



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two

Relations All the Way Down

Edited by
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Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology

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In various disciplines such as archeology, psychology, psychoanalysis, international relations, and philosophy, we have seen the emergence of relational approaches or theories. This series, founded by François Dépelteau, seeks to further develop relational sociology through the publication of diverse theoretical and empirical research—including that which is critical of the relational approach. In this respect, the goal of the series is to explore the advantages and limits of relational sociology. The series welcomes contributions related to various thinkers, theories, and methods clearly associated with relational sociology (such as Bourdieu, critical realism, Deleuze, Dewey, Elias, Latour, Luhmann, Mead, network analysis, symbolic interactionism, Tarde, and Tilly). Multidisciplinary studies which are relevant to relational sociology are also welcome, as well as research on various empirical topics (such as education, family, music, health, social inequalities, international relations, feminism, ethnicity, environmental issues, politics, culture, violence, social movements, and terrorism). Relational sociology—and more specifically, this series—will contribute to change and support contemporary sociology by discussing fundamental principles and issues within a relational framework.

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Christian Papilloud
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ISSN 2946-4110

ISSN 2946-4129 (electronic)

Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology

ISBN 978-3-032-02412-1

ISBN 978-3-032-02413-8 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8>

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The Limits of Relational Sociology

Christian Papilloud and Frédéric Vandenberghe

Our first volume allowed us to set out the contemporary state of the art of relational sociology, its significant principles and orientations as they were laid down in the 1990s and have been discussed at length since (see, e.g., Emirbayer 1997; Archer 2010; Fuhse 2010; Donati 2011; Mische 2011; Dépelteau and Powell 2013; Kaufmann 2016; Crossley 2015). Relational sociology (RS) responds to the need to place relations and processes at the centre of sociological reflection. Although this claim dates back to the founders of the discipline, who were fully aware that no society and thus no sociology was possible without relations between people, it took another century of reflection to systematically address the question so as to cover the whole spectrum of relations, from micro-relations within and between people and meso-relations within and between institutions to macro-relations within and between societies. Being highly sensitive to changing intellectual currents, not to mention fad and fashions, RS

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_1

reactivated American pragmatism and symbolic interactionism at the micro-level, institutionalism at the meso-level and functionalism and critical theory at the macro-level to conceptualise interpersonal relations (relations of the first order), institutional relations (relations of the second order: relations of relations between people) and more structural or systemic relations (relations of the third order: relations of relations between institutions, subsystems and fields). New theoretical approaches, notably network analysis in the United States (White 1997), systems theory in Germany (Luhmann 1987) and actor-network theory in France (Latour 1987), gave rise to new paradigms, consolidated in various rival schools with international reach.

Comparative theory is an art and a technique (Anicker 2020). Some attempts have been made to compare one or two of these approaches and stimulate dialogue between the schools, for instance between network analysis and field theory (Bottero and Crossley 2011) or network analysis and systems theory (Fuhse and Stegbauer 2011). More work still needs to be done, however, to smoothen ontological, epistemological and methodological differences between the various relational sociologies (Papilloud and Vandenberghe 2025). Systematic comparison between theories could help to integrate the different relational schemes among each other and to better articulate the theories with the various methodologies and data (White 1997; Fuhse and Mützel 2011; Reed 2015; Papilloud and Hinneburg 2018). Moreover, if relational sociology is not to remain a specialised approach among others, defined by its obsession with *relationalia*, it has to break out of its conceptual silos and reconnect its singular concern to social theory at large. More and better integration among the relational schemes, but also more and better communication with the non-relational world are key to the further development of RS as a whole. Indeed, one doesn't have to be post-structuralist to understand that this singular obsession with relations tends to exclude the non-relational from its purview. While everything is by definition susceptible to be defined relationally (including nothing), not everything in this world is relational (Piette 1992). The world is made up not only of relations, but also of processes and entities (Grossetti 2022). In this short introduction, we want indeed to develop a critique of relational sociology, critique being understood here in the classical sense as reflection on the conditions of possibility, as well as on the limits, of scientific knowledge.

Theoretical and conceptual integration are one thing. Social and systemic integration—or, timelier, given the current disarray in the world at large: disintegration—are something else. If we look back at the debates

within RS, such as the debates about the various themes related to agency (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and inter-subjectivity (Silver and Lee 2012), the relationships between subjective and institutional structures (Bourdieu 1977; Archer 2007), actors and networks, habituses and fields (Bottero and Crossley 2011) or methodological individualism and holism, we see classical variations on the theme of social order, social integration and social relationships. The general idea is that the degree of integration depends not only on the normative order, as in Talcott Parsons' normative functionalism, but also on a sense of social cohesion and shared togetherness (Oevermann et al. 1976; Bothner et al. 2004; Fuhse 2012). The relation between “the parts of the system” and the relations between “the people” can vary independently from each other (Archer 1996). The system may be running smoothly without structural contradictions, while the streets are filled with demonstrations. Inversely, the people may be content with the establishment, seemingly unaware of the rifts that will sooner or later cause serious systemic problems. There is also the intuition that our society develops by privileging certain social relationships over others at different moments depending on the type, mode and scope of integration (White 1995; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). While the economy may determine the state of society “in the last instance”, at other moments, politics may be decisive and push through major reform, moving fast and breaking things.

As RS becomes more aware of itself as a theoretical framework centred on the relation, it discovers that we do not precisely know what makes some social relationships more substantial and more structuring for social life and society as a whole than others. Our increase of knowledge makes us all the more conscious of our ignorance. Sociology has often talked about this problem of the intricacy of social relationships and the difficulty of working with “ultimate factors” (Boltanski et al. 2014). However, it has just as often downplayed its complexity, reducing it, for example, to the supposedly rational motivation of individuals, the constraint of formal rules, the soft power of conventions, the codes of social systems or the privileged classes that define them. Sociology sees this change in the regimes of social relationships as an indicator of social change and the transformation of our societies. However, authors attached to relational sociology have warned that one does not necessarily imply the other (Archer 1996; Dépelteau 2008). No one can assert with certainty that when our social relations change, society also changes, or, inversely, be confident that when social relations remain stable, society will not change

either. We're thus in the same position as economists. When the late Queen Elizabeth II met our colleagues at the LSE in London in November 2008, she wondered why they hadn't seen the crisis coming. If we do not take the relation problem seriously, we cannot address the questions of social order and social change. These questions are of interest not only to the discipline but also to society as a whole. Contemporary upheavals remind us that relations can be tested and unravel in no time. New alliances can be formed and quickly undo the social order. Perhaps, the time has come for sociology to shift its attention from the question of order to the question of chaos. Relational sociology could be at the forefront to analyse the dissolution of social relations and investigate what happens when the islands of order become the exception rather than the rule.

The authors of our first volume have sought to highlight this breeding ground for reflections in the attempt to outline the contours of a relational sociology that is consistent with its critical topic—the relation. Each of them has told us in his or her way, sharing his or her version of the relationship, how, on this basis, relational sociology has gained visibility, how it has opened up dialogue with other disciplines in the human sciences, and stimulated discussions and controversies on and around the relation. Our second volume will allow us to show how relational sociology formulates further arguments, continuing its investigation on the relation, deepening and broadening the ground for reflections on the types, modes and scope of social relations. On this occasion, we will see that the authors also point to a mutation in the expansion of the relation that goes beyond the human and the non-human towards what we might call the “relational other”. This preoccupation with the “relational other” comes in three distinctive forms, which are not exclusive to each other: The relation with otherness (the more-than-human), the otherness of the relation (the outside or other side of the relation) and the combination of both in the “otherwise of the relation” (the robots among us). Let us take them in turns.

THE RELATION WITH OTHERNESS

It may be a passing fad, but the introduction of non-humans into sociology by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon (Latour and Strum 1986; Callon 1986) has had a real effect on the discipline. By calling non-humans “actants”, anything that can bring a change in the course of action was brought into society, which was redefined first as a heterogeneous

association or socio-technical network and then, later, after the ecological turn, as a collective or even a commons (see the chapter by Pyyhtinen and Meskus). However, we will be unable to adequately understand the novelty that RS can represent if we confine it to this broadening of sociological reflection from human beings to non-humans only. After all, there is nothing new about taking non-humans into sociological reasoning regarding society and social life. In the history of sociology, many examples of non-humans are taken into account to understand better how humans build society. We might mention religious symbols, like flags and other totems, and how they stimulate activities within and alliances between groups of human beings, as Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss have clearly shown. We can consider all the objects that surround us as forming a society with us, including bacteria, animals whether they live with us or in their natural habitat, our computers or the simple notices we write before we go shopping—such topics are contributions to relational sociology as various approaches of networks in sociology extensively show. We could continue this list indefinitely: it would only lead to the conclusion that sociology did not have to wait for Tarde, Deleuze or Latour to take into account the role of non-human entities in the structuration of society.

What Latour has brought home is that society is a relational network of variable geometry. Depending on the investment of human beings and non-humans in this relation, society can grow stronger or become weaker. It can wax or wane. We therefore do not simply have one axis of relations between humans and non-humans—a horizontal or spatial axis or, more technically, in the language of Saussure's semiotics, a "paradigmatic" axis of binary oppositions that structures the social narrative, but two. The second axis is a processual one that has to do with the sequential integration of actants, one by one, into a proliferating chain of signifiers. It corresponds to the "syntagmatic" or temporal dimension in semiotics. Joining the two dimensions, we re-encounter relations and processes or structures and events. It is our contention that the two dimensions are crucial for a relational sociology that aims to integrate various theories and methodologies in a single relational scheme. While the first dimension refers to the structural dimension of relations one finds in theories of systems, fields and networks, the second dimension refers to the processual dimension of actions, reactions and events that connect persons and things in systems and networks. It points to the work that has to be done to enrol and integrate actors and actants in an expanding or contracting collective.

THE OTHERNESS OF THE RELATION

The alterity of the relation does not only refer to the alterity of society, alias the multitude of actants that somehow keep the humans together, but to the other of the relation. To understand what this means, we should perhaps make a distinction between relational and relationistic sociologies: while the latter affirms that everything is a relation, the former underscores that the relation is not everything (Piette 2025). Everything does not necessarily link to everything everywhere, at all times and all the time (Seyfert 2019). This second volume contains several contributions that return to this crucial point (see the chapters by Seyfert, Brighenti and Sabetta). Social facts are predicated on relational acts, and some scholars have advocated for a relational sociological approach to illuminate this ontological fact (Gottlieb 1983; Ritzer and Gindoff 1992; Powell 2013; McCourt 2016; Jackson and Nexon 2019). However, it has its cost. First, relationalist sociology often risks reifying the very concept of relation, inadvertently introducing an essentialist framework where relations themselves become fixed entities rather than dynamic processes. Second, it tends to overestimate the centrality of relationships in social life. While society is undoubtedly constituted through relations, it also depends on their absence. Disruptions, discontinuities, and disassemblies are integral to social life, as they create the conditions for its reorganization. Building on this argument, RS acknowledges that social life is structured by relationships, but also by their interruption—by moments of rupture, suspension, and disengagement. These interruptions are not mere anomalies; they are constitutive of sociality itself. If we accept this premise, we can outline two fundamental limits to relationalism in sociology: the persistence of relationships, which constitutes an endogenous limit (the lower boundary), and the incessant production of relationships, which constitutes an exogenous limit (the upper boundary).

The endogenous limit challenges the assumption of relational homogeneity. RS does not presume that the integration of human and non-human diversity unfolds in a seamless web. On the contrary, it inevitably involves lags, errors, gaps, failures, deviations and deviants. These discontinuities, in turn, motivate further relational work by the actors and the systems to repair, maintain or disrupt the social tissue. In this volume, we will see various contributions (Buchholz and Schmitz, Crossley, Papilloud and Schulze) that explore, directly or indirectly, this idea of the intrinsic heterogeneity of sets of social relationships to explain how this heterogeneity

motivates the mobilisation of actors. These contributions attempt to trace the effects of such more or less heterogeneous bundles of relationships in terms of social mobility and stratification at local, regional, national and even transnational levels. They reveal the elasticity of relations as integrative frameworks—demonstrating that relations can extend to encompass society as a whole or remain limited to specific segments. In other words, we cannot rule out the possibility that social relations that structure small communities may gain in extension, just as, conversely, we cannot rule out the possibility that transnational relations may succeed in influencing local social relations. However, this requires a great deal of work and investment on the part of the actors and collectives involved in integrating human and non-human diversity. Because of variations of scale and scope, the collective presents itself differently each time we move from the local to the global levels, and vice versa. This attention to the heterogeneity of the relation problematises, for example, the structural isomorphism of which Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell speak when they describe the development of the different institutional and organisational structures of a society (Dimaggio and Powell 2004). This isomorphism does not presuppose and does not warrant *a fortiori* a relational isomorphism, that is, the transposition of a set of social relations from one context to another, from local to regional, national or transnational scales (Beckert 2010). The transition between these different levels of social life presupposes multiple transformations of the social relations and of the actants too. While the relations at one level can grow stronger, they may shrink at another level, strengthening or weakening the whole of society.

The exogenous limit refers to the otherness of the relation, that is, the fact that the permanence of relations does not entirely depend on relations and processes. Relations can perdure over time without continuous action, independently from actions and even in spite of them. Think about perverse effects of action that crystallise into autonomous systems that nobody really wants (Vandenbergh 2009). Examples go from local traffic jams to global warming. The debates about the micro-macro link and the agency-structure *problématique* have misled us into thinking that structures and cultures always depend on the continuous production of activities by the actors themselves—with no time out. We have to remember what the sociology of conventions teaches us: a non-negligible number of situations in social life emerge from conventions that we follow, of which we are not necessarily aware (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987; Boltanski et al. 2014). Society is not only between us and before us; precisely because it is between

us, it is also in our back, behind us. In other words, we are not in the constant production of social relationships, even if the sources of production of social relations are as varied as there are human beings and non-humans, even if social relationships that do not occur here and now may occur elsewhere at one time or another.

THE OTHERWISE OF RELATIONS

The introduction of bots and robots in our midst exacerbates the relational otherness on both fronts. Not only are they more-than-human agents, but they also operate according to a different modus to produce social relationships. These non-humans are unique because they are no longer simply projective surfaces that stimulate the production of social relationships and the (de)mobilisation of collectives. They are constantly producing relationships and working on all kinds of existing relationships. Whether we are talking about contemporary robots (Jones 2013), such as those dedicated to assistance tasks—guiding people in museums, answering various practical questions of consumers in hotlines, assisting doctors during their surgery interventions—or content-generating algorithms, like the contemporary LLMs (*Large Language Models*) developed as part of the so-called artificial intelligence (Floridi and Chiriatti 2020; Zong and Krishnamachari 2022). Today, we are dealing with superintelligent non-humans who can produce their relation over and over again based on the analysis of our most diverse relationships. This last sentence is important because it means that these non-humans do not derive their particularity only from the mere fact that they produce their relation. It also states that this relationship is able to capture our relationships and turn them into different kinds of relationships that can support or subvert our relationships without us being able to anticipate the consequences of such relationships or control their effects on social life. This production of the relation by these humanoid non-humans manages to integrate the entire scope of our social relationships and to play with them, even to manipulate them. This is what the expression “the otherwise of the relation” describes. We borrow it from the phenomenologist Immanuel Levinas to thematise the strange ontological mode of relations that comes into being with the creation of artificial intelligent beings. These humanoid beings are bound to form a “third species”, next to humans and animals. The relations they establish among themselves and also with us integrate human beings and their collectives differently in relationships, dramatically expanding the

scope of human and non-human diversity in ways that cannot be foreseen and remain hard to imagine.

A quarter of a century ago, in *Social Systems*, Luhmann (1987) mused about the possibility that computers will further evolve into a new kind of autonomously operating system beyond the human, beyond biological, psychic and social systems we know so far. This moment has now arrived. Cybernetic systems are interconnected worldwide and even if they are not completely autonomous as yet, they already have strong impacts on social systems, organisations, interactions and individuals or, in short: on social relations. This radical alterity raises, of course, the question of its impact on sociology itself. Because this other relation is not only a new lever of social life. It is also an instrument for real-time analysis of the scope of the relation and the way it integrates humans and anthropoids in a new system of observation and registration of social life. It embeds the whole range of sociological investigative techniques and benefits from a continuous and exponential flow of data that no sociologist would ever have dreamed of. It is what not only supports its expansion towards a growing number of activities but also allows professionals to analyse data and challenge sociologists themselves. Therefore, this other relation does not only question how our societies operate. It also questions the pertinence of the sociological investigation of society, the legitimacy of sociologists to account for it and, more generally, the knowledge of the social thing.

With Armin Nassehi (2024, 27–41), a German systems theorist, one could take a more optimistic vision and argue that thanks to the interconnection of digital data and the use of artificial intelligence, we are now able to discover relations and make visible patterns we could not even fathom before. Data that individuals leave behind on the Internet, their mobiles, their credit cards and elsewhere, and which are of interest to private companies, state agents and yes, also to sociologists, show that there's a social order *sui generis* that determines their actions without any awareness from their part. The digital makes visible patterns that remained hidden for sociology. Now that those patterns and clusters become visible, we discover a host of regularities and relations that determine our behaviours. These patterns can be objectivated, made visible and methodologically controlled as never before. "As a matter of fact, Nassehi writes, it is the technologies of digital pattern recognition in the realm of the social that provide what I call the third discovery of society. Perhaps this is the most radical discovery of society at the moment of its disappearance. It looks as if thought steeped in sociology has long passed its prime. However, it is

precisely the techniques of pattern recognition that really follow through with the social sciences' old basic conviction that behind the backs of actors lie structures and regularities that they are not aware of and that are not reflected in self-descriptions" (Nassehi 2024, 31). The question is not just a methodological one, however. It goes well beyond the question of access to data to the more philosophical and political questions of who we are, what kind of humanity is emerging and what kind of humanity we want to be. Can we still control, steer and regulate the machines that control, steer and regulate our behaviours by changing radically our relations to ourselves, to others and to the world? Can the forces that register and drive our behaviours behind our backs, through invisible and opaque algorithms, be brought to the fore? And what is the task of sociology in this new world that is coming into existence? How can relational sociology contribute to make sure that the new social relations that are emerging do not destroy the human relations on which they ultimately depend, at least for the time being?

* * *

The first volume of *New Directions in Relational Sociology* had as subtitle *Relations all the way up*. The subtitle of the second volume is *Relations all the way down*. The irony is, of course, that the relations that go up and those that go down are ultimately the same, as indicated by the Müller-Lyer illusion (>--< <-->). The second volume contains three parts and 12 chapters. While the second volume largely avoids the intersubjectivity and social bonds that played such an important role in the first volume, it is remarkable that most of the chapters have been written in collaboration between two authors. The first part of the second volume is devoted to structural relations, as one finds them in field theory (Buchholz and Schmitz), network analysis (Crossley), systems theory (Papilloud and Schulze) and post-structuralism (Selg) that form the "hard core" of RS. Here, the relations do in fact come down. Whether it is in fields, structural networks or systems of circulation, the agents seem to be caught up in relational clusters which they cannot see, but which the analysts make visible thanks to their access to aggregated data. The chapters of the second part will bring back some of the agency by shifting from macro- to microsociology, but without fully restoring action, however. If anything, there will be more passivity (Seyfert), more reaction (Brightenti and Sabetta) and more power (Reed) than action in the middle part of the

book. The chapters of the last part will move RS beyond the human, back to the biotic realm (Kunneman, Lahire) or forward to the bionic realm of robots (Coeckelbergh and Gunkel). While all the chapters on the biotic and the bionic break away from anthropocentrism, they do so in different ways and with different sensibilities. Some go for hard science, others are more philosophical, but somehow they all veer between modernism and postmodernism, with Lahire at one end and Pyyhtinen at the other end of the spectrum.

Part I unfolds as a conceptual drama: structure is built, bent and finally unraveled. Three structuralists set the stage—Bourdieu with his fields, White with his ties, Luhmann with his codes—only to have the script flipped by Laclau, who insists politics begins where structure breaks down. The first chapter of Part I is written by **Larissa Buchholz and Andreas Schmitz**, two German field theorists. Both have worked on network analysis and extensively used Bourdieu's toolkit to analyse the transnational field of contemporary art (Buchholz, 2022) or the nation state as a field (Schmitz and Witte 2017). In their chapter, they have a field day, exploring relations within, between and across different fields in global, transnational and national contexts. While they pretend to remain within the Bourdieusian fold, they make concrete proposals to overcome methodological nationalism and extend the framework to analyse social dynamics that transcend national boundaries.

Also related to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, **Nick Crossley** is much more critical of the French master. Nick is the director of the Mitchell Centre for Network Analysis in Manchester. In his books and articles on relational sociology, Nick has used the concepts, tools and techniques of network analysis to throw light on social movements, mental illness and of late also on the electronic music scene in the North of England. In his chapter, Crossley attacks Bourdieu's concept of social space and its concept of social structure. Structures, systems, fields, dispositions don't do anything. As an alternative to the top-down approach to social structures, he proposes a bottom-up approach, based on network analysis, in which social interaction and networks of effective relations between persons do all the work. In the same vein, he advances Peter Blau's model of social space against Bourdieu's to think through intersectionalities of class, gender and race that allegedly cannot be properly plotted on the axes of a correspondence analysis.

Taking a more radical turn, **Christian Papilloud and Eva-Maria Schultze** introduce their theory of the relation, a novel approach to

understanding social phenomena which they have laid out in two hefty volumes. In the first volume (Papilloud and Schultze 2022), they outline the theoretical scaffolding of their formal structuralism at the highest level of abstraction. In the second volume (Papilloud and Schultze 2023), they apply the new perspective to stratification, communication and molecular medicine. Unlike traditional relational sociologies, their theory focuses on the dynamic process of relation in circulation rather than static social relations. The theory emphasizes how relational structures deviate from ideal relations due to the primacy of circulation. In essence, the theory of the relation seeks to provide a more fluid, dynamic view of social relations in circulation, challenging many assumptions of traditional relational sociology by emphasizing mutual constitution of agency and structure based on their more or less successful inscription in relational structures supporting their circulation within or between such structures. Here the relation is not an observable fact in front of the actors, but rather a principle that organizes the dynamics of social life.

Peeter Selg is a political theorist and a radical relationist from Estonia who has developed the perspective of political semiotics (Selg and Ventsel 2020) on power and democracy and worked on “wicked problems” in government. In his chapter on post-structuralism, he uses the distinction between self-action, inter-action and trans-action to throw light on a series of obscure concepts in Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist theory of hegemony. This distinction between three modes of action, which originally comes from American pragmatism, but was later reactivated by Mustafa Emirbayer and François Dépelteau, allows him to present a fully transactional interpretation of society, power and hegemony. In his trans-actionalist sociology, society appears as a constantly evolving set of intricate relations that are continuously produced and transformed by contingent practices of articulation. Nothing is ever fully fixed; everything is relational and in flux.

The second part of this volume is devoted to one more “turn” after the Relational Turn. It contains three chapters at the cutting edge of contemporary cultural sociology and social theory. Between the action, reaction and rector theory there are surprising affinities. Although they were written independently, they seem to be in dialogue with each other and form a coherent set of complementary reflections on agency, passivity and reciprocity. The first contribution is by **Robert Seyfert**, a German social theorist who’s currently working on digital affects and algorithmic cultures. His contribution harks back to his habilitation thesis on relational modes

(Seyfert 2019) and focuses on passive and interpassive relationships. Sociology has traditionally focused on active social interactions, viewing relationships as dynamic exchanges between individuals and groups. However, this “actionist bias” overlooks a crucial aspect of social relations—their passive nature. This chapter challenges the dominant view by highlighting the importance of passivity and interpassivity in forming and maintaining social bonds. It argues that many relationships exist precisely because of the absence of active engagement, decisions, or communication.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Lorenzo Sabetta, two brilliant Italian scholars, have teamed up to investigate not action, but reaction. This is their second study in a series of three (Brighenti and Sabetta 2024, 2025) on reaction in which they analyse the formation of reaction-chains in a spirit that is close to Simmel, Tarde and Mead. Reaction is a key analytical concept at the intersection of processual and relational sociology. The reaction to an action-event reveals the dynamic interplay of continuity and discontinuity in social interactions; it also a proof that a relation has been established. Indeed, if there’s no reaction, there’s no relation, though silence in all its ambiguity does not necessarily disprove the non-existence of the relation.

Isaac Reed is the main theorist of the younger generation of The Yale School of Cultural Sociology. In his chapter, he does neither analyse non-action (Seyfert) nor reaction (Brighenti and Sabetta). Instead, he outlines the lineaments of his Rector-Actor-Other (RAO) theory, a theory of agency, power and enrolment. His question is how a powerful actor, called the “rector” can transform another actor into an agent who works for him on behalf of his project. The relational aspects come in at the nexus between power and agency where the rector or ruler binds an actor to act as his agent, while excluding others from the project. The combination of “positive ties” between the rector and the actor who has been turned into an agent, and negative ties between them and the others, configures the structure of power of the society.

The third part of the volume explores the convergences between relational sociology and post-humanism, suggesting that both, in their own ways, challenge anthropocentrism, reconfigure agency and foreground entanglement, whether between humans or across species, technologies and materialities. The first text is by the famous French sociologist **Bernard Lahire**, well known in France and abroad, as one of Bourdieu’s best critics, who has developed his “sociology at the scale of individual” to

analyse how an array of dispositions are formed and activated or inhibited in contexts of action (Lahire 2011). In the last years, Lahire has drifted towards the hard edge of the life sciences. Instead of investigating intra- and interindividual variations, he now compares the social life of animals with that of humans and looks at interspecies variations. The text we publish here exemplifies his new approach (2023) with its naturalist, scientist and even positivist resonances.

Harry Kunneman is an emeritus professor of the University for Humanistics in the Netherlands. Humanistics is a normative, empirical, applied discipline that deals with existential questions from a humanist perspective. In his chapter, Harry takes a post-humanist turn and looks at the origins of life of the most elementary biological organisms, which he calls “biots”. It turns out that those “biots” have to produce their housings like us, that they live and work together in company like us and form fellowships, that they struggle and fight to survive, almost like us. Through anthropomorphising techniques of description, the continuity between us and them is underscored and post-humanism appears as a prelude to a new enlarged humanism.

Olli Pyyhtinen and Mianna Meskus come from a different direction. Olli Pyyhtinen is known for his work on the sociology of Georg Simmel, the anthropology of the gift and the sociology of the more-than-human, while Mianna Meskus is a feminist who works on reproductive technologies. Both have post-structuralist sensibilities and post-humanist sympathies. In their chapter on post-human feminism, they challenge traditional views of human relationships by exploring the intricate bonds between humans and non-humans. While social sciences and humanities have embraced these connections, relational sociology has remained stubbornly anthropocentric. The authors propose bridging this gap by merging post-human feminist scholarship with relational sociology. This fusion offers a fresh perspective on embodied existence in a world beyond human confines, a world between humans, waste, biotechnology, reproduction and aging.

Mark Coeckelbergh and David Gunkel are stars in the field of artificial intelligence and social robotics. Coeckelbergh (2011) has developed a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach to human–robot interaction, while Gunkel has deconstructed the opposition between the human and the machine to explore difficult questions of moral personhood and legal rights in AI. In their chapter, they outline their relational approach to moral status and standing of humans, animals and machines. Instead of

asking whether bots and robots have sentience and consciousness, they flip the question around and ask how the relations we have with them—and they with us—decide about the moral status we decide to attribute to them. Following Levinas, ontology does not come before ethics. Rather the reverse. When we come face to face with animals and robots, the moral properties emerge in the context of social interactions. Coeckelbergh and Gunkel are philosophers, but their relational approach to sociality and morality has far-reaching implications for sociology. We know how to study symbolically mediated interactions, power and social relations. Can we apply our theories and methodologies to study our relations with non-human others and welcome them in our midst, giving them the standing and the rights they deserve?

Daniel Silver figured out how sociologists visually represent theories, concepts and relations (Silver 2020). His chapter on “figural social theory” is so good, we thought it would be perfect to close our two volumes. So, we put it in as a Coda, not as an Afterword, but as an Afterimage. Daniel challenges how we think about social theories. Instead of looking at concepts, he looks at diagrams, tables and other figures that appear in sociological theory. Drawing on C.S. Peirce, he dives deep into the world of “figural theorising” and uncovers innovative ways to visualise abstract concepts. From cognitive maps to experimental sketches, his text reveals how Peirce’s pragmatic maxim meets modern-day diagramming. With a keen eye for detail, Daniel dissects sociological theory diagrams, uncovering hidden patterns and recurring elements.

Last but not least, we want to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors to both volumes. Our exchanges over the past two years have only reinforced our conviction that relational sociology is, at its core, a friendly society. We have lost two dear friends—François Dépelteau and Philippe Chaniel. They were not mere networkers, but *netweavers*, tirelessly building connections that mattered. We also warmly thank the team at Palgrave: Chandralekha Mahamel Raja (aka Chandra) in Chennai and Jessica Faecks in Sydney, who supported us with dedication and enthusiasm as we explored new directions in relational sociology.

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PART I

Structural Relations



Rethinking Relationalism in (Global) Field Theory: Four Critical Directions

Larissa Buchholz and Andreas Schmitz

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu's research program offers a distinctive, sophisticated strand in relational sociology that is perhaps nowhere more fully elaborated than in his field theory (Bourdieu 1980, 1991a; Vandenberghe 1999; Papilloud and Schultze 2018). Yet while Bourdieu's work focused

The first author acknowledges the second author's contributions in writing the first section after the introduction and last section before the conclusion, as well as in providing feedback on the other sections. The first author wrote the remaining six sections and provided feedback on the two sections authored by the second author. Special thanks to Frédéric Vandenberghe, Christian Papilloud, Ulf Wuggenig, George Steinmetz, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and to Michael Jauchen for his support in editing the final version.

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Switzerland AG 2025

F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_2

mainly on social fields at the national level, the past decade has seen a surge of studies on transnational and global fields that expand his relational approach beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in innovative ways.¹ This growing body of research is vital in a time when much of the broader discipline recognizes that global and transnational dynamics challenge several of the national assumptions embedded in dominant sociological traditions. Nevertheless, this development has also prompted a critical question: To what extent and how do we need to rethink and revise traditional Bourdieusian relationalism when field theory is extended beyond its “national” frame of reference?

It’s important to confront this question not only to avoid the perennial problem of “methodological nationalism” in how we approach field relations in transnational/global contexts (Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Beck 2003).² It is also critical to engage with this issue to circumvent a reifying scholastic fallacy in the construction of sociological objects, which Bourdieu previously warned about in his national-level research (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992). Additionally, critically reviewing Bourdieu’s original relationalism can contribute to prevent some of the Eurocentric flaws of “Northern theory,” a style of theorizing that upscales existing approaches from the Global North to make claims about “global society” (Connell 2007, 2020).

Building on the growing body of work on global and transnational fields, this contribution argues that advancing a Bourdieusian relational field approach beyond the nation-state requires more than extending the geographic *scale* of field relations. We also need to critically rethink the ways in which Bourdieu’s relationalism was still entwined with the ontology of the nation-state, which is in line with a nationally oriented research program in which theory, methodology, and empirical analysis are linked. To this end, we argue for a reflexive, (neo)-Bourdieuian relationalism that involves at least four crucial directions for rethinking relationalism in global/transnational field theory, which we reconstruct and develop further in this article: (1) the relationality of fields as a variable, (2) the

¹To name just a few empirically grounded studies and related edited volumes (cf. Heilbron 1999, 2014; Casanova 2004; Buchholz 2008, 2022; Go 2008; Go and Krause 2016; Steinmetz 2008, 2016; Lebaron 2010; Kuipers 2011; Krause 2014; Schmidt-Wellenburg and Bernhard 2020; Carlson and Schneickert 2021; Ferguson 2021).

²Methodological nationalism can be understood as the “assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Schiller 2002, 302).

incorporation of macro-level types of relations; (3) the shift from uni-scalar to multi-scalar relationalism, and (4) the poly-contextualization of field relations through the analytical frame of a generalized global field of power.

As we demonstrate, these four theoretical advances within a contemporary field-theoretical relationalism provide a flexible framework for examining the global, the transnational, and the (sub)national, while avoiding the pitfalls of reifying these scalar concepts. Taken together, they lay the foundation for a (neo)-Bourdieuian relationalism that acknowledges the fact that field relations in transnational or global contexts often lack the same degree of boundedness, cohesion, and uni-scalar structuration implied by Bourdieu's original models. The complexity of cross-scalar field relations, therefore, necessitates the development of new conceptual tools. Before we unpack these arguments, however, we first lay out the fundamental building blocks of the Bourdieusian relational approach.

RELATIONALISM IN BOURDIEU'S FIELD THEORY

A clear, general, and fundamental definition as to what theoretically underpins and practically frames the Bourdieusian tradition of thought is *the principle of relation* (cf. 2000 ; Vandenberghe 1999). Relational thinking emphasizes the relationships and interactions between entities as fundamental to understanding their nature and dynamics. Relational ontology (a relational conception of reality) and a relational epistemology (a way of approaching reality by observation as relating) help overcome substance thinking (cf. Emirbayer 1997; Vandenberghe 1999; Schmitz 2018). In doing so, it vastly differs from "substantialism" in that it does not attempt to analyse social phenomena by isolating and examining the inherent characteristics of individuals, groups, or institutions. This approach assumes that there are essential qualities that define these entities and that understanding these qualities is critical to understanding the social world.

For Bourdieu (1998, 3), "the real is relational" in a fundamental sense: reality is structured and to be assessed by relations (cf. Emirbayer 1997; Vandenberghe 1999) rather than by atomized entities (such as singular individuals). Bourdieu's relationalism asserts that the essence of things and the nature of reality are best understood by examining relations between various elements instead of isolating them and focusing solely on their inherent properties. We must consider, however, that Bourdieu's relationalism is distinct from network theory and analysis since it focuses on *latent* rather than *manifest* relationships between social entities.

From a network perspective, the manifest personal relations in which actors are embedded can considerably influence their perceptions and practices. For example, from a relational network perspective, the formation of political opinion is not just an individual act of self-determination; research shows that political preferences and elections are influenced by specific social networks (Kwon et al. 2015). Thus, seemingly individual and subjective opinions – just like practices (i.e., the choice of a political party)—are genuinely socially shaped by the direct ties with which actors are associated.

Bourdieu's specific concept of relations, however, highlights the importance of *latent* relations. In this relational view—and with its appurtenant method of empirical analysis – actors, practices, or objects “derive their social meaning from their indirect hierarchical positions with respect to one another in a social field and not from their intrinsic characteristics” (De Nooy 2003, 305; cf. Lizardo 2011). The focus on latent (hierarchical) instead of direct relations implies that actors are (and can be) related without knowing each other, and beyond any specific direct interactions or common affiliations with a manifest network. Even in the absence of direct interactions or visible network relationships, society can profoundly influence actors' opinions and practices—even their very constitution. Latent relations refer to structures that operate between and across actors without them directly affecting each other through social interaction (as in interactionist theories) or structures of manifest relationships (as in network theory). But Bourdieu's latent relationalism should also be distinguished from US-American versions of field theory, which place a stronger emphasis on intersubjective relations at a distance in the form of mutual observation and strategic actions (e.g., Fligstein and McAdam 2011).

Accordingly, one of the crucial tasks of Bourdieusian relational research is to identify and reconstruct the latent structures that relate actors and groups (Lebaron 2009). To conceptualize latent relations and the structures they form, Bourdieu developed the crucial concepts of spaces and fields. Social spaces describe overall societies, such as national ones (e.g., the social space of France; cf. Bourdieu 1984). Fields denote subareas of societies, such as functionally or institutionally separated contexts (economic fields, fields of science, fields of politics, fields of art, etc.), which are structured by their own material and symbolic stakes and competitions. In a way, the field concept continues Weber's, Durkheim's, and Simmel's

theory of social differentiation by attempting to theorize the formation and dynamics of relatively distinct and specialized domains of the social.

Within relatively autonomous fields, Bourdieu (1993) specifically conceptualizes latent relations as structures that derive from the unequal distribution of field-specific forms of capital and their respective combinations. Depending on the field being studied, the respective context will have its own hierarchical structure as indicated by specific forms of capital (such as scientific capital in the natural sciences; cf. Bourdieu 1991b) and types of actors with specific beliefs and interests. However, in Bourdieu's work, fields share some basic properties. For example, they all possess latent power structures that relate and assign positions to human or organizational actors within a social context that is relatively autonomous in relation to other fields and the broader social space. At the same time, fields are defined as spaces of power struggle among the involved actors, and these dynamics are themselves structured by the latent power differentials. Accordingly, power is a crucial relational concept for illuminating the differences and mutual affections between actors in a particular field. Fields reveal social relations by highlighting hierarchies between actors and groups; the ways in which they compete for resources through their practical strategies; and the definition of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, practices, and tastes.

From this perspective, practices, utterances, and goods gain their meaning only in relation to other practices within a social field, not because of intrinsic meaning or merely due to direct influences. In contrast to intersubjective approaches, it is not assumed that political opinions are negotiated in a dyadic relationship but that the actors involved are already affected by their socio-spatial and field positions (Bourdieu 1984, 578). For example, the results of a political debate (agreement, dispute, etc.) are not generated anew with each (manifest) interaction but are instead influenced by the (latent) position each interacting party occupies in a common space.

It must be emphasized that the latent relationalism Bourdieu advocated for does not negate processes of interaction, intersubjectivity, and networks but rather locates such manifest relationships within social spaces and fields (cf. Vandenberghe 1999). In his approach, manifest relations (interactions, networks, etc.) are not rejected; rather, their primary causal status is questioned (De Nooy 2003).

BOURDIEUSIAN FIELD THEORY BEYOND METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM?

Like many other sociological traditions of the twentieth century, the formation of Bourdieu's relational theory has been strongly impacted by its use of national subjects of inquiry. Although Bourdieu discussed the transferability of his relational sociology from France to Japan (Bourdieu 1984, xi, xiv, 1998, 1–3), in his actual empirical research, he did not apply his mature theoretical framework of the 1980s and 1990s beyond a single national context.

Despite this strong national heritage, there is by now a near consensus that Bourdieusian field theory does not suffer from “methodological nationalism.”³ One key argument refers to the theory's relational methodology. As Go and Krause underline, field theory does not start from “any pre-given unit of analysis” but from “relationships” (2016, 10f.). The approach thus calls “for establishing relevant research objects empirically based on observed relationships, rather than assuming isolated units of analysis such as individuals or nation-states as the starting point of the investigation” (Krause 2020, 99). In this sense Bourdieusian field theory is not tied to a particular geospatial national scale but offers great analytical flexibility for examining a broad range of relational configurations below and above and across the national scale (Go and Krause 2016; Witte and Schmitz 2021).

However, while “empirizing the scale” (Krause 2020, 98–101) has been key for the development of global/transnational field analysis, we argue that it is still not sufficient to escape the trappings of methodological nationalism. Because Bourdieu's research, in practice, was usually national and often Francocentric, there are still “national” assumptions engraved in his theory that go beyond the question of scale. The root problem is that a national ontology still underpins a conception of relations in social fields that is highly bounded and structured. Indeed, if social fields are understood, analytically, as a space of relations of ‘dominant and subordinated positions in which each epistemic position (e.g., an artistic producer, or a

³This assumption runs through multiple contributions that adopt different argumentative vantage points, for example, Buchholz (2008, 217f., 2016, 33f), Schmidt-Wellenburg and Bernhard (2020), Go and Krause (2016, 10f.), Sapiro (2018), Krause (2020, 99f). Schmitz and Witte (2017, 2020) insightfully problematize how Bourdieu's conception of the field of power nevertheless remained tied to the nation-state (Schmitz and Witte 2017, 70, 2020, 83f), cf. also the last section of this chapter.

particular artwork) derives its distinctive properties from its internal relationship to all the other epistemic positions' (Vandenberghe 1999, 52; Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992), then we are dealing with the assumption of an internally highly integrated relational system. This type of "container" relational thinking informs, in turn, Bourdieu's theoretical arguments about the relational co-constitution of power, conflict, meanings, or cultural change in social fields.

Take, for example, the visual art field. Based on such an integrated relational perspective, Bourdieu's approach implies that the meaning of a cultural good, like a painting from Édouard Manet, derives from the position that this painter and his art occupy in relation to all other visual artists and artworks within the same French field at a given point in time (Bourdieu 1993, 1996, 2007a). Similarly, if we look at the question of artistic change and innovation, Bourdieu writes that "by virtue of an almost perfect unification of the artistic field and its history, each artistic act which leaves its mark by introducing a new position in the field 'displaces' the entire series of previous artistic acts" (Bourdieu 1996, 160). Hence, "given that positions [...] are internally related, a change in one of them will necessarily have repercussions for all the others" (Vandenberghe 1999, 52). But, as we discuss below, such a state of "perfect unification"—that is, the assumption of a highly integrated, bounded relational field structure—can become problematic for transnational or global contexts, where relations among field positions can be much looser, multi-scalar, and more interdependent between different types of fields.

Of course, one might counter these critiques by pointing out that Bourdieu conceptualized fields not as overly bounded but as "*relatively* autonomous" social microcosms (e.g., Bourdieu 1996, 132, 141; emphasis added). The relativity of autonomy implies that any social field remains simultaneously relatively heteronomous from the broader field environment. It thus remains susceptible to external influences in its inner dynamics, albeit to varying degrees. The original field model does not rely on an overly bounded view *per se*; and we must consider a field's *relations* to other fields too, particularly the field of power (Wacquant 1993). For example, in order to explain historical change within cultural fields, Bourdieu argues one must principally pay attention to how struggles among its internal agents "can draw support from external changes moving in the same direction" (Bourdieu 1996, 127). In short, Bourdieu's field-theoretical relationalism wouldn't be so closed after all.

Nonetheless, the “external” dynamics Bourdieu refers to are usually located within a bounded nation-state itself, as in his analysis of the French literary field, when he refers to the growth of an educated population along with a growing school system to explain the expansion and autonomization of this field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1996). Likewise, his conception of the “field of power” is theoretically closely linked with the nation-state (cf. Schmitz and Witte 2017, 2020). He conceived of the “field of power” as a meta-field that would relationally integrate all other social fields within the territory of a bounded state configuration (Bourdieu 1989; Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992). Insofar as the nation-state still serves, more or less implicitly, as the “epistemic guarantee” (Schinkel 2015) and social integrator for external field relations and changes, the problem of how to go beyond national “container thinking” in relational field theory becomes outsourced rather than theoretically solved (cf. Schmitz and Witte 2017, 2020).

To engage with this problem and address recent advances toward a (neo)-Bourdieuian relationalism beyond national presuppositions, we first must point to a deeper ambiguity in Bourdieu’s understanding of theory. It oscillates between a *rationalist* meta-theoretical approach in which theories function as heuristic “as if” models for “social functions” that are conceived as “fictions” (Bourdieu 1982, 49; cf. Vandenberghe 1999, 44). Here, the ultimate ambition of the (field) theorist is to develop generative models that can be applied quasi universally across time and space (along with substantive modifications). On the other hand, Bourdieu endorsed an ontologically more grounded *realist* approach to theory in which the goal is to capture the relational configurations of social fields in their ever-evolving historical specificity. Both Calhoun and Vandenberghe pointed to this ambiguity in Bourdieu’s work early on (Calhoun 1993; Vandenberghe 1999, 44), and it becomes even more important to keep it in mind for extending field theory beyond a national frame of reference. An overly rational understanding of theory as a heuristic set of “analytical fictions” would not only risk neglecting the “specificity of epochs, societies, and cultures” (Hilgers and Mangez 2015, 267); it also risks projecting an overly unified and structured model of field relations to transnational and global contexts in ways that reify field structures from the vantage point of a national episteme.

Thus, on the broadest level, we need to take seriously an ontologically grounded, historically specific approach to field theory as a meta-foundation for a reflexive (neo)-Bourdieuian relationalism in (global)

field analysis. Only then—based on a consequent relational approach that is at the same time firmer and more flexible—can concepts such as field, capital, habitus, practice, etc. be systematically applied to illuminate phenomena that are located above, across, or between nation-states. In what follows, we develop this argument further in a four-pronged approach, drawing on practical research examples to illustrate its implications.

FOUR DIRECTIONS FOR RELATIONALISM BEYOND METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM

Relationality as a Variable of Fieldness

One critical challenge to overcoming methodological nationalism in the conception of field relations beyond extending the national scale of field boundaries involves paying increased attention to a field's varying degrees of relationality.⁴ As indicated above, Bourdieu's original approach operated with a field model that, at times, presupposes strongly integrated, unified structures. This idea was foundational for several of his relational arguments—for example, the notion that a symbolic good derives its meaning from its distinctive relation to all other symbolic goods in a shared cultural field of struggle and competition (Bourdieu 1984). But from a historically grounded approach, this relational perspective only becomes possible within a field that has developed a tight-knit structure and shared history that can serve as a tangible (and sole) reference for anyone involved and initiated in a particular field.

Yet already at the supranational regional level, Sapiro observes that the field of the European Union, for example, is “far from having performed the work of cultural integration achieved by the nation states (Swaan 2007), despite multiple more or less autonomous attempts to create a collective imaginary” (Sapiro 2018, 169). This issue can become exacerbated

⁴The second author wishes to emphasize that this section draws from a specific point Schmitz and Witte (2020, 80) make regarding the definition of a “constructivist notion” of a field, which they describe as “the extent to which a certain field or space actually relates particular entities, that is, the question of its degree of ‘fieldness’ or ‘spaceness’.” In writing this section, the first author develops this constructivist notion by articulating a definition of “degrees of relationality”; defining a spectrum of strong and weak fields in regard to degrees of relationality; differentiating relationality as a dimension of fieldness from alternative notions of fieldness in the existing literature; and by associating the discussion of relationality with the problem of methodological nationalism.

in global fields. Several authors have noted how social fields, and their relations tend to be more ephemeral at an extended scale, marked by greater flux and “indeterminacy” (Madsen 2006, 24, 33) and “ontological openness” (Marginson 2008, 313). Agents in the global art field, for example, might share a common orientation toward the idea of “global art” and struggle for mutually desired symbolic rewards. However, there is no common art history across six continents that could provide cultural agents with a clear reference system to relationally position the ‘innovativeness’ of new artistic practices or styles (Buchholz 2022). More generally, on the global scale, there isn’t always a highly unified and institutionalized symbolic reference system in which all the “position-takings”—that is, the practices of all the field agents (Bourdieu 1996, 193–205)—could be clearly hierarchized and made sense of. And yet, the agents are still indirectly related by being part of a common space of competition for shared global stakes.

The reasons for the greater indeterminacy of relations in supranational fields are multifaceted and could be due to the lack of common educational systems (Vauchez 2011, 342), the absence of a world state with overarching symbolic power (Meyer et al. 1997), or the sheer instability and contingency of cross-border flows (Marginson 2008, 313). Yet, regardless of the underlying factors, the implication is clear: one cannot universalize the notion of a field with highly integrated relations associated with a Western nation-state to supranational levels or even to societies in the Global South (cf. Hilgers and Mangez 2015).⁵

Still, rather than swinging to the opposite extreme and simply discarding the notion of strongly unified field relations altogether, we suggest an approach that explicitly frames relationality as a variable of fieldness, where “fieldness” can be generally understood as the degree to which “specialized practices arrange themselves into fields” (Steinmetz 2016, 101; Schmitz and Witte 2020, 80).

Existing studies suggested we think about different degrees of fieldness along two main dimensions. For one, Vauchez’s and Mudge’s work on “weak fields” refers to the extent of field autonomy: weak fields constitute an ideal-typical opposite to strong fields insofar as they have a weak degree of separateness and blurry boundaries, which renders them highly interdependent with neighbouring fields in a kind of “interstitial position”

⁵A truly relational theory would not suggest that such a model applies to all local- and national-level fields either.

(Vauchez 2011, 344; Mudge and Vauchez 2012; cf. also Medvetz 2012). Steinmetz additionally associates fieldness with varying degrees of “settledness”: an unsettled but minimally autonomous field has established a field-specific form of capital and interpretative stakes that are “recognized as legitimate by all the field’s agents” and orient their field struggles (Steinmetz 2016, 102). At the other end of the spectrum, in a “settled field” agents agree also about “how that capital should be measured, that is, about the principles of its distribution (Bourdieu, 2000)” a consensus about criteria of evaluation that can manifest in both codified and informal ways (Steinmetz 2016, 102; cf. also Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 92).⁶

Building on these contributions, we propose that, beyond a field’s autonomy and settledness, its internal *degree of relationality* should be considered a third, analytically distinct dimension of fieldness. This quality refers to the relative density and strength of relations that connect a field’s entities, both objectively and subjectively. It is analogous to what field theorists in physics describe as a field’s internal coupling strength. In a weak field with low relationality, agents are indirectly linked through their shared orientation toward similar field-specific stakes of struggle. However, their hierarchical relations and the extent of mutual information exchange across different field regions remain underdeveloped. Such weak fields exhibit a low degree of institutionalization of commonly acknowledged sources of power and information. As a result, agents’ long-distance interactions—and their mutual interdependencies—are weaker.

By contrast, fields with strong relationality have achieved a high level of internal coupling strength in terms of the density and strength of power relations, as well as the mutual information that agents can draw upon in their practices. Bourdieu—particularly in his works about the spheres of artistic and intellectual production—privileged this relational field type in his theorizing about the highly interdependent nature of agents’ practices in fields (e.g., Bourdieu 1993, 1996). But thinking in terms of degrees of relationality, it becomes clear that it constitutes only a strong ideal type in an overall spectrum. This strong type should not be set a priori in the construction of sociological objects and explanations, however, because that would lead to overlooking or misinterpreting certain emerging (or vanishing) global, transnational, or even national fields. Instead of trying

⁶This notion of “settledness” as an indicator of fieldness resonates with Krause’s broader discussion of how social fields can vary in their levels of consensus and contestation (Krause 2018, 11).

to model “a” field and substantialize strong and weak fields, the researcher must instead pay reflexive attention to varying degrees of relationality to account for fields in different stages of structural consolidation.

We should emphasize that our notion of degrees of relationality refers not so much to the problem of where to draw appropriate boundaries for a field’s relational structures, which is a key methodological question in any field study. Rather, the degree of relationality designates the overall level of internal density and institutionalization of relations among positions within an already demarcated, relatively autonomous field. A field’s degree of relationality should also not be equated with a field’s “settledness” (Steinmetz 2016, 102f.). A relationally highly integrated field can have either a high level of consensus or contestation. Consequently, relative relationality should be regarded as a distinct analytical dimension of fieldness, which aids in avoiding the unreflexive projection of a highly cohesive (national) vision of relations onto diverse field configurations. By adopting this perspective, we can more effectively address the varying relational features present in global, transnational, or national fields.

Distinct Types of Macro-Structural Relations

A second critical direction for moving beyond methodological nationalism in relational field analysis concerns theorizing global-level power relations as more than a direct reflection of national-level relations. While the first move above suggested attending to varying *degrees* of relationality along a spectrum of strong and weak fields, the main point now is to better theorize unique *types* of ‘macro’ level relations in ways that do not unreflexively perpetuate national presuppositions.

Originally, Bourdieu’s field model focused on power relations among the positions of agents at the individual, collective, or organizational level. However, when moving beyond the national scale, Bourdieu (2003, 91) and Casanova (2004, 94) suggested that field theory can be extended so that it pays attention to power relations between larger macro-entities, including countries. To integrate such a macro-power structure into global/transnational field analysis, they proposed delineating the unequal distribution of field-specific forms of “national capital” among national fields (e.g., their different stocks of cultural, economic, political, symbolic, or linguistic resources; cf. Bourdieu et al. 1991; Bourdieu 2003; Casanova 2004). For instance, to theorize the macro-power structure among countries in the world literary field, Casanova examined inequalities in their

relative volume of “national literary capital” (Casanova 2004, 14–18). The term refers to the relative symbolic capital of a country’s literary production—for example, the relative high prestige “French literature” attained in the early twentieth century—together with a country’s overall institutional resources for literary production (the volume/prestige of its publishing houses, the extent of its professional literary milieu, etc.). In Casanova’s framework, the uneven dissemination of “national literary capital” demarcates the dominant and dominated national fields of the world literary field and, in this sense, the centers and peripheries of world literature, whereby some “median literary spaces” fall in between (2004, 277).

Why and when is it fertile to incorporate a macro-structure for examining field relations in global/transnational contexts? This type of added structure becomes relevant for those global/transnational contexts where the dynamics of field competition cannot be reduced to the meso-level power relations among individual and organizational players (Buchholz 2018b, 21). For example, when discussing the global economic field, Bourdieu argued that the positionality of a firm in the unequal macro-structure among national economies exerts a “positive or negative multiplier effect” on its prospects for success in commercial competition across borders (Bourdieu 2003, 91). The qualifier “multiplier” is key. Although Bourdieu did not make it explicit, an agent’s structural position in the global macro-structure thus has *contextual relational* effects in addition to their agent-level resources. To extend the example of the global economic field, two corporate enterprises with comparable resources will have different odds of succeeding in global competition if one is associated with an economically advantaged national field while the other is associated with a disadvantaged one. In this sense, a macro-structure functions as an added contextual layer for understanding power dynamics in global/transnational fields; it affects field struggles between agents without being analytically reducible to that level. Advancing field theory beyond the nation-state thus invites us to analytically incorporate *distinct types of macro-relations* that go beyond the traditional focus on agents at the meso-level.⁷

⁷In contrast to versions of world-systems analysis, the distinction between dominant/central and dominated/peripheral countries in global field theory does not reduce their positions to functional roles within a system of a division of labor. Instead, it refers to a status variable of the continuous type. Thus, centers and peripheries are no longer agents that fulfill systemic functions but are entities with structural positions within a continuum of unequal relations (Buchholz 2018a b, 21). Edward Said (2001) and Amartya Sen (2006) in their critique of Huntington’s clash of civilization thesis (1996) lucidly underlined that, in order

Nevertheless, in order to advance the analysis of macro-level relations in global fields beyond national presuppositions, we must be careful of two potential pitfalls that Bourdieu and Casanova did not discuss. First, it is not necessary or advisable to automatically assume “national” capital is the primary organizing category for mapping macro-level power relations. The importance of ‘national’ resources, as compared to subnational or regional ones, may change over time for a particular field. Its relevance can also vary across different fields. Sassen (1991) has shown, for example, that global cities, rather than nation-states, define the macro power structure of global finance. Thus, the assumption that “national” capital is inherently relevant should be replaced with a framework that instead considers the various types of “macro capital” of different possible units, including cities, regions, etc. (Buchholz 2016, 51f., 2018b, 21f.). Such an approach would reflexively identify the most pertinent entities for representing macro-structural relationships in global or transnational fields, based on the specific case and research question being addressed.

