CDA proposed by Norman Fairclough (2009a) could be seen as one of the possible forms of implementing this way of thinking. In particular, Fairclough proposed that CDA should be integrated within the framework of what he calls transdisciplinary research, such as the school of “cultural political economy” (Jessop 2004).

## **2. Criteria of Textuality**

Let me now discuss the implicit power-reproduction functions of some of the other tools of contemporary discourse analysis. A particu-

larly inspiring case is provided by the well-known concept of standards of textuality developed by Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler (1981). Although their approach may be seen as no longer central to discourse analysis, most of the concepts popularized by de Beaugrande and Dressler remain important notions in contemporary text analysis. Their seven “standards of textuality” include “cohesion,” “coherence,” “intentionality,” “acceptability,” “informativity,” “situationality,” and “intertextuality.” A good example of the continuing central role of de Beaugrande and Dressler’s “standards of textuality” in contemporary discourse studies is a recent introduction to the discipline by Ruth Wodak (2008). To be sure, Wodak argues that the specific criteria should be assigned different importance and recognizes the contextual nature of “intentionality,” “acceptability,” “informativity,” and “situationality,” but overall she still presents them as fundamental concepts of discourse analysis. Let me remind the reader, that originally they were supposed to define which “communicative occurrences” could be classified as “communicative.” De Beaugrande and Dressler considered texts that failed to meet their standards to be non-communicative “non-texts.” As is typical for a traditional, individualistic approach, several of their standards of textuality pertain to psychological notions, characterizing inner states of the brain rather than social facts. Thus intentionality is defined as “concerning the text producer’s attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer’s intentions” (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981: 7). Similarly, acceptability is also defined as the attitude (of the text receiver) “that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use or relevance for the receiver” (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981: 7). It was Herbert Blumer who pointed out that the notion of attitudes can be used as a tool to arbitrarily assign invented traits to individuals (Blumer 1969). The criteria of informativity, situationality, and intertextuality mentioned by de Beaugrande and Dressler do not refer to psychological characteristics; rather, they refer to texts and their contexts. Their practical assessment can also be, however, a highly subjective process. All in all, these standards are perfect examples of the mechanisms used in building text hierarchies. In addition, the entire list appears highly arbitrary. Whatever our criteria of textuality may be, assessment will always have an aspect of the exercise of power. After all, textuality appears to be a useful and academically legitimate tool that gives some texts more power than others. Thus de Beaugrande and Dressler’s model and its later derivatives may be seen as a powerful social

machine enabling a natural recognition of the privileged status of specific texts and a depreciation of others. “Standards of textuality” seem to be typical academic tools for the legitimization and delegitimization of any statements we would like to consider superior, inferior, or simply invalid. These seemingly formal and objective notions even allow those bestowed with academic competencies to delegitimize specific statements as cases of “non-text.” What is simultaneously naturalized is the context of power relations that bestow legitimacy on the use of such academic tools. This is possible because the criteria of textuality are defined as characteristics of specific texts pertaining to states of minds of specific individuals. What is silenced is their implicit definitions and rules of application, which are governed by socially defined criteria and common-sense norms embedded in the dominant relations of power.

### 3. Coherence

A particularly interesting case of standards of textuality, which constitutes part of de Beaugrande and Dressler’s system and several other approaches to discourse analysis, is that of coherence and cohesion. Many authors make a clear distinction between the two (coherence concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world are related, while cohesion concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text are linked). Here, however, I am not so interested in that distinction and will focus on a generalized notion of coherence that will pertain to its most typical uses. Michel Foucault challenged the objective nature of the notion of coherence in his seminal *Archeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972). Foucault rejected four hypotheses concerning the unifying principle of a discursive formation: reference to the same object, a common style in the production of statements, the constancy of the concepts, and reference to a common theme. As Foucault argued, discursive formations are not held together by any hidden rule or structure. Rather, they are held together by what he called “regularity in dispersion.” Dispersion thus becomes the principle of unity, “insofar,” as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe phrase it, “as it is governed by rules of formation, by the complex conditions of existence of the dispersed statements” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). As Foucault argued, discursive formation is a configuration which in some contexts may be recognized as a whole. Thus the ability to declare a set of statements to be a coherent discursive formation becomes crucial and its political character seems obvious. Such an ability to identify coherent wholes—be they sen-



tences, texts, or discourses—seems to be at the core of any theory dealing with the notion of coherence, just as with de Beaugrande and Dressler's concept of standards of textuality. In all these examples we can clearly see how linguists get involved in the power-laden game of hierarchizing statements, elements of which frame distinctions between “good” and “bad” or “valid” or “invalid” sentences, texts, or discourses. Discourse analysts may try to avoid making direct judgments in these matters; however, the theoretical notions they work with unavoidably make them produce, sometimes implicitly, such hierarchies. On many occasions such judgments are direct, as is the case with many statements about the coherence of specific texts. In fact the entire process of producing academic knowledge can be seen as a game based on assigning a different degree of coherence to texts competing for the status of most authoritative manifestos of a given discipline.

#### **4. Ideologization and Politicization**

There are several other notions commonly used in discourse analysis that can be deconstructed in a similar way. One major example is the role of genre. Genre analysis may be perceived as an area of confrontation between discourse analysis and other fields, in particular politics, the media, and other social sciences. Classification of particular statements in terms of genres often involves direct political controversies and is strongly linked to power relations (e.g., the distinction between news and opinion). This is, first of all, because such categorizations influence the status of particular statements and consequently their effectiveness. As Norman Fairclough has noted, “much actual political text and talk is hybrid with respect to genres, i.e., combines different genres together (...) How one defines and delimits politics is itself a political choice, and it determines how one delimits the genres of politics” (Fairclough 2009b: 293). This seems to be a good example of how tricky the assignment of “political” and “ideological” status to texts can appear. The identification of such traits of texts usually implies their depreciation, particularly in the academic field, because “politicization” and “ideologization” are ordinarily defined as incompatible with academic standards—given the assumption of the autonomous status of the field of science. What is, however, usually ignored in such cases is the arbitrary and usually political nature of the distinction between the fields of politics and the social sciences, or academia in general. It should be also emphasized that a “political” or “ideological” nature can not be assigned independently of the context in which such categorizations are possible. In

other words, to be able to make at least some objective analysis of this kind we have to be aware of the social construction of the border between “political” and “academic” and its relational nature. We also have to be aware of the linkages of debates on an issue to specific configurations of the field of power in a given society. These linkages reflect the positions of the major actors in the field of power that are usually involved in arguments about specific definitions of the political.

The ideal distinction between “bad” politics and “good” academia is strongly linked to another important symbolic divide, namely that between reason and folly or emotionality and rationality. The power-relations aspects of these debates are of course well known, at least since Michel Foucault demonstrated the inner workings of the distinction between madness and rationality and its key role in the reproduction of power relations in contemporary societies. However, in discourse analysis, notions of emotion and emotionality continue to be used without reference to their social nature.

## **5. Rhetorical Structures and Macrostructures**

The rhetorical structures assigned to texts can be shown to have a similar character. Their reconstruction always implies an assessment of the efficiency of texts, that is, their impact on power relations. Thus, argumentation analysis seems to be a highly normative branch of discourse analysis. It also shares the assumption about the cooperative nature of language interaction and marginalizes the dimension of power relations. A good example of such an approach is the so-called pragma-dialectical school of argumentation theory. Its fundamental assumptions include rules of “good discussion,” which allow “fallacies” to be distinguished from “good” arguments (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992). Luigi Pellizzoni (2001) has convincingly demonstrated how the “myth of the best argument,” a notion commonly used in argumentation and deliberation studies, is based on the naturalization of power relations behind communicative interactions.

Another interesting case is the theory of macrostructures developed by Teun van Dijk (1980) and its applications. Reconstruction of macrostructures is by definition a subjective process, which refers to the supposed states of consciousness of readers and may imply changes in the status of an interpreted text. Identification of macrostructures is, at the same time, also conditioned by the social ability to make certain types of interpretations that imply a hierarchization of texts. Although the theory of macro-

structures is strongly embedded in the language of cognitive psychology, it could be argued that the theory should rather be about the social logic of power relations, which conditions a person's ability to perform van Dijk's "macro-operations," including "generalization," "construction," and "deletion." Thus, for example, declaring part of a statement to be irrelevant or deleting or generalizing a larger part of a text in a particular way requires a particular social status, as the impact of such action may change power relations. All these operations produce—as the theory of macrostructures stipulates—representations of texts in the form of abstracts or the topics and themes assigned to them. These representations can in fact be seen as attempts to control texts and maintain their hierarchies. Specific forms of what van Dijk labelled generalization and construction (forms of summarizing and developing stories or exposing their hidden assumptions) are also procedures ruled by socially shared—though sometimes contested—norms which cannot be confined to mental operations. In other words, it can be argued that the macrostructures of texts are as much individual as they are social products.

### **/// Conclusions**

As has been argued in this text, the academic analysis of language is still largely abstracted from the power relations underlying its own function. Discourse analysis will always be involved in games of categorizing texts and other language behaviours—as its analyses automatically imply the assignment of specific value to texts. Discourse analysis has to be seen as implicated in the social network of power relations. Any analysis of a text also implies an involvement in the construction and reproduction of hierarchies of texts, which are part of social hierarchies. Any textual analysis is itself an act of participation in the contest for the highest social status in the global text hierarchy and wider social world. A critical, relational sociology of linguistics can be seen, in this light, as an attempt to reconstruct the hidden aspects of the social and political work of linguists as well as the workings of critical sociology itself. This paper does not aspire to provide an objective and distanced analysis of either. As Pierre Bourdieu suggested, however, one way to reduce one's own subjectivity is through the systematic reconstruction of one's own place in the structure of the social relations in which we are involved—including the logic of social fields, their internal structures, and the dependencies between them. This seems to be one of the most fruitful avenues for the development of a relational critical

discourse analysis, as it is understood in this text. It entails a proposition to analyse the location of all those involved in the academic study of language in their respective fields. It must also involve self-analysis of one's own social position, without which a person risks being fully captured by the dominant hierarchies of power, even if trying to challenge them. A good example of such a process was given by Michael Billig, who noted that CDA is gradually entering the mainstream of linguistic discourse, which makes the sense of "critical" in its name lose its original meaning (Billig 2000). This is another reason why I am calling here for a relational critical discourse analysis, which would have a much more self-critical focus on its own field. In particular, it would need to recognize the social and relational nature of its own tools and realize that their application can hardly be seen as an objective identification of the traits of specific texts and actors. This relational analysis should realize that these concepts are tools of power developed in a framework of specific social relations, whose primary function is the hierarchization of texts, which can be seen as part of a wider mechanism of the reproduction of social relations.

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### /// **Abstract**

This paper proposes a relational and critical sociological perspective on discourse analysis, in particular on so-called “Critical Discourse Analysis” (CDA). The main argument of this paper is that CDA has not yet been able to turn its critical perspective towards its own field. Meanwhile,



neither CDA nor other schools of discourse analysis can still pretend not to be integral parts of the system legitimizing social hierarchies in modern societies. The paper argues that discourse analysis can be seen as highly dependent on power relations, both because of its institutional positioning and because of its restricted reflexivity. A call for the development of a critical sociology of discourse analysis based on a relational approach is therefore presented. Its draft programme is largely based on inspiration from the sociology of knowledge, in particular from “the sociology of sociology” of Pierre Bourdieu.

Keywords:

critical theory, discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociology of linguistics

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**REPORT, COMMENTS  
AND POLEMICS**

# Humanism in an After- Modern Society The Relational Perspective

March 6, 2017

## Program

**11.00-11.30**

*Opening* **Andrzej Waśkiewicz**, Director of the Institute of Sociology,  
University of Warsaw

*Introduction* **Elżbieta Hałas**, University of Warsaw

**11.30-13.00** Lecture I

**Pierpaolo Donati**, University of Bologna

*The Possibility of Humanism After Modernity. The Relational Perspective*

*Commentary* **Michał Federowicz**, Polish Academy of Sciences

*Discussion*

**13.00-13.30** Coffee Break

**13.30-15.00** Lecture II

**Pierpaolo Donati**, University of Bologna

*Human Fulfillment in a Morphogenic Society. Challenges and  
Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint*

*Commentary* **Tadeusz Szawiel**, University of Warsaw

*Discussion*

*Closure*

Relational Sociology Seminar  
Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw  
Karowa 18, room 104

Secretary of the Seminar: Stanisław Krawczyk, [krawczykstanislaw@gmail.com](mailto:krawczykstanislaw@gmail.com)

# HUMANISM IN AN AFTER-MODERN SOCIETY: THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE SEMINAR REPORT

Elżbieta Halas  
Stanisław Krawczyk  
University of Warsaw

The eponymous seminar was held on March 6, 2017 at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw. It gathered participants from several academic and research centres in Poland. For the most part, the seminar consisted of two lectures by Pierpaolo Donati, a longtime professor of the University of Bologna and the founder of the new relational paradigm in contemporary sociology. The lectures—“The Possibility of Humanism After Modernity: The Relational Perspective” and “Human Fulfilment in a Morphogenic Society: Challenges and Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint”—were focused on the humanistic dimension of the relational approach. The topic of the seminar was introduced by Elżbieta Halas and comments were provided by Michał Federowicz, Aleksander Manterys (both from the Polish Academy of Sciences), and Tadeusz Szawiel (from the University of Warsaw). The lectures and comments were followed by a general discussion.

Pierpaolo Donati is perhaps one of the most prominent contemporary thinkers. His scientific output is enormous and impressive: dozens of books written as sole author or co-author, more than fifty edited monographs, and several hundred articles. Pierpaolo Donati’s book *Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale* (1983) has been a seminal work in the orientation known as the Italian relational turn, and his publications in English—such as *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (2011) and *The Relational Subject* (co-authored with Margaret S. Archer, 2015)—have effectively brought this orientation into the world of international scholarship. This is

significant not only for the reconstruction and further development of the social sciences as human sciences, but above all for our efforts to face the problems of our time, which require us to focus on the transformations of social relations and to utilize the relational epistemological perspective offered by the relational theory of society.

The uniqueness of Pierpaolo Donati's creative output lies in the fact that it is a combination of theoretical achievements with extensive empirical research on topics such as family, generations, health, non-governmental organizations, citizenship and, more broadly, the issues of freedom and control amid complex cultural and social processes. His analyses have allowed him to work out new concepts and give new meanings to terms already functioning in the social sciences, e.g., relational goods and relational identity.

Professor Donati has served as president of the Italian Sociological Association and as a member of the board of the International Institute of Sociology. The awards and distinctions he has received include a United Nations Organization acknowledgment, an Honoris Causa Doctorate of the Pontifical Lateran University, and election to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. Founder of the Centre for Social Policy Studies and subsequently the Centre of Studies on Social Innovation at the University of Bologna, Pierpaolo Donati has contributed immensely to the development of the social sciences, and to the understanding of specific social and cultural processes in what he calls the *dopo-moderno*.

### **/// The After-Modern**

The term "dopo-moderno" ("after-modern") differs in meaning from the term "postmodern" introduced by Jean-François Lyotard; the latter has become a designator of the specific cultural changes of our time, accumulating since the 1960s. Unlike the ambiguity of the prefix "post" in terms which have proliferated in discourse on postmodernity, to mention only post-truth and post-memory, the term "after-modern" indicates a complete break of continuity both in regard to modernity and to postmodernity. (In recent years, the term "trans-modern society" has also appeared in Pierpaolo Donati's works.)

Pierpaolo Donati takes a different position as compared to the interpretations that dominated the social theory of such critics of modernity as Alain Touraine, Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck, or Anthony Giddens. He goes beyond the concepts of postmodernity as the climax of modernity

and beyond the concept of the unfinished project of modernity. Thus, the term “after-modern” should not be confused with the term “postmodern” and with Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, since the leitmotif of both is cultural relativity, coupled with the destabilization of social institutions.

Pierpaolo Donati attempts to overcome the limitations of two rigid conceptual frameworks within which interpretations of contemporary changes have been performed: the collectivist and the individualist one. According to the first standpoint, postmodernism manifests itself as the destruction of normativity in society. According to the second, postmodernism is the affirmation of differences and of the culture of expressive, unrestricted individualism.

The concept of the after-modern refers to the new possibilities and alternatives which are revealed when modern cultural and social processes are perceived from a relational perspective.

### **/// Humanistic Sociology in a New Sense**

One feels compelled to ask whether the diagnoses and prognoses formulated by Pierpaolo Donati and summarized in the concept of *dopo-moderno* actually allow us to better understand ongoing processes, and whether the fragmentation of the modern order of institutions and culture is really accompanied by the emergence of new social forms, new networks of solidarity and non-utilitarian social exchanges—in other words, a new culture of relations. Hence, the transformation of social relations is a crucial matter when discussing after-modern relations, which, according to Pierpaolo Donati, should generate relational goods, strengthen relational identities, realize the norm of meta-reflexivity, and refer to values.

A special challenge is associated with the concept of a new cultural model, or a new cultural matrix, and the concept of transcendence in relations. A trans-modern social configuration would have the following five characteristic features:

- the relational character of the person;
- a relationally defined common good;
- a positive dialectic of relational identity;
- an assessment of relations according to their significance and ethical value;
- the distinguishing of every social relation from other relations on the basis of their purpose (Terenzi et al. 2016: 77).

The emergence of such a configuration and semantics of relations is a matter for debate.

Pierpaolo Donati's relational sociology is a humanistic sociology in a new sense of the word. Thus, it necessarily draws the attention of those who have observed the disappearance of humanistic sociology—a sociology to which the so-called interpretative turn has contributed—along with a kind of amputation of the vital problems of culture and values. Polish sociology once used to focus on relations and was distinguished by the humanistic approach in its different variants, to mention only Florian Znaniecki, Stanisław Ossowski and Maria Ossowska, as well as Paweł Rybicki. Interest in the humanistic relational sociology of Pierpaolo Donati may also create a chance for the regeneration of this tradition of Polish sociology.

Pierpaolo Donati proposes a new humanism, or neo-humanism, the assumptions and implications of which deserve thorough consideration and critical debate. At this point, it is necessary to specify the hallmarks of classic humanism. Florian Znaniecki drew an opposition between the humanistic current begun by Renaissance thinkers and the dogmatic scholastic thought, which—as Pierpaolo Donati notes—constituted an important cultural matrix for Western societies. In the modern discussion about reconstructing sociology after postmodernism, criticism is directed against the current of anti-humanism, which expresses itself in the negation of the Cartesian *cogito*, or the self as the centre of consciousness. The new humanistic approaches, including Pierpaolo Donati's relational sociology, postulate a concept of the person as a moral agent and a relational subject. This concept must be proven in analyses of ongoing social and cultural changes as important for reflections on the *dopo-moderno*.

### **/// Leading Ideas of the Lectures**

In his first lecture during the seminar, Pierpaolo Donati discussed the contemporary challenges to traditional European humanism posed in Western culture by the so-called death of the human subject. He observed that due to the processes of modernization, and due to the celebrations of the alleged advent of the post-human and trans-human era, the human person is presently deemed to be too fragile, and thus to be in need of transcendence. Yet in Donati's view, this transcendence should not be sought primarily in the enhancement of individuals, or in the introduction of still new technologies, but in the sphere of interpersonal relationships.

Human beings are exceptional in their relational constitution, which has an internal dimension (the personal body/mind relationship) as well as an external one (the relationships with others and with the world). Only through that particular constitution are we able to exercise the specific causal powers necessary to generate relational goods, such as love or trust. It is this understanding that Donati submitted as a way to comprehend the human capability for transcendence and flourishing, and a way to preserve and renew European humanism.

The second lecture offered an analysis of the good life, human fulfillment, or human happiness, in a morphogenic society (that is to say, a society in which morphogenetic mechanisms—the ones that drive structural change—prevail over morphostatic mechanisms, or the ones that reinforce structural stability). Donati defined happiness in the current fluctuating social conditions as the possibility to enjoy opportunities that present themselves in contingent situations. He distinguished between three main sources of opportunities, which are driven by, respectively, bound, unbound, and relational morphogenesis:

- the “lib/lab” system (the market regulated by the state);
- the anonymous communication matrix (the matrix of new social networks that—while escaping the logic of the lib/lab system—have a chaotic, situational nature and are not oriented toward any moral order);
- the networks working through relational steering (the ones that—in addition to escaping the lib/lab logic—are directly concerned with the goal of achieving a good life).

The first two sources are more likely to generate relational evils than relational goods. It is only the third source that has the potential to create a realist utopia of “the society of the human.”

### **/// In Conclusion: The Problem of the Human in Contemporary Society**

The theoretical articulations, diagnoses, and prognoses offered by Pierpaolo Donati stimulate critical reflection on the sociology of modernity and postmodernity. They are also provocative, but they certainly show that “a sociology worthy of the new millennium” requires reflection on the difference between the human and non-human. Such a sociology also requires a non-trivial approach to the concepts of the “human” and “social,” an approach going beyond the distinction between the “life-world”



and the “social system.” In Pierpaolo Donati’s work, this approach is based on the assumption that “the social is human insofar as and whilst ever it is relational” (2011: 42); in other words, it exists only in relations, as opposed to all that is “non-human.”

The distinction between “human society” and a “society of the human” (in Italian: *società umana* and *società dell’umano*) is an interesting leading idea in the face of the problems experienced by technologically advanced society, in which the human and the social appear to be increasingly separate and divergent. The concept of a “society of the human” means that the “human society” is no longer directly given in active human experience. We might say it no longer contains a humanistic coefficient as given, or rather, to quote Pierpaolo Donati, it “must be produced reflexively, through a new assignment of meaning to the links in the interplay between the human and the non-human—in contradistinction to both ‘animal society’ and ‘technical society’ *inter alia*” (2011: 41).

“The problem of the human” has been just one of the issues raised in seminar lectures and discussions. Fortunately, the meeting has not been the only opportunity for interested scholars to enter into direct conversation with Pierpaolo Donati in Poland. He was also present at an earlier international seminar on relational sociology, which took place in September 2016 at the Warsaw University Library. The seminar in March 2017, therefore, can be considered a further step forward for Polish researchers joining the international movement of relational sociology.

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# THE NORMATIVE SOCIOLOGY OF PIERPAOLO DONATI: A POLEMICAL NOTE ON “THE POSSIBILITY OF HUMANISM AFTER MODERNITY: THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE”

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The text by Donati entitled “The Possibility of Humanism After Modernity: The Relational Perspective” is not purely sociological in nature.<sup>1</sup> It is rather located on the borderline between the disciplines, that is, between a strictly sociological approach to human nature, and philosophical interpretations. These interpretations, as social philosophy, philosophical anthropology, or ethics, not only venture to reflect directly on the essence of mankind and its exceptionality but also to place the answers in a larger metaphysical or ontological context. Therefore, in the first part of the present text, we will first consider some of the sociological problems that Donati’s proposal faces. In the second part, we will scrutinize the broad philosophical context that the proposal attempts to oppose. Certainly, it should be borne in mind that the paper under review is only a minor part of Donati’s enormous intellectual corpus, and merely hints or signals what is clarified and built upon in his work. For the sake of precision and methodological honesty, a thorough assessment of the concept of relational sociology as presented by Donati should then take into account the other

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<sup>1</sup> The text presented at the seminar “Humanism in an After-Modern Society: The Relational Perspective,” University of Warsaw, March 6, 2017, is an enlarged version of the chapter *Transcending the Human: Why, Where, and How?* by Pierpaolo Donati in Ismael Al-Amoudi and Jamie Morgan (eds.), *Ex Machina: Realist Responses to Posthuman Society*, Routledge, 2018.

works in his corpus. Unfortunately, we cannot do justice to his body of works in the space available to us. Briefly, however, we can indicate a few issues which appear not only in the text under review but also in some of Donati's other texts and which raise more or less serious reservations.

Of course, it would be highly unjustified to contend that each sociological theory that aspires to be useful for the study of particular social phenomena should, as a point of departure, recognize the fundamental philosophical dilemmas that such a theory automatically presupposes. In truth, all major scientific revolutions are accompanied by subversions in the paradigms of our reasoning in the remaining domains of culture, including mainly philosophy. However, these two revolutions are to a large extent independent of one another. It is perhaps because the subject matter of sociology is situated on a totally different level of abstraction than the main topic of a purely philosophical theory. It would be in vain to expect a sociologist, before he embarks on his usual empirical investigations, to settle the current philosophical problems; in doing so, he or she would merely risk being entangled by those philosophical issues and not arriving at an empirically relevant theory at all. Nevertheless, it is also impossible to believe that by utterly ignoring these problems, he or she would avoid the risk of discovering what is already well known. Donati would definitely like to avoid both those dangers. Still, the fact that he sets high demands for his theory, both philosophically and sociologically, makes his theoretical proposal vulnerable to a two-fold danger: from a sociological vantage point, the danger is that it will become overly theoretical or ideological; and from the philosophical vantage point, that it will involve a resort to clichés and lack proper philosophical sophistication.

Let us first recall what is at stake here. Donati's purpose is to retrieve the possibility of humanism after modernism has revealed its dehumanizing face. First and foremost, the author strives for a theory that would be grounded upon a deeply humanistic understanding of the essence of the human being and his or her relations with Others. Hence, such a theory would allow people—unlike in the case of dehumanizing theories—to have better self-understanding and consequently, to fulfil their human potential. To attain these goals, Donati must avail himself of philosophical tools; but because he also wants his theory to be principally sociological—that is, to be applicable to empirical investigations and be useful for practical actions—it cannot be overburdened with philosophical speculations.

The text we are commenting on here entitles and provokes the reader to take a stand on both those issues: the philosophical and the sociologi-

cal one. For the sake of the precision of our exposition, the reader should not get confused by these two domains. Rather, he or she should carefully distinguish between the two so that each may be treated as relatively independent of the other. This is the method adopted in the present text. In the philosophical part (II), we shall mainly consider the problems alluded to by the first phrase in the title of Donati's text: "The Possibility of Humanism After Modernity." With this purpose in mind, we will ponder the meaning of the titular humanism and confront it with post- and transhumanism, both of which are invoked by Donati himself. Referring to Martin Heidegger's famous *Letter on "Humanism,"* we will inquire into the source and justifiability of these distinctions as well as into where Donati's conception is located with reference to the former. Yet before we turn our attention to some general problems of a philosophical nature that Donati's conception poses, we will consider his idea from a purely sociological point of view. First, we will study the possibility of the purely empirical application of the concepts constituting Donati's theory and their methodological effectiveness. Then we will also pose a question regarding the theory's normative aspect.

## I

Let us start with enumerating some difficulties that emerge in approaching Donati's theoretical proposal from a purely sociological standpoint. The following question is definitely valid: to what degree is the theory of relational sociology formulated with the intention of providing an epistemic category that would allow for the better recognition and description of social reality *in concreto*, and, on the other hand, to what degree is the theory a postulate that assumes a normative position towards reality or even aspires to shape it to some extent? Donati seems to claim that a type of sociology that keeps its distance from any normativity will be unable to provide us with the analytical tools that are indispensable to cognize social reality. The dilemma between cognizance and shaping reality is not thus trivial and is not reducible to the adherence to one or the other set of values. Thus it is worthwhile to take a closer look at it.

In striving for some sort of answer to the above question, it should readily be noticed that in Donati's theory presented here a purely epistemic aspect merges with the normative one.

Donati's thought can be promptly subsumed under humanistic sociology, in opposition to those theoretical tendencies that assume a lesser or

greater reification of human being. Thus Donati opposes theoretical approaches that describe social reality in ways that, in his view, validate the anti-humanistic mechanisms of modern society. One such conception is, for example, systems theory. It is little wonder, therefore, that in one his first steps, Donati expressly objects to Niklas Luhmann's neo-functionalism, regarding it as a paradigm example of an anti-humanistic epistemic perspective. He confronts it with a sociological theory that involves continuously taking the human person into consideration. In his opinion, the subjectivity of a person is inextricably intertwined with the person's relations with other persons. On the one hand, it is true that a human person, who "comes into existence" only by virtue of the existence of Others and by virtue of relations with them, is never a Self isolated within its own subjectivity and from the world. On the other hand, it does not ensue that these relations thus become a separate entity, detached from given persons, and capable of being represented—as is the case in neo-functional analyses—in complete abstraction from the individuals constituting them. The primordial struggle of humankind to transcend its boundaries (the need for transcendence) is realized in interpersonal relations. Donati consistently emphasizes that people are constituted by their relations with Others, and that through being receptive to another person, we become persons ourselves and that a Subject is inextricably connected with Others. In other words, being in a relation with Others, a Subject creates with them a certain constitutive whole. From a historical point of view there is no doubt that, on the one hand, the so-called modern epoch amplified the process of individuals transcending their limits, simultaneously unleashing ever more possibilities. On the other hand, the said epoch has come, in a sense, to hinder this very process by building increasingly complex social structures, which have somehow started to live their own lives, treating individuals not only as actors but mainly as objects of influence. Therefore, in Donati's opinion, there is a need for such a sociological theory, being humanistic in its message, which would allow for separating the relations being conducive to building a personal subjectivity from those that erode it. This is also the task of the new relational sociology, and the very normative dimension of scholarship, which, according to Donati, no sociology should relinquish for as long as it aspires to keep in close contact with social reality.

Donati's contribution is not solely an exposition of the category of relation—which is after all a ubiquitous category in science and sociology—but also a normative description of the category. In order to even better elucidate the category's theoretical peculiarity, Donati critically as-

esses those research perspectives that in recent years shape the landscape of sociological disputes. First, these are the above-mentioned systemic approaches—common in sociology—that favour a third-person perspective, and thus, *nolens volens*, contribute to the reification of individuals. In the light of these approaches, human being is merely a substratum of the relations generated by large social structures. Putting aside the value of particular individuals and considering their respective relations with others in terms of transpersonal, anonymous, and totalizing social structures contributes to the intensification of the negative (and hence dehumanizing) tendencies of the modern world. Second, Donati mentions those theories that—while being opposed to the above-mentioned dehumanizing approach—merely emphasize the first-person perspective, which consequently favours another negative tendency of the modern world—its extreme individualism and subjectivism. In the light of the latter, humans are isolated beings and their relations with other individuals are simply contingent and instrumental in nature. Criticisms of both systemic thinking and of theories granting primacy to human individuality constitute the negative account of the relational sociology proposed by Donati. At the core of this theory is a thesis on the relationality that constitutes a human person, and this very concept of relationality determines the content of the remaining conceptual categories. Without them, a proper approach to social reality and its creation (morphogenesis) would be impossible.

One of the central categories put forward by Donati is the concept of relational goods, which emphasizes the significance of the relation itself. A relational good not only stems from the relation but can also exclusively be experienced with a person or persons in relation with whom the very relational good emerges. A relational good is indivisible; it is not an aggregate of individual goods and cannot be experienced by a single Subject. Because it is obvious that not every social relation leads to a relational good, the latter has its own counterpart in the form of a relational evil. Through the perspective of “You” and through the experience of a relational good or evil, the category emerges of “We” and of the relation between “Us,” and thus the very essence of the existence of a society. In Donati’s theory, a person participating in creating and experiencing a relational good obtains in exactly this manner the opportunity to transcend his or her boundaries, that is, such persons transcend themselves. Furthermore, this is what humanism is all about and at the same time experiencing a relative good is a mechanism in which multifarious social forms (structures) transform themselves. The normativity of doing sociology involves creating concep-



tual categories that allow for checking whether given social relations enable the said transcendence and thus either add to the possibility of the development of humanism or rather stymie it. In other words, everything boils down to the question of whether they strengthen the subjectivity of a person (let him or her flourish) or weaken it. What is more, the question is whether they overcome or perpetuate the negative repercussions of modernity. In Donati's view, sociological theories that keep a distance from normativity conceived of in these terms are unable to recognize the mechanisms by which societies emerge and transform.

The argument formulated above is convincing insofar as a relational good and the emergence of the category "We" stemming therefrom is empirically verifiable. This possibility emerges especially on the micro-social scale, as opposed to macro-social relations, which are much less illuminated. Donati pays far more attention to those micro-social relations. However, it is in the possibility of reconciling micro- and macro-social analyses that a serious misgiving arises. Namely, it is unclear by virtue of what set of concepts the constitutive unity of a person and his or her relations with Others is to be considered in macro-social analyses, which—as is known—are key to doing sociology and to cognizing social reality. In the text under analysis it is difficult to pinpoint any argument demonstrating a shift from reasoning on the micro-social level to higher ones. We will address this weakness shortly; now we should note an important point regarding the analysis of social networks included in this criticism of "relationist" theories.

Extensive critiques of the systemic approaches—usually functionalist—at some point gave rise to the hope that what could be created instead was not a system but a descriptively adequate approach to social reality. The answer was supposed to be the concept of social networks. In this context, it is worthwhile to note Donati's distinction between the relational approach (under which his theory is subsumed itself) and relationist ones (e.g., network theory). As opposed to the former, the latter does not regard human persons (nor their relations with other persons) as equally important shapers of social reality. In relationist approaches, a person is rather conceived of as "made up of social relations" (Donati 2017b: 18). Thus, a human person is again deprived of subjectivity and what is favoured instead is the reification of the person. Relationist theories regard social processes, instead of human persons, as the driving forces generating relations. By contrast, in his relational sociology, Donati underlines the importance of a human person's reflectivity, which must accompany rela-

tions to endow them with this driving force and at the same time to enable individuals to transcend themselves (and their respective limits). From this vantage point, it is worth noting Donati's critique of the inadequacies of constructivism. As opposed to constructivism, relational sociology, in its quest for conceptual categories that would allow for pinpointing and describing real constraints in constructing social reality, assumes, on the one hand, a person's reflective relationality (anchored in morality, among other things), and on the other hand, the inevitability of an external reference to a "transcendental cultural matrix."

This last category, which—apart from a relational good—seems to be one of the most important concepts in Donati's theory, gives rise to serious doubts. The murky status of the "transcendental cultural matrix" is an obstacle to finding a connection between the micro- and the macro-social level. Moreover, interpretation of the text is not facilitated by a certain confusion between the meaning of transcendence and transcendental-ity (which will be more extensively addressed in the second part of this article). In Donati's text, there is no single, consistently applied concept with a clear meaning; instead, we find a whole array of derivative expressions whose meaning is—as we can guess—synonymous or nearly synonymous. Thus we encounter, for instance, "cultural matrix," "symbolic code," "transcendent symbolic matrix," "transcendental matrix," "transcendental principle," "transcendental sense," and even "transcendental reality" and "transcendental realities." At the beginning of his exposition, Donati states that "By 'transcendental matrix' I do not mean the dogmatic beliefs of a specific religious faith, but the symbolic code underlying every great culture or civilization concerned with ultimate realities. It is a matter of fact that any science does refer to some kind of transcendental matrix, although very often in an unwitting or unspoken way" (Donati 2017b: 10). This expression would be fully satisfactory if it were applied in successive parts of the text consistently. Indeed, Donati does rightly require sociological theories clearly to specify which "cultural code" they refer to while constructing their analytical tools. However, in apposition to the expression referred to, instead of some explanation, what we get is another category, whose meaning we can only conjecture: "All sociologies have a cultural matrix that depends on a 'mother-matrix' where ultimate realities are placed"(Donati 2017b: 10). Quite as before, the status of this "mother-matrix" is unclear. The procession of vagueness goes even further: "The recognition of the dignity of every entity (in Latin the word *dignus* means 'a thing or a person deserving respect for its qualities') marks

the boundary between what I call ‘immanent transcendence’ (as a product of society) and ‘transcendent transcendence’ (as a reality which is not the product of society)” (Donati 2017b: 11). So what appears—and now continues to accompany the reader—is a dual doubt. First, is the category of “cultural matrix,” and concepts akin to it, created by people (or society), or is this “transcendental reality” supposed to describe something to which people have only limited access and therefore cannot influence? Second of all, does “cultural matrix” refer to a real entity or is it rather an epistemic category specifying a research perspective adopted in a given sociological theory. These doubts continue to haunt the reader throughout the text. The following explanatory note is also of little help: “In summary, the problem is the following: whether or not it is necessary—if not, why, and if so, what is it—to have a symbolic matrix that allows us to face the enigma of the relation in such a way that it is possible to see how and why human relations and transcendental relations are ontologically connected to each other” (Donati 2017b: 11). Furthermore, the “enigma of the relation” permeates the entire text not so much as a strictly sociological category but as a signal that the author means something that is barely expressible in words, at least within scholarly discourse, or the realm of philosophy—something that could most readily be explained in poetry. Still, Donati attempts an explanation by introducing another conceptual category, that is the concept of “vital relations,” which in turn makes reference to another obscure expression, that is, to the “transcendental order of reality.” Donati writes:

What brings together the first and second causes is what I call the “vital relation,” which is both human and social (i.e., which relates the human and the social to each other) by appealing to a transcendental order of reality. It “stands outside” of terms that it gathers, with its own qualities and causal powers. The vital relation is the relationship outside a human person that is necessary to herself in order to be reflexive in herself on herself, so that she can tell herself to be herself, on the basis of distinctions with what is not (Donati 2017b: 19–20).

The fact that Donati’s text does not fully elucidate the concept of “cultural matrix” causes the text to lack a proper point of departure to construct successive sociological concepts, which would, on the one hand, take into consideration Donati’s determinations in the sphere of the essence of the human person and sociological micro-relations, and on the other hand, would describe phenomena on a macro-sociological level, which are—after all—largely responsible for the dehumanizing tendencies present in our modern world. Such a missing link could be, for example, social

institutions which, although they constitute “matrices of sense” independent of individual actors, are continuously negotiated in dozens of social relations and are ultimately transformed as more social experience accrues. We construe the incompleteness of such concepts as “transcendental cultural/symbolic matrix” and “vital relations” as an implicit belief that the relations between people cannot be treated as a being per se—to which, incidentally, Donati strongly objects and which is the reason for his sharp criticism of approaches reifying the human person. As convincing as this last thought may be, the emphasis put upon the “transcendental” nature of such entities as “transcendental order of reality” has its cost, which consists in losing the possibility of creating constructs that would be sociologically clear, that is, empirically verifiable. A relevant example is the view of a relational good that would allow us to describe social relations in empirical terms, simultaneously making explicit references to the macro-sociological level and endorsing relational analyses of larger social forms/structures without diminishing the sense of subjectivity of the human person. In another lecture,<sup>2</sup> Donati demonstrates the role of large social forms when it comes to creating various kinds of opportunities. These relations between macro and micro levels and the study thereof are nothing new in sociology as such. Yet, in relational sociology what would be meant thereby is something else: having adopted Donati’s conception of the human person and the role that relations play therein, sociological conceptual categories could be produced that would reveal the mechanisms of subjectively transforming macro-social structures. A concept of cultural matrices could thus be constructed (but not transcendental ones, which are conceived of unequivocally as the product of people, while being at the same time transformed by people themselves). However, what would also be at stake is a wide array of other concepts referring to different levels of organizing social life and its various aspects. The above-mentioned social institutions, coupled with their formal and informal aspects, would be proper examples here. These sorts of concepts could be useful in studying the mechanisms of social change and the transformations of large social forms in which people, on the one hand, experience significant constraints in constructing social reality—as was rightly underlined by Donati himself—and on the other hand, have some room for subjectively transcending their limits. To regard

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<sup>2</sup> The text “Human Fulfillment in a Morphogenic Society: Challenges and Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint” presented at the seminar “Humanism in an After-Modern Society: The Relational Perspective,” University of Warsaw, March 6, 2017 is an enlarged version of *What Does a ‘Good Life’ Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology*, by Pierpaolo Donati in: Margaret S. Archer (ed.), *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, Springer, 2017.

such categories as the business enterprise, the association, or even the state as social networks does not seem sufficient to grasp their dynamics while taking into account the subjective role of the actors entangled in them. Resorting to the constitutive role of “social molecules” (Donati 2017b: 23) is important, but this is not a concept that would illuminate the mechanisms connecting micro- and macro-social dynamisms. In the present variation of the text, what emerges is perhaps an unintended impression that the subjectivity of a person is mainly or exclusively realized in micro-social relations, that is, on the basis of personalized relations (e.g., “significant others”), and when we abstract from these, what remains for a person is the resort to an underspecified “transcendental reality” situated somehow beyond social control.

In the final parts of the text, Donati poses the question, “When can a social form be called human?” (Donati 2017b: 22). It is exactly at this moment that what could be offered are the sociological concepts with which the macro-social part of relational sociology is more conspicuously furnished. Instead, what we encounter is another vital statement returning us to the question posed at the beginning of this part of our text, that is, to what extent does relational sociology provide us with epistemic categories applicable to studying reality, and to what extent is relational sociology formulated from the position of a desired end-state and thus becomes a postulate itself? As we stated above, epistemic and normative threads are indistinguishably blended there. It can be conjectured that this manoeuvre is deliberate and is aimed at overcoming those consequences of modernization that should be evaluated—on the grounds of a rational theory—as evil or harmful, which means dehumanizing and eroding social relations. Donati formulates a sort of credo:

The most hidden reality of human life can mature as such only if it passes through appropriate social forms, that is, relationally valid to generate and express the humus of the human flourish, that is, the relationality of the good life. A social formation can be called human to the extent that the nature of its internal as well as external relationality is qualified by the recognition and satisfaction of basic human needs and nourishes people’s reflexivity in order to help them to realize their ethical ultimate concerns as a way of transcending human limitations (Donati 2017b: 22).

As we already mentioned, according to Donati, in constructing theories sociology should pay attention to whether the analytical tools the theory provides allow us “to read the signs of the new historical dynamics” (Donati 2017b: 15). Donati constructs his theory while exposing the importance of relations for the constitution of human persons because that is the way he construes “basic human needs,” and in particular the need to realize the “ethical ultimate concerns” by which a person is driven. Such an interpretation of social reality entitles him to place his sociological theory above the need to make evaluative judgments as to which social structure is good and which is bad. He labels his theory a “concrete utopia,” that is, one that is empirically grounded, as opposed to the “abstract utopias” that are sometimes formulated. This “concrete utopia” probably aspires to change the world, and what it definitely aspires to do is to recover the social bonds that are the essence of a human being. For this goal to be attained, some analytical categories are needed—the categories making researchers sensitive to the needs cherished by people, including ethical needs.

## II

The doubts that Donati’s theoretical proposal raises from a purely sociological standpoint are augmented when its philosophical and cultural context is taken into consideration. We shall now try to supplement the problems of a strictly sociological nature presented above with critical reflections on Donati’s proposal, while bearing in mind its broad context, which according to Donati himself should be remembered in assessing its truth and propriety. On our part, it is not an act of usurpation at all that we situate a given proposal for a sociological theory in such a broad background. Donati himself claims that this should be the case. The very title of his text—“The Possibility of Humanism After Modernity”—leaves us with no delusions as to what is at stake here. In the light of the above remarks, it seems quite justified to maintain that Donati’s theory does not constitute such a radical turning point in sociology as it would be if it were willing to live up to its own revolutionary declarations and make a breakthrough in thinking about human and society.

What serves as a common denominator of the first and the second part is a remark Donati recalls about thinking in terms of utopia and the significance of the category of “opportunities.” From the historical point of view, it is obvious that both the category of “utopia” and the accompanying category of “opportunities” are very deeply anchored in the way of

thinking representative of the modern age. Whereas in medieval thought, it was rather “necessity” that was the category of existence that determined people’s view of themselves and the world, with the rise of the modern age it was the category of “possibility” that gained the advantage. The latter category perfectly corresponds with the other categories typical of modernity: with the concept of novelty, liberty, subjectivity, creativeness, labour, development, imagination, etc. From Donati’s proposal, it can be inferred that in the postulated epoch of “after-modernity,” people should still move within a wide range of options but should pay more attention to their subjectivity, the basis of which is interpersonal relations. However, this implies that what we are dealing with here is a sort of paradox which involves overcoming the negative consequences—in Donati’s estimation—of the Enlightenment paradigm, on the grounds of this very paradigm. Can an attempt be made to replace the negative consequences of certain tendencies of modernity by its positive attributes? Or, to the contrary, is it not the case that in repudiating the negative tendencies of modernity, the same must unfortunately be done to the positive ones because both constitute two sides of the same coin? How can a solution be found to the dilemmas of the contemporary world (modern, postmodern, and after-modern) by relying on the same model of understanding humanity that, on the one hand, offered subjectivity to the individual, and, on the other hand, caused this very subjectivity to be more and more threatened?

Donati’s general strategy of combining strictly sociological considerations with a philosophical approach should come as no surprise. All revolutions—irrespective of whether they pertain to science, politics, economics, social life, religion, or the arts—are always realized on a borderline, where a given discipline borders the philosophical reflections corresponding to it, and these philosophical reflections set the so-called conceptual primes of the discipline. The said primary concepts frame something resembling a Kuhnian paradigm. At this point, Donati speaks of a transcendental pattern (matrix), which as a cultural code delineates the ways human persons cognize their environment and themselves. This code shapes a given representation of the world. From the viewpoint of philosophy, it can be said that these concepts specify certain characteristic modes of the existence of things, with which the said disciplines deal. Due to the conceptual primes, a given discipline is assured a reference to a given stretch of the world which that discipline “appropriates.” For a revolution to take place, even the most spectacular idea, plan, or discovery in a given field will prove insufficient as long it does not give rise—through philosophical investiga-

tions—to a redefinition of primary concepts. However, the change in the content of those concepts is very difficult because they have a multi-layered structure and come from a historical stock of meanings which, as history proceeds, settles how the mode of existence of a given domain is understood. Revolution does not just involve attaching a new layer of sense to the existing ones, but rather their destruction or deconstruction. The latter is about questioning, unleashing, and making variations on the existing senses. Thus if determinations in a given domain are to be revolutionary in nature, the domain's primary concepts must be called in question. This usually materializes in a two-fold manner: “bottom-up” or “top-down.” A bottom-up revolution takes place when some discovery or change in historical reality induces us to pose new philosophical questions; a top-down revolution, on the other hand, takes place when, anticipating some turmoil in the abyss of Being, philosophy opens up previously unknown horizons wherein things acquire surprising new facets. And it is precisely these that are grasped by scientists or people of action in making major discoveries or, respectively, introducing spectacular changes to reality.

Going to back to Donati, who in his new theory strives for the highest goals of both a theoretical and a practical nature, it must be said that a revolution in sociology and *a fortiori* in the realm of social life can materialize only when empirical and purely theoretical investigations are accompanied *ante aut post* with intense philosophical reflection concerning such primary concepts as human being, society, interpersonal relations, personhood, happiness, liberty, value, culture, etc.

And indeed, this is where the great value of Donati's work lies—that in wanting to present his idea about a new approach to sociological issues, Donati does not evade taking up philosophical motives or investigations. However, it is exactly this realm of reflections—as can easily be guessed—where the biggest dangers threatening the entirety of his conception loom.

Let us start by reminding our readers of the general philosophical and cultural background against which Donati launches his reflections. What is meant is humanism and the latest attempts to overcome it, that is, post- and transhumanism: in the face of all the variations upon “the death of man” and the belief that humankind is weak, frail, and imperfect, humankind struggles—by developing high-tech technologies—to transcend its limits and create a new species of human—a trans- or superhuman. This idea is called transhumanism; in the last decades of the twentieth century, it resonated among philosophers, scientists, politicians, and pop-culture artists.



Sometimes, while enumerating the sources of inspiration for such a view of the human person and its transformation, Nietzsche's thought is adduced. Enlightenment sources—in which individuals, freed from God's help and violence, must single-handedly transcend their limits to attain on Earth what was earlier expected only in heaven—are also indicated. The perfectly full array of human possibilities and happiness remains the ultimate end here and in heaven alike—what changes are only the means of reaching it. Salvation through grace is thus replaced by human self-perfection armed with reason and technological means, with humans owing whatever they have to God or to the evolution of their own cunning and skill. The epoch in which humankind gradually becomes aware of its own autonomy and creative potential is called modernity (the peak is the Enlightenment period). As the name suggests, it is a time of looking forward and creating what is new. The future, creativity, liberty, the transcendence of boundaries, modernity, labour, imagination—these are only some of the categories that might be used to describe this turbulent epoch. The strenuous and irrepressible struggle for something that is not out there yet but that seems, from today and tomorrow's viewpoint, better and more efficient finally makes the very impulse to struggle itself into a constraining factor that must be overcome. Revolution eats its children. Modernism becomes a burden and a limitation, from which it must free itself. Humankind must step further and transcend modernism, because going back is not feasible and the call to transcend and move forward is principally modernist in nature—what one is left with is a sort of trans-modernism, postmodernism, or finally after-modernism. In each case, the call to transcend human limits remains in effect. Human being is something that shall be overcome (Nietzsche).