Another, more intricate point to keep in mind is that while countries may be most relevant units in many situations, it is crucial to distinguish between nationally and supranationally relevant stocks of “national capital.” What matters for a global/transnational field are only those resources of national fields that indeed create structural asymmetries for competition at a global/transnational level (Buchholz 2016, 51f.). For instance, a study about the power structure among countries in the global art field considered only those national art institutions to be “national capital” if they were open toward transnational artistic exchange in their operations (Buchholz 2022). This included certain international art biennials, transnationally oriented museums or art exhibition spaces. In this way, the analysis aimed to identify those institutional inequalities among countries that indeed constitute power imbalances for the cross-border mediation of contemporary art within the *global* field. In a similar vein, Schmitz et al. (2017, 2023) analyzed “the international field of power” with field-specific indicators of countries. Drawing upon geometric data analysis, they identified two dimensions with particular weight for differentiating

to prevent overly homogenized and reified accounts of power and conflict in the global arena, it is not fruitful to think of macro-entities as agents, or as “actors.” This line of thought echoes a general precaution toward “reified collectives” as agents (such as “states”) in field theory (Bourdieu 1994; Steinmetz 2008; Vauchez 2011, 340), which must be extended to a global level.

power positions among countries at the international level: (1) *meta-capital*, as international power factors based on size, resources, and military; and (2) *internal functionality*, which captures institutional functioning but also proximity to European notions of functional societies.

Thus, a (neo)-Bourdieuian relationalism must theorize macro-structural relations in global/transnational fields beyond nationalist assumptions. That includes a deliberate effort to denationalize Bourdieu's and Casanova's original formulation of "national capital," both in the choice of the most relevant macro units and of the appropriate indicators.

From Uni-Scalar to Multi-Scalar Relationalism

A field-theoretical relationalism that steers clear of methodological nationalism involves not only engaging reflexively with different degrees of relationality or distinct types of macro power relations, it also invites us to question the assumption that the relations defining a social field can be reduced to just one scale.⁸ Bourdieu's work in the sociology of literature, for example, metonymically speaks of the "French" literary field. Yet his empirical research in the *Rules of Art* focuses primarily on the activities of modern writers in Paris rather than France as a whole (Bourdieu 1996). His classic study tended to equate field relations at the urban scale with those at the national scale, rather than theorizing how they might differ or interact within the same literary domain. This uni-scalar flattening of relations likewise echoes the epistemic baggage of a nation-state-centered paradigm in sociology, since it presupposes that social processes can be boxed into single, geographically bounded entities.

Within the growing literature on global/transnational fields, however, several contributions have problematized the uni-scalar relationalism of traditional field theory.⁹ Theoretically, Buchholz has introduced the notion of *relative vertical autonomy* as an angle to conceptualize the

⁸Note that the notion of "scale" in this article is informed by how the discipline of geography understands that term—as the spatial extent on which a particular phenomenon operates in geographic space. This understanding differs from sociological-theoretical scales of macro, meso, and micro (Cf. Ming-tak Chew 2023, 534).

⁹For exemplary studies that implicitly and explicitly challenge the uni-scalar assumptions of traditional Bourdieusian field theory (cf. Casanova 2004; Kuipers 2011; Heilbron 2014; Buchholz 2016, 2022; Dromi 2016; Levitt 2020; Sievers and Levitt 2020; Ferguson 2021; Ming-tak Chew 2023). For broader reviews discussing contributions that advance a multi-scalar framework (cf. Krause 2020; Hamann 2023).

multi-scalar structuration of certain fields (2016). While Bourdieu's original notion of functional "relative autonomy" designated a field's social differentiation from other *types* of fields,¹⁰ the concept of vertical autonomy refers to a field's sub-differentiation into scalar *levels*. In the example of the French literary field above, for example, that process involves the sub-differentiation of urban and national levels.

The notion of relative vertical autonomy suggests that scalar levels (e.g., (sub)national, regional, global) within the same domain of practice can develop relational structures and logics that are relatively independent of other scalar levels. The fields of social science or contemporary art, for example, developed scalar sub-differentiations between global, regional, and national levels that are embedded in unique infrastructures and logics (Heilbron 2014; Buchholz 2022).

However, the qualifier *relative* likewise underlines that scalar field levels are not completely independent from one another. We need to keep in mind how they also remain interdependent in their dynamics, albeit to varying extents (Buchholz 2016, 48–50; Dromi 2016). One might draw an analogy with sports. The FIFA World Cup in soccer constitutes just one (and one might say the highest) level at which the sport unfolds. However, there are still regional and national competitions, such as the UEFA Champions League and the DFB-Pokal. While these contests follow their own protocols, they can also feed into what happens at the World Cup, and vice versa. A multi-scalar relationism must consider both the differentiated coexistence *and* interplay of field relations at various scales (Buchholz 2016; Dromi 2016; Krause 2020, 102; Hamann 2023).

By now, we have seen an increasing number of studies that productively examine the multi-scalar differentiation of fields.¹¹ However, we still lack a deeper theoretical understanding concerning how scalar levels interact and produce inter-scalar effects. Stray and Wood, for example, note in their insightful research on educational policy that the specific "processes that connect a local or national educational policy field with global fields are still weakly understood and theorized" (2020, 256). And Ming-tak Chew rightly points out that one concept alone (e.g., relative vertical autonomy) is, by itself, not sufficient for constructing a multi-scalar field perspective (2023, 533).

¹⁰As, for example, regarding the historical autonomization of the modern French art field from the field of power (e.g., Bourdieu 1993, 1996).

¹¹Cf. footnote 9.

In line with the relational focus of our contribution and the emerging scholarship, we propose three key areas for advancing theoretical perspectives on relations *between different* scalar levels. The first refers to the need for more nuanced conceptions and indicators of the varying strengths of inter-scalar field relations (i.e., the degree of relative vertical autonomy/heteronomy), which will provide a fuller explanation of the differences in the convertibility of resources and meanings within multi-scalar fields. To what extent, for example, can symbolic capital at the global level serve as a power resource in national field competition? Similarly, when is the scalar convertibility of such capital limited due to a national field's stronger vertical autonomy? In contrast to more deterministic center–periphery models, a multi-scalar field approach implies that global-level resources do not always translate into the same type of national advantages, since the strength of relations between scalar field levels can vary.¹²

To better account for such relational variations, laws and policies for importing and exporting foreign goods, credentials, or ideas (e.g., copyright) are obvious initial candidates to consider as indicators and mechanisms of vertical autonomy. More protectionist laws and policies will increasingly limit flows from regional or global levels (and vice versa), and thus, they will circumscribe inter-scalar field effects (cf. Kuipers 2011; Sapiro 2016, 83–84; Van Es and Heilbron 2015, 301).

Another more intricate way to refine our understanding of the relative strength of inter-scalar field relations refers to the balance of power between scalar oppositions that run through each field level (e.g., between those oriented around national stakes and those that are not, cf. Go and Krause 2016, 12). Bourdieu's original framework overlooked such scalar oppositions, which can take different forms. For example, in her study of the field of economics in Chile, Fourcade (2006) reveals clashes between traditionalists and globalizers. Casanova's and Sapiro's work on world literature, by comparison, uncover conflicts between nationalists and internationalists in national literary fields (Casanova 2004; Sapiro 2018, 170).¹³ Meanwhile, research on the European Union highlights the ongoing tension between nationalists and Europeanizers as a key battleground across national political fields (Georgakakis 2013; Schmidt-Wellenburg 2017).

¹²For an early critique of deterministic center–periphery models in cultural and medial imperialism theory (cf. Straubhaar 1991).

¹³Cf. Ming-tak Chew (2023) for an insightful elaboration of this division for the Chinese intellectual field.

Thinking through these findings more broadly, we can hypothesize that the state of power relations between scalar poles within each field level preconditions the strength of relations (i.e., relative vertical autonomy/heteronomy) between respective levels. For example, if a national field is more heavily dominated by globalizers, it will exhibit weaker vertical autonomy toward the global level—and thus be more open toward its supranational forms of capital—than fields that are dominated by nationalists (and vice versa). While more research is needed to confirm this idea, it underscores once again how an extended relational perspective allows us to move beyond uni-scalar relationalism and challenge an overly endogenous view of “national” or even supranational fields.

A second theoretically constructive site involves cultivating a more nuanced account of the actual processes involved in the inter-scalar *conversion and translation* of resources and meanings. Specifying mechanisms for the strength of “vertical” relations provides only an initial approximation to help theorize multi-scalar field effects. We also need to better understand the conditions under which resources and ideas are adapted from one scalar level to another and how they become significant. In other words, we must look at the specific sociocultural processes involved in the interactions between scalar levels, not just the strength of their relations.

The few existing studies that have explored this idea have productively extended Bourdieu’s work on the international circulation of ideas from inter-national to inter-scalar field dynamics (Bourdieu 2002; Mangez and Hilgers 2012; Dromi 2016; Stray and Wood 2020). They reveal how cultural models or goods undergo a relational process of translation when they move from one scalar level to another to ‘suit the requirements and the logic’ of each level with its own “internal structure and diverse positions and oppositions” (Mangez and Hilgers 2012, 199f.; Dromi 2016; Stray and Wood 2020). Mangez and Hilgers demonstrate, for instance, how the impact of the international PISA study on France’s education policy field depended on its translation into specific national debates with “competing and pre-existing policy options” (Mangez and Hilgers 2012, 199f.). Even within the same *type* of field, the inter-scalar circulation of meanings hinged on adaptive meaning-making processes that were prefigured by prevailing relations at each *level* (ibid.).

Dromi’s insightful study about the formation of a transnational field of humanitarianism illuminates how inter-scalar cultural processes can also operate *bidirectionally*.¹⁴ Actors within different national fields framed the

¹⁴Hamann (2023) discusses several other pioneering contributions that go in this direction, also beyond the question of translation.

mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross with patriotic values and imagery, helping to legitimize “universal” humanitarianism through nationalistic meanings in their respective countries (2016, 2020). The “downward” patriotic translation of humanitarian models served as a cultural mechanism for the “upward” expansion of the transnational humanitarian field. Dromi’s study highlights how translations can act as cultural bridges that connect scalar levels in mutually effective ways, despite the structural variations that may exist between them.

Nevertheless, more theoretical work is necessary to specify inter-scalar translation processes. For one, we need to further conceptualize the cultural structures at a given scalar level that prefigure translation processes—analogue to what Bourdieu (1993) referred to as a field’s symbolic space. Even when scalar levels fall into the same domain of practice, we must remain cognizant of how their properties may vary. The fieldness of global and national levels, for example, should not be approached in symmetrical terms (cf. “[Relationality as a Variable of Fieldness](#)” section), unlike Bourdieu’s (2002) framework on the circulation of ideas, which focused on countries (and thus fields at the same scale).

Moreover, to fully understand how cultural models or objects circulate across different levels of social fields, we must also examine how their inherent cultural characteristics influence their “translatability”—and, in turn, their ability to function as links between field levels. Bourdieu’s work on the international circulation of ideas highlights the power of polysemic texts, whose multiple meanings make them adaptable across different contexts (2002). However, other studies suggest that clear, simplified, or quantified cultural texts—what Bourdieu might term ‘vulgate’ (Bourdieu 1984; Mangez and Hilger 2012, 199)—can be equally effective in traversing scalar boundaries (cf. also Petzke 140). These variations underscore the need for a theory of multi-scalar field effects that examines both the structural characteristics of scalar levels and the properties of the cultural texts that move between them *in relation* to one another.

The study of “scalar intermediaries”—which involves both certain professional organizations and individuals—represents the third strategic research site for advancing a multi-scalar relationalism. Operating as brokers between field levels, scalar intermediaries provide fertile ground for theorizing how specific agents navigate and shift scalar levels. Habinek’s field study on the Nobel Prize in Literature, for example, demonstrates how certain organizations can serve as multi-scalar junctions in which agents have to adjudicate between different scales of reference, a process

he conceptualizes as “scalar mediation” (2023). As his study reveals, the Nobel committee’s deliberations are not just about identifying the authors most deserving of the prize. They are also influenced by debates about the appropriate scale and evaluative criteria that should be applied, which have shifted from a national to a local to, eventually, a global level (Habinek 2023).

Individual professionals, too, offer strategic cases to better understand how relations among “vertical” field levels are negotiated in practice. Kuiper’s study of the transnational TV field, for example, demonstrates how certain television buyers performed a multi-scalar brokerage for the flow of goods and discourses while maintaining and mediating relations among national and transnational television fields (2011, 549). Similarly, economic policy experts in the EU, or educational policy officials who engage with PISA to position their countries in the global education field, represent other examples of specialized scalar intermediaries (Schmidt-Wellenburg 2017; Stray and Wood 2020). Given that the multi-positionality of these professionals disrupts routine forms of action and potentially demands forms of split habitus (Bourdieu 2007b), an in-depth study of them also raises important questions about theorizing practices within fields beyond the traditional uni-scalar perspective (Habinek 2023; Kuipers 2011).

From Boundedness to Poly-Contextualization: Thinking About the Global Field of Power

Employing relational reasoning, we must assume that units of inquiry and units of context are—or, at least, can be—*simultaneously constitutive*. This is one implication of generalized field theory and the “fields of fields perspective” (Schmitz et al. 2017; Witte and Schmitz 2021, 30), which emphasized that “the units of comparison can be freely chosen according to the theoretical and empirical requirements at hand, and, moreover, different units can be compared simultaneously (human actors, organizations, nations, etc.)” (ibid.). This social fact of *multiple relational references* (for both scientific inquiry and the practices of the actors involved) applies to differentiated societies in general. This is why the very figurations of different fields and spaces lie at the heart of their revisions of Bourdieusian theory: the field of field perspective motivates the *global field and space* as the ultimate reference system. Namely, the “global field of power” (cf. Schmitz and Witte 2017; Witte and Schmitz 2021) denotes the broadest possible frame of reference for societization, expressing both the

geographical-physical extent of society and the fact that all field and space relations—whether they be national, subnational, supranational, transnational, or any hybrid form—can be related to each other, both in theoretical and empirical terms.¹⁵

It is crucial here to clarify that “global” does not simply refer to the global expansion across the globe, nor does it refer solely to phenomena on different scales or the simultaneous operation of individual, organizational, national, and transnational fields. Here, the term “global” also refers to the fact that every field and habitus is affected by the “field of fields” in a way that can be determined empirically. This strictly relational view sees every field as affected and co-constituted by other fields, which is not, of course, only relevant in these times of global and transnational research. Nevertheless, this more recent discourse can provide numerous examples that are related to this insight. Take, for instance, global climate change discourse, which illustrates the intersection of political, economic, and national fields. Political fields at both national and international levels, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), intersect with economic fields, including multinational corporations and international financial institutions, to define, play down, address, etc., the global issue of climate change. The Paris Agreement is a prime example where national fields (governments of various countries) and organizational fields (NGOs, corporations) intersect to create a global response. The agreement’s implementation affects national policies, corporate strategies, and individual behaviors globally, demonstrating how each field and habitus is co-constituted by others within the field of fields.

In a way, the extended perspective of the global field of power approach resembles the context of polycontextuality, particularly the way it was taken up by the German system theorist Niklas Luhmann (2012) and specified in the direction of the conception of system-specific codes (true vs. untrue, paying vs. not paying, etc.). In this tradition, polycontextuality refers to an empirical fact of modern society—namely, the existence of mutually independent functional systems, which may be accompanied by far-reaching challenges for social integration as well as for the individual actor. In contrast to the systems-theoretical use of the concept, which seeks to solve the problem of integrating (world) society in the face of disconnected systems assuming autonomous systems, relational theory

¹⁵ See Simmel ([1908] 2009) for the concept of societization (cf. Schmidt 2020, 415).

focuses on the relations and mutual influences between social fields and spaces, which are always only relatively autonomous.

While the majority of research is limited to individual fields—be they national or transnational—this proposal suggests prioritizing the plurality and simultaneity of fields in the conceptualization of social phenomena. Preserving the analytical characteristics of Bourdieu’s concepts, this perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence of various social fields across national borders, acknowledging the dynamic relationships that shape the construction of habitus and practices. Just as the micro-macro dichotomy dissolves in the concepts of national field, national habitus, national practice, etc., an extension to the transnational realm does not imply a macro-view. Rather, the relational view considers the transverse interrelations of different social fields, including their co-constitution, their joint production of plural habitus, and their effects on adding to or undermining nation-stateness. This reveals that national habitus is not produced by the national field alone and that national politics, economics, law, culture, etc. are also involved in that process, but it also reveals that the presence and effects of other national fields can have a constitutive effect on the national habitus of a given national field. For example, as discussed by Bourdieusian scholarship, migrants’ habitus reflect a pluralistic set of dispositions and practices that are shaped by the interplay between the country of origin and their new country, by field-specific disposition (economic, religious, cultural, etc.), and, not least, by the condition of the transnational movement itself (which is what one might call the “transnational habitus”; cf. Carlson and Schneickert 2021).

The generalized relational framework critically enables us to perceive nation-stateness as a variable within a relational space, serving as both the *explanandum* and *explanans* for sociological inquiry. In contrast to a false dichotomy of either rejecting the theoretical and empirical relevance of the nation-state or hypostasizing it, this approach allows us to relate and decenter the nation-state. The nation-state, no longer has the function of framing and integrating all social fields. Instead, it can be regarded as a field alongside others, which actually can add to or challenge the extent of a given nations’ relationality in the sense of the extent and scope of its internal national integration. In doing so, a solution to the conceptual problem of burdening the nation-state with a series of analytical functions is proposed, without—based on an overly enthusiastic shift away from methodological nationalism—discarding the nation-state’s empirical relevance. Thus, while nation-states can still be understood as important

causes in field analysis, they themselves are understood as entities that are constructed by different fields. For example, the economic field is often and variously involved in the establishment of borders; this occurred in Singapore's transition to an independent nation in 1965, which was partly due to economic disagreements with Malaysia. Similarly, the religious field can contribute to the formation of borders between countries. For example, the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was heavily influenced by religious differences between Hindus and Muslims, resulting in the creation of two separate nations with different religious majorities.

The plurality of fields and field relations is not only relevant for the conceptualization and analysis of a given nation-state but likewise for the comparison between nation-states. While research on the international comparison of nation-states is based in particular on structural or survey data and takes the nation-state as a natural or at least self-evident category, the perspective reconstructed here emphasizes that not all societies that can be formally labeled as nation-states actually possess the same degree of internal stability and social integration. The foundation of the space of nation-states, however, turns out to be a combination of definitions and effects from different fields, for it is the interplay of economic, juridical, political, cultural, etc. capitals that structure a nation's position in this space and, crucially, the space itself. This does not make the comparison of nation-states obsolete; on the contrary, it rests on a more fundamental epistemological foundation, namely, the question of the extent to which we are dealing with a case that corresponds to the ideal-typical image of a state, and which global power and symbolic dimensions justify this status: there is a wide continuum between so-called failed states and the long-established Western nation-states, which have advantages not only in institutional resources but also in symbolic capital, so that it is precisely Western nation-states that traditionally define what constitutes a "nation-state" (Witte and Schmitz 2021; Schmitz et al. 2023). Ultimately, the extension of field theory to include different scalar levels and multiple field relations can contribute to the advancement of reflexivity of the contemporary Bourdieusian engagement with global and transnational phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This chapter contributes to recent advancements of a relational sociology of transnational and global fields. We propose a critical reevaluation of how Bourdieu's original relational model has been linked to national

ontological assumptions in ways that surpass the issue of the scale of field relations. Building on and extending current scholarship, our contribution identified four analytically distinct directions for rethinking Bourdieusian relationalism within global and transnational contexts. These directions include treating relationality as a variable, the reflexive theorization of macro structural relations, the shift from uni- to multi-scalar relationalism, and the poly-contextualization of field relations through the generalized frame of a global field of power. While these advances in relational field theory are particularly relevant and amplified for global/transnational field studies, we have also emphasized that they are not limited to field theory across national borders. A consistent relationalism broadens the applicability of the Bourdieusian toolbox to global and transnational phenomena without succumbing to conceptual reification or even a reverse “methodological transnationalism” (Go and Krause 2016, 7).

Nonetheless, this chapter represents a small but important step toward consolidating the relationalist field approach to global/transnational studies. In this growing research program, it highlights the vast potential for further advancements of a (neo)-Bourdieusian relationalism, which should also address epistemological and empirical-methodological considerations and continue to engage with postcolonial advancements (e.g., Go 2018). In the spirit of the reflexivity inherent in Bourdieu’s sociology, the field of Bourdieusian research must expand to integrate diverse national fields and focus on the blind spots that stem from the perpetuation of Western (national) thought.

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Rethinking Social Space: Positions, Dispositions and Networks

Nick Crossley

Pierre Bourdieu's conception of social space is one of the central pillars of his theoretical framework and is central to his understanding of relational sociology. He argues that every social actor in a society is positioned relative to the others through the capital they possess. Some have more than others (a higher "volume") and ratios of economic to cultural capital ("composition") vary, putting actors at differing "distances" from one another. These distances or "structural relations" are constitutive of social space, for Bourdieu (1985, 1987, 1998), and provide the key to his version of relational analysis. Actors' dispositions and the formation and mobilization of social groups are understood by reference to their positions in social space, which are in turn defined by the structural relations between them. When Bourdieu claims that 'the real is relational' it is these structural relations and their effects that he is referring to (Bourdieu 1987, 3, 1998, 3, see also Schmitz et al. 2016).

In *Distinction*, this theoretical conception is extended into the methodological and empirical domains. Bourdieu (1984) uses correspondence

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_3

analysis and the scatterplots it generates to map social space, exploring and showing how actors and their tastes and practices are juxtaposed in a space whose two dimensions reflect volume and composition of capital respectively. These maps bring the spatial metaphor to life by visualising it. Moreover, to invoke the Bachelardian epistemology Bourdieu draws upon, they constitute his object of analysis (Bachelard 2002; Bourdieu et al. 1991). Social space becomes a perceptible, measurable object of investigation.

There is much to commend Bourdieu's conception of social space. His discussions are insightful and his effort to extend relationality into the methodological and empirical domains is crucial if relational sociology is to be anything more than a superficial coat covering "substantivist"¹ research practices that have remained largely unchanged for years, serving innumerable very different theoretical masters. Theoretical arguments must inform methodology, closing the theory-research gap identified by Abbott (1997, 2001), if the relational turn is to be anything more than the latest in a long line of decorative dressings for 'sociology as usual'. However, Bourdieu's conception of social space is flawed on several counts and in this chapter I will show why, suggesting an alternative.

My alternative is centred upon social networks and concepts deriving from social network analysis (SNA) (Scott 2000; Wasserman and Faust 1994). Bourdieu affords a role to social networks in his approach (e.g. Bourdieu 1987, and on social capital, Bourdieu 1986). However, he underestimates this role and its importance in the processes he is exploring, subordinating what he calls the "effective relations" constitutive of social networks and captured in SNA to the abovementioned "structural relations", which he affords both theoretical and temporal primacy. Structural relations precede effective relations, for Bourdieu, and explain them. I challenge this prioritisation, demonstrating that structural relations presuppose effective relations and arguing that each of these two types of relation shapes the other in a dynamic which the prioritisation of structural relations and the model of social space built upon it distorts. We need a model of social space which includes both effective and structural relations, I argue, refraining from prioritising either and allowing for the mutual impact of each upon the other.

¹ Bourdieu opposes relational thinking to substantivist thinking. Where the former studies objects comparatively and in relation to one another the latter treats objects in an atomistic fashion, tending to regarding their properties as intrinsic and essential.

My alternative also resolves a further problem with Bourdieu's model. His "social space" is centred upon the distribution of economic and cultural capital and makes no room for social differences and divisions which are not reducible to this distribution; divisions such as those based upon gender, ethnicity and age. Bourdieu recognises gender inequality and the gendered nature of habitus across many of his works, mostly obviously in *Masculine Domination*, and he makes some references to generational and ethnic divisions at various points (Bourdieu 1984, 2001). However, such divides find no place in his model of social space. Where he mentions them he deems them superficial obfuscations of the "real" relations constitutive of social space. His model of social space belongs to a broader discussion of how social groups form, acquiring the capacity for collective action and agency, and he deems social classes, defined by the capital of their members, the key collective actors in contemporary societies.

Insofar as he offers any justification for prioritising social class over gender, ethnicity, age etc., Bourdieu (1985, 1987) appeals to the greater explanatory power of the distribution of economic and cultural capital in relation to lifestyle, habitus and group formation/ mobilisation. As distinctions such as those of gender and ethnicity are not included in his statistical analyses in *Distinction*, however, this claim is not empirically tested. Moreover, replications of the study which have included these variables have found associations at least as strong and in some cases stronger than those they have found for class (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009).

It is my contention, therefore, that social space and social position are shaped not only by economic and cultural capital but also by gender, ethnicity, age and other statuses, and that we need a conception of social space which reflects this. One way to do this would be to add further dimensions to Bourdieu's model of social space, each capturing a further axis of social division. To Bourdieu's two principal axes of social space, for example, one might add one for gender, one for ethnicity, one for age, etc. As I elaborate further below, however, this poses further problems and stretches Bourdieu's spatial metaphor beyond its usefulness.

SNA affords a meaningful alternative. We can conceptualise and visualise social space as a network of effective relations, taking account of social distinctions as measurable statistical parameters which shape that network but without abstracting them as a separate structure and whilst acknowledging a two-way process in which those same distinctions are themselves generated within the very interaction processes (i.e., effective relations) they shape. Social space is dynamic on this account; a process wherein

resources are exchanged, distinctions drawn and effective relations forged, transformed and dissolved. This is the alternative I propose. I begin the chapter by outlining Bourdieu's understanding of structural relations and social space.

STRUCTURAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL SPACE

Bourdieu's conception of social space rests upon a notion of "structural relations", which he contrasts sharply with what he calls "effective relations", which he identifies in the work of Weber, "interactionists" and SNA (see also Schmitz et al. 2016). "Effective relations" are based upon interaction and interdependence between actors. Examples include employment relations, friendship, active² family relations, relations with colleagues and neighbours etc. "Structural relations", by contrast, are "distances" between actors defined along two continua: (1) the total *volume* of capital they possess when all of their economic and cultural assets are combined, and (2) the *composition* of this capital; that is, the ratio of economic to cultural capital in their possession. Whilst university professors enjoy a good income and are therefore generally economically well-off, for example, their very high levels of cultural capital set them apart from others enjoying a similarly high volume of capital. They possess the very highest educational qualifications (what Bourdieu 1986 calls "institutionalised cultural capital"); they possess the know-how to talk knowledgeably about high-cultural issues, have a large vocabulary and often talk, walk, dress and gesture in a way which signifies high-culture to others ("embodied cultural capital"); and they typically own books, records and reproductions of paintings drawn from the canons of high-culture (objectified cultural capital). The CEO of a large company, by contrast, whilst they may have a university degree and even an MBA and therefore considerable cultural capital, is distanced from professors and others by their very high level of economic capital. They will often command a very high salary, boosted by share dividends, bonuses, etc. Both the professor and the CEO have a high volume of capital but whilst the professor's is skewed towards cultural capital, the CEO's is skewed towards economic capital. The composition of their capital is different.

²That is, family members who are known and interacted with.

Bourdieu is clear that overall volume of capital makes the most difference and therefore has the greatest sociological significance but differences in composition are important, particularly amongst those who enjoy a high volume. Though both close to its apex, professors and CEOs occupy very different positions in social space and Bourdieu expects to observe differences in their tastes, lifestyles and habitus as a consequence.

The distribution of volume and composition across a population constitute the first two of three dimensions of social space for Bourdieu and can be captured on a scatterplot (see Fig. 3.1). Volume is captured along the vertical axis and composition along the horizontal. Every actor in a population (or survey sample) has a position in this space according to their individual volume and composition. In Fig. 3.1, for example, John and Jane are high in volume, compared to Mike and Michelle, but differ in terms of composition. John's volume is largely attributable to economic capital, Jane's to cultural capital. This is what Bourdieu means by "social position" and in accordance with his understanding of relationality, he maintains that the significance of any one position depends upon its distance from (or proximity to) other positions; its location within the overall configuration of points. When he refers to "social distance", he means the distance between any two actors' positions in social space. The third

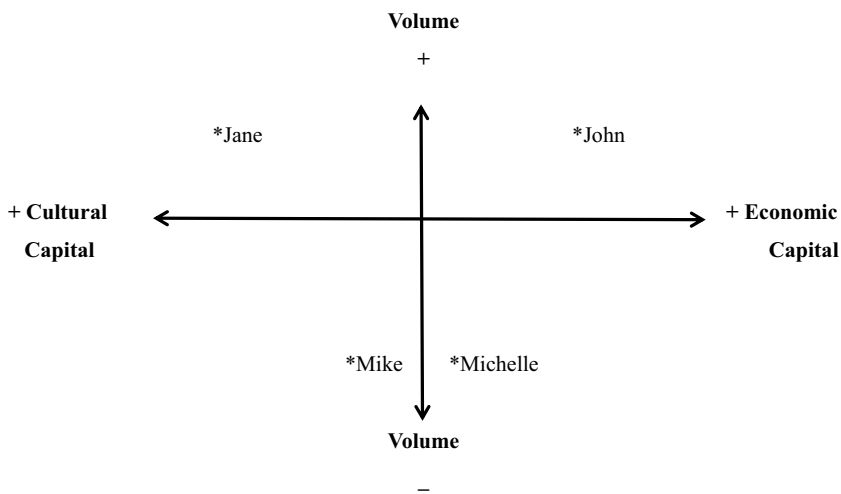


Fig. 3.1 A hypothetical visualisation of Bourdieu's social space

dimension of social space, as defined by Bourdieu, involves actors' trajectories through the former two across time but he doesn't elaborate and I will bracket this dimension for present purposes.

Bourdieu (1984) claims to verify this model empirically in *Distinction* by way of a correspondence analysis of survey data (on correspondence analysis see Clausen 1998; Le Roux and Rouanet 2004, 2009). As a data reduction method which uses the associations between multiple categorical variables to generate a small number of continuous variables, correspondence analysis is promising in this respect. For example, one might use it to derive a scale of cultural capital from a series of categorical indicators. However, Bourdieu never explains in any detail how he arrives at the correspondence maps that he presents in *Distinction* and replication studies by other researchers, whilst offering qualified support for his overall thesis, have been unable to reproduce them. Consequently, they have either used correspondence analysis in a different way to him or abandoned it in favour of more conventional statistical methods (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009; Vandebroek 2017).³

RELATIONS: EFFECTIVE AND STRUCTURAL

The structural relations constitutive of social space underlie effective relations, according to Bourdieu, conditioning their likelihood. The probability of any two actors meeting and forging an effective tie is a function of the structural relation between them. SNA's focus upon effective relations is superficial from this perspective; a distraction from the structural relations which underlie and shape them:

It is this structure that determines the possibility or the impossibility (or, to be more precise, the greater or lesser probability) of establishing the linkages that express and sustain the existence of networks. The task of science is to

³Where Bourdieu appears to construct the axes of his space using indicators of economic and cultural capital, and then later to project lifestyle dispositions into this space, subsequent researchers, such as Bennett et al. (2009) construct the axes and space using lifestyle dispositions and then later project class, along with other status differences such as gender and ethnicity, into the space. One reason for this was that the researchers were unable to make Bourdieu's way work (Savage personal communication). Vandebroek (personal communication) abandoned the use of correspondence analysis altogether in an attempt to replicate *Distinction* in a study of body maintenance and modification for the same reason (see Vandebroek 2017).

uncover the structure of the species of capital which tends to determine the structure of individual or collective stances taken, through the interests and dispositions it conditions. In network analysis, the study of these underlying structures has been sacrificed to the analysis of the particular linkages ... and flows ... through which they become visible. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 114)

Bourdieu's claim that structural relations condition the probability of effective relations is credible. Network analysts have long recognised and found evidence of "status homophily"; that is, the tendency in some networks for similarities in status and the resources available to actors to influence the likelihood of relations forming between them (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1964; McPherson et al. 2001). However, the separation that he makes between structural and effective relations and the theoretical and temporal primacy he affords to the former cannot be sustained. Social space does not and cannot pre-exist social interaction and networks of effective relations. Economic capital typically takes the form of money, for example, which is a social institution whose existence and value depend upon inter-subjective agreement in a population and the diffusion, over time, of that agreement through concrete social networks. As Elias (1984) amongst others has shown, it took time for money to gain acceptance as a token of value and medium of exchange within European populations. Similarly, "cultural capital" presupposes inter-subjective agreement regarding hierarchies of cultural value, with the interaction required to bring this about. And its most obvious manifestation, educational qualifications, derives from interaction in schools and universities. Indeed, the value of the capitals to which Bourdieu refers is exchange value and therefore presupposes concrete exchanges (interaction). And the distribution of any form of capital at any point in time is always the outcome of a history of (ongoing) concrete interactions and exchanges.

Structural relations do not pre-exist or "underlie" concrete interactions and relations, therefore, in the manner Bourdieu suggests. Rather, they are a perpetually evolving emergent property of the configuration of those interactions and relations, albeit one which acts back upon (subsequent) interaction in a recursive circuit. Structure and interaction represent different levels of abstraction from reality, not different levels of reality or indeed different "things". Bourdieu's failure to recognise this is a form of the "theoreticism" he criticises in others. He confuses his model for the reality it purports to model.

No less importantly, the “dispositions” and “stances”, individual and collective, to which Bourdieu refers in the passage cited above, are not, as he claims, a direct effect of the capitals possessed by an actor, even if capital makes a difference. Rather, they are forged in interaction between actors and diffused through a process of social influence in social networks. The “particular linkages” and “flows” whose importance Bourdieu questions in the passage quoted above are integral to the formation of habitus. Bourdieu recognises this on occasion. In *The Love of Art*, for example, he suggests that middle class adults are disposed to visit art museums because they were taken around such museums as children and taught to appreciate art by their parents (Bourdieu et al. 1997). The disposition to visit museums and enjoy art flows from parents to children in family networks. These observations are never developed, however, and Bourdieu more typically suggests that dispositions (habitus) are explained by positions in social space. I explore this in more detail in the following section.

POSITIONS, DISPOSITIONS AND POSITION-TAKING

Bourdieu (1985, 1987) posits his concept of social space as a contribution to the understanding of social class formation. Classes emerge, he argues, from clusters of actors located closely in social space. Such clusters are only “classes on paper”, however, and a far cry from historically effective classes who act collectively, steering the direction of history. The process that transforms a cluster of proximate actors into an effective class has several aspects, for Bourdieu. Here I restrict my focus to the role he accords to dispositions and “effective relations”.

A class on paper first begins to approximate a historically effective class, for Bourdieu, as a consequence of the forging of effective relations between its members. Real classes are, amongst other things, clusters of densely networked actors. Proximity in social space makes this more likely; first, because it increases the probability that two actors will come into contact; second, because position in social space shapes an actor’s dispositions (habitus), such that actors who are closely positioned in social space are more similar to one another, making it more likely that they will hit it off, forging a tie, when and if they do meet:

The model thus defines distances that are predictive of encounters, affinities, sympathies, or even desires. ... [P]roximity in social space predisposes to

closer relations; people who are inscribed in a restricted sector of the space will be both closer (in their properties and in their dispositions, their tastes) and more disposed to get closer, as well as being easier to bring together, to mobilise. (Bourdieu 1998, 10–11)

The claim that proximity in social space makes “encounters” more likely is straightforward and uncontentious. Economic capital affects where an actor is able to live and therefore who their neighbours are, the local amenities they are likely to use and the schools where they send their children. Consequently, actors with similar levels of economic capital enjoy a higher likelihood of coming into contact. Likewise, economic capital is linked to occupation and workplace, which again provides an occasion for meeting and forging ties. And cultural capital influences whether an actor goes to university or not and, if they do, which university they go to, shaping their pool of potential friends and romantic partners at an important stage in their lives.

However, Bourdieu’s claim that social position shapes dispositions, which further affect the likelihood of actors meeting and forging ties, is more problematic. Research in SNA both recognises and empirically demonstrates, under the rubric of “value homophily”, that similarities in “values” (tastes, attitudes, etc.) make effective relations between actors more likely (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1964; McPherson et al. 2001). This is an important idea. However, the idea that dispositions are in some way a direct consequence of positions, as if actors first acquired their likes, dislikes and orientation to the world individually, as an effect of objective conditions, only later entering into relations with other actors, is implausible. It is far more plausible to suggest that actors’ dispositions are formed in their concrete interactions and relations with one another, albeit under the further influence of the constraints, opportunities and exigencies posed by the material conditions in which they live.

In addition, the claim that dispositions are shaped by cultural capital is tautologous because cultural capital is defined in some part by reference to cultured dispositions. This is most obvious in relation to “embodied cultural capital”, which consists precisely of highly valued cultural dispositions but it is also true of “objectified cultural capital”. Whilst owning prints, recordings and other reproductions of highly valued art objects is not identical to having a taste for them it is typically an effect of such tastes and cannot be invoked as an explanation of them—although, to return to Bourdieu’s argument in *The Love of Art* and his key educational studies,

where those objects are found in an actor's childhood home they may serve as a props in a process of social influence whereby "high" cultural tastes are transmitted from parents to their offspring.

Bourdieu does not always formulate his thesis in this way. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, for example, he suggests that the habitus of any individual actor is a variant upon the collective habitus of their class, suggesting that habitus are forged in collective (class) action (Bourdieu 1977). Members of a given class fraction develop similar values and orientations because they develop them together, in interaction, influencing one another. In his work on social space, however, the primacy afforded to collective history in this earlier work is displaced and Bourdieu explains collectives by reference to structure and dispositions which, he claims, pre-exist them. Structure gives rise to dispositions, which give rise to effective relations, which constitute the basis upon which classes form.

In what follows I examine this claim in detail but first it is important to note an inconsistency in Bourdieu's use of "habitus" when discussing these matters. Sometimes he equates "habitus" with preferences and practices which are relatively stable over a given period of time. For example, he lists the culinary, sporting and entertainment preferences and practices characteristic of the working class habitus. On other occasions, by contrast, he distinguishes habitus, as an underlying orientation, from actors' preferences and practices, suggesting that this orientation informs their choices of the latter and lends those choices a degree of coherence without being identical with them. In this usage, "habitus" refers to an "outlook" and "system of values" which mediates between positions and lifestyle choices. Positions shape habitus, which in turn shape preferences and choices:

the relation between *social positions* (a relational concept), *dispositions* (or habitus) and *position-takings* (*prises de position*), that is, the 'choices' made by the social agents in the most diverse domains of practice, in food or sport, music or politics. (Bourdieu 1998, 6, his emphases)

I will keep both of Bourdieu's uses in mind in the foregoing. However, I will not consider those uses which treat "the habitus" as an agent. Habitus do not do anything. As I have argued elsewhere, it is embodied actors who act. They may be disposed to act in particular ways but this presupposes prior actions which have become habitual and also a natural disposition on behalf of the embodied actor, qua organism, towards

habitation (Crossley 2001a, b). This is not the place to critique Bourdieu's tendency to reduce agency to habitus (*ibid.*), but it is important to stress both that an actor's habitus is only one of several facets of their agency and that the translation of "positions" into "dispositions" is mediated by the ways in which actors respond in the first instance to situations. Habitus are products (via habituation) of actors' prior actions and responses to situations.

Habitus Formation According to Bourdieu

When discussing the relation of positions to dispositions Bourdieu sometimes suggests that the conditions attaching to the former "condition" the latter. The discussion of "distance from necessity" in *Distinction* is the clearest illustration of this (Bourdieu 1984, 373–97). Because they only have the resources necessary to keep themselves alive, he argues, those situated at the bottom of social space eschew "frills" and tend to approach all aspects of their life with a functional orientation; valuing that which contributes to their economic survival and material reproduction but recognising no value beyond this.

Whilst no doubt true to some extent, this claim raises a number of problems. First, it is more applicable to those whose lack of resources imposes considerable constraints upon them and who struggle to feed and clothe themselves than to those higher in social space, who also have a distinct habitus in Bourdieu's view. Resource-rich actors enjoy much greater freedom and the question arises of why they would use this freedom in a sufficiently uniform manner to give rise to a distinctive class habitus? Bourdieu admits that there may be some "fuzziness" in the middle of social space:

While it is true that the principles of differentiation which are objectively the most powerful, like economic and cultural capital, produce clear cut differences between agents situated at extreme ends of the distributions, they are evidently less effective in the intermediate zones of the space. (Bourdieu 1985, 12)

However, the case of the very wealthy, whose actions are subject to very little constraint and who enjoy a large range of different opportunities, is no less puzzling. Why would they respond to their freedom and opportunity in a homogenous manner?

Second, even in the case of those very low in social space lack of resources and material conditions do not determine habitus. Agency plays a role and the uniformity of habitus within social groups therefore remains a puzzle. Different actors can and do react to the same situations in different ways, which could result in different habitus. Imagination comes into play and with it the capacity to reframe and live circumstances in different ways. This is true whether we conceive of habitus in terms of individual preferences and practices or orientations and values which underlie them. But this in turn begs the question of why, insofar as they do, actors in similar positions choose to live those positions in similar ways, giving rise to a distinctive class habitus?

Third, whilst it is no doubt true that actors' choices with respect to the ways in which they live their lives are shaped by their material circumstances this is not a "relational" explanation, in Bourdieu's sense. Actors are adapting to their material circumstances, a process which is independent of whatever other actors in different material circumstances are doing. Struggling to meet the demands of physical survival is an absolute, not a relative (relational) condition, and distance in social space plays no part.

At times, Bourdieu seems to recognise these points. In his main papers on social space, for example, he stresses that the link between positions and dispositions must not be understood in an overly "mechanical and direct" way, such that the dispositions formed are deemed "necessary" (Bourdieu 1998, 3). One must not, he warns, succumb to the substantialist and essentialist thinking that would deem a link between position and disposition "intrinsic". One must rather approach statistical associations between positions and dispositions from a relational perspective. Which dispositions and practices are associated with which positions is less important than the fact that different dispositions and practices attach to different positions.

This is underlined by the fact that incumbents of the same position in different national societies may develop different dispositions. For example, those with a low volume of capital in Japan may have very different lifestyles to those with a low volume in France. In addition, different dispositions may attach to the same position in the same society over time and some preferences and dispositions can be observed to migrate across social space over time:

An initially aristocratic practice can be given up by the aristocracy—and this occurs quite frequently—when it is adopted by a growing fraction of the bourgeoisie or petit-bourgeoisie, or even the lower classes. ... Conversely, an initially lower-class practice can sometimes be taken up by nobles. (Bourdieu 1998, 4)

This argument is elaborated further when Bourdieu discusses “symbolic space” and the meanings which attach to practices and objects. Actor’s choices of objects and practices are affected by the meanings which those objects and practices take on in society’s “symbolic space”, he observes, and those meanings vary between groups, over time and across national contexts: “the same behaviour or even the same good can appear distinguished to one person, pretentious to someone else, and cheap or showy to yet another” (ibid., 8). This helps to explain how and why the same object or practice might be appropriated by different groups at different historical conjunctures or even simultaneously. The same practice can take on different meanings and thereby appeal to very different values. To oversimplify for purposes of illustration, boxing may appeal to male working-class values of toughness and physical prowess, whilst its upper-class patrons during the nineteenth century, who introduced the Queensbury rules, evidently associated it with strategic nous, technical mastery, self-discipline, strength of character, fair play (via adherence to the rules), etc.

This is a more sophisticated position than Bourdieu takes in *Distinction*, where, as the argument on “distance from necessity” illustrates, he is inclined to explain habitus as adaptations to material circumstances. However, it begs the question, noted above, of why, insofar as they do, actors in proximate positions respond in similar ways to their situations, giving rise to similar dispositions? If the values and practices of, for example, the upper-middle class are arbitrary and have no intrinsic connection to their position then why do they uniformly adopt those values and practices? And why and how can we talk of practices migrating from group to group; an aristocratic practice becoming proletarian and vice versa? Why do we observe the homogeneity of habitus between actors located closely in social space that Bourdieu claims we do?

Habitus Formation: An Alternative Explanation

Even his own empirical work and *a fortiori* that of those who have replicated his studies suggests that the uniformity of social groups and associations between positions and dispositions are much weaker than Bourdieu's theoretical rhetoric suggests (Bourdieu 1984; Bennett et al. 2009; Vandebroek 2017). Statistical tendencies can be found but they are not always particularly strong. However, insofar as they do exist I suggest that they are best explained by reference to mutual influence in networks.

Actors do not respond to their circumstances and choose how to live them in isolation but rather in interaction with others—family, friends, neighbours, colleagues etc. Dispositions do not precede effective relations, as Bourdieu claims, they are formed within them. Actors influence one another, converging in their practices, values and orientations, and forming pockets of relative cultural homogeneity. Furthermore, because networks of effective relations are typically status homophilous and actors disproportionately interact with others of a similar status to themselves these pockets often have a distinct demographic profile. Working-class men of a particular generation tend to have a distinctive habitus, insofar as they do, for example, because they are drawn together in workplaces and neighbourhoods where they interact, collectively generating dispositions which they share. Regional linguistic accents provide a clear illustration of this. There is no necessary association between particular accents and the regions in which they are found. However, actors who have grown up in the same region typically share a distinctive accent because they have lived in close proximity, influencing one another's linguistic behaviour and resulting dispositions (Milroy 1991).

A similar argument to this has been made by McPherson (2004), who draws upon Blau (1974, 1977). Different social groups are often characterised by different and distinctive attitudes, he argues, but this is not, as sociologists often assume, an effect of the underlying impact of their material conditions. Rather, it reflects high levels of in-group interaction and a lack of contact and communication across group divides. Whatever homogeneity is observed within groups is explained by mutual influence between their members, whilst intergroup differences reflect a lack of such influence. Moreover, this applies also to the meanings which actors attach to actions and objects. Members of the same group attach the same meaning to objects and actions, which may be different to those attached by members of other groups, because interaction between them facilitates the

development and diffusion of agreements over meaning between them. McPherson's thesis has been tested in relation to musical tastes by Mark (1998, 2003), who reports that they provide a better explanation of observed associations between positions and dispositions than Bourdieu's framework.

A critic might argue that social networks are essentially micro-structures and that whilst they can explain local variations, such as regional accents, they cannot explain homogeneity within groups which extends across a whole national society. I disagree. Though focused principally upon ethnicity (to which I return) Milgram's "small world" research is instructive in this respect (Milgram 1967; Korte and Milgram 1970; Travers and Milgram 1969; see also Schnettler 2009a, b; Watts 1999, 2004). In an effort to measure the average "path length"⁴ connecting social actors in the United States, Milgram devised a fascinating experiment. Randomly selected actors were recruited to deliver a package to another random actor living in a different city. However, they could only pass the package to an acquaintance that they knew by name, who was then asked to do the same and so on until the package reached its destination. This allowed Milgram to measure the length of the paths connecting starter and terminal actors. The famous conclusion of this research was that any two randomly selected individuals from the US population are, on average, at "six degrees of separation", a finding supported in subsequent studies (Schnettler 2009a, b; Watts 1999, 2004). Interestingly, however, Milgram also discovered that geographical distance was much more easily traversed than social distance. Whilst packages typically moved quickly and easily from one city to another, irrespective of geographical distance, their progress often faltered if they were required to pass between ethnic groups. Actors typically had friends and acquaintances in a variety of geographical locations across the United States but not in ethnic groups other than their own. If the movement of Milgram's packages illustrate channels through which social influence can pass then geographical distance poses much less of an obstacle than social distance.

⁴ Social actors can be indirectly linked through their mutual acquaintances. John may not know Jane, for example, but he may know Sue, who knows Jane. In this case there is a path between John and Jane: John↔Sue↔Jane. Path lengths are measured by reference to the number of relationships (↔) they involve. In this case two. We say that John and Jane are at a distance of two degrees.

That geography might not pose a significant problem for my argument is also suggested by an interesting paper on youth subcultures by Fine and Kleinman (1979). Youth subcultures typically originate in dense social networks concentrated within small geographical areas they argue but they escape these geographical confines relatively quickly in virtue of the wider (weak) ties of their members, spreading quickly from city to city. Practices and styles invented by youths in small areas of one city quickly spread to youths in other cities. As specifically *youth* subcultures, however, they spread between young people, leaving adults and young children largely unaffected. Again social distance is more of an obstacle to transmission and diffusion than geographical distance.

Communication and transmission need not be exclusively face-to-face. Similarly positioned actors are linked by a variety of channels, mediated and unmediated. The key point, as Shibutani notes, is that similarities between those proximate in social space are best explained not by the determinate effects of position but rather by the flow of influence through communicative channels:

Variations in outlook arise through differential contact and association; the maintenance of social distance ... through segregation, conflict or simply the reading of different literature – leads to the formation of distinct cultures. Thus people in different classes develop different modes of life and outlook, not because of anything inherent in economic position, but because similarity of occupation and limitations set by income level dispose them to certain restricted communication channels. (Shibutani 1955, 565–6)

My argument, to reiterate, is that whilst actors' resources and material environments impact upon their habitus, whatever degree of homogeneity we observe between the habitus of similarly positioned social actors is best explained by reference to "effective relations" and social influence between them rather than, as Bourdieu suggests, the conditioning that results from social position alone. In fairness to Bourdieu he acknowledges that effective ties and interaction increase the homogeneity of class habitus:

[T]hose dispositions which favour the development of relationships, formal or informal (like homogamy) ... tend to increase ... homogeneity. ... [B]eing subject to similar conditions, [actors closely positioned in social space] tend to resemble one another and, as a result, are inclined to assemble practically ... and thus to reinforce their points of resemblance. (Bourdieu 1985, 6)

However, the idea that dispositions pre-exist effective relationships implies that actors first form their dispositions in isolation from one another. In his effort to prioritise structural over effective relations Bourdieu commits himself to an implausible theoretical abstraction. Human actors never exist in isolation, always in networks of concrete interactions and effective relations which influence, without determining, everything that they do and become. Actors respond to the situations they find themselves in, thereby generating enduring dispositions, but they do not do so alone. From the moment of birth they are influenced, in different ways, by the actions of others and their interactions with them.

The importance of networks of effective relations is further indicated in Bourdieu's reflections upon meaning and symbolic space, again running against the grain of his intended argument. Whilst objects and practices might sometimes take on individual meanings for actors Bourdieu's reference to "symbolic space" implies shared meanings, which in turn implies inter-subjective agreement. Upper-class men in the nineteenth century did not independently arrive at an understanding of boxing as an exemplar of gentlemanly conduct; that meaning reflects a (relative) consensus forged in interaction between them. Practices are attractive to actors (or not) on the basis of symbolic meanings previously forged in social interaction within networks.

DIMENSIONS OF DIVISION

The above arguments suggest a need to incorporate networks of effective relations into our conception of social space. This need is further indicated by an additional problem with Bourdieu's model; it reduces social position to volume and composition of (economic and cultural) capital, neglecting status divisions such as those relating to race, gender and age. The importance he occasionally attaches to these other divisions finds no expression in his model of social space and group (class) formation. He acknowledges them but only as perturbations which interfere with the process of class formation. The distribution of capitals is "the most 'realistic'" principle of social differentiation, he argues, "in that it relies on the real underlying principles of practices" (Bourdieu 1987, 7).

Insofar as he offers any defence for this position it comprises three key points. First, he claims that the distribution of capitals captured in his concept of social space has the most explanatory value in relation to lifestyle variations and processes of group formation. Second, relatedly, he argues

that groups founded upon other differences are less stable than those founded upon the distribution of capital:

[G]roupings grounded in the structure of the space constructed in terms of capital distribution are more likely to be stable and durable, while other forms of groupings are always threatened by the splits and oppositions linked to distances in social space. (Bourdieu 1985, 726)

Finally, he suggests that ethnic divisions in particular map onto social space, such that the disadvantage of some ethnic groups can be explained as a consequence of their relative lack of economic and cultural capital.

The problem with these claims is that they are asserted without either argument or evidence. Furthermore, where scholars have tracked gender, age and ethnic differences in studies which seek to replicate *Distinction*, they have found them to have an equal and sometimes stronger effect upon tastes than class does (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009). Moreover, this is found when class effects are (statistically) controlled for, challenging Bourdieu's reduction of ethnic differences to class. Finally, Bourdieu sometimes claims that ethnic and gender divisions fracture class solidarity, challenging his own assertion that the latter are more "stable and durable" and begging the question of why he deems them more 'real' than other divides. By the logic of Bourdieu's own argument this suggests that these other distinctions should be included in our conception of social space.

One way to address this would be to add further dimensions to Bourdieu's model of social space, capturing the social divisions he marginalises; an approach anticipated in the work of Peter Blau (1974, 1977). Noting "the social distinctions people make in their role relations and social associations" (Blau 1974, 28), Blau argues that any status which generates a homophily effect should be regarded as a distinct dimension of an n-dimensional social space. However, this is problematic too. Bourdieu's two-dimensional representations of social space are relatively clear and easily understood, which is assumedly the rationale for using them and, indeed, for conceptualising social structure in spatial terms, but this clarity and comprehensibility would diminish with the addition of further dimensions, detracting from the purpose of using graphs and calling the spatial metaphor into question. Categorical differences further confuse matters, moreover, because they do not lend themselves easily to spatial imagery. Whilst one can easily imagine actors located along a continuum according to their age or income, for example, no such image is forthcoming for the

distribution of actors across a series of non-sequential ethnic categories. The idea of an ethnicity or gender ‘dimension’ makes little sense.

As both Bourdieu and Blau are ultimately interested in the formation of and segregation between social groups, comprising effective relations, a better approach, in my view, is to begin with networks of effective relations, taking those as the basis for our model of social space. Like Bourdieu’s social space, smaller social networks can be visualised in two dimensions as a graph (see Fig. 3.2).⁵ Actors are represented as small shapes (nodes or vertices) and effective relations between them as lines connecting those vertices (edges). If we wished we could arrange vertices along axes such as those suggested by Bourdieu (i.e. vertically according to their volume of capital, horizontally according to their composition). However, “space” is understood differently in social networks and the vertical/horizontal placement of nodes typically has no analytical meaning. It is purely aesthetic. In contrast to the Euclidean/Cartesian logic of scatterplots, the space of a network is understood in terms of effective relations. The geodesic “distance” between two nodes, for example, is measured by counting the number of edges (referred to in this instance as

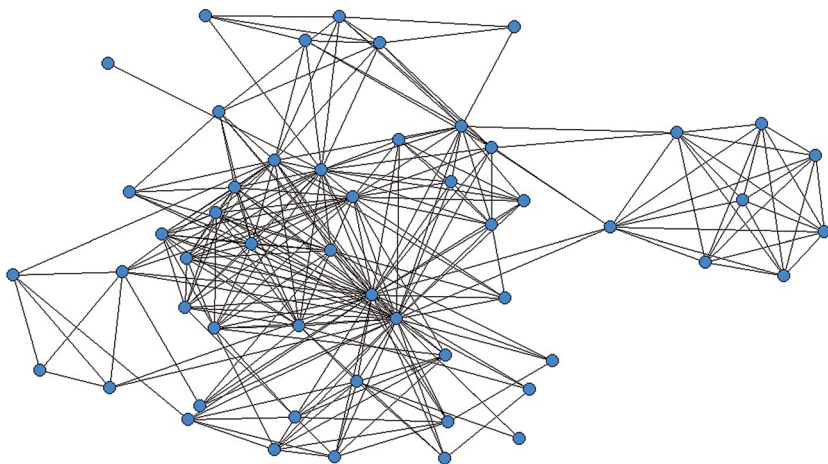


Fig. 3.2 Social space as a network

⁵The graph was drawn using the Netdraw program within the UCInet software package (Borgatti et al. 2002).