In his short exposition of the philosophical and cultural background, Donati seems to miss one crucial thing. He does not properly and consistently distinguish between what is referred to as transhumanism and what is labelled post-humanism. This is indubitably not merely a verbal problem, although it is the case that both names often function as synonyms. However, attention should be drawn to the essential substantive difference between the two. It is certainly possible, without much qualification, to approve of what Donati understands by transhumanism or post-humanism. However, in adopting such an approach, we would miss something of importance, something that does not allow us to fully appreciate the position of Donati himself. What Donati calls post-humanism is still subsumed under a broadly construed transhumanism—as he concedes himself, after

all. From this perspective, his own position seems to him to be radically different. Still, from the position of properly understood post-humanism (which we shall scrutinize shortly) even his position should be classified as transhumanism. In regard to the difference between transhumanism and post-humanism, we posit that we are confronted with two radically different ways of understanding humankind and reality.

The idea of transhumanism is relatively well known and there is little point in elaborating upon it any further. Let us just say that although the idea seems to be relatively new, its understanding of humankind is derived from the ancient description of human being's essence as a rational animal.

Throughout history, human person's essence, thus understood, was explained in manifold ways: human being is an animal, which is and wants to be more than a mere animal; they are a combination of body and soul, a combination of what is earthly and divine; they are the only entity deprived of any lasting and ready-made essence; they are a being-in-itself and a being-for-itself; they are what they are not or are not what they are; they are an existence which precedes essence, etc. Due to his ambivalent nature, human being incessantly struggles for something, is an open being transcending itself, stepping out of itself; they are a being in transition, in movement, in the process of change. The consequence of this dynamic human nature is history and technological progress. The latter allows human being to transform not only his environment but also his body, which, when combined with new technologies, gradually overcomes its natural limitations. By dint of new materials and technologies, human person is able to lastingly and organically connect his body with instruments. The ultimate goal is to connect his body—especially his brain—with a machine (a computer or virtual reality) in such a way as to provide him with full transcendence and allow him to become an almighty god (Adamski 2012; Ilnicki 2011).

Due to the above, it can be said with a small hint of exaggeration that any humanism somehow entails transhumanism *ex hypothesi*. Because human being is what permanently transcends itself, reflecting upon and protecting its nature—which is what is normally referred to as humanism—human being must be ceaselessly renewed and transcended. Hence, humanism as trans- and neo-humanism is strictly related with metaphysics, which—by analogy to human being's self-understanding—is founded upon the idea of transcending (*meta*) any being (*physis*) by what is called its basis, condition, ultimate cause, and what is associated with some primordial principle (*arche*) or with God, etc.

Confusing transhumanism with post-humanism is a misunderstanding because the latter constitutes a critique of the fundamental philosophical principles of the former—or more broadly, of humanism as such and of the metaphysics connected with it. Whereas transhumanism is an attempt to infer ultimate positive consequences from the above-mentioned understanding of human being, as well as being an attempt to “ultimately think over” the traditional European metaphysical conception of human person, post-humanism is an attempt to deconstruct the former, to overcome it (*Überwindung*)—not, however, in the sense of transcending and “going further,” which would render it much like transhumanism and humanism, but rather in the sense of twisting it (*Verwindung*). The philosophical assumptions of post-humanism were provided by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Its ideological successors mainly belong to metaphysics elaborated from the position of phenomenology (this metaphysics found its most creative representatives in France in the twentieth century). To learn what post-humanism is, it is best to study Heidegger’s famous *Letter on “Humanism,”* in which—without specifying his own position towards post-humanism—the author presents the ideas representative of this intellectual formation. The fact that neither Heidegger nor the adherents of Heidegger’s approach explicitly call their positions post-humanism is not an act of negligence on their part; it is rather a deliberate strategy aimed at emphasizing their radically different position towards transhumanism and humanism, and hence towards metaphysics as such, which, as is well known, relishes the creation of new “isms.” However, because their thought to a large extent concerns humankind, whose nature is at stake in this philosophical-historical battle and is therefore principally of a humanistic, rather than naturalistic or theological, nature, it can be labelled “humanistic” or post-humanistic reflection, which means that it not only studies humankind as such but also cares about humankind (and its *humanitas*) as such. What is its main message?

The point of departure is the thought that “any humanism is based on metaphysics or else it makes itself a basis of metaphysics” (Heidegger 2004: 321, transl. M.F., D.S.).<sup>3</sup> Metaphysics here is construed broadly as a reflection on the essence of Being and embraces ontology, a discipline which is usually distinct from it. The idea of humanism being founded upon metaphysics expresses in other words the same contention as the one we signalled at the very beginning of our considerations while speaking about the connection between different domains of reality and philosophy’s de-

<sup>3</sup> In the original text: „Jeder Humanismus gründet entweder in einer Metaphysik oder er macht sich selbst zum Grund einer solchen.”

scription thereof (primary concepts). In this connection, Donati speaks of a transcendental pattern. Human being and the human community can not be pondered without raising, *nolens volens*, metaphysical issues. Especially at present, when the essence of human person is associated with things, and when he or she is treated as one of those things (transhumanism, actor-network theory etc.), what is required is a deeper reflection upon human person and other beings. On making some preliminary determinations in this field, it is visible—says Heidegger—that “the highest determinations of the essence of the human being in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of the human being” (ibid.: 330).<sup>4</sup> And this is the case because they are clearly alien to the explicitly posed question about Being (*Sein*). Metaphysics asks only about what is out there (the things in existence) (*Seindes*), and so about these or those things, and is not concerned with questions that attempt to get to the sense and truth of Being itself. Because it does not ask about Being, it unwittingly treats Being as a lasting substance, or as presence (*Anwesenheit, Gegenwärtigkeit, Vorhandenheit*), and as the highest cause and foundation. From the perspective of existence thus conceived (*Seindes*), which—as metaphysics—creates the history of European culture, what is determined is the leading understanding of human being as *animal rationale* and particular modes of human existence. In Nietzsche’s thought, which laid the ideological foundation for contemporary times, this sort of thinking reaches its final stage, after which either the same pattern will recur *ad infinitum*—which is referred to as technological, civilizational, and social, etc., advancement—or a change in the social order will come from the middle of nowhere. In Heidegger’s opinion, man understood from the perspective of metaphysics is unable fully to be what he is because the said understanding of man casts a shadow on his proper essence, which lies in his existence, connected with the clearing (*Lichtung*) of *Seindes*. Still, this way of thinking cannot be modified just like that, without any reflection upon the basic thread of metaphysics, which is existence and its history. Hence the *humanitas* proper to man can only be specified and man’s dignity protected when it becomes possible to overcome the metaphysics-derived conception of existence as a lasting presence. Not only the understanding of man as an *animal rationale* ensues from this conception, but also everything else connected therewith: the concept of liberty, ethics, value, subjectivity, community, family, state, society, instruments, technique, God, science, and art. This overcoming will not, however, materialize through

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<sup>4</sup> In the original text: „Vielmehr ist der einzige Gedanke der, dass die höchsten humanistischen Bestimmungen des Wesen des Menschen die eigentliche Würde des Menschen noch nicht erfahren.“

the creation of new philosophical systems or scientific theories—this sort of theoretical attention is a way of thinking that is entangled in the categories of presence.

How does Donati's idea of relational sociology look from this post-humanistic perspective? How does Donati conceive of humankind as such? Donati here invokes the nature of humankind as being unique relative to the rest of being, and lying in its intersubjective relations. That is why, in his opinion, it is erroneous both to conceive of humankind as a derivative of relations and system (the third-person perspective) and as subjectivity closed within itself (the first-person perspective). To approach the nature of humankind properly, a second-person perspective should rather be invoked. Forming a relation with "You," a human person creates relational values (good and evil), which intensify the dynamism of his or her growth *qua* person. Humankind is after all an entity that permanently transcends itself, from what is toward what can be, between being and non-being—and it does this best in interpersonal relations. This understanding of humankind is founded upon the traditional metaphysical thesis that

at the beginning (of any creation, not only of the original creation) there is not a bottomless depth, but a Being ever able to transcend itself by relating himself to the Non-Being. It is in this process of transcendence (emergence) that being and non-being are related, while no one of them can exist per se in absolute isolation. The very nature of creation would then consist in a relation that brings into existence what does not exist through a process of emergence (Donati 2017b: 9).

The general assumption is that substances and relations are principles of social life that are of equivalent importance. Construing human being as a relational entity, as suggested by Donati (internally, this is a body–soul relation, whereas externally, it is human person–environment), with this entity emerging in the creative process of transcendence from being to non-being, is—contrary to its revolutionary aspirations—unfortunately yet another form of metaphysical thinking of human being as *animal rationale*, that is, as an entity which transcends (and it must do so) its existence towards what is not but could be out there. And the question whether the above is endorsed by being-in-a-relation towards other people or creating relational goods, or by something else, is of merely secondary importance. The way Donati understands the very concept of transcendence as a meta-

level of reality is indubitably entangled in a metaphysical-theological framework of thinking. Apart from that, two more things seem to raise doubts.

First, Donati does not seem to distinguish what is transcendent from what is transcendental. And these constitute two radically different categories, whose confusion should be avoided at any cost. The modern distinction between the two was formulated by Kant himself. In medieval thought, a transcendental character was assigned to what we somehow always presuppose whenever we think of something existing: be it *ens, res, unum, verum, or bonus*. In Kant's thought, "the transcendental" also refers to something which is conceptually prior (*prius*) to our epistemic grasp of objects. Yet Kant narrows his investigation to the understanding of objects that is possible a priori (pure natural science or mathematics). What are studied in transcendental cognition are the necessary essential concepts and ideas of pure reason, by virtue of which the prior-to-experience world of objects and the knowledge thereof are constituted. By contrast, the concept of "transcendent" refers to beings that lie beyond the capacity of our experience (such as God, the soul, or the beginning of the universe). In other words, what is "transcendental" is cognition or understanding and what is prior to and constitutes our conceptualization of the world of objects; what is transcendent, on the other hand, are objects: objects of our perception as related to that very perception or such being that lies outside the capacity of any cognizance (Kant 1974: 63; Höffe 1994: 47ff).

Second, while remaining true to the metaphysical perspective, Donati does not reach any ground-breaking conclusions. Does not the thesis that human being is and becomes human person only in relations to other people—to which relations, human being is, however, not reducible—seem utterly trivial from the viewpoint of social philosophy? Does the other thesis not permeate the entire edifice of social theology—the thesis positing that for a person to become a person in relation to other people, he or she needs to refer to a transcendent being (God?), which endows these relations with a hint of something "necessary" and "good"? Does that mean that the mystery of a relation to other people and to God consists in its relationality? The contention that "at the beginning there was a relation" and that human being is a relational entity presupposes some ontology, and further, metaphysics of relation.

It is known that thinking in terms of relations is very old, derived from as early a thinker as Plato himself; it is the framework that was theologically supported in Judeo-Christian tradition, and it became a primary ontological category together with neo-Kantism and the philosophy of science.

In Heidegger's thought as well, the concept plays a vital role. After all, he points out that man as *Dasein* is essentially a being-towards, which assumes different forms, such as, say, being-in-the-world, being-towards-death and also being-with-others and being-others-related. So if sociology is assumed to be the science of studying different forms of being together (*Mitsein*), to speak of "relational sociology" is as pleonastic as it is vacuous. Heidegger says that "Relation is a formal definition which can be directly read off by way of 'formalization' from every kind of context, whatever its subject matter or way of being" (Heidegger 2004: 77, par. 17).<sup>5</sup> Hence there is a need for further specification. If such a specification is missing in speaking of a relation, what is being spoken about is virtually everything and nothing.

Due to the above, Donati's call for the redefinition of primary concepts (the transcendental matrix) in such a way that they should serve to better elucidate and build social relations seems, albeit justifiable, impossible to realize while sticking to the traditional metaphysical framework. We concur with Donati that personal relations are full of paradoxes and that is why one must learn to think paradoxically, but it is not possible from the word "go." Donati's project fits a certain tradition of "humanistic" thinking which was common in the twentieth century and which, based on a negative assessment of contemporary times (untamed technological advancements, the virtualization of reality, vanishing interpersonal relations, etc.), tries to search for a solution by re-establishing intentionally or not—certain ideas representative of Christian culture. Then, one readily starts to refer to such ideas as caring about people, the ecology, humanism, neo-humanism, etc. without realizing that the suggested solution actually belongs to the same movement (the metaphysics of presence) that one is apparently opposing.

### /// Conclusion

There is no doubt that Donati's theoretical proposal constitutes an important point on the map of contemporary sociological disputes. The call for humans to recover their well-deserved dignity, coupled with an emphasis on the value of interpersonal relations, necessarily arouses respect and approval in modern society, which is after all inclined toward collectivism and individualism. There is a need for a middle-of-the-road position that

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<sup>5</sup> In the original text: „Beziehung ist eine formale Bestimmung, die auf dem Wege der 'Formalisierung' an jeder Art von Zusammenhängen jeglicher Sachhaltigkeit und Seinsweise direkt ablesbar wird.”

would overcome the difficulties of systemic thinking on the one hand, and on the other, extreme anarchy-like individualism and relativism. The theoretical and world-view-related foundations of both these positions were formed at the turn of modernity, and that is why what is true is that by questioning modernity's leading paradigms and transcending them, it will be possible—both from the theoretical and practical point of view—to remedy modern society. The question remains open: can this be done by dint of one loud, ground-breaking move or is what is needed rather a revolution by small steps and at a slow pace, after which what is true will remain. Judging both from the substantive perspective and on the basis of the sort of optimistic mood which usually accompanies its announcement, it seems that Donati's proposal rather inclines to the former option. However, in postulating the necessity of overcoming limitations, stepping beyond them and transcending them, creating utopias, building new roads for development, searching for new opportunities, etc., Donati's proposal thereby confirms that it is a true successor of modernity, and thus a hostage to both its positive and negative philosophical, world-view-related, and cultural assumptions.

Revolutions in sociology take place when advanced empirical investigations are accompanied with intense philosophical reflection, with the latter being courageous enough to be confronted with the most important ideas of the European tradition. In other words, relational sociology should be supplemented with a greater awareness of theoretical and historical interdependencies. For example, in the case of relational sociology, the most important idea is relation. If one contends that it is exactly this category that can overcome the limitations of contemporary intellectual and cultural formations, one should embark upon its historical (de)construction, that is, one should unravel its hidden senses, which have accrued throughout history, and confront them with the "thing itself." In the process of deconstruction two scenarios are possible: it will either transpire that the original intuition of the concept is right on the mark and that actually, after investigation, this very concept, freed from metaphysical connotations, will turn out to be useful in building a new paradigm for considering humankind and its environment, or else the investigation will demonstrate that the concept is so strictly and inextricably connected with the most fundamental metaphysical categories that using it to build a new research perspective will be impossible without resort to other concepts representative of metaphysics—and these concepts are no longer (or perhaps never were) compatible not only with a bygone epoch and its primary metaphysi-



cal experience but, first and foremost, with the metaphysical requirements of contemporary times. There is some fear that in-depth investigations into the history of the notion of relation will make the second scenario more likely.

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# COMMENTARY ON PIERPAOLO DONATI'S "WHAT DOES A 'GOOD LIFE' MEAN IN A MORPHOGENIC SOCIETY? THE VIEWPOINT OF RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY"

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One of the important innovations in Donati's analysis is his introduction of the category of opportunity.<sup>1</sup> The novelty does not reside solely in the employment of the term, but specifically in its exaltation to a key concept. As an analogy—not necessarily within the horizon of Donati's social theory—one can mention, for example, Peter M. Blau (1994), whose macrostructural theory attempts to define opportunities ascribed to social positions that, like Durkheim's (1964a [1895]) constraint, correspond to chances/probabilities of forming specific associations, i.e., relations between actors and their environment. Parsons (1968 [1937], 1951, 1960, 1977, 1978), like Donati, had a similar way of thinking: from the first scheme of the actor-in-a-situation, defining a voluntarily constrained ego, through pattern variables seen as tools characterizing the set of possible categorizations of human actions or the choices from a wide variety of structural and cultural possibilities, to a systemic interpretation presenting the interpenetration of the universe's various components, which from the actors' viewpoint create strings of legitimized goals and the means of their acquisition.

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<sup>1</sup> The text "Human Fulfillment in a Morphogenic Society: Challenges and Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint" presented at the seminar "Humanism in an After-Modern Society: The Relational Perspective," University of Warsaw, March 6, 2017 is an enlarged version of *What Does a 'Good Life' Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology*, by Pierpaolo Donati in: Margaret S. Archer (ed.), *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, Springer, 2017.

Theoretical interpretations are not as essential as certain modes of thinking, or more precisely, as an attempt to address these complexes of actors' orientations that cannot be reduced to any level (whether micro, meso, macro, or global). Neither can they be understood as, to cite Parsons again, "environments" of social action that, like ultimate reality in whichever form, are struggling to combat the uncertainty of the human condition (or, to use contemporary poetics, are mirroring an omnipresent and multileveled contingency). They are not fields either, but rather rules defining their emergence and mutual relations.

Donati (2017: 141–147) identifies three types of opportunities, or rather three different logics of their management: individualistic, systemic, and relational. These create three sets or platforms, on which individuals proceed toward a flourishing state, prosperity, wellness, a good life, or general *eudemonia*. To be less specific and to avoid valuations while recalling the language of practice theory (see, e.g., Schatzki et al. 2001), these types are sets of constitutive rules offering three "autonomous" images of the good life. Such analytical distinctions gain importance when applied to the analysis of historical transformations perceived as transitions from the vision of harmonized relations between the individual and the community/society in the pre-modern period to the decline, if not breakage, of these "natural" bonds during the dawn of modernity and the destruction of the human-nature project in after-modernity. The main task is to determine if the "flourishing" or the "good life" are possible under the circumstances of radical morphogenesis, and to what extent the re-constitution of associative relations between individuals—labelled as "relational policy," and in the context of after-modernity—is enabling the achievement of the good life.

Donati distinguishes three types of moralities of the good life. These include the norms/regulations that concern individuals and communities, define the status quo, and fuel and direct social changes. Liberal (capitalist market) morality makes a virtue of honest and effective competition multiplying the supply of goods and thus creating new (better) opportunities of the good life, while improving the status of society and its functional realms. Collective (socialist) morality emphasizes actions aimed at acquiring the common good in circumstances stabilized by the state, which guarantees civil rights and an equal start. Both these types of opportunities generate various dysfunctions, which are usually described as a flawed realization of the ideals, such as when, for example, getting rich overshadows being honest, or the free market remains beneficial as long as

it is preserving someone's dominion in a certain economic sector, or when the state appropriates, "licenses," or limits in any other way the civil rights or civic activities of individuals and communities. The third (associative) type of morality recalls the Enlightenment idea of *fraternité*, or solidarity, and refers to the criteria of reciprocity: trust, cooperation, partnership, etc., while excluding references to market rules or political citizenship. The area of this third morality depends on the circumstances created by the social networks of civil society inasmuch as they develop niches of activities not regulated by the market exchange and redistribution norms. These three types of moralities constitute three areas of social relations, or orders characterized by a different relational logic.

The notion of opportunity (Donati 2017: 149–158), redefined in relational categories, stands for a situational contingency that, by establishing the complementarity between certain components of the universe, creates the probability of rearrangements that are favourable to the agent, and are useful or beneficial (generally not morally indifferent) under any crucial practical circumstances. The situational character of such logic is in some measure doubled. First of all, it refers to actions performed on the comparatively firm ground of possibilities defined by a particular situational stage. Secondly, such possibilities, although embedded in the source reference system (e.g., as moral criteria), remain conglomerates of modality-forming components, which direct actions related to various ingredients of the social universe, various levels of human actions, various types of actors, and finally, various spheres of human activity: the economy, culture, politics, etc. We can say that the situation becomes the real locus of circumstances processed into accessible here-and-now proposals of a modality of action, employing predispositions and dispositions inherent to the agents and described by their habitus. Employing these proposals—understood as making a choice from a situational menu of chances—entails reproduction and transformation related to action directed toward categories of the good life. If we speak of the good life, it is a morphogenesis of *eudemonia*, creating situations facilitating access to goods that are not given per se, nor simply "present." The good life is a trajectory of deeds formed under the label of enhancing chances/possibilities of accessing beneficial opportunities, which maintain a basic sense of security and trust in alter ego and network relations.

The three situational logics correspond to the three interaction systems. The first, lib/lab logic, even though not generically morphostatic, results in a replication of the existing structures. New opportunities change

neither the liberal morality nor the perception of the good life by actors interacting in situations defined by the situational logic distinctive to this morality. This leads inevitably both to exclusion from participation in consuming the benefits and to the generation of opportunities that are accessible only to relatively narrow circles or categories of persons, who are predisposed to exploit the advantages intrinsic to these new situational circumstances. The second logic, sheltering under the auspices of equality, drives the emergence of interaction systems, which are somehow escapist in relation to existing structures, and do not necessarily represent a compromise between market and state. An “anonymous communication matrix” is a platform of morally unrelated interactions, network opportunities, or temptations to behave immorally, which stretch civil rights to include illegitimized demands and behaviours. An apparent sense of safety and impunity promotes the blurring of such logic and buries the chances for the good life in categories of equality.

Paradoxically, processes that create conditions of authentic relational morphogenesis and opportunities for the emergence and propagation of communitarian or associative forms accompany this civilizational transformation in the spirit of after-modernity. This is the most astonishing aspect of Donati’s (2017: 153ff.) thought. In this overwhelming contingency, in conditions which amplify and preserve inequalities and blur the core of human nature, and when morality is often limited to incidental rules realizing egoistic goals, how is it possible for a range of opportunities accentuating cooperation, solidarity, or *fraternité* to emerge? It is, in essence, a question of the possibility of innovation being oriented toward the creation of common goods. According to Donati, such a possibility requires meta-reflexivity, or the relational direction of interaction to transcend the constraints, limitations, and dysfunctions of economic exchanges and unbridled civic autonomy. If we were to go beyond references to Donati’s text, we could recall images of bored bankers for whom conspicuous consumption is not enough, or Internet users for whom the illegal utilization of cultural goods ceases to suffice. To speak even more definitely, the destruction of the social fabric in after-modernity creates pressures on cooperation and arriving at a consensus that respects the rights of all, as it is impossible to leave the iron cage of the “anonymous communication matrix” without it. Relational re-normativization becomes functionally indispensable, and while dysfunctions potentially influence all social actors, this direction of movement is not a paroxysm, but a meta-reflexivity that, even if forced and defensive, remains the nucleus of the new, truly relational social forms, and

it constructs the We-relation in the frames of effective new social praxes. This requires answering the question about the relational nature of the subject and the possibilities of its constitution and persistence through subsequent situational stages.

Donati (2017: 148–151) notices the traps or paradoxes imminent in late modernity: from the double bind—the demand of being free confronted with obligations that potentially or actually constrain freedom; through being free as the need to choose whom to depend on, such as in relations and affiliations defining one’s identity; to the injunction to be free meaning being independent from all social relations that attribute to individuals the responsibility for everything that happens to them. Finally, these conditions are continuously self-transcending and moving toward a post- or trans-human subject. No less important are the dangers to privacy: the technologization and virtualization of primal relations, and on the public level—bureaucratization, technocratization, and mass mediatization. All such processes (and most probably many more) lead to the degeneration of human nature and the destruction of social bonds, replacing subject-subject relations with an artificial (trans-human) construct.

To rephrase, the dynamics of such processes are superseding all forms of symbolic exchange and creative processes, sustaining and transforming what lingers between significant subjects, i.e., the sphere that (according to Donati 2017: 150–153) includes the nest of normative reciprocity and the respective form of *eudemonia*. The cardinal dysfunction of the lib/lab system is the generation of relational evil, thus leading to perception of the common good rather as an investment than a quality shaped by normative cooperation in the name of the good society. Defining the common good in relational categories is only made possible by an understanding of the relative success of restoring the logic of mutual obligations. This is a question of the conditions under which social networks become moral and create and transfer moral values, or analogously, become the arena of exploitation, oppression, marginalization, or injustice. In both cases the process of establishing values and anti-values is relational. This does not signify that actors’ intentions are *ex definitione* irrelevant, and the realm of structural and cultural constraints remains indifferent; it is rather an indication of processes achieved with the participation of, in relation to, and in connection with, what characterizes relative, analytical, and empirical independence when constituting relational qualities. To be more precise, according to Donati (2017: 153ff.) there are three conditions to be met: (a) a particular relational molecule must relate to aims and means defined by norms and



values (which implies, as I understand, the moral “saturation” of actors’ feelings, aspirations, and intentions); (b) a social relation must lead to the emergence of a phenomenon, which in itself or in its consequences can be good to all the actors; and (c) there is no possibility of acquiring this good in any other way, without constituting the We-relationship.

Fundamentally, this is the same riddle with which, for example, Schütz (1967 [1932]; Schütz & Luckmann 1980 [1973]) was struggling when precis-ing the “we-relationship” and then contemplating—to name the thing in exchange-theory jargon—extra-dyadic forms of social relations. Donati, a bit like Schütz or Giddens (1984), is embedding his thought in the char-acteristics of friendship, which is a purely relational form of good: ego and alter can create it, but it cannot be privately appropriated by either of them. In this moment the analysis of social networks, or their inher-ent ambivalences, which constitute the environment of their reproduction and transformation, can indicate circumstances in which friendship miti-gates competition and fosters the creation of social capital, or, to clarify, facilitates its transmission, and likewise the conversion of certain assets included in the habitus, to relational goods. From the actors’ viewpoint these are shared orientation components, present and accessible as ingredi-ents of the interactional equipment at hand, yet not imposed by anyone or anything. They are good not as a result of how costly their constitution was (although it could have been costly), but because their price is regulated by a relationally established and sustained value. It is, if we insist on economic language, another currency, or (after Luhmann) a different zone with a dif-ferent generalized medium of exchange and categories of honesty, justice, and solidarity, or in other words—an interactional decency that is morally measured, in contrast to references to market value and rules arbitrarily imposed by the state and defining relations between freedom and equality.

In what circumstances can the externalities of human activities be posi-tively utilized, supporting the emergence and maintenance of the common good? Donati indicates such “pro-relational islands,” e.g., in ethical eco-nomics or in certain new types of media. Generally, these are areas that enable the production of relational goods evaluated in categories of good or evil, and in this sense they enable binding persons and agency with social and cultural structures. These moments, when someone’s activity cannot be reduced to the expression of an autonomous personality but can be un-derstood only in relation to significant others, are almost imperceptible yet spectacular in results. Being a person, according to Donati, involves main-taining relations—constituting one’s own personality not only in solipsistic

self-relation; it is Mead's (1934) conversation with significant others, a looking-glass self, per se relational (as Cooley (1902) would prefer to see it), or, finally, in the theoretical redaction of Goffman (1959, 1974) or Scheff (2006), a strategic yet morally saturated self-presentation. Social networks are depositories of virtual relations, instruments that can be used to form intersubjective relations. These virtual relations comprise opportunities that can be described situationally as commodified or decommodified. In other words, social bonds are molecules that can be understood as dynamic processes (in the sense of the transformation and emergence of new social forms), as well as instituted reality. They can be "subjectified" under circumstances of progressive contingency, thus deepening actors' alienation. The bonds become really associative, as they function as autonomous orders of reality, sets of rights and obligations that should be reciprocated and taken into account as the orientation axes of participants in interactions. Symbolic and subjective components are not sufficient, and the *religo* component becomes indispensable, being a structure forcing diversity and modality, and, so to speak, normatively half-open, or precised in terms of mutual obligations but opened in the sense of moral good and evil. Relational reflexivity is essential; it points toward the components of situationally accidental relation; it is, to paraphrase, situationally specific. Cooperation, friendship, recognition, solidarity, and mutual assistance—these are all social forms (or virtual bonds) that can be filled with content belonging to all levels of social life.

According to Donati (2017: 155ff.), a *sui generis* renaissance of human nature is an essential recipe for how to achieve the good life. It requires a choice—but understood neither as an injunction to choose, nor a compulsive pursuit of creating new social relations. It resides in openness to new meanings, other relational worlds, and areas that do not divide its participants into winners and losers, the included and excluded.

Donati's article is thought-provoking. The author employs the notion of "utopia," which can be misleading. In a certain sense all theories are utopias, as they are "idealized visions" of so-called reality. Donati, just like Parsons or Durkheim (and many others), ponders the nature of social orders. Such an inquiry is, on the one hand, universal in the sense of being the most generic (although precise!) formula possible for constituting and re-constituting order, or for defining, so to speak, the optimal parameters or characteristics of actors, structures, processes, social networks, etc., along with the no less optimized set of connections between them. It is, to employ Pareto's language, a certain state of dynamic equilibrium. On the other hand, the question refers to the possibilities of approaching such

a state in various historical eras, political formations, or types of societies. Durkheim asked the same question, and in regard to modern society it was in fact a question about the possibility of forming individuals into moral individualists. Parsons (1951) talked about a community of values as a certain theoretical situation in which the top-down regulations become useless. Such a community provides a common moral fundament, or point of reference, as well as the possibility of creating new situations or opportunities fuelled by the efforts of free actors. Like Dahrendorf (1958), for example, (although not with his own theoretical concepts), this could be labelled utopian thinking, and thus in fact thinking that preserves the status quo. According to Donati (2017: 158ff.), the after-modern era and its inherent dynamics create niches for constituting morally saturated associative opportunities. What is essential in such thinking is a certain presupposition related to the concept of human nature.

It may seem that this whole narrative (including the classics mentioned above) is presenting human nature as something relatively stable, while the fact that the social world is not necessarily a proper stage for its realization and development can be interpreted as negative externalities, which sometimes crucially deform, so to speak, the natural or relational pathways of the good life. If, instead of the flat and banal optics of the developmentalist school, we were to perceive this problem as evolutionary, we could comprehend culture as an increasingly crucial part of this evolution. It is not a coincidence that we speak of a dual inheritance, which reveals at least two paths in the transformation of human nature. The biological part remains relatively unchanged, while the cultural one, even if we recall only the images of trans-human subjects, is transforming abruptly and radically. In what sense thus can we speak of a return to human nature? I understand Donati's intentions to be a reframing of Kant's question of the possible realization of the ideal of the good life in the sense of a theory that would indicate and define possible scenarios of such an accomplishment.

Reference to the world of norms and values is justified, but in the form presented by Donati it becomes questionable. Such re-normativization of human activity, forming relations in categories of symbolic exchange and moral good and evil, entails a choice—of course not between salvation and damnation or with irreversible consequences to a certain life course but rather as a confirmation of relationally realized values. Are these values objective, as Scheler (1973 [1966]) would like them to be, and are they to be spontaneously declared, sensed, and realized, or discovered as implementable attributes of human relations? Is the world of anti-values, or what we perceive as evil,

equally objective? Is such interactional Manichaeism creating new dysfunctions? Is it really always better to act according to the *fraternité* category? If Newton, acting in the name of truth, had considered the opinions of others, he would not have revolutionized physics, and, indirectly, he would not have questioned the morally saturated optics of societies based on—as Durkheim (1964 [1893]) would have said—mechanical solidarity. How does the good life according to Newton relate to the good life according to the then “cultural dopes”? And finally, the majority of seemingly morally indifferent behaviours are elements of everyday life routines, and they define if and to what extent one needs to engage emotionally, morally, intellectually, or in any other sense. It is morally reprehensible, or at least alarming, to ignore somebody’s greeting, and likewise to indulge in inappropriate associativity, violating the rules of netiquette. These “pieties,” the replicated logics of everyday practices, determine the sphere of clearly moral—through reference to good and evil—choices. Truly relational being “on-line” denotes a morally nuanced, skilful use of symbolic instruments: from seemingly unconscious routines, through more or less morally determined choices labelled “one ought to,” to practices constituting associative communities.

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# REMARKS ON PIERPAOLO DONATI'S PAPER: "HUMAN FULFILLMENT IN A MORPHOGENIC SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM A RELATIONAL STANDPOINT"

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Donati's paper (2017b) is very rich in content, dense, and extensive in analysis.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to comment on everything worth noting in it. Therefore, after briefly discussing my understanding of some of its basic ideas, I will focus on a few selected topics. Donati's paper is actually a modified version of a chapter in a volume devoted to the issue of human flourishing in late modernity, which is characterized by the dominance of morphogenetic processes over morphostatic ones (Archer 2017a). In the introduction to the volume Archer elaborates on the processes that lead from a morphostatic type of society to a morphogenetic one. Archer differentiates between a "fully blown Morphogenic Society," which she calls a "Concrete Utopia" (after Ernst Bloch), and a society of "unbound morphogenesis." A Concrete Utopia involves "possibilities of emancipatory praxis, which are real but not yet actualized." A society is envisioned in which

the production, exploration and exploitation of 'contingent compatibilities' constitutes novel opportunities (jobs, roles, *modi viv-*

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<sup>1</sup> The text "Human Fulfillment in a Morphogenic Society: Challenges and Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint" presented at the seminar "Humanism in an After-Modern Society: The Relational Perspective," University of Warsaw, March 6, 2017 is an enlarged version of *What Does a 'Good Life' Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology*, by Pierpaolo Donati in: Margaret S. Archer (ed.), *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, Springer, 2017.

*endi*) whose take-up follows a situational logic of opportunity (the new being found more attractively advantageous than the old) and meets with little opposition because no vested interests have yet been consolidated on this novel terrain (Archer 2017b: 10).

In turn, the society of unbound morphogenesis is

one where morphogenetic processes intensify until they predominate over morphostatic ones, becoming less and less constrained by them and hence will proceed to generate increasing variety. It follows that social action becomes less governed by routinization, by habitus or habits and that it lies in the hands of individuals and groups to seize their own means of flourishing or implicitly to accept that they will not thrive, or at least as well as they might (Archer 2017b: 11).

For Donati morphogenetic society consists in an environment which, on the one hand “produce large existential vacuums, life failures, processes of alienation,” but also provides the paths to achieve human fulfilment, culminating in possibilities of social change and a project of the “society of the human” (2017a: 155ff). Thus he avoids the problem of justifying the historiosophical conception of directional development from one social formation (a morphostatic one) to another (morphogenetic). This is the first problem that bothers Archer and the authors of the volume on human flourishing. The second is the precise character of the relation between the intensification of morphogenetic processes and human flourishing (or eudaimonia, the good life). In Archer’s formulation, “why would it be thought at all that intensified Morphogenesis could foster Eudaimonia rather than the two lacking any determinate relationship?” (Archer 2017b: 11).

Donati offers not only theoretical and analytical tools to analyse and explain, in novel ways, the phenomena of late modern societies, he also argues at length that “a good society, under conditions of radical morphogenesis, is feasible only through a peculiar ‘politics of relationality’” (2017a: 137).

In the paper Donati explores the opportunities for the good life and the good society, asking “what human flourishing means—or can mean, whether theoretically or empirically”; “which morphogenetic dynamics in human persons’ ways of life make them more or less happy or unhappy”; and “which good life becomes desirable and possible in a morphogenetic

society” (2017a: 137) His main analytic tool is the concept of a “relation” and a “relational good,” and his basic theoretical claim is the “primacy of relation.” There are at least three important senses of this primacy: the “relation” is a good in itself, which, secondly, entails the priority of caring for the relation. And, thirdly, the primary theoretical unit of investigation is not an individual but a relation consisting of the individual human entities. All these constitute the sense in which we can speak about the primacy of the relation: “the human being is a *sui generis* potentiality that can be actualized only through the relationality with other human beings” (2017a: 141), or in another formulation, “the human person is not a self-sufficient entity: he or she is an ‘individual-in-relation,’ where the relation is constitutive of the person” (2017a: 154). A similar logic applies to “relational goods”: “relational goods are goods that consist of relations: they are not material entities, they are not performances, they are not ideas (...)” (Donati 2017a: 152). Donati exemplifies this by such a relational good as friendship:

Friendship is a social relation that goes beyond individual dispositions. Certainly, friendship flows from people, and only people can be friends and create friendship, which is a virtue for them as persons. But it cannot be an individual undertaking. Ego and alter are not friends as individuals. Friendship is the acknowledgement of something that does not belong to either of the two, although it is of both of them. This is the relational good (...). It is the good that exists in common between people; only they can create it, but it does not belong to either of the two people, even if it is of both of them. Likewise, friendship cannot be the product of a social structure; it cannot become an institution, a structure to which people must conform (Donati 2017a: 152).

Having that theoretical framework in mind enables some problems to be addressed. The first problem concerns the opportunities for “human fulfilment,” “human flourishing,” or the “good life.” In several places it is claimed that opportunities exist or emerge (in the worlds of the capitalist market, the welfare state, civil society, the media, and especially social networks) for individuals to enter relations which produce relational goods and thus create the possibility for a “society of the human.” These opportunities can be realized through “productive practices” and “new processes.” Donati claims that “these new conceptions and practices of the good life are the product of ‘conscious’ and ‘free’ agents who make ‘rational



decisions” (2017b) by pursuing “politics of relations,” or “doing relational work.”

It seems that the emergence or existence of these opportunities is contingent on particular circumstances, which are present in a society of unbound morphogenesis. Donati shows these particular circumstances in various social domains by analysing numerous examples. He convincingly demonstrates that relational goods really emerge and accordingly that human flourishing or the good life is possible. Morphogenetic processes create opportunities that make both the relational goods and the good life possible but not inevitable. Such relational goods as justice, solidarity, subsidiarity, cooperation, friendship, recognition, mutual help, etc., have greater possibilities of emerging in a morphogenetic society than in any other kind. Consider one of Donati’s examples: “One discovers that working as a team, cooperating with others rather than acting individually, is more effective and satisfying, on condition, obviously, that the task has not been imposed and that teamwork is not a tool used by those in charge to make higher profits” (Donati 2017a: 154).

The awareness of these processes, that is, the realization of opportunity that leads to discovery, is not driven by any recognizable, persistent, and directional tendencies (directional in the sense that, over time, these processes become more frequent). Social change depends on a kind of discovery, on the emergence of awareness, on realizing that something can be achieved, and on a special kind of reflection.

This can be seen as the weak side of the theory of opportunities for a good life in postmodern societies. On the one hand, we have a “situational logic of opportunity,” on the other, the reflexive activity of the relational subjects. It seems that such an approach overloads the motivational and reflexive activity of the subjects. Donati claims that:

People are forced to ask themselves: what is human in me? Which means: what is good for me? What is the good life in which the-human-that-is-in-me can flourish? In other works, how can I be happy? To answer these questions, individuals have to reflect, take distance from themselves, and appeal to the social morality of certain relations instead of others. Their happiness or unhappiness lies in the choices they make (Donati 2017b).

And he repeats similar claims to the above (“people are forced to ask themselves (...)”) many times: “it is necessary for acting subjects...”, “you

must choose whom to depend on...”, “individuals have to reflect, take distance from themselves.” It might legitimately be asked what “forces,” what “necessitates,” what “prompts” choosing and reflecting? It is certain that all of these do not reside in “reflective activity” itself.

Donati’s paper does not explicitly address the basic driving and transforming force of modern and postmodern civilization and societies, namely, science and science-based technology. Of course, science and technology do appear in the context of morphogenetic processes and human flourishing. Archer, in the volume mentioned, theorizes on the processes of applying scientific theories and their impact on—to use her language—“natural,” “practical,” and “social orders” of “natural reality” (Archer 2017c). But the main thrust of her interest is the role of science and technology as the tool that produces changes in the orders of natural reality that confront and challenge humans: climate change as a consequence of economic growth on a global scale and, at the other pole, the introduction of computers (in place of typewriters) to the secretarial world on the individual level. Science and technology—being, in a way, external forces of material growth—are causing changes and exerting pressures, which Archer analyses in terms of human capacities and liabilities.

But the impact of science and science-based technology is deeper than the above conceptualization. It can be said—and this is the main argument in my remarks—that science and technology change the soul of the “relational subject” and the essence of “relational goods.” Science and technology penetrate and exert a powerful impact on every aspect of modern and postmodern life. They promise to provide—and deliver with ever greater efficiency—at least four instrumental goods: security (and relief from suffering and pain), order, predictability, efficiency, and productivity based on the control and manageability of causal relations. It is very difficult to avoid the logic of efficiency and control. Hence, our relations with others always come under the pressure of being instrumentally used to deliver security, relief from suffering, and decent living conditions.

This represents a constant threat to relations, which are valuable in themselves, and which for relational subjects are objects of care. To give a few examples: there may be a caring relation between a child and a parent, especially in the case of an elderly parent who, due to disabilities, is unable to be self-sufficient in everyday life and may require constant care. Sometimes an adult child will engage in providing care for such a parent. What emerges is a relational good. But, as we know, in recent times a tendency clearly prevails for elderly people with chronic illnesses or disabilities

to be placed in professional facilities, which offer constant care, including medical and social services. Usually adult children carefully consider the kind of arrangements that will ensure their parents a decent life. But personal engagement in a relation that involves care for an elderly parent is something very different from providing the parent with professional, residential care in a nursing home. From the viewpoint of the theory of relational sociology we might also call such an arrangement an emergent relational good. But why do adult children prefer the latter choice? Because of the efficiency and professionalism of the medical treatment, especially the alleviation of pain and suffering by various medicines, the 24-hour assisted living, the predictability and security. It is an instrumental perspective, which emphasizes securing an acceptable and decent life for the parent through customer-centred life-sustaining services. But this instrumental relation of an adult child and an elderly parent in residential care is a very different relational good in comparison with the child's personal care of the parent. Nevertheless, in the case of the former we rarely, perhaps never, say that it is a kind of necessary, emergent relational evil.

I could recall other examples: friendships rarely survive when one of the friends has to relocate to a distant place for work; teamwork is almost exclusively viewed as an instrument for increasing labour productivity; family bonds are seriously stretched when husband and wife work and live in distant places. In all these examples, caring for the relation (with its relational goods) loses against the demands of instrumentality and efficiency. And in order to overcome the tendency to view and evaluate relations from the perspective of instrumentality and efficiency based on the control and management of causal relations (cause and effect) we need different perspectives, with different concepts of the phenomena in question. In the perspective of instrumentality and efficiency promoted by science and technology, our attention in regard to the concepts of pain and suffering, for instance, is focused on their reduction, control, or complete elimination by administering the appropriate medicines. Their meaning is thus reduced or impoverished—some might even say their meaning is completely changed by this special perspective of the medical science. But impoverished or changed in comparison to what? The obvious answer is, for example, in comparison to the religious meanings of pain and suffering. Concepts are always concepts from a given perspective. “A loving parent,” “a friend,” “a caring relation”—all these concepts have different meanings from the perspective of the opportunities provided by the nascent morphogenetic society in comparison with the religious perspec-

tive. The latter also has concepts that have no counterparts outside of it, for instance, “unconditional love,” “the glory of God,” and “caring for the salvation of one’s own soul.” Douglas Porpora, in an interesting and—in the context of all the other contributions—rebellious essay in Archer’s volume questions the perspective of “human flourishing” as a goal and argues that from the religious perspective the “glorification of God” constitutes such a “goal” (Porpora 2017). This difference of perspectives is well illustrated by a biblical parable. Postmodern men are confronted by a situation similar to that of the rich young man in the New Testament parable: “Jesus said to him, if you will be perfect, go and sell all you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in the heaven; and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Matthew 19: 21–22, AV). It will not be an abuse of the parable if in place of “great possessions” we put “human flourishing.” The rich young man had the means and opportunities for a good life. And he turned out to be blind to this other perspective. He lived, in a sense, in a morphogenetic phase of his social environment but was unable to discern and appreciate the new possibilities. It is hard to say what constitutes this other perspective for today’s human beings. From the perspective of the dominant role of science and technology it seems that the Weberian diagnosis in the form of the metaphor of an “iron cage” is still in place—at least Weber would certainly think so. And perhaps the remedies envisaged by him are also still in place:

No one knows who will live in this [iron] cage in the future, or whether at the end of these tremendous developments **entirely new prophets will arise**, or there will be **a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals**, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (Weber 1989 [1930]: 182) [emphasis added].

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## **REVIEWS**



# THE ENIGMA OF SOCIAL RELATIONS IN AFTER-MODERN SOCIETY

**PIERPAOLO DONATI, *L'ENIGMA DELLA RELAZIONE***

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The deep changes that globalization has produced have highlighted the shortcomings of the theoretical and epistemological paradigms of modern sociology. For a long time, people have hoped for a “new sociological imagination” Fuller 2006), capable of offering new categories for the analysis of contemporary society, characterized by an explosion of connectivity and interrelations. Manuel Castells (1996) has called this society “network society.”

## **/// The Social Relation: New Life for an Old Concept of Sociological Theory**

For an increasing number of researchers, social relations have become the central element of sociological analysis. Such an idea is not new. In fact, all classical and contemporary sociologists have used the concept of the “social relation.” Nevertheless, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Elias, Goffman, Parsons, Luhmann, Bourdieu, and Habermas, to mention just a few thinkers, have privileged only certain aspects of the social relation. Even Georg Simmel, who is considered by many to be the pioneer of relational sociology, only focused on the formal aspects of the social relation, and paid less attention to its content. As has been pointed out:



While relations have of course been paid some attention in the tradition of sociology, it is only with few exceptions that they have been considered in relational terms. On the contrary, relations are typically understood primarily on the basis of beings, for example as something possessed and/or caused by individuals or structures (Pyyhtinen 2016: 7).

Even today sociology dictionaries hardly define social relations, despite being full of references to them (Bruce & Yearly 2006; Scott & Marshall 2014; Turner et al. 2006).

Powell and Dépelteau (2013) and Dépelteau and Powell (2013) have produced a comprehensive and updated study of the relational approaches present in contemporary sociology. In one of their edited volumes, they claim that relational sociology became a more mature research paradigm in the 1990s after the publication of *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* by Emirbayer (Powell & Dépelteau 2013). However, a relational approach had already been elaborated at the beginning of the 1980s in Italy by Pierpaolo Donati (1982, 1983). Much earlier than Emirbayer, Donati published *Teoria relazionale della società* (1991), in which he proposed a systematic theory of relational sociology fully articulated at the ontological, epistemological, and methodological level. Even though Dépelteau and Powell's volume (2013) included a contribution by Donati, interestingly they do not antedate the birth of relational sociology to the works of the Italian sociologist, who was at the centre of the international debate long before the publication of *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (Donati 2011). Already in *Teoria relazionale della società*, Donati attributes the “relational turn,” and the notion of the social relation (*Wechselwirkung*) as a constitutive element of the social order, to Simmel. Donati (1991: 46) writes that: “For Simmel, the social phenomenon is neither an emanation of a subject, nor of a more abstract system, a priori posited. The social order is the relational as such. It is the mutual relation or interaction that is productive of, embodied in, and manifested by something that, although invisible, has a certain degree of ‘solidity’.”

What does it mean to observe the social world in relational terms? Powell and Dépelteau's work has highlighted that there is a “family” of different relational approaches. Terenzi (2013) individuates three major directions of research. The first direction is what Mische has defined as the “New York School,” chiefly represented by Whyte (1992) and Emirbayer (1997, 2009; Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer & Mische 1998).

A second direction was developed in francophone sociology, thanks to Ba-joit (1992, 2013, 2015) and Laflamme (1995). A third direction originated in Crossley (2011), who realized that neither individuals nor social structures are adequate units for the analysis of social life. According to Terenzi, these three tendencies remain within the dichotomy of individualism/holism. The “individualist” approaches conceive the relations as “interactions that do not exceed the social actors involved,” while the “holistic” approaches “believe that social relations are derived from the social structures and afterwards embodied in society” (Terenzi 2013: 9–10). This also means that those sociologists who see themselves as relational, by going back to the turn initiated by Simmel, have some trouble handling the nature of the social relation. Why are they incapable of freeing themselves from a conception of social relations understood as the product of something else?

### **/// “Man Rarely Learns What He Thinks He Already Knows”: Social Relations as an Enigma**

Social relations are enigmatic. This is the fundamental thought in Donati’s essay, which I will review in the following pages. Relations are enigmatic in two ways. On the one hand, the enigma is in the relation; on the other hand, the existence of the relation is itself an enigma. In both cases, relation is an obscure reality, which “speaks covertly” to us. Donati’s claim is a singular one, particularly if we consider that Donati is one of the chief theorists of relational sociology. Donati has in fact elaborated his approach for decades by studying different problems, from the sociology of the family to the sociology of health, from the transformations of the state to multiculturalism (Terenzi et al. 2016).

According to Donati, the enigma of human life is inextricably tied to the enigma of social relations.

Human life—Donati writes in the introduction—hangs by the thread of relations, those with themselves, with others, and with the world. Nevertheless, we take little care of them. We use them, but we do not stop and try to understand them, despite their being the source of so many of our daily dilemmas. (...) The enigma can be simply expressed with this question: why should we live with others? (2015: 14–15, transl. M. Stango).