‘degrees) involved in the shortest path connecting them, irrespective of their placement on a graph. Two very distant nodes might be placed side-by-side on a graph whilst two very close nodes are at opposite ends of the plot. Relatedly, the “diameter” of a network is defined as the longest geodesic distance in a network.

This does not preclude “social distance”. A small number of status differences, categorical and continuous, can be represented on a graph by using different shapes and colours for nodes, and by varying their size. More importantly, there are various ways of testing and measuring the impact of multiple status differences upon the likelihood of ties forming between nodes, alongside structural configurations which may both be important in their own right and may impact upon the measurement of homophily and need therefore to be controlled for.

For illustrative purposes, consider Fig. 3.2. This is a network of student activists, linked where they both work on political campaigns and socialise together (see Crossley and Ibrahim 2012; Ibrahim and Crossley 2017). Ideally I would have data regarding a range of demographic variables for these activists. I only have gender. However, I have a range of further variables which suffice to demonstrate how we might incorporate demographic variables: ideological orientation (three categories); number of campaigns involved in; years spent at university; and co-membership of political groups. Stated thus, with the exception of co-membership, which characterises pairs of activists, these are individual attributes but we can derive relational attributes from them. Rather than specifying the gender of individual activists, for example, we can specify for pairs of activists whether or not they are the same gender. For continuous variables, such as number of years spent at university, we can specify the difference (in number of years) between them. And we can explore the impact of these relational variables upon the likelihood of actors being connected.

There are several ways in which we might do this. In Table 3.1, I present a (QAP)⁶ logistic regression model.⁷ This model, which captures the increase in the odds of two nodes enjoying an effective relation when they are similar in a specified manner, and which explains 33% of variance in tie

⁶Network data violate the assumptions of standard tests of statistical significance. The quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) is one of a number of alternatives available to network analysis.

⁷This was done using the UCInet software (Borgatti et al. 2002). The process is discussed in Borgatti et al. (2013).

**Table 3.1 A (QAP)
logistic
regression model**

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>
Intercept	-4.004	0.02
Transitivity	0.551	1.74
Co-memberships	0.926	2.52**
Gender	0.763	2.14**
Ideology	1.745	5.72**
Years at university	-0.098	0.91*
Campaigns	0.02	1.02
R2 = 0.33**		

* = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$

formation, identifies relatively strong effects for co-membership, gender and ideology. Years of study has a small negative effect (meaning that a bigger difference in years of study makes a tie less likely) and number of campaigns has no significant effect. In addition, the model captures ‘transitivity’,⁸ a frequently observed structural pattern in social networks which might confound the model if not controlled for. The details need not concern us. I am presenting the model simply to demonstrate that actor attributes (categorical and continuous), which might include statuses and resources, can be configured as relational (network) variables and used to explain network structure. This is a direct and informative way of capturing social distances, their impact upon effective relations and the consequent likelihood of group cohesion, uniformity and mobilisation.

If social space is conceptualised in network terms, moreover, then we can also capture a range of important social-structural properties not captured by Bourdieu. Networks can be more or less dense, more or less centralised and more or less compact, for example, each of which affects the rate of diffusion within them and the likelihood of effective group formation and mobilisation (Coleman 1988, 1990; Marwell and Oliver 1993; Valente 1995).

Furthermore, some network variables, such as transitivity, capture other processes (than homophily) which shape networks. It is not always possible to incorporate these into regression models of the type presented above but other models which make this possible are available, some of

⁸The tendency for nodes to share alters with their alters (e.g. being friends with one’s friends’ friends).

which allow us to model the interaction between tie and attribute formation. For example, we might model a process wherein similarities in taste between two actors increase the likelihood that they will form a tie, whilst the existence of ties between them is found, simultaneously, to influence their tastes (Lusher et al. 2013; Snijders et al. 2010).

In addition, network data allow us to capture and analyse the ways in which actors manage their multiple statuses within networks—a question Bourdieu does not even consider. Do they, for example, seek out exact matches to themselves in all relations or do they have different groups in their personal network, each reflecting one of their key statuses (their “same class” friends, their “same ethnicity” friends, etc.)? This is complicated further when we consider different tie types. Heterosexuals have heterophilous⁹ romantic/sexual ties, for example, but may have gender-homophilous friendship ties. Again SNA and a conception of social space as a social network allow us to capture and explore this.

It is not possible to collect data on the whole network comprising a national society, any more than Bourdieu was able to survey the whole of French society for *Distinction*. Like Bourdieu, however, we are able to sample, and more specifically to sample ego-nets (see Crossley et al. 2015). This is not the place to discuss this methodology in any detail but it is important to note, lest population size be deemed an obstacle to the approach I am proposing.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Pierre Bourdieu’s influential version of relational sociology hinges upon a conception of social space, which in turn hinges upon a conception of structural relations rooted in the composition and overall volume of actors’ stocks of economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu prioritises these structural relations over more direct relations, rooted in interaction and interdependence between actors, which he dubs “effective relations”, arguing that the former precede and affect the likelihood of the latter in both direct and indirect ways. They make contact between actors more or less likely and they shape actors’ dispositions, thereby affecting the likelihood that actors will click when and if they do meet.

This account contains important and valid insights but I have argued that Bourdieu’s prioritisation of structural relations cannot be sustained

⁹Heterophily is the opposite of homophily: opposites attract.

and that the role he affords them in shaping dispositions is implausible. Whilst structural relations do shape effective relations they are in turn shaped in numerous ways by effective relations and the interactions the latter entail, and so too are dispositions. Similarity in dispositions is both a cause and an effect of interaction and similarly positioned actors share habitus, insofar as they do, because they are more likely to interact and therefore influence one another.

On this basis alone it would make sense to add effective relations to our understanding and conception of social space. This conclusion becomes more compelling, however, when we consider Bourdieu's neglect of a range of distinctions, such as those of age, gender and ethnicity, which cannot be reduced to volume and composition of economic and cultural capital, and which cannot simply be added to his conception of social space, as further dimensions. If the significance of social space is its impact upon networks of effective relations, then we can maintain a manageable conception of social space by making those networks themselves the focus of our conception, incorporating the various factors which shape effective relations as (statistical) network parameters. From this perspective, social space is a dynamic network of interaction wherein status distinctions are drawn, dispositions formed and effective relations variously formed, transformed and dropped. And none of these processes enjoys absolute primacy. Any one might be more important for particular purposes but more generally each impacts upon the others in a tangle we must learn to work with.

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A Theory of Relation—In Circulation: Basic Concepts and Prospect

Christian Papilloud and Eva-Maria Schultze

The question of whether a theory of relation is necessary today may be answered in the affirmative, provided certain conditions do not result in the shortcomings that usually plague sociological approaches that use a relational scheme. Instead, through relation, they must deliver a comprehensive and in-depth view of the circulations of actors from one position to another. This chapter on the key concepts and the prospect of a theory of relation will be introduced by detailing these conditions (see Papilloud and Schultze 2022 for an extended outline).

For a theory that speaks about relation, the first condition sounds paradoxical, namely that of avoiding the false problem of trying to define what the relation is. It means that the relation cannot be reduced to a well-defined factual phenomenon, because this word designates a set of very varied phenomena which bring together, link and unlink humans and non-humans, that is, animate and inert, material and immaterial actors,

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_4

symbols, ideas, representations and other media. Considering the range and multidimensionality associated with the term *relation*, such phenomena will later be referred to as relational events, ranging from simple contacts to actions, interactions and other social relationships. Yet, a theory of relation should not only reflect this diversity, but must work out its modes of organisation while avoiding their reduction to those of individual or collective actors. A theory of relation does so by speaking of relational structures, which actors differently support; four relational structures will be distinguished, and why exactly four will be explained.

The second condition is that these relational structures do not represent either homogeneous or stable sets of relational events. Instead, they undergo transformation when interactions, actions and relationships of all kinds take place, which is not without consequences for the existence of the human and non-human actors that these relational events bind and unbind. Formulating a theory of relation today means something different from recording these transformations the way a seismograph records the tremors of the earth's crust on a moving roll of paper. Such a theory must understand that these transformations are alternatives within each relational structure, that is, alternative ways of organising relational events that each relational structure contains as one of its possible dynamics.

A direct consequence of this second condition is that any relational structure carries within it its subversion, because it contains alternatives to its mode of organisation. As will be shown later, these alternatives relate to the specific mode of organisation of the other relational structures. From this viewpoint, relational structures retain the general property of any relational event: they are composite—heterogeneous or ambivalent—which means that a single social relationship, a particular interaction or an action can express other social relationships, interactions or actions. Therefore, these relational structures do not only structure the lifestyles of individual and collective actors, but also condition the alternatives to these ways of life as so many possibilities to subvert a relational structure and organise it according to other principles, which are but the principles of other relational structures.

The following are the very basics of a theory of relation, which seeks to understand the structuring power of the interplay between relational structures and its consequences for the individual and collective actors within these structures. Formulated from the viewpoint of individual and collective actors, a theory of relation analyses how ways of life that impose themselves on others reinforce, or weaken, the relational structure that models them, thus contributing to the imposition of this relational

structure on other relational structures or, conversely, to its submission to them. The utopia of the ideal relation motivates such influences within, and between, relational structures. Through the variety of its individual and collective actors, each relational structure tends in its way to become this unique, perfectly harmonious relation, this omnipresent reference frame of all possible forms of life, infinitely constant in space and time, without borders or age, beyond the by-products of relational structures which, because they are the concrete manifestation of the practical impossibility of this utopia, nevertheless maintain this illusion. In a sense, the theory of relation shows that because this utopia fails to become concrete, social life gains its specific shape through relation.

The critical endeavour here is to get deeper into the theoretical apparatus underlying a theory of relation, which models its dynamic architecture. Initially, it will be argued that the theory of relation theorises the dynamic character of relational structures with the concept of circulation, and it leads to the assertion that a theory of relation rests on the primacy of circulation. To understand what circulation means and does, a more detailed examination of relational structures is needed. This will enable a discussion of the sequences that structure them and outline the general circulation specific to each relational structure that supports the particular circulations of actors within, and between, these relational structures as well as their inscription in these structures.

This will be followed by a detailed argument about the inscription of actors in relational structures. The concepts of the actors' resistance on the one hand, and of reciprocity in relational structures on the other, will be introduced. It will be explained why these three concepts—inscription, resistance and reciprocity—are linked to each other in a theory of relation and how they contribute to the distribution and differentiation of actors and social instances in the relational structures. Following that, it will be argued that the variations in the distribution and differentiation of actors and social instances contribute to expanding or, on the contrary, to shrinking relational structures, which accordingly strengthen, or weaken, their circulation, with a corresponding inscription of actors and collective actors in these structures and their resistive power.

Finally, as a consequence of the first two steps, the general purport of a theory of relation will be underlined. As a sequential order of circulations, each relational structure influences the other ones according to the same pattern, which consists in propagating the concept of reciprocity that one relational structure represents and imposing it on all other relational

structures, thus becoming this ideal relation that each relational structure tends to be.

Yet, there already exist relational schemes in sociology, which develop even more systematically in the context of relational sociologies and similar prospects in the social sciences of the last two decades. Therefore, why is there a need for yet another theory of relation?

WHY A THEORY OF RELATION?

The prospect and the corresponding conceptual apparatus which this theory of relation uses to develop its analysis go beyond the framework of relational approaches in contemporary sociology and social sciences. In what follows, it will be shown how this theory of relation takes up concepts that these approaches use or that are familiar to sociologists working at relational schemes, and how it deconstructs and reformulates them. What motivates such deconstruction and reformulation is obvious from the starting point of a theory of relation, namely the need to understand relation as a macro-concept (Trezzini 1999, 515; Scott 1991, 38; Granovetter 1979, 501, 517; see also Schultze 2022, 4). However, taking the relationship to be a macro-concept brings with it difficulties that sociologists have underlined when speaking more generally about process concepts and similar concepts that evoke an idea of process, for example, Wolfgang Knöbl in his recent monograph *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte. Zur Kritik der Sozialtheorie* (Sociology before History. A Critique of Social Theory) (Knöbl 2022). He argues that the social sciences, especially sociology and sociological theory, show deficits when they use the concept of process and similar concepts denoting a process. Knöbl is “mainly concerned with the question of why the modern social sciences, and especially sociology, from the very beginning have used robust process concepts from the start to explain their respective link to current contexts on the one hand ..., but on the other hand have periodically criticised precisely these concepts and their associated propositions, because actually no one knows how well they grasp past and present” (ibid., 12–13, translation by the authors; see also Hoebel et al. 2020).

Especially in Chap. 7 on social sciences and the philosophy of history, Knöbl explains that process concepts presuppose narratives that social scientists do not always consider when using such concepts. It often leads to a misrepresented complexity of the (according to Knöbl historical) reality that such concepts should describe. Can the description of broad social

contexts in time and space capture what it claims to explain? Is there a tendency in the social sciences to rely “all too credulously on the explanatory power or even the conciseness and selectivity of these concepts” (Knöbl 2022, 271)? The point Knöbl emphasises is less that of the indeterminacy of concepts, of which the social scientist would not be aware (*ibid.*, 280). Instead, he considers concepts embedded in socio-political contexts (*ibid.*, 257, 269). These contribute to the meaning of the concepts that, therefore, cannot easily be used to describe other contexts.

Looking at the concept of democracy and its extension to “democratisation” for example, Knöbl points out that such an extension is subject to questions. These range from the relationship between the economy and politics, the population and the state, and equality and inequality yesterday and today, here and elsewhere, on the planet. Such questions lead to controversial discourses in the social sciences based on “narratives” that do not come to a satisfactory conclusion regarding universal validity in time and space (see Knöbl’s discussion of Charles Tilly’s analysis of democracy and democratisation, *ibid.*, 285–8). Knöbl’s critique likewise affects relational sociologies as they primarily focus on—frequently deconstructed—process concepts. Such concepts do not only build the self-image of relational sociologies; the main object of relational sociologies are “processes” on the one hand, and “dynamic, unfolding relations” on the other (Selg and Ventsel 2020, 15; for different versions of this view, see Elias 1977, 131; Crossley 2020; Emirbayer 1997, Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Dépelteau 2013; Papilloud 2017; Donati 1995; Bottero and Crossley 2011). They also show the differences between relational sociologies depending on their specific understanding of relation (see Prandini 2015; also Selg and Ventsel 2020, 30–5). Taking into account the specific case of this theory of relation, one way to reflect on Knöbl’s critique is to explain why, and how, it uses the concept of relation as it does and what this means for the framework that it supports (Knöbl 2022, 296). It favours an in-depth deconstruction of the starting point of this theory and provides a better understanding of its unfolding.

STARTING POINT OF A THEORY OF RELATION

A theory of relation does not rely on the assumption that its immediate object of investigation is social relations, human relationships, interactions and other such relational events (Papilloud 2017). With reference to Knöbl, it has been shown that such terms are not neutral. Instead, they are

situated both historically and in our disciplines. In the case of sociology, they link to well-established movements and sometimes to well-known theoretical traditions (for the expression *relational sociology* or the word *relation*, see Prandini 2015). It has been demonstrated that process concepts such as “relation” are not necessarily at the forefront of epistemological and theoretical interests in all sociological traditions (see, e.g., Papilloud 2002, 2012; Papilloud and Rol 2019). In the French tradition, they are not the core element of theoretical frameworks, while in the American sociological tradition, they are critical for sociological investigations. In the German sociological tradition, sometimes process concepts are more to the forefront of theory. This is the case in Georg Simmel’s works and his concepts of *Wechselwirkung*, *Vergesellschaftung* and *Tausch* (Papilloud 2002); in Leopold von Wiese’s relational ontology (Papilloud and Rol 2006); and in the concept of communication and its different meanings and usages in German pragmatism, as in Jürgen Habermas’ theory of modernity or Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (Papilloud 2005). However, such concepts usually support a view often understood as a heuristic for the study of other, more important concerns for these theories, such as modernity, the forms of sociability in the history of societies, social homeostasis, values and complexity, to mention just a few. In other words, such process concepts remain a means to an end. In themselves, they do not represent the core of sociological enquiry.

As these last examples show, relational sociologies do not primarily rely on one process concept, but on several process-like concepts (Selg and Ventsel 2020, 30–5) that they equate with, or translate into, *relation*. What explains these translations is the understanding of society *as a relation*. Here, the starting point of society is the interpersonal relationship conceived *as a relation* which leads to a corresponding sociological investigation of societies *as relation*. It is at this point that a theory of relation differs from these sociologies. A theory of relation does not formulate the assumption that processes in the weak and non-homogeneous sense of relations emerge between people, because, from the viewpoint of the theory of relation and following other theoretical frameworks which are sensitive to relational events, they are not specific to human beings alone (Latour and Strum 1986; Pyyhtinen 2010; Kaufmann and Cordonier 2011; Abbott 2016). Therefore, a theory of relation assumes a relation that is more than social relations in the sense of relational events, that is, human interactions, social relationships and actions. It conceives the relation as a macro-sociological concept that frames the organisational mode

of the diversity of relational events. Such a theory has the advantage of not reducing relational events to human interactions alone and of not describing them *as relations*. Instead, a theory of relation explains them indirectly *through relation*, following in this sense the founding sociological insights about relational schemes. It makes relation not the answer to a multitude of questions but the question itself or—in the sense of practical sociological investigations—the problem with which this theory deals. A theory of relation sees this problem as the fundamental question of social life, with which every society, every informal or formal group and every actor in these societies and groups continually struggle, even if this struggle takes place in very different ways and therefore acquires correspondingly different meanings, as will be seen below.

The development of a macro-concept and a macro-understanding of relation and the corresponding macro-sociological view of relation at the core of a theory of relation rests on the insight—in contrast, for instance, to Pierre Bourdieu's macro-relational theory of relations *between positions* (see Bourdieu 1987, 2019)—that the explanation of the social *through relation* ought to consider the position of actors and the relation symmetrically. It differs from other sociological theories that use a relational scheme, because it does not reduce position to relation and relation to position. Instead, it focuses on the dynamics between position and relation, which a theory of relation understands as a circulation between positions through relation. This is why a theory of relation argues according to the primacy of circulation. It is in order to understand better what such primacy of circulation means and presupposes that the concept of relational structures is developed.

PRIMACY OF CIRCULATION AND RELATIONAL STRUCTURES

The primacy of circulation means that actors and actants circulate within, and between, relational structures, which shapes the general dynamics between position and relation that generates these relational structures. This circulation is not *sui generis*; it does not happen automatically, and it requires the work of actors on relational events to develop beyond simple movement. Therefore, the circulation is not a process in Knöbl's sense with a given start, a given end and a given homogeneity. It does not proceed circularly either, but rather varies within relational structures and from one structure to another. These variations mean that the circulation paths of actors and actants turn out very differently. They are long or

short, fast or slow, stable or vulnerable and account for the infinite complexity of the circulation of actors and actants, which a theory of relation understands by working out the principles that organise such circulations. Indeed, these principles are the said relational structures. However, why are circulations complex?

On the one hand, circulations presuppose relational events, which are events that are not, and will not ever be, fully developed. Consequently, relational events have neither determinable origins nor predictable ends, and they show unexpected mutations. This is where a theory of relation differs from Knöbl's view of process concepts. Knöbl, like Bruno Latour, understands processes as an arrangement of interlinked events, which he sees connected to an apparent "beginning and end point" (Knöbl 2022, 258; see also Latour 2005). Knöbl's view of processes implies not only that events have *one* determinable starting and end point, but also that they retain their (initial) form and quality throughout time and are accordingly "closed" (Knöbl 2022, 261). In contrast, a theory of relation captures events in their social embeddedness; in their manifold possibilities of development and connection; in their potentiality of being left behind, of being taken up again and of being (repeatedly) influenced; thus taking into account both the heterogeneous structure and the indeterminacy of events (see Seyfert 2019).

On the other hand, the complexity of circulations rests on the fact that relational events are *by definition* always becoming and, accordingly, they diverge from a successful, ideal relation with a beginning, end and with recognisable, clearly situated actors whom it connects. Therefore, a theory of relation conceives relational structures as divergent assemblages of relational events with actors, actants, instances, symbols, signs and media. In order to avoid repeating the succession of terms such as actors, actants and so on, the phrase "actors and actants" will be used in the following to differentiate human from non-human actors. Moreover, since the primary concern of this chapter is the basics of a theory of relation, the critical meaning of the media that the theory of relation formulates as mediations of relational events will not be covered. Within a theory of relation, media are connected with the symbolic operations of actors and the formal procedures of instances that support circulations specific to relational structures. They provide a better understanding of the weakening or disruption of a relational structure and the corresponding development of alternative circulations in this relational structure (for more on this, see Papilloud and Schultze 2022, 313–70). But back to the basics of a theory of relation.

The divergent characteristic of relational structures does not solely result from the combination of relational events with actors and actants, but also from their specific dynamics. Relational structures develop, or do not develop, which presupposes work on relational events, even if such work does not necessarily occur all the time precisely because relational structures do not automatically and inevitably develop. If they can expand, they also can shrink, because actors and actants do not constantly work on relational events or contribute to such work. The latter is, therefore, intrinsically non-uniform, reflecting the great diversity of relational events, actors and actants that support such work. This is another important feature of the theory of relation, which can be highlighted as follows. Because relational events are diverse, all possible actors can claim them and involve all possible actants. As these actors and actants are various, they can claim all possible relational events or take part in the work on relational events. This fundamental openness of relational events to actors and actants and vice versa means that the work on relational events does not link to specific actors and actants that could develop a relational structure. It can happen here and there, and if it is not taken up here and now by these or those actors with these or those actants, it will sooner or later be taken up elsewhere by other actors with other actants. Therefore, the work on relational events performs unequally, because it virtually links to all the actors and actants in relational structures. For this reason, the work on relational events is a constant of relational structures, because it actually happens if not here, then there, if not with these actors and actants, then with others. In its heterogeneous forms, the work on relational events plays a significant role in either favouring, or disfavouring, the development of relational structures.

WORK ON RELATIONAL EVENTS

Work on relational events supports the development of relational structures, which in concrete terms means it promotes both circulation paths and possibilities for actors. Because of the fundamental openness of relational events to actors and actants and vice versa, it is unlikely that only one actor and one actant work on only one relational event. More likely is an assembly of different actors and actants around various relational events or a heterogeneous composition of actors, actants and relational events. It cannot be ruled out that such an assembly takes form because actors, actants and relational events are products of history which brings them in

contact with one another (for empirical work in the field of relational sociologies, see Bidart et al. 2011). This only develops further if there is additional work on relational events. If this does not happen, there is no further development of relational structures and no support for the circulation of actors, who evolve as if they were actants on their unstructured circulation paths until such paths split. However, if the contact between assembled actors and actants develops further, it can lead to a mobilisation of actors and actants (present as well as absent) and the channelling of relational events that support the development of relational structures (see Papilloud 2017 on the meaning of contact as a concept denoting this area between position and relation).

Using the example of “weak ties”, Mark Granovetter notes that even weakly structured relationships can favour the assembly of actors without them being actively involved in relational events (Granovetter 1973). Therefore, actors can achieve goals by investing less work in relational events. As Georg Simmel underlined (Simmel 1989, 280), it saves personal energy, even if one put such an assumption into perspective. More or less well-arranged relational structures exist because one cannot rule out that social work takes place somewhere or that someone has initiated it. Therefore, the power of “weak ties” not only exists because actors do not necessarily have to devote themselves to work on relational events—that is, mobilising further actors and actants, channelling relational events and paving circulation paths that result in circulation possibilities. It also exists because such work has taken place at some point, or because someone has initiated it. It is on this point that a theory of relation differs from other relational approaches. A theory of relation does not assume that relational events always exist because they would always be present as transcendental entities in the social world. Relational events and, therefore, relational structures exist because one cannot possibly exclude that someone, somewhere, at some point, works them out. Such a turn from an ontological perspective that substantiates the relation to a sociological perspective that makes the relation a collective good nevertheless raises a question: If we are not living in a social world full of relational structures, and if there can also be no relational structure at some point, how can we conceive the distinction between the presence and absence of relational structures in a unified way? The answer to this question is the primacy of circulation.

Unlike differentiation theories which insist on sharp boundaries that separate social subjects, objects and areas of activities and that often substantialise differences *in abstracto*, that is, disregarding the collective

nature of social life—what is not left is right, what is not up is down, what is not in is out, etc. (see Bourdieu 1987)—a theory of relation does not prioritise sharp distinctions between what relational structures are and what they are not. Instead, consistent with its primacy of circulation and its conception of social work on relational events, it bases these differences on the differences between relational structures on the circulations within them against the circulations between them. This distinction, in turn, is based on the conception of relational structures departing from an ideal relation as well as departing from each other. As shown above, a theory of relation argues that, in practice, there is no perfect, ideal relation. Therefore, relational structures diverge from an ideal relation, just as circulations diverge from an ideal circulation, and just as relational structures diverge from other relational structures.

Regarding the primacy of circulation, this means that circulation paths *within* a relational structure differ from circulation paths *between* relational structures or circulation paths in another relational structure. Considered at the level of relational structures, it means that these divergences stratify the relational structures through circulation paths and possibilities. Correspondingly, divergences stratify these circulations or represent the stratification principle attached to the primacy of circulation itself.

Similarly to Standing, who describes the numerous variations of more or less “strong” or “weak ties” (Standing et al. 2007), a theory of relation proposes that there are multiple variations of the primacy of circulation in the form of diverse circulations within, and between, relational structures. More concretely, how can this stratification of circulations and relational structures be understood? It can be understood sequentially.

DIVERGENT RELATIONAL STRUCTURES AND SEQUENCES

Why claim that relational structures diverge from an ideal or perfect relation? It may be useful to return to the distinction between relations and relationships that John Levi Martin proposes, which leads to an innovative conception of social structure and its incorporation at the level of individual actors (Martin 2009).

Martin distinguishes between “relations” that refer to dyadic interpersonal interactions and “relationships” that support action and lead to structures that reflect the principles involved in the conduct of an action (ibid., 336–7). This distinction permits an understanding of phenomena which, although mutually supportive, remain fundamentally distinct.

According to Martin, interactions between people are not relationships, even though, when they aggregate, they may lead to relationships. Once they have taken shape, however, these relationships go beyond the people interacting, and they differ from their interactions. They describe a different level that Martin calls structures, that is, the “recurring patterns of social interaction, where the patterning is in regard to concrete individuals (and not roles or classes)” (ibid., 9). These structures can lead to broader structures in the form of relationships joined by individuals (ibid., 12). The important point Martin makes is that these structures contain principles that guide action and “link a person to particular others, as opposed to classes of others” (ibid., 14). In other words, these structures provide individuals with principles that they can transpose in other contexts of interaction with other actors, and if this transfer works—and it only works with *particular* others—then it leads to the setting-up of institutions. These institutions reflect a set of principles of action that particular actors support and that other actors can use, and transpose, in further and different contexts of interaction. Yet, this does not mean that these institutions are structured in the same way as the relationships that have led to their creation. Here, too, the structure is subverted in the transition from relationships to institutions, just as it is in the transition from interactions to relationships.

Martin’s distinction between relations and relationships is similar to the distinction here between relational events and relational structures. It is clear that the setting-up of institutions in relational structures is based on the formation of collectives at the different levels of a relational structure in its different sequences. Above all, however, no formal or structural correspondence between these three different levels—relational events, relational structures and institutions—is evident. One is not compatible with the other even if it is necessary for the existence of the other. In other words, they diverge from each other: if interactions are a prerequisite for the existence of relationships, which are necessary for the existence of institutions, relationships diverge from both interactions and institutions. Speaking of divergence, a theory of relation simply generalises this reasoning to all possible relationships. None of them can therefore be perfect, self-sufficient, omnipresent or omnipotent. Moreover, a theory of relation provides this reasoning with a conceptual anchor, which is the notion of circulation as a subversion of form and structure or, to use Martin’s terms, a subversion by circulation of the principles of action to other contexts of interaction, or by the circulation of individuals to other contexts of

interaction, to other relationships and to other institutions. The idea of sequences makes it possible to distinguish between the most fundamental divergences and to conceive them as a different order of relation or—following Martin—as different principles of relation. This is what relational structures mean. Each relational structure is a different specific order of the relation. It is not ideal, and it provides inscription possibilities for actors and institutions, generating circulations that transport such principles to other levels of a relational structure, to another of its sequences or to another relational structure.

The first divergence from an ideal relation comes from the practical idealisation of the relation itself, which shapes the dynamics of a first relational structure relying on the investment in the work at relational events, that is, the investment in the relation itself. A second relational structure diverges from such an idealisation, in which the actors emphasise their representation through collectives, without which no work on relational events would be possible. A third relational structure diverges from this second one, in which the materiality, or the realisation of actors, stays in the foreground, without which the collectives would not exist and without which an investment in the work at relational events would not be conceivable. A fourth relational structure diverges from this last relational structure, emphasising the attractiveness of the media, that is, of the mediations without which actors would not be able to realise themselves, build collectives and manage to work on relational events. Or put more simply, what predominates when it comes to organising the work on relational events can be the relation itself, the collective it presupposes, the individual actors building this collective, or the mediations used to perform this work. These four principles of relation correspond to the key sequence around which each of the four relational structures develop—relation to investment in a first relational structure, collectives to representation in a second relational structure, individual actors to materialisation in a third relational structure, and mediations to attractiveness in the final relational structure. At the same time, they are the starting point of the divergences that structure them as relational structures with not only one key sequence, but the four sequences equally present in the other relational structures. This leads to a description of the motivations and dynamics conditioning the divergent development of relational structures at the level of the distinction between position and relation.

The distinction between position and relation translates into the difference between actor-centred and exchange-centred relational structures.

This distinction defines the first two main features corresponding to two relational structures, that is, it leads to the first two divergences from an ideal relation corresponding to a relation-centred and position-centred relational structure. From this first distinction between two relational structures, two further relational structures emerge that diverge from an exclusively relation-centred and an exclusively position-centred relational structure. These latter divergences are “second-order divergences from first-order divergent relational structures” (Papilloud and Schultze 2022, 24). They produce two further alterations of the two main relational features of the two first relational structures. On the one hand, we have a third relational structure in which actor-centred features dampen its exchange-centred features. On the other hand, we have a fourth relational structure in which the exchange-centred features balance actor-centred features.

Relational structures diverge from an ideal relation and produce further divergences until such divergences are exhausted. What makes a relational structure diverge from another relational structure is the same as that which makes relational structures diverge from an ideal relation, namely the divergence from the main feature of a given relational structure. As demonstrated above, this main feature gives a relational structure its unique feature compared to the other relational structures. At the same time, the main feature of relational structures is the point at which they differ from each other on the one hand, and diversify internally on the other. This internal diversification of relational structures results from the primacy of circulation: circulations circulate differently. Second, it is a consequence of the sequential development of relational structures as divergences from an ideal relation. It, in turn, means that even within relational structures, divergences from the main feature of these relational structures take place, which are similar to the divergences between relational structures.

Therefore, in every relational structure, there is a divergence first from the investment in the work on relational events, second from the representation of actors by collectives, third from the materiality of the actors, and fourth from the attractiveness of mediations involved in such work. From a general viewpoint, one could say that in a theory of relation, one always deals with the same relational structure, even if one distinguishes four relational structures. Such an observation, however, only refers to a decidedly structuralist view on relational structures that does not take into account their circulation dynamics. Once relational structures are

understood as structured through circulations, it becomes obvious that even if these relational structures present identical sequences, that is, the sequences structuring the social work on relational events that equally show up in all relational structures, the sequence representing their main feature differs in each. Yet, because a relational structure develops in supporting its main feature, its internal differentiation and corresponding dynamical structuration do not follow the same pattern as in another relational structure. It is valid for all four relational structures, and it means that although the sequences of investment, representation, materiality and attractiveness are present in support of every circulation within, and between, relational structures, they do not show up in the same order of priority. Instead, they are mobilised sequentially from the point representing a relational structure's main feature. Therefore, based on the primacy of circulation, the theory of relation distinguishes four relational structures that are not structurally different, but differ from each other due to their specific circulation.

The central feature of the relational structure that first diverges from an ideal relation is the investment in the work on relational events that collectives represent, actors of these collectives materialise, and mediations used in such investment make attractive. From this relational structure diverges a second one in which the representation of such investment in relational events is to the fore. Such representations become concrete through the work of the collective and individual actors who materialise them. They highlight the mediation of these representations to make them attractive, thus stimulating further investment in relational events that support such representations. The third divergence develops from this second relational structure and highlights the materialisation power of actors, making its mediations attractive to stimulate investments in relational events and their representation in support of the further realisation of actors. A final divergence emerges from this third relational structure, pointing to the importance of the mediations that make the investments in relational events attractive and stimulate the latter, its representation and the materialisation of this representation through the realisations of actors.

This description of relational structures from the viewpoint of their sequences does not only underline their specific meaning as dimensions of the primacy of circulation. It also shows that relational structures are separated because their circulation diverges. Such separations mean that there is a space between relational structures—similar to what François Dépelteau means when he refers to transactional areas (Dépelteau 2013)—enabling

circulations from one relational structure to another, which finds its counterparts between sequences within relational structures, enabling the circulation from one sequence to the following sequence in each relational structure. These spaces favour other divergences from divergent circulations, even if such divergences cannot be repeated *ad infinitum*. Further divergences of relational structures always return to one or other of these four existing relational structures, or one or other of their four sequences. Consequently, from the viewpoint of a theory of relation, there is no exteriority to the relation, which is an essential condition that warrants a theoretical frame entirely structured by the relation.

Circulations behave similarly to relational structures. Individual actors and actants of different natures (such as signs, symbols, media, things, bacteria) circulate, even if they circulate differently. Here, a theory of relation draws on the lesson of relational schemes in sociology, based on the concept of *agency* (cf. Somers 1994; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; White 2008; Mische 2011), according to which categorical strategies in sociology cannot capture satisfactorily the identity of actors (using categories such as gender, age and occupation) without stigmatising the actors. Such stigmatisation, or such a reductive view of actors, contrasts with views of actors' identity based on the relational agency as sequential embeddings of cultural, social and personal features that each actor represents. Yet, the theory of relation reverses this scheme. Rather than an embedding of these features in actors, which would reflect their specific identity or *agency*, a theory of relation speaks of the inscription of these actors in circulations that provide such features to them and, therefore, singularise actors (Thévenot 1984; Lahire 2001). Not the embedding of features, but the inscription of actors in circulations, sequences and relational structures, where these features circulate, contribute to their identity as singular actors. Such a reformulation of the relational *agency* supports the primacy of circulation insofar as it presupposes that differences between human actors, human and non-human actors, as well as individual and collective actors, translate into different inscriptions in circulations. More concretely, if individual human actors circulate along sequences of relational structures, the circulations of non-human actors develop independently from sequences and relational structures within, and between, every sequence and relational structure. Finally, collective actors and further mediating instances that emerge from them do not circulate. They age in sequences and relational structures in which they expand or shrink. As for relational structures and sequences of relational structures, this distinction between

circulating and non-circulating actors rests on the concept of inscription, which is, as will be shown, closely related to the two concepts of resistance and reciprocity within a theory of relation.

INSCRIPTION

The concepts of inscription, resistance and reciprocity describe what circulations concretely require to circulate in concrete. They are the conditions for the structuring of sequences and of relational structures, resulting in a differentiation of circulations, related activities and spheres of activity as well as related (collective) actors and actants in relational structures. Because relational structures formally and structurally rest on the same basic principles, they are open to all social activities and spheres of activity. This is why, conversely, all conceivable activities and spheres of activity may be found in each relational structure. However, since forms and structures are subverted through the primacy of circulation or because relational structures are rooted in circulations, it is likely that activities and spheres of activity do not develop arbitrarily, but according to how they support the sequential organisation of circulations in the corresponding relational structure. Such support results from the inscription of actors with actants and more or less formal collective actors, such as institutions and organisations, in such relational structures.

Therefore, the concept of inscription points to that which materialises the distinction between relational structures and sequences in relational structures. It clarifies the position of actors in relational structures on the one hand, while on the other hand, it provides information about their performed circulations and further circulations to be completed in the future. Thus, inscription presupposes an anchoring in sequences of relational structures (from the viewpoint of the actors' position) and distribution over other sequences of relational structures and other relational structures (from the perspective of relation). It differentiates actors' circulation paths, potentiates them and opens them up to further possible circulations. This is the general meaning of the concept of inscription, and it will now be examined in more depth from the viewpoint of the work on relational events.

The concept of inscription presupposes performing social work on relational events. It means the involvement of actors with other (collective) actors and with actants in these relational events, even if such an involvement alone is insufficient, unless it mobilises these actors and actants or

contributes to assembling them in a weak way at least. There are enough examples of social work that barely motivate actors and from which they turn away sooner or later, which proves that acts of inscription only happen occasionally. However, there is also work that one needs to do, or would like to realise, as well as activities that rob one's inner peace, illustrating that acts of inscription do happen. Such involvement leaves both psychological and physical traces. It may drive actors around in circles for a lifetime and change them over time until this inscription gains in recognition and leads to the legitimation of the actors involved. Though this legitimation may be modest, like, for example, in the case of the recognition of existing fundamental rights (Thévenot 2001; Boltanski and Thévenot 2007), yet, this inscription has a different meaning depending on the type of actor considered.

Individual human actors need such an inscription to support further the readjustment of their position in sequences and relational structures or to additional work on relational events. Collective actors need such inscription for further consolidation of their position. In Latour's words, collective actors warrant *obligatory passage points* for actors (Latour 2005) that support and sanction (positively or negatively) the work of actors on relational events. In the sense of non-human, material or immaterial actors, actants do not need such inscriptions, because their circulation develops independently of the sequential order of relational structures. This is why actants may affect, but do not depend on, the circulation of actors or the position of collective actors. This, in turn, is also why any human individual actor, or collective actor, can take these actants up and use, change or discard them in any circulation. Whether actants support or inhibit the inscription of actors, they contribute to the complexity of that inscription and its divergent nature as an inscription that can never be perfect.

An inscription is thus an act of more or less successful involvement of actors in their work on relational events with collective actors and actants. It diminishes the importance of the work of both actors with actants in the sense that inscription relates the activities of both parties to, or anchors them in, the sequence of a relational structure and, therefore, in a relational structure. Acts of inscription never occur unilaterally as if only the circulating actors performed them, due to the divergent nature of relational structures, the multiplicity of possible circulations and the actants as instances of mediation of such circulations at the different sequential levels of relational structures. Acts of inscription always presuppose the involvement of legitimating collective actors in the actors' work on relational

events. Thus, these collective actors are fundamentally instances that mediate circulation paths and circulation possibilities for actors in sequences of relational structures, and in these relational structures (for a similar conception of collectives, see Grossetti 2018, 2022). They illustrate the primacy of circulation in each sequence of a relational structure in which they take place.

Or, put differently, they socialise the actors to an understanding of circulation, sequences and relational structures, and they sanction them positively, or negatively, accordingly. This is why the theory of relation speaks of a *double inscription* of actors in the social work on relational events. Actors inscribe themselves with collective actors in their work on relational events, resulting in mutual recognition and legitimacy.

The divergent nature of relational structures, sequences of relational structures and the correspondingly more or less successful acts of inscription mean that double inscription does not occur once and for all. Actors must repeat it during the circulations of actors with further collective actors of sequences and relation structures. Here, a theory of relation does not reinvent the wheel. On the one hand, it supports the widespread sociological scheme, such as that found in socialisation theories, role theories and conflict theories, according to which circulations lead to repeated life-long acts of inscription of actors with collective actors. On the other hand, it takes up this argument with the primacy of circulation in such a way that acts of inscription condition the circulation paths of actors.

In contrast, such determinism varies in terms of strength or weakness, depending on which actors rely on which collective actors in which solid or weak state of a sequence and a relational structure. For example, the selection function of educational institutions such as schools or universities does not remain unchanged over time. It varies not only with pupils or students who enrol in such social instances, but also depends on the presence, or absence, of competing educational institutions in other sequences of a relational structure as well as in other relational structures. Finally, it varies with the social meaning of education as symbolic mediation in relational structures (see Euriat and Thélot 1995; Merle 2002; Albouy and Wanecq 2003; Lozach 2020). These variations of the deterministic power of acts of inscription open different circulation routes and further possible circulations for actors, and they determine the actors' expectations, and expectations regarding expectations, along the development of such circulations. This has corresponding consequences for the mobility of actors within, and between, sequences of relation structures,

and within, and between, relation structures. It stratifies these sequences and relational structures differently and makes them grow, or shrink, accordingly. These last two points will not be elaborated on in the context of this chapter; instead, the actors' resistance, an element they share, will be underlined.

RESISTANCE

The actors' resistance is a consequence of the starting point of a theory of relation. Its meaning may be summarised as follows: due to the non-uniform nature of the work on relational events, the multiplicity of these events as well as the multiplicity of actors and actants in relational structures, it is impossible for individual human actors to take a position in relational structures and keep it indefinitely. Sooner or later, actors move from one position to another. For example, the socialisation of actors presupposes the cooperation of actors with actants on the circulation path that the actors can develop while registering with social instances. This cooperation makes actors change, that is, it enables them to consider, and eventually move, to other positions. At the same time, this change of position, and the actors' ability to rely on position, do not reduce them to functions of relational structures, as if they were only contributing to normalising the development of relational structures. This last argument will be examined in detail because it also provides the starting point of the concept of resistance in a theory of relation.

Actors can be reduced neither to a position nor to a relation, or put differently, they can change positions in a relational structure, and therefore they can change relational structures as well as sequences of relational structures and circulations, because they resist *in favour of* or *against* positions, sequences of relational structures, relational structures and circulations. Paths that the actors have paved and positions they have taken do not lead to the complete satisfaction, or the complete disappointment, of actors, but to experiencing the diverging nature of relational structures as a condition of their circulations. Resistance reflects this embodiment of rearrangement as the constitutive duality of every human actor, who takes up positions in circulations through relation, and changes positions in relation through circulation. This conception of the actors' resistance needs further examination.

Resistance is always a resistance *in favour of* possible circulations between position and relation that constitutes a unique feature of each

human individual as a changeable individuality, whose changes are performed step by step along the various acts of inscription of the corresponding actor in relational structures. Resistance is, at the same time, always a resistance *against* other circulation possibilities and, therefore, different circulation paths, which may make acts of inscription more difficult or even impossible. According to Georg Simmel, resistance is the expression of an individual law, and this he develops using the example of the concepts of reserve, scruple, decency and personal intimacy. It is the first stage in the experience of contact with relational events, further actors (present and absent) as well as actants at the individual level. Resistance is the first stage of the experience of one's difference, which differentiates in further circulations during each actor's career (Simmel 2001). To use an image: if the inscription gave the direction that the circulation of actors takes, resistance would be like its reorientation. Resistance motivates reflexivity and the expression of affects that lead to expectations, and expectations of expectations, in the work on relational events. Accordingly, resistance conditions either support, or destabilise, the actors' inscription in circulations and, therefore, in relational structures. Because resistance is the expression of the actors' law, and considering that such actors are products of history, resistance is not something of which actors are fully aware. This is why concrete expressions of resistance go from testing activities with different actors, actants and relational events to the everyday development of tactics and strategies that accompany, and influence, the mobilisation of other actors and the work on relational events.

The relationship between the resistance *in favour of* and the resistance *against* a relational structure and the weight of both aspects of the resistance on the circulation between positions through relation, provides information not only about the attitude of actors towards their relational structure and the state of its general circulation. This relationship also affects the path-independency of actors' circulations either within a sequence of a relational structure, between sequences of a relational structure, or between relational structures. This last observation is here contrasted with Bourdieu, for example, who understands the subtle differences between actors based on path-dependencies between habitus, capitals and fields, which symbolise an external social order imposed on the actors, given their "*relative positions* in a space of relations" (Bourdieu 2012, 48). The resistance approach enables us to understand such differences between actors in terms of how strongly or weakly they support this work during their social work. Accordingly, it permits reconstruction of their position

more *in favour of*, or more *against*, a sequence of their relational structure and their relational structure as well as reconstruction of the order of such positions in relational structures. The resistance approach leads to a mapping of the stratification of relational structures depending on how strongly or weakly the actors support them in each of their components (sequences and circulations). This results in describing the distinctive features and practices of actors not in terms of their actual, existing class in society, but instead, distinctive features and practices that lead to distinctive circulation possibilities that sequences and relational structures can deliver.

In other words, if Bourdieu's sociological question is one of power in support of domination that keeps society unchanged in time, a theory of relation, with its concepts of inscription and resistance, shows that "society" moves along circulations through relation, and that such moves contribute to favouring some relational structures over others, as well as some sequences over others within relational structures. A theory of relation results in the unequal distribution of circulation possibilities over sequences and relational structures that directly affect the categories of actors and actors in these categories from the viewpoint of the affirmation of their difference, that is, from the perspective of their inscription and their resistance in sequences and relational structures. It, in turn, means that social differences have to be conceived in their relationship to the state of circulations within, and between, sequences and relational structures to understand how unequal they are and, therefore, how they contribute to social inequality between actors and actors' categories through sequences and relational structures, which translates into inequality between sequences and between relational structures.

This view on inequality does not affect individual human actors only, but also collective actors mediating the circulations in sequences and relational structures. At this point, a theory of relation takes up the question of reciprocity in a new way.

RECIPROCITY

The concept of reciprocity completes the basic apparatus of a theory of relation and the channelling between inscription and resistance. If the inscription is like the direction of circulations, and if resistance points out its orientations, the reciprocity describes the moment where the direction and orientation of circulations contribute to the position of collective actors who, in turn, contribute to further differentiations of such

circulations and, therefore, to further circulations of actors. With inscription, resistance and reciprocity, there are three steps that differentiate actors' work on social events, where the next step acts as a moment of differentiation from the earlier stage. However, as in the case of inscription and resistance, some particularities are unique to reciprocity, as will be described in the following.

In every variant of relational sociologies, theorising society according to a relational approach is assumed to presuppose a concept of reciprocity. A theory of relation is no exception, even if reciprocity is understood as follows. Instead of arguing ontologically and seeing reciprocity as a permanent property, that is, as a substance of any relational events emerging from the interpersonal flow of exchange (Bourdieu 1983, 192; Kondylis 1999, 498; on Coleman and Bourdieu's implicit conception of reciprocity, see Schultze 2022) translating into a foundation principle of a social relation between alter and ego (see the well-known contribution by Gouldner 1960), a theory of relation maintains that reciprocity only exists if there is a successful double inscription. If there is no double inscription, there is no reciprocity. This incisive formulation is used to make clear that according to a theory of relation, reciprocity is not a *sui generis* back-and-forth movement immanent in relational events. It, in turn, relates to what has been mentioned earlier regarding relational events that do not connect to anything in themselves. The characterisation of reciprocity from the viewpoint of a theory of relation will now be examined more closely.

The first characteristic of reciprocity is to underline the difference between actors (in their variants as human beings, collectives and non-human actants) on the one hand, and between actors and relational events in terms of their different contributions to circulations in sequences and relational structures on the other. Second, reciprocity enables translating different times and spaces into other—quick/slow or short/long—circulations that expand, or contract, the spheres of activity in sequences and relational structures. Reciprocity should therefore be understood contextually and from the viewpoint of the stratification of sequences and relational structures. Contextually, reciprocity acts as a principle of differentiation of spheres of activity. From the perspective of stratification, it acts as a principle of (re)distribution of actors across these spheres of activity. Reciprocity legitimises the reconfigurations between position and relation, which structure the spheres of activity, sequences and relational structures.

In other words, reciprocity in a theory of relation does not link directly to exchange and interdependent exchange practices. It does not develop from bipolar and multipolar interactions, or from linear or circular sequences of interaction *between people* (as, e.g., in the gift; see Lévi-Strauss 1981, 642–3 and also Mauss 1989), because reciprocity links directly to resistance and inscription and depends on them to become concrete. Reciprocity is not a norm, but the result of social work based on more or less successful acts of inscription in sequences and relational structures, given the resistance of individual and collective actors to such acts of inscription. Therefore, if based on diverging resistance, the social work of the individual and collective actors diverges, the inscription in a relational structure is weakened or disturbed. This results in weak reciprocity that threatens the circulation of the individual human actors and the position of the collective actors. The collective actors have more difficulty supporting the circulation paths and opportunities of individual human actors, which weakens the relational structure in parts, or as a whole, and blurs the differences between the circulations in a relational structure for all individual and collective actors. As a result, collective actors in such a relational structure have difficulties maintaining their position. They shrink or break down, which makes such a relational structure less attractive for individual human actors, who tend to leave it for another relational structure. With fewer collective actors and individual human actors in the relational structure, the remaining actors have fewer circulation possibilities. In contrast, strengthening the double inscription based on converging resistances in relational structures strengthens reciprocity, circulations paths and opportunities in such a relational structure, and finally, this relational structure in one or more of its sequences. It makes it more attractive for circulating actors and strengthens its influence on the other relational structures.

This understanding of reciprocity as the result of double inscription and resistance avoids the pitfalls related to an understanding of it as the direct result of interpersonal or intergroup relationships, or as a “mechanical law” of gift and return gift (see Bourdieu 2009, 226, e.g., on the law of reciprocal exchange formulated by Lévi-Strauss), which resumes the view that individual human actors, or collective actors, could influence reciprocity directly (see Bourdieu 2009, 216) and alter its meaning, that is, strengthen or weaken it. The latter presupposes that reciprocity would be in the control of actors, *as if* they controlled double inscription, circulations, sequences and relational structures. However, such a conception of

reciprocity neglects the embedding of actors in the multiple levels of relational structures whose interplay, as well as the consequences of such interplay in terms of the divergences from this interplay, they cannot overwhelm at will, let alone eliminate. Such a conception of reciprocity would also have the disadvantage of leading to an approach that could not address its unintended effects, such as the sense of duty towards other actors or collectives, the identification with an activity and the feeling of belonging to a collective, without reducing such unintended effects to conscious or intended usages of reciprocity and to strategic action developing from interpersonal ordinary everyday relationships. Such a view of reciprocity confuses the parts with the whole, taking vestiges of reciprocity from past acts of inscription of actors and collectives for reciprocity itself. This understanding of reciprocity as something that would develop from interpersonal relations and structure the whole of society proves once more how essential inscriptions and resistance *in favour of*, or *against*, are for actors and collectives, who therefore look for such reciprocity everywhere in their work on relational events, even if it does not develop from such events but, instead, from acts of inscription, and vanishes with completed inscriptions.

Yet, this does not mean that actors do not have any influence on reciprocity. Rather, it means that they affect the reciprocity of their relational structure indirectly, based on their social work on relational events on the one hand, and through their inscription with collective actors in this relational structure on the other. Collective actors also indirectly affect reciprocity in a relational structure. Unlike individual human actors, however, they exert their influence by regulating the circulations in their relational structure, which enables them to maintain, and ideally expand, their mediation structure across the entire relational structure. This is a consequence of the non-circulation of collective actors mentioned above. To maintain their position in their relational structure, collective actors seek to extend their view on reciprocity and related techniques, strategies, formal procedures and the symbols they develop in support of such a view to each sequence and each stratum of these sequences in their relational structures. Therefore, such collective actors contribute to the maintenance and, ideally, to the ascending social mobility of the category of actors they primarily socialise, given their position in a relational structure and its sequences.

Starting with Knöbl's critique of the use of process concepts in the social sciences to which the concept of relation certainly belongs, it has

been explained how a theory of relation understands relation in the light of the primacy of circulation and what the concepts are that promote such an understanding of relation. This leads to the main claim of a theory of relation that was briefly introduced at the beginning of this chapter and to which the conclusion below will return.

CONCLUSION

A theory of relation states that relation as an ideal, perfect relation motivates social life and the various relational events that generate social life and sequentially explain the divergences from such an ideal relation in the form of relational structures. Accordingly, a theory of relation explains how this quest for a perfect relation constantly vanishes at the different levels of a society which, in turn, generates circulations of actors, mobilisations of collective actors, acts of inscription, ascending and descending mobilities, changes in inequalities, in strategies of influence, in power struggles, and even the production of social bubbles as vulnerable meta-relation structures generate.

However, the description in this chapter of a theory of relation did not go that far. Instead, its starting position was explained, along with its basic concepts—beginning with the primacy of circulation, relational events, the divergent characteristic of relational structures and their sequences, through the social work of actors, their inscription with collectives and their related resistance *in favour of*, and *against*, their relational structure. Based on this starting point, it becomes possible to formulate the core question of this theory, namely: How do societies in all their components and dimensions deal with rearrangements that result in inscriptions of actors with actants in relational structures, and at which price? This question may well structure the diversity of relational sociologies and of sociologies that are based on a relational scheme. Within the theory of a relation framework, this question receives a clear answer, which develops in its complexity at the different levels of this theory and may be formulated as follows, namely according to circulation through relation.

Unlike other, or former, relational schemes developed in sociology to theorise society, a theory of relation avoids reducing relation to a single meaning of this word and therefore avoids identifying relationships with a specific interaction. Moreover, it avoids flattening society, that is, equating it with a relation, or considering it *as* a relation. A theory of relation, therefore, deconstructs such forms of relationism to the advantage of an

analytical, diachronic and synchronic comparative view of societies in transition, that is, in their different configurations as varying relational structures characterising these societies from their institutions and organisations to their actors. Thus, a theory of relation cannot only support the relativism of relational approaches, according to which social phenomena are in relation; it can also problematise it. A theory of relation is productive for sociological investigations of society through relation, and it stimulates new views on habitual sociological questions such as social inequality, recognition and legitimation, associated sociability networks and their effect on alternative forms of social life beyond established hierarchies, recognised rights and usual forms of social cohesion (see Papilloud and Schultze 2022, 253–312 for an extended outline).