The fact that we do not understand social relations is the result of a cognitive deficit on our part. It is no longer sufficient to recognize, as classical Western thought has done, that man is a social animal. The relation to others is ambivalent—necessary but at the same time dangerous, since “it compels us to act in a way that does not correspond to our desires” (Donati 2015: 16); “it is a reality that demands attention in itself and for itself” (ibid.: 17–18). For this purpose, Donati makes explicit why it is so hard to understand relations right from the outset: “thinking about the relations is a reflexive act which requires a return on one’s thought—our thought, which is always about something or somebody—always from a different point of view, that of the relation to the referent of one’s thought” (ibid.: 11).

In his earlier works, Donati introduced the reader to this “different point of view,” his relational approach, from the front door, so to speak, where the motto “in the beginning is the relation” (Donati 1991: 25) is engraved in clear letters. In this book, the reader is rather lead to the relational perspective from a back door. To use Goffman’s expression, Donati invites the reader into the “backstage” of his thought. From this vantage point, the reader has access to the emergence of relational thought in its relationship to the enigma of human life in its social dimensions. It is a melting pot of ideas and arguments that follow each other and reappear in different chapters, every time under a new light. Most of the titles of the sections are formulated as questions. This does not seem a mere rhetorical strategy. On the contrary, those questions are the enigmas with which the author engages throughout the book and through which he clarifies his epistemology, showing in this way how his approach is different from other relational sociologies.<sup>1</sup>

While remaining within the sociological perspective, Donati’s approach has broader implications. His paradigm enters into a fruitful dialogue with other human and social disciplines which “share the same ontological and epistemological ground according to which human life is constituted of relations” (Donati 2015: 67). The reader is thus challenged in this stimulating and at the same time demanding journey from sociology to philosophy (classical and contemporary) and theology. Nor does Donati miss the chance to quote a song by the long-standing band King Crimson. Aware of the many difficulties in the study of human relations, Donati leads us through unusual territories. He also shows, through references

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<sup>1</sup> For a more analytical comparison of Donati’s approach and other relational approaches, such as Fuhse, Crossley and Emirbayer, compare Martignani and Ruggieri (2014).

to art history—including the mosaic of the Trinity in Kourion, Canova, de Chirico, and Nan Goldin—what it means to understand the change of social relations, such as in the case of love relationships (ibid.: 75ff.), or in the way painters have spoken of the loss of the social ties through their portraits (ibid.: 202ff).

### **/// How to Think About the Enigma of Social Relations**

Even though the erosion of human relations that started with modernity is not over, Donati's relational perspective leads us to consider the "reappearance of new forms of sociality, where people can live with trust, cooperation, and reciprocity" (2015: 20). During the past four decades, Donati's relational theory has developed substantially. Donati realized that our society is morphogenetic, namely, a society constantly generating new relational forms. Instead of trying to fit this new, ever-changing scene into the old categories of modernity, he has accordingly attempted to elaborate a new epistemology that could face the challenges of contemporary society. Such an epistemology should be able to navigate the different morphogenetic forms of our society: those that regenerate human social bonds and those that make them perish. The structure of the book might appear enigmatic both to those who cherish a technical sociology for specialists and to those who are looking for ready-to-hand solutions. But those who are looking for a new sociological imagination will not be disappointed. Donati's goal, which is revealed only in the last page of the book, is that of "suggesting a way of thinking," of "indicating a path"—not necessarily a new path, but a renewed one.

The path traced in *L'enigma della relazione* is articulated in five chapters that deal with topics on which Donati has worked for many years: the birth of plural society and the destiny of the West (chapter 3); the distinction of human and non-human (chapter 4); and more recently the emergence of relational subjects (chapter 5). What seems to me new in this book is the framework within which these traditional topics are placed. Since the first pages, Donati admits that thinking in relational terms is not easy, because "the culture in which we live removes the enigma of relation" (2015: 33). Even "the relation to ourselves, before the relation to others, is something impenetrable, and nevertheless real, because it brings to us joy and pain. The enigma hides a reality that we cannot decipher. Most of the time we react to the enigma by trying to avoid it, to remove it, or in any case to

make it innocuous, indifferent” (ibid.: 13). Donati maintains that human relations, although constituted **by** individuals, are not made **of** individuals. He defines them as “the immaterial reality (immersed in the space-time) of the inter-human, namely, something that is among the actors and ‘constitutes’ their mutual positioning and behaviour while being irreducible to the singular actors, either individual or collective, who are the poles or terms of the relation” (ibid.: 70).

While sharing the concern for placing the social relation at the centre, Donati’s approach is different from those perspectives according to which “relational sociologies tend to dissolve both substantialized actors and substantialized structures into dynamic relations and fluid processes” (Pyyhtinen 2016: 16). The relational perspective put forth by Donati has nothing to do with those philosophical or sociological relationalisms that focus on the social relation while neglecting the problem of social ontology. Already in the first chapter Donati claims that “we should conceive of the social relation not as an accidental reality, secondary to or derivative of other entities (individuals or systems), but as a reality in its own right. Such reality has an autonomy consisting in the special way in which the affective, cognitive, normative, and symbolic elements are combined together” (2015: 42). But this does not amount to neglecting the reality of the actors or of the social structures. The principle that “in the beginning is the relation” does not imply that the relation has an ontological priority over the person, so that it is the relation to generate the person and to “determine it in its fullness” (ibid.: 39). In the chapter devoted to relational subjects, as we will see later, Donati puts forth an original approach to the link between actor and social relation. At the same time, Donati’s relational sociology cannot be assimilated to those approaches which, inspired by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari or the sociology of Latour, propose a “rhizomatic” conception of relation, in order to go against the anthropocentric character of relational sociologies (Pyyhtinen 2016). Donati shares the idea that the social does not coincide anymore with the human, since social reality is produced by practices and processes that are no longer caused only by human actors but by nonhuman factors or more-than-human artifacts. It is sufficient to think here about the pervasive role played by technology and by the “technological system” (Ellul 2004). While on the one hand Donati does not accept the verdict that the human being is “outdated” (Anders 1956), on the other hand, his perspective cannot be confused with those, such as Pyyhtinen, who promote a “more-than-human sociology” and the end

of a dualistic conception of social reality based on the outdated opposition between substance and discourse, due allegedly to the fact that they are “ontologically interrelated” and that “any divide between them is a product of boundary practices” (Pyyhtinen 2016: 7). In the relational sociology elaborated by Donati, substance does not evaporate; reality does not lose its consistency (as it does in certain paintings by Salvador Dalí) by being reduced to pure relations. For Donati,

the relation does not annihilate the substances (persons) but shapes them throughout the social time, so that the actors are ‘shaped’ by the relations, while maintaining their capacity to act freely (agency). We always have to keep in mind that substance and relation are co-original principles of reality, in the sense that there are no substances without relations and no relations without substances (...). To say that the human person is a ‘relationally constituted’ subject does not mean that the relation ‘generates’ the subject (substance), but only that it imparts onto him a certain ‘shape’, a way of being in time. But it remains true that the person has an original nature that can be actuated in different ways, even contrary to his own potentialities (2015: 57–58).

This critical realism prevents Donati from making the same mistakes of reduction that can be found for instance in the relational approach of Pyyhtinen (2016), which conflates different orders of reality by reducing them to a mere product of our social practices.

The path opened by Donati is not that of a “more-than-human sociology” where everything is mixed together and confused, but that of a sociology capable of managing the distinction between human and non-human. The fundamental thesis of the book is that “the human preserves and transcends himself in the social bond, on the condition that the bond is configured as a vital and generative relation” (Donati 2015: 24).

In the second chapter, Donati analyses the cultural vicissitudes of Western society, which, after exalting the “I” to the detriment of its relations, is now witness to the end of its most foundational myth, the “claim that the individual is self-constituted and self-determined” (2015: 82). In Donati’s diagnosis, the crisis of the myth originates in the gap between the cultural and social systems, given that the former cannot explain what happens in the latter: “On the one hand, the culture of our society puts an emphasis on the equality of opportunities and strengths of individuals,

while on the other hand the structural outcomes reveal growing social discrepancies and weakness in the individuals” (ibid.: 84). For Donati, the incapacity to see concrete social relations is the disease of the century. We are not able to understand our social relations because we do not see them, and we do not see them not simply because they are intangible goods but also because our culture prevents us from seeing them as a potential support or resource—seeing them instead as “a tie and a constraint from which to break free as soon as possible” (ibid.: 85).

In order to facilitate the analysis of social relations, Donati suggests an analogy with air. Social relations are invisible and necessary to life just as air is. They are the environment in which our being lives. However, as happens when the air is polluted, we become aware of the existence of our social relations only when they become bothersome. Contrary to the air, which is a variable mix of gases, social relations have a special structure, given by the fact that they are an emerging phenomenon, while the air is a cluster. Finally, the structure of social relations has qualities and powers distinct from the subjects involved in them. Donati’s relational sociology, contrary to other forms of relational sociologies, presupposes a precise social ontology and epistemology, as it “assumes the approach of critical and analytic realism that sees being as act. ‘Rel-ation,’ in fact, indicates a mutual action”<sup>2</sup> (2015: 94). This is its originality compared to the positivist sociologies that, focusing on the “facts” (for instance, Durkheim’s), end up overlooking human conduct and its potentialities. However, to observe the social relation as an emerging phenomenon without objectifying it, a reflexivity of the first order is not sufficient. First-order reflexivity allows us to observe the interaction among visible elements, for instance, individuals. Only a second-order reflexivity allows us to observe relations among the individuals, namely, “a reality that is not reducible to the elements that have generated and regenerated it over time” (Donati 2015: 97), a reality “that can be good or bad for those who are affected by it” (ibid.: 102). This reality is not identical to what the individuals exchange, nor is it reducible to a functional interdependency. Rather, it is something that exceeds and transcends it. Friendship is a good example of this.

In this way, the fundamental tenet of Donati’s relational approach, “in the beginning is the relation,” becomes clearer. While certainly echoing Martin Buber’s claim (1923) that “in the beginning is the relation,” Donati has elaborated his view independently from Buber. He wants to indicate

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<sup>2</sup> Donati plays on the Italian word for “relation,” i.e., “relazione,” by showing how *rel-azione* conveys the idea of a mutual or reciprocal (*re-*) action (*-azione*) [translator’s note].

that “social reality—what makes us ‘social beings’—is the relation, that is, the generative continuous act that generates us as people with a certain character, a certain lifestyle, a certain way of dealing with other people (...)” (Donati 2015: 98). The relation, then, “gives social form” (ibid.) to our existence, without taking away the fact that “the person is a presocial and metasocial substance” (ibid.). Donati’s approach represents then a strong antidote against the relativistic tendencies in sociology. On this point, Donati’s account of his encounter with Achille Ardigò, one of the fathers of Italian sociology and also Donati’s teacher, is very instructive. In order to rescue individual subjectivity, Ardigò saw the social bond as grounded in intersubjective-objectivity, and distanced himself from an objective conception of the social relation understood as external and coercive. On the contrary, around the same time it was already clear to Donati that in order to avoid the stagnant conception of relation typical of modernity—exposed, on the one hand, to the risks of subjectivism and relativism and, on the other hand, to those of structuralist determinism—it was necessary to think of social relations as a *sui generis* order of reality, with precise qualities and properties—an order of reality that finds its place in a multilayered view of reality. Postulating the existence of a relational order of reality allows Donati to respond to the objection of those, like Ardigò, who think that speaking of relations jeopardizes the ontology of the person. Since the person is at once within and without the relation, there is no opposition, but rather integration, between ontology of the person and ontology of the relation: “the relation is constituted by the person as long as the person is generated by a relation and the relation from which the person is originated depends in turn on the person, on his agency, on the agency of a substance” (Donati 2015: 99).

The defining feature of human relationality is a special form of reflexivity that can be called “internal conversation.” Donati uses this concept, which was introduced by British sociologist Margaret Archer (2003), to explain how the “I” constantly redefines its personal and social identity over time, by engaging with the identities that others assign to it (“Me,” “We”), and those that it chooses (“You”), in such a way that “our I is always the same from the point of view of the ontology of the person, because the person is unique. But his personal identity and his social Self change with the relations, because the I is put to the test by the Me, the We, and the You” (Donati 2015: 109). Through the internal conversation we can differentiate us from what we are. The process of identity differentiation presupposes a new semantics that, compared to the semantics of the past,



redefines the difference as a relation. In effect, the principle of identity ( $A=A$ ) has not been of great help in modern social sciences, which have developed a semantics of identity based on the idea of identity as the result of a double negation, so that the identity of A is the negation of all that is not A. According to Donati, this semantics is destructive and nihilist: “If I am simply the negation of all that is not me, I do not have a real identity because I am the result of the infinite play among negations” (2015: 114). The semantics of relational identity opens a new scenario. “Relation goes to the very heart of identity, identity can be generated only through difference and only those who can manage the difference can also ‘generate,’ namely, can become something different from themselves while remaining the same” (ibid.). I would like to mention here a movie that in my view exemplifies this dynamics very well. The movie *Gran Torino* (2008), directed and interpreted by Clint Eastwood, describes through the power of gestures the transition from a nihilistic to a relational semantics of identity. Walt Kowalski—a Korean war veteran of Polish origins, retired worker at Ford, and a widower—goes from an initial hostility toward his Hmong neighbours to a relation of friendship that redefines his social and personal identity. The personal relations of the protagonist trigger an internal conversation that, in the final scenes of the movie, generates in him an unexpected transformation of identity, turning him into an altruistic person. Such a change is not only a change in the protagonist of the movie but also of the stereotypical identity of the director/actor. The alternative to this generativity brought about by difference is the narcissistic relation that parents often have toward their children: a relation aimed at the realization of a double, namely, of “an other who has to realize the same I” of the narcissist (Donati 2015: 115).

### **/// The Enigma of Multiculturalism, the Post-Human Time, and the Perspectives of Relational Sociology**

In the following chapters Donati addresses the problem of how relational sociology can deal with some more urgent phenomena of contemporary society, which reveal, although with different manifestations, a deficit of relationality. This sounds paradoxical in a society where the defining feature is the explosion of relationality.

The third chapter advances an interpretation of the destiny of Western society after acknowledging the crisis of multiculturalism. According to some of its critics, multiculturalism has spared governments from the

effort of declaring their fundamental principles by putting forth a conception of tolerance that comes very close to abstention from any judgment. The crisis of multiculturalism has also been acknowledged lately by the political leaders of those European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, that had previously embraced multiculturalism wholeheartedly. After the end of the politics of “all different, all equal,” there is now a great uncertainty about the future of Western civilization. The enigma that Donati wants to solve is whether there is “a solution to the civil coexistence among different cultures capable of avoiding the negative effects of ethical and cultural relativism and of the secular politics that has accompanied multiculturalism” (2015: 134).

The pivotal point of Donati’s project is the concept of “relational reason” and that of the “theological matrix of society.” The starting point of the analysis is understanding the characteristics of “plural society,” which has “institutionalized variety as the constitutive principle of its social order” (Donati 2015: 126). “Variety” here stands for “the coexistence of multiple and in principle incompatible principles of organization” (ibid.). However, contrary to what used to happen in modern society, in which diversity was perceived as a resource and an opportunity, in the present conditions diversity produces problematic situations in different areas of society, including the family, the processes of education, and the possibility of coexistence of different ethnicities, cultures, and religions in a globalized world. Here Donati stresses a difference that he also suggested elsewhere (Donati 2008) between multiculturalism as “social fact,” amplified by migratory processes, and multiculturalism as ideology. For ideological culturalism, cultural and religious differences are a good only on the surface, but in reality this form of multiculturalism neutralizes them because “their valorization is only private, while indifference reigns in the public sphere” (Donati 2015: 131). The cause—this is Donati’s diagnosis—has to be found in the fact that multiculturalism “brings with it a secularization that takes away the sense of relation, because it abandons and eliminates the ambivalence of the human relation, which consists in entering the identity of the Other in order to differentiate one’s self, and exiting with one’s own identity” (ibid.).

Donati’s claim is that in order to give grounds for people to coexist a new paradigm of relationality is necessary. This paradigm should be able to “expand reason from the human person to social relations, in such a way that reason can play the role of mediation among cultures” (Donati 2015: 134). In order to solve the problem of managing the borders between different faiths/religions and the public sphere—which has proved lethal for

multiculturalist ideology—religions need to develop an internal reflexivity capable of showing the difference between the internal reasons of any faith and the rational argument which should be developed in the public sphere. “Relational rationality” could represent a new comprehension of varying cultural identities, whose differences would be understood as the “different ‘way’ of interpreting and living the relation to the values that are common to every man. Or better, to the values that inhere in the relations among human beings” (ibid.). The elaboration of the concept of relational rationality requires a deep revision of the Weberian paradigm of rationality, especially with respect to the following four components: instrumentality, directedness to a goal, relationality, and relation to values. From here it follows that deliberative and procedural rationality are partial forms insofar as they combine only some of these components. The importance of relational rationality resides in the fact that it allows us to provide an answer to the enigmas left unresolved by the other forms of rationality. Above all, it can be applied to relations (and not to singular actions), “distinguishing them on the basis of the values from which they stem and the consequences they produce” (ibid.: 151).

The paradox of multiculturalism, in other words, the “indifference to the differences,” is another product of its incapacity to observe and manage social relations, without which the gap between the differences is immunized and deprived of its meaning. Donati reads this phenomenon by retrieving the semantics of identity and difference (as dialogical border, as binary opposition, and as relation) and by appealing to the “theological matrix of society,” which means for him “the matrix of the ‘ultimate values’ of any culture and society informed by a culture” (Donati 2015: 173). This also includes the ideologies and the systems of value “insofar as they reflect upon their most fundamental assumptions about what there is (social ontology) and what ought to be (social ethics)” (ibid.: 173). The pages devoted to this concept are full of references to philosophy, theology, Holy Scripture, and documents of the magisterium of the Catholic Church. In close dialogue with these disciplines, Donati’s sociological arguments go even deeper in unveiling the nature of human relations. Donati’s mastery in moving among different disciplines can disorient the reader at times. But the effort is always rewarded with a depth of analysis that is often absent from ordinary sociological analyses. Donati’s work is extremely rich. Contrary to those who take the religious phenomenon to be an outdated legacy of the past, Donati puts at the centre of his analysis the modalities in which religions manage the differences, and concludes that Christianity is

revolutionary because its theological matrix has no functional equivalents. According to Donati, Christianity, “contrary to all other religions, admits the case that one person can have two natures (Christ, true God and true human, *perfectus Deus* and *perfectus Homo*) and draws from this relational matrix analogous consequences for human beings and society” (ibid.: 175).

Over the last decade it has become clear that the multiculturalist project has not maintained its promises, and that it has proved incapable of promoting mutual acknowledgement among cultures. At most, it has worked for their coexistence. But this coexistence has been intrinsically precarious because it has been grounded on two premises: a certain relativism of values that theorizes the impossibility of a mutual exchange among cultures, and the irrelevance of the differences for the public sphere, which claims to be neutral with respect to them. What is then the destiny of the West after the failure of the multiculturalist project? The solution—and this is the task of Donati’s theoretical and practical proposal—can be found in a theological understanding of social relations, which could allow us to “go beyond the mere negative tolerance of the other and the recognition of the other as mere negotiation of the borders that leave us foreign to each other; it becomes necessary to acknowledge (namely, to know again) what can allow us to combine identities and differences without resulting in indifference for the differences, which exists and are constantly growing” (Donati 2015: 178). This theological framework is provided by Christianity, which is, according to Donati, the only theological framework capable of giving value to the differences instead of merely tolerating them.

The fourth chapter is another example of how the relational approach works. In this chapter Donati deals with the transformative influence that technology has on human identity, which is redefined in its biological and psychological dimension as well as social and cultural dimension. Donati delineates the main features of what many have characterized as an unprecedented “anthropological mutation.” In the transition from the modern to the postmodern epoch we witness a “change of pace.” If modernity has pursued the immunization of social relations by producing the legacy of a weak and limited human subject, with the beginning of the postmodern epoch the imperative for the subject becomes overcoming his own limits. Moved by the dream of radical changes, contemporary societies see in the future the time of the post-human, of the trans-human, and of the hybridization of the organic and inorganic (cyborg) (Monceri 2009).

For Donati, the best way to interpret these changes is to understand that postmodernism wants to modify human nature by changing the na-

ture of social bonds. Phenomena such as genetic manipulation, fluid gender identities, virtual identities, the reduction of work to mere functional performance, could take place because people have lost those social bonds that were considered “natural” in the past. For him, then, “the battle over the human and nonhuman, human and post-human, human and trans-human, is fought today not on the field of a traditional understanding of human nature (...), but rather on that of human relationality, because it is in the social bond that human nature exists and realizes itself” (Donati 2015: 188). Human identity becomes in this way subjectable to any possible change and open to any contingency. This does not mean that the human subject is fully freed from the social bond. What happens is rather the replacement of ascriptive bonds with other kinds of bond. Habermas seems to express the same belief when he writes that “with genetic programming, however, a relationship emerges that is asymmetrical in more than one respect—a specific type of paternalism”(2003: 63), “a social relationship in which the usual reciprocity between persons of equal birth is revoked” (2003: 64). The German philosopher and sociologist, however, does not go beyond this simple remark, which on the other hand should be sufficient by itself to limit the genetic liberalism so pervasive today, by inducing it to accept the moral, ethical, and legal juridical imperatives typical of a certain idea of human life.

How can this be realized, however, if so many think that human society is close to an end? For Donati, the imminent end is not an unavoidable outcome. Just like some human relations are lethal for the human being, other relations can be regenerative. Donati’s tenet on this point is that the destiny of human society is in the “qualified morphogenesis of the social bond”: “regenerated man is the fruit of a new conception of his social relations” (2015: 210). For this reason, the “relationality of the social bond, together with its causal properties,” is “a fundamental criterion to distinguish what is humanly acceptable from what is not” (ibid.: 194). Not all kinds of morphogenesis satisfy this criterion. “Bound morphogenesis,” which is the most widespread at the moment, treats the social bond as a residuum, as a “subproduct of individual actions” or as “what emerges from the individual liberties guaranteed by a Hobbesian social order” (ibid.: 200). “Unbound morphogenesis,” developed by authors such as Pyyhtinen (2016), inspired by Latour’s actor-network theory, empties the social bond of its historical-temporal dimension. According to this view, the structure of the social bond is “denormativized with respect to absolute values, so that the rights and duties inherent to the bond are dictated by the interactions of

the moment” (Donati 2015: 201). Human society always realizes a special kind of sociality, where the social bond emerges through the mediation of a relational rationality and reflexivity. The emergence of time banks, the personalization of educational and welfare systems, the forms of co-production, the phenomenon of social streets, some of the new forms of housing characterized by the intentional construction of a social bond among the residents: these are all human social forms, understood as social relations “produced by subjects who cooperate on the basis of a shared horizon of meaning” (ibid.: 218). Contrarily, those forms of sociality in which people do not cooperate on the basis of a shared meaning, or in which people are merely functional actors, do not qualify as properly human.

Donati’s relational approach acknowledges that human society is no longer an immediate given but that it has to be produced through reflexivity. Accordingly, Donati sketches a plan for the work of the social sciences which takes into account the transcendence of the human being, understood as a process of overcoming his limits. The social sciences can succeed in their goal on the condition that (a) they work with a generalized theory of social relations capable of showing how the social relations create (or destroy) the specificity of the human being, (b) they acknowledge the “generativity of the social bond as latent potentiality in people and social relations, a potentiality that only the bond can expand further” (Donati 2015: 222).

In the last chapter, devoted to relational subjects, Donati spells out how the relation “generates” the subject, as also recently developed in a collaboration with Archer (Donati & Archer 2015). Social relational subjects are those who are able to identify and solve the enigma of relation, which is so intensified in our pluralist, webbed, virtual society (Donati 2015: 213). A necessary condition for the existence of a relational subject is that social actors reflexively endorse social and cultural structures in such a way as to produce a “We-relation” (ibid.: 233). This is not a holistic entity, because “the ‘We’ of the relational subject is a relation” (ibid.: 234). For Donati, a “relational subject is the one capable of seeing the ‘third’—namely, the relations among the individuals, the network structure among them—and the one who takes care of this ‘third’ in his conduct” (ibid.). Taking care of relationality as a good in itself is critical for the good of the individuals involved in the social bond. The relational subject is begotten through the exercise of a specific form of reflexivity. The hypothesis suggested by Donati is that, in the case of the relational subject, “the object (the goal) of his deliberation and effort is not to act on the relation in function of the I and

his interests (...), but to act on the relation in order to maintain and change it in function of what it represents and what the relation can generate for me and for the others involved in it” (ibid.: 236). In these pages, Donati clarifies what he means when he says that relation is a “*sui generis* reality,” or “relational order of reality,” or when he claims that relation has “specific causal powers,” all expressions that are frequent in the book. The relationality of which Donati speaks is “activity-dependent, namely, dependent on the actions of the subjects, and its structure is manifested in the power it has to retroact on the members (ego and alter) of the relation” (ibid.: 241). In this way, the social is not seen any more as the product of the entities—individuals or structures—but as an order of reality in its own right.