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Post-Structuralism as a Precursor to Relational Sociology

Peeter Selg

INTRODUCTION

Post-structuralism revolves around the idea of strictly relational understanding of the social. It is true that post-structuralism dates back to at least Jacques Derrida's early work in the 1960s (see especially Derrida [1966] 1993) or even to Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* ([1957] 1972). But we are here to talk about post-structuralism in the context of social/political theory. Here, of course, even bigger names than Derrida and Barthes keep getting pushed to the pantheon of founding fathers of post-structuralist social theory—mostly Michel Foucault and his early disciples. I agree that he could partly fit with this characterization, and he has certainly influenced the most intricate and elaborated expositions of post-structuralist social theory—the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. We will have more to say about Foucault in the later parts of this chapter, when we touch upon his analytics of power and argue that, yes, there is definitely a connection with post-structuralism, but it is not

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_5

unproblematic. Thus, even though it might sound like an overstatement that it was Laclau and Mouffe who produced the most elaborate works on post-structuralist social theory, it is worth bearing with me on this claim.¹ Thus, somewhat nontraditionally, for this chapter the main figure in post-structuralist social/political theory is Ernesto Laclau, not Michel Foucault. Laclau might offhand seem to be a logician, but there are good grounds to claim that he is actually a social theorist (social ontologist, if you like) in the tradition that started with the foundation of social theory. Issues of power, governance and democracy loom large in his works when he talks about populism (e.g., 2005) or hegemony (e.g., 1996). His main co-author Chantal Mouffe, of course has taken post-structuralist social/political theory almost to the level of political commentary especially in the works after her *Democratic Paradox* (2000), and almost gotten rid of theorizing about the ontological foundations (e.g. Mouffe 2005, 2013) Thus, we focus mostly on the joint work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001)² and reflect on some aspects of Laclau's later works. We provide the connection with Foucault in the concluding section.

Before we proceed, a remark regarding one of the side debates regarding Laclau and Mouffe—the issue of their Marxist or post-Marxist persuasion that had some resonance in the late 1980s, but has not really stood the test of time afterwards. There were quite heated debates on the by now marginal issue of whether Laclau and Mouffe were truly members of the Marxist tradition most notably those initiated by Norman Geras.³ It is true that the first two chapters of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) are dedicated to the crisis of Marxism or the Left more generally, and the genealogy of the notion of hegemony in its Leninist and Gramscian roots, but it is first and foremost ch. 3 of this book that concerns us, where the post-structuralist thinking is at the focus of social theorizing. Post-structuralism has its roots mostly in linguistics and semiotics (although the latter is usually ignored by the tradition) and has nothing essential to do with (post-)Marxism.

Therefore, this chapter argues that the central notions of the post-structuralist tradition in social theory initiated by Laclau and Mouffe

¹For a more historically oriented overview of post-structuralism see Howarth (2013); for a more analytical exposition which relates Laclau's (and Mouffe's) notion of hegemony directly to the issues of power, governance and democracy see Selg and Ventsel (2020, ch. 3).

²The first edition was published in 1985.

³See Geras (1987) for the initial attack, Laclau and Mouffe (1987) for their influential response, and Geras (1988) for a rejoinder.

(antagonism; contingency of the social; empty signifier or nodal point, discourse, logic of difference and equivalence, etc.) would not make any sense without relational ontology underpinning them. Often, post-structuralists, however, are not very explicit about their relational persuasion, although the word “relational” is often present in their works. The latter *concept* (not to be confused with the *term*), of course comes originally from Saussure, who saw language as a “system of differences.”⁴ Other crucial notions for the post-structuralist tradition, like articulation, sign as a (constitutive) relation between the signifier and the signified, the arbitrariness (contingency) of the sign also have its origins in de Saussure (1983; see also Heiskala 2003).

The most important takeaway, when it comes to relational view of the world is that relations are to be seen as *constitutive* not merely *causal* between/among entities (for a longer treatment of the issue see Selg 2020; Selg and Ventsel 2020, chs. 1 and 7; Selg et al. 2024). The understanding that social relations “constitute” not only “cause” social phenomena is actually a pretty established language-game, having its roots in the distinction between “internal” and “external” relations leading back to Kant and Hegel (see Bhaskar 2005, 46–8) or even Leibniz (see Kusch 1991; Heiskala 2001, 2003, ch. 13). In contemporary social/political theory, this language-game comprises various schools of thought ranging from phenomenological sociology (Schutz 1967, 1970) to discussions of “constitutive rules” in analytic social philosophy (Searle 1995, 43–8, 2010, 96–7), “narrative constitution of identity” (Somers 1994) and, of course, post-structuralist political theory with notions like “constitutive outside,” “constitutive antagonism” or even “constitutive impossibility” and “constitutive lack” (Torfing 2009; see also Mouffe 2000, 2005, 2013; Laclau 1990, 1996). More recently, even a proposal for “radical relationalism” has been put forth containing an explicit guideline to “treat relations as constitutive of objects” (Powell 2013, 190). What is meant, however, by “constitutive relations” or “constituting” in the first place, has most clearly been explicated in outlines of constructivist approaches to international relations as they started to emerge in the 1980s and the 1990s

⁴ Often Ernst Cassirer’s work is cited in this regard as another possible candidate for being the founder of relational thinking in the very early period of the “relational” movement (see Vandenberghe 2001 in this regard). Unlike Saussure, Cassirer was very influential already in his life time and—in fact, before the posthumous fame of Saussure.

(Onuf 1989; Wendt 1998, 1999; see also Selg 2020; Nōgisto and Selg 2023 for general overview).

Nevertheless, what is relational understanding of social phenomena is made most explicit in the now momentum-enjoying tradition of *relational sociology*. It is a rich tradition (besides the current two volume book, see Dépelteau 2018a) and, even more importantly, a tradition that is alive and more and more kicking, meaning that there are also internal rivalries.⁵ The version of relational sociology presumed in this chapter is what the current author and his collaborators have dubbed processual-relational sociology, which has its roots in Dewey and Bentley's notion of trans-action that is distinguished from other major species of social theory, namely, self-action (e.g. in rational choice theory or exchange theory) and inter-action (e.g. variable-based thinking in social research).⁶ Let us untangle the Deweyian/Bentleyian notions of self-action, inter-action, and trans-action as tools for further investigation when we try to tackle the strictly relational character of post-structuralism. In general, we are talking about three different conceptualizations of social action. The first two understandings are usually referred to as substantialist, while the third one is considered to be truly relational understanding of social action (see Emirbayer 1997 for the most influential contribution along these lines).

1. **Self-action**, as the prefix “self-” indicates, refers to an action that is taken up by fully constituted individual and independent entities that might, but need not encounter other such individual and independent entities. All the required capacities and resources for taking up the action in question are contained in the entities. The world view that presumes the world to be built up by nothing else but various forms of self-action is the first form of substantialism.
2. **Inter-action**, as the prefix “inter-” indicates, refers to an action that takes place *between/among* entities that themselves are fully constituted prior to action. This involves the second form of substantialism. In the social sciences it usually takes the reduction of relations between entities into a peculiar propositional form—relations between variables.

⁵ See for instance a recent volume on the methodological differences within the tradition—Halas (2023).

⁶ For the earlier statements from the current author see for instance Selg (2016a, b, 2018, 2020, 2021; Selg and Ventsel 2020; Nōgisto and Selg 2023; Selg et al. 2023, 2024).

3. **Trans-action**, as the prefix “trans-” indicates, refers to an action that, in a way, *transcends* the entities, which are seen as *constituted within* this action. This is usually considered not substantialism, but relationalism. For instance, Crossley (2010, 16) makes the following point with a different vocabulary:

Relations are ‘more than’ individuals who stand in relation, on this [relational] account. They have specific properties as, for example, relations of slavery or wage labour (or love, marriage, friendship, parenting etc.). And, to reiterate, they define the actors who are involved in them. Slave relations do not form when masters and slaves conjoin. Masters and slaves only exist as such in virtue of the slavery relationship.

According to Pratt (2020, 69) who explicitly refers to Dewey and Bentley’s notion of trans-action, the latter “refers to the arrangements of unfolding processes which cannot be specified apart from one another, extending in time as well as space, and which, in the case of the organism and its environment, deny the independent pre-existence of either one.”

To adopt for a moment—for purely didactic purposes—a more substantialist common-sense vocabulary: the actions that the things or beings are or have been involved in are defining parts of their very nature. Social phenomena like institutions, power, (in)equality, freedom, and the like are to be (re)defined as concepts of relationships rather than as concepts of substances, properties, or dispositions (see Elias 1978).

Dewey and Bentley’s intervention is usually mediated via Emirbayer’s classic (1997) through numerous works of the late Dépelteau (e.g. 2008, 2013, 2018b, c), seconded by Vandenberghe (2018), Pyhtinen (2018, 2020); Morgner (2020); Guy (2020) among others. Dewey and Bentley’s concept of trans-action marks the entry into a strictly processual-relational perspective. This view, as outlined by Emirbayer (1997, 287), holds that “the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction.” In this framework, trans-action is understood as a *dynamic* and *evolving* or *unfolding process*, where the trans-action itself becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than its individual components (ibid.). Dépelteau (2008, 60) articulates this most clearly: “any individual action is always one piece of a moving puzzle composed by interdependent actions: the action^A is the action^A only because it is interconnected to the action^B, and vice versa.” Consequently, from a processual-relational

standpoint, social research (or even social theory) cannot begin with discrete, pre-existing units such as individuals, societies, classes, groups, or states, as their characteristics emerge within ever-changing trans-actional contexts. Using Dewey and Bentley's vocabulary, trans-actionalist epistemology and methodology would require that

systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements'. (1949, 108)

In this quote, not only the *constitutive* nature of relations is implied, but also that those relations are seen as *processes*. The latter means subscribing to “the principle of primacy of process” (Dépelteau 2008, 62). A researcher/theorist adopting a processual-relational perspective “sees relations between terms or units [of analysis] as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances” (Emirbayer 1997, 89). If we adopt the processual-relational perspective, we realize that “[s]ocial phenomena are fluid and moving like movies instead of being fixed like pictures” (Dépelteau 2008, 62). Though processes are irreducible from this perspective, it does not entail that there is no continuity in the social world: the “social universe is full of more or less continuous and similar trans-actions (or social structures) that we call market, wedding, war, genocide, racism, exploitation, domination, love, and so on” (ibid.). Social phenomena (structures, selves, identities, groups, etc.) and their stability and change “should be studied as chains of trans-action” (ibid.). Analyzing social phenomena as “chains of trans-action” means viewing them as constituted within social processes composed of elements and their relations that “can be *considered separately*, but *not as being separate*” (Elias 1978, 85, italics added). This “separately, but not as being separate” dictum borrowed from Elias, is, in fact, crucial to the processual-relational sociology, that it shares with post-structuralism—although the latter never makes it explicit. Let's see how it plays out by considering a selection of crucial notions from the post-structuralist tradition. We consider, first, some key concepts from the works of Laclau and Mouffe who could without any hesitation considered to be the founding members of the post-structuralist establishment at least

when it comes to social or political theory.⁷ Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (ch. 3 of it to be more exact⁸) set the post-structuralist camp truly ablaze. It is a very raw draft of a book as every reader of it knows. The most annoying part of it is that the reader gets overwhelmed with an almost impenetrable array of concepts, most of which don't stand the test of time and are all but "forgotten" by both Laclau and Mouffe in their subsequent works. To make the reader "scared," let me just list 27 of them in alphabetical order (i.e., not in their conceptual order) that can be deciphered in ch. 3 alone, which forms the social-theoretical foundation of their book: *antagonism, anti-essentialism, articulation, closure, democratic subject position, discourse, discursive field, discursive formation, element, essentialism, hegemonic formation, hegemony, historical block, imaginary, logic of difference, logic of equivalence, moment, nodal point, objectivity, organic crisis, over-determination, political space, popular subject position, society, subject position, the People, the social.*

What has survived in all of both Laclau's and Mouffe's works, however, is, of course, the notion of hegemony, which unavoidably presumes the notion of antagonism, which in turn presumes the logics of difference and equivalence, and last, but definitely not the least, the notion of nodal point which in Laclau's work since the early 1990s has become more and more substituted with the notion of empty signifier. However, even more trickily, all this presumes the notion of discourse. In what follows, we will demonstrate how all these notions and their interplay presumes processual-relational ontology ("trans-actionalism") as outlined above. We will start with the notion of Hegemony in order to pinpoint its unavoidable counterparts or even ontological underpinnings—the notions of discourse and antagonism.

⁷ Other "usual suspects" include direct or indirect students of Laclau and Mouffe, like, for instance, David Howarth, Jason Glynos, Oliver Marchart, Yannis Stavrakakis, and Aletta Norval (see Howarth 2013 for the difficulties of fitting various authors within the family of post-structuralism). Though we discuss later also some aspects of Michel Foucault's work, we also see that regarding him as part of post-structuralism is problematic in many ways, although the label keeps sticking to him rather frequently.

⁸ Titled "Beyond the Positivity of the Social: Hegemony and Antagonism."

HEGEMONY IS A TRANS-ACTION NOT A PROPERTY

The term “hegemony” possesses a field of meaning within language games that bears a family resemblance to Laclau and Mouffe’s conceptualization. It is primarily associated with the notion of dominance or supremacy of a particular force or entity. However, Laclau elevates this category to an entirely new socio-ontological level. His approach is characterized by a particular kind of dual movement. On the one hand, his project engages in the deconstruction of Marxist theory and practice (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, chs.s 1 and 2), a tradition from which the concept of “hegemony” as a theoretical category originates most powerfully. On the other hand, over the decades, he progressively refined the conceptual apparatus for theorizing the phenomenon of hegemony, drawing primarily from post-structuralist theory and, more recently, from analytical philosophy, synthesizing these influences with a psychoanalytic perspective on affect and naming. As a result, it has become customary to speak of three models of hegemony in Laclau’s work.

Beyond developments in theoretical jargon—ranging from Gramsci’s “hegemonic bloc” and “war of position” to Lacanian “nodal points” and “empty signifiers”⁹—Laclau’s scholarship reveals a growing tendency to expand the domain in which contingent articulations of meaning operate. In other words, his perspective increasingly conceptualizes social systems as open structures. Each model advances the idea of “openness” one step further, culminating in the third model, where Laclau develops his position based on Derridean notions of undecidability (Norval 2004, 142). In this section, we focus primarily on this third, most advanced model, while also following David Howarth in arguing that these models should be understood as continuous moments within the development of a single theoretical concept rather than as distinct conceptualizations (Howarth 2004, 258–62).

Hegemony according to Laclau (and Mouffe) arises when a particular social force assumes the role of embodying totality—something radically incommensurable with itself. A classic example is *Solidarność*, which initially represented the concrete demands of workers in Gdańsk but gradually came to embody the demands of the entire “Polish people” against a

⁹Actually the term itself was already used by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1972 [1957]) in the 1950s.

repressive regime. This is a hegemonic relation, characterized by a universal dimension assumed by a particular force. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, “Such a form of ‘hegemonic universality’ is the only one that a political community can reach” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, x). What are the formal conditions for this?

A hegemonic relation presupposes what is termed structural undecidability. That is, within any system (or structure), there must exist an element that cannot be fully determined by the system’s own logic—otherwise, the establishment of hegemony would not be possible. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, “If social objectivity, through its internal laws, determined whatever structural arrangement exists (as in a purely sociological conception of society), there would be no room for contingent hegemonic rearticulations—nor, indeed, for politics as an autonomous activity” (2001, xii). Structural undecidability is a fundamental ontological premise of post-structuralist philosophy, particularly in light of Derrida’s analysis of *différance* and the deconstruction of Western metaphysics. However, contingency and undecidability do not imply total chaos—for in such a case, hegemony would also be impossible: “In order to have hegemony, the requirement is that elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to enter into one type of arrangement rather than another, nevertheless coalesce, as a result of an external or articulating practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xii).

A hegemonic relation necessarily entails a universalist dimension. This means that the force establishing hegemony—whether a political party or another entity—must be capable of presenting its position as universally valid. But what is the specific nature of this universality? Unlike the abstract universality assumed by Habermasian theorists, Laclau and Mouffe’s respective concept is what could be called a “contaminated” universality: “(1) it lives in this unresolvable tension between universality and particularity; (2) its function of hegemonic universality is not acquired for good but is, on the contrary, always reversible.” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xiii). What is the nature of this tension between the universal and the particular that ultimately renders every universality reversible? How exactly does this logic operate? These questions are best explored through a key notion that underpins Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis—namely, the concept of “discourse.”

DISCOURSE IS A TRANS-ACTION NOT A STRUCTURE

This concept of discourse encompasses a variety of problematics. First and foremost, discourse can be understood as the interplay and tension between the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence. This also entails an engagement with the perennial issue of the relationship between the discursive and the nondiscursive, or between the intra-discursive and the extra-discursive. Let us begin with the latter problematic.

Basically the distinction or at least dichotomy between discursive and nondiscursive practices is discarded because:

- a. Any object is constituted as an object of discourse, at least in the sense that no object is given outside of all discursive conditions;
- b. any distinction between what is typically referred to as the linguistic and behavioral aspects of social practice is either mistaken or should instead be understood as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured in the form of discursive totalities (ibid., 107).

To put it more bluntly than Laclau and Mouffe: discourses don't "express" reality, they constitute reality. This is put in a less obscure language by two of the most eminent representatives of interpretive political science, Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes already in 2006, when they discuss the issue of what is the point of studying interpretations of political actors in the first place. The usual dismissal by the positivists is roughly like this: you are only studying what the political actors "think" and "express," but what is truly important is to explain political action. To this, Bevir and Rhodes respond: interpretations are *constitutive* of action. In other words, to study meanings and interpretations is really to study the *constitution* of action (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006, ch. 2). And what is more real in the social world than social action? In a similar vein, discourse in a post-structuralist sense is not an "expression" of reality "out there"—it is the condition of its very possibility, it is *constitutive* of reality. In order to dismiss some common objections, three clarifications must be made, though. First, the fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with the question of whether there exists a world outside of thought, nor with the opposition between realism and idealism. An earthquake, for instance, undoubtedly exists regardless of my will. However, whether its specificity as an object is constructed in terms of a "natural

phenomenon” or as a result of “a wrath of God” depends on the structuring of the discursive field. Thus, the claim is not that objects do not exist outside of thought but rather that they cannot constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive conditions (*ibid.*, 108).

Underlying the previous misconception is the assumption that discourse is of a “mental nature.” Against this, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the *material* character of discursive structure. To assert the opposite, they argue, is to accept the classical dichotomy between the objective field of reality “as it is,” and discourse as mere expression of thought (about reality “as it is”). Several philosophical traditions—from existential phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) to speech act theory and Wittgensteinian notion of “language games” as “forms of life”—have sought to dismantle this dualism. For instance, it is evident that the material properties of objects are part of what Wittgenstein calls a language game, which, in turn, serves as an example of what Laclau and Mouffe term “discourse” (*ibid.*).

Finally, we must consider the advantages of assigning such a central role to the category of discourse. Above all, this significantly expands the field of objectivity. To clarify: let us assume that we attempt to analyze social relations based on the type of objectivity constructed by the discourse of natural sciences. This would mean that certain relationships and objects would be automatically excluded. For instance, a metaphor is impossible as an objective relation between two entities. Similarly, contradiction is excluded within a naturalist paradigm. However, if we examine social relations as discursively constructed, contradiction becomes possible. While the classical understanding of a “real object” precludes contradiction, a contradictory relationship can exist between two discursive objects. Thus, this expansion of the field of objectivity simply means that by abandoning the discursive/nondiscursive dichotomy (and consequently, the thought/reality dichotomy), the range of categories capable of explaining social relations has significantly increased. For example, metaphor, synonymy, and metonymy are not merely “forms of thought” that add some secondary meaning to a primary meaning. Rather, they are part of the primary meaning of sociality itself. Therefore, in addition to rejecting dichotomies, we must also reinterpret categories that were previously considered mutually exclusive (*ibid.*, 109–10).

In view of this rejection of these dichotomies—a rallying cry of basically all major trans-actionalist sociologists since the above-mentioned inputs of Emirbayer and Dépelteau to name just the two—let us ask a trickier question: Can a discourse be totally fixed or unfixed? The answer is, of course,

in the spirit of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*: the question itself is wrongly posed. The next subsection tries to explain why.

The Impossibility of Complete Fixation or Complete Non-Fixation of Discourse

Neither the complete fixation nor the complete non-fixation of discourse is possible. Why? To address this question, we must consider the constitution of discourse through two logics: the *logic of difference* and the *logic of equivalence*.

Let us begin by examining why discourse cannot be entirely *non-fixed*. As a system of entities based on difference, discourse—as previously noted—exists only through a partial limitation of the *surplus of meaning* that threatens to undermine it. The very condition for the constitution of any social practice is this surplus of meaning, which is inherently present in every discursive situation. To put this in more traditional terminology: for my identity to exist, some form of the *Other* is necessary. Of course, the specific way in which this *Other* is constructed—who or what it is—is a separate question. However, what is clear is that this *Other* can never be identical to me. Returning to Laclau and Mouffe's terminology: no differences can be complete differences without also being, in some sense, *equivalent* to another difference.

To put it in a more mundane language: two total strangers can never be total strangers in a sense that there is no connection between them whatsoever: they are *different*, but at the same time (no matter how marginally) also *equivalent*.

What about the impossibility of complete fixation of discourse? Why, then, is the complete fixation of discourse also impossible? Strictly speaking, for the same fundamental reason: the *Other* can never be fully identical to the *Self* but only equivalent to it. In other words, no matter how "similar" we may be with the *Other*, some difference will always remain (ibid., 112). Again, to put it in a nontechnical vocabulary: although two lovers can perceive themselves as being essentially one with each other, there will always remain some constitutive differences between them (the impossibility of total fixation of their love into undistinguishable oneness—identity). Thus, the lovers are *equivalent* but never *identical*.

What comes out of it is that since the complete fixation is impossible, there must exist *partial fixations* of discourse—otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Although the social cannot fully fix itself

into recognizable and institutionalized forms of society, it nevertheless exists as an attempt to constitute this impossible object—"society." Every discourse is an attempt to dominate the discursive field, to appropriate the flow of differences, to construct a *center*. Laclau and Mouffe refer to these privileged points of partial fixation as nodal points. Later, beginning with Laclau's essay collection *Emancipation(s)* (1996), he refers to these *nodal points* as *empty signifiers*. Limits on the chain of meaning (discourse) are necessary for meaning to emerge at all, as a discourse that fails to fix meaning to any degree would be a psychotic discourse. One might add—though Laclau and Mouffe do not state this explicitly—that the reverse is also true: a discourse that is completely fixed would be analogous to *Newspeak* in an Orwellian sense. Thus, discourse, is always inherently in tension between two logics—those of equivalence and difference—without any "final victory" of one or the other. And here, Laclau uses explicitly the word of special importance for this book, saying:

Since all identity is relational—even if the system of relations does not reach the point of being fixed as a stable system of differences—since, too, all discourse is subverted by a field of discursivity which overflows it, the transition from "Elements" to "Moments" can never be complete. (ibid., 113)

"Elements" in their vocabulary refer to entities that are not articulated into parts of a "system of meanings" (i.e., another name for "discourse"); while "Moments" are elements that are exactly articulated as parts of such systems of meanings. What they just said in the previous quote is that this transition from "Elements" into "Moments" is never complete. That should sound awfully familiar for those who focused on the quote by Dewey and Bentley above.¹⁰ But Laclau and Mouffe continue:

The status of the 'elements' is that of floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain. And this floating character finally penetrates every discursive (i.e. social) identity. But if we accept the non-complete character of all discursive fixation and, at the same time, affirm the

¹⁰Just in case let the reader be reminded of this quote by Dewey and Bentley in a footnote:

systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements'. (1949, 108)

relational character of every identity, the ambiguous character of the signifier, its non-fixation to any signified, can only exist insofar as there is a proliferation of signifieds. It is not the poverty of signifieds but, on the contrary, polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure. That is what establishes the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of every social identity. Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. *The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.* (ibid., 113, italics in the original)

But is there a direct experience of this partial fixedness of discourse and objectivity? Enter antagonism—a notion that absolutely rules out any conceptualization in substantialist terms, and can only be made sense in relational terms. This is the last major concept we will discuss when it comes to Laclau and Mouffe’s intervention.

ANTAGONISM IS A TRANS-ACTION NOT A SUM OF CLASHING INTER- OR SELF-ACTIONS

Thus far, the impossibility of closure of the social/discursive (i.e., the impossibility of society) has been presented as the instability of any identity, manifesting itself as the continuous movement of differences. However, the question now arises: Are there any “experiences” or discursive forms where what is manifested is no longer the perpetual deferral of a “transcendental signified” (a final meaning), but rather the very vanity of this deferral, the impossibility of any stable difference and, consequently, of any “objectivity”?

The answer is affirmative. The “experience” of the limits of any objectivity has a distinct discursive presence—this is antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe note that, despite the extensive research on antagonism in historical and sociological literature, scholars have largely avoided the fundamental task of defining what constitutes an antagonistic relationship (ibid., 122).

For Laclau and Mouffe, one of the few attempts at such a definition comes from Lucio Colletti (1972), who argues that the categories of “real opposition” and “contradiction” explain the specificity of antagonistic relations. His analysis is based on a Kantian distinction:

1. **Real opposition:** The formula “A – B” signifies that each side possesses its own positivity, independent of its relation to the other. This

corresponds to Dewey and Bentley's notion of self-actionalism. Here, explanations seem redundant; however, it is worth noting that this type of opposition appears between real objects because the identity of any real object is not solely exhausted by its opposition to another object—it possesses its own reality independent of that opposition.

2. **Contradiction:** The relationship between the terms “A – not-A” exhausts the reality of both terms. This corresponds to Dewey and Bentley's notion of inter-actionalism because contradiction appears at the level of propositions (usually disguised as variables in the social sciences).

Why is Colletti's dualistic distinction—contradiction or real opposition—limited? The reasons are twofold:

1. His framework allows for only two types of entities: real objects and concepts.
2. His analysis presupposes a strict separation between thought and reality. However, as previously discussed, the distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive is ultimately untenable. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 123)

Thus, Colletti remains within the purview of self-actionalism and inter-actionalism. How, then, can we move toward a trans-actional understanding of antagonism, as ultimately reached by Laclau and Mouffe (even if they do not explicitly use these terms)? First, it is clear that antagonism cannot be a real opposition. A collision between two vehicles is not antagonistic—it is a material fact subject to physical laws. Applying this principle to the social field, one might mistakenly conclude that the antagonist element in class struggle is the physical act of police officers beating workers or individuals shouting over one another in parliament. Second, there is a conflation of two distinct claims: (a) reality is contradictory and (b) contradictions exist within reality. The first claim is self-defeating. The second, however, is undeniably true—there are situations in reality that can only be described in terms of logical contradiction. Since propositions belong to reality, one can assert that contradictions exist within reality. As long as social practices take on a propositional form, contradictions are always real. While contradictions undeniably exist in reality, they do not, in themselves, explain social antagonisms. Contradiction does not necessarily entail antagonism.

If neither “real opposition” nor “contradiction” adequately accounts for antagonistic relations, what does? First, does the fact that antagonism cannot be assimilated into real opposition or contradiction mean that it cannot be assimilated into anything common to both? These two types of relationships share something—the fact that they are *objective* relations. In both cases, the relationship is intelligible through what the objects already are. In other words, both rely on a form of substantialism (self-action, inter-action), since both contradiction and real opposition presuppose fully positive identities of the constituent parts of the relation.

Laclau and Mouffe, however, argue that: “In the case of antagonism, we are confronted with a different situation: the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution” (ibid., 125). Why is antagonism neither contradiction (inter-action) nor real opposition (self-action)? Because, “[t]he presence of the Other is not a logical impossibility: it exists; so it is not a contradiction. But neither is it subsumable as a positive differential moment in a causal chain, for in that case the relation would be given by what each force is, and there would be no negation of this being” (ibid.). Here, we enter the domain of trans-actional thinking. To clarify why trans-actionalism is not reducible to inter-actionalism or self-actionalism, consider the following: in the latter, as represented by real opposition, a physical force cancels out an identical but opposite force due to its physical nature. Antagonism, however, operates differently: because a peasant cannot be a peasant (i.e., fully himself), antagonism exists—not within himself but in relation to the landowner who evicts him.

In summary, real opposition (self-action) and contradiction (inter-action) are “objective” relations. Antagonism (trans-action), on the other hand, constitutes the very limits of objectivity, revealing itself as partial and unstable objectification: “If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference: in that sense, it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it—that is, as metaphor” (ibid.). Thus, “[a]ntagonism escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language since language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts” (ibid.). Meaning that actually “[a]ntagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are *shown*—in the sense in which Wittgenstein [in his *Tractatus*] used to say that what cannot be *said* can be *shown*” (ibid.). This necessitates understanding antagonism in trans-actional terms. What follows from this understanding of antagonism for the notion

of society? The social exists as a partial attempt to construct society—an objective and closed system of differences. Antagonism, which testifies to the impossibility of fully constituting society, is the “experience” of the limits of the social: “Strictly speaking, antagonisms are not *internal* but *external* to society; or rather, they constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself” (ibid.). This definition may appear paradoxical or even absurd when viewed through the lens of common-sense assumptions (i.e., self-actionalism and inter-actionalism). These assumptions broadly include:

1. The assumption that “society” can be equated with physically existing agents living within a specific territory. However, the empirical co-existence of agents does not necessitate that their relations must be shaped by an objective and intelligible scheme.
2. The assumption that society is a knowable and objective ensemble. Accepting this assumption introduces yet another presupposition incompatible with this approach—namely, the idea that the social, conceived as an empirical totality, possesses an underlying principle of rational totalization (ibid., 126).

Antagonism, therefore, is the “experience” of the limits of the social. This experience unfolds in two ways:

1. As an experience of *failure*: “If the subject is constructed through language, as a partial and metaphorical incorporation into a symbolic order, any putting into question of that order must necessarily constitute an identity crisis” (ibid.).
2. This failure does not grant access to some alternative ontological order beyond differences—such a beyond does not exist.

All this is but another way of saying that—sorry for the repetition, but it is important:

systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’. (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 108)

Post-structuralism in the tradition initiated by Laclau and Mouffe has been trans-actionalism or processual-relationalism all along—but decades before Mustafa Emirbayer’s “Manifesto for a relational sociology” (1997).¹¹

WHAT ABOUT FOUCAULT, THOUGH?

What about Foucault, though, who was even earlier than Laclau and Mouffe? He is definitely a trans-actionalist, but has always had difficulties fitting with any –isms, post-structuralism included. Since he is often associated with the latter movement—and has explicitly inspired its representatives—he deserves at least a short mentioning in the final section of this chapter. We focus only on some aspect of his notion of power (see Selg 2016b, 2018 for more extensive treatment). But before that, let us state the obvious regarding Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) intervention: the whole discussion thus far about discourse, nodal points, antagonism, and hegemony—has been a discussion of *power*. A hegemonic relation is a power relation. Post-structuralist theory of hegemony is a theory of power. Just to make it clear that this is also to be found in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s work, let us consider the latter, since Mouffe is almost notoriously clear in his exposition of the basics. In one of her sections titled “Politics as Hegemony” (2005, p. 17ff; see also Selg 2012), she explicitly states: “Next to antagonism, the concept of hegemony is the key notion for addressing the question of ‘the political’” (Mouffe 2005, 17), and continues with reference to the contingency of every social order:

Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices... things could always be otherwise and therefore every social order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is in that sense that it can be called ‘political’ since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. Power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape. (ibid., 18)

Now, if there is one person who has gone even more deeply into the intricacies of power as constitutive of the social than Laclau and Mouffe, it

¹¹ *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was published in 1985. However, Laclau “stumbled” on these topics already in the late 1970s (see Laclau 1977).

is none other than Michel Foucault, arguably the most influential theorist of power of all time (the likes of Hobbes and Weber included in the pantheon). Was he a post-structuralist? In a way, yes, but he was very critical of the Saussurean origins of the movement—mostly because of his background or maybe even because of his misreading of Saussure. The fact is that he has explicitly dismissed “analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures” (Foucault 1980, 114). He himself considered himself a historian, or even more peculiarly, a historian of the present, and it is “history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” (ibid.). Hence, for him the Saussurean “‘semiology’ is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue” (Foucault 1980, 115). In view of what Laclau and Mouffe had to say about power—hegemony—in an explicitly Saussurean idiom, Foucault is definitely wrong. But he is wrong in a right way—by offering even more intricate take on the notion of power (and its multidimensionality) than Laclau and Mouffe. Hence the question: What about Foucault, though?

Foucault ends with an almost apophatic “definition” of power: “power is *not* an institution, and *not* a structure; *neither* is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (Foucault 1978, 93, emphasis added). This stretches the concept of power almost to the extreme of being utterly meaningless. But this is one of the general consequences of taking a stance on power that is as trans-actionalist as it gets. Power cannot be a regional category referring to certain “level,” “area,” or “domain” of society: “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to *other types of relationships* (*economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations*), but are *immanent* in the latter” (Foucault 1978, emphasis added). For Foucault, power “which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action” (Foucault 1982, 788). He points out that: the analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision; that it should not attempt to consider power from its internal point of view and that it should refrain from posing the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: “Who then has power and what has he in mind? What is the aim of someone who possesses power?” (Foucault 1980, 97). Those would be substantialist questions about power (inter-actionalism, self-actionalism).

When taking a trans-actionalist stance then methodologically speaking, we need “a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application, there—that is to say—where it installs itself and produces its real effects” (ibid.). This entails reorienting our major research questions about power:

Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. ... rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects. (ibid.)

It is in view of this that Foucault’s own distinction of different logics of power should be taken. Based on his oeuvre as a whole, but especially his later and posthumously published works (such as Foucault 1977, 1978, 2003, 2007), three such logics of power can be deciphered: (1) a sovereignty-based model, accompanied by an understanding of power as akin to commodity that can be distributed, or as working through a mechanism of repression or saying “no”; (2) disciplinary power that works primarily through surveillance and the production of docile bodies; (3) biopower or biopolitics of population that works primarily through mechanisms of security. These three logics of power should not be understood as separate and distinct; rather, they form a triangle whose practices and mechanisms penetrate each other and intervene in each other’s functioning. Therefore, sovereignty, discipline, and security are neither “governing entities” within which power relations can be categorized, nor do they designate certain stages of historical development (such as social formations in the Marxist tradition). These three logics cannot be analyzed in isolation. Nevertheless, we can point out that different relational settings call for prioritizing different vocabularies: overall, the vocabulary of biopolitics might be more pertinent to conceptualizing power relations in a late capitalist setting more generally, but one can easily imagine relational settings *within* this general relational setting (such as military conflict, operation of police forces during violent crises) that call more for sovereignty-based vocabulary. The intertwinedness of different vocabularies of power analysis actually makes perfect sense, when one takes a

trans-actionalist stance. Then Foucault's most notorious single quote doesn't sound that self-refuting anymore: "Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 1978, 93). In other words, power is a trans-action, not a possession, property, etc. of self-actors or inter-actors. And here is how one should proceed to analysis of power from the trans-actionalist perspective:

[U]nless we are looking at it from a great height and from a very great distance [as self-actionalists or inter-actionalists], power is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively, and those who do not have it and are subject to it. Power must, I think, be analyzed as something that circulates, or rather as something that functions only when it is part of a chain. It is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them ... The individual is in fact a power effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted. (Foucault 2003, 29–30, emphasis added)¹²

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¹²I end this chapter with a parodic note alluding to the ending of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) which ends with a footnote, letting the reader know that this book is now over. This chapter is over too.

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PART II

One More “Turn” after the Relational
Turn



Interpassive Relational Sociology

Robert Seyfert

ACTIONIST OBSESSIONS

The sociological gospel begins with the sentence: In the beginning was activity! The common consensus in sociology is the conviction that sociality always presupposes some form of activity, with action, construction, fabrication, production, with practices, doing and so on. Decisions and selections have to be made; operations and communication have to be carried out. Social relationships must always be actively produced: they are inter-activities, inter-actions, etc. The social must be actively brought about; it does not happen by itself! We are dealing here with the idea of an inanimate pre-social background that only becomes socially animated through the active creation of social relationships. The intra-disciplinary disputes then relate solely to the question of who is actually the bearer of the activity: the human actor, the situation, the system or the network?

This is the translation of the revised chapter 10 of *Beziehungsweisen. Elemente einer relationalen Soziologie* (Seyfert 2019). Interpassivity as Delegation and Dialectics

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_6

The following considerations are based on the observation that, due to its actionist orientation, sociology tends to exclude passive and vague forms of social relations both in theory and in empirical research. I focus on the analysis and development of such non-activist social relations. After a brief description of the actionist obsession of central sociological approaches, alternative considerations are put forward in the second part. Here, I assume an a priori social immanence, which includes social relationships that are completely independent of the initiative of actors, systems, networks and so on. Actors, systems and networks emerge from this social immanence in the first place. With the concept of a priori social immanence, the importance of passive forms of sociality for social life and sociological analysis comes into focus. This means that the social is not constitutively dependent on the activities of the individuals, systems or networks involved. At this point, the importance of passivity and interpassivity, relations of passors (the passive counterpart of actors) will be emphasised. These form the passive counterpart, as it were, to the actionist paradigm.

ACTION-THEORETICAL OBSESSIONS

A first impression of the activist obsessions of sociology can be gained by taking a look at Max Weber's Basic Sociological Concepts. There he first defines sociology with great verve as "a science that in construing and understanding social action seeks causal explanation of the course and effects of such action" (Weber 2019, 78). Here, social action is distinguished from pure behaviour; behaviour is only a sociological fact if it is social action, that is, if it is associated with meaning and related to the actions of other actors. Weber thus excludes a very large number (if not the majority) of empirical phenomena from sociology. The fact that this is not unproblematic can be seen in particular in the empirical examples that Weber himself cites as non-social phenomena: For Weber, the "collision of two cyclists" and "people put[ting] up their umbrellas simultaneously" are not sociological objects of investigation, but "mere event[s], just like any natural occurrence" (Weber 2019, 99–100). However, both cases are obviously social relationships of high social relevance. We only want to suggest in passing that the joint opening of the umbrella could also be interpreted ritualistically, as a mutual imitation that is often completely independent of the intensity of the rain. It could also be interpreted in terms of technological affordances, where the technical structure of the

umbrella is equally involved in opening of the umbrella (Gibson 1977). These are interactions without actionist aspects. Above all, they are examples of social relations that are not based on any selection, choice or similar operations. Rather than excluding such phenomena from sociology or reinterpreting them in actionist terms, an independent sociology of interpassivity is required to understand the human contributions to these social events. From the outset, Weber was well aware of the selectivity of his theoretical choice, for he adds to his now canonised definition additions that have not gained the same popularity, but which nevertheless decisively restrict the basic definition. Weber knows all too well that limiting the subject area of sociology to social actions would exclude a large proportion of empirical phenomena. And this applies in particular to phenomena that had already been extensively studied by sociologists and social psychologists before him. With regard to Gustave Le Bon's mass psychology and, in particular, Gabriel Tarde's theory of imitation, Weber explicitly discusses two authors who placed "reactive behaviour, that is, behaviour unrelated to a subjectively intended meaning" (Weber 2019, 79) at the centre of their social psychological and sociological analyses. In this context, Weber states that instances "of mass determination and of imitation, are fluid and borderline cases of social action" (Weber 2019, 101). Although Weber recognises this research as a legitimate object of observation alongside social action, it remains only a borderline case of legitimate sociology. However, Weber goes even further in the course of his discussion with the deconstruction of the primacy of social action when he ultimately declares it to be only the field of interest of his own sociology: "sociology is not only concerned with 'social action,' for the sociology pursued here is simply its central referent, what could be said to be constitutive for it as a science. But this is to say nothing about the importance of this referent as compared with that of others" (Weber 2019, 101). Strictly speaking, with traditional and affective action, Weber even considers types of action that could also be described as "behaviour unrelated to a subjectively intended meaning" (Bongaerts 2007, 252). Moreover, Weber is well aware that such forms of behaviour should de jure form the object of sociological observation, simply because they occur de facto in social reality.

Agents engage in real action for the most part in a dreadingly half-aware condition, perhaps entirely unaware of its 'intended meaning.' The actor 'senses'

meaning more indefinitely than consciously or positively acknowledges it, and generally acts by instinct or habit. (Weber 2019, 98)

In view of the ubiquity of their occurrence, however, the question arises all the more as to why such behaviour is not adequately considered in Weber's sociological theory. However, if Weber at least did not completely exclude other forms of social relations (both theoretically and empirically), then his influence as a classic of sociology has in many respects helped to shape the fundamentally actionist orientation of sociology. This exclusion is fully developed, for example, among representatives of interaction theory. They are almost exclusively interested in those forms of action that are orientated towards a subjectively intended meaning.

INTERACTION-THEORETICAL BLOCKAGES

George Herbert Mead's interaction theory plays a prominent role in this context. Not only did he develop a prototypical theory of interaction, he also proved to be a particularly harsh critic of sociological approaches that sought to focus on passive behaviour as an analytical category. Historically and conceptually, Mead's theory of role-taking cannot be understood without differentiating it from Gabriel Tarde's theory of passive imitation (Leys 1993, 287). He developed his theory of reciprocal role-taking explicitly in opposition to Tarde's theory. Like Weber before him, Mead categorically places the interaction of imitating actors in Tarde's work in the same category as Gustave Le Bon's mass behaviour, in the category of specific behaviour within a pre-individual mass, of behaviour without a self. Strictly speaking, and this is the crucial point here, these forms of behaviour are a pre-social formation—and therefore not a subject of sociology. Behaviour that is not filled with subjective meaning is considered pre-social or non-social. This is where the actionist logocentrism of sociological theory is fully developed. Mead's own concept of role-taking then forms the conceptual antithesis to pure behaviour: Sociality is formed on the basis of interpersonal interactions of self-aware, reflexively behaving subjects. Thus, for Mead, role-taking serves not only to empathise with and recognise the other, but also to form and recognise the self. If imitation was understood by authors such as Tarde and Simmel as a vehicle for the dissemination of social behaviour (e.g., in fashion)—and thus as a deeply socialising matter—then for Mead such social relationships primarily serve the process of individualisation.

Socialisation then does not take place by adopting the behaviour of others; imitative behaviour (role-taking) is designed in such a way that the subjectivity formed in the process is produced as a normalised one. By observing myself from the perspective of the other, I get to know myself anew, namely as an objective and normalised self: “when we put ourselves in the attitude of another, we direct our attention upon ourselves as a normal object” (Mead 1982, 72). For Mead, every form of imitation is not only the adoption of the perspective of the other, but also the performative production of a normalised self. If Mead distinguishes his concept of role-taking from other forms of imitation, such as pure empathy and sympathy, and emphasises its rational and reflexive character, it is because he is concerned with the social construction of a reflexive self in the sense of the enlightenment. Instead of empathy and empathy for others, he is concerned with an “intelligent sympathy” (Mead 1982, 93). In contrast to Le Bon and Tarde, Mead sees this reflexive form of imitation, the conscious and active imitation of the other self, as the central mechanism of sociality. In contrast, Mead claims, “[s]imple suffering with another is comparatively unimportant” (Mead 1982, 93).

Beyond imitation as subjectivation, interaction theory develops two further central theoretical strands, a general rationalism that, depending on the theoretical position, can also be thoroughly irrational, for example, as bounded rationality. And second, it immunises itself normatively by identifying the theoretical approaches advocated by Tarde and Le Bon as a counter-enlightenment slide into irrationalism. As Ruth Leys has shown in her extensive critique of Tarde’s theory of imitation, this hostility is primarily “ethico-political” (Leys 1993, 296). Such a sociology develops the same aversion to mass phenomena as it has to the passive and pre-reflective behaviour of individuals. The modern subject has to be an active and reflective subject! The ethical reservations about the theories of imitation, on the other hand, stem from the famous fear of the triggered masses—the mob. In this understanding, the actors imitating each other fall back into a pre-reflective state of nature and display downright antisocial behaviour. For sociology, the masses are antisocial, mad or criminal (Moscovici 1985, 71; Borch 2012, 271). This reveals the conceit of sociology, namely that it identifies such forms of sociality, such social relationships—such as mass gatherings, unreflected forms of imitation, of passive behaviour—as non-social phenomena. It thus excludes behaviour that not only Le Bon and Tarde say is *de facto* the dominant form of social

relations, but which, as we have seen, Weber also described as real social phenomenon.

The normativity of interaction research is based not only on a contempt for the masses (Sloterdijk 2009) but also on an aversion to pre-reflective social relationships and a preference for rationalistically based individual behaviour. If this cannot be found in empirical reality, then it is simply conceptually assumed. Thus, even routinised, habitualised and typified behaviour is often reinterpreted as intentional and conscious decision-making, that is, as a conscious decision for traditional action, for behaviour that has already proven successful in previous contexts (Berger 1991, 71).

In terms of theory strategy, these approaches operate with the mechanism of appropriative reversal by reinterpreting empirical phenomena that quite obviously contradict their own theoretical assumptions (irrationality, passivity) as their opposite (rationality, activity): A “conduct that might be construed as ... automatic or as an obligatory response to inflexible and traditional demands, can be recast as a rational decision voluntarily taken in regard to defined alternatives” (Goffman 1967, 171). If rational choice theory tends to reinterpret every form of social behaviour without exception as rational behaviour (e.g., as bounded rationality) in order to make it methodologically operationalisable, then interaction research operates in a similar way with regard to the question of passive behaviour. The social is then seen as a “continuous flow of activity” (Hirschauer 2016, 47, my translation). In this way, even the most passive or pseudo-activist forms of behaviour are reinterpreted in interactionist terms and thus made operationalisable.

As its name suggests, such behavioural research suffers from an aversion to any form of passivity and an unreflected tendency towards actionism. This tendency is also evident in interactionist reinterpretations. Stefan Hirschauer’s analysis of a shared lift journey is an example of this. Such a situation poses major problems for interaction theorists. For interaction theory, sociality presupposes interaction, but in a shared lift ride—an interpassive situation par excellence—all communication and interaction is suspended: you leave the activity to the lift. In terms of theoretical strategy, Hirschauer now uses the strategy of appropriative reversal familiar from rational choice theory, that is, in this case, simply declaring the passive to be the active. Hirschauer thus describes the interpassive situation of a shared lift journey as a problem that must be actively solved: “What must be done to ensure that nothing social happens?” (Hirschauer 1999, 221,

my translation). He thus describes this situation in actionist terms. Hirschauer insists that the lift should not be thought of as an “asocial space”. The assumption here is that a lack of individual action leads to a lack of sociality. Hirschauer focuses our attention on “behaviour in lifts” (Hirschauer 1999, 221), for example, on how we specifically avoid eye contact, ensure distance from other passengers, etc. He thus understands behaviour, quite contrary to Weberian sociology, as a social action or, strictly speaking, as an interaction between human actors. However, Hirschauer also opposes an “actionist concept of behaviour”, but is not referring to interaction theory as much as rational choice theory (Hirschauer 1999, 228). Riding the lift together cannot be explained rationalistically, also because it is based on collective decisions, which certainly means intersubjective judgements (Hirschauer 1999, 227). But I don’t think it can be explained in terms of interaction theory either. One has to ask why passive behaviour—actions that are not carried out—is not mentioned in this study. As a rule, people avoid talking, touching and other forms of interaction in lifts. And these avoidances are not active actions, but precisely their suspension. Those who do nothing, do not act! And why does the actor who is the only one active in this situation—the lift—only appear in this study in the imagination of the human actors, but not as an actor? Doesn’t all social activity in this situation emanate from the lift? In this study, the lift is only the object of the imagination and the recipient of orders, to which tasks are delegated (Hirschauer 1999, 228). It is part of the social immanence in which every action is embedded and from which it emerges. But if this is the case, aren’t the people in the lift better described as passors—my clumsy attempt to spell out the passive equivalent of actors—as passors who are suspending their activities? Instead of interacting, you occupy yourself with other things: thinking, listening to music, etc. If you are drawn into an interaction, for example, through small talk, this may even be perceived as a disruption and nuisance. In contrast, in interaction theory, joint waiting can be anything—control, management, distancing, withdrawal—it can be described as any form of activity, but never as what it obviously is, passive behaviour in interpassive situations.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to point out that the actionist bias can also be found in actor–network theory. Even if actor–network theory (ANT) has developed a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the actor concept in its own name over the course of its career, it undoubtedly has the same actionist bias as the approaches mentioned so far: “every

entity, including the self, society, nature, every relation, every action, can be understood as a ‘choice’ or a ‘selection’ of finer and finer embranchments going from abstract structure—actants—to concrete ones—actors” (Latour 1996, 373).

In the following, I would therefore like to develop a theory of interpassivity that allows the passive moments of social life to regain their sociological right. It is by no means a question of replacing activity with passivity, even if the following intensive advocacy of passivity, interpassivity and passors may occasionally give this impression.

FROM INTERACTIVITY TO INTERPASSIVITY

Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde have probably presented the most radical social and sociological theories in which sociality does not emerge from the activities of (human or non-human) actors. Rather, for them, sociality precedes activity. At the same time, they have presented more realistic theories for understanding the social. For human activities are part, but not the constitutive mechanism of the social, and certainly not the meaningful activities. This also applies regardless of whether action and interaction theories view actions as rational, non-rational or irrational, whether it only claims to present heuristic models and generally makes no claims to adequacy theory. This is because by focusing solely on activities, it deals empirically at best with the remote, and at worst with illusory problems. The significance and prevalence of passivity and interpassivity is much greater than one might think (Tarde 1962, 94).

If sociologists such as Weber and Mead consider active and reflexive imitation to be the central category of sociality and passive and unconscious imitation to be relatively unimportant in comparison, then authors such as Le Bon, Simmel and Tarde point to the fact that Weber already conceded, that real social relationships are predominantly unconscious and passive: “The substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age” (Le Bon 2001, iii). Tarde illustrates the dominance of unconscious action with an empirical example, namely the fact that passive consumption is much more widespread than active production

It is consequently surprising to find that when a whole people are charmed into wearing certain stuffs and jewels, and into living in houses which are built on certain plans, no member of the community is inspired with a lively

desire to produce these stuffs and jewels and houses. So imitative is man, in general, and so passive besides, in his manner of imitating. (Tarde 1962, 330)

Tarde's sociology of imitation will therefore supplement the theory of interactivity with a theory of interpassivity. The concept of "passive imitation" (Tarde 1962, 97) or "imitative passivity" (Tarde 1962, 333), which is seen as the original sociality, is the counterpart to interaction theory: a theory of interpassion.

However, before I go into the theory of interpassivity and its position in Tarde's theory of imitation in more detail, I would like to point out that various concepts of passivity and interpassivity have been worked on in recent years in the context of an aesthetic theory. In the following, I will briefly present these and, in an initial sketch, distinguish them from a Tardian theory of interpassivity.

INTERPASSIVITY AS DELEGATION AND DIALECTICS

An aesthetic theory of interpassivity has been developed in recent years by Robert Pfaller, Slavoj Žižek and others. It primarily refers to a theory of "delegated enjoyment" (Pfaller 2000, 2002, 2007, 2008). As Robert Feustel and colleagues explain in the introduction to their anthology *We have never been active (Wir sind nie aktiv gewesen)* (Feustel et al. 2011a), this theory of interpassivity has been developed from a critique of the "hype surrounding the interactivity of art in the 1990s" (Feustel et al. 2011b, 7, my translation). The aesthetic theory of interpassivity operates on the basis of Althusser's scepticism towards the idea that "the active is better than the passive" (Feustel et al. 2011b, 11).

In contrast to interactivity, which expects permanent engagement from the viewer, interpassivity is a concept of self-referentiality, for example, "a work of art that observes itself" (Pfaller 2008, 148, my translation). However, this is not just an aesthetic characteristic, but "an extremely widespread cultural phenomenon", namely the delegation of enjoyment and consumption: "There are a lot of people who not only do not want to laugh, but who also flee other pleasures and seek to delegate them (such as the vicarious use of the video recorder, which saves the film buff from having to watch the film)" (Pfaller 2008, 148). The sociality here is a mediated one, that is, instead of interacting, one delegates the action to a third party: "If, for example, someone has a dog that eats his biscuits on his behalf, then he uses the dog as an interpassive medium" (Pfaller 2008,

148–9). As a theory of the delegation of enjoyment, the aesthetic theory of interpassivity is also a manifesto for passivity, a theory of “silent participation” in which the more passive the participants are, the more they benefit (Pfaller 2008, 25). Slavoj Žižek, for example, interprets the canned (‘fake’) laughter in television comedies not only as a cue for the audience to laugh, but also as a source of unburdening, allowing viewers to relax without feeling the need to laugh themselves (Žižek 2002).

However, this approach is not about social relations between two passors, but about delegation, that is, a shift in activity; the actor becomes an “interpassive medium” (Pfaller 2008, 30). Interpassivity is thus understood here as a triadic structure in which actions are delegated to third parties, for example, to the biscuit-eating dog, to a proxy (Wagner 2011) or to a scapegoat (Binder-Reisinger 2011). It is somewhat surprising that the mediated form of activity is not noticed, especially with regard to delegation; delegation is not passivity but another form of activity. Seen in this light, this theory of interpassivity has great similarities with Hegel’s dialectic of master and servant. The dialectic of master and servant is nothing other than the productivist counterpart to Pfaller’s consumerist delegation thesis. If for Hegel the servant is the medium of production that stands as an active mediator between nature and master, then the interpassive relationship of delegation is merely the equivalent on the side of consumption; the servant is the “medium of consumption” (Pfaller 2008, 12). While the master consumes without working, Pfaller’s delegator produces (e.g., biscuits) without consuming. The activity is passed on, but not postponed; it continues to underlie social relationships as a central mechanism. One delegates its maintenance to others just as Hegel’s master delegates its production to his/her servant. Interpassivity as delegation obviously implies a constellation of power—one must be able to afford to pass on the activity of consumption, even if this other is only a dog that has to eat the biscuits.

The aesthetic theory of interpassivity shares this form of indirect actionism with many approaches that seem to be in favour of the passive elements of the social. This can also be seen in the theory of the passive, which was developed following the work of Walter Benjamin. This approach is concerned with “depotentiation”, a “passivity”, the “thinking of a standstill” (Sieber 2014). As with the theory of interpassive delegation, this involves dialectical thinking. And it is this dialectical thinking that does not allow passivity to come into its own. This tendency has already been criticised in Hegel’s dialectic. In Hegel, difference is

subordinated to unity; a unity of unity and difference. However, the difference, the difference itself, is not recognised as independent (Deleuze 1994). Similarly, in the dialectical theory of passivity, the passive is not given its due; rather, but is subordinated to activity. It is a dependent and secondary variable: “activation through passivation” (Sieber 2014).

In the following, I would like to take up the concepts of passivity and interpassivity, even if this approach is accompanied by considerable transformations. I am neither making a plea in favour of passivity nor deconstructing the difference between activity and passivity, between the individual and society, as is central to Feustel and colleagues (Feustel et al. 2011b, 9). Rather, it is about a new sorting and thus the renewed production of differences within a relational schema of activity and passivity (Seyfert 2019). In this context, Gabriel Tarde provides fundamental social theoretical considerations that differ significantly from the theory of interpassive delegation. Here, interpassivity does not stand for delegation, but for passive imitation. It is not so much about delegation to third parties—avoiding direct interaction—but about passive relations between two actors, or, to be more precise, between two passors.

INTERPASSIVITY AS PASSIVE IMITATION

In order to develop a passive theory of interpassivity, I will draw on Tarde’s sociology of imitative passivity. I have already shown why it can be helpful to undertake this reconstruction comparatively, which particularly makes sense because Tarde himself has already developed his theory in contrast to other sociological approaches (to a significant extent to Durkheim’s theory).¹ I pointed out that the entire theory of action has always been constructed in opposition to Tarde’s theory of imitation (and Gustave Le Bon’s mass psychology). This can be found prominently in Max Weber and his aforementioned distinction between action or social action and

¹It is known that Durkheim was in theoretical competition with Tarde, although it must be pointed out that the reception rarely distinguishes between theoretical politics and theoretical difference. The re-staging of the competition between Durkheim and Tarde, obsessively pursued by Bruno Latour (Vargas et al. 2008), obscures the fact that Durkheim’s entire late theory of religion (which, significantly, only emerged after Tarde’s death) bears the traits of a theory of imitation: “we must act; and so we must repeat the necessary acts as often as is necessary to renew their effects. From this standpoint, it becomes apparent that the set of regularly repeated actions that make up the cult regains all its importance” (Durkheim 1995, 420).

behaviour. I also pointed out that this tendency is only implied in Weber, not fully developed. However, it is fully developed by representatives of interaction theory, such as Mead. They are almost exclusively interested in those forms of action that are oriented towards a reflexive and intentional subjectivity. The critical reception is characterised by a normative fear of the triggered mob and a preference for rational and reflexive behaviour. Additionally, there are normative assumptions about what should be considered sociality, namely only the activity of reflexive and intentional subjects. However, it is precisely this implicit conceit against unconscious behaviour that alternative interpretations and promising applications of Tarde's sociology are given away.

As already mentioned, this central position of passive imitation in Tarde's work has led interpreters such as Mead to erroneously understand imitation theory as a purely mass theory. Conversely, other authors have completely overlooked the central importance of this concept, as evidenced, for example, by Alfred Vierkandt's assessment that Tarde's theory of imitation is a "pronounced individualism" (Vierkandt 1899, 571), Steven Luke's classification of Tarde as "methodological individualist" (Lukes 1973, 303) or Seth Abrutyn and Anna S. Mueller's identification of Tarde as symbolic interactionist (Abrutyn and Mueller 2014). The diversity and contradictory nature of Tarde's interpretations is inherent in the complexity of imitation theory itself. Many authors tend to generalise a specific aspect of imitation as a universal principle. Indeed, based on the concept of imitation, Tarde develops both a mass theory (Borch 2009; Stäheli 2009, 2015) and a theory of purely individual self-relations and even a theory of interaction (Papilloud 2009).

In addition, however, he also includes a theory of passive imitation that has not yet been acknowledged, which I would like to call a theory of interpassivity. Interpassivity differs from active imitation and massification in that it does not refer to self-relations, mass relations or interaction relations, but rather explicitly to passive practices. Interpassivity is passive behaviour within social relationships (i.e., which are not interactions and therefore not produced by activities). For example, the central characteristic of various group members can be the suspension of any activity, that is, avoiding any form of activity, action, selection, etc. In this case, social relationships are made possible, established and maintained precisely by doing nothing.

IMITATION, COUNTER-IMITATION, NON-IMITATION

In *The Laws of Imitation*, Tarde develops a theory of universal repetition, which defines each area of reality through a specific form of repetition. This also involves a concept of dissemination (of ideas, images, behaviour, etc.) that simultaneously guarantees similarity and deviation. Tarde conceptually distinguishes three main forms of repetition; the physical propagation of waves, biological inheritance and social imitation. As a sociologist, he is particularly interested in the social form of repetition, which he in turn breaks down into various sub-forms. Tarde's concept of social imitation contains an infinite number of specifications, and classifications that encompass even what at first glance appears to be the exact opposite of imitation: counter-imitation, non-imitation, opposition, etc. In *L'opposition universelle*, for example, Tarde discusses a myriad of forms of opposition that contain symmetries, rhythms and polarities (Tarde 1897).

Tarde's concept of imitation aims to address two problems. First, it avoids assuming atomised individuals who create sociality through mutual imitation, and, second, it also avoids assuming a completely conformist society where all individuals behave identically. As Konrad Thomas has demonstrated, this theoretical conception allows for a great deal of flexibility.

It is obvious that this approach has an important anthropological advantage: it does not need to assume a natural similarity, a predetermined sameness. It leaves concrete individuality, we can also say natural-contingent individuality, for what it is. The second advantage is that in a fundamental sense it thinks historically and processually. Imitation is always a process that has a precursor. (Thomas 1983, 63, my translation)

This flexibility even goes beyond the purely anthropological and allows for processes of imitation—which are both similarisations and differentiations—to be extended to non-human and more-than-human spheres, such as abstract assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 2005).

This is accompanied by fundamental changes in social theory. The social or social relationships do not have to be produced (activist obsession), as the collective rays of imitation form the social immanence. However, reflexive actions and meaningful social relationships—interactions—which can be identified as their special forms are still distinct from this. Furthermore, imitations can in principle be both active and passive.

This is illustrated by the case of non-imitation and counter-imitation. Counter-imitation—“doing or saying the exact opposite”—is actively pursued by the imitator and leads to the actors becoming more similar rather than more different (Tarde 1962, xvii).

Now, one must not confuse “counter-imitation with systematic non-imitation”, which is “not always a simple negative fact” (Tarde 1962, xix). While counter-imitation actively does exactly the opposite, non-imitation has an active and a passive form. On the one hand, as the absence of any social relation, it is a passive relation in the conventional sense of the word; it is “a non-social relation” (Tarde 1962, xix). Beyond that, however, non-imitation can be much more active and thus a social practice, namely as the wilful refusal to imitate, in which case it is an “anti-social relation” (Tarde 1962, xix):

The refusal of a people, a class, a town or a village ... to copy the dress, customs, language, industry, and arts which make up the civilisation of their neighbourhood is a continual declaration of antipathy to the form of society in question. It is thereby declared absolutely and forever alien. (Tarde 1962, xix)

Non-imitation therefore has a passive and an active character; it is active when it consciously refuses to imitate, and it is passive when it practically does not imitate. Tarde’s concept of imitation not only explains the creation of social similarity between individuals but also their heterogeneity (Tarde 1962, xix). Ferdinand Tönnies, for example, overlooks this when he sees Tarde’s concept of imitation merely as a mechanism for producing similarity and misses the emergence of the particular (Tönnies 1929, 187–8). Tarde’s concept of imitation is not simply a sociology of “little monkeys” (Tönnies 1929, 182) or “ape-like” behaviour, as Durkheim accuses him of in his chapter “Imitation” in *The Suicide* (Durkheim 2005, 76). If it is a matter of imitation, then it is not pure copying, but a differential repetition. Strictly speaking, the idea or desire of imitation must be distinguished from its practice. In fact, Tarde even uses the notion of aping himself, but emphasises: “This body of simian proclivities constitutes the potential energy of a society” (Tarde 1962, 107). The emphasis here is on desire and potentiality, which are to be distinguished from actual imitation in practice. What we want to imitate is not identical with what we then actually imitate: “Successful imitations are numerous indeed, but how few they are in comparison with those which are still unrealised

objects of desire!” (Tarde 1962, 107). Durkheim’s accusation against Tarde’s “mechanical, ape-like repetition [of an] automatic reflex” (Durkheim 2005, 79) overlooks the difference between virtual imitation (desire) and actual or real imitation. Only in the unconscious wish is imitation an imitation; de facto and practically, imitation for Tarde is a non-identical repetition, a “differential and differentiating repetition” (Deleuze 1994, 308). Every “repetition necessarily generates differences, which precludes repetition without variation” (Stäheli 2015, 193, my translation).

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL LAWS

Contrary to Bruno Latour’s assertion, Tarde’s theory is not an approach that proclaims the end of the social (Latour 2002). On the contrary, Tarde defines the social and distinguishes it clearly from other spheres. He not only distinguishes it from wave motion in physics, but also criticises the approaches that seek to extend the concept of biological inheritance to sociology (Tarde 1962, xv). Not only does Tarde not speak of the end of the social, he is also not to be confused with the theorists of the end of society, he even has a quite specific definition of society: “Let us say, then ... that a society is a group of people who display many resemblances produced either by imitation or by counter-imitation” (Tarde 1962, xvii).

The social is now defined by two limit-concepts; the collective mass and pure individuality. On the one hand, the mass where individuals imitate each other completely unconsciously without further reflection, and on the other, the awake, reflective subject that delays imitation. The purely individual action of conscious subjects tends to be pre-social and action in the masses is the purest sociality. Within this imitative continuum of mass and individual, of passive imitation and reflection, Tarde locates individuality (the inner psychology of self-imitation) and active, alert social relationships of interactivity (Papilloud 2009). Concept of interaction is the mediating mechanism of reflective subjects and their attempt to re-establish social relationships where they have interrupted unconscious imitation (e.g., through inventions). We can see, however, that even in the context of inventions, the suspension of rays of imitation is much more important than the actual act of inventing the new. And as we shall see, even invention is much more often passive imitation than the act of a lone genius.

Within the various forms of imitation, Tarde distinguishes between social and psychological forms. On the one hand, the psychological and the social are de facto of the same origin, that is, they cannot be derived

from each other: “The psychological is explained by the social just because the social sprang from the psychological” (Tarde 1962, xiv, fn. 1). On the other hand, the psychological in its pure form (as self-imitation in memories and habits) tends to be *de jure* extra-social, “an unconscious imitation of self by self. There is, evidently, nothing social in this ... It is another case of non-social, or, as I might better say, of presocial or subsocial self-imitation” (Tarde 1962, 75).

In this respect, Tarde’s social psychology refers to interpsychological and not to intrapsychological relationships; social facts are based on interpsychological relationships as they manifest themselves in imitation practices, whereas intrapsychological facts are pure self-imitations. In contrast to interaction research, for example, Mead’s, the sphere of the self for Tarde is the sphere of pure logic, of pure psychology. If the social is pre-individual, it is because it does not follow the rules of logic and the reflections of the self, and if the pure individual is pre-social, it is because the logic and reflexivity of the individual—its considerations and deliberations—hinder the expansion of the social; they interfere with the unimpeded course of imitations. According to Tarde, one then has two options; either to act alogically, or to follow the laws of pure logic and act non-socially.

Being social means thinking and acting irrationally and illogically, because the individual allows himself to be determined much more by the views and complexes of ideas from different epochs, which often contradict each other, by the random inspirations and changing moods of the whole than by the dictates of consistency and expediency. (Vierkandt 1899, 569, my translation)

Thus, individuality can be heuristically deduced from pure sociality from the type of imitation. Self-imitations can be both individual and social, depending on whether the self-imitation has its model in an individual experience or the observation of others. In contrast to pure self-imitation (of one’s own idea or habit), self-imitation is social “if the remembered idea or image was originally lodged in the mind through conversation or reading, if the habitual act originated in the view or knowledge of a similar act on the part of others” (Tarde 1962, 75).

It is obvious that purely individual and social self-imitation are factually and empirically indistinguishable, because every own idea can in fact be an illusion and thus an unconscious imitation and therefore a social self-imitation. All in all, the purely individual—the psychological—is merely a

heuristic limit-concept that has no independent reality. It has no independent reality for the very reason that even self-imitation is an imitation and is therefore in principle subject to social laws.

REPUTATION AND ATTRACTION

In addition to pure inactivity, passivity can also refer to letting things pass. For Gabriel Tarde, passive power represents the central mechanism of the social and for him society is an event of day dreamers: “The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action” (Tarde 1962, 77). Tarde also uses the term “magnetisation” (Tarde 1962, 82–3), “hypnotic suggestion” (Tarde 1962, 199, fn. 1) and “sommambulism”: “Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism” (Tarde 1962, 87).

It is obvious that terms such as somnambulism, magnetism and hypnosis have a specific age, Tarde calls them “old-fashioned term[s]” (Tarde 1962, 76, fn. 2) (*ibid.*, 97, fn. 31). A theoretical-historical contextualisation of Tarde’s vocabulary has occasionally been called for, a contextualisation that ultimately aims to problematise theoretical concepts and is implicitly linked to the call for a critical distancing from Tarde (Leys 1993, 281). However, reading Tarde suggests that he did not simply adopt contemporary theoretical constructions, but rather reworked an already existing concept for his own theory. This method of theorising can already be found in the explanations of the concept of imitation. According to Tarde, a theorist “must choose a neologism, if he is put to it, or he must decide, and this is unquestionably better, to stretch the meaning of some old term” (Tarde 1962, xiii). As a theorist of imitation, Tarde cannot see himself *per se* as the inventor of new theories. At the same time, however, he does not see himself as an adept of a theoretical context, but as an author whose approach to theoretical concepts is always differential repetition. They generate deviations. In this respect, terms such as somnambulism, magnetism and hypnotism are always to be understood as concepts that gain a new meaning in Tarde’s theory.

Tarde’s theory is directed against various alternatives, the most prominent of which is Durkheim’s idea that social facts have an obligatory character: “[S]ocial somnambulism ... is not brought about through fear or the power of conquest, but through admiration and a sense of brilliant and irksome superiority” (Tarde 1962, 85). But Tarde also criticises the idea of a Hobbesian social contract, which comes about against a background of

fear, or a Nietzschean priestly deception, through which the population is deceived. Rather, there is something in societies that could be described, in the terminology of Tarde, as attractive vanguards. These vanguards are not Machiavellian princes, but attractive authorities: “Did they rule through terror and imposture, as alleged? This explanation is obviously inadequate. They ruled through their prestige” (Tarde 1962, 78).

The concept of reputation specifies the general dyadic structure of imitation, in which two social individuals are in a one-sided relationship. The central mechanism of the social is the “one-sided, passive imitation of the somnambulist” (Tarde 1962, 78). The imitative movement always proceeds “ab interioribus ad exteriora” (Tarde 1962, 204). For Tarde, this exterior of the somnambulist is the hypnotist or magnetiser, who allows sociality to arise not through coercion but through attraction. We imitate because the hypnotist enjoys our respect: “The magnetiser does not need to lie or terrorise to secure the blind belief and the passive obedience of his magnetised subject. He has prestige—that tells the story” (Tarde 1962, 78).

However, the description of social life as social relationships between magnetisers and magnetised people, between hypnotisers and hypnotised people, could give rise to misunderstandings, as the choice of words suggests that there is a conscious exercise of power on the one hand and a state of pure submission on the other—pure activity versus pure passivity. Sociality would then be the encounter of an awake actor with a dreaming passor. And then Tarde would be more of a theorist of the charismatic leader in the sense of Freud (2007) and Weber (2019, 374–8).

For Tarde, however, imitation is fundamentally general, that is, all-encompassing, as he defines sociality through “imitative quiescence of the social being” (Tarde 1962, 79) or the “imitative passivity of mankind” (Tarde 1962, 333). Society and social life are first and foremost multiplicities of imitative rays. Behind the dyadic structure of imitation, thus, lies a triadic social theory, because an imitation only becomes a ray of imitation when at least three actors are involved: “Suppose a somnambulist should imitate his medium to the point of becoming a medium himself and magnetising a third person, who, in turn, would imitate him, and so on, indefinitely” (Tarde 1962, 84).

PASSIVE INVENTIONS AND SELECTIONS

Two quasi-active aspects can be distinguished in passive imitation. The most obvious aspect is what sociology has termed unburdening. According to Tarde, interpassivity allows the passor “to escape the trouble of inventing for themselves” (Tarde 1899, 63). However, this does not turn passors into completely uncreative automatons, because every imitation is by definition an invention.

Here we encounter the twofold existence of invention, which may be confusing as inventions are attributed to both the deeds of great men and geniuses, as well as originating from the sphere of pure individuality and pure psychology: “To innovate, to discover, to awake for an instant from his dream of home and country, the individual must escape, for the time being, from his social surroundings. Such unusual audacity makes him super-social rather than social” (Tarde 1962, 87–8). From this perspective, a pure sociology would only be identical imitation and changes would be introduced from outside, from pre-social individuals. On the other hand, every repetition should produce deviations, which Tarde understands as a source of creativity. This form of invention would now be profoundly social. According to Tarde, invention exists in two forms: first, as a conscious act that requires the initiation of a ray of imitation and active interactions, and second, as the effect of unconscious imitation, which is inventive in itself through the introduction of a deviation.

This seeming contradiction is solved insofar as Tarde does not attach great importance to the contributions of the great men. For Tarde, the theory of unconscious deviation tends to replace the theory of great men when points out that “writers have frequently made the mistake of speaking of great men when they should have spoken of great ideas, which often appear in very unimportant men, or of the trivial ideas and infinitesimal innovations contributed by each of us to the common work” (Tarde 1899, 188). Inventions in unconscious imitations are then interpassive inventions—small deviations, pure coincidences—whereas individual inventions are interactive, that is, require the suspension of an old and the initiation of a new ray of imitation. Imitation is therefore already creative in its unconscious and passive form. Jean Marie Guyau, an avid reader of Tarde, aptly described unconscious imitation as the transition from the copy to the original for imitations in art: “imitation in general tends to become a creation and fiction tends to disappear into life” (Guyau 1884, 36, my translation). Passive imitation could lead to genuine new creations

without the passors even realising it. Precisely because unconscious imitation is unburdening, it enables “an epidemic disposition to welcome foreign novelties” (Tarde 1962, 261).

The unburdened passors do not become mere consumers. Instead, they passively immerse themselves in a new context. Passive imitation is a specific mechanism for allowing oneself to be affected by a new environment: “In this singular condition of intensely concentrated attention, of passive and vivid imagination, these stupefied and fevered beings inevitably yield themselves to the magical charm of their new environment” (Tarde 1962, 84).

Passive imitation not only serves the unburdening function of increasing attention but also involves selection. Passors do not imitate everything possible but rather one or more specific aspects due to the one-sidedness of imitation. The role of active selection in unconscious imitations is especially important in complex urban environments. While cities offer an ideal type of sociality due to their speed and abundance of suggestions, they also require individuals to constantly choose between specific imitation patterns or to suspend imitation altogether. This will be further discussed in relation to imitation in complex societies.

EMOTIONAL ADAPTATION AND AFFECTIVE FITTING²

Unburdening, increased attention and selection also make passive imitation distinguishable from non-everyday forms of affective imitation, such as Émile Durkheim’s collective effervescence. Collective effervescence is a mechanism for generating collective cohesion. It involves the intensification and mobilisation of emotional energy, which requires extraordinary events. As Durkheim notes, in moments of collective effervescence, “people live differently and more intensely than in normal times” (Durkheim 1995, 213). Following Durkheim, Randall Collins has worked out the special affective dynamics of such social relationships. In Collins’ anthropology, the actors are emotion junkies who are driven by a search for emotional energy. They find this in interactions with the help of shared attention and joint emotional adjustment (entrainment): “Emotional energy is what individuals seek; situations are attractive or unattractive to them to the extent that the interaction ritual is successful in providing emotional energy” (Collins 2005, 44). In this respect, ritual interactions

²Adaptation (Anpassung) vs. Fitting (Einpassung), see also Uexküll (1957).

primarily serve to procure a supply of emotional energy. Tarde has also dealt with such more intensive forms of mass imitation (Stäheli 2015). In *L'opinion et la foule*, he had an almost Durkheimian moment, as it contains a depiction of the mass that is very similar to the collective effervescence. Here he points to a commendable social function of the mass, “the festive crowd, the crowd of joy, the crowd in love with itself, drunk only on the pleasure of coming together for the sake of coming together” (Tarde 1910, 45, my translation).

The euphoric masses are only of secondary interest in Tarde’s theory and at the centre of his theory of imitation is a kind of fitting in through unconscious imitation with affects of normalisation:

to be put at one’s ease in a given society is to adopt its manners and fashions, to speak its dialect, to copy its gestures, in short, to finally abandon one’s self unresistingly to the many surrounding currents of subtle influences against which one first struggled in vain, and to abandon one’s self so completely that all consciousness of this self-abandonment is lost. (Tarde 1962, 86)

The conceptual difference between emotional adaptation and affective fitting is also evident in the establishment of social relationships, which Collins conceptualises with Durkheim as chains of interaction and Tarde describes as rays of imitation. In comparison to the Durkheimian chains of interaction, which provide extra-ordinary affectivity, interpassivity is more of an everyday intensity. Here, there is no leaping of emotional sparks, but rather a slowly increasing stream of affective desire. Individuals who form rays of imitation do not interact. They are in interpassive relationships, simply because the difference that emerges in each imitation is no longer due to the activity of the actors, but to the natural deviation that occurs in the repetition. Although passors imitate what is attractive and has prestige, they do not do so solely in order to accumulate extra-ordinary affectivity.

As previously mentioned, Tarde’s theory of imitation does not propose that all active phenomena are passive; he avoids using an appropriative reversal. Rather, it is about a certain realism that takes the widespread prevalence of passive behaviour into account in a sociologically appropriate way. And so, Tarde finds forms of social imitation beyond passive imitation that suggest interactivity.

CONSCIOUS IMITATION, RECIPROCITY AND INTERACTIVITY

Not to have clearly distinguished passive imitation from this active and conscious imitation is a widespread phenomenon in the secondary literature, for example when Vierkandt criticises Tarde's one-sidedness of imitation and recommends Simmel's theory of society as a group of mutually influencing beings (Vierkandt 1899, 575). Tarde has placed the "the imitative quiescence of the social being" alongside reflexive and reciprocal imitation as a threshold "produced only in our so called waking life and among people who seem to exercise no magnetic influence over one another" (Tarde 1962, 79). Christian Papilloud, who has analysed Tarde's theory of interactivity carefully and in detail, points out that in Tarde's work a fundamental distinction must be made between "action" and "relation" (Papilloud 2009, 316). If actions tend to be individual and thus pre-social processes (Papilloud 2009, 318), then Tarde's concept of relation is reserved for pure sociality. "Activity, act and action" are always related first to the activities of the individual, but not to interpsychological relationships (Papilloud 2009, 316): *ab interioribus ad exteriora*.

Interactivity is an intermediate figure; it is the conscious and awake hypnosis, the specific moment that can actually be described as an active relationship, when someone attempts to introduce an invention or a novelty into the general imitation process. In fact, every awake and conscious activity is thus an obstacle to established imitations and the greatest obstacle to everyday rays of imitation consists in a new invention, that is, in the attempt to establish a new ray of imitation. Thus "invention, from which I derive everything that is social, is not, in my opinion, a purely social fact in its origin" (Tarde 1962, xxii). An invention interrupts the swarm of imitative rays; it interrupts the general interpassivity, destroys undisturbed sociality and has to mediate it again through interactions. Interaction is therefore, just like the waking state, a social state of emergency; it disrupts the rays of imitation that spread in regular patterns according to social laws, introduces competing or reinforcing imitations and does so only by suspending the relatively unhindered spread of an imitation between passive passors. Direct imitations are delayed by reflections, sociality becomes precarious and is fundamentally threatened. Sociality must be re-established strategically through interactions. Although interactivity can be seen in Tarde's work as a characteristic of modern societies, as a sign of urbanity, it does not become the dominant mode of social life. For Tarde, waking life remains an exceptional case in contrast to somnambulistic social life,

and the primacy of passive imitation explains why people believe they are awake and thus the origin of their own actions. Tarde states “[b]oth the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous” (Tarde 1962, 77). Wakefulness is therefore fundamentally a delicate matter, because even awakening and enlightenment can turn out to be a dream (Tarde 1962, 82–3). This refers not only to children, but also to enlightened and reflective adults, because the “[t]he alleged awakening is only a change or piling up of slumbers. In the substitution of fashion-magnetisation for custom-magnetisation, the usual symptom of incipient social revolution, we have an analogous, although magnified, phenomenon” (Tarde 1962, 83).

What Tarde calls active “mutual imitation” also falls into this realm of tendentially pre-social relationships. Awake, reflexive reciprocity is a fleeting moment, but one that brings the general interpassivity to light: “Since the somnambulist is for the time being deprived of this power of resistance, he can illustrate for us the imitative quiescence of the social being in so far as he is social, i. e., in so far as he has relations exclusively with his fellows and, especially, with one of his fellows” (Tarde 1962, 79).

Another special form and a kind of awake imitation is found in veneration, which Tarde distinguishes from the unconscious imitation of prestige. Passive obedience distinguishes prestige from conscious and intensive veneration as a one-sided, “polarised” social relationship. In her empirical study on veneration, Veronika Zink also pointed out the attractiveness and activity of “imitative practices”, in which the participants are by no means “passive consumers”, but actively venerate (Zink 2014, 80). Prestige denotes passive obedience, while veneration implies conscious respect. It is the medium of the rather shy and reserved, who naturally hesitate to imitate and therefore seek out role models whom they consciously honour (Tarde 1962, 86). Inventors strategically break the unconscious rays of imitation and try to introduce new ones; they are the creative destroyers. Shy venerators unconsciously disrupt sociality because they are too shy to imitate. They have to imitate quasi-consciously in order to be social. One of the forms of this quasi-conscious imitation is worship. But if there are imitating actors in veneration, then Tarde’s dream dancers are not actors but, strictly speaking, passors, those who allow something to pass in the double sense of the word.

I have already referred to the special form of imitation in metropolitan urban spaces. Tarde approaches social relationships within urban spaces in

an ambivalent way. The high density of people and opportunities for imitation creates a social space with high intensity. However, it also seems to produce a certain form of rational action in Tarde. This ambivalence is the subject of the concluding section on interpassivity.

URBAN IMITATION

With regard to complex societies, two seemingly contradictory tendencies can be recognised in Tarde's work. On the one hand, we have seen that reciprocal and conscious imitation in interactive relationships is an urban phenomenon. In classical theories of social differentiation, one would assume that this increased interactivity and reflexivity is accompanied by a decrease in unconscious and passive imitation. On the other hand, Tarde defines the city as an ideal type. A "perfect and absolute [form of sociality] would consist of such an intense concentration of urban life that as soon as a good idea arose in one mind it would be instantaneously transmitted to all minds throughout the city" (Tarde 1962, 70).

The emergence of urbanity and city life tends towards complete socialisation. As Tarde asks, "[I]s not city life a concentrated and exaggerated type of social life?" (Tarde 1962, 84) This concentration is due to the emergence of stratified chains of imitation, which make it more difficult to overcome. In this respect, complex societies are far from being reflexive or 'modern' societies. Strictly speaking, society's self-image as reflexive modernity is a phenomenon of the illusory spontaneity described by Tarde. Wakefulness is also a dream within a dream, an illusion of unconsciously imitating social scientists:

Civilised peoples flatter themselves with thinking that they have escaped from this dogmatic slumber. Their error can be explained. The oftener a person has been magnetised, the easier and quicker is it for him to be remagnetised. This fact shows us how it is that societies come to imitate one another with increasing ease and rapidity. As they become civilised and, consequently, more and more imitative, they also become less and less aware that they are imitating. In this particular, mankind is like the individual man. (Tarde 1962, 82)

Beyond the spread of interpassivity, Tarde also finds a transformation of passive imitation into an urban form of interpassivity. In addition to the

intensification of imitation, it consists of an increase in unconscious selections:

As the suggestions ... become more numerous and diversified around an individual, each of them loses in intensity, and the individual becomes freer to determine his choice Thus it is certain that the progress of civilisation renders subjection to imitation at once more personal and more rational. (Tarde 1962, 83)

The increase in urban rays of imitation and its interferences necessitates selection. In each specific field and case, only one specific thing can be imitated, such as a belief, hairstyle or style of dress. Urban social relationships now offer a greater number of role models to choose from, resulting in an ever-growing arsenal of options. Tarde speaks of the “interference of two imitative rays” (Tarde 1899, 101) when different ideas and forms of desire overlap. These overlaps and contrasts are pre-social because “the really fundamental social opposition must be sought for in the bosom of the social individual himself, whenever he hesitates between adopting or rejecting a new pattern offered him, whether in the way of phraseology, ritual, concept, canon of art, or conduct” (Tarde 1899, 83–4).

In such cases, “interference-combinations” or “interference-conflicts” between different beliefs and desires occur (Tarde 1962, 30). However, when faced with the choice between two imitations, it does not necessarily result in a competitive relationship or antagonism. Instead, they can coexist harmoniously or avoid competition altogether. As Tarde explains, “[s]trife is merely a coming together of harmonies; but this kind of encounter is not the only relation that exists between harmonies; their most common relation is agreement the production of a superior harmony” (Tarde 1899, 196).

For Tarde, however, modern life, which is functionally differentiated if you like, is not defined by the development of scope for individuality, as Durkheim believed. Rather, it represents a complex and dense tangle, an interweaving and overlapping of rays of imitation from which the passors must unconsciously choose.

This effect of complex societies—that passors increasingly have to choose between more extensive, more complex and contradictory rays of imitation—leads them to the limits of passive imitation, as it were, because selection involves a certain degree of reflexivity and rationality. The tendency of urban massification, which consists in the increase of unconscious

imitations, is thus seemingly accompanied by a kind of individual rationalism that arises with the increase in imitation offers and a compulsion to make a selection. However, this form of selection and reflection in Tarde's case cannot be compared with wakefulness, active invention or interactivity. And there is no individualism in urban relationships either, because individual choice and action is itself only part of other rays of imitation:

But even when imitation is voluntary and deliberate, even when we do and believe that which appears to be the most useful and the most believable thing, our acts and thoughts are predetermined. Our acts are what they are because they are the fittest to satisfy and develop the wants which previous imitation of other inventions had first seeded in us. (Tarde 1962, 94)

The individual benefit shown in the rational choice is nothing more than the benefit of those who were the first to make this choice. In modern societies, this is an unconscious selection that consists primarily in the rejection of alternatives. The possibility of transforming selection into pure rejection is made possible by the binarity of one-sided social relations. When faced with a choice between alternatives, only one possibility is rejected, “only two theses or judgments can be in opposition wherever this elementary fact occurs: the thesis or purpose of the individual-model and the thesis or purpose of the individual-copy” (Tarde 1962, 167). Selection pressure only occurs when the hypnotist's and the passor's rays of imitation conflict:

[A] question for societies, as for individuals, is a wavering between a given affirmation and a given negation, or between a given goal and a given impediment; and a solution ... is only the suppression of one of the two adversaries or of their inconsistency. (Tarde 1962, 156)

It can be seen that interpassivity is thus preserved in more complex social relationships. The intervention—the negation of imitation as opposed to the affirmation of another—relates solely to the perpetuation of interpassive relationships. Selection becomes non-imitation and suppresses rationality and reflexivity by operationally limiting itself to the negation of alternatives and thus ensuring the perpetuation of interpassive relations in urban social relations.

CONCLUSION

With Tarde, we can learn that reflexivity and individual meaning introduce time delays into reciprocal relationships. Social relationships are therefore at their most intense when they take place without reflection. In a way, this is the counter-model to Weber's intellectualist sociology. Tarde provides a sociologically profound insight that is often overlooked by sociological interaction research, namely that doing nothing and non-communication can also be social relationships or can be in social relationships. Such relationships can, like Tarde, be described as somnambulistic relationships.

And indeed, it can be assumed that the majority of social relationships function in this way. In contrast, every form of reflexive behaviour tends to interrupt and delay social relations, simply because socially constitutive reciprocity is delayed here. In this respect, Tarde can show that the reflexivity of social relations is external and, moreover, is itself fundamentally dependent on or based on passive imitation.

Passors do not decide, do not act, do not communicate, do not interact, but rather suspend decisions. They imitate in a passive way so that they keep connected with different, sometimes even contradictory role models. In other words, specific mechanisms are found to avoid making decisions. The purchase of evening shoes, for example, is both a decision and a commitment to wear these shoes only in the evening. Sneakers, on the other hand, are an expression of a suspended decision: you can always wear sneakers! Suspensions are not selections and decisions, instead they suspend opinions and decisions.

Tarde's theory of imitation shows that passivity and interpassivity is typical of urban areas in particular, where the opportunities for selection are constantly increasing. The greater the selection possibilities, the more likely we are to suspend decisions. In highly differentiated metropolitan contexts, keeping suspended behaviour in abeyance allows for reciprocal imitative behaviour that does not force us to make selections, but is nevertheless compatible with all possible expectations (for those who have expectations). In urban spaces, however, suspensions also create imitations that no longer correspond to the role model: after all, you don't have to wear sneakers for sport. The suspension of decisions can also explain other contemporary phenomena, such as the suspension of the definition of identity. It explains the increasing resistance to committing oneself to a cultural, ethical or gender identity. Instead of belonging to a culture, having a personal history, having a gender, etc., decisions are kept open.

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Which Sort of Relation Is a Reaction? Relational Sociology and Reaction Research

Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Lorenzo Sabetta

BEYOND VISCERAL COUNTER-ACTIONS

In a recent paper, we envisioned the category of reaction as a “strategic research material/site” (Merton 1987) for sociological analysis, and defined it rather minimally as “action that wouldn’t have occurred without someone else’s (previous or envisioned) action” (Brighenti and Sabetta 2025, 86). Elsewhere, we highlighted the connection between the concepts of reciprocity and reaction (Brighenti and Sabetta 2024). In this chapter, we seek to locate the notion of reaction more clearly within the premises of relational sociology. The attempt is to investigate what kind of relation a reaction is, and which advantages may derive to the relational approach from using and developing reaction as an additional analytical prism. Highly diverse testimonies—ranging, for example, from the

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_7

anthropology of vendetta in the Mediterranean (Peristiany 1965) to the history of warfare escalation (Bellamy [1990] 2015), from the moral sources of modern selfhood (Taylor 1989) to emotional episodes of transitional justice (Elster 2003), as well as from the spread of viral news on the social media (Al-Rawi 2019) to sport consumer response to the termination of a sponsorship (Delia 2017)—show that reactive formations play a nonneglectable, sometimes fateful role in social life. Reaction tends to effectively enchain actors into series of cascading events, out of which it can be quite difficult to backpedal: not unfrequently, reaction leads to spiraling orbits that intensify the social intercourse, with sometimes dire, even deadly outcomes (Gould 2000).

If there are practical reasons to study reaction, there is theoretical import, too. Far from any simple behavioristic determinism, reaction cannot be “explained away” as a mere response moment within the classic Stimulus-Response circuit conceptualized by behaviorism in the early twentieth century. To the contrary, an accurate understanding of reaction requires accounting for both the continuity *and* the discontinuity that exists between different social acts.¹ Reactivity defines a condition of “opening,” whereby the parties involved in social intercourses reveal some mutual “interest.”² Quite literally, “interest” is what lies in the space between people (*inter est*: “it is in between”). *A minima*, this means that the space of social interaction cannot be neutral, but always carries some stakes. Interest, in other words, forces one party to consider the other party, or parties, *under some respect or capacity*.³ This might, or might not, entail conscious or rational acts (Crabtree 2003; Retsikas 2010), indicating anyway how hard it is to get distracted from the idea of the *socius*: under this condition, the other exercises an ongoing “spell” upon one.

¹Pierre Janet first made this point in his discussion of the reflex arc (Janet [1929] 2005; Brighenti 2019).

²This also holds true *au contraire*: the feasibility of social isolation, predictable routines, and smooth patterns of conduct rests on “closing” and preventing possible reactions. In this light, the solitary janitor protagonist of Wim Wenders’ last movie, *Perfect Days*, relishes every turn of an asynchronous tic-tac-toe game he plays with an anonymous Tokyo’s public-toilet customer insofar as each next move is already predetermined—that is, with only necessary, utterly unimaginative reactions (made almost redundant in “perfect” tic-tac-toe games).

³For instance, the whole process of the international circulation of ideas (see, for example, Lamont 1987; Santoro and Sapiro 2017) revolves around the different types of reaction that paradigms, authors, and approaches elicit in different contexts and different respondents.

Gabriel Abend's (2014) discussion of the "moral background" in business ethics comes apropos here. Abend illustrates how psychologists and neuroscientists, to facilitate both operational tractability and empirical measurement of otherwise ineffable domains, tend to construe moral judgments as automatic gut reactions (e.g., hooraying, booing, and ahah-ing) impossible to disentangle from their triggers, like "a surge of epinephrine at the sight of a snake in the desert or a cop in the city" (ibid., 382). Such assumptions imply a standard S-R viewpoint; but, if "in Physics, action and reaction are more or less equal [...] the analogy does not really constitute evidence for the claim that action and reaction are equal *in ethics*" (ibid., 272, italics in the original). In fact, in moral deliberation, actors may always be asked to ground their reactive judgments and explain why they felt compelled to come up with certain evaluations in the first place. Even though they may be short on reasons ("people's responses may be confused, unhelpful, or incomprehensible," ibid., 34), actual reactions remain "always open, in principle, to a demand for reasons" (ibid., 34). The very fact of having reacted attests the compelling force of what provoked the feedback (Luft 2023, 325). By reacting, social actors declare their susceptibility, engagement, and care—incidentally, this explains the old adage according to which indifference is worse than hate.

It is only in the classic behavioral approach that things move ahead essentially by continuity, through call-and-response sequences that spread without any qualitative interruptions. In the 1920s, an earlier attempt to modify behaviorism was carried out by George Herbert Mead, who distinguished a restricted "psychological behaviorism" *à la* John B. Watson, from a more sophisticated "social behaviorism," which Mead himself sought to premiere. In a revealing passage, Mead discusses ants and humans in comparison:

Contrast these two situations: in one [i.e., the ant nest] there is a highly complex social activity in which the gestures are simply stimuli to the appropriate response of the whole group; in the human situation there is a different response which is mediated by means of particular symbols or particular gestures which have the same meaning for all members of a group. (Mead 1934, 56)

In one case, we may gloss, society emerges out of continuous, ongoing interindividual reaction chains, whereas in the other case it proceeds through discontinuous collective symbols (those having the "same

meaning for all”), which individuals can trade among themselves. That is all the difference between ant society and human society. We can note how Mead seems to take up an essentially Durkheimian trope: the collective, as an order of reality of its own, is necessarily discontinuous vis-à-vis the individual, and discontinuity between the actors can only be bridged by a general medium: in Mead’s theory, such is the role of that complex called “attitude-gesture-language”—where Mead attached great importance to “vocal gestures,” namely spoken language.

While Mead sought to contrast sharply the situation of ants to that of humans, essentially because of the exceptional function of human language, the discoveries by sociobiology and ethology during the twentieth century invite more caution (Wilson and Hölldobler 2009; De Waal 2019). In fact, continuity and discontinuity can be seen at play *both* in various animal societies *and* in interspecific social configurations, that is, relations spanning more animal species getting in contact (Jerolmack 2009).⁴ There is basically no manifestation of social life that does not include heterogeneity and symbiosis. That is why the articulation of continuity and discontinuity across the social domain cannot be resolved through the terms of a simple opposition, like in the classical *differendum* between Tarde (siding with continuity) and Durkheim (siding with discontinuity). A more nuanced scenario of scattered discontinuities is to be seen at play, as a multidimensional manifold where both continuities and discontinuities are exhibited across different respects, according to different traits to be singled out on a case-by-case basis.

In his systematization of relational sociology, François Dépelteau (in Powell and Dépelteau 2013, 177–83) distinguishes deterministic, co-deterministic, and “deep-relational” strands in relational thinking. Whereas determinism remains sternly linear in admitting the causal cogence of structures upon actors, co-determinism struggles to “find the right balance between agency and structures.” But only deep relationalism

⁴Ironically enough, a (if not *the*) torchbearer of a broader interspecies perspective on agency, Bruno Latour, unwillingly flattened the concept of reactivity by conflating it with irreflexive/primordial categories as “instincts” and “appetites”: “To say that primates other than humans have a rich social life simply means assuming that no primate actor can achieve any goal without passing through other interactions with partners. Instead of imagining a presocial being motivated solely by instinct, reactions or appetites and seeking immediate gratification of its goals—assuaging hunger, reproduction, power—the new sociology of simians, on the contrary, depicts actors who cannot attain anything without negotiating at length with others” (Latour 1996, 228).

definitely rejects the structure/agency dualism to fully embed relations within individuals. Eager as we are to endorse Dépelteau's deep relationalism as a general approach that rhymes with process philosophy, we are also wary that, with his proposal, the epistemological problem is only postponed: either continuism or discontinuism are bound to reemerge, were it not for the purposes of defining individuals and relations in their own terms. As Vandenberghe (2018) has suggested, there seems to be some inescapable "magic" to the notion of relation, and it is not clear whether or not, and to which extent, relational sociology is susceptible to become an integrated field. With this in mind, what makes reaction good-to-think-with is that it condenses within itself the double character of social life, continuous *and* discontinuous, pointing to the question of its proper "location:" *Where* is it exactly that social life occurs, and *How* is its space organized?

Such questions are not merely questions of geographical location, but effectively address the intrinsic constitution or, as physicists say, the "parameter space" of society. The space of effectuation of the social operation raises, not so much a topographical interrogative, as much as an "elemental" one. Capturing the element of social life means describing, not simply the space the social occupies in *extension*, but also the one that, so to speak, it engenders in *intension*. Seen in this light, reaction can be said "concretize" the occurrence of social interaction: it explains "how what's 'outside' gets 'in' and vice versa" (Vaisey 2008, 611) by connecting action's internal (to the extent that both formation and execution of motivations, feelings, goals, etc. respond to others' acts being dealt with) and external spheres (since how acts are acknowledged, received, and confronted largely conditions their real consequences). Reaction unfolds in that element which both enables and constrains how the *socii* relate: it is not the *cause*, but the *proof* of relation. It is the syntax of the interaction order.

SOCIAL LIFE INTENSIFIED

To better understand what such "evidentiary" aspect of reaction entails, let us take one historical-epistemic step back. The notion of reaction is thoroughly modern. Indeed, the ancients only knew "action" and "passion"—in Greek, *poieo* and *paskeho*, in Latin *ago* and *patior*—as categories of operation. While the very term "reaction" is first attested in use in the late Middle Age (apparently, in the work of Albertus Magnus), it is only

with modern physics and chemistry that it takes on its current comprehensive signification (Starobinski 1999). Sociology, too, is a modern science, whose constitution could be envisaged only once “the social” asserted itself as an independent level of reality that had to be somehow squared with the classical project of (democratic) politics (Arendt 1958).

Certainly, this does not suffice to establish any direct causal link between the notion of reaction and the possibility of sociology as such. Nonetheless, a certain elective affinity between the two can be evinced. Indeed, one could speak of a structural similarity: just as (per Arendt’s famous analysis) the social emerged as the *tertium quid* between individual life and the political state, so reaction analogously emerges as the *tertium quid* between one action and another one. The category of reaction thus offers a way of acknowledging that between one action and another there might be (indeed, *there is always*) quantitative *as well as* qualitative change. Reaction, we contend, can be the name of the operator of such transformation: it is the difference *between action and action*, or, to speak more philosophically, the internal difference of repetition (Deleuze 1968).

Famously, Gabriel Tarde (1890, [1898] 1999) placed imitation at the root of the social operation. Later, Girard (1989, 131) would characterize imitation as the “pure essence of desire,” in terms of its capacity to generate tying, agonic relations (determining what Girard calls “sacrificial crisis”). And it is noteworthy to recall that, for Tarde, imitation is but one enactment of the more basic phenomenon of universal repetition (Toews 2003, 89 ff.). Our thesis here is that the structure of repetition can itself be identified as reactive: in other words, it is the same *re-* prefix that has oversight of both repetition and reaction. Repetition is not just a return of petition, but an intensification of it. By the same token, reaction intensifies the meaning and the significance of action. *Reaction is*, in this sense, *the purest form of repetition*, namely *repetition recognized as carrying with it its intrinsic*—or “internal”—*difference*. This means that there is never assurance that what returns, what is “repeated,” in any sense equals the “model” of which it is supposed to be a reoccurrence. From this point of view, the problem with interactionism as a social theory is that it has evacuated asymmetry, whereas the latter (or, more precisely, the phenomenon of symmetry breaking) proves essential to understand social life as a specific type of life.⁵ To the extent that the *re-* of reaction is the sign of

⁵This is, for example, what makes original certain recent contributions on disruptive interactional moments (Tavory 2018; Tavory and Fine 2020).

intensification (as variously epitomized by potlatches, justifiable homicides, and posthumous consecrations), it indicates that the structural state of the social operation lies in being out of balance.

By incorporating an energetics of the social intercourse into our theoretical framework, we can retrieve a precious Simmelian insight. Simmel's conception of *Wechselwirkung* can be rescued from the soothing idea of symmetrical exchange. Although *Wechselwirkung* is usually rendered in English as "mutual action," we suggest that a more apposite translation could be, precisely, "reaction." Only factoring in an asymmetrical energetic regime can one reveal the complex mathematics whereby, as Simmel put it, "each party offers to the other more than he possessed before" [*jeder dem andern mehr giebt als er selbst besessen hat*] (Simmel [1900] 2004, 80). If actors can literally give "more than they have," this means that the general situation of *Wechselwirkung* is placed outside of the exchange framework.⁶ The notion of reaction can offer a more fitting framework to account for this fact. Cutting out a counterintuitive but necessary theoretical space for reaction, here we aim to show that reaction always entails more than knee-jerk reflex. To see this, a terrain of social existence can be laid out where automatisms dilute, without renouncing the impelling quality that relays energy quanta in the effectuation of the social operation by imparting oriented energies to the parties involved.

REACTIVITY AND ADAPTIVENESS

The compellingness of reaction does not proceed without the chance of it swerving into different "solutions" or alternative states: philosophically speaking, reaction affords "transduction," the sudden transformation of a system's state, through bifurcation and the quick expansion of a structuring germ inside an oversaturated solution (Simondon [1964–1989] 2013). As suggested above, there is no simple overdetermination of reaction: neither causally (efficient causation) nor teleologically (final causation) can reactions be equated with what they are supposed to answer to, or for that matter, elicit. Whether by reference to a superior level (the Durkheimian "collective") or not, reaction keeps together the exigencies of social connection and the problem of the "horizon," or medium, of

⁶Incidentally, the idea of *Wechselwirkung* goes back to Fichte, to determine the "mutual formation or reciprocal determination of the mind as both the living form and the determinable matter of its own determinations" (Gentry 2021, 381).

social life. Insofar as reaction is relationality, it does reveal a peculiar facet of what a relation is, and what it can do.

As we are trying to conceptualize it here, reaction pertains to a sort of mid-terrain of social existence, neither completely free nor utterly constrained. This way, theorizing reaction has its payoffs. First, by de-emphasizing action (along with its intimate association with intentionality, planning, and strategy), reaction theory rescues the role of void in social life. The place of meaning, abstract language, and symbolic forms has been greatly exaggerated in twentieth-century social theory; in fact, meaninglessness, emptiness, mechanical and dreary occurrences occupy no small portion in the extent of social life (Brekhus 1998; Sabetta and Lombardo 2023). Reaction, in this sense, reminds us how often social life does not revolve around deliberative thinking, as much as it does around carrying on, hanging in, perpetuating existence (such a blind perseverance, Spinoza once called *conatus*). Second, it is also necessary to “dissect the void,” a seemingly paradoxical expression that alerts us to the deeper constitution of the phenomenon at hand: what we call “the empty” of the social state is in fact full of mysterious stuff, which the regular schematics of social theory mostly fail to recognize.⁷ In social life, there is always more than meets the eye, and reaction directly taps into such invisible element, into a reservoir of *intension* that is neither entirely psychological nor entirely semiotic. Finally, following Susie Scott (2018, 4), the “absence of something” (circumscribed vacua, lack of specific features/objects) does not equate to the “absence of everything” (absolute void). This unfolds, for example, the space of repressed, hold-one’s-tongue aborted reactions as well as tacitly vented ones, as with what James C. Scott (1990) so called the “hidden transcripts.”⁸ Since people structurally learn and situationally decide to react *or not* also because of their understanding of social rank (Gould 2003), a consideration of the nature of reaction provides some ballast for explaining power imbalances, inequalities, and capital differentials.

From the individual’s perspective, reaction is part and parcel of the process of adaptation to the environment. The link between reactivity and

⁷ One is reminded here of Georges Pérec’s (1989) search for the “infra-ordinary” of social life: Pérec sets out his inquiry into the infra-ordinary precisely with the consideration that the latter will never make its way into the news.

⁸ The famous “Ethiopian proverb” (*When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts*), which serves as epigraph to Scott’s masterpiece, signals how reactions can manifest twice (publicly and secretly) at the same time.

adaptability cannot be stressed enough: indeed, reactivity is the first index of vital dynamism, and the first means to enhance adaptation. Insofar as there is reaction, there is hope of survival, and hope of meaning. There are, however, at least two different models of adaptation to be considered: the first, Darwinian, is fundamentally asymmetric, insofar as the environment does not adapt itself to the organism that adapts to it. To Darwin's eyes, adaptation appears as the strife of the organism to fit into an environment that, by and large, remains indifferent toward it (Darwin [1859] 2011).⁹ The second model is, by contrast, symmetric, and could be dubbed Tardeian. In his Leibnizian-monadological elaboration, Tarde conceives of adaptation as the reciprocal accommodation of two entities, calling for some sort of compromise, or collaborative harmonization, of the parties entailed in the adaptive deployment, according to the adage, "Agrégat signifie *adaptat*" [any aggregate is an adaptation] (Tarde [1898] 1999, 109). In sum, we can distinguish between one-way and two-way models of adaptation.

Once we try to interpret reaction in the light of these two types of adaptive models, we appreciate how its prism can shed light onto the problem of the social element: the individual reacts in order to adapt to the environment, but the environment structurally *includes the socius*. This way the socius, in the precise sense of the associative function appended to each individual, and encountered by each, makes its way into the adaptive equation. Since the associative function exists both within the reactant parts as well as around them, reaction can be said to directly weave together the most intimate and the most impersonal or, in Zerubavel's parlance, the "specific" and "generic" visions of personhood (Zerubavel 2023). Reaction literally *moves* the individual, but the latter—insofar as it is a subject who can conceptualize what is happening to itself—can always consider that "there is nothing personal about it." That is why both adaptive models must be kept in mind at the same time, with two-way models emphasizing harmonization and personalization (as in "collaboration"), and one-way models emphasizing disharmonization and impersonality (as in "competition").

Certainly, it is true that one only obeys to the extent that the other commands, that one only learns to the extent that the other teaches, that one only buys to the extent that the other sells, and so on; but such

⁹Before Darwin, Giacomo Leopardi ([1817–1832] 2019) long mused about the same topic.

adaptive developments necessarily unfold in an impersonal element capable of recording within itself a wide range of out-of-equilibrium points, corresponding to a number of possible asymmetrical, nonadapted outcomes (i.e., failures). A reaction research program thus calls for zooming in into what precisely happens in acts such as those of obeying, learning, buying, and so on as they can be evinced in terms of responsive-retroductive adjustments. Shortcoming is always a chance in social life. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the test of social adaptation turns out to be quite loose: there is no single clear cleavage between adapted and unadapted, rather, varying degrees of adjustment and, complementarily, maladjustment, all of which are entitled to exist *insofar as they are able to exist*.¹⁰ Accordingly, reactivity swings in the uncertain, underdetermined space between too-much and too-little, between too-early and too-late. By the same stroke, reaction engenders its own rhythmic (including, quirky) requirements, to which actors are called to adapt. This dynamic of intensity variations leads to an ongoing modulation of the *relata* through the associative function.

Although reaction seems to be above all about the present (*Hic Rhodus, his salta!*), in fact its temporality is not univocally flattened upon the “now” of action. To the contrary, the past persists in it in the form of memory (habitus, etc.) just as the future is constantly gestured at in terms of emergent (morphogenetic) configurations. Reaction prefigures and post-figures, but it is never in the same way, or by the same measure, that the two effects occur—indeed, as suggested above, reaction could be precisely conceptualized as the difference between them.

PARTICIPATING AND REACTING IN THE DIGITAL DOMAIN

Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ethos, has developed a whole theodicy of reactivity. For instance, “reactive” employees are imaged as those able to quickly respond to commands, without ever questioning the demand for flexibility that comes with them (Sennett 1998). However, since capitalism also needs a “spirit” to remain a workable social arrangement (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), a palpable tension ensues from two ideal-typical experiences: on the one hand, *reacting*; on the other hand, *taking part*. Usually, these two phenomena are construed as near opposites: whereas reacting is considered a sort of blind, short-term behavior,

¹⁰This is another manner of making sense of what Merton (1948, 210) called the (Thomas Love) “Peacock theorem”: “whatever is, is possible.”

taking part is considered as an active, sustained participation in meaningful activity. Such significations are quite evident, for instance, in political theory and political sociology, although they have also been tackled extensively in media studies. Indeed, the digital domain provides some of the most interesting illustrations of similar adjustments: in contrast to the traditional broadcast media of the twentieth century, the new digital media have since the late 1990s been hailed as enabling users to participate more fully and “interactively.”

A whole participationist paradigm in the digital sphere has ensued, which has spanned more than a decade. However, early enthusiasm for the democratic potentials of the new digital media has progressively faded, in parallel to the recognition that, between participation and emancipation, there remains a considerable gulf. In a recent study on digitally mediated interaction, Comunello et al. (2022) have worked out the category of “passive participation” to capture a type of widespread online behavior. Short of being a form of active participation in the traditional sense of the word, the authors argue, new media participation appears to be largely reactive in nature: half-asleep agents react to incoming stimulations (“notifications”) without giving them much thinking, and, by doing so, they leave a plethora of traces readily exploited by various other actors and agencies for their private (usually lucrative) purposes. Implicitly, the data-as-the-new-oil metaphor means, in fact, reaction-as-the-new-oil: our precise, imperceptible, constant flow of responses via and toward digital networked technologies (including, for instance, how long we watch a show before switching to the next, which posts we share with which other contacts of ours, how often we engage with certain types of contents, etc.) define us and our “profile” better than any well-polished statement of self-presentation. Moreover, controlling behaviors can also flourish at the micro-level of peer interactions: since social media enable the search for information (whether a partner liked or commented on someone else’s post, whether she/he used geopositioning systems, and so forth), any reaction can engender further reactions (including abusive, exceedingly monitoring ones) from significant others (Belotti et al. 2022).