The relational subjects can be observed at all levels of social interaction. For example, a couple is a good example of the micro level. A couple is a social relational subject if the partnership relation emerges as a reality irreducible to the two individual subjects (the “third”) and if it has an influence on each one of them. This can happen only under certain conditions: the individuals have to treat the relation as a reality irreducible to their Self; the relation should neither be considered a projection, nor an expectation of the individuals; the relation has to be defined as a “We”; this “We” has to be symbolized; the “We” that is born out of the two individuals has to make a difference in the personal and social identity of the two individuals. Associations are a good example of relational subjects at the middle level of interaction. In this case as well, two conditions are crucial: first, the symbol of the “We” has to be common, namely, it has to involve all the individuals in order to be effective, and second, the “We” has to be put into practice in a common endeavour. Donati even speaks of relational subjects at the macro level (although as a limit case), such as public institutions and transnational organizations. This requires a synergy of systemic and social integration.

The possibility of a relational subject at any level requires that the actors involved in it find the social relation attractive; that the relation is seen as an emerging good and not as a mere sum of parts; that the actors see in the bond something good for them; and finally, that they are aware that the relational subject will continue to exist only as long as these conditions will not cease to be satisfied (Donati 2015: 258).

In conclusion, *Lenigma della relazione* provides the reader with the opportunity to explore an original and groundbreaking version of relational sociology, one capable of facing the challenges of our time and stimulating the sociological imagination of the reader. The book can be difficult

and challenging, but the theoretical explorations contained in it are always connected to empirical facts. As is often the case, the most arduous and unexplored paths are also those that open new perspectives. Donati's book is one of these paths, one which allows us to look into the enigma of social relations.

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# RELATIONAL SUBJECTS AND RELATIONAL GOODS IN THE NEW CIVIL SOCIETY

**PIERPAOLO DONATI, MARGARET S. ARCHER,**  
***THE RELATIONAL SUBJECT***

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Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret S. Archer's *The Relational Subject* is an important contribution to the development of contemporary social theory not because of the authors' well-established reputations in the social sciences, nor because it is their first joint publishing venture (they previously edited the publication *Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together* (2008)), but because the book synthesizes relational sociology, the theoretical approach developed by Donati (e.g., 2011), with Archer's approach to the theory of the morphogenesis of subjectivity (e.g., 2000, 2007, 2017).

The book is composed of three parts, though only the first and the conclusion (in the third) were written by both authors together. In Part I, the authors polemicize with theories of social relations at both the individual and collective level in order subsequently to display the distinctness of their own theory in this context. The other parts of the book result from a division of labour: Part II, which concerns the morphological emergence of Relational Subjects in the process of socialization and these Subjects' connections with culture and structure, was written by Archer; Part III, on the concept of relational goods and their function in the new model of civil society, was written by Donati. At first glance, such a layout could give rise to suspicions that the proposed model of Relational Subjects is reproducing the same divisions into micro- and macro-structures that previously harmed the development of social theories. It is thus worthwhile to follow

the authors' presentation closely in order to evaluate the explanatory power of their ideas and the ramifications. In this review I will attempt to reconstruct the main outlines of the authors' proposed conceptualization of the research object of relational sociology. I will also make a number of critical remarks concerning the concept of how reflexivity is shaped in the process of socialization, and on the ethical bases of relational goods.

It should be emphasized that even in their introduction the authors reject attempts to place them in the role of creators of broad theories clarifying the functioning of society *en bloc*. They see themselves in the modest role of creators of an "explanatory program" (Donati & Archer 2015: 4), though in one of his earlier publications Donati (2011) declares outright that this programme is a new paradigm in the social sciences. He considers that classical sociological theories are unable to elucidate the processes occurring in postmodern societies. Functionalism and neo-functionalism, which were initially a source of inspiration for him, do not take into consideration the humanistic dimension of social life. His proposed new theoretical orientation makes social relations the centre of interest, as the proper object of sociological analysis. Society is not a receptacle in which relations emerge, take form, and fall apart: it **is** those relations. They are neither the ideational schemes of individuals nor the material epiphenomenon of hidden structures. Relational sociology's explicit theses, which have developed within the framework of humanist sociology, mark a new path, avoiding both individualism and holism. A new theoretical orientation has to validate itself by two strategies: it must clearly define its premises concerning the ontology of the social world, the subject matter of research, and the resultant epistemology; and it must undertake discussions with existing theoretical orientations in order to set forth its own demarcation lines.

This is the task the authors imposed upon themselves in the first part of the book. Their main theses can be reduced to the following claims: (a) the crisis of late modern society originates in the domination of two seemingly mutually exclusive discourses—individualism and collectivism; (b) these discourses, realized in the practices of governing (centralization and individualization), lead to the atrophy of social relations, and to individuals' feelings of alienation and loneliness; (c) as the main object of sociological research, the study of subjects in social relations and results of their actions (collective subjects, goods) is not only a new manner of describing social phenomena but also an opportunity to break down the social isolation of the individual and to give social relations their proper value in human life.

The authors are critical of the two dominant ways of conceptualizing the human being in social theory: as *homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus*. Both conceptions fall into the trap of reductionism and conflation (see Archer 2000), which promote an anti-humanist model of social life. In consideration of the theory about the reflexivity of the social sciences as a source of the auto-regulation of social life (Giddens 1976; Halas 2011), it can not be ruled out that these theories are not only models of but also models for social life. Thus it is even more important to rebuild a humanist sociology capable of overcoming the crisis of modernism, postmodernism, and constructivism, and to return to human beings their immanent properties of dignity and agency.

However, not all sociological theories that declare their subject matter to be social relations are humanistic. The authors very clearly distinguish their proposed relational sociology from “relationalism” (Donati & Archer 2015: 53), pointing out that the latter derives from premises that are radically individualistic, understanding society as a sphere of networked individuals exchanging transactions. These transactions only appear to create social relations; in actuality they are merely channels for the flow of resources or information, in which individuals are either reduced to “nodes,” as in network analysis (e.g., Mustafa Emirbayer, Nick Crossley), or are figurations emerging from the relations that constitute them (e.g., Christopher Powell). Reductionism does not concern solely the individual but paradoxically the relations themselves, which are denied reality (e.g., François Dépelteau). In addition, many of these approaches fail to analyse the social and cultural context in which the relations are situated and the mutual ties between them.

Relational sociology derives from different ontological premises, which can be summarized as follows: (a) man, as a spiritual being, develops in authentic social relations; (b) society is a diverse network of relations between individuals and groups. These relations really exist, and their ontological autonomy is proven by the fact that they have separate, emergent properties that can not be reduced to the properties of the individuals who create them, or to determining structures; (c) a necessary condition for the existence of a relation is the reflexivity of individuals capable of analysing and appraising their relations with other people (and the effects) from the perspective of “We” as “Relational Subjects.” Relational Subjects create relational goods, although in certain conditions they may produce relational evils. These products have an influence not only on the persons engaged in the relations, but also on the Relational Subjects’ immediate and more

remote environment; (d) Relational Subjects are by nature dynamic, playing a key role in social and cultural morphogenesis. Social relations do not exist in a vacuum but are situated in social and cultural macrostructures, which yet do not have determining force, as they themselves undergo morphogenesis as a result of the activities of the Relational Subjects. Their analysis does not lead solely to micro-sociological research but encompasses all levels of social reality: micro, meso, and macro, and none of these levels is homologous with the others.

In the succeeding chapters of the book, the authors develop these theses and discuss in detail issues connected with the creation and functioning of Relational Subjects in social life. In claiming the ontological separateness of Relational Subjects, they reject both individualism and holism. They also criticize the position of philosophers who postulate the existence of a Plural Subject. Their main censure concerns support for an aggregational individualism and consequently the creation of a Plural Subject on the frail pillars of a similarity of intentionality (Michael E. Bratman)—an idea rescued by John Searl, who introduced the premise of self-confirming convictions of the existence of such similarities (“I believe that you believe that I believe (...)” (Donati & Archer 2015: 39)), and Raimo Tuomela, who postulated the existence of a normative system binding the Plural Subject into a unanimous entity. The holistic concept proposed by Margaret Gilbert, in which a Plural Subject emerges from a network of mutual obligations based on a social contract, has also proven unsatisfactory. All these theories assume that the existence of a Plural Subject depends on sharing common intentions, uniformity of thought, or the existence of mutual obligations. The authors of *The Relational Subject* do not agree with these claims and provide examples to prove them false: the tax system does not compel a sense of community, and musicians in an orchestra do not need to have the same aims to form a group. Thus in order to explain the existence of collective entities, it is necessary to find a point of departure in which the relational dimension of social subjects is taken into account, along with their dynamics and the ability of individuals to reflect on those relations and their effects.

The proposed conception of man is a humanist conception; it does not reduce the human being to the product of social or natural forces. Man is not a closed monad equipped with a self, but by his or her nature is a relational being. His or her activities are directed toward three types of orders: the natural, practical, and discursive. In each of these orders different types of relations are realized: object-object, subject-object, and subject-subject.

As a result, each of these orders produces properties that constitute the essence of humanity: sense of self, praxis, and symbolic communication. The authors of *The Relational Subject* have made a close analysis of these orders in previous publications (e.g., Archer 2000: 121–193). This time they concentrate on Relational Subjects, which are defined as social entities orienting their activities toward other people and establishing relations with them: “The subject is social in that he or she is relational” (Donati & Archer 2015: 32). However, these relations cannot be reduced to an aggregate of individuals connected by networks of dependence or a superior structure; they create an entirely separate level of reality impacting both individuals (e.g., defining social identity) and social structures at the micro, meso, or macro level. They are intentionally constructed by people, but their emergent nature means that their effects can not be foreseen at the moment they are initiated. A relation “is not merely the product of perceptions, sentiments and inter-subjective mental states of empathy, but is both a symbolic fact (‘a reference to’) and a structural fact (‘a link between’). As such, it cannot be reduced to the subjects even though it can only ‘come alive’ through these subjects” (Donati & Archer 2015: 143). The authors emphasize that rational choice theory, which understands relations as an exchange based on maximizing individual benefits, excludes the possibility of building relations. Martin Buber’s concept of relations that are created in the process of a mutual hermeneutic agreement also gives rise to doubts, as there is a large probability that interpreting the desires of an alter ego by intuition or analogy could be fallible. The conditions that must be fulfilled by a Relational Subject in order to exist do not presuppose either rational calculation (“Me-ness”), or extraordinary empathetic ability (“Thee-ness”), or shared mental content (a Plural Subject).

Who is a Relational Subject? This subject exists solely within relations and refers to a “human person apprehended in making these relations and being made by them” (Donati & Archer: 54). The authors distinguish two types of Relational Subject: individual (personal) and social. In the first case they point to the relational nature of human beings, who develop in relation to the three above-mentioned orders, and they particularly draw attention to the stratifying-relational dimension of the human self, which is in a constant dialogue between “I,” “Me,” “We,” and “You,” wherein these aspects of the human being define and redefine themselves in relation to the social context, the relation with Others. In this sense, every human individual is a Relational Subject. A human being is born with potential abilities and possibilities, which are activated and developed in relations



with the external world (material and social). The development of a human being can be described as a square divided into four fields, each standing for a successive stage of change. “I,” “Me,” “We,” and “You” are not real entities but internal relations within the individual self, which conducts an endless internal conversation. At the start of his or her road of life, a person discovers his or her objective position in the world and becomes aware of social privileges and limitations (“Me”). Individuals, in order to change their social position to a more advantageous one, can form social relations, creating Corporate Agents; they can mobilize and strive to change their social position (“We”) in order to realize plans for their future (“You”) (see Archer 2010: 222–252). Corporate Agents are Relational Subjects, which enable the organization of collective activities aimed at the morphogenesis of the existing social order in order to satisfy the needs of people connected by relations (“You”) and also the needs of the social environment in which this entity functions. However, the actual life aim of a human being is not the improvement of his social position but realization of ultimate concerns, that is, autotelic values, which are constitutive for our personal identity and which determine who we are and who we will become.

Social (Collective) Relational Subjects are a specific type of social arrangement, which has to fulfil a range of conditions in order to exist. Such an entity can be spoken of only when the individuals creating it are conscious of the existence of the relations linking them and the persons who are engaged in this relation consider it to be an important value. The internal relations between the individuals creating it are essential, but so are external relations with the environment, real feelings of community and solidarity (“We-ness”), and the orientation of a person’s own activities toward the relation and the relational good it produces, and not toward the individual persons creating the relation. This means that the Relational Subject can not be reduced to specific relations between individual members of the community or their networks (the exception is a dyad, as a two-person Relational Subject), or to communication processes. Social Relational Subjects function at different levels of the social structure. At the micro-social level these are a kind of relation based on face-to-face contacts (e.g., couples, families). At the meso-social level, they are various kinds of organizations in which a multiplicity of direct and indirect interactions occur. In the latter case, the creation of a sense of community in striving for aims is significantly harder. It is possible when people become aware that the task they are setting themselves can be realized solely through joint action and when individuals engage in maintaining the relation. On the macro scale,

large international organizations are operating; these are dominated by impersonal relationships and thus they rarely form Relational Subjects, or only when they manage to create systemic and social integration. For this to happen, a “network of brokers” (Donati & Archer: 192) needs to be developed to mediate between the component individual and social subjects to prevent their isolation; at the same time, the network must not make any attempts to dominate or centralize the organization.

Usually the first Relational Subject that human beings encounter on their life path is their family. Socialization, in the sense of an active and selective process of gradually engaging the child in the world, plays an important role in shaping the ability of the individual to create Relational Subjects. The authors do not agree with Georg Herbert Mead and Lev Vygotsky’s concept of the development of the self, in which socialization is a linguistic process and the self, with its properties, is exclusively a social creation. Donati and Archer also consider that views on socialization need to be revised given the world’s ongoing individualization and social diversification, the lack of normative harmony, the possibility of developing a Generalized Other, and also the appearance of competing groups in regard to the primary groups that were once exclusively responsible for socialization. In the process of socialization, the individual actively builds his or her own hierarchy of engagement in concerns and relations by relational reflexivity to achieve governance over his or her life. This process is composed of several phases: (a) discernment, during which individuals identify the goods that are important to them and divide them from those that are not; (b) deliberation, in which life priorities are selected; and (c) dedication, in which individuals strive to realize those concerns that are most important, continually experimenting and reorganizing the hierarchy of concerns under the influence of their personal experiences. As a result, a person integrates his concerns into a relatively cohesive plan, which becomes his life compass (Donati & Archer: 127–141). Choices are not made solely in regard to individual needs: people are connected with other people by diverse social relations and these relations could have a significant impact on their decisions, facilitating or hampering their activities—which in turn determines the quality of those relations, their continuation, or disintegration. Thus the creation of a *modus vivendi* is closely connected with the relational dimension of personal life. The process of initial socialization can be considered finished when a person manages to create a complementary plan of his own concerns, organizing activities and aims.

Archer considers that in each of these phases a person faces the necessity of making choices between various orders of importance and attempts to reconcile them. This would not be possible without reflexivity. The authors list several types: (a) communicative—realized in conversations with others, in the course of which a given problem is deliberated upon; (b) autonomous—the subject independently weighs a problem and makes a decision; (c) fractured—the subject’s considerations do not lead to the undertaking of activities but solely to increased stress and cognitive disorientation; (d) meta-reflexive—the subject critically analyses his previous findings and actions. This reflexivity is connected with relations in the family; communicative reflexivity appears most often when family relations are very close and create many goods. In the remaining types of reflexivity, the child distances itself from its family, independently designating aims for itself. Archer’s research shows that meta-reflexivity most often appeared among young people, while communicative reflexivity was the least common, which would seem to indicate that relations in the families studied were not strong (for more on the subject, see Archer 2012).

The authors consider that if numerous goods are produced in family relations, and the members of the group are mutually caring and involved with each other, a child will try to recreate similar relations in its future life. If a family does not create relational goods or does not create many, the child will seek them in other groups. However, the family environment does not determine the child’s future, because the child could be influenced by other groups—for instance, the group of its contemporaries—as well as independently seeking temporary affiliations, trying its strength in various social arrangements. The authors also take note of the fact that in contemporary families the type of relations linking parents and children has changed: from strong ties of dependence and intergenerational solidarity into interpersonal relations based on the exchange of mutual services and the intensification of extra-familial relations, which is often connected with large social mobility. Furthermore, postmodernity does not promote the construction of Relational Subjects. Modern communication media, especially the internet, favours the formation of social relations, but they are most often superficial and deprived of reflexivity.

The above-mentioned process of reflexivity, which is shaped during socialization, is a type of thinking in which the individual submits his own behaviour to evaluation and plans further action. However, for the existence of a Collective Relational Subject it is important to develop relational reflexivity. This happens when subjects who are connected by relations

appraise those relations and their effects, considering in what manner to improve them in order to create more goods in common, achieve set goals, and form a *modus vivendi* that is advantageous for the continuation of the relation. It is not a question, in this case, of creating one's own life project but of creating common plans of action. We can speak of their existence when the relation becomes a value toward which the individuals involved orient their activities. The reflexivity of Relational Subjects consists in the parties continually monitoring the relation in internal and external conversations, and also in their thinking about their jointly created goods and their methods of achieving those goods. It is important, however, that what is involved is not the development of a strategy for obtaining goals but the guarantee that the relation created as a result of joint action is desirable and attractive for all the people engaged in it. When such an attitude is lacking, the relation begins to create evil, and ultimately to fall apart, as the authors demonstrate using the example of Anna Karenina and Alexei Vronsky. Relational evils are produced when the parties to the relation begin to orient their activities toward their own benefits and aims, and lack of confidence and discouragement appear.

The main task of Social Relational Subjects is to produce relational goods, which cannot be reduced to the creations of individuals engaged in those relations. These common goods can not be parcelled out, and when the relation disintegrates (e.g., in the case of a divorce), the divided goods lose their relational status. The concept of relational goods originates in Adam Smith's theory, although a broader analysis of such goods appeared only in the 1980s in the work of economists such as Carole Uhlaner (1989) and Benedetto Gui (1996). Relational goods were analysed in the context of research into happiness and interhuman relations involved in the production and consumption of material goods; the relational goods were supposed to intensify this sense of happiness and these relations and at the same time to provide a sense of well-being, increasing cooperation and mutual confidence. The concept of relational goods proposed in *The Relational Subject* criticizes the ancillary function of these goods in regard to economic processes and also the possibility of their exchange for material goods. The creation of relational goods may be based on mutual services, but it is not a matter of obtaining material benefits, as the priority value is the relation and the desire to preserve it by the parties engaged in it. These goods are not material, although they are socially desirable (e.g., confidence, collaboration, participation, solidarity) and can not be created beyond the Relational Subject. They have emergent properties which mo-

tivate individuals to strengthen the relation through a symbolic exchange and the realization of a common good *pro publico bono*. They appear during joint action and the parties to the relation are responsible for their creation, development, or dissolution, as well as their effects for the immediate or wider social environment. They are created when people become conscious that access to existing private or public goods is insufficient. Their beneficiaries are both the people creating the Relational Subject and external entities (e.g., local society). They must be available to the general public and can not be appropriated by anyone.

Two types of relational goods can be distinguished: primary, created in informal groups and direct interactions; and secondary (collective), created in communities in which formal and/or indirect relations predominate. They can also—though it happens very rarely—be produced by organizations acting within the framework of the state or market, on the condition that they abandon the principle of competitiveness and de-bureaucratize their governance strategy. It should be emphasized that in each of these cases the goods are neither private nor public; they do not have a specific individual or collective owner, and moreover they can not change owner. Public goods can be transformed into private ones and vice versa (e.g., through privatization or collectivization) but they can not be changed into relational goods. Such goods can be exchanged between various types of Relational Subjects (e.g., the family and non-governmental organizations). Conditions for the existence of relational goods include the non-instrumental motivation of the engaged persons; observance of the principle of mutuality and solidarity—both internal (within the relation) and external (with the social environment); the orientation of the individuals' activities toward the relation; the appearance of relational reflexivity; and an appropriate budget of time for the creation of such goods. Examples of such relational goods are NGOs or schools established and run by parents on the basis of an agreement with the district, which provides certain material means (e.g., the premises).

One of the most important results of the creation of relational goods and at the same time a generator of such goods is sociability, which is defined as “trust and cooperation among people who act in terms of reciprocal symbolic references and connections” (Donati & Archer 2015: 301). It arises as the result of joint action and increases in the course of activities as added social value, the emergent effect of the mobilization of networks and of reflexivity in regard to the quality of the relation and means of enlarging its parameters, for instance, through mutuality, confidence, cooperation,

and inclusion. Social relations also create other types of values—exchange value, use value, and the value of dignity. Some of these may be privileged at the cost of others, as is the case, for instance, in trade relations, in which exchange and use value dominate. Added relational value has an interesting property: its growth not only increases opportunities for the generation of relational goods but also stimulates the valorization of other values.

Relational Subjects are established for the creation of relational goods, although they can also generate evil. Relational evils are produced when human rights are broken, the unjust division of profits is generated, or discriminatory behaviours appear, and the signs of such evil are a decline in the members' mutual confidence, with a lack of "We-ness," the depersonalization of interhuman relations, and the commodification of activities. The main enemies of Relational Subjects, though, are the principle of free competition and the excess rivalry associated with it, state authoritarianism, and the bureaucratization of social arrangements—all of which break social solidarity apart.

Relational Subjects atrophy because these entities easily succumb to colonization by the state or market and become organizations acting in accord with bureaucratic or competitive rules, submitting to the pressure of professionalization and allowing the idea of self-help to be driven out by the idea of profit. The result of such processes is that civil society does not function in a manner that is beneficial for citizens. This can be explained as follows: civil society is premised on being a society that creates conditions for the emergence of various Relational Subjects and their production of relational goods as common goods—such production can not be ceded to the state and market. The aim of decentralization is to weaken the prerogatives of the welfare state and to transfer to citizens many of the activities previously undertaken by the state; the citizens will "create multiple and cooperative citizenship by different kinds of actors/agents: public, private, and relational" (Donati & Archer 2015: 247). Civil society is based on three main principles or pillars: equality, freedom (in the negative sense of "freedom from" and the positive sense of "freedom to"), and social solidarity. The principle of solidarity is connected with the principle of subsidiarity, whose guarantor can be solely Relational Subjects, not the State. Civil society is composed of four subsystems: the market, the state, informal networks, and the collective Relational Subject. In this civil society model, the State is a configured legal system; it can not be the central axis around which social life is organized, though. And thus the State fills solely an auxiliary function.

Contemporary civil society is wrestling with many problems, and the chief cause of the disadvantageous phenomena is the action of the state and market. The market acts according to principles set forth by the ideology of neoliberalism, whose main principle is free competition, and whose effect is to deepen social inequality. A welfare state acts to equalize the effects of free market activities and to ensure equal opportunity. A model emerges which is internally contradictory: the growth of consumerism drives the profits of entrepreneurs and increases budget revenues, which are expended on activities to repair the damages inflicted by the free market and artificially inflated consumption. In turn, a restriction of consumption leads to a reduction in the state budget and a lack of funds to improve living standards for the poorest strata of society. The welfare state is unable to resolve social problems, and equalizing the distribution of goods by hand-outs means the weakest individuals become passive beneficiaries of social programmes. The sole exit from the situation at the macro-social level is an expansion of civil liberties and of the Relational Subjects' field of activities (the creation of cooperatives, which are not oriented toward large profits), and at the micro-social level a change in lifestyle and a limiting of consumerism. Money should not be the dominant form of capital, and particularly, it should not be an autotelic aim. Changes in the sphere of morality are also necessary: individualist ethics should be replaced by an ethics of responsibility, the humanization of social relations, and the growth of ecological awareness.