In the new media sphere, “scrolling” seems to define the zero degree of an enlarged reactive regime: one scrolls to the extent that one is offered a self-building multitude of items that appear one after the other and which are recognized as uninteresting, or minimally interesting (incidentally, the algorithm generating data feeds is known precisely as “infinite scroll”). The user moves through scrolling items in some way—mostly, in

distracted fashion.¹¹ By and large, reaction stays minimal, yet constant and necessary for the user to advance through the feed. A naughty interpretation might claim that the biggest possible reaction (namely, escaping the pull-to-refresh mechanism and go offline) is exactly what is disincentivized, whereas a killing-me-softly diffuse state of minimal reactivity is encouraged by default. Indeed, perspectives stressing the potential of individual self-regulation and it's-all-what-you-do-with-it kind of subjective responsabilizations (i.e., efforts to make people accountable for how—and with which intensity, awareness, frequency, etc.—they react online) are commonsensical and essentially misguided. Quite radically, Baym et al. (2020, 9) contend that activities as “heedful or thoughtful scrolling” are oxymoronic, and come to claim that “consciousness and mindfulness, no matter how diligently practiced, cannot save our landscape from the vegetation cover of Facebook. Disconnective practices may help people find balance in the trap, but they cannot set them free. The disturbances may already be irreversible.”¹²

Digital content producers naturally struggle to activate the user to a further degree than simple scrolling, so as to effectively interrupt the scrolling behavior and direct the user's attention toward certain items meant to trigger greater, more focused reaction: this, in practice, may mean a click, a like, a repost, a comment, a purchase, a subscription, and so on. The domain of the digital media thus presents us with series of fleeting focalizations infused within a landscape of distraction and minimal reactivity, which, however, can instantly intensify into implosive “surges” and “flares”—as, for instance, in those infamous public outcries known as “shitstorms” (Montgomery 2016), where both the number and the intensity of reactions (the “epic proportion”) determine the very meaning of the phenomenon. But even contentious and distressing contents can be anesthetized through the zero-degree state of web surfing, as in “doomscrolling,” namely “the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing” (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021, 1741). Indeed, the entire debate on the

¹¹Walter Benjamin can be evoked here as an earlier theorist of media distraction and its potentials. The topic of “digital flânerie” (Skees 2010) has also been reprised from Benjamin.

¹²There are, in fact, more nuanced forms of scrolling, as that of “scrolling back” to old Facebook content on one's own profile (to retrieve digital traces of now-forgotten past activities or events), which are so “unnatural” to configure a possible tool for qualitative research (see Robards and Lincoln 2017). However, here we are only addressing the fact of scrolling through *other users' feeds*.

possibility of construing online engagement as predictive of electoral success (see, for example, Murthy 2015) boils down to the question of whether digital reactivity can turn into political action—which is not normally the case (Tumasjan et al. 2010).

DIGITAL REACTION CIRCUITS

Reaction can be best understood, rather than as a given determined behavior, as a shifting range of intensity, a dromology of activation, and a rhythm of syncing in and out of given environments (Brighenti and Sabetta 2024). New media studies have above all emphasized the “infrastructural” power of digital platforms vis-à-vis the “dramas” that are being played out on those same platforms: power in the digital domain is, in large part, power through the algorithm (Beer 2009). Although infrastructures remain unremarked most of the time (Sabetta and Zampieri 2024), there are also instances suggesting that the drama *can* change the architecture. Different reaction circuits actually contribute to shaping the architecture of visibility and intervisibility, with the exigencies of reactivity advancing their own requirements. As a recent case, over the last decade Facebook has “refined” its reaction tools: whereas until 2016 the platform provided its users with just one single “like” button, between 2016 and 2020 five more buttons have been added, in what could be regarded as a substantive increase in expressive reaction range (Paolillo 2023).¹³

Other instances reveal cases where usage tweaks the architectural rules, or exploits architectural weaknesses to directly tap into enhanced reaction potential. For instance, on Instagram, users cannot ascertain who viewed their photos on their main feed unless they receive an explicit reaction (a “like”); however, on the “story” section, they can instantly check out who viewed their story. Since it is easier to get social validations for stories than for posts on the main feed, young people tend to use stories more than the normal feed (Yenilmez Kacar 2024). Similarly, users have awareness that simply checking some digital contents equates with “giving views” to the content creators, so that they refrain from doing so in the case of unappreciated creators (Bainotti et al. 2021). In the digital domain, the

¹³ Interestingly enough, the hypothesis of a straightforward “dislike button” had been rejected on the grounds that “it would sow too much negativity,” as disclosed by Facebook’s chief product office Chris Cox (<https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2016-facebook-reactions-chris-cox/>).

individual often finds itself in the situation of juggling between different temporal horizons for reaction. In her debut novel, *Conversations with friends*, Sally Rooney describes how a young protagonist works with the deliberate postponement of reaction, interjecting a dedicated propitiatory, offline ritual before actual reception:

The next day, I received an email from Melissa. I was sitting in the library, typing up a page of notes, when her email arrived. I decided that before reading it I would take a walk around the library desks. Slowly I arose from my seat and began my walk. Inside, everything was very brown. Out of the windows I could see a rattle of wind making its way through the trees. On the cricket green a woman in shorts was running with her elbows working up and down like small pistons. I cast a glance back at my own library desk to ensure my laptop was still there. It sat glowing ominously into nothingness. I walked halfway around the room before looping back to my own seat, as if this circuit around the library desks was actually a physical endurance test of some kind. Then I opened the email. (Rooney 2017, 233–4)

The digital domain, thus, illustrates in various ways the issues of intensity and intensification ensuing from reaction. The manifestation of emotions is a rich domain for new media studies. It is known, for instance, that YouTubers and content creators tend to tactically exaggerate their emotional fruition of reviewed content to trigger further reactions in the viewers (McDaniel 2021). Such *imitogenic* behavior—that is, behavior aimed at fostering imitation as a response—is quite widespread. Online competition for user attention also pushes toward adopting controversial styles of communication, endorsing more disputatious views: for example, in online forums, “a very controversial comment may really get things going, while a huge consensus in comments (‘convergence’) may lead the thread to finish” (Rooderkerk and Pauwels 2016, 13). This way, online reactivity exhibits interesting phenomena of timing and rhythm. Empirical findings (Castillo et al. 2014) demonstrate that the overall traffic eventually generated by online news depends on the reactions they are able to arouse during the first ten-to-twenty minutes since publication: such is the window of opportunity to reach a critical mass of reactions, past which the chances for a given content to “go viral” diminish steeply. Reaction in these contexts thus functions as a “use-it-or-lose-it” resource, whose importance follows a sort of exponential decay curve. Having something (endorsements, comments, critics, likes, visualizations, followers, etc.) in return is what orient a diverse gamut of digital activities.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

As hinted at the outset, reaction points toward a peculiar location in the effectuation of relational life. Being a relation, reaction inherently reveals that relations are more than positions, or connections. As suggested above, to theorize through reaction means considering the interweaving of continuity and discontinuity in the social operation, where factors of intensity engender out-of-equilibrium dynamics. Reaction comes with rhythmic requirements and ongoing modulations, which compound the pulse of social life; or, as we have tentatively put it, *reaction is the proof of the social relation*. The digital domain abounds with examples of how the range of reactive options comes to shape the meaning and the form of the social process. The new media environments appear as infrastructural vis-à-vis the “superficial” dramas that are being played out in them; yet, we have been able to review several ways in which reactive circuits have momentous consequences that bounce back onto the very architecture of mediation. In many cases, *reaction* is the show people were looking for. But, because of the very excess it encapsulates, owners and regulators have become painfully aware that the game can easily get out of hand. More than of an agency/structure dualism, the workings of reaction appear to be a manifestation of a sort of event/element dualism, which illuminates the domain of social life as the nonformal reservoir of becoming out of which forms, actors, and patterns emerge.

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Theorizing Agency Relations: On the Origins and Development of Rector-Actor-Other Theory in Sociology

Isaac Ariail Reed

Rector-Actor-Other theory is an emergent conceptual vocabulary for sociological theory and research with special relevance for political, cultural, and historical sociology. In this chapter, I explain how RAO theory (1) reinterprets core sociological concepts and presuppositions in new ways, especially *agency*, (2) was originally developed as a sociological translation and transformation of principal-agent theory into a theory of agency relations as simultaneously social and symbolic (a transformation deeply influenced by the historical-sociological concern with transitions to modernity), and (3) came to articulate four fundamental aspects of *agency relations*

The author thanks Harper Jones for research assistance, and Matthew Norton, Mitchell Atkinson III, Julia Dessauer, Abigail Cary Moore, and Frédéric Vandenberghe for comments and criticisms of earlier versions of this chapter.

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_8

which are posited, here, as corresponding to four human experiences of hierarchy.

As an explicit vocabulary, RAO theory has been, in its early stages, used to explain or interpret the discursive basis for political transformations from monarchy to republic in the USA, England, and France (Reed 2020); the work of assistants in volatile creative industries (Dessauer 2025); violence, state power, and racism in policing (Moore and Reed 2019); the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the dynamics of racial marginalization therein (Atkinson 2023); the relationship between popular sovereignty in thought and practice in the early American republic and the American military's attack on native peoples (Reed 2017); and the gendering of the social contract and the political body (Reed and Weinman 2018; Reed and Adams 2025).

This emergent theoretical vocabulary, however, draws on a much larger corpus of scholarship oriented to an account of agency relations in social science and history (Adams 2011). In this larger set of applications, many of which I discuss in this chapter, the sociological turn to agency relations was deeply entwined with efforts by historians and historical sociologists to understand empires both ancient and modern (Pagden 2003; Barkey 1994). Sociological agency theory in this larger sense had a special role in integrating an account of early modern European colonialism into the core narratives of the discipline concerning modernity and insisting that sociology refind its interest in the complexities of sovereignty (Adams 2005a; Adams et al. 2005; Norton 2014; Adams and Steinmetz 2015).

With reference to Jeffrey C. Alexander's scientific continuum (Alexander 1981), RAO theory has been articulated at several different points on the continuum: models, concepts, and observations (or, concrete interpretations). It has also provided certain definitions, and in one instance worked toward a rigorously phenomenological grounding (Atkinson 2023). It has not, however, articulated the general presuppositions of the theory *in relationship to* theorizations of agency and structure. The latter have long been central to the connection between social theory pursued at the most abstract level and sociological research (Giddens 1979; Sewell 1992; Archer 2003; Keane 2003; Archer 2010a). Here, I take up this task, positioning RAO theory as both a synthesis and a critique of two very prominent ways of theorizing agency.

REINTERPRETING AGENCY

“Agency is a word to conjure with” in social theory (Adams 2011, 3), especially in the 50 years since 1975 (Archer 1996, 2010a, b; Giddens 1986; McNay 2000; Adams 2011). The development of a sociological theory of agency relations is no exception, but the understanding of agency that animates Rector-Actor-Other theory can be usefully set against *both* sides of a well-known opposition in social theory concerning agency. The opposition is between a broadly humanist concept of “agency” as grounded in the will and capacities for action of human individuals and, in a more contingent and fraught way, groups, on the one hand, and a broadly post-humanist conceptualization of *agencement* or assemblage, which reimagines “agency” as the variable efficacy and reliability of actants, on the other hand. The humanist formulation of agency emphasizes the creativity of action and asks about the capacities for resistance that individuals and groups possess vis-à-vis structures, systems, or power. The post-humanist formulation reimagines such structures and systems as made durable by technological connection and held together by various hybrids of “social” and “natural”—terms that it approaches with great skepticism. Thereby the post-humanist formulation asks about the agency not only of persons but also of their various allies and opponents in the world (and especially the artefactual world). But there is a third everyday (and in some instances legal or technical) meaning of the term “agency” in English, in which the term refers to the phenomenon whereby a person, group, or recognized social entity becomes the *agent of* another person, group, or recognized social entity. As a matter of convenience, I will call these three conceptualizations agency₁, agency₂, and agency₃.

Agency₁

Agency₁ refers to the capacity for creative action, problem-solving, control, and resistance to control that operates in human life. Via terms like “purpose,” “project,” “effort,” and “will,” some notion close to agency₁ operates in many different philosophies and social theories. But it is available in Max Weber’s classic definition of power as “the probability that an actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber 1978, 53). Two aspects of this often-repeated quotation are worthy of note here.

First is the notion of “own will,” which, while intuitively graspable by anyone who has ever found themselves “overpowered” by someone else who wants something different, nonetheless implies a complex set of ontological commitments in its view of the person. The statement may be interpreted to imply (1) that persons have wills, and perhaps even desires, for certain projected futures or outcomes to come in to being; (2) that persons can recognize or in some way know their “own” will, either before, during, or after the actions they take; and (3) that there is a relationship that the sociologist can expect to obtain between the “will” of a person and the “carrying out” that takes place through action-in-the-world. Second, Weber’s definition of power places the person with a will over and against something called “resistance.” If one infers that at least part of the “resistance” to the will of the person with power is *other wills, with other projects or desires for outcomes*, then the definition can be taken to imply that power, in human life, involves a struggle of wills, or at least the possibility of a struggle of wills. This is sometimes called a clash of interests. Here, much debate rages in the history of sociology, but the point, for now, is just that agency₁ as capacity for action in pursuit of what one “wills” may be conceptualized as applying not only to a person or group in power but also to those who resist power. This is a central theme of the last 50 years of sociology, which has asked repeatedly about the “agency” of various persons and groups, variously positioned in social structures with various understandings of the world, to resist the plans and commands of the powerful, the incessant workings of vast and abstract social systems, and/or their own enculturated bad habits of subordination and self-delusion. Agency₁ links “agency” to power, and it is for this reason the operative understanding of agency for many sociologists in fields like political sociology.

The presumption in such studies is often humanist in an ontological sense. In agency₁, there is (1) an implicit philosophical commitment to a distinction between subject and object, and (2) a more diffuse implication that the social sciences qua area of study concern themselves with persons (subjects) arranged into various collective patterns, which feature more than one person. These collective patterns involve, of course, many material resources variously distributed, a variety of ideas and communications, and so on. But the focus—especially for abstract social theory—is on people as “actors.” Anthony Giddens’s classic text, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, first

published in 1979, set out the basic problems for theorizing agency₁. Recall that the crucial second chapter, titled “Agency, Structure” begins this way:

The principal issue with which I shall be concerned in this paper is that of connecting a notion of human action with structural explanation in social analysis. The making of such a connection, I shall argue, demands the following: a theory of the human agent, or of the subject; an account of the conditions and consequences of action, and an interpretation of ‘structure’ as somehow embroiled in both those conditions and consequences. (Giddens 1979, 49)

It is precisely the humanist premises of paragraphs like this one that the second conceptualization of agency was designed to dispute.

Agency₂

Agencement or “assemblage” is the frequently used term from Actor Network Theory (ANT) that emphasizes the varied histories, complex translations, and multiple affordances of technology in making society durable (Latour 1990). Thereby the concept of agency undergoes a crucial inversion. The specifically *humanist* location of will, thought, capacity, and so on in the subject is approached via a hermeneutics of suspicion, and the tendency, especially in sociology, to describe the object of sociological study as “social,” “cultural,” or “discursive” is deconstructed (Latour 1991, 3–12). The core Latourian point is, however, a positive one, which “reassembles” the social via actants that are either intermediaries or mediators (Latour 2005).

As many social theorists have noted and debated, the Latourian turn, first in science and technology studies and eventually in social theory more broadly, had the distinct effect of decentering a Giddensian understanding of (human) agency and returning the nonhuman as the “missing masses” of social science (Latour 1992). Under the influence of ANT, the idea that I might need “allies” to accomplish a project has less of the ring of the backroom political deal (unless you count the cigars!), and more the sense that, to accomplish even basic goals—such as completing this paragraph—a supposedly human and humane subject such as myself needs computers, a connection to the Internet, a series of books and lamps, and so on. And that is just for doing social theory. Everything else is even harder, as Latour

and Michel Callon make clear in their classic essay “Unscrewing the Big Leviathan”:

The ethnomethodologists forget to include in their analyses the fact that ambiguity of context in human societies is partially removed by a whole gamut of tools, regulations, walls, and objects of which they analyse only a part. We must now gather up what their analysis leaves out and examine with the same method the strategies which enlist bodies, materials, discourses, techniques, feelings, laws, organizations. Instead of dividing the subject with the social/technical, or with the human/animal, or with the micro/macro dichotomies, we will only retain for the analysis *gradients of resistivity* and consider only the *variations in relative solidity and durability of different sorts of materials*. (Latour and Callon 1981, 287)

Leaving behind the “juridical Leviathan” of Thomas Hobbes, Latour and Callon focus instead on the struggle between Electricity of France (EDF) and Renault, which they characterize as a matter of how Leviathan “is built up in practice” by *enrolling* various other actants, “making no distinction between what is from the realm of nature (catalysis, texture of grids in the fuel cell, what is from the realm of the economy (cost of cars with an internal combustion engine, the market for buses), and what comes from the realm of culture (urban life, *homo automobilis*, fear of pollution)” (Latour and Callon 1981, 288–9). This insistence on the complex process of creating long chains of allies, and enrolling various other actors, is a compelling picture; it may in fact be much more compelling than the philosophical antihumanism that undergirds it.

Part of Latour’s antihumanism is manifest in his disputation with use of the adjective “social.” It is thus intriguing to consider that objections to substantialist ontologies in some ways similar to Latour’s were voiced from within the project of relational sociology for which this handbook is named, and wherein a reader will quickly find that the adjective “social” and the concept of “social relations” are understood to articulate the fundamental relationality that constitutes the human world. Several of the foundational texts of relational sociology insist that discussions of “entities,” “individuals,” and “collectives”—and various other terms in sociology—fail to appreciate the processual, networked, and dynamically interactive properties of social relations; they share Latour’s skepticism, but for different reasons and in a different voice. Here, agency as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement” (Emirbayer and Mische

1998). There is even a clear and coherent argument that relational sociology should avoid using the concept of agency, replacing it with the concept of transaction (Dépelteau 2008; Dépelteau 2013).¹

From Agency₁ and Agency₂ to Agency₃

While agency₁ and agency₂ channel a variety of complex ideas and points of study, each has a straightforward core premise. Agency₁ takes as its premise that the human person is an *actor* on a stage of perception/interpretation, who is equipped with practical consciousness and *through whom* structure operates via habits of action and interpretation. Agency₂ takes as its premise that the links (translations, mediations, etc.) between various human and nonhuman actants are what, in fact, shape and move and shake the world; these connections—between all kinds of “stuff”—are what determine the outcome of trials of strength.

It is worth noting that agency₁ and agency₂ have ambivalent relationships with the cultural turn in the human sciences, and with semiotics. There is, in many of the works that articulate agency₁ and agency₂ for social theory, recognition that the practical consciousness of willful actors or knowledgeable agents involves those agents’ *representations* of the world, or, that *agencement* involves representation. There is even a connection between the development of Actor Network Theory and A.J. Greimas’s semiotics (Høstaker 2005). Yet Giddens, in his theory of the knowledgeable, reflexive agent (and especially in the concept of reflexive modernization that accompanied it), had difficulty in investing systems of signification with equivalent heft to systems of roles or systems of labor (Alexander 1996). Similarly, agency₂ has often been articulated within the framework of a “new materialism” which is explicitly positioned against cultural explanations of action and the “discursive turn” (see especially Bennett 2010).

In retrospect it seems clear that linking agency to a left-Weberian concept of power (agency₁) and to “unscrewing the big Leviathan” (agency₂) are both highly fruitful intellectual projects. An account of the structuring of the human world needs to be able to conceptualize the practicalities of power, humanist insights about both creative action, and the complex way

¹Addressing these (admittedly crucial) problems would require a different paper (and see the excellent discussion in Ian Burkitt’s “Relational agency: Relational sociology, agency, and interaction,” Burkitt 2016).

in which artistic representation, technological capacity, and the built environment are entwined together to make the world variably solid and variably translatable. Yet, one also needs to attend to how social ties can be *forged out of* the habituation of representations and the effectiveness of culture that, when taken for granted, supplies to actors the principles of vision and division for understanding the world, and one hopes that a synthesis of the best insights of agency1 and agency2 might be possible. To pursue this in more than an ad hoc fashion, RAO theory, in its development of agency3, also operates with straightforward core premise:

Power is getting someone else to do something for you.

This premise draws on certain long-standing and multiply interpreted ideas in the history of social theory. “Power” as a political phenomenon and “agency” as a feature of specifically human action may not be the same concept, but they nonetheless bear a certain family resemblance, as both refer to a difference in the “ability... to make a difference” (Poggi 2001, 3). This idea is traceable to Thomas Hobbes (1656, 127) but reappears in important ways in the post-1960s social theory that, via the humanist Marxism of the New Left intellectuals, investigated resistance to vast and intricate systems of power and exploitation (Giddens 1973; Thompson 1957; Thompson 1978).

In a different register, social theory’s concern with the pragmatics of action—*getting things done*—led to the theorization of the recruitment of allies, both human and nonhuman, and the activation of the ties formed with aides, allies, and opponents in the pursuit of projects. This idea appears, in a specific way, in Actor Network Theory (with the emphasis on technology), but it is also a much broader intuition, shared by very different approaches to action, and beautifully manifested in the tragically unfinished work of Alfred Gell (1996). However, the artifactual world is not the only aspect of “mobilization” that makes projects possible. There is also the fundamental question of how one *delegates* to other humans and how one persuades, cajoles, coerces, or otherwise compels them to act in a certain way. In her political theory, Hanna Pitkin articulated with a humorously long list of English terms the overgrown jungle of complexities that attend “delegated authority” to a representative. “The representative has been variously likened to or defined as an actor, an agent, an ambassador, an attorney, a commissioner, a delegate, a deputy, an emissary, an envoy, a factor, a guardian, a lieutenant, a proctor, a procurator, a

proxy, a steward, a substitute, a trustee, a tutor, and a vicar” (Pitkin 1967, 119).

Finally, in the pursuit of projects, humans work in and through *projections* of the world that draw their legibility and coherence from background meanings which make the pursuit of action (as distinct from behavior) possible. That is, in every human project we are liable to find both purpose (which is specifiable to individuals and groups) and *collective representations* that exist in, through, and beyond that purpose. These collective representations inhabit even the most instrumental or brutal moments of power relations, and the study of them (via hermeneutics and semiotics) allows sociologists to better account for variation in the patterning of human action (Durkheim 1995; Alexander and Smith 2001).

Given this background, a more empirically tractable set of conceptualizations were developed in RAO theory, for which a slightly new vocabulary was deployed: a triangular relationship between *rector*, *actor*, and *other* is pictured. The term “rector” (latin for “ruler”) was adopted as term relatively free of specific connotations in modern social theory, and thus not precommitted to a specific account of how power works. The preference for this triad of rector, actor, and other also indicates the importance of the *symbolic* dimension of this triangle of contestation, because it is meant to evoke questions that are both questions of the sociologist and questions that might occur to people who find themselves in unfamiliar power situations: Who is the rector here? (or, to use the American expression of challenge, “who died and made you boss?”); what are you acting as and who are you acting for?; who are you other to and who is other to you?

Thus, Agency₃, in counterpoint to Agency₁ and Agency₂, may be parsimoniously defined as the ability to send and bind an agent to act on one’s behalf. But as we shall see, this introduces extraordinary complexities, and, even more important, ambiguities and ambivalences, to the grasping of concrete situations by the conceptual model. In the remainder of this chapter, I explicate RAO theory as a way to think about agency and hierarchy, first via a historical account of the theory’s intellectual history, and then via more abstract meditations on agency relations and the human experience of hierarchy.

THEORIZING AGENCY RELATIONS: AN UNBEARABLY SHORT HISTORY OF AGENCY₃

In the 1970s, there arose in the disciplines of political science, law, and economics an intellectual constellation named either “agency theory” or “principal-agent theory” (Mitnick 1992, 1998). It concerned situations in which one person, or entity, could be legally thought of, politically imagined to be, or economically modeled as “serving as the agent” for another, and, thereby, also “standing in” for that other person or entity. In these literatures, one common picture was the relationship between employer (principal) and employee (agent) (Ross 1973; Jensen and Meckling 1976). From this certain questions emerged: (1) How to ensure that agent acts either as principal wishes, as principal would act if principal were in agent’s situation, or in principal’s best interests? (2) How much is principal legally liable for agent’s actions? (3) Given that agent has transferred to principal a right to direct agent’s action or assign tasks to agent, can these rights themselves be transferred by principal to another person or entity?

These developments inscribed principal–agent theory as part of a larger battery of models and games in the rational choice approach to the social sciences. It is thus not surprising that consideration of “principal” and “agent” would enter Anglophone social theory through two parallel routes: (1) attempts to secure sociology on a methodologically individualist, rational choice foundation (Coleman 1990), and (2) interpretations of Weber’s political sociology that adapted his insights to instrumentalist or incentive-centered understanding of states as power organizations (Kiser and Schnieder 1994; Kiser 1999; Kiser and Kane 2001; Pfaff and Kiser 2003; Kiser and Baer 2005). In either case, the introduction of the theory helped to address difficult and long-standing problems, concerning, for example, how the abstraction of the corporation enabled the reorganization of economic relations (Coleman 1982) and how the modern state emerged from efforts to make tax-collection more effective and efficient (Kiser and Schnieder 1994; for the key cultural argument in response, see Gorski 1995 and then Kiser and Schnieder 1995 for further reply).

Crucially, however, these transportations of principal–agent theory into social theory were also *translations*, and translation is Janus-faced. On the one hand, the understanding of agency problems as grounded in interests was expanded into ever more realms of social life, creating a kind of imperialism of rational choice theory: all of social life was understood as instrumental. On the other hand, the new context for this translation allowed a

more capacious understanding of agency relations to emerge via robust criticism of the classic employer–employee paradigm. This criticism concerned not only the empirical scope of the rational choice approach but also its presuppositions (Adams 2010). This was part of a larger trend in sociological theory wherein the potential expansion of rational choice thinking to every nook and cranny of sociological investigation raised the most fundamental questions about how both interests and the entities that supposedly had such interests were in fact constituted (Ermakoff 2013; Spillman and Strand 2013; Reed 2020, 30–46).

For RAO theory, the translation of principal–agent theory into a discipline that had a more historical and structural understanding of instrumentally rational action enabled “agency relations” to be transformed into *both* a conceptual model for understanding power and hierarchical relations *and* a denaturalization of the assumptions unconsciously written into economics, political science, and business school master’s programs. The application of the idea of agency relations to zones of social activity outside of those habitually understood to be governed by the mundane logic of instrumental power, self-interest, and/or efficiency (e.g., modern states and markets) had interesting and paradoxical effects on the overall picture of what this theory was *really* about. Consider: children as the agents of their parents (or parents as the agents of their children! (Coleman 1990, 158));² an enslaved person as the agent of his master; or the interplay between a charismatic leader and her charismatic community as one in which *both* are in some sense principal and in some sense agent. To analyze these situations, the sociology of strategic action had to be synthesized with a sociology of emotions, a sociology of sex/gender, a sociology of patronage relations (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980, 2011), and a sociology of the construction of systems of honor, power, violence, and natal alienation (Patterson 2018).³ It was thus in attempting to address such

²Coleman’s meditations on this phenomenon are remarkable, and reveal the intriguing strangeness at the heart of the supposedly straightforward rational choice approach (Coleman 1990, 158; see Adams 2010). Underneath rational choice approaches’ frequent protestations that it has a strictly heuristic self-understanding, one finds a set of metaphysical questions about what constitutes an actor and/or an agent (Reed and Weinman 2018).

³For the analysis of slavery, one is faced with the question of whether control and oppression derive not only from instrumental gain but also from the fetishization of violence and pain: “The violent tenor of the slave’s life is manifested through the overseer’s disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner and in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave’s body. Violence, here, becomes an *element in manners*, like whipping or taking of the slave’s

relations in their concrete meaningfulness and tendency to generate ambivalence and contradiction, and in attempting to comprehend the kinds of historical innovations required to produce, regulate, and deregulate the modern corporation and the modern state, that sociologists radically reinterpreted “agency theory.”

The breakthrough in this reinterpretation occurred in a series of articles, dissertations, and book chapters published by Julia Adams and her students and colleagues (Adams 1996, 1999, 2005b, 2011; Adams and Reed 2020; Adams and Shughrue 2015; Martin 2008; Norton 2022, 135–9; Reed and Adams 2025). Many of the ideas that were developed in those texts came to life in the graduate seminars on “Theories of Agency” (and relatedly, on “Sociological Theory”) taught by Adams at the University of Michigan and Yale University. In these texts, several of the core ideas that would come to define the theoretical vocabulary of RAO theory saw first light, including: the conceptualization of power as hierarchical networks and the interest in a historical approach to transformations in, and discourse about, patron–client relations (Adams 1996, 2005a; Charrad and Adams 2015); the investigation of how relations in these hierarchical networks are symbolized, which entered through a sociology of the gendered representation of rulership in the making of the modern state (Adams 1994a, b, 1996, 2005a, b; Reed and Adams *Forthcoming*); and the investigation of how the *modern subject* is construed and constructed out of transformations in (and even fantasies about) agency relations and their representation (Adams 1999, 2011; Reed and Adams 2011; Norton 2014; Reed 2020; Norton 2022).

This work led directly to RAO theory, but it lacked a formal vocabulary to mark its distance from the ahistorical and acultural assumptions of rational choice theory implied by the language of “principal” and “agent.” Also, though the historical sociology produced in this work was occupied with mortal violence, trade in women, various material formats of radical dispossession and disempowerment, and the creation of early modern states and empires, it had not synthesized theoretically the Weberian tradition of thinking of the state as a complex organization with the “tradition of the other” as an approach to power. The latter, perhaps best telegraphed by Walter Benjamin’s famous line that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the

life itself: an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror. Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life” (Mbembé 2003, emphasis added).

exception but the rule” (Benjamin 1968) and best exemplified by Paul Gilroy’s “primal history of modernity” in the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), would have to be incorporated into the new theoretical vocabulary so that it could address not only modernity as logistics and discipline but also modernity as dehumanization (and, inversely, as democratic humanism) on the other.

RECTOR, ACTOR, OTHER

The story is a simple one, because every theory begins with a reduction of complexity. A person or group sends and binds another person or group to do something for them; when this happens, the first becomes not only an actor but also a *rector* and the second becomes not only an actor but also an *agent*. A struggle for recognition, for authorship, and/or for resources ensues. But this struggle between rector and actor always has a third, an *other*, whose very existence outside the struggle inflects both the relation and the people who are being formed and reformed within it. Every society is constantly made up of these relations and their multiple symbolizations.

The three figures in this story and their relations are the basis for RAO theory. The figures can be used as a reference point for a conceptual method wherein the researcher asks, of a given set of social relations: Who is rector, who is actor-turned-agent, and who is other, and *in what way* do each of these terms fit the situation under study? This method is intended to be part of a double hermeneutic; the question is always also: How are those in the situation representing who is rector, who is actor-turned-agent, who is other? This double hermeneutic serves a double purpose. It culturalizes the account of agency relations, but it also provides a focus point and a ground for cultural analysis. The cultural question is always: how is the triangle being represented, justified, fantasized about, or reimagined here?

The claim of this chapter, then, is that this very simple triangle, informed by the work on agency₃ reviewed in the previous section, can provide the basis for both research and further conceptualizations. In what follows, I take apart the triangle (and its hermeneutic double). I ask what happens when (1) an actor becomes an agent, (2) an actor becomes a rector, (3) an actor becomes an other, and (4) (1)–(3) are symbolized.

(1) *An actor becomes an agent.*

First, consider the process whereby a person or a group transforms from an *actor* into an *agent* in the sense of *agency*.³ When they do so, they mobilize their variable and various capacities, directing them according to an interpretation of orders taken (vague or specific), or according to a *project* that they share with someone else. For, when one becomes an agent, one becomes both an agent for someone else (person, group, etc.) and an agent working on behalf of a *project*. When an actor becomes an agent, this involves the creation of a *dyad* between actors (one becoming the agent of another) *and* a relationship to an intersubjective reality (a project). The space of possible variations that results is significant, because the degree to which an agent is beholden to his superior *or* to the project that he is carrying out for said leader can explain a great deal. (Recall, in this regard, stories such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, wherein the head butler is more invested in a certain project for the household than is his master, or, more humorously in this vein, Oscar Wilde's depiction of the pursuit of honor by both gentleman and his servant in *An Ideal Husband*.) But wherever the actor-turned-agent ends up in terms of fealty to project and fealty to rector, the act of *alignment*—a fundamentally political act—involves a closing down of possibilities but a gain in direction and vision. For, in becoming an agent, the actor enters and helps create a new world. Via alignment, her actions become legible in a larger arc.

Consider a young person who joins the political campaign of a certain candidate, joins a social movement, or a political party. There is an aspect of this that is in some ways similar to an experience of religious conversion, because “becoming part of the project” (of electing a certain legislator, of seeing through that legislator's vision, of working or fighting for a leader or ruler, etc.) is a transformation of self. The actor takes a certain direction, purpose, sense, and significance from *becoming an agent* of the politician, the party, and so on.

However, becoming an agent does not consume *all* of the actorship of a person or group. All the world is still a stage, and many different projects, from the mundane to the metaphysical, may still occupy the actor while he, she, or they are also *agent of* another. No matter the demands of the party, artistic collective, charismatic leader, or CEO, everyone still has to eat, rebel against their father or mother, seek sexual satisfaction, arrange to get a certain set of resources rather than a different set, and so on. It is only, perhaps, in truly totalitarian situations, total institutions, or scenarios of radical dehumanization that *all other projects* are rendered inactive or

completely subordinated to a single project for which the actor becomes an agent. The historicization of such “total” political situations has a long history in social and political thought, but it is worth noting that theorizing of this kind usually proceeds, either implicitly or explicitly, with questions derived from agency₁—questions about the will of the human being, resistance to structure and system, and the abandonment of moral judgment and thereby the capacity for moral agency. Operating with and through agency₃, RAO theory translates these concerns into an account of the human experience of *alignment*. All leaders and all projects—not just “total” ones—articulate some kind of demand, implicit or explicit, that actor, in becoming agent, aligns with rector. And yet, each moment of aligning the capacity-to-act-on-behalf reconstitutes the nonreducibility of the actor to this process of becoming an agent; the fundamental tension between actorship and agenthood persists. The moral crisis of the “destruction of the human” in those who, in joining totalitarian movements, invest their efforts into projects of radical destruction and systematic violence is a testament to the extremity of the situation (and the isolation that proceeds it), because the irreducibility of the actor to the agent is a recurrent, near-universal feature of organized sociality in human life.

Here we find ourselves working in a space of thought established by Hannah Arendt. Arendt’s understanding of the concept of action is different than the understanding of social action that is routinely placed at the foundations of sociological theory. Arendt contrasted action, understood as *praxis*, with labor and with work, and criticized Karl Marx for conceptually reducing both action and work to labor. Perhaps because of this difference from the sociological tradition (see Martin 2016), Arendt was able to argue rigorously that “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities.” (Arendt 1998, 8–9). She understood, moreover, that the tension between the actor’s capacity to begin something new, and the necessity of finding agents to help carry through “what he had begun” (ibid., 222), was fundamental to the imagination of (different kinds of) politics. For Arendt, the crucial and devastating moment in the history of thinking politics in her tradition was the moment in which the *agency relation began to thwart the possibility of praxis*. This is the basis for her criticism of Plato’s “escape from action into rule” in *The Statesman* (ibid.). Therein, Plato sought to assure that

the beginner would remain the complete master of what he had begun, not needing the help of others to carry it through. In the realm of action, this isolated mastership can be achieved only if the others are no longer needed to join the enterprise of their own accord, with their own motives and aims, but are used to execute orders, and if, on the other hand, the beginner who took the initiative does not permit himself to get involved in the action itself. (ibid., 222–3)

And so, in the melancholy modernism of Arendt (Benhabib 1996), we can see a recognition that modernity has brought to a breaking point the tension between the capacity to begin anew and the pleasure of acting for another.⁴

(2) *An actor sends and binds an agent, and thereby becomes a rector*

Let us look at this dyad from the opposite point of view. Consider the allies and support needed to bring a picture of the world into actuality. In this, agency₂ is particularly useful to think with, especially when put into dialogue with the immensely complex and often-underused literature on patronage relations. Latour is surely correct that we need door closers (Johnson 1998), but what Latour's famous article underestimates is what Peter Bearman would later detail about the *doorman* (Bearman 2005). Doormen are essential *as agents for* the wealthy persons who occupy apartment buildings in Manhattan: they juggle complex tasks, exercise discretion on behalf of (but also sometimes without the knowledge of) their rectors, and thus are nodes in the skillful construction and reconstruction of the social order and essential aides in the pursuit of various projects. *Rectorship*, then, is accessed when the sending-and-binding of other humans, groups, and recognized social entities takes place. Rector, seeking to make a project an actuality, turns various actors into agents, and mobilizes other (nonhuman) aspects of the world as agents as well.

To become a rector, then, is to occupy a higher position in a chain of power. But as rector gets agents, she engages a tendency inherent in their creation—her *removal from the world*. Rector may create agents for

⁴There may be a certain elective affinity between Arendt's meditations on the history of political thinking, and especially her passages on the rise of the social, and the later work of Alain Touraine on the subject, though Touraine's historicization of the subject *outside the social* is articulated differently in theory and historicized differently as well. See in particular the first chapter of part III of *Critique of Modernity* (Touraine 1995).

pragmatic reasons, and in response to rather mundane human problems: a leader cannot be everywhere at once, there are not enough hours in the day for one group to accomplish all necessary tasks so some have to be delegated to other groups, and so on. But when an agent is created out of another actor, the torque that practical action exercises on the world is distributed downward, and a metaphysical rift is opened up. This is the hidden part of the agent “standing in” for the rector, and it is what the strictest rational choice theorist shares in insight with the most metaphysical Hegelian: the introduction of agents to solve problems creates the problem that, by “standing in,” agent becomes the locus of *techné*, and perhaps *phronesis* and *epistémè* as well. In the history of social theory, this problem—of the rector removed from the practicality of action—is a central topic for thinkers who attempted interpretations of the passages of G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* that addressed “Lord and Bondsman” and “Unhappy Consciousness” (Hegel 1977; for discussion of differing interpretations, see Reed 2020).

The relation between rector and actor-turned-agent is, then, a moral drama. Recall the interaction between a mother and son offered by Garfinkel in his invention of ethnomethodology:

One student acutely embarrassed his mother in front of her friends by asking if she minded if she had a snack from the refrigerator. “Mind if you have a little snack? You’ve been eating little snacks around here for years without asking me. What’s gotten into you?” (Garfinkel 1991, 47–8).

The implication of the mother’s disorientation, embarrassment, and (implied) irritation is that she has long acted as an *agent* of her son, making him *rector*. Having (thanklessly?) stocked the fridge with his snacks, she has been the taken-for-granted agent of his project of satiating his hunger—mother as moral, mother as martyr. And now, for the benefit of *his* moral status in front of her friends, he is acting as if *she* is the commandant of the household, the rector from which he needs permission.

(3) *An actor, excluded from the previous two fundamental aspects of agency relations, becomes an other.*

For each projection of a future that emerges from rector–actor relations, before that future is created, there are opponents and allies, but there are also countless “others” in a mundane sense of the word—others just passing by or part of the environment. People have projects: winning a court case, getting a job, educating a child, forming a political party,

developing a new exercise routine, painting (and selling) a painting. Most of these projects enter into the totality of the networked world as but a small piece of it, and the relation to most other persons is often faint. For example, for the small agency chain involved in the production of this chapter, most other persons, most of the time—and even most other academics currently alive—are of little to zero import. These kinds of others do not know, or cannot possibly be concerned with, countless other happenings and occurrences.

I begin with this account of the “degree zero” of othering, not because it is particularly central to RAO theory, but because it throws into relief the distinctness of others as *part of* the RAO triangle. The distinctness of alterity is that it can function, not just as that which is outside, but rather as a *constitutive exterior* of the agency relation between rector and actor-turned-agent; the abject nonsubject helps make legible the struggle for recognition between subjects from which it is excluded. The network equivalent of this language (which entered the language of social theory via iconic works by Judith Butler (1990) and Julia Kristeva (1982)) is the *negative tie*, especially since a crucial instance of negative ties in the development of network theory is denunciation as a format of social control (Bergemann 2017). The other, then, is the abject, the witch or political prisoner whose very denunciation or radical exclusion allows more positively defined hierarchies to function.

Classical social theory grappled extensively with the question of the other’s inflection of or impingement upon more standard understandings of hierarchies. Émile Durkheim articulated several different theories of social integration premised on the difference between in-group and out-group relations (Merton 1948, 198–208). Karl Marx describes the causal effect of the industrial reserve army on wages (Marx and Engels 1978; Marx 1963, 1977). Georg Simmel developed a theory of (the function of) the stranger (Simmel 1950). Most significant of all, W.E.B. Du Bois rewrote the history of the struggle for democracy in industrial capitalism as a story of capital, white worker, and black worker, in which the fundamental structural feature of society was the alterity produced by the color line and the veil, and in which the abject illegibility of black Americans to white society structured not only the distribution of work between whites but the reduced organizing capacity of the emergent industrial working class (Du Bois 1935). From these classical roots grew the various sociologies of alterity: labeling theory in criminology, the sociology of race,

racism and racialization, queer theory, and so on. All of these sociologies made *alterity* central.

RAO theory translates this work into an account of how the exterior persons to agency relations are related to and symbolized, and of how persons excluded in this way themselves disrupt these relations and symbolizations. The goal is to give an account of how alterity structures society and, in particular, shapes power understood as agency relations. The route to doing so is to write a phenomenology of exclusion from agency. Theorizing from extremes, Reed (2020) and especially Atkinson (2023) have posited four kinds of radical alterity: slavery, enemies in war, scapegoats, and invisibility. Interestingly, each of these can be conceptualized as a pathology of *authorship*, if that term is taken to indicate not only the human capacity for creativity but also the tensions I am examining here. The enslaved are denied authorship credit and publicly recognized projects of their own, while being essential to the construction and maintenance of the material and social worlds (they are authors denied recognition as such). Enemies in war are (ostensibly) removed from all authorship relations within the “homeland,” but are consistently investigated and fantasized about in terms of what they are capable of authoring (i.e., enemies are both existentially other and yet also respected as authors). Scapegoats are *overattributed* authors, blamed for various social pathologies, sicknesses, and cycles of violence (Girard 1979). Most interesting, perhaps, is Atkinson’s theorization of invisibility in terms of the phenomenology of chains of power, which shows that invisibility is quite distinct from the mundane format of “degree zero” alterity explicated at the beginning of this section. He writes:

The tragedy of the Flint water crisis, and much of the recent history of the city, is that the residents were simply not a part of the social discussion. They were neither feared, directly exploited, nor actively sacrificed. They were simply ignored. I will call this fourth form of alterizing ‘recoil,’ and others who experience this form of alterity, ‘the invisible’... Recoil, here, is a complex, non-originary act of consciousness that has implications at the level of social practice and is meant to capture one way in which a chain of power reacts to an altered community. (Atkinson 2023, 22)

Thus, for Atkinson, “the intersubjective character of the chain of power figures into its essential determination in such a way that the power may only be fully described through the unfolding of the alterity it attempts to

exclude. The chain of power is partially constituted through its preferred mode of alterization” (Atkinson 2023, 244). This leads Atkinson to one of the essential insights of RAO theory, one which places the theory firmly on a phenomenological foundation and, simultaneously, makes clear why the theory has to be triadic. This is worth quoting at length:

It is only because of the unique character of the individual positions within a chain of power that the chain may exist at all. The sending and binding functions of the chains require alterity within the chain, alterity defined as *differential* authorship. When we talk about alterity between chains of power, or between a chain of power and a marginalized people, we do not speak of a competitive difference in authorship but of its lack. Nonetheless, we may ask ourselves what would become of chains of power if there were no such thing as alterity, either as difference or as lack. The situation would be such that all subjects exhibit authorship equally. The chain collapses: no rectors, no others, all actors. Such a situation may or may not include the sending and binding function between subjects, but sending and binding, if it occurred, could occur between any two subjects in either direction. Alternatively, the sending and binding functions could be absent from the social space, so that authorship becomes an intra-subjective concept exclusively. This brief exposition of the possibility space governing the concept ‘chain of power’ shows, I think conclusively, that alterity is an essential, constitutive determinant of any chain of power. (Atkinson 2023, 245)

Atkinson’s account of alterity in RAO theory makes a crucial contribution to the debate about agency. In agency₁, the question of resistance was written into a dialectic of structure and agency, and thus the capacities of the oppressed are queried as resistance to structure and system. For this reason, in agency₁ the other (the stranger, the profaned, the removed, the “underclass”) is bound *into* the system, and is thus a prized feature of what is ultimately a dyadic world (as revealed by the fact that *lumpenproletariat* is a modification of *proletariat*). In contrast, agency₂ is widely and diffusely distributed across different trials of strength; the dialectic has no special status, because giving it such status would be to play the game of subject and object.

However, as Atkinson makes clear, alterity can occur via differential agency accruing to humans, and thus the world of actors, when it becomes a world of power, is a world of *three* positions: actors-turned-agents, rectors, and others—the latter being a case of the *lack* of authorship. RAO theory, then, seeks neither a flat ontology nor a dialectical one, but rather

attention to how and when actors, who always find themselves as agents in one way or another, are differentiated and dishonored to the point that they find themselves to be others.

(4) *Uncanny Symbolizations*

By articulating signs, actors form and perform into being the very relations to which they claim to refer; in so doing they operate under semiotic conditions that do not spring fully formed from their heads. This is the articulation, in RAO theory, of agency₁ and structure. Chains of power and their representation are constructed out of bodies, artifacts, and signs, and this means that they participate chains of signifiers that exceed the projects of the persons caught up in those chains. The result is the irrevocably dynamic situation of action both habitual and creative, which operates in the space between material affordance, social-structural relations, discursive patterns, and performativity. This dynamic is (famously for social theorists) hard to handle analytically. RAO theory suggests that the difficulty derives not only from the involvement of the social scientist in judgments about world and action (interpretation; see Schütz 1967) but also because of the incessant slippage of signifiers over and against each other, creating the space for interpretation, misinterpretation, counter-interpretation, and overinterpretation. Nonetheless, out of this interplay emerges islands of stability whose signifiers gesture to the sempiternal while never achieving it. Agency relations, thereby, come to have sense and significance for the subjects that inhabit them. For RAO theory, the gap between the *rendering* of rector, actor, and other in performance and discourse, and the *relational ties* that secure footing in the social universe, is a recurrent point of focus.

Adams first articulated this understanding of the dynamic relationship between symbolic and social in agency relations in her studies of the early modern Netherlands. Therein, she showed that the “principal” that many elite Dutch men and women were acting on behalf of was “the family” or the “family line,” and this very understanding of a familial project of power involved a variety of moves in a game simultaneously ritualized, cathected, and hyperstrategic. At stake were imperial riches and state power, and yet also virtue, honor, and the policing of women’s bodies and behaviors. Via the working, practical conceptualization of the enhancement of familial power as the metaproject to which even the most powerful father-lords were responsible, these symbolic struggles were implicated in the

formation of the modern state in the Netherlands. For, the state emerged, in part, as an implicit agreement among elite Dutch families to share governing power (and access to surpluses generated by trade and imperium), such that sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons could also be expected to possess a piece of a state as family patrimony. This was the first step in Adams' political sociology (Adams 1994a, b, 2005a).

But the second step was perhaps even more important. Throughout her work on "Father Rule" and early modern empire and state (Adams 1999, 2005b), Adams repeatedly noticed the trouble made by, and yet also the opportunities opened up by, the gap between *representations and performances* of idealized masculine and fatherly rulership/kingship and the actual, and very messy, decision-making by, delegation to, and interpretations of *actual men placed into positions of power*. It was this messiness, for example, that allowed Queen Elizabeth I to adroitly wield her second, kingly body over and against her first "body of a woman" in her projects for the state.

This complex contingency articulated by Adams became, in the cultural-political sociology of modernity, sometimes limned as the "Lawyers, Guns, and Money" approach to culture and the state (Reed 2019; Norton 2022), a particular angle from which to study power and signification. Matthew Norton theorized this as the study of "interpretive infrastructures," wherein the investigator examines the process whereby representation, in both its ability to produce conceptual order and its opening to resignification, was a crucial element of various power projects, such as the elimination of piracy in the English maritime system (Norton 2022).

CONCLUSION: THEORIZING AGENCY AS RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

The ambition of RAO theory is to provide a configuration of concepts of wide, though not endless, applicability. We seek to refine and modify the model to the point that it can become part of the theoretical repertoire of the working sociologist (Rojas 2017). It articulates an understanding of agency that is avowedly relational, *yet also* admits the irruption of the human subject into its model as the excess of uninterpellated possibility. For, in the end, RAO theory is a model of hierarchy and its discontents. In this regard, it may be imagined as a deliberately limited synthesis and transformation of agency₁ and agency₂ into the basis for an account of

certain human, all-too-human, experiences: getting someone to do something else for you (rector), aligning one's action with the pursuit of someone else's project (actor turned agent), and being denied access to the tensions of authorship (other).

Though the ambition of RAO is not paradigmatic, its interpretation of agency as a relational phenomenon does enact certain presuppositional commitments. In the RAO model, certain *substances* dreaded by a purely relational sociology—namely persons and groups—tend to occupy the nodes in hierarchical networks, though those networks may also have as nodes recognized social entities such as corporations. And thus, RAO theory incorporates into its outlook the focus of agency₁ on humans' capacity for creative action. There is also in RAO theory a presuppositional commitment to the impossibility of anything except for relational autonomy. This is the insight that aligns Hannah Arendt's political philosophy with the technologists, as radically different as they are: no one gets anything done without enrolling allies. Furthermore, as Arendt herself would be the first to point out via her concept of work, there is no leviathan without roads, railroads, and airplanes.

Nonetheless, we find in Arendt's attention to politics as the act of *bringing actors over to one's side as agents, so as to act in alignment*, the humanism of RAO theory. In her magnum opus *The Human Condition*, Arendt recognized the relationality of agency₃, and found in that relationality a remarkable space of variation. She traced the variation to the Greek language itself:

In order to illustrate what is at stake here we may remember that Greek and Latin, unlike the modern languages, contain two altogether different and yet interrelated words with which to designate the verb "to act." To the two Greek verbs *archein* ("to begin," "to lead," finally "to rule") and *prattein* ("to pass through," "to achieve," "to finish") correspond the two Latin verbs *agere* ("to set into motion," "to lead") and *gerere* (whose original meaning is "to bear"). Here it seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by "bearing" and "finishing" the enterprise, by seeing it through. Not only are the words interrelated in a similar manner, the history of their usage is very similar too. In both cases the word that originally designated only the second part of action, its achievement – *prattein* and *gerere* – became the accepted word for action in general, whereas the words designating the beginning of action became specialized in meaning, at least in political language. *Archein* came to mean chiefly "to rule" and "to lead"

when it was specifically used, and *agere* came to mean “to lead” rather than “to set into motion.” (Arendt 1998, 189)

This is the problematic of agency₃, articulated as a normative critique of changes in the use of language which are taken as symptoms of a deeper problems: the forgoing of political freedom for hierarchy and the impossible promise of sovereignty. But Arendt, whose engagement with sociology was notoriously negative, did not realize that when she traced the death of politics in the Western philosophical tradition to Plato’s *The Statesman*, she was also engaging in a theoretical redescription of well-established sociological findings. For, in attending to the problem of action seeming to having “two parts,” a beginning and a carrying-through, she is also (inadvertently) redescribing in an insightful way the organizational problems, typical social movement dynamics, and dynamics of the delegated state that are the core focus of large swaths of sociological research. Most work organizations struggle with the definition of leadership, the legitimation of hierarchy, and the distribution of tasks and remuneration. Most social movements (of the right and the left) are articulated simultaneously within, and in opposition to, existing representations of legitimate hierarchy. Finally, nothing activates agency problems quite like the many hands of the state (Morgan and Orloff 2017; Morgan and Campbell 2011).

Chains of power and their representation, in other words, are both a mundane feature of everyday life and a skeleton key for studying social order, political disruption, and the remaking of rule in political modernity. Can we imagine an Arendtian sociology, pitched not only at the level of the history of political thinking but also at the level of the sociology of everyday life? That is the hope embedded in the language of rector, actor, and other.

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PART III

More-than-Human Relations



(Social) Life Is Relational

Bernard Lahire

INTERDEPENDENCE OF ALL LIVING ORGANISMS

The great biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote in 1964 that “individuals and species belong to ecological communities and eco-system” and that “an individual taken out of the system in which it normally occurs is incomplete and it may be inviable” (Dobzhansky 1964, 444). Moreover, “biotic communities or ecosystems are not miscellanies of species which happen to live side by side or in the same general region; they are structured associations of more or less mutually interdependent forms” (ibid., 447).

It is therefore a central fact of life (Lahire 2023, 327–331)¹—a fact that is inseparably biological and social—that bacteria, plants, fungi and ani-

¹After formulating this *meta-fact of the interdependence of living organisms*, I discovered the thoughts of American biologist and ecologist Rob Dunn, who succinctly mentions the same fact, mobilizing the language of law, “The law of dependence states that all species depend on other species” (Dunn 2021, 20).

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_9

mals all maintain permanent interdependent relationships with each other, within the same species, as well as with other living organisms: holobionts, mycorrhizal networks, interdependencies between various plant species, between plant species and animal species, such as flowers and pollinating insects, interdependencies between animal species and bacteria, between animal species themselves, including those between humans and non-humans, and so on. This interdependence is fundamentally linked to the dual necessity, for each species, to survive by feeding on or benefiting from other living organisms and to reproduce and, at the same time, to protect itself from predators or parasites seeking to do the same.

There are three main types of interdependent relationship between members of the same species or between species, depending on the balance of forces involved: mutualism, commensalism, parasitism, which in the human species take the form of balanced exchange (each party derives an advantage from the situation), unbalanced exchange without negative consequences (only one of the two parties derives an advantage from the situation, without harming the other), and domination or exploitation (only one of the two parties derives an advantage from the situation, clearly harming the other). Living beings interact between individuals of the same species or with other species to render mutual services, collaborate, kill each other, domesticate each other and so on.

Over the course of history, and in particular through the accumulation of knowledge and artefacts such as tools and weapons, human beings have gradually acquired the experience of domination in their interdependent relations with other species, as well as in relations between societies or between social groups within the same society. It also experiences, universally, dependence on its progenitors, given the fact of *secondary altriciality*,² as well as the equally universal experience of interdependence between men and women, given *the separation of the sexes*.

Referring to Norbert Elias or Pierre Bourdieu, sociologists often speak of a “relational way of thinking”, a “way of thinking” or a “relational sociology”, suggesting that relationality is just another scientific strategy, certainly a fruitful one, but conceived in a *nominalist perspective* as a pure point of view on reality or a method. The extension of the framework of observation to the whole of the living world (and we could say to the whole of reality, if we consider that the physical real is just as relational)

²This refers to the long period of dependence of the human child compared to other mammals, and even other primates.

shows that interdependence is a *universal fact of nature* and that if “relational thinking” is a “profitable” or heuristic scientific strategy, it’s because, as Bourdieu occasionally says in a clearly realist vein, “*the real is the relational*”. But evoking Hegel, as Bourdieu does in some of his texts,³ by hijacking a formula from his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (“everything that is real is rational”), unfortunately contributes to weaken the original realist intention. For sociologists largely won over to the cause of relativist pluralism, this is all it takes to make the “relational” character just another sociological point of view.⁴ A greater epistemological realism, based on the observation that all the sciences of matter and life have never ceased to highlight the relational character of reality, leads us to believe that there is no social science other than relational, and that this is not an *option* among other possible options, but a basic postulate of all research.

Rather than playing with unrealistic philosophical references, it would be more appropriate to quote Darwin when he points out that “the structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all other organic beings, with which it comes into competition for food or residence, or from which it has to escape, or on which it preys”, giving the example of “the structure of the teeth and talons of the tiger” or again “that of the legs and claws of the parasite which clings to the hair on the tiger’s body” (Darwin 1962 [1859], 88).

Darwin also shows that the nature of these interdependent anatomical conformations between species is not due to competition or struggle alone. It can also be the product of mutually beneficial adaptations between species for the survival of one or other species, or even both at the same time. This is how a species of flower and a species of bee can, “either

³“The relational (rather than more narrowly ‘structuralist’) mode of thinking is, as Cassirer (1923) demonstrated in *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, the hallmark of modern science, and one could show that it lies behind scientific enterprises apparently as different as those of the Russian formalist Tynianov, of the social psychologist Kurt Lewin, of Norbert Elias, and of the pioneers of structuralism in anthropology, linguistics and history, from Sapir and Jakobson to Dumezil and Levi-Strauss. (If you check, you will find that both Lewin and Elias draw explicitly on Cassirer, as I do, to move beyond the Aristotelian substantialism that spontaneously impregnates social thinking.) I could twist Hegel’s famous formula and say that *the real is the relational*: what exist in the social world are relations—not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals, but objective relations which exist ‘independently of individual consciousness and will,’ as Marx said” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 96–97).

⁴We then speak of “relational sociologies”, clearly implying that non-relational sociologies could make sense (Steiner 2019).

simultaneously or one after the other, modified and adapted to each other in the most perfect manner, by the continued preservation of all the individuals which presented slight deviations of structure mutually favourable to each other" (Darwin 1962 [1859], 104). Nothing is more powerful for realizing the relational character of reality than to show that the anatomy and genetic characteristics of each species, which seem to belong to it and define it, are only the temporary result of the changing relationships it maintains with all living species (bacteria, plant or animal), as well as with all inorganic (or abiotic) conditions, such as climate, geography, technology and so on.

This law of interdependence can lead to behaviour that can be described as social in many animal species, and perhaps in all living things if we take into account the world of bacteria or plants. From the social life of bacteria, eusocial animals (such as ants, termites, wasps, hornets, bees and certain social spiders, to spotted hyenas, African wild dogs, eusocial shrimps, naked mole rats and Damara mole rats) and animal societies of all kinds, many species organize themselves socially in groups of varying size and durability. We observe more or less unequal exchanges of resources and information, mutual aid and cooperation, collective hunting, warning signals in the event of danger, exogamy, avoidance of incest, courtship, parental care and protection, cultural transmission, domination and social hierarchies, power struggles and so on. As André Leroi-Gourhan pointed out as long ago as 1964, human societies are simply the continuation of this evolutionary "strategy" or "solution". For him, social life did not appear with *Homo sapiens* but long before our species (Leroi-Gourhan 1964, 206).

This leads us to believe that, had they not fallen victim to the opposition between nature and culture, innate and acquired, biological and social, the social sciences could quite logically have aspired to be the study of all forms of society, human and non-human alike, and to encompass all the disciplines dealing with the question of social structures and behaviours, which today appear in dispersed order (ethology or behavioural ecology, palaeoanthropology, prehistory, history, anthropology and sociology). By cutting itself off from (1) non-human animal societies, (2) societies of the past and (3) societies that still sometimes exist but are classically studied by ethnology (societies long described as "primitive"), and by devoting itself essentially to the study of contemporary societies (state-controlled, urbanized, schooled, industrialized, capitalist), sociology in particular has lost all means of comparison (interspecific, inter-epoch,

inter-civilization) and has locked itself into a problematic presentism (Elias 1987, 135–151). By making humanity, against all evolutionary logic, an exception in the history of living beings—a purely historical, exclusively cultural species that never ceases to vary and therefore cannot give rise to a science like any other—it has embarked on the problematic path of nominalism, cultural relativism and scientific scepticism.

SOCIAL INTERDEPENDENCIES

Humans didn't invent social life, which is present to one degree or another, and in more or less varied and sophisticated forms, in every species, from the beginning of life on Earth with bacteria to the so-called higher mammals, via plants and all branches of the animal kingdom. Alfred Espinas's pioneering work on animal societies was therefore right on target, despite the poor development of naturalistic descriptions of the social life of different species in his day (Espinas 1877).

In the mid-twentieth century, Warder Clyde Allee recognized the author of *Des sociétés animales* (1877) as a precursor of the idea that no living being is solitary, and that, from the simplest to the most complex, all are immersed in some form of social life (Allee 1951, 10–11). For Espinas, social life was not an accidental condition characteristic of bees, ants or humans alone, but a “universal fact”. If sociology had been able to hear Espinas's point, it could have covered the whole range of social manifestations in the living world. Instead, along with all the other so-called social sciences, it has locked itself into the restricted confines of humanity, losing a whole series of comparative levers that would have enabled it not to attribute to culture all the characteristics of human societies.

Because what we've learned since then is that non-human animals are no less social than we are. They're simply less cultural, with no institutions or history (or a history so slow as to be almost imperceptible). They are also sometimes less cooperative than we are, who are “hyper-cooperative” beings (Burkart et al. 2014, 1–9) in our search for food, in helping with childbirth, in breeding children, in our division of tasks (division of labour), and so on.

MUTUALISM, COMMENSALISM, PARASITISM

First of all, sociality can begin at the level of relations between different species. Researchers have discovered that “the nesting of a bacterium within an archaea [unicellular prokaryotic microorganism] seems to have been one of the key moments in the history of life, the intertwining process that gave rise to all the cells with a nucleus inventoried on the planet” (Bapteste 2017, 136). At the origin of eukaryotic organisms (including animals), then, is “a bacterium nested within an archaeal host”, that is, the symbiosis of two initially distinct organisms.

Similarly, some of our properties as placental mammals were originally due to viruses that enabled us to carry babies (viviparous) rather than lay them (oviparous). To do this, viruses had to be used—domesticated to lower certain immune defenses and enable females to tolerate the presence of a foreign body inside them (the foetus). Of our DNA, 8% is viral DNA (mainly retrovirus genes). So viruses are not just around us; they’re inside us. They are part of who we are, and we owe our placental mode of reproduction to them.

Parasitoid wasps, on the other hand, have their eggs carried by other insects, notably caterpillars, by injecting virus elements that disarm the caterpillar’s immune defenses. The use of these viruses was random, but as they performed a function that was not dangerous, they were maintained and used perennially to perform these functions. This shows that as soon as life existed, it tried—an unintentional process, of course—to take advantage of other forms of life with which it coexisted. Interdependence is part of who we are.

First of all, sociality can begin, it’s important to note that, from the point of view of evolutionary theory, species in permanent relationships and which, in one way or another, depend on each other for their existence, co-evolve together. Darwin had already made this clear:

I am tempted to give one more instance showing how plants and animals remote in the scale of nature, are bound together by a web of complex relations. [...] Hence we may infer as highly probable that, if the whole genus of humble-bees became extinct or very rare in England, the heartsease and red clover would become very rare, or wholly disappear. The number of humble-bees in any district depends in a great measure upon the number of field-mice, which destroy their combs and nests [...]. Hence it is quite credible that the presence of a feline animal in large numbers in a district might

determine, through the intervention first of mice and then of bees, the frequency of certain flowers in that district! (Darwin 1962 [1859], 85–86)

This is how a flower and a bee can slowly adapt to each other and co-evolve. The different species enter into three main types of relationship, reminiscent of human social relations. It was Belgian zoologist Pierre-Joseph Van Beneden (1809–1894) who described these three main types of inter-species relationship as mutualism, commensalism and parasitism. To put it another way, in a vocabulary that makes it even easier to see the analogy between inter-species and intraspecies phenomena, we are dealing with either cooperation that benefits both parties or a balanced exchange between them, or domestication, non-penalizing or non-destructive use of one by the other, or penalizing or destructive exploitation.

In the first case, for example, what are known as holobionts (or super-organisms) are created between microorganisms and macroorganisms, which can be beneficial to both guests and hosts (*mutualism*). Mammalian intestinal microbiota, for example, are indispensable for proper digestion, which has led some biologists to argue that the individual organism is not a reality that can be detached, in its ordinary functioning, from the other organisms with which it is linked, and that true biological individuality is made up of holobionts: “Recognizing the ‘holobiont’—the multicellular eukaryote and its colonies of persistent symbionts—as a critically important unit of anatomy, development, physiology, immunology and evolution, opens up new avenues of investigation and conceptually challenges the way biological sub-disciplines have hitherto characterized living entities” (Gilbert et al. 2012, 326).⁵

In other cases, one species may take advantage of another without harming it, but without providing any particular benefit either (*commensalism*). And finally, in certain well-known cases, one of the two organisms acts as an exploiter, taking advantage of the other organism while at the same time harming it, with the degree of harm going as far as the death of the parasitized organism (*parasitism*).

In all cases, and at all levels, we see widespread interdependence and the interplay of relationships that are sometimes beneficial (mutual aid, exchange, mutualism) and sometimes negative (competition, exploitation). Éric Bapteste sums it up neatly with these words:

⁵ Cf. also Éric Bapteste’s fundamental work (2017) on the interdependence of species, particularly micro- and macroorganisms.

There are collectives everywhere in biology: from molecules to holobionts (and I'm not even mentioning ecology, which developed from the outset as a science of interactions). The generality of this observation prompts us to ask why this is so. In my opinion, the answer is simple. Collectives are everywhere, because nothing in the biological world is really capable of reproducing itself, nor of persisting on its own. Every biological entity influences or is influenced by something external to it. (Baptiste 2017, 226–227)

This shows that interdependence, which in no way presages the positive, ambivalent or negative nature of the relationship for the organisms involved, is as central to biology as it is to sociology, and that the so-called social between members of the same species is merely an extension of the necessity, observable at all scales, of inter-species interdependence for the preservation of life. In such a perspective, the concepts of “link” (between components), “types of interactions (causal, physical, chemical, etc.)” or “dependency relationship between components” are central (Baptiste 2017, 253). Relational thinking is therefore not just a figment of the imagination, but corresponds to very real phenomena of interdependence [*meta-fact of the interdependence of living organisms*].

AMOEBAE AND BACTERIA

In a text that is quite unique in his work, Claude Lévi-Strauss evokes the life of amebae, single-celled microorganisms that move by deforming themselves and forming membrane extensions called “pseudopods”. They can live solitary lives when the bacteria they feed on are not in short supply, but turn to a social mode when resources become scarce:

They converge and agglomerate by the tens of thousands, becoming a single body only one or two millimeters high, but a true society in which reigns a solidarity that Durkheim would have called organic. Individuals specialize, some forming a hollow tube to which dead amoebae serve as reinforcement. Others arrange themselves at the top of the tube in a globule filled with spores. These will disperse and give rise to a new generation on soil richer in food. In their social phase, in fact, amoebae have the ability—which they lack in their solitary state—to move towards sources of humidity and heat. As Durkheim would also have said in this case, society is more than the sum of the individuals that make it up. (Lévi-Strauss 2000, 495)

Commenting on this text, Maurice Godelier saw it as nothing more than an “amoebic farce” (Godelier 2010, 571). This reaction is fairly revealing of the gulf that has opened up between the natural and social sciences, with the divide being such that it is no longer conceivable to think that the social—which the vast majority of social scientists would be hard-pressed to define—could be anything other than a human reality. And yet, Lévi-Strauss was quite right to evoke those elementary forms of social life which show that social life becomes a vital necessity in certain circumstances. Cooperation, which is one of the two great foundations of social life along with competition, is therefore an evolutionary “strategy” for survival, and the social is not opposed to the biological; it is simply a particular way of functioning.

As André Leroi-Gourhan so lucidly wrote, the development of man’s cerebral apparatus could lead us to believe that he alone is capable of reciprocal altruism, mutualism or cooperation, and therefore of a social life worthy of the name, which would be a mistake “because, for several reasons, it must be admitted that even in its most primitive stages, the Anthropian is a social being”:

To demonstrate this, it is not necessary to have recourse to anthropoids, which, in various forms, live an organized social life, because the facts of grouping for mutual benefit in Mammals, more widely in Vertebrates and even more widely in the whole living world, are sufficiently numerous to show that there is, in social life, a fundamental biological option in the same way as in bilateral symmetry as opposed to radial symmetry, or in the specialization of the forelimb for prehension. (Leroi-Gourhan 1964, 205–206)

Living organisms of all kinds have had no choice but to cooperate in order to survive [*the (biological and social) law of conservation-reproduction-extension*]. Amoebae have aggregated to reach unattainable foodstuffs individually, just as humans have organized themselves collectively to look after the youngest dependents due to secondary altriciality, the oldest unproductive ones due to longevity, to help women give birth due to difficult parturition, to hunt collectively animals stronger or faster than themselves and so on, and to do all these things by dividing the work between men and women at first, and between different specialists as societies grew demographically and artefacts and knowledge accumulated and became more complex. The minimum of behavioural altruism implicit in all cooperation—between amoebae, between bacteria, between cells of

multicellular organisms as well as between plant or animal macroorganisms—is proof that the human species is merely prolonging what was put into practice long before culture, consciousness or morality appeared: “As a consequence, when we behave cooperatively today, at some personal sacrifice, and when we call that behavior altruistic, it is not the case that we humans have invented the cooperative strategy out of the kindness of our hearts. The strategy emerged strangely early and is now old hat” (Damasio 2018, 195).⁶

Biologists clearly prove Godelier’s sarcastic judgement wrong, showing, for example, that bacteria, those prokaryotic unicellular organisms that appeared over three billion years ago and on which amoebas feed, have a full social life, as cellular microbiologist Pascale Cossart points out, despite the fact that they have neither brains nor nervous systems:

Research into bacterial behaviour has shown that all bacteria, without exception, have a real social life, that they live in small groups or diverse assemblies that can be found on surfaces of all kinds, in the form of “biofilms”, and that they can live in harmony with many of their congeners, forming highly heterogeneous but stable groups (Cossart 2016, 11).⁷

Bacteria communicate with each other via chemical signals and can thus “recognize each other by species or by large families, and [...] distinguish themselves from one another” (ibid., 12), store traces of their previous confrontations with antibiotics and know how to protect themselves from them (Ben-Jacob et al. 2014: 366–372), coordinate to form biofilms,⁸ with a practical sense of their numbers (*quorum sensing*⁹), and thus resist aggression or, on the contrary, attack other bacteria or the animal or plant host that welcomes them through the production of toxins (“certain

⁶ Peter Kropotkin specified that if “association is found in the animal world at all degrees of evolution”, it can be noted that, “in proportion as we ascend the scale of evolution, we see association growing more and more conscious, It loses its purely physical character, it ceases to be simply instinctive, it becomes reasoned” (Kropotkin 1955 [1902], 53).

⁷ Cf. also Lyon (2007, 820–833).

⁸ A biofilm is a multicellular community of microorganisms (bacteria or microfungi, among others), linked together and adhering to a surface. This community is characterized by the secretion of an adhesive and protective film.

⁹ “Many pathogenic bacteria only express their virulence factors at high density. To do this, they perceive, thanks to receptors located on their surface, a molecule—an auto-inducer—that they and their congeners produce in the environment. The ability of bacteria to act together following the perception of this auto-inducer is called quorum sensing” (Cossart 2016, 63). Each bacterium is capable, thanks to the “accumulation of signaling molecules in an environment”, of estimating the “number of neighboring bacteria” (ibid., 75).

pathogenic bacteria only deploy their attack mechanisms if they are sufficiently numerous and their chances of success are high” (Cossart 2016, 12). They can also ally with each other or cohabit with others to form microbiota within macroorganisms (there are around 100,000 billion bacteria in a human intestine, whereas the human organism is made up of just 10,000 billion cells; McFall-Ngai 2014, 17794). As the authors of one study put it about cooperative processes between bacteria: “Understanding how bacteria identify their social partners and how they synchronize their behaviours to conduct multicellular functions is an expanding field of research” (Troselj et al. 2018, 923).

All these facts show that, as with amoebae, bacteria can alternate between solitary individual lives and highly coordinated social lives, particularly in situations of danger. The biofilm is a sort of premise of a multicellular organism: “Bacteria therefore do not act alone but in bands, as if they were part of a multicellular organism” (Cossart 2016, 76). And the social character of bacteria is so important that if we study them separately and in isolation from their natural ecosystem, we fail to grasp their mode of functioning, based both on modes of cooperation or competition between them and on relationships to other microorganisms as well as to the host that harbours them (*ibid.*, 89).¹⁰ All this—chemical communication between bacteria, collective grouping and cooperation in the event of aggression, defense of its territory or displacement in search of food—is not foreign to us, from the very point of view of the experience of human societies, and it would be “foolish, however, not to recognize that simple bacteria have governed their lives for billions of years according to an automatic schema that foreshadows several behaviors and ideas that humans have used in the construction of cultures” (Damasio 2018, 24).¹¹

Cooperation (mutual aid, sharing) and competition (struggle, combat) are facts present at the very cellular level, including within multicellular organisms whose proper functioning relies on the cooperation of cells that “accept” not to go it alone. Biological research shows that the various cells of the human body maintain a cooperative relationship, despite the fact that each of them has the potential to reproduce, proliferate and thus

¹⁰ “Only with the emergence of ecology in the second half of the 19th century did organic systems—comprised of individuals in cooperative and competitive relationships—complement the individual-based conceptions of the life sciences” (Gilbert et al. 2012, 326).

¹¹ Damasio also writes further that “even at the highest levels of sociocultural creation, there are vestiges of simple life-related processes present in the most humble exemplars of living organisms, namely, bacteria” (Damasio 2018, 59).

compete with the others. Cooperation ceases when, for one reason or another, the cell stops receiving the chemical signals that compel it to cooperate. We have a kind of balance between predispositions to cooperation and predispositions to competition, and, when competition wins out, some cells stop exchanging nutrients and chemical signals with others, proliferate and cause what are commonly known as cancers (Lecointre 2021).

Russian geographer and zoologist Peter Kropotkin was well ahead of his time when he wrote in 1902:

The first thing which strikes us as soon as we begin studying the struggle for existence under both its aspects—direct and metaphorical—is the abundance of facts of mutual aid, not only for rearing progeny, as recognized by most evolutionists, but also for the safety of the individual, and for providing it with the necessary food. With many large divisions of the animal kingdom mutual aid is the rule. Mutual aid is met with even amidst the lowest animals, and we must be prepared to learn some day, from the students of microscopical pond-life, facts of unconscious mutual support, even from the life of microorganisms. Of course, our knowledge of the life of the invertebrates, save the termites, the ants, and the bees, is extremely limited; and yet, even as regards the lower animals, we may glean a few facts of well-ascertained co-operation. (Kropotkin 1955 [1902], 9–10)

CONCLUSION

Throughout the long evolutionary history of living organisms, culture (and therefore cultural transmission) has emerged as an advantageous evolutionary solution, extending the adaptive role of natural selection. The permanent genetic mutation of organisms enables some of them to be better adapted to the conditions of a new environment, to live longer and reproduce more, passing on to their offspring favourable genetic characteristics in relation to the environment (if the latter is maintained long enough to benefit the carriers of these characteristics). This ongoing process of selecting organisms with the “right” genetic properties means that organisms can gradually evolve over a very long period of time. Evolution, which gradually leads to new species, involves many losers in the struggle for survival. Cultural adaptation, on the other hand, enables more immediate survival by providing greater flexibility in relation to variations in the environmental context than the simple play of partly random genetic mutations, with knowledge and know-how, as well as artefacts, making up for the organism’s weaknesses.

Just as the individual (actor or agent) in sociology is permanently modified (socialized) by the cultural contexts through which he passes, so the living organism in biology is selected by the biotic (all other species in a relationship of interdependence or interaction with the species in question) and abiotic (all the climatic, geological, physical and chemical conditions to which biological organisms are subjected) context-environment in which it lives, and which exerts a *selective pressure* on it. This analogy between sociological and biological explanatory formulas is no mere coincidence, but can be explained by the very properties of reality itself.

Moreover, if the organism and the socialized individual are modified under the effect of the environment or cultural contexts, they are not themselves without effect on these environments or contexts, which they contribute to producing or constructing through their own actions. The organism-environment and disposition-context dialectics make it necessary to consider the effects of organisms on their environments, and of socialized individuals on the contexts in which they act, as much as the effects, most often considered, of environments or contexts on organisms or dispositions.

The same phenomenon can be observed in physics when we distinguish an object (e.g. a particle) from the whole in which it is placed (e.g. an electric or magnetic field). Researchers are necessarily led to ask the same type of questions, concerning both the effect of the whole on the object (its “behavior” and specific properties) and, conversely, the effect of the object on the whole. In this sense, a physicist might just as well state the following formula: “Particle \Leftrightarrow Electric field = Particle behavior”. All these analogies are a reminder of the *fundamentally relational nature of reality*, far beyond the biotic real (*the meta-fact of the interdependence of living organisms*).

However, a crucial difference separates physics, which works with inorganic matter, from biology or sociology, which work with living realities: the fundamental characteristic of living organisms—whether considered as biological or social individuals—lies in the fact that they possess both an internal structure of their own, endowed with a relative autonomy of operation and drawing from the environment outside them the elements necessary for their preservation, a capacity to reproduce and a plastic capacity to adapt, and therefore to transform themselves according to their interactions with their environment. The relational and dialectical character of the biological and sociological formulas that relate and envisage the mutually transformative effects of an “inside” and an “outside”, of

an “internal structure” and an “external environment”, is therefore fundamentally rooted in the properties of what we call “life”.

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A Biotic Perspective

Harry Kunneman

In this chapter, I develop a biotic perspective on our existence. This biotic perspective begins not with humans, but with other forms of life, which I will hereafter refer to as ‘biots’.¹ This perspective foregrounds everything we humans share with other biots and what we have inherited from them. Humans are biots amidst other biots, both the countless ones that preceded us and the biots who live and interact with us here and now, in our bodies and beyond.

The *first* commitment of this biotic perspective is to improve our severely troubled relationships with other life forms. This undertaking is primarily a practical project, entailing the incremental development and enhancement of concrete collaborative practices, like organic farming and sustainable forestry. But it also needs strong cultural and philosophical support. Over the past centuries, our relationships with other biots have

¹I call them biots—*bioten* in Dutch—because this concept (although a little awkward) can be loaded with new content, over and against the restricted meaning that modern biology has given to the concept of life forms or ‘biota’. In the same vein, Donna Haraway speaks of ‘critters’ (Haraway 2016). ‘Biots’ has the advantage that it allows for an adjective: ‘biotic’.

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_10

become locked in the conceptual straitjacket of modern sciences and the attendant fixation on control over the life and work of other biots. In my view, that technical-scientific straitjacket is a significant causal factor in the ecological disaster of modernity. As long as humans remain locked into that straitjacket, only a limited segment of the broad range of their relational potential is addressed, specifically the part that analyses, explains, predicts and seeks control over others. To improve the relational quality of our dealings with the lives and work of other biots, we need access to the relational capacities that have been largely put out of action by the techno sciences and the neoliberal colonisation of the lifeworld.

In view of this, the biotic perspective that is outlined here, aims to provide a different vocabulary and new foundational concepts that promote cooperative connections with other life forms, as opposed to the objectification and the control that characterise prevailing approaches. I use the term ‘foundational concepts’ here in the sense of ‘Earth-directed’ concepts that help to bring our thinking ‘down to Earth’, as Bruno Latour (2018) would say. Such concepts guide us away from the human-centred heights of modern progress and the ecological destruction that is internally linked to it. They help us to ‘land’ on the Earth that carries us and to connect there on equal footing with all the biots that maintain the life-sustaining capacity of this singular planet day in and day out.

This brings me to the *second* commitment of the biotic perspective developed here. Contemporary human societies address only a limited part of the broad spectrum of relational possibilities to which we have access from our biotic history. Just as our relationships with other forms of life have become increasingly impoverished in the process of ongoing modernisation, so the development of modern societies has also led to a creeping psychological, relational and cultural impoverishment in the relationships between an ever-larger numbers of people. This phenomenon is exemplified by the continuing rise of the ‘oversized self’ (Kunneman 2005a) and by the dominance of narcissistic figures in the domains of politics, the economy and the ‘social’ media, topped off by the escalating polarisation in society. This relational impoverishment of social life is internally connected to the great difficulties experienced by citizens of modern societies to properly understand both themselves and other forms of life within the conceptual and relational straitjacket of the modern worldview. Hand in hand with the natural scientific image of a calculable and controllable reality, dominant cultural notions such as self-centred autonomy and individual success in life, confine many people to a limited segment of the

broad spectrum of relational possibilities offered to us by our biotic history.

In view of this dual commitment, the perspective developed here also offers some hope. It does not offer a reassuring message, but it does point to an alternative pathway to the prevailing self-destructive overdevelopment characteristic of modern societies. This alternative path does not delineate a clearly demarcated road, but rather a long, winding, disappearing and re-emerging path that, like the development of life itself, traverses perilous and marshy environments. This pathway, however, is not merely a figment of imagination. It emerges from very real capabilities stemming from the relational development work done by countless biots who preceded us.

The reality of this development work of other biots represents a modest but persistent source of hope and confidence, which is becoming increasingly important in my own life. The crux of the matter lies in recognising that we *are not alone* on that alternative path. Most bacteria, trees, plants, insects and fungi (to name but a few) offer concrete examples of biots whose lives are embedded in extensive networks of (tension-filled) relationships of cooperative exchange with other life forms. If humans would approach other life forms with more respect and would cooperate with them on equal footing, instead of exploiting them and making their lives miserable, most biots would be prepared to develop relationships of cooperative exchange with us too, for the simple reason that this would bring *them* a better life, including of course all the tensions inherently associated with cooperation between biots. This assertion is corroborated in the daily practice of many 'organic' farmers, foresters and water managers. Consequently, people are *not alone* in their efforts to realise an alternative developmental pathway that diverges from the modern, ecologically destructive highway.

The present chapter is organised as follows. As a prelude, I briefly discuss the pioneering work of the primatologist Frans de Waal. This work offers an important first step towards a biotic perspective on existence, albeit it remains limited to life forms that exhibit readily discernible affinities with humans. In the second, most comprehensive part of this chapter, I will build on the work of Frans de Waal to outline the contours of a biotic perspective that encompasses the existence of *all* life forms, including humans. To this end, I will formulate an alternative view of the origin and evolution of life, or rather the *development* of life. I prefer 'development' to 'evolution', because this last concept offers conceptual space for

including the active contribution of countless biots to the development of life; it offers space for acknowledging their own agency.

More specifically, I try to understand the development of life as a gradual expansion of the *relational* registers that became accessible with the emergence of the first life forms. Just as the registers of organs comprise a certain number of tone heights, so the relational registers that all biots have access to comprise specific relational capabilities or ‘forms of relating’ as I prefer to say. These relational registers manifest in two distinct forms. Firstly, there are the relational forms that emerged during the initial phase of life’s development and are common to all subsequent life forms. I designate these as the universal biotic registers.² Secondly, building on these universal registers and the forms of relating associated with them, multi-form branches within the ‘tangled tree of life’ (Quammen 2019) have taken shape in the further development of life, connected with specific relational forms and capacities for action. Finally, in the conclusion of this chapter, I look back on the genesis of my argument and look ahead to new possibilities that could open up when human biots stop thinking in terms of ‘we humans’ and start thinking and acting in terms of ‘we biots’.

DE WAAL AS PATHFINDER

The biotic perspective I outline here draws on many sources. But the work of the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal deserves special attention because he is by far the most important pioneer of this perspective. The following quote catchily summarises the main message of his many books: ‘If we look straight and deep into a chimpanzee’s eyes, an intelligent self-assured personality looks back at us. If they are animals, what must we be?’ (de Waal 2007). The answer to this question is not hard to find: if chimpanzees are intelligent and self-assured personalities, characterised by their own capacity to act, and we regard *them* as animals, then we must also begin to see *ourselves* as animals. This is a far-reaching idea, as the elevation of humans over ‘animals’ is a central part of the cultural identity of modern societies. But de Waal, goes one step further. He invites us to consider ourselves as animals among other animals. He also invites us to accept that

²Biologists speak in this context about the ‘last Common Ancestor’, or LUCA (Lane 2015). Their characterisation of LUCA focuses however on its genetic properties, while I propose to focus on the relational repertory of biots and advocate a view on the development of life that starts from this repertory.

central features of our humanity stem from a long evolutionary development process and were largely developed by other life forms long before humans appeared on the planet.

Perhaps most far-reaching in this regard is his thesis that morality was neither developed by humans nor bestowed on us by a supreme being. Instead, primates that appeared on Earth long before us already have a highly developed sense of justice (de Waal 2013). According to de Waal, this is therefore best regarded as an ancient trait that can also be found in other mammals such as elephants and dogs, and probably in many other animals as well. De Waal distinguishes between two levels, or orders, of feelings of justice. The first order concerns ‘one-to-one morality’. This involves behaviour in which animals show friendly behaviour towards others, curb their aggression towards them and towards family members, and try to settle conflicts that nevertheless arise and show caring behaviour towards each other. On this basis, de Waal states, ‘Moral law does not come from above, nor is it derived from reasoned principles; rather, it stems from values that have been ingrained in us since the beginning of time’ (de Waal 2013, 188). This first-order justice is complemented by a second-order sense of justice. This relates to a just distribution of *resources* and is expressed in feelings of indignation and resentment when equal efforts are unequally rewarded and resources unequally distributed. De Waal adds that this second-order morality is limited to the ‘in-group’. Generalising it to *all* humans, beyond one’s own family, relatives and friends, is a recent development. So far only humans have succeeded to some extent in this generalisation.

Given our existential kinship with other primates, the work of de Waal is also an important source of insight for a better understanding of the complexity of human beings themselves. We have *received* life-defining existential registers such as partner relationships, sex, parenthood, relationships with relatives and friends and all the—often-painful—relational entanglements connected with conflict, struggle and oppression. We have not chosen or constructed these but have inherited them a long biotic history. If we would understand this history better, we could perhaps develop a little more compassion for ourselves and for other human beings. There is a lot of relational complexity from our biotic history that comes together *in intensified form* in human existence. As a result, being human is not easy. Both the work of Frans de Waal and my biotic broadening of his work could maybe foster that important awareness and the compassion brought by it.

A NEW BEGINNING

From a biotic perspective, society encompasses the coexistence of *all* life forms on Earth. Society began as soon as the first life form succeeded in spawning offspring. With that feat, relationships *between* biots came into the world, that is to say: society. Thus, for the improvement of society, the agency of other biots and the relational capacities in which that agency takes shape are as important as those of humans. *They* have developed these capacities in a long process of trial and error, and we humans have inherited our relational capabilities for the most part from biots who lived before us.

To flesh out this biotic perspective, I develop a vocabulary that helps to clarify the fundamental affinities between all life forms reaching back to the beginning of life. To avoid misunderstandings, I emphasise that I am not concerned with *explaining* this beginning. Although there is a great deal of scientific knowledge available about the origin of life on Earth and the circumstances that helped make it possible, within the natural sciences this origin itself is still at its core an enigma, notwithstanding the impressive efforts of great minds to unravel it (Schrödinger 1943; Russel and Martin 2004; Lane 2015).

I don't presume at all to solve this riddle. Instead, I am looking for a new 'take' on the beginning of life, starting from the assumption that the new possibilities connected with the emergence of life have a *relational* character. Before the emergence of life on Earth, just under four billion years ago, there were only interactions between material entities on Earth, not relationships. The first forms of life brought new relational registers into the world, which gradually expanded over the course of life's development.³ As stated above, my concern is not with an explanation of the origin of life, but with a perspective on its nature and development that does justice both to the agency of the first life forms, and reveals the deep kinship between those first biots and humans. In light of these stakes, I attempt to characterise the first stage in the development of life in terms of the emergence of three relational registers and associated forms of relating that the first biots—the bacteria and archaea—brought into the world and

³In this chapter, I focus on the first stage in the development of life and the emergence of the universal relational forms in this stage. In future work I hope to sketch the two consecutive stages, leading eventually to the emergence of human biots.

have since been shared by all subsequent life forms. I designate these universal registers as ‘*housing*’, ‘*persisting*’, ‘*transferring*’ and ‘*social action*’.

Housing

The first relational register concerns the housing of biots, understood in a double sense: on the one hand, their housing in the sense of their ‘casing’; on the other hand, their housing, understood as an activity, as housing-work. Biologically, this ‘casing’ refers to the cellular form common to living beings. That form is characterised by partially permeable walls that both protect and enable exchange. As soon as that form begins to harbour life, we can speak of the ‘housing’ of biots. Housing is understood here as a thoroughly relational activity.

As an entry point for the further explication of this relational character, I use the Latin verb ‘*fero*’. This means ‘to carry’ or ‘to bring’. I try to elaborate the relational nature of housing through several related verbs that all share the root *fero*, that is, ‘carry’ or ‘bring’. The housing of biots *carries* their lives, but also constantly *brings* something new into the world through the various relational forms that are inseparable from housing as an activity. In what follows, I will speak of ‘forms of relating’, to emphasise this active nature. Relations emerge from and are maintained through the relational work of biots. Housing is the first relational register I distinguish. Just as an organ has several registers characterised by a set of notes with a particular pitch, relational registers consist of a set of interconnected modes of relating. Housing as an activity consist of three modes of relating that I designate as ‘referring’, ‘differing’ and ‘preferring’.

The *first* mode of relating is *referring*. That term is derived from the Latin *referre*, which literally means ‘to bring back’, or ‘to bring home’. The related expression *refert mihi* means ‘this concerns me’, or ‘this matters to me’. By extension, I understand establishing a relationship (or ‘relating’ for short) as forming a connection with something that matters to a specific biot.

The *second* mode of relating associated with the housing of biots is ‘*differing*’, that is, making distinctions, making differences. To be able to bring something home, it must first be designated as x or y. Making such distinctions is closely related to the *third* mode of relating that characterises the housing of biots, namely exercising preferences, ‘*preferring*’. Exercising preferences for certain things and processes also means ignoring or rejecting others. Biots are engaged in a constant process of selecting

what matters to them and what does not matter, what they ignore, or, in other words, what is outside their current field of reference.

The first three modes of relating are closely related. Biots' referencing, discriminating and preferring together determine their current 'field of reference', that which currently matters and does not matter to them.⁴ This elaboration also implies that biots' housing is inextricably linked to their field of reference. I will come back to this.

Persisting

The second relational register is closely related to the first. It concerns *persisting* in housing. This persistence register includes three specific modes of relating that I refer to as working, encountering and remembering/anticipating. As an introduction to the further elaboration of these different modes, I will first reflect on the necessity of persisting. Why was it a problem for the first biots to persevere in their housing at all?

The main reason was that the casings of the first biots were not only very small, but also extremely fragile. They were exposed to permanent subversive interference and to internal perturbations that made it difficult for biots to persist in their housing. Seen from the point of view of modern physics, they had to contend with a peculiar characteristic of our universe, namely 'entropy'. In simple terms, this is a measure of disorder in any system. According to the second law of thermodynamics, disorder (in a closed system) *inevitably* increases. The order that exists within it seeps away so to speak. This phenomenon is a daily experience for anyone caring for a household but also imposes itself forcefully when people 'age' and finally die. This characteristic of our universe can also be formulated as follows: ordered states are less likely within it than disordered states, or conversely: in the long run, disorder is more likely than order. Or again: in the collection of all possible states in the world, the probability of disordered states is much higher than the probability of orderly states. This characteristic of our universe has profound implications for living things. Their house is a paragon of order, and as such forms an improbable physical configuration that sooner or later will collapse under entropic pressure.

⁴This concept is closely related to what Jacob von Uexküll (1934) famously designates as the 'Umwelt' of living beings. The notion of 'field of reference' however foregrounds the relational work involved.

This brings me to the importance of *time* for persisting. The collapsing of biots has a temporal dimension. I distinguish between three dimensions of time that are connected to each other in the housing of biots. To start with there is physical time and the entropy connected with it; second is the ‘lifetime’ of biots—the amount of time during which they can resist the entropic pressure and persist in their housing; and third is the history of life, understood as everything that happens to, in, with and through biots. Seen in this way, the history of life begins as soon as the first forms of life manage to locally suspend the entropic pressure associated with physical time. In doing so, they give rise to two distinct forms of time within physical time: on the one hand, their own lifetime, and on the other, through that lifetime, the history of life as a whole. This means that the lifetime of individual biots serves as a bridge between physical time and the history of life as a whole.

Against this backdrop, I provisionally define the persistence of biots as everything they do to stay in time, understood as the intersection between physical time, the lifetime of individual biots and the history of life as a whole. This ‘staying in time’ involves three different but closely connected modes of relating, namely (a) *housing-work*, (b) *encountering* and (c) *remembering/anticipating*.

Housing-Work

The first mode of relating by which the first biots managed to suspend entropy locally, I denote as ‘housing-work’. ‘Work’ or ‘labour’ is usually defined by physicists in terms of ‘force’ and ‘distance’: for example, the force exerted by a steam engine in moving a train of a given mass at ten kilometres per hour over a hundred metres. As the French physicist Carnot first demonstrated, energy losses inevitably occur in the process. In the case of a steam train, this mainly involves the heat given off by the engine to the surrounding air, the air resistance experienced by the train and friction losses via the wheels and rails. Therefore, stokers had to constantly throw new coals on the fire. In the case of modern civilisation, this is about the warming of the atmosphere and oceans, as a result of burning ever-increasing amounts of coal, oil and gas. As with the steam train, the energy lost in the process can no longer be used to perform labour. That energy has leaked away, or ‘dissipated’, as Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (1984) say.

The first living creatures—and all biots after them—were directly confronted with this leakage and the associated temporality of their housing.

They had to work not only to bring in the energy needed to build and maintain their casings, but also to compensate for the inevitable leakage of some of that energy again and again. The biotic work at issue here, however, has a different character from the work that a steam engine or a nuclear power plant can provide, although it is inextricably linked to this physical work.

To mark this difference terminologically, I distinguish from now on between ‘work’ and ‘housing-work’. By ‘work’ I mean all the processes and events that are analysed in modern physics in terms of the characteristics of elementary particles and their role in the interactions between atoms and molecules, and in terms of the four fundamental forces of nature. By ‘housing-work’, I mean all the work that biots do to safeguard the integrity of their housings and keep them in time. With the hyphen in ‘housing-work’, I try to express that this biotic work is *inextricably* linked to different forms of physical work and to physical and chemical processes and events.

Building on Richard Sennett’s (2009) pioneering book on craftsmanship, I consider the housing-work of biots, and the relations established in this work with physical and chemical processes and entities, to be the primal form of *craft*. Just as the work of woodworkers, sculptors, architects and teachers is characterised by an indissoluble bond with their ‘material’, living beings maintain an indissoluble bond with the specific combinatorial and transformational possibilities of photons, atoms and molecules. Herein lies the (partial) *correctness* of modern physics and molecular biology in this respect: the housing-work of biots is always entangled with material processes and events.⁵ But housing-work also involves something else: it is inextricably connected with staying in time.

If we understand the housing-work of biots as a craft characterised by an indissoluble link to physical and chemical processes and event, then it becomes clear that the housing of living beings is connected, from the outset, with a specific form of knowledge—namely *know-how*. An obvious example of this know-how concerns all the craft skills associated with the ‘metabolism’ of biots, particularly the ability of early life forms to distinguish and engage specific carriers of energy, store this energy in specific molecules, and use it through oxidation and reduction to form amino

⁵For this reason, both idealism and materialism fall short, in my opinion, for understanding the development of life. In different ways, they both miss out on the essential *feedback loops* between what they separate as mind/idea on the one hand and matter on the other.

acids and nucleotides, as well as to repair damage to their membranes. Another example would be their ability to establish connections between amino acids through so-called peptide bonds, to form the proteins that play a crucial role in all kinds of building and transformation processes within cells. Or their ability to use catalysts to accelerate chemical reactions that would not otherwise take place. In other words: the first life forms were *molecular virtuosos*. Or to be more precise: they gradually *developed* into molecular virtuosos over tens of millions of years. That development process—like all other craft learning processes—was characterised by many failures and dead ends (Margulis 1999), but also by unexpected successes and discoveries that made new steps possible.

Encountering

This brings me to ‘encountering’, the second mode of relating by which I aim to clarify how biots can locally suspend the entropic pressure. In view of the modern emphasis on production and manufacturing, it cannot be overemphasised that biots’ housing-work is inseparable from everything they encounter and can relate to. As already indicated, the universe biots find themselves in confronts them with entropic pressures regardless. But that same universe also offers them all kinds of ‘life-friendly’ constellations and configurations that contribute to their perseverance and make their development possible. Newborn humans, for instance, are happy to encounter oxygen when they start breathing.

A concrete example of this ‘bio-friendliness’ encountered by biota on Earth (Hertog 2024) is the cellular shape, which—as I have already mentioned—plays a crucial role in the persistence of all biotopes on the planet. This shape is based on the ability of specific molecules, called lipids, to spontaneously form a semi-permeable membrane under certain conditions (Meer 2008).

This membranous envelope is vitally important because, on the one hand, it provides protection against disruptive interference, thereby helping to enable complex molecular transformations within the cell. On the other hand, it enables relationships and interactions through the wall—in other words, it facilitates ‘metabolism’ through the cell wall. Biots encounter that life-friendly form; they did not produce it or bring it into being. They have encountered it, refer to it and *work* with it. The ability of biots to locally suspend entropic pressure and maintain their housing thus depends as much on their craft as on the life-friendly conditions they encounter on Earth.

Remembering and Anticipating

This brings me to the third mode of relating through which I seek to elucidate how the first biots managed to keep their fragile, physically improbable casings in time. The issue here is the expansion of the time domain within which biots can relate and differentiate and within which they can perform operations beyond the here and now of their actual operations. This expansion occurs through the emergence of two crucial capacities, namely *remembering* and *anticipating*.

The biologist Lynn Margulis (whose work has been particularly important to my own thinking) says in one of her books that the very first life forms probably had hundreds of millions of years of failed attempts behind them before (in my terms) the first biotic housing reached a certain stability and they were able to temporarily suspend entropic pressure (Margulis 1999, Margulis & Sagan 2002). These failures were related to the fact that the ‘proto-biots’ had to regularly reinvent many crucial processes, such as protein formation and combination, through trial and error. Since most of the chemical reactions relevant to biots are critically time-dependent, delays thus occurred that led to the breakdown of essential reaction chains.

This changed not only with the discovery that catalysts allowed to significantly speed up reaction chains, but also by one of the most important inventions of the proto-biots: the ability to record and remember. After many dead ends, they discovered the potential of a complex molecule called RNA, to be used as a kind of ‘recipe book’, in which they could record the complex operations for forming proteins and other essential molecular combinations and recall them at the appropriate time. This represented a major expansion of the persistence of biots that to this day determines the flourishing of all life forms

The same is true of the capacity for anticipation, that is, the ability to refer to *future* events. That capacity constitutes an important extension of the different modes of relating I elaborated above: to refer, to differ and to prefer. This ‘relational trio’ is exercised in anticipation not only with respect to entities and processes that presently occur, in short ‘present events’, but also with respect to *future* entities and processes. This creates a significant expansion of their field of reference. The biologist Robert Rosen (1985), an important inspiration here, gives a striking example of this from the life of ‘deciduous trees’ as they are called, which shed their leaves as winter approaches. These trees use the decrease in light as an indicator of the arrival of winter long *before* it arrives. Once biots acquired

the ability to anticipate, they were thus able to perform operations *in their present lifetime* regarding events that concern them but *have not yet* taken place in physical time.

Transferring

This brings me to the third relational register shared by all life forms: transferring, understood as the transfer of the housing, craft repertoire and generative capacity of a biot to a new biot. This transfer makes a crucial contribution to the ability of biots to withstand entropic pressure locally and remain in time despite their fragility

Biologists speak of ‘cell-division’ here. In this process, a biot generates a new biot by dividing itself and thereby transferring its own housing, its own craft repertoire and its own generative capacity to a new biot, a new ‘fellow in craft’, or ‘fellow’ for short. Equipped with the same housing as a central reference point, this fellow can actively continue the craft practised by the preceding cell, including the ability to bring a new fellow into the world itself. I will use the term ‘fellow creation’ to designate this ability because this concept has several advantages above the usual notion of ‘cell division’. First, ‘fellow creation’ emphasises the creative character of the process by which one fellow brings forth another, who in turn brings forth another, and so on: one becomes two, two become four, four become eight and so on. It is this generative process that allows all forms of life to stay in time. Second, the concept of fellow creation underscores the transfer of, and continuity in, the craft repertoire between successive fellows. And, finally, the term ‘fellow’ also allows for an alternative to the usual term ‘species’, namely ‘fellowships’. This concept emphasises that the continuity between the members of the same fellowship is not simply based on the fact that they share the same DNA, but on the fact that they share the *entire* craft repertoire of the fellowship involved, for example the repertoire of bacteria.

The development and flourishing of life on Earth were made possible by the emergence of this new and amazing crafting ability, the ability of ‘fellow creation’, ensuing in fellowships. Biologists have developed very detailed knowledge of the various steps and molecular transformations involved in ‘cell division’. The emphasis here is on the transfer of DNA to new cells. In fact, in the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution, based in part on the discovery of the ‘double helix’ and on the new possibilities of

reading and manipulating the genomes of living beings, it seemed for a long time that only the DNA of biots was important in the transfer between cells.⁶

This one-sided picture has now been considerably nuanced by the emergence of so-called epigenetics. Whereas genetics focuses on the role of DNA and on changes in the ‘genome’, epigenetics focuses on all the factors that influence the *expression* of genes. This expression is, simply put, the conversion of a genetic ‘recipe’, as laid down in specific genes or combinations thereof, into executable instructions for the assembly of specific proteins. The great ‘discovery’ of epigenetics is that, in many cases, this is determined by ‘additional’ factors and processes that not only determine whether genes and specific combinations of genes become active or blocked but also affect the mutation rate of specific genes and groups of genes. These additional, ‘epigenetic’ processes are directly related to the development of the biots in question (Weele, van der 1999). A crucial difference from the genes on which they act is that these epigenetic processes can also be influenced by ‘environmental factors’.

The advent of epigenetics represents a major step forward from the one-sided, gene-fixed view of all that is involved in generative transmission and fellow creation. However, epigenetics shares an important limitation with the gene-centred view of such transmission. Both paradigms involve only interactions, not relationships in the biotic sense of the term that I elaborated above. When housing-work and anticipation are also considered, it becomes clear that cell division entails more than the transfer of the genetic recipe book. Rather, during cell division the *whole* craft of the dividing cell, its *agency*, is transferred. Hence, I speak of ‘fellow creation’ rather than ‘cell division’. In the case of fellow creation, a new actor comes into being that is immediately capable of acting as a competent fellow. The new cell possesses the entire craft repertoire of the preceding cell and can also—within certain limits—deal with unexpected, *unanticipated* events and developments that fall outside the reference field and repertoire of the preceding biot.

In my opinion, this is the most important answer that the first life forms developed to the problem of entropy, their response to the inevitable

⁶The pinnacle, or rather the low point, of this fixation on the role of DNA is the well-known book by Richard Dawkins (1976), *The Selfish Gene*. For a much more sophisticated view on the development of life, doing justice to the ability of living beings to adequately deal with unanticipated events, see West-Eberhard (2003).

degradation and undermining of any form of order that seems to be as ingrained in our universe as its life-friendliness. As mentioned above, the first cellular casings were not only very small, but also very fragile and vulnerable. Moreover, the first life forms, the ‘bacteria’, had to also contend with difficult living conditions, in part because of the enormous pressure of the water in the deep oceans in which the first life forms probably originated. Nevertheless, for nearly four billion years from the time the first biots mastered fellow creation, life has continued to grow, flourish and diversify. Life persists even though biots are a very unlikely physical configuration. Four billion years is a considerable period, both historically and cosmologically. This persistence in time, both of individual biots and of biotic fellowships, is based primarily on the ability of almost all living beings to transfer both their own housing and craft repertoire to new fellows, *including* the ability to further develop, expand and renew that repertoire from new references, differentiations and preferences, including their own ability to learn. With the creation of fellows, new biots enter the world who have both mastered the craft of housing and can transfer the associated knowledge and the capacities to act to a new fellow.

Social Action

The fourth relational register that takes shape in the first stage of life’s development derives directly from the third register, the fellow creation and transmission of repertoires that takes place in the process. As soon as fellow creation arrives, a new type of relationship can take shape, and with it new associated modes of relating and acting, namely social relationships and social actions. Initially, these are only relationships between biots from the same fellowship. After the emergence of new fellowships with a different repertoire, these social relations begin to include relations between biots from different fellowships, biots who do not share the same craft repertoire.

In the introduction to this chapter, I emphasised that seen from a biotic perspective ‘society’ does not only include the social relations between humans. If the housing-work of all biots is the starting point, then society includes the relationships between *all* biots on Earth, both those between biots from the same fellowship, for example between dolphins, and those of different fellowships, for example between trees and bacteria. I use the terms ‘social’ and ‘social action’ here in accordance with Max Weber’s classic definitions. When I checked that definition in my 50-year-old copy

of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, I was pleasantly surprised. For it turned out that his definitions could be transplanted without friction from the actions of people and social relations between people to the actions of and relations between other biots. I take this as an interesting indication of the fundamental affinities between humans and other biots: we are all social beings.

Weber defines ‘action’ as human behaviour (‘Verhalten’) to which the person involved attaches a *subjective meaning*. ‘Social action’, he then continues, ‘is to be understood a form of action which, according to the meaning the acting person attaches to that action, is related to the behaviour of *others* and is oriented towards it in its course’ (Weber 1972, 1). In view of my argument thus far, it seems justified to transplant these definitions directly to the actions of biots and to their interrelationships. The social actions of biots among themselves can then be described, following Weber’s definition, as all forms of actions that are related to the actions of *other biots* by way of the references and preferences of those involved.

As soon as the first biots develop social relations, they also develop a new *social repertoire* tailored to their relationships with other biots. Further adaptations then emerge in their housing that are directly related to those social relations, as I will elaborate below. From that moment on, the history of life includes not only everything that happens on, in, with and by biots. Moreover, that history also includes everything that happens *between* biots, both between biots from the same fellowship and between biots from different fellowships. I will elaborate this new relational register in terms of three new modes of relating to other biots: (A) *Cooperation*; (B) *Residue processing*; and (C) *Opposition*.

Cooperation

Within the bacterial fellowship, specialised sub-fellowships soon emerged, sharing the same housing but characterized by a different field of reference and a different housing-repertoire. With all the sub-fellowships within it, the bacterial fellowship is still the largest, oldest and most cooperative society to be found on Earth (Whitman et al. 1998). Alongside the bacterial society, a different fellowship of unicellular biots soon emerged, which not only had a different repertoire than the bacteria, but also different casings. These are called ‘archaea’ by biologists. The membranes of the biots within this new fellowship had a different molecular composition and their metabolism differed greatly from that of bacteria (Gribaldo et al. 2006). Within this second fellowship a variety of specialised

sub-fellowships emerged that developed divergent reference fields and repertoires in relation to changing material conditions and potential resources, some of which were passed on to new archaea. Bacteria and archaea together are referred to by biologists as ‘microbes’. I will henceforth refer to these two fellowships of unicellular organisms as the ‘microbiots’. The flourishing of these microbiots was partly due to all the forms of cooperation and exchange they developed, both among themselves and with other bacteria and archaea, and—later in the development of life— with biotic fellowships very different from them.

A first example of cooperation between bacteria are the ‘bacterial films’ that they construct together under specific conditions. These are very thin physical structures, a kind of mini mats, which help them to adhere as a group to specific surfaces, such as rocks, and thus provide them with protection. Because making them is beyond the individual abilities of bacteria, they have found a solution to this that biologists call ‘quorum sensing’ (Miller and Bassler 2021). When the formation of a biofilm benefits their own housing-work, bacteria secrete specific molecules and then determine their concentration in the neighbourhood of their housing. When enough bacteria do the same, the density of these molecules around their housing reaches a threshold, and they all start building part of the shared biofilm.

A second example of cooperation between biots from the same fellowship is the exchange of specific genetic recipes. Biologists refer to this as ‘horizontal gene transfer’, or *HGT* for short (Daubin and Szöllosi 2016). In this process, bacteria exchange so-called plasmids, via a ‘tube’ that one of them forms and temporarily connects the housings of two bacteria. Plasmids are small molecular structures that contain individual strands of RNA or DNA, in which specific recipes for assembling proteins and other important molecules are stored. Through this exchange, they gained access to specific genetic recipes of other bacteria and the associated repertoire. By developing this fellow-oriented skill, bacteria were able to greatly enhance their persistence, particularly their ability to respond to new conditions. The ability of so-called resistant bacteria in today’s hospitals to withstand the destructive force of large doses of antibiotics depends largely on the rapid sharing of genetic recipes until, in the process, one or more plasmids emerge that allow them to survive these attacks.

These examples of cooperation among bacterial fellows illustrate that in relations of fellowship, biots’ ability to refer, differ and prefer takes on a new form. In addition to the material and energetic events and processes that concern them, and in addition to all the regulatory and tuning

processes connected with their housing, their field of reference now starts to include the presence, housing-work and repertoire of other biots within their own fellowship. Their action then not only acquires a social character in Weber's individual-oriented sense (the 'subjective sense' of that action) but also begins to include *reciprocity*: It becomes a form of social action in which fellows reciprocally align their references and preferences.

This example of cooperation from the first phase of life's development was the starting point for the development of a literally innumerable number of reciprocal cooperative links between biots. First between biots from the same fellowship and, later, after differentiation within that fellowship and the formation of new fellowships, also between fellowships with a very different housing and a very different repertoire. For example, the special cooperation that arose much later in the development of life between flowering plants and the insects that pollinate them, or between trees and shrubs on the one hand and bacteria and fungi in the soil on the other. Those bacteria and fungi release important minerals for trees and shrubs and receive essential nutrients in return.

Residue Processing

The second mode of relating in which social relations between biots take concrete shape is the processing of residues. The metabolism of biots always results in residues in two forms. First, there are the material residues of their own metabolism which are secreted by biots because they are unusable for them. These excrements can, however, be very important for other biots, as a source of energy or as building material. Since they consist of molecular compounds resulting from biotic processes, they often form ready-to-use chunks for their fellows and for other life forms, requiring much less transformation work than unprocessed molecular compounds.

The same is true for the second form: the processing of what remains of the housing of other biots that have succumbed to entropic pressure. For specialised 'scavengers', these remains are a kind of 'ready-to-eat' meals, requiring comparatively little energy to convert into useful nutrients and building materials. In other words, biots can also contribute via their remains to the persistence of other biots.

A striking example of this contribution, linking cooperation and residual processing, is provided by the actions of a number of bacteria that produce an enzyme during their lifetime, a so-called Lon-protease, which *after their death* helps to break down large proteins from their former housing into small peptides that can be easily taken up and processed by

other bacteria (Gibson et al. 2025). Above, I described the anticipation of biots as the ability to perform operations *in the present* with respect to events that matter them but have *not yet* occurred. This example shows a remarkable extension of that, in the form of anticipating the support of biots from the same fellowship *after* their own death.