Given the emergent nature of relational goods and the associated question of the predictability of the effects of Relational Subjects' activities, the authors' analysis of the ethical consequences is important. The authors draw attention to the fact that social inequality is growing in the contemporary world, the pauperization of large human communities is proceeding, and human rights violations are common. It is often pointed out that globalization is responsible for these processes. Such an explanation is unsatisfactory, however, as specific individuals and groups are behind these processes. Classical ethics analyses evil in the context of the intentions of social actors. Who, though, is responsible for the side effects of activities—particularly in a situation where we are dealing with a chain of connected activities whose effects occur far in time and space from the initiating actors? In such situations, individuals and groups are freed from moral responsibility and the blame for such a state of affairs is placed on structures and impersonal processes, while repair of the negative effects is left to the state. In the authors' opinion, these negative processes are cre-

ated in interhuman relations and the persons creating those relations are responsible for the relational evil they have generated and which only they could have prevented. This is possible only when Relational Subjects reflect social networks as the product of relations and their outcome at every stage of their production, to correct the distribution of goods. An ethics of responsibility should respect not only the principles of freedom and equality but also solidarity and subsidiarity. Without them, it will not be possible to build a real civil society on the global scale.

To summarize, the theoretical perspective proposed by relational sociology is not only a theory of the morphogenesis of the social person, of culture and structure (whose foundation is social relations), but also a plan for a new civil society in which the ethic of responsibility and subsidiarity is respected.

In conclusion, a few critical remarks: the main defect of this book is its very high saturation with new ideas and typologies. These create a complicated network of meanings in which it is very easy to lose oneself. The situation is made even worse by the fact that the authors quite frequently refer to their previous works and sometimes discuss the ideas contained in them in a highly abbreviated manner. For a reader with a slight acquaintance with these works the book is difficult to digest. Furthermore, it might be quite hard to reconstruct the philosophical foundations of the authors' proposed sociological theory if the reader is not familiar with the social ontology of the critical realism of—for instance—Roy Bhaskar, who is not mentioned in *The Relational Subject*, even in the footnotes. Thus even for a person who is following the authors' arguments carefully, many unresolved questions could arise. I am presenting only a few of them here.

In a polemic with philosophers analysing the ontology of a Plural Subject constructed on collective imaginings or individual representations of the minds of other people, the authors postulate the existence of a Relational Subject, whose foundation is the reflexivity of the engaged subjects. However, the authors do not explain whether all engaged persons should undertake such reflection. A situation can be imagined in which certain individuals will have more potential or capital (analytical, linguistic) and therefore their manner of defining the relation could become dominant. The authors do not in general reflect on the subject of authorities or of symbolic power, either on the micro scale or at the level of social macrostructures.

The analysis of individuals as individual relational subjects is fairly general and meant to serve as a model. However, not all persons taking



part in the formation of Corporate Agents (“We”) are capable of morphogenesis and will remain members of the original subjects of action (“Me”). Archer discussed this process in *Being Human* (2000: 253–283) and *Making Our Way Through the World* (2007). In *The Relational Subject*, the question has been treated very briefly and thus it is not clear how the balanced social identity of a person who does not become part of the active and causal “We” would develop. It is possible to imagine the existence of individuals who are not part of such organizations, who remain passive in regard to the structural restrictions, and who must wait until Corporate Agents initiate morphogenesis. But are they capable of taking full advantage of the results of morphogenesis? Or could a “new edition” of privileged social roles once again pass them by? Similar observations could be made about the process of socialization. Even if we agree that in the contemporary world family relations are significantly weaker—which is a fairly large generalization not taking into account intercultural variations—the family function of socialization in this model is only sketchily discussed. Archer overlooks, for instance, the fact that a child could have different relations with its father and with its mother. Are we in this case dealing with a Relational Subject if both relations are satisfactory for the parties and create relational goods? If we agree with the thesis that a family is a group in which the members develop relational reflexivity, what type of family best supports such a development? From a few passing remarks it can be concluded that this would be a family in which numerous relational goods are produced and which develops communicative reflexives and meta-reflexives. What happens when a child is raised in an orphanage or similar facility? Can such an institution function to stimulate the development of relational reflexivity, and if so, how? What fate awaits individuals who did not have positive patterns of relations, were not able to build a cohesive life plan in the process of socialization, and developed fractured reflexivity? Are they capable of creating Relational Subjects in the same degree as persons who experienced positive relations?

Further doubts could be produced by the concept of relational goods, which in the view proposed in *The Relational Subject* are deprived of strong axiological foundations. It is not known, after all, how “good” is defined, what its ethical bases are, and what it is to serve. Is the priority a social good, or the good of a human being—which in Catholic social thought, for instance, transcends society? The answer is connected with the question of a human being’s position in the world. The omission in the book of a clear attempt to conceptualize the essence of a human being slightly weakens the

humanist perspective of the theory. The authors claim, in truth, that a human being is a “spiritual being and social relations are one of the essential elements defining what is human” (Donati & Archer 2015: 258), but it is not known what other elements (agency, rationality, liberty?) define human nature and what is its genesis.

The authors’ position on the ethical question is also not known. Relational goods can be various for various Relational Subjects, but are all definitions equally legitimate? Relational solidarity and a sense of satisfaction can also be based on the performance of moral evil. It is not clear if the proposed ethic is a relativist ethic—in which the positive and negative values of objects and persons are relative qualities—or an objectivist ethic, in which the absoluteness of good is assumed (Tatarkiewicz 1989: 25–103). In addition, the authors of *The Relational Subject* have considerably broadened the sphere of the idea of responsibility, which could give rise to many reservations. First, they include persons who have unintentionally contributed to social evil (and are not thus conscious of the consequences of their acts and not “properly qualified”) in the set of responsible agents (Ingarden 1987: 77). This leads to a situation in which an individual’s decision and the effect are separated from each other, and thus also agency and its moral qualification; consequently, such an ethics is not cohesive with the concept of agency proposed by the authors. Second, such a broadening of the concept of responsibility causes it to lose its sense, because each of us becomes responsible for social evil—present, past, and future equally—because it is always possible to indicate a certain chain of deeds in which our actions are one of the links. The idea of reflexivity does not save this position because the authors themselves point out that it varies depending on people’s biographical trajectories. The question thus arises: Who is responsible for a lack of sufficient reflexivity—the individual person, or also the other individuals who are in relations with that person? Third, an ethics of responsibility can not be built on a relativistic theory of values, as Roman Ingarden observes (1987: 100–101), but the authors are vague on the question of axiology. It can thus be said that their model of an ethics of responsibility is built without solid axiological foundations.

The book clearly omits to place considerations on the relational properties of social life in the broader context of social theory. Reference is almost absent to Catholic social science, which also analyses social existence as a real, relational, and polymorphic existence, and the common good as a universally available relational good constructed in accord with principles of solidarity and subsidiarity located deep in an axiological sphere and

closely linked with the good of the human being (John XXIII 1961; Pius XI 1931; Tischner 1982). The authors also do not debate the libertarian concept of the state or communitarian concepts of community life. Nor do they refer to the works of the leading representative of humanist sociology, Florian Znaniecki, who understood the human being in a relational manner (Halas 2010) and devoted many chapters of his work to an analysis of social relations (Znaniecki 1965).

In spite of a certain lack of completeness that might be felt by the reader after finishing this book, the above remarks should not be treated as a list of defects. It is rather a catalogue of the questions that could be departure points for further discussion of the relational dimensions of social life and their consequences for the functioning of civil society. And even if sceptically inclined readers consider that the project proposed by the authors of *The Relational Subject* is unfinished, and certain ideas a bit too utopian, it should be emphasized that this is one of the few projects in contemporary sociology in which human subjectivity, both in its individual and its collective aspect, is so strongly stressed—and this is reason enough to read the book.

transl. Michelle Granas

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# DICTIONARY OF RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

**PAOLO TEREZI, LUCIA BOCCACIN, RICCARDO PRANDINI  
(EDS.), LESSICO DELLA SOCIOLOGIA RELAZIONALE**

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A dictionary of relational sociology immediately raises questions: what is it, what does it mean, and what are its uses? Some helpful suggestions are present in the dictionary's preface, written by its three editors. Relational sociology, systematically developed since the early 1980s in accordance with the paradigm initiated by Pierpaolo Donati, has become a prolific research orientation in Italy and is described as the Italian relational turn. It is being creatively developed by many researchers, including the authors of entries in the dictionary, which serves as a guide to relational sociology as understood by Pierpaolo Donati. Among the 26 authors, who are of different generations and are all well-known scholars and researchers, 13 are associated with the University of Bologna. Hence, we may use the term "Bologna school of relational sociology," since that is where this current was initiated and then evolved in the circle of its creator. A glance at the alphabetical list of entries is sufficient to note that the dictionary establishes a new conceptual grid, often by adding the adjective "relational" to various terms. This is obviously a manifestation of the new way of theorizing. Examples include "Relational contracts," "Relational differentiation," "Relational education," and "Relational reason." Entries pertaining to the widely accepted vocabulary of sociology are relatively few in number. Moreover, the reader finds that concepts such as "association," "communication," or "socialization" have also acquired a new relational sense. Among the concepts of classical sociology, the fundamental distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* has been interpreted anew. It serves as an example of

“revisiting” classic works to once again pursue sociology as a science about society understood as networks of relations (Terenzi et al. 2016: 99). Entries such as “Social risk,” “Social capital,” “Interculturalism and multiculturalism,” and “Social morphogenesis” show that relational sociology takes up key problems discussed in various contemporary sociological theories of postmodernity and late modernity, as well as in other works about modern socio-cultural transformations. The relational angle shows these issues in a new light, while the concept of the *dopo-moderno* (after-modern), discussed in a separate entry, thematizes these changes in a distinct, innovative way. The tissue of social relations makes it possible to combine the concepts of social networks and everyday life (both of which are included in the *Lessico...*), even though they have hitherto been associated with two different theoretical currents. Of course, basic concepts, such as the entries on “Social relation” and “Reciprocity,” play a fundamental role. Obviously, we will not list all the entries here, or even exhaustively group them. However, those that relate to the public sphere, civil society, the third sector, social work, and social policy should be mentioned. All this serves to highlight the practical orientation of relational sociology.

The dictionary has appeared at a time when the term “relational sociology” is spreading rapidly in scholarly publications around the world (Porpora 2015: 182–189). Importantly, the meanings given to it are often imprecise, blurring the original sense ascribed to this term by Italian sociologists. In response to the pressing need for a clearer formulation, a special issue of the “International Review of Sociology” appeared in 2015, edited by Riccardo Prandini and dedicated entirely to relational sociology (Prandini 2015). In that issue, Pierpaolo Donati published a policy paper that showed Mustafa Emirbayer’s failure to correctly use the concept of relationality. Emirbayer’s manifesto has caused many misunderstandings (Donati 2015; Emirbayer 1997). Thus, an English edition of this dictionary would obviously help ensure that the worldwide development of relational sociology proceeds in the right direction.

The dictionary’s aim is to show the three pillars of relational sociology: the ontological and epistemological premises upon which the morphogenetic theory of social phenomena is founded, the methodology of empirical research, and the so-called “application pragmatics”—in other words, the application of relational sociology, especially in the field of broadly understood social policy. The basic premise states that “at the beginning (of any social reality) lies the relation” (Terenzi et al. 2016: 9). The *Lessico...* explains that relational sociology does not reject classical sociology; on the

contrary, it articulates its legacy anew. This reformulation leads to the formation of a new, unique methodology that will function as the path to relational cognition. Empirical analyses become the standard for testing relational sociology. The ultimate aim is social intervention, but in a form completely different from modernist social engineering.

The entries in *Lessico della sociologia relazionale* represent an introduction to the theory and methodology of relational sociology, while simultaneously showing their usefulness in empirical research and the practical consequences as regards various areas and problems of social life.

The lexicographic arrangement of each entry is exceptionally original and consists of three sections: an exposition of the concept, which contains unambiguous definitions proposed by Pierpaolo Donati and an account of their evolution over time; then references to Donati's works on the given topic (up to five for each entry), which enable the reader to trace the development of each concept; and finally, creative elaboration of the topic by other authors (also up to five selected works). A bibliography of Pierpaolo Donati's works (published between 1971 and 2015) has been placed at the end of the dictionary. It contains 787 titles published over more than 40 years. Thus, the *Lessico...* presents the achievements of the representatives of Italian relational sociology, but above all, it is a guide to the monumental scholarly legacy of its creator, Pierpaolo Donati, while also being a tribute to his work.

It is worth noting that the *Lessico...* has had a prototype in the form of a glossary included in the volume *Sociologia. Una introduzione allo studio della società* (Donati 2006a). This glossary contains the definitions of basic concepts in relational sociology. The *Lessico...* is an excellent introduction to relational sociology, especially since its form is conducive to non-linear reading and enables the reader to take various paths when exploring the territory of relational sociology. A certain redundancy of information in the form of essential repetitions in entries that constitute separate wholes makes this easier still.

One type of entry merits particular attention: entries that contain two related concepts, e.g., "Sociologism/Relationism" or "Relational subject/Social subjectivity." Although the entire dictionary is dedicated to relational sociology, no entry presents the premises of this current in a synthetic fashion. Hence, the critique of sociologism and relationism enables us to determine the premises of relational sociology through negation: by discarding all those elements of former and modern sociological approaches that are considered an encumbrance or ballast. Criticism of sociologism is,



of course, nothing new. It has a long tradition, originating from numerous polemics with Émile Durkheim's concept of the social fact. In recent times, Raymond Boudon, among others, has voiced this kind of critical opinion afresh (Boudon 1979). Donati's relational sociology differs in its focus and aims from Boudon's theory of individual action, which was initially directed against sociologism understood as a radical standpoint attempting to explain social phenomena only through social phenomena. Thus, this critical starting point proves to be a crucial matter, as the issue of the novelty and originality of relational sociology as a theoretical proposition must inevitably arise, given that this current has emerged precisely from the critique of sociologism and its ontological assumptions. Paolo Terenzi, the author of the entry *Sociologismo/Relazionismo*, emphasizes that Donati's relational sociology represents an alternative possibility, especially in regard to the particular kind of sociologism present in theories of social reproduction. Thus, the anti-sociologism of relational sociology consists of rejecting a concept of man and society where social actions and events are understood and explained through the prism of determinist factors belonging to a collective order, either structural or cultural in character. At its beginnings, Donati's relational sociology is more or less convergent with other orientations characterized by criticism towards Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism. These orientations can be as varied as symbolic interactionism or Margaret S. Archer's morphogenetic theory. While a critique of the over-socialized concept of man as a "gift of society" (to quote Margaret S. Archer) seems only a variation on the topic taken up and deeply analysed by many authors, raising the issue of relationships between empirical reality and values, especially moral values, appears to supply novel viewpoints and noteworthy arguments in the discussion with sociologism.

Relational sociology has challenged sociologism (Terenzi et al. 2016: 300) on the grounds of sociological discourse, rather than philosophical discourse or some other type of discourse. A critical point in Donati's relational sociology is the postulate of breaking away from the amoral nature of sociology, understood as freedom from valuation. In other words, he presents the controversial project of turning sociology into some kind of moral science, as well as a new form of political thought. Some premises of relational sociology must obviously provoke discussion, e.g., its criteria for the moral evaluation of observed social facts and for formulating visions of how reality may be transformed. In particular, it is doubtful whether the positions that remain faithful to the postulate of freedom from valuation should be classified as examples of sociologism, since searching for valu-

ation criteria on the grounds of sociology itself, even relational sociology, may be a sign of sociological reductionism, and thus effectively of sociologism, to which relational sociology is opposed. It seems that the postulate of creating relational anthropology may be a way to escape this trap (*ibid.*). It should be noted that the dictionary contains no overview of the concept of relational sociology in a separate entry. Such a synthetic characterization would certainly prove very useful. There are also no entries on ethics, morality, or values, which (considering the sensitive issue of the controversial relationships between sociology and ethics) seems a serious deficiency, one that should, perhaps, be remedied in subsequent editions.

The critique of sociologism under various forms of social reproduction, which reify social institutions, has been extended to new orientations, which have begun to be called relational, and which Donati calls relationist. The critique of relationism was initially directed against Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. For Mannheim, knowledge is a purely socio-cultural construct. Donati subsequently began using the term "relationism" to refer to the so-called relationist sociologies of Mustafa Emirbayer, Jan Fuhse, Nick Crossley and others. He emphasizes the contrast between relational sociology, based on the ontology of critical realism, and relationism. It is very important to understand the distinction between relationism and relationality. Relationality means a definite rejection of the mere processuality of relations, one-sidedly emphasized by relationists, in favour of a proper analysis of emergent reality; in other words, of the specific reality of social phenomena as the relations between entities, where the relation perceived as a process also has its own structure.

The entry "Person" evokes the promising possibilities offered by relational anthropology. Both the new way of perceiving anthropology and the innovative character of the relational concept of the human person will certainly serve as a focus for a critical study of this approach, given e.g., the wealth and diversity of existing personalistic anthropology, as well as the earlier presence of the concept of the person in social theory, to mention only the works of Marcel Mauss, Pitirim A. Sorokin, or Florian Znaniecki. Later on, this concept became less visible. For several decades of the twentieth century, sociology tended to focus on the actor, agent, or at best the Self, until the concept of the person finally came back into favour in the twenty-first century. Christian Smith's book is a good illustration of this trend (Smith 2011). The observation that Donati did not deal systematically with the theory of the person (Terenzi et al. 2016: 175), articulating the implicit understanding of the human person as a relational subject only

in his commentary on the position of Margaret S. Archer (Donati 2006b), raises the following question: what elements of relational sociology would hold important implications for the new anthropology? Apparently, it is necessary to define the essential conditions for the emergence of social forms that can be considered human as long as relations are created by reciprocally oriented subjects and the human quality of relations consists of respect towards the Other (Terenzi et al. 2016: 178).

A critical distance to the metaphysical notion of the person, but also to the transplantation of any other philosophical anthropology into the social sciences, is associated with an attempt to carry out an integral project involving relational ontology, social relations theory, research methodology (relational analysis), and a political project in a broad sense—involving social work, among other things. The concept of the person is supposed to enable us to take a fresh look at the relation between the person and society, as well as, on a methodological level, to solve the conflict between individualism and holism, and on a political level, the conflict between a liberal and socialist (collectivist) interpretation of civil rights (the liberal market versus the welfare state and the labour force: “lib/lab,” to quote Donati). Each of those dichotomous positions essentially eliminates social relations and the person as an individual-in-relations. Hence, the relational approach is intended to allow linking the person with society, as long as both entities maintain their respective specific realities and autonomy. In this perspective, the person appears as a relationally constituted being who constantly transcends the relations he or she generates, while simultaneously remaining a subject in interactions—also capable of building relations with him- or herself. As the reality of social relations cannot be brought down to communication processes, the relational concept of the person extends far beyond the conceptualization of the semiotic or dialogic Self. However, this concept requires further theoretical elaboration, taking into account the differences and links between the person and the Self, especially since relational sociology has taken up the issue of reflexivity, which has been so important for the theory of the Self ever since the works of Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead appeared.

The conceptual frames reflected in the *Lessico...* naturally represent only what is most significant in the theoretical vocabulary of relational sociology. It turns out that issues of social subjectivity, considered in regard to the person as a relational subject (as illustrated by the double entry “Relational subject/Social subjectivity”), prove particularly important for this theory. The above-mentioned double entry contains the concept of the re-

lational “I,” which, unlike the Self, redefines itself through relations. Subjectivity is expressed through identity; Donati presents a relational model of the latter. However, the concept of the Self, particularly the dialogical Self, apparently cannot be marginalized in this theory, since the above-mentioned problem of reflexivity needs to be taken into account. Donati elaborates reflexivity as relational reflexivity, which (like relational identity) is discussed in a separate entry.

The relational subject exists only in relations and is constituted through relations. The concept of the relational subject pertains not only to persons. It holds significance in regard to collective subjects, enabling us to better understand the social subjectivity of various social formations arising from the relationality of persons on the micro-social level (sociology of everyday life). Social subjectivity subsequently develops on the meso and macro levels. Social subjectivity is distinguished from the concept of the collective actor, as it manifests itself in the forms of association of individuals or groups (individual actors and collective actors) in which the common identity is linked with the participants’ freedom and responsibility.

It is a paradox of sorts that Donati’s relational sociology, despite originating from a negation of Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism and neo-functionalism (especially of Niklas Luhmann), uses a heuristic tool based on the AGIL scheme, which has its own entry in the *Lessico...* However, in Donati’s interpretation, the four structural requirements (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency) take on a whole new meaning and become imbued with new content, preserving only the logical and analytical form of AGIL. As generalized components of action, they are: the means (tools), the goal, the norm, and the value model. In other words, the AGIL scheme refers to the means and instrumental resources, the intent or situational goal, normative regulation, and the cultural model of values. This heuristic scheme of relational sociology, which emphasizes the social context and situation, is described as a kind of methodological compass, making it possible to orient the analysis of social facts as emergent phenomena in the processes of morphostasis or morphogenesis. In particular, it represents constitutive dimensions of the analysis of social relations. This interpretation is critical both in regard to Niklas Luhmann’s theory, where the AGIL scheme is an autopoietic mechanism of the social system (Terenzi et al. 2016: 269) and in regards to Parsons’s approach (functional requirements). This scheme contains no postulates; it is merely an instrument enabling us to study the actual configurations of the dimensions of social relations. It is a way of con-

ducting observations, a tool for studying the relational order as the basis of every social structure.

It is worth noting that the *Lessico...* does not contain separate entries interpreting social action or interaction from the perspective of relational sociology, although “relation dynamics” and emergence are continually emphasized. The latter is not discussed in a separate entry either. Admittedly, in Donati’s interpretation the AGIL scheme proves exceptionally effective from an analytic point of view, as shown, e.g., by the entries: “Solidarity” (types of solidarity; solidarity as the redistribution of resources and means; solidarity as sharing common ideals and interests; solidarity as the social norm of reciprocity of gifts (symbolic exchange); and solidarity as confirmation of the unity of a human community according to the AGIL analytic paradigm (Terenzi et al. 2016: 311)) or “Relational reflexivity” (ibid.: 240–249), which distinguishes the following types of this phenomenon—instrumental reflexivity, value-oriented (autonomous) reflexivity, relational (communicative) reflexivity, and meta-reflexivity understood as value reflexivity. On a purely lexical level, some of the terms are identical with those used by Margaret Archer (2012); however, she utilizes a different concept of reflexivity types, although both concepts are theoretically coherent and rooted in relational sociology.

The AGIL scheme can be applied in analysis from a viewpoint that is either internal or external in respect to the relation; in other words, from the standpoint of the acting subject and the subject’s intentions in the given relation or in respect to other relations. In the second case, the analysis is performed in such dimensions as heteronomy, instrumentality, autonomy, or selflessness. Thus, AGIL becomes an instrument that enables us to study social processes which generate social facts. These facts are explained and interpreted as an emergent relational effect.

Readers are tempted to ask what distinguishes relational sociology from other sociological theories, both classical and new, as regards the kind of cognition it proposes. The opening entry in the *Lessico...*, *Analisi relazionale* (“Relational analysis”), contains important clues to the answer. This entry proves particularly helpful in avoiding the confusion which may be caused by the apparently central role of the AGIL scheme, associated mainly with functionalism (Talcott Parsons’s Grand Theory). Relational analysis is part of the relational cognitive system, which contains the following components: approach, theory, paradigm, and method. The relational approach consists of adopting the optics of relationality, which makes it possible to distance oneself both from individualism and from holism by focusing on

the social relation as an elementary social fact. The aim of the constructed theory is to understand and explain social phenomena as phenomena generated by social relations. The relational paradigm is based on the concept of society as a network, whereas the research methodology depends on relational analysis. Interestingly, relational analysis is seen as a way towards developing an interpretative theory of social phenomena in the light of the relational approach, utilizing various heuristic models such as the modified AGIL model or the model of social relations as *refero-religo* (the psycho-cultural dimension of meaningful orientation and structural ties). However, although interaction is so important for the interpretative paradigm, it does not appear to be explicitly thematized, despite being an inherent part of any relation *in actu*. As mentioned earlier, an entry on interaction has not been included in the *Lessico...* This only serves to highlight the distinctiveness of the relational paradigm and the main idea of society as a social relation, rather than society as symbolic interaction. (This latter view was favoured by Herbert Blumer, who emphasized the importance of the interpretative process of creating and negotiating meanings in establishing social order.)

The stages of relational analysis, and therefore of the methodological approach, have been described in detail. Without going into specifics, it should be noted at this point that relational analysis begins with choosing between descriptive observation or problematizing observation. The target stage of analysis is the application, and therefore the implementation, of the Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance (ODG) formula. Thus, relational analysis combines the theory and pragmatics of social intervention. Here, again, the sensitive issue of valuation in sociology comes up. The position of relational sociology articulated by Donati seems as refined as it is ambivalent: he describes relational sociology as a positive science, based on facts, but not positivist (Terenzi et al. 2016: 18). Moreover, it should be hermeneutically adequate, which may also be interpreted as a postulate to include the experience of values, including moral values. The postulated obligation of the sociologist to ascribe the proper ethical value to the facts in question and to explicate the ethics on the basis of which they are judged, and hence the postulate of questioning the positivist separation of facts and values, is not an excuse for confusing sociology with ethics. Postulates of this sort certainly make the sociologist's task extremely complex as compared to the simpler choices of either complete neutrality or determined commitment. Relational sociology undoubtedly prompts us to rethink the differences and relationships between sociology and the moral sciences. It reconstructs and transforms sociology as a systematic undertaking. It is founded on the

new semantics of identity, the conceptualization of reciprocity, and above all the analysis of social relations as reality *sui generis*, the distance that simultaneously distinguishes and links together the ego and alter. The carefully elaborated *Lessico...* is certainly a significant achievement for Italian scholars and an important step towards establishing relational sociology as a methodical undertaking, axiologically oriented towards relational goods.

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# THE QUEST FOR THE “NEW WELFARE STATE”

**PIERPAOLO DONATI, LUCA MARTIGNANI (EDS.),  
TOWARDS A NEW LOCAL WELFARE: BEST PRACTICES  
AND NETWORKS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION**

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The book under review is a collection of texts that are the outgrowth of a conference held in June 2014 in Bologna. The collection was presented to readers a year after the conference and contains texts which vary in style and are loosely related thematically, ranging from considerations of theory to case studies. I will begin my review with a discussion of individual chapters to familiarize readers with the subject matter and help them in selecting those topics of interest to them. I concentrate, however, on the text by Donati in order to consider whether and to what degree the perspectives he proposes can be called innovative, and what are the consequences.

After a brief introduction the book opens with a text by Adelbert Evers and Benjamin Ewert, *Social Innovations on the Local Level: Approaches, Instruments, and Different Ways of Dealing with Them*. This is a synthesized summary of the results of the EU WILCO project. From the text we learn that the aim of the project was to investigate whether and in what way social micro-innovations can contribute to social inclusion and support local social policy. Without going into details or giving too large a number of examples, the authors discuss five dimensions of innovation that were identified thanks to the project. The article is undoubtedly a competent synthesis of the findings of a large study, but it is devoid of any discussion of the broader question of social innovations implemented by NGOs.

The text by Pete Alcock, *Reconstructing Poverty and Social Exclusion: Agency or Structure? The Implications for Policy and Practice in the UK*, contains a deftly written synthesis of the changes that have occurred in UK social policy. The account is divided into a consideration of structure—that is, the elements conditioning social exclusion—and agency, that is, individuals’ ability to pull themselves out of poverty by their own efforts. Alcock shows that British social policy has alternated between placing greater emphasis on the removal of structural barriers and wanting to help individuals to increase their agency. He does refer marginally to the connection between ongoing changes and NGOs, but this theme plays a secondary role in his text. Anglo-Saxon literature is already rich in analyses of the historical evolution of social policy in the UK, but Alcock’s text might be of use to someone looking for a synthesis.

Isabel Vidal called her text *The Role of the Third Sector in Local Welfare*, but the title is quite misleading because she addresses the question of the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on NGOs. Her answer to this question is based on fragmentary data and limited to Italy, Spain, and England. After a brief and rather superficial discussion of selected examples of NGO activity, the author arrives at the fairly obvious conclusion that in a time of austerity the significance of cooperation between various entities increases.

The next text brings another change of subject. Victor A. Pestoff considers the question of co-production in the text *Co-Production as Social Innovation in Public Services*. The article is largely theoretical in nature; the author considers various definitions and ways of conceptualizing the issue of co-production, seeking answers to the question of whether co-production is an “individual act” or “collective action,” or both. Incidentally, he also addresses the question of the durability of co-production. The article is undoubtedly worthy of recommendation to persons interested in this subject.

In *Shifting Ideas of Subsidiarity in the Netherlands: Old and New Private Initiatives in the Social Domain*, Paul Dekker focuses on Holland and analyses its policy in regard to initiatives that encourage citizens to act together for their neighbourhood or public facilities, or to care for their elderly relatives. In an interesting and organized manner, Dekker describes the evolution of Dutch social policy after World War II. In particular, he analyses the slow process of departing from a model based on religious “pillars.” In Holland, the institutions of the welfare state rested on “traditional subsidiarity.” Simply stated, this means they functioned under the auspices of religious institutions and to a large degree depended on the engagement of religiously motivated citizens. I will devote some extra space to this case

as it is particularly interesting in the context of Donati's arguments in the final part of the book.

The classic diagnosis of the crisis of the welfare state consists in pointing out its excessive wastefulness and ineffectiveness in fulfilling its tasks (compare Pierson 1998). Such a diagnosis leads directly to criticism of the national or local administration of which the welfare state is a part. Holland is one of the examples, besides Switzerland, which does not fit the description. Civil society, rather than the government, was the basis for the welfare state built there. The crisis resulted from secularization and individualization: the Dutch increasingly failed to identify with their faith group and were not prepared to devote time and money to supporting it. As Dekker writes, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of seeking "new subsidiarity," when the state unwillingly took upon itself the tasks previously performed by citizens. The role of NGOs also changed, with a shift from a substitutive role toward a complementary role. Based on research, Dekker shows that citizens want greater freedom and criticize bureaucracy for "interfering in their lives," but when it comes to a specific problem to be resolved—such as, for instance, looking after the elderly—they expect a competent national or local institution to take over. Even the best prepared programmes do not change this fact and therefore, in the opinion of the Dutch sociologist, the expectation that people can be forced into long-term engagement on behalf of others is naive.

In the next text, *Italian Local Welfare: Between Fragmentation and Social Innovation*, Luca Martignani analyses the organization of the Italian welfare state. The text is unclear in several places, which is partially due to a faulty translation and partly to the lack of clear definitions of the categories Martignani uses in his analysis.

The following text is on a different topic. In *New Social Risks and the Re-configuration of Local and National Welfare*, Giuliano Bonoli addresses the question of the influence of federalism on the development of the welfare state, showing that this form of government does not foster the development of welfare but leads to the various parts of the federation avoiding responsibility by shifting it from one to another. The analysis uses the examples of Germany and Switzerland. The question is undoubtedly interesting. In analyses of the welfare state, attention is usually focused on internal legal regulations and institutional actors, while the issue of a country's political system is rarely considered.

In *Personalization and Innovation in the Social Services in a Cold Financial Climate*, Nadia Brookes considers the issue—which has been much investi-

gated recently—of the personalization of social services. The range of her analysis is limited to examples collected in the UK. A major problem in fitting individual social services to the needs of specific small groups, or even individual people, is that it increases the cost of services, and Brookes questions what fate awaits personalized programmes in a period of economic crisis. The conclusions are not encouraging: the author expects that with tighter finances, there will be restrictions on innovative, personalized services, and this will lead to lowered effectiveness and a deepening of the crisis.

The final text of the book is a long essay by the co-editor, Pierpaolo Donati, entitled *Prospects: Are We Witnessing the Emergence of a New 'Relational Welfare State'?* Donati's text clearly differs from the others. We do not find in it any descriptions of innovation or analyses of changes in specific social policies. Donati has selected for himself a much more ambitious goal: on the basis of his sociological theory he wants to plan a radically new system of social policy. In part, his text offers a general diagnosis of contemporary Western societies, and in part a utopian description of what model of welfare state is most desirable, or even necessary, if these societies are to survive. The attempt to realize such an ambitious aim within a single article understandably forces Donati to considerable brevity and generalization, but as a result it is sometimes hard to tell what he is trying to say. Nevertheless, I will try to reconstruct the main lines of his argument and to consider whether he is in fact bringing something new to the numerous analyses of crises in the welfare state and whether he is truly proposing a new model.

The crisis of the welfare state is only one of the symptoms of a deeper crisis in Western societies. Thus to understand its genesis, according to Donati, we have to look from a broader perspective, because the essence of the problems troubling these societies is neither political nor economic in nature. For Donati, the crisis is above all a moral crisis, manifested in weak interpersonal relations and the disappearance of social responsibility in every sphere of life. This view is not new: Tony Judt, for instance, saw morality as the source of the crisis in the welfare state (2011). But while the American historian saw a prescription for the crisis in reforms, Donati doubts the efficacy of reform activities because they do not take the complexity of the situation into account.

To escape from the crisis is difficult, if at all possible, because it requires the resolution of six dilemmas:

increase individual freedom, while increasing the citizen's responsibility for the consequences of private behaviour, increase autonomy (self-management) for intermediate social spheres, while directing them to the common good, increase social security, while avoiding the bureaucratization of society, increase social equality, while respecting differences (for example, cultural or gender differences), respond to the needs of individuals, while promoting solidarity among persons, aspire to globalization, while responding to local needs (Donati 2015: 216).

On first glance, Donati appears to be one of these pessimists, who, like for example Alasdair MacIntyre, consider that Western societies have stumbled into a blind alley and are trying to come to terms with values that are mutually exclusive. However, Donati does not believe, like the Scottish philosopher, that salvation lies in a return to tradition. He does not reject modernity and its achievements, but he thinks that in order to preserve them, much must be changed.

Later in the text, his diagnosis of the crisis is simplified and slightly modified. In referring to Luhmann, Donati claims that the state of contemporary society is defined by an unsolvable contradiction between the state and the market. As he writes,

modernised systems are a mix of lib and lab, that is, lib/lab systems. Whenever the market (lib) is insolvent, one resorts to the state (lab), whenever the state (lab) is insolvent, one resorts to the market (lib). This is the game of modern economy, which attained its most accomplished model in the second half of the twentieth century. Our societies are still working on the basis of this framework, looking to stabilise economic cycles and a fairer resource distribution through lib/lab regulations (Donati 2015: 232).

The existing lib/lab system can not be reformed. A change in the proportions by which the state is linked to the market will not help; correcting individual market or state institutions will not avail. The problem lies in the values guiding the members of society, and therefore what is needed is “a radical change of the ethical principles,” to bring about a “new society” (Donati 2015: 217). The key to the “new society” is supposed to be “after-modern citizenship,” in which a connection “between *homme* and *citoyen*”

will occur (ibid.: 222). Who or what is to form the new citizen? It would seem—I write “seem” because it is not clear—that this is the task of “new welfare.”

We learn that “new welfare” is to be distinguished by two traits. First, it is to support “culture centred around quality of life” (Donati 2015: 225), instead of the “poverty or riches of industrialization” (ibid.). Second, “social policies are no longer limited to the state-market binomial, but demonstrate precise differentiated dynamics in other spheres” (ibid.). Emphasizing the significance of “quality of life” in the activities of welfare-state institutions is nothing specific. How is the welfare state, centred on quality of life, to operate? This we do not discover. On the other hand, in explaining the second trait of “new welfare,” Donati refers to the example of NGOs, whose activities contravene both the logic of the market and of the state, going beyond the lib/lab system.

Such new enterprises as low profit limited liability companies and community interest companies, as well as new financial markets, can produce a different response to the world economic crisis, not merely by adapting themselves but by giving moral standards priority in economic and social action and by being able to modify life, work and consumption styles. Compared with traditional capitalist enterprises, such enterprises have a number of peculiar features: for instance, they produce relational goods (and more generally intangible goods), they show greater flexibility and value lateral social mobility rather than upward or downward job mobility (Donati 2015: 241).

I have quoted a longer passage here, because it is one of the rare instances where Donati more precisely defines what he means by “new welfare.” However, it is difficult to learn from this passage, or in the rest of the text, how such an NGO-ization of society is to occur.

Donati also appears to adopt an idealized image of NGOs. It is to be regretted that he did not refer to Paul Dekker’s text, which contains a penetrating analysis of the failure of a welfare-state model in which NGOs played a key role. Donati might reply that the Dutch are an example of the moral crisis destroying Western societies. In order for the postulated model to work, the above-mentioned “after-modern citizenship” is necessary. Yet Donati writes about NGOs as a kind of school for shaping that “after-modern citizenship,” while Dekker has convincingly shown that NGOs

can mobilize certain people to act for a certain period, but that such energy is quickly exhausted and then either the state must intervene again or the market reappears.

To this point in Donati's reflections the idea of a "relational welfare state" is entirely absent; it is only mentioned at the end of the text. Unfortunately, Donati focuses on describing the idea of a "relational state"—which is familiar from earlier texts (Donati 2002/3, 2004b)—and what we learn about the "relational welfare state" is limited to a single paragraph, from which it follows, first, that the local welfare state is responsible for the creation and support of "the complex citizenship" mentioned above, and second, "at the local level, the welfare state is no longer the centre and vertex of society; it does not 'produce' the latter, but becomes a subsystem that has to act in a subsidiary way towards all other subsystems providing welfare (market, third sector, families and informal networks) by adopting forms of social governance working through social networks" (Donati 2015: 251). Of what are these relations to consist and how do they differ from what scholars discuss under the heading of "new governance"? It is not clear.

Donati is trying, in a brief text, simultaneously to promote the "new society" model and to present a diagnosis of the crisis. He touches on many themes, involving the economy, the family, and the state. The question of the welfare state is only a pretext for these reflections and it is hard to say whether what he has written opens new perspectives for the study of the welfare state. Claims that the welfare state is in crisis are as old as the welfare state itself. Many volumes have been written on the subject, and many more will doubtless appear. No institutional solutions are perfect, or permanent, and faced with new challenges the welfare state will fall into crisis, which must be diagnosed as a point of departure. Donati does not add anything new to the existing analyses of the crisis of the modern welfare state. His ambitions do not lie in reforming specific institutions, but in the moral regeneration of all society. Here, however, we are moving onto more uncertain ground, as judgment depends on viewpoint—the general philosophical premises and values guiding the author. Donati is not a typical conservative fixed on the models of the past. He rather follows in the traces of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in seeing modernity as a Gordian knot of untieable paradoxes and contradictions and in hoping for some kind of "new society." And, like many others, he follows in the path of the French philosopher by demanding a revolution—although it is supposed to be a spiritual revolution, an ethical change that will enable people to combine



the contradictions of our modernity in a new fashion. Donati does not give a specific prescription for how the revolution is to be conducted. This seems to be the proper strategy, because when he does come down to the level of the concrete—as in the case of NGOs—his postulates are fairly artless.

Is *Towards a New Local Welfare*... worth reading? That depends. The book is a typical post-conference collection of works. It is a selection of more or less interesting texts on various questions which do not form a coherent whole. This is not a fault in itself: readers can find the texts that will interest them in such a variety. However, it is certain that the promise contained in the title is not fulfilled and that aside from Donati no one deliberates on the question of “new local welfare.” It is thus difficult to state whether relational sociology has expanded our knowledge about the welfare state. And is this the proper perspective from which to make philosophical reflections on the subject of a possible “new society”? Readers will have to judge for themselves.

transl. Michelle Granas

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# HOW TO SEE AND USE RELATIONS

## **JOHN ASHCROFT, ROY CHILDS, ALISON MYERS, MICHAEL SCHLUTER, *THE RELATIONAL LENS: UNDERSTANDING, MANAGING AND MEASURING STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS***

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University of Warsaw

Since the Harvard revolution in the late 1960s, relational thinking has increasingly been gaining ground in the social sciences. Sociology is now recognized to be more the study of social networks than the study of social groups (Giuffre 2013), while organizational theory focuses on organizational fields defined as relational spaces (Wooten & Hoffman 2008). Relational explanations are becoming more influential than dispositional or systemic ones (Tilly 2005), and we know that networks are no less important than markets and hierarchies (Powell 1990). Thanks to the development of the internet, common knowledge is also ever more shaped by relational thinking. Yet it seems that relational thinking is at an early stage of implementation in the management and leadership practices of organizations. The objective of the book being reviewed, *The Relational Lens: Understanding, Managing and Measuring Stakeholder Relationships*, is to promote the importance of the relational aspect of organizational life for managerial practices.

*The Relational Lens...* is the book behind the “Relational Analytics” services of a company established by the book’s authors. One of the authors, Michael Schluter, had earlier co-authored a book entitled *The R Factor* (Schluter & Lee 1993), in which the idea of relational proximity is articulated. Moreover, “relational proximity” is a registered trademark: “re-

lational analytics” can not be provided without a license from the authors. Still, it would seem that evaluating relations for the corporate sector is a rather pioneering enterprise. As the authors point out, we have a lot of tools allowing organizational performance to be measured on the basis of individual units of analysis. Our social environment is perceived through the filter of individualism dominating Western culture. Similarly, the filter of finance draws our attention to commodities which can be evaluated in financial terms. Therefore, phenomena that are hard to measure in currency are not considered important for organizations. The objective of the book is to convince leaders of organizations that managing relations could increase the performance of their organizations.

In order to measure relations and assess their impact on organizational performance, we first need to operationalize them. Especially in the tradition of social network analysis, we already identify certain aspects of relations that, when distinguished, bring deeper knowledge of the relations themselves, for instance, the strength of ties (Granovetter 1973) or the ties’ directions (Giuffre 2013). To measure relational proximity—the distance between individuals and organizations in the relationship—Ashcroft and his colleagues decided to use five scales: directness, continuity, multiplexity, parity, and commonality. The authors devote a separate chapter to each of the scales in order to present their understanding of these notions and illustrate them with examples from organizational life.

“Directness” is a measure of the degree of the relationship’s mediation by time, technology, or other people. The most direct relationship is when two individuals are present in one place and interact face to face. Yet very often relations are mediated by communication technology—the authors devote considerable space to e-mail communication and the use of social media. Transportation technologies are also mediations of relations. An important factor for the social sciences is that many relations are mediated by people; communication channels are hierarchical in organizations in particular, but in markets there is also very often a need for brokerage.

“Continuity” refers to the time scale of a relation. The authors claim that in the case of incidental encounters between two parties there is no relation. Relationships require at least a minimal degree of recurrence. The authors highlight that continuity is not only the rhythm of behaviours and the flow of time but also a narrative about the relationship and expectations of its future. According to the authors, humans build stories about their relations, and meaningful relations need to be discursively expressed.

“Multiplexity” is a dimension describing the breadth of the relation. If the encounters on which the relation is built occur only in a single social context, then the relation is of low multiplexity. If the two individuals or organizations have opportunities to interact in various contexts, then their relationship will likely be stronger. Such interactions enhance the possibilities of gathering more knowledge about the other party to the relationship and therefore are a base for trust.

“Parity” describes the balance of power in the relation. Very often relations are asymmetric in power—both in the organizational and market context. Organizations are hierarchical, while various actors in the market have unequal resources. According to the authors, the inevitable imbalances of power are accepted by people if they recognize that there is fairness in the relations. In this sense, procedural justice matters for relations.

“Commonality” is the dimension of the purposes of the social actors engaged in the relation. Commonality is larger if the purposes of the partners in the relation are more aligned. If their purposes do not overlap the relation will involve conflict, even if the other four dimensions of the relation are present in a high degree.

The authors thoroughly consider possible combinations of various levels of the five dimensions of relations. In the case of each dimension, the degrees that are felt to be appropriate or inappropriate are discussed. The book is loaded with illustrations and examples where stakeholders were able to improve their performance thanks to a deeper understanding of their relations. Unfortunately, the book does not provide details of the research tools used to assess relational proximity; therefore, the book could be considered a means of obtaining customers.

The book aims to broaden our thinking about what contributes to the value produced by organizations. The authors translate the findings of studies in organizational theory, social network analysis, and social psychology into guidelines for leaders of organizations. Many sociologists tend to complain that the soft aspects of social life, such as relations, are not considered very important by the stakeholders of public agencies, business enterprises, or non-profit organizations. Yet, as *The Relational Lens...* suggests—I imagine not purposively—proper incorporation of the value of relations into organizational life would equal colonization of that aspect of social life with metrics and managerial techniques. Since the 1980s the notion of social capital has been making an enormous career in the social sciences. It describes “the advantage created by a person’s location in a structure of relationships” (Burt 2005: 4). As a notion, social capital is

a new way of grasping what sociologists have been stating since the very beginning of their discipline—that social relations matter. Despite many interesting studies and the influence of authors such as Robert Putnam or Michael Woolcock, social capital still remains an allegory. It is very hard to measure its actual financial value. If techniques like relational analytics are successful, more aspects of social life will come to be supervised, controlled, and possibly disciplined. It is another niche for rationalization which will bring more value to the stakeholders. However, I am not so certain that it is going to provide much value for the rank-and-file members of organizations, whose relations will become the object of managerial techniques.

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**FORTHCOMING**

## **2017 /// Sociology under State Socialism – Varieties, Similarities and Exceptions**

The historiography of sociology in state socialist countries has emphasized the discipline's subordination to the regimes' political needs. Being 'banned' from the academic landscape in the course of the Stalinization of higher education systems during the late 1940s and 1950s, sociology was reintroduced as a subject of teaching and research after 1956 to varying but limited degrees. Common portrayals draw a picture of sociologists either as ideologues of Marxism-Leninism or as dissidents defending academic freedom against a repressive political elite.

This standard narrative, oversimplified for the sake of clarity, deserves significant refinement for a large number of reasons. First, it tends to treat the situation of sociology under state socialism as a uniform experience, neglecting the enormous variations over space and time. In particular, the Stalinist period serves as the model while the expansion of higher education and the social sciences mostly took place during the late 1950s and 1960s in phases of relative relaxation of ideological control and repression. Both within, but more importantly, between countries, the diversity of theoretical, methodological, and thematic pluralism was enormous, with Marxism-Leninism being far from the monoparadigmatic hegemony often assumed.

Second, the story is mostly written as a sociologist's history, while the viewpoints of the Communist elites are seldom seriously reconstructed. The latter's fundamental dilemma of being in need of social knowledge and expertise in order to legitimate their power, while at the same time limiting the space of critique and subversion inherent in this knowledge, is not adequately captured. Thus, also the concrete means by which the Communist elites exerted control over sociologists is not well studied, as well as the fact that the Communist elites were not homogenous in their views and policies.

Third, the alleged backwardness of East European sociologies due to the socialist regimes is almost never corroborated by systematic international contextualization. Ideological pressure, the instrumentality of sociological knowledge for state power, and even ideological reconstruction of departments and research environments are no phenomena reserved for authoritarian regimes but have happened in West European democracies too. In general, most portrayals of sociology in state socialism rest upon assumptions of realities in the West being much brighter than they were.

The aim of this special issue is to go beyond commonplace statements on sociology in state socialism by addressing these or similar issues through more rigorous historical research. We invite authors to take on the *problematique* of sociology in state socialism through systematic consideration of empirical evidence and theoretical argumentation. One way to achieve this is the use of comparative studies, contrasting instances of higher and lower degrees of academic freedom, of dissident and of conformist sociologies, of international and of parochial orientations, etc., and asking for possible explanations for these differences. Another strategy is to address the institutional and intellectual changes of the discipline in one or more countries more systematically.

### **2018 /// The Future in the Social Sciences**

“Savoir c’est prévoir,” to know is to predict, declared Auguste Comte, the self-proclaimed priest of the Religion of Humanity. Despite these roots, sociology has abandoned this optimistic vision and speaks about the future reluctantly, by separating empirical knowledge about the past and present social world from futurology, which is based on speculation. As a result, sociology distrusts its own abilities to predict the future. In the name of value-free science, sociology has also withdrawn from designing the future social order, thus rejecting the inspiration of the great utopias. The pressing social need to anticipate the future is fulfilled by practices from beyond the bounds of sociology, or on its edges: from science fiction and post-apocalyptic fictions to futurology, technology assessment, trend analysis and modelling, to scenario planning and road mapping for particular organizations. The academic social sciences tend to disregard the applied methods of anticipating the future that have been developed at the request of governments, military agencies, and corporations rather than by academia.

However, in recent years, the theme of possible futures has entered the debate with new intensity: the division between science fiction and the near future falters. On the one hand, we witness billionaires’ plans to create Martian colonies and human-machine hybrids – is this for real, this time? – and on the other hand, we hear prophecies about the climate apocalypse and the advent of non-human time in the Anthropocene, an epoch when human actions alter the planet for hundreds of thousands of years. We may say after John Urry (*What is the Future?*, Cambridge 2016) that the times call for social science to enter the discussion about possible futures – hence, to



reveal the political and performative dimension of the collective imagination of the future. Sociology might thus look for new inspiration in futurology or science fiction, but it also might enrich reflection on the social future with new approaches and solutions. Sociology might then also ask questions that were previously left unstated.