Opposition

The various forms of opposition between biots are the third mode of relating in which the register of social relations between biots takes concrete shape. As in the case of cooperation, this form of social action starts to play an important role in biots' existence early in life's development. I distinguish three modes of opposition,⁷ which also occur in combination: (1) *parasitism/predation* and *resistance*; (2) *competition*; and (3) *displacement*. Before elaborating on these forms of opposition between biots, I will first examine the relational complexity that arises with the emergence of opposition as a social relationship.

I suggest that the ethical and moral issues with which humans as well as other primates (de Waal 2005, 2007) have been grappling for so long have their origins in the emergence of parasitism/predation and the development of competition in the relationships between the microbiots from which all other life forms emerged. As a background to the elaboration of the various forms of opposition between biots in the remainder of this section, I would like to elaborate this idea using some key concepts from the ethics of Paul Ricoeur. Not only because he is a great and influential thinker but also because his ethics has helped me to realise how much his work is bound up with the anthropocentrism of modern humanism.

The starting point of his ethics is the idea that a good life takes shape in relationships 'with and for others'. Relationships between friends (or between partners, sisters and brothers, or often also between parents and children) are, for Ricoeur, the paradigmatic example for this, especially the reciprocal empathy and care involved. What I liked so much about this ethical perspective is its relational nature. This hinges on the feedback loop that is central to it: the very experience of those for whom others are doing

⁷In the (more extensive) Dutch version of this chapter, I use the term 'tegen-werking' (literally: 'working-against'). In English, the term 'opposition' seems more appropriate than, for instance, 'antagonism', since there is no emotion or hostility involved between microbiots. They simply work against others in order to persist in their own housing. If cooperation were more beneficial, they would cooperate instead.

good, their own references and preferences towards the other, are not just consonant with those of the other. Moreover, that consonance is *reciprocated*. Friendship is characterised by the shared experience of ‘doing each other good’. Friendship comes under severe pressure as soon as one of us loses this experience and this reciprocity threatens to be broken.

When this human-centred perspective is broadened to a biotic perspective that foregrounds the work and relationships between *all* biots, two important shifts occur. First, from the perspective of the relations between microbiots, it is not friendship but *cooperation* between biotic fellows that provides the paradigm for reciprocal relations. The friendship relations that Ricoeur focuses on can then be seen as a special, so to speak ‘work-exempt’ form of the original relations between cooperating biotic fellows.

Second, and more importantly, it then becomes clear that relations between biots are characterised by relational complexity very early in the development of life. I suggest that the ethical and moral questions with which human beings struggle are not only related to the question of how to develop empathetic and caring relationships with others and from there arrive at a just society, as Ricoeur has it. The ethical and moral questions he foregrounds are also internally linked to the reality of power, exploitation and subjugation between people. These forms of mutual opposition emerge early in the development of life and have been a daily, troublesome reality for most biots ever since.

In thinking about ‘the good life with and for others’ (Ricoeur 1992, 171–202), I believe that this troublesome reality should not be relegated to the background but should be brought fully into the foreground from the very beginning. This is why it is so important in ethical questions not to start with people but to adopt instead a perspective that centres on the fundamental affinities between people and other forms of life, starting with the first biots.⁸ Instead of pinning our hopes on the empathetic and caring capacities of humans, as Paul Ricoeur does, or on equal communicative relations and dialogical exchange between humans themselves, as Jürgen Habermas (1986) and many others do, it is then possible to face not only the realities of power and exploitation between humans themselves but also the fact that relations between humans and almost all other biots are primarily dominated by power, exploitation and subjugation. When these realities are included, the relational *complexity* that character-

⁸ Thus, the title of Ricoeur’s (1992) major ethical treatise *Oneself as Another* takes on a different, biotic meaning.

ises the relations between almost all life forms becomes central, rather than the relational univocality of empathic and caring relationships. Microbiots have dealt with that complexity early on, in the form of the entanglement of cooperation on the one hand and parasitism, predation and competition on the other.

Parasitism/Predation and Resistance

The emergence of various forms of opposition among biots early in the development of life is quite understandable: the casings of biots belonging to other fellowships constitute a kind of readymade meal. In this context, biologists speak of ‘auto-trophic’ and ‘hetero-trophic’ life forms, or ‘self-feeding’ and ‘feeding by way of others’. The first category is capable of independently unlocking material sources of energy and material. Examples of autotrophic life forms include bacteria, archaea, algae, fungi, plants and trees. The second category, the ‘hetero-trophic’ life forms use either the remains of other biots as a source of food and material, or the casings and/or the working capacity of living biots.

Once life differentiates into distinct fellowships of biots that do not acknowledge each other as fellows, parasitism and predation arise as a solution to the basic problem that all living beings face: to persevere against entropic pressure in their housing. Forcibly appropriating the housing and labour of other biots is an attractive solution to this problem, because much of the work has already been done by the other. The latter has developed a specific repertoire, tapped into energy sources, created proteins and catalysts and developed a recipe book. The essence of parasitism and predation, then, is that the biots in question forcibly *appropriate* the work of other biots and their results, thereby degrading or destroying the other’s persistence and fully adapting their own housing and repertoire accordingly. In the terminological distinction between ‘autotrophs’ and ‘heterotrophs’, this coercion disappears into the background, and with it, the problem of *power* as a central feature of relations between biots.

As with the concept of ‘social’, I turn here to Max Weber’s classic definition. In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, he defines power as ‘the opportunity, within the framework of a social relationship, to carry through one’s own will, even in the face of opposition from another’ (Weber 1972: 29). This is very precise. If the concept of ‘own will’ in this definition is replaced by the notions of references and preferences, I think this definition can also be applied to power relations between micro-biots. As Weber emphasises, *resistance* (and the associated repertoire I would add) is central here.

Before parasitism and predation began to play a role in relations between biots, entropic pressure alone was responsible for undermining their housing. As soon as power and coercion—along with cooperation—begin shaping their mutual relationships, a new form of damage is added, alongside and intertwined with physical undermining based on entropic pressure. Biots now also must deal with the undermining of their housing via opposition by parasites and predators. This has profound implications for the development of their housing and their repertoire. To illustrate this, I will take a closer look at the housing-work of the oldest and most successful parasites on Earth: the viruses.

Opinions differ on the origin of the first viruses, or ‘bacteriophages’ as biologists call them, but they are probably almost as old as the first bacteria. According to some biologists, viruses cannot really be considered living beings because they have no membrane to speak of, no metabolism of their own and have comparatively few genes. But from a biotic perspective, viruses are indeed living creatures. They have a housing; however minimal, they have a sophisticated repertoire; they are capable of fellow creation—although they need the craft of other biots to do so; and they are particularly capable of withstanding entropic pressure: viruses, together with bacteria, make up the most numerous life form found on land and in the oceans.

Although there are many different viral fellowships today, at their core their *modus operandi* is still almost identical to that of the viruses that parasitised the first bacteria. Simply put, these ‘bacteriophages’ invade the bacterial housing, nestle into the genome of their ‘host’ and manipulate its recipe book so that it begins to produce large numbers of viral fellows, until it finally bursts open and dies. These numerous new bacteriophages then seek out other victims to repeat the same process. Much of the work required for viruses to persist is thus *forcibly* done for them by other biots! Viruses exert *power* over the housing and working capacity of other biots. In doing so, they also evoke *resistance* to the undermining of their persistence.

Competition

The second form of opposition between biots is competition for resources that are also favoured by other biots. For contemporary biots, these resources are very diverse, including not only food but also space, water, oxygen and nitrogen. For microbiots, this competition mainly concerns food resources and shelter.

Following the idea that ‘evolution’ is all about ‘survival of the fittest’, biologists and ecologists have long attributed a central role to competition between life forms for the development of life. Today, most biologists would agree that cooperation among biots is at least as important as competition. In retrospect, traditional biologists have projected the competition that characterises modern market relations onto the relations between other life forms and thus assigned far too great a role to competition in the development of life. An illustrative example is the idea that trees and plants living in close proximity compete to capture as much light as possible with their leaves at the expense of others. This turns out to be only partially true. It is true that trees from the same fellowship develop the largest possible leaf area, given the circumstances, but those circumstances also include their neighbouring fellows: they grow in such a way that these also catch some light, albeit less than themselves (Brommer et al. 2008). Moreover, in many cases competition goes hand in hand with mutual support, as closely related trees and shrubs contribute to soil fertility and a favourable microclimate, which also benefits other trees in their vicinity.

I assume that this coexistence of competition with mutual support and cooperation among trees and plants also applied to the first bacterial societies. Especially when resources became scarce, cooperation often gave way to competition, even between bacteria and archaea from the same fellowship. Such competition could undermine the persistence of fellow biots, but it could also indirectly strengthen it. Like parasitism and predation, competition thus contributes to the relational complexity that characterised the relationships between biots early on.

Extinction

The third and final mode of opposition between biots that I distinguish is the most far-reaching. It involves the extinction of fellowships due to the actions of other fellowships, resulting in the permanent loss of their repertoire and their contribution to the development of life. This form of pushing to extinction as part of the social relations between living beings is an ancient phenomenon. A striking example is the emergence of a new craft-like capacity in the so-called cyanobacteria, estimated to have occurred more than 3.5 billion years ago. These organisms lived in shallow parts of seas and oceans and discovered a way to use solar energy to produce glucose from water and CO₂. This process, known as photosynthesis, releases oxygen as a by-product. Because of this, biologists refer to it as oxygenic photosynthesis.

For a long time, the released oxygen was ‘buffered’ by reacting with minerals such as iron, carbon and sulphur. Around 2.5 billion years ago, however, this buffering system reached a tipping point: the available minerals became saturated. As cyanobacteria multiplied, their photosynthesis led to a relatively rapid and drastic increase in Earth’s atmospheric oxygen. Biologists call this the Great Oxygenation Event, ‘GOE’ (Lyons et al. 2014). As a result, the oxygen concentration in the atmosphere gradually rose from around 0.3 percent to over 10 percent. This had dramatic consequences for many bacterial fellowships and archaea whose housing and repertoire were adapted to an oxygen-poor environment—anaerobic microbes, as biologists call them. For these organisms, the surge in atmospheric oxygen proved literally poisonous, pushing them out of time. Only the bacteria and archaea that managed to sufficiently adapt their repertoires survived.

CONCLUSION

This chapter stems from a quest that has lasted over two decades. The goal of that search was to connect critical social theory, hermeneutic thinking and moral values on the one hand, with insights from physics, biology and evolutionary theory on the other. Over the years, I learned a great deal, but I couldn’t quite produce a text I was truly satisfied with. In hindsight, coming from a modern background, I had long been looking in the wrong direction. My introduction to complexity theory—in particular to the critical complexity thinking of Paul Cilliers (1998) and Edgar Morin (2018)—put me on the trail of fascinating research at the edges and frontiers of contemporary biological sciences. These perspectives renewed my hope that another form of science might be possible at the intersection of the social sciences, the humanities and the natural sciences.

At the same time, together with colleagues at the University for Humanistics, my PhD students, and the fellows of the journal *Waardenwerk* (which explores the mutual implication of work and values), I pursued a different, practice-oriented line of research. This approach focused on moral and relational learning processes in concrete social practices. The ultimate question here was how to enhance these learning processes in practice—using searchlights such as normative professionalisation and value-work (Kunneman 2005b, 2012, 2017). Philosophical insights and scientific knowledge played an important background role as sources of inspiration. But ultimately, good action had to be taken in light of the

moral horizon of the practice at hand—be it good police work, good education, good caregiving, or building and maintaining good relationships with loved ones, friends and colleagues, including handling inevitable tensions and conflicts as well as possible.

In this practice-oriented framework, ecological questions and initiatives have become increasingly important for both me and those around me over the past decade. Partly inspired by the work of Bruno Latour (2017) and kindred thinkers, value-work—*Waardenwerk* in Dutch—was gradually complemented and enriched by Earthwork—*Aardewerk*. From the relational and practice-oriented nature of both value-work and Earthwork, I was eventually able to let go of my search for a richer form of scientific knowledge development and instead focus on a different kind of question—a relational one: What kind of perspective on life and its development can help humans improve our troubled relationships with other forms of life and bring an end to the large-scale degradation of the Earth?

It was from that question that I was ultimately able to integrate the (partial) physical and biological knowledge I had acquired with my philosophical and sociological background and lived experience, leading me to a biotic perspective. At its core, this is an action perspective—scientifically informed but grounded in a practical relational and moral commitment: improving our relationships with other life forms. The ultimate ‘test’ of this perspective is not logical or empirical, but relational and companial. This test involves the question of not only whether other life forms might come to experience humans as better fellowship—and somehow let us know—but also whether we humans would come to better understand our own complexities and entanglements. Would we be able to feel more compassion for ourselves and for others, if we no longer primarily say and feel ‘we humans’ or ‘I, human’, but first and foremost ‘we biots’?

In the face of the overwhelming global problems dominating the news, many people have seen their modern expectations of progress give way to deep worry and fear for the future. Will there still be a liveable world for our children and grandchildren? Or have we already ruined it, with humanity set to perish amid division and conflict? That is, of course, an urgent question. But it is also limited by its very framing: the horizon it invokes is still centred on the future of humanity and the welfare of human children. It is important to recognise that this framing is part and parcel of the very thinking and repertoire of action that has contributed to today’s global problems. When our starting point shifts from ‘we humans’ to ‘we biots’, the future of human society becomes inseparably linked to the life

chances and well-being of other biots—those who make the flourishing of life on Earth possible and who are increasingly unable to do so because of our actions.

This thought brings me back to the words of hope I offered in the introduction. Amid all the worrying and even appalling developments occurring at both the geopolitical and ecological levels, the biotic perspective offers me two sources of cautious hope.

First, it reveals that we are not alone in the search for a path towards a liveable future. Industrial and post-industrial progress now actively hinder the Earth-sustaining capacities of countless other life forms. Yet, for the most part, those capacities still exist. If we were to stop damaging them or preventing their expression, we could be confident that these life forms would continue to use their capacities for the benefit of the planet's liveability—for all biots on Earth.

Second, I draw hope from the idea that modern humans have made life unnecessarily difficult by placing ourselves outside the long biotic history to which we are intimately bound. I believe our struggle with our own complexity—and that of fellow humans—is largely rooted in the fact that we are trapped in a modern straitjacket of self-focused freedom and autonomy. This framework forces us to navigate relationships from within only a narrow sliver of the broader relational possibilities offered us by the history of life. I am convinced that many people could live less-constrained and less-lonely lives if they were more in touch with their biotic history and recognised their deep affinities with other living beings—especially the universal relational forms and existential registers that shape our lives.

This is the modest hope the biotic perspective offers. Modest though it may be, its roots run deep—deep into our personal and professional lives, nourishing our capacity to relate across a wide spectrum of connections, to both humans and other biots.

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Relationality in Posthuman Feminism

Olli Pyyhtinen and Mianna Meskus

INTRODUCTION: A NON-EXISTING DIALOGUE

Relational sociology does not constitute a uniform theory or school. Rather, it presents a somewhat diffuse cluster of theories and approaches with several dissonances between scholars (Dépelteau 2018; Vandenberghe 2018; Pyyhtinen 2021). One of the main disagreements between relational sociologists concerns the question of human and non-human relations (e.g. MacFarlane 2013; Dépelteau 2018; Pyyhtinen 2015, 2021). The great majority of approaches and perspectives within the movement are predominantly anthropocentric, limiting their analytic scope exclusively to relations between human actors (see e.g. Emirbayer 1997; Donati 2011; Crossley 2011; Fuhse 2013). Craig MacFarlane (2013) has for this reason criticised relational sociology for establishing an arbitrary boundary between humans and non-humans, which has resulted not only in an all-too-narrow concept of relation but also in a distorted understanding of humans. As MacFarlane formulates this criticism: “Despite the move toward the concept of relation, relational sociology maintains a

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_11

reactionary humanist social ontology acting as though social relations are limited to the relations that are obtained between humans and denying the existence of those relations that are obtained between humans and nonhumans such as animals, plants, and things” (MacFarlane 2013, 45).

While we share this critical attitude towards anthropocentrism, in this chapter we wish to move beyond critique and present perspectives which elude, counter, and unsettle the prevailing human-centredness of relational sociology by extending relationality beyond humans. Due to the influence of new materialist and posthuman thinking, claims about the interrelatedness of humans and non-humans have gained increasing popularity in the social sciences and the humanities recently (see e.g. Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Fox and Alldred 2016). Those perspectives, however, have received very limited visibility within relational sociology. One reason for their marginalisation may have to do with the fact that hardly any of the authors who have emphasised the connections between humans and non-humans have identified themselves as relational sociologists (and would probably also refuse the label). “Relation” is not their master concept, but they substitute it with other concepts, such as rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), actor-network (Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005), and meshwork (Ingold 2011).

In what follows, we turn especially to posthuman feminist scholarship, not least because unlike in the work of the authors referenced above, relations and relationality are part of its core conceptual repertoire. Posthuman feminist theories consider relationality beyond human relations, emphasising, for example, embodiment and materiality, non-human agency, post-anthropocentrism, and technological mediation. Whereas preceding feminist scholarship challenged the idea of a universal human being with the white, heteronormative man as its norm, posthuman feminism takes this critical work a step further, by questioning human exceptionalism and the traditional humanist category of the human—along with those of race, body, and woman, for example. It considers humans as embodied beings in a more-than-human world and emphasises care and the ethico-political and ontological aspects of the relationships with that world (e.g. Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). By engaging with posthuman feminist theories, the chapter sets out not only to disclose the limitations of the notion of relation as it is used in relational sociology but also to bring relational sociology and posthuman feminist perspectives into a hopefully productive dialogue. Heretofore, the two strands have mostly

stood apart, not so much as one against the other but as one without the other, with hardly any contact, crossings, and communication between them. Posthuman feminist scholarship is underused and scarcely cited in relational sociology (see also Redshaw 2013) and vice versa.¹ They also emerge from somewhat different traditions: while relational sociology is contextualised by and large within the sociological discipline, posthuman feminist theories tend to be more interdisciplinary by nature, influenced by continental philosophy, such as the work of Gilles Deleuze. We believe that it is nonetheless possible to cross thresholds and pass from one field to another and establish connections while acknowledging and respecting their differences. The endeavour of connecting the two strands is relational in itself, if you will, creating a plane of encounter to build common ground. To be precise, we picture the dialogue not as a movement to and fro, “between” two stable and fixed terminals or sides which would remain unchanged by their encounter, but as a creative movement or a “line of becoming” that runs midstream (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 293; Ingold 2015, 147, 153), carrying new insights and *along* which both of them could potentially change and become something else.²

Our argument is laid out as follows. First, we discuss selected ideas and concepts on human-non-human relationality by scholars whose work can be labelled as posthuman feminist thinking, explicating their similarities with and differences from some of the key ideas in relational sociology. We also give examples of what kinds of non-human actors have been considered in feminist theorising on human sociability. The subsequent two sections elaborate on practical examples of doing more-than-human relational sociology. First, we explore waste as an active element in human knowledge production, and after that we engage with technologies and how they co-constitute human embodiment and social relations. In these sections, we draw mostly on our own respective research. We conclude the chapter by summing up its main points and suggesting why it might be wise for posthuman feminist scholarship to pay heed to relational sociology.

¹ On the marginality of feminist epistemologies in the context of relational sociology, see also Doucet (2018).

² For the preposition of “along” in contrast to that of “between” as a conceptual scheme of fathoming relations, see Pyyhtinen (2021).

HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN RELATIONALITY

Relational sociology is, principally, a movement of making relations explicit. While the sociological study of relations may be as old as the discipline itself, for relational sociology “relation” is not just one concept among many but marks a novel approach to reality. For it, relations are not only *what* is thought but also concern the *how* of thinking: relations designate a perspective, a mode of thought, a method of approach. What relational sociologists tend to have in common despite their dissonances is the idea that relations constitute the main stuff of social phenomena. Whatever topics they choose to focus on, they consider their objects of study in relational terms, as constellations of relations and as the outcome or effect of interactions or trans-actions of interdependent actors.

Such an emphasis on relations is shared by several posthuman feminist authors, which makes it fascinating to examine the two strands of thinking in connection with each other. Rosi Braidotti notes in her book *Posthuman Knowledge* about posthuman subjectivity that the “key term is indeed relationality, operating in an embedded and embodied and grounded, multi-directional and multi-scalar manner” (2019, 45). Instead of starting from beings, posthuman feminist onto-epistemological tenets start from relations and adhere to an idea of immanent ontological relationality: there is nothing beyond relations. For Donna Haraway, “[t]he relation is the smallest unit of analysis” (Haraway 2004: 24). This implies a dissolution of everything substantial into relations: entities such as humans have no substance beyond their relations and entangled becomings. Individual entities are no fixed and final elements, but they are composites, contingent, and changing confederations of relations, and they become what they are in and through relations. “We are relational beings, defined by the capacity to affect and be affected”, Braidotti (2019, 45) suggests. This means that nothing exists in and by itself, unconnected to other things. “[N]othing ever ‘is’ alone. *To be is to be related*” (Mol 2002, 54; italics in the original).

Every encounter is an event of transformation. “We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others” (Tsing 2015, 27). When one or several of our relations change, we change too. The idea of relations as constitutive of entities is expressed in the relational sociology movement by the famous notion of “trans-action” by John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949) that is widely used in relational sociology. In contrast to what Dewey and Bentley call “self-actional” and

“inter-actional” perspectives, trans-actionalism does not attribute the relata any identity or being outside their relations. For it, “the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction” (Emirbayer 1997, 287). Dewey and Bentley propose that when sociological notions attune to the trans-actional view, “systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 108). What Dewey and Bentley are suggesting here is that nowhere do we hit upon the truly elementary, basic building blocks of reality implied by the idea of independent entities, essences, or realities. All we have is relations and entities constituted in and through them.

On the surface, Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-action” would seem to be quite similar to the notion of trans-action by Dewey and Bentley (though without bearing any real, veritable connection to it), insofar as both draw an explicit contrast to the more common notion of “interaction” and do not assume any pre-existing entities that would then engage in action with each other. For Barad, intra-action “signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies”. She insists that, “in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad 2007, 33). Despite their similarities, there are however at least two crucial differences between Barad’s approach and the trans-actionalism of Dewey and Bentley. Firstly, while acknowledging that even the “most advanced” cognitive processes of human beings are activities not of human beings alone, but “processes of the full situation of organism-environment” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 104), Dewey and Bentley are nevertheless primarily interested in relations of intelligibility and in the problem of communication in contrast to the more embodied aspects of relations examined by Barad and posthuman feminist accounts more widely. Secondly, and on an interrelated point, intra-action, as Barad understands it, is not limited to relations between humans alone, thereby overcoming the anthropocentrism that plagues the trans-actional perspective.

Here we get at the most crucial difference in how relational sociology and posthuman feminist theories conceive relations. While relational

sociology tends to delimit its analytical scope to one level only—that of human relations—posthuman feminist perspectives extend relationality beyond human relations, attending to our “dependence on multiple non-humans” alike, ultimately on “the planetary dimension as a whole” (Braidotti 2019, 45). Posthuman feminist theories can thereby be said to pay attention to and integrate all the “three ecologies” explicated by Félix Guattari (2000): human subjectivity, social relations, and the environment. While relating to the self and to human others, “the posthuman subject relates at the same time to the Earth—land, water, plants, animals, bacteria—and to technological agents—plastic, wires, cells, codes, algorithms” (Braidotti 2019, 46). Human agents are continuously constituted by and in relation to the material world/s they live with.

The critical detachment from both anthropocentrism and the tradition of humanism insisted by posthuman feminist authors entails acknowledging the multiplicity of different kinds of non-humans. Whereas relational sociology, insofar as it asserts a fundamental divide between the human and the non-human, tends to envision the non-human only in negative terms, as “everything that is not human” (MacFarlane 2013: 62), posthuman feminist studies defy such abstract generality and have explored the ontological entanglement of humans with a wide array of non-human entities like bacteria and viruses (Paxson and Helmreich 2014; Brives et al. 2021), soil (Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Krzywoszynska 2019), technology (Haraway 1991; Hayles 1999; Braidotti 2013), waste (Hird 2022), and non-human animals (Haraway 2004; Wolfe 2009; DeMello 2012). The renunciation of the human/non-human and nature/culture binaries by stressing “naturecultures” (Haraway 2004) is accompanied by the requirement of recognition: of identifying, accepting, respecting, caring for, and giving a place to our non-human fellow beings.

The insistence on recognition of, care for, and “response-ability” (Haraway 2016) towards non-human or more-than-human others alludes to yet another difference between relational sociology as we commonly know it and posthuman feminist thought. The former by and large does not concern itself with ethical questions, at least not explicitly; in it, the question of ethics seems to be bracketed. For several posthuman feminist authors, by contrast, thinking is intricately also an ethico-political practice. As Braidotti expresses it: “Thinking is about acknowledging, capturing and working with extensive and intensive ethical relationality” (2019, 123). In other words, for posthuman feminist scholarship, thinking is not only about truth claims and cognition, but fundamentally a relational and

affective practice, a way of relating to the world, of fostering new and different relational encounters. As we humans inhabit the world together with other species “in relations of interdependency” (Butler 2020, 51), human flourishing and even the very conditions of our survival are dependent on the more-than-human world. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing suggests that “survival always involves others”; “staying alive—for every species—requires liveable collaborations” (Tsing 2015, 29, 28). We therefore need to, firstly, acknowledge that we become and exist as relational beings together with other humans as well as non-humans and, secondly, learn to address this co-constitution in our theorising.

MATERIAL DIS/ENTANGLEMENTS WITH WASTE

The post-anthropocentric manoeuvre comes with the refusal of human exceptionalism and the adherence to the idea of ontological democracy, placing humans on an equal footing with non-humans, both living and non-living. Human subjects are regarded not merely as members of a society but also as members of a species amongst other species (Braidotti 2019, 10): “Relationality extends through the multiple ecologies that constitute us” (ibid., 47). Around us, every moment, there is a plethora of intertwined “world-making projects” (Tsing 2015, 21) that emerge from practical activities of making lives. These activities alter the planet, and only some of them originate from humans. As Tsing remarks, “all organisms make ecological living places, altering earth, air, and water” (ibid., 22): beavers, for example, reshape streams by building dams, birds pollinate many plants and disperse their seed as well as keep insect populations in check, insects not only pollinate flowers but also recycle nutrients, control pests, and maintain healthy soil, and plants create energy and release oxygen by using carbon dioxide, sunlight, and water.

Insofar as the world-making projects of humans and non-humans are intertwined, creatures like animals, plants, fungi, and microbes cannot be confined to the realm of *zoe*, “bare life”, alone, but they are part of *bios*, the life of humans organised in society, calling thereby into question the categorical divide between the two realms (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 545; Braidotti 2019, 10; cf. Agamben 1998). Tuija Kokkonen has stressed how “[w]e are dependent on non-human hospitality, in the end non-humans form the condition that makes our lives possible” (Kokkonen 2014, 202). Bacteria, for example, have a crucial role in making our oxygen atmosphere, and plants in helping maintain it (Tsing 2015: 22). The

vitality of non-humans is irreducible to human endeavours, as they not only enable, assist, hamper, or disturb human action but also have “trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, 2). In fact, as suggested by Jane Bennett, “humans need nonhumans to function more than nonhumans need humans, for many nonhumans—from a can rusting at the bottom of a landfill to a colony of spores in the Arctic—fester or live beyond the proximity of humans” (ibid., 151–152). Mineral, water, and sunlight are not dependent on humans to nourish plants and animals, but ecosystems get along fine or even better without human intervention.

Waste, we propose, provides a visceral example of non-human actors that shape and disturb social relations. To be sure, the human waste entanglement is quite different from the way some viruses are an integral part of human DNA or how the soil is crucial for the subsistence and maintenance of human life and its environments. Waste does not constitute a part of our being in the same way as our “gut buddies” (Lorimer 2017). Contrary to being essential in shaping human beings, garbage is undesirable to live with and therefore tends to be expelled, discarded, and abandoned to avoid contamination.³ People usually do not seek to get in touch with biowaste, for example, or pursue intimate relations with it but distance themselves from it.

In the past couple of decades, there has happened a major shift in the technologies of waste disposal from the sheer elimination of waste as unwanted and disturbing excess to optimising, exploiting, and distributing it in the domain of value and utility. The death of matter is no longer the way in which waste management manifests its power and efficiency. On the contrary, the circular economy policies and practices rather try to exclude death and decay through a sought (quasi-religious) eternal redemption of waste as resource and value. Such a manoeuvre seeks to impel the vitality of matter beyond its presence and actuality towards living-on and potentiality. Nevertheless, while not seeking to eliminate waste matter but exploit it as resource, arguably the circular economy attests to

³We acknowledge that this holds largely for the rich Global North. People living in the lower-income countries of the Global South are to a disproportionate and unjust extent exposed to waste and to the harms and health risks related to it, since developed countries dump their waste there. Because of this necessity to live with and amongst waste, harvesting waste is a key economic activity in the Global South for disadvantaged people such as waste pickers (Gregson and Crang 2015; Carenzo 2016).

the most far-reaching attempt at effacing waste: the elimination of its very category (Pyyhtinen et al. 2025).

Yet, humans are never entirely free and separate from waste but remain intimately connected with it. Employing Barad's (2007) notion of "entanglement" with a twist, the conflicted duality of detachment and attachment, dissociation and association, could perhaps be thought with the help of the anti-dualist notion of *dis/entanglement* (Pyyhtinen et al. 2025): while being a product of an act of separation (to some extent it is even ultimately necessary that waste is kept at a safe distance from human bodies to protect their health), waste is nevertheless also an integral part of ourselves. Waste simultaneously stands as a mark of the boundaries between humans and non-humans and attests to their fragility, blurriness, and permeability. While sorting things out by means of classifications are crucial to making them ordered and governable, in its ambiguity, indeterminacy, equivocality, and leakiness waste transgresses neat categories and normative boundaries; its containment "remains contextual, provisional, and leaky at best" (Pyyhtinen and Zavos 2025, 83). In waste, life, value, and prosperity conjoin with death, loss of value, and decay. Waste is both present and absent; it is that which remains of an object that used-to-be but is-no-more, haunting our presence. Besides present/absent, it unsettles and challenges any simple binarism also between self/other, clean/dirty, valuable/non-valuable, organic/inorganic, nature/culture, alive/dead, subject/object, human/non-human, here/there, and inside/outside, for example. Waste is also temporally indeterminate. As all things will ultimately become waste, into an annihilated state, their wasteness is folded into them in a "virtual" sense (Deleuze 1991) even before they are actually waste. "Waste is every object, plus time", as Brian Thill (2015, 8) puts it.

The assumed indeterminacy of waste does not mean that waste would be simply unknowable. It does mean, however, that one cannot know waste in the abstract, in general. One can only know it in relations, paying attention to the relationalities constitutive of and constituted by it. Nothing is waste inherently and by its essence, but things become waste in situated practices, processes, and relations. Knowing waste may even require handling it physically: one needs to "touch it, to feel it, to sort it, to smell it" (Rathje and Murphy 2001, 9).

The first author has sensorily engaged with waste in such a manner together with his research team when doing “garbographic”⁴ fieldwork (Martinez and Pyyhtinen 2025) on the leaky realities of waste by following waste flows and waste practices across various sites, such as households, incineration plants, waste management companies, and a nuclear waste repository. In the Summer of 2023, some of his team members participated in a waste composition study organised by a municipal waste management company in Southern Finland. For two weeks, the researchers shovelled samples of mixed household waste collected randomly from selected residential areas within the municipality to sort out the materials into 35 different categories with the purpose of determining the composition of the waste in quantitative terms. For garbographers, the sorting exercise provided a rich experiential and experimental field, where excitement and curiosity when faced with the stinking remains of our daily lives were mixed with visceral disgust and at times even dread (Lehtokunnas et al. 2025; Väisänen 2024).

To be sure, it is not only for the researchers but also for the people living and working with waste that the indeterminate matter may gradually start to make sense and allow itself to be known through sensory engagement. On a beautiful and warm day in May 2023, the first author took the train with two of his colleagues to a small city in Southern Finland to visit a factory manufacturing Styrofoam products. After having first been given the customary hyped pitch about the company’s progressive circular practices and the promises of the circular economy, our host kindly showed us around in the factory and warehouse facilities. There, in one of the vast halls, we met Seija, an employee presumably in her late forties or early fifties. Seija’s task was to go through the incoming sacks from demolition sites that contain Styrofoam materials to be recycled and reused in manufacture. The partner companies are expected to sort the various materials on-site beforehand, but Seija’s task was to reopen the sacks still and inspect the contents to make sure that the composition is indeed right and everything is in order. And quite often it isn’t, she revealed to us. When asked

⁴The neologism “garbography” is a combination of the terms “garbology” and “ethnography”. The concept of garbology was made famous by archaeologist William Rathje in the context of a project that he developed in the early 1970s to study our contemporary remains—that is, rubbish—to understand the world in which we live (Rathje and Murphy 2001). However, whereas Rathje and his colleagues focused on the cultural meanings of such residuals, we are equally interested in how they may not necessarily be directly translatable to verbal language and make much sense, and yet be available and given to our senses.

about how long it takes her to go through the materials contained in a sack, she said that she may process as many as fifteen sacks in two hours, but when the contents are “of poor quality”, she may not manage more than five in an entire day. By poor quality she referred to mixtures of miscellaneous materials, explaining that “everything is all mixed up in there, phenols and XPSs and films and PURs and EPSs”.⁵

The team of researchers were amazed by Seija’s connoisseurship; she truly knew the debris materials she sorted and worked with. While the materials are close in chemical composition, she can tell a difference between them by relying on her senses. As she herself described how it is that she comes to know them:

I can already see when I open the bag what is there, roughly. ... If I can’t *see* it, then I can *feel* it at the latest at the point when I hold it in my hand ... Then I can *hear* it when I do this [shows how she breaks something using both hands] and the XPS says “snap” and then the PIR says “snap” [in a slightly higher pitch] (laughter). [...] Then I have an extremely strong sense of *smell*, which is probably getting weaker all the time (laughter) or it’s just developing, it may actually be that I’m just getting more sensitive. I can tell by just the smell if there is phenol in a sack. I can smell it. And then you know from the weight that either it’s phenol or [...] The XPS sack weighs a maximum of 15 kilos, and if you can feel that it weighs more than that, if you have to carry it, then there’s a lot of concrete or phenol in it. Phenol weighs a lot, especially if it is moist, so it weighs a lot. [emphases added]

The above excerpt indicates how Seija came to acquire her highly developed skill of identifying the different materials and inhabit a more differentiated world of materials by engaging with them through her senses and learning how to become affected and mobilised by them. The process of knowing entailed a kind of “active passion” (Gomart and Hennion 1999): Seija became a knowing subject as she submitted herself to be affected by the materials through vision, touch, hearing, and smell. Her practice of sorting things combined cognitive evaluation with bodily hands-on practices and sensory exposure to the materials. It entailed a relation between the sorting and knowing subject and one’s environment, a relation between a sensory medium and a sensitive or sensed world. The knowing

⁵ XPS (Extruded polystyrene foam), PUR (polyurethane), EPS (Expanded polystyrene), and PIR (polyisocyanurate), which appears later in the lengthy quote, are all plastic materials used in insulation, especially in building construction.

required entering relations and amounted to a relational activity. As Barad puts it, “We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because ‘we’ are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (2007, 185).

All in all, posthuman feminist theories cultivate curiosity towards forms of entanglement across multiple ecologies. While categories are an integral part of the social life of humans, posthuman feminist scholarship decisively expands the study of relationality across boundaries between assumedly clear-cut categories and species. This anti-categorical intention is also reflected in the concepts used. Haraway, for example, explains that she uses “the idiomatic term *critter* to mean a motley crowd of lively beings including microbes, fungi, humans, plants, animals, cyborgs, and aliens. Critters are always relationally entangled rather than taxonomically neat” (2008, 330f.). All beings are hybrids, mixtures or compounds, constituted at various scales and temporalities of a myriad of relations with other hybrid entities.

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION IN ASSISTED REPRODUCTION AND AGEING

Posthuman feminist theories have changed the way social worlds and relations are theorised. The question remains, how could relational sociology become more engaged with such theoretical work? To begin with, it would require challenging distinctions between the materiality of the physical world and the social constructs of human thoughts and desires, as well as the human-centredness of relations (Fox and Alldred 2016). This entails, for instance, becoming interested in living and non-living technologies and analysing how different technological actors take part in and shape human sociability. Like in the study of waste-related practices, studying tools developed to know, modify, and govern health allows us to move from human-centredness to more open and inclusive understanding of social relations and agency. To elaborate the idea further, this section presents the second author’s research on biomedical care. We provide examples that illustrate what it means to trace the effects of biotechnologies in human practices of knowing and curing disease and suffering.

Attempts to make and shape worlds are fundamentally dependent on technological modification of our beings and surroundings, including our bodies. The technologies can be living or non-living. Posthuman feminist

theories, and new materialist theories in general, consider human agents as deeply seated in the material world. Therefore, in these theories humans' relations to others involve more-than-humans such as different kinds of tools, apparatuses, and devices. Haraway's work is helpful in directing our attention to companion species—as the previous section pointed out—but it also encourages to foreground the power of technologies to shape, enhance, and resist human action. Haraway writes:

Never purely themselves, things are compound; they are made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify power, to make something happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshly acts of interpretation. Technologies are always compound. They are composed of diverse agents of interpretation, agents of recording, and agents for directing and multiplying relational action. These agents can be human beings or parts of human beings, other organisms in part or whole, machines of many kinds, or other sorts of entrained things made to work in the technological compound of conjoined forces. (Haraway 2008, 250)

The idea of humans and technologies as relational, co-constitutive, and thus compound surfaced already in Haraway's famous *Cyborg Manifesto*. In this text, she laid the claim that social and bodily realities should be lived—and theorised—in a way that “people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway [1985] 1991, 154).

To develop this line of thought, it is insightful to consider how advances in technologies of life shape human sociability and bodily capabilities in advanced capitalism. Posthumanist feminist theorising rests on a thorough engagement with biology, biopolitics, and biotechnologies and their material concerns regarding changing conceptions of humanity (Develennes and Dillet 2018). In one of the key anthologies on posthuman feminism, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008) argue that research needs to pay more attention to the materiality of the body itself as an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force. They contend that “we need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit” (ibid., 4).

One example of human–technology relations is the ART, assisted reproductive technology, developed to help counter involuntary childlessness. When undergoing in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment to attempt to have biological children, for instance, patients' relations to other humans, such as clinical doctors, embryologists, gamete donors, and peer support

group members are crucial, but not exhaustive to this social world. Gendered bodies are enacted and lived in relation to material things such as gametes, embryos, hormone preparations, incubators, and freezers (Helosvuori 2018; Homanen 2018). Tracing this practice, Meskus (2015) analysed online peer support discussion amongst women receiving IVF treatment. For the treatment to be successful, it is important that the body, which was often called the “hatchery”, adapts to the hormone preparations. Sometimes the medication fails to produce the desired effects and the body under medication reacts in an unexpected way:

My body is doing tricks of its own here. I mean, I’m now in the suppression stage for FET [frozen embryo transfer]. So I shouldn’t be getting my period or anything. Everything should just be quiet. But now, of course, I’m bleeding like the Niagara Falls. The doc is monitoring the situation, but it looks like my body doesn’t quite know what to do. It won’t even respond to external hormones. (Meskus 2015)

The IVF technology is connected to the practice of freezing embryos. Women experiencing treatment share information about their frozen “stuff”, which is also referred to as “candidates” or “frosty fellas”. Embryos are experienced both to have agency and to be lacking of it. “Now I’m just scared that the frosty fella is as bad as his ‘siblings’ and does not survive the thawing”, one forum member posted. Meanwhile, the freezer is a technological mediator for concrete material entities such as embryos but also for the hopes and fears of aspiring parents. An empty freezer is a painful experience, as this quote illustrates:

We have one traveller aboard [after embryo transfer], but it was just at the 3-cell stage, and the freezer was left empty. All I can say is that we suffer such tremendous losses time after time that I couldn’t help crying a bit about it. But what can you do, except believe firmly in that only one. (Meskus 2015)

Posthumanist feminist approaches to ARTs show that family- and kin-making relations are made up of combinations of many actors that are both human and more-than-human. Consequently, reproduction can be characterised as involving *agential multiplicity* (Meskus 2015). Multiplicity here owes to Annemarie Mol’s (2002) idea of how, when attempting to exercise “empirical philosophy”, reality multiplies. In her ethnography on atherosclerosis, Mol shows that the ontology of the disease becomes

multiple through a variety of medical practices that treat, and thus also enact, the disease. In the case of infertility treatment, the ontology of human reproduction multiplies through the fact that technologies mediate the amount and kind of participants involved. Importantly, the agential multiplicity extends beyond local clinics and laboratories. Other actors involved in “making babies” include transnational pharmaceutical and biotechnological giants that provide fertility products from embryo culture mediums and incubator technologies to time-lapse technologies that allow the monitoring of how the embryos grow in the incubators. These technologies are designed to standardise and automate knowledge production on the viability of embryos at the clinics (Helosvuori and Homanen 2022). Theoretically, the argument here is that following actors that are not only humans allows for a deeper understanding of modern social practices. The arrangement of social practices includes many other relations and relational constellations than human-to-human ones alone.

Biotechnologies have become an essential part of present reproductive practices in affluent countries. Yet, technologies of life are relevant world-making projects across the human life course. People’s lives are mediated by and created through technology at different sites and time points. Reproductive technologies concern the beginning of life, but we may also consider the late phases of life, or ageing. At least in the Global North, elderly people’s lives are increasingly mediated by various types of assistive technologies that shape and produce different types of social relations. Biotechnologies such as medications and vaccines are used to treat and modify individual bodies and selves. Investigating ageing in relation to various technological actors enables the critical analysis of what “normal” ageing currently entails and how good life might be achieved.

The second author with her research team studied biotechnologies and the ageing body by investigating elderly people’s ideas, values, and experiences of life mediated by technologies. To stimulate collective deliberation and generate what-if questions, the researchers showed the participants vignettes of media and other texts as well as news pictures on emerging biotechnologies developed to shape the human body (Hautamäki and Meskus 2024; Meskus and Tikka 2024). The thought experiments with the participants illustrate how experiences of ageing and the lifespan are constituted in and through relations with human and more-than-human others, including technologies.

For instance, the research team introduced the prospect of applying the Nobel-winning gene-editing technology of CRISPR-CAS9 to modify an

individual's genome. The participants of the study were invited to consider the use of genetic engineering to prevent genetic diseases, correct poor eyesight, or even change the genotype and phenotype of the offspring, and thus future generations, through modifying their germline. In the conversations, several participants expressed the concern that biotechnological modification would aim to enhance the human species and, consequently, that diversity as an inherently human value would be compromised. The prospect of germline modification invoked, for instance, the following account on humans' relations to technological modification:

Since the aim would be to make us [humans] better and better, this kind of genetic modification, passing from one generation to the next, could easily result in the reduction of human variability, making everything the same. (Hautamäki and Meskus 2024)

When attempting to define ordinary or “normal” ageing, the participants recurrently used examples from other species to explain what they felt was “natural” or belonged to nature for humans as well as other living beings. Ageing as human experience and practice was understood in relation to more-than-human beings. For instance, one of the participants stated:

somehow there must remain some sense in all this manipulation. Nature must be allowed to flourish freely also in the human world and not only in the realm of butterflies and flowers. (Hautamäki and Meskus 2024)

Researching technologies have thus led social researchers to consider and conceptualise human–technology relations and their entanglement with human–animal relations. It is worthwhile to reiterate Braidotti's (2019) statement, already quoted in the previous section, that posthumanist thinking means that human subjects are regarded not merely as members of a society but also as members of a species amongst other species. To underscore this and make our final point on technologies as salient more-than-human actors in present societies, let us look at social research conducted on biotechnologies that involve the birth and death of laboratory animals.

Both in laboratories and in the “wild”, animals are constitutive of biotechnologies through which humans shape their bodies and environments.

Biomedical treatment of conditions related to reproduction, ageing and beyond, is fundamentally dependent on the active participation of animals in knowledge production, and in the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of disease and suffering. One recent example is malaria control through the genetic modification of mosquito reproduction. A strong human aspiration and a defining goal of global health, malaria control has become involved with research strategies that aim to control the insect-borne disease by altering mosquito biology. The genetically modified mosquito is regarded as having great potential as a preventive technology. Yet, it is a complex living technology whose release in the targeted environments involves the complications of governing genetically modified organisms (Mäkelin 2024). For instance, one microbiologist working with genetically engineered mosquitoes explained the following:

So the idea of gene drives was, you target those few species of mosquito that transmit malaria and not the three and a half thousand that don't. In my mind that was a much better solution for the environment. I'm very much driven towards having a better ecosystem, more sustainable world, most sustainable everything. [...] It's almost frustrating when the use of GM must be on the opposite side of that. (Mäkelin et al. 2024)

Again, human practice is constituted through entanglement with more-than-humans that, in this case, are also shaped by humans into technologies. Here, as in the case of IVF, the agential multiplicity of knowledge production gives rise to “naturalising” biotechnology in strategic ways. This involves weaving together connections between cellular, embodied, demographic, and ecological processes and understandings of good practice, desirable futures, and proper science. As theorised by Mäkelin et al. (2024), strategic naturalising of the technological modification of life is increasingly connected to the co-productive role of social scientists in justifying interventions into the living. This means that social scientists become enrolled in justifying technologies of life and, consequently, in the situated enactment of Anthropocene realities. In other words, our research example shows that posthuman feminist theory enables and encourages the social scientist “doing” the theory to consider their own role and involvement in the making of human–non-human relations. Theorisation may thus become more self-aware of the consequences of studying social relations in a way that pays attention to more-than-humans in human constellations. This relates to Haraway's ([1985] 1991) argument presented

above that social and bodily realities should be theorised without being afraid of humans' joint kinship with animals and machines, and their partial, interconnected identities. Theorists of social relations are themselves a part of these interconnections.

CONCLUSION

The agreed strength and innovativeness of relational sociology is the premise that relations constitute the main stuff of social phenomena. Relations are understood and theorised as the effect of trans-actions of interdependent actors. In this chapter, we have engaged with the critique directed at relational sociology for its human-centred ontology and tendency to exclude non-humans from social relations. The proposed way for renewal for relational sociology has thereby to do with extending relationality beyond humans. Yet, the methodological issues of conducting such a gesture remain largely underexplored. What does it mean to think and study relationality beyond humans?

We propose that feminist posthumanism offers valuable tools to broaden the concept of relationality and to reconsider how human action is conceived. Approaches in feminist posthumanism align with relational sociology in that they consider how there is nothing beyond relations; they posit an immanent ontological relationality to the world. In Barad's terms, entities "lack an independent, self-contained existence", which means that they do not "preexist" their relations, but "emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (2007, ix). The novelty, in comparison to relational sociological approaches, has been that feminist posthumanism takes as its premise the critique of human-centred analysis of social practice and experience. While relational sociology has been pivotal in allowing social theory to focus on the encompassing, essential relationality of human action rather than on atomistic subjects pursuing their individualistic rational choices, feminist accounts on relationality have ventured into the interconnectedness of humans with other living and non-living entities.

To illustrate how to take the material world and the relatedness of all existence seriously, and to provide concrete examples of conducting research at the intersection of relational sociology and posthuman feminism, we have discussed, firstly, waste as active matter. Humans have living relations with waste. The collective fieldwork experiences by the first author show that things become waste in situated practices, processes, and

relations, where waste is managed and distanced from human bodies, and yet remains an integral part of ourselves and our living environments. Secondly, we have given examples of research on biotechnologies related to reproduction and ageing, discussing how such technologies mediate and indeed co-constitute life, both human and non-human. Technologies are, as the second author's collaborative studies indicate, entangled with how people's lives are conducted and shaped. Technologies are constitutive of social relations such as kin relations and relations with one's body and animals used in laboratory settings. Through the examples from our case studies, we hope to have shown that relations are constitutive of entities, both human and more-than-human.

The reconfiguring of the human as materially embedded and embodied entails an ethico-political dimension. The developments in the world at various scales, from microplastics and biotechnological tools to expansive troubles with environmental destruction and technoscientific inequalities, demand creating new concepts and navigational tools to help us through the complexities of the present. Indeed, Braidotti contends that "thinking is about acknowledging, capturing and working with extensive and intensive ethical relationality" (2019, 123). Thus, we propose that engaging with posthuman feminism allows relational sociology to strengthen the ethical stakes involved in theorising the social. Conceptual work on human relations on a suffering planet is becoming increasingly pertinent. This does not mean sidelining human experience but, rather, situating it in relation to other entities, since human flourishing and survival are inseparable from the more-than-human world (see Pyyhtinen 2024).

While we have emphasised in this chapter what relational sociology could learn from posthuman feminism, we acknowledge that also posthuman feminism could strengthen its theoretical premises through engaging with core theoretical ideas of relational sociology. To be sure, relational sociology and posthuman feminism differ, for example, in terms of the role given to language and meaning-making in their accounts of the world. Some versions of relational sociology conceive social relationships as interwoven with meaning and develop a theoretical model of social networks that arise out of communication (see e.g. Fuhse 2013, 2022). Meanwhile, in its post-anthropocentrism, posthuman feminism often foregrounds the materialities, while leaving the communicative and linguistic aspects of relations with less attention. Here, posthuman feminism might, however, benefit from paying heed to discussions and debates in relational sociology. Not only would this help contextualise the concepts and perspectives

of posthuman feminist authors in relation to a long theoretical lineage in sociology, but would also give due regard to meaning-making and the cognising, interpreting subject.⁶ This would not entail privileging the human subject. Rather, by situating humans in relation to non-humans, it opens space for *difference* beyond binary hierarchies and rigid oppositional dichotomies that ground identity in static, non-relational essences.

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⁶For cautions against refuting meaning-making and the notion of subjectivity, see, for example, Hayles (2017); Braunmühl (2018); Andersson (2022).

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A Relational Approach to Moral Standing: Reframing Ethical Boundaries in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

David J. Gunkel and Mark Coeckelbergh

INTRODUCTION

The question of moral standing—for example, deciding who or what is deserving of moral consideration—is central to contemporary ethical theory. Traditional frameworks for determining these matters have often relied on anthropocentric and essentialist criteria, properties such as rationality, sentience, and species membership (Singer 1975). These views tend to limit moral consideration to a narrow category of beings, excluding nonhuman animals, marginalized human groups, and nonbiological entities like artificial intelligence (AI) and robots. In contrast, the relational approach to moral standing, developed by Mark Coeckelbergh and David

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_12

J. Gunkel, redefines moral consideration as arising from the nature of relationships between entities rather than from fixed attributes (Coeckelbergh 2012; Gunkel 2012).

This chapter provides an introduction to and overview of this relational approach to moral standing, emphasizing the critical shift in ethical thinking that it develops and deploys. By focusing on interactions, relationships, and context, Gunkel and Coeckelbergh provide a more inclusive and dynamic framework for moral consideration—one that can respond to and take responsibility for others and other forms of morally significant otherness. The chapter will explore the theoretical foundations of the relational approach, assess its strengths, address potential criticisms, and conclude with suggestions for future research to further refine and apply this approach—including links to work in sociology.

THE RELATIONAL APPROACH TO MORAL STANDING: OVERVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Beyond the Properties Approach

The relational approach to moral standing, as articulated by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, challenges traditional essentialist frameworks by rejecting the idea that moral status is inherent in and derived from certain ontological or psychological properties belonging to an entity, such as consciousness, sentience, rationality, and so on. Standard approaches to deciding the question of moral status typically proceed, as Coeckelbergh (2012, 14) has demonstrated in *Growing Moral Relations*, by following a rather simple decision-making process, which he calls the “properties approach”:

1. Property *P* is sufficient for moral status *S*
2. Entity *E* has property *P*
3. Entity *E* has moral status *S*

In this transaction, we first determine what property or set of properties are sufficient for something to have a particular claim to moral recognition and respect. We then investigate whether an entity actually possesses that property or not. Finally, and by applying the criteria decided in step one to the entity identified in step two, it is possible to determine whether this entity can have a claim to moral status or is to be regarded as a mere thing.

On this account, then, the question regarding moral status is firmly anchored in and justified by the essential nature or being of the entity that is determined to possess them. In this transaction, what something *is* determines how it *ought* to be treated. Or to put it in more formalistic terminology: ontology precedes and determines social, moral, and even legal status.

This way of thinking raises a number of epistemological problems. How do we know that a particular class of entities deserves a particular moral status? And how do we know that the entity in question actually possesses the qualifying property or set of properties? The traditional approach is vulnerable to these skeptic responses. These are especially relevant in cases where there is doubt about an entity's moral status and/or that entity's properties, or where there is criticism of the traditional categories. For instance, why, exactly, does a particular AI lack sentience? And is it not problematic to suppose that humans are on top of the moral hierarchy, being authorized somehow to decide about the moral status of all other entities?

The relational approach flips the script on the standard way of thinking. In this case, moral status is decided and conferred not on the basis of subjective or internal properties determined in advance but according to objectively observable, extrinsic social relationships. As we encounter and interact with others—whether they be another human person, a nonhuman animal, or a seemingly intelligent machine—it is first and foremost experienced in relationship to us. Consequently, the question of moral status does not depend on what the other is in its essence but on how it stands in relationship to us and how we decide to respond and take responsibility for the mode of responding.

This means that the order of precedence in moral decision-making is reversed. Internal properties do not come first, and then moral respect follows from this ontological fact. We have had things backward. We have projected the morally relevant properties onto or into those others who we have already decided to treat as beings that are socially and morally significant. In social situations, then, we always and already decide between *who* counts as morally significant and *what* does not and then retroactively justify these actions by “finding” the essential properties that we believe motivated this decision-making in the first place. Thus, properties, according to this view, are not the intrinsic prior condition for moral status. They are products of extrinsic social interactions with and in the face of others. They are, in other words, the outcome and not the starting point. Or to

give it a Humean spin (Hume 1980; Hudson 1969): whereas standard forms of Western ethics (virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology) derive the moral *ought* from a prior *is*, the relational approach reverses the direction of the derivation.

One Approach; Different Theoretical Angles

While Coeckelbergh and Gunkel largely agree on what it means to have a relational approach, they partly come at it from different theoretical angles and have different points of emphasis. Gunkel, inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and others, often uses the language of otherness to talk about the moral standing of nonhuman “others.” In order to provoke discussion about this topic, he has—following the example of a generation of post-Levinasian ethicists (Benso 2000; Calarco 2008; Derrida 2008)—advocated for opening up the Levinasian category of “other” to other forms of socially significant otherness, including technological artifacts, robots, and artificial intelligence (Gunkel 2007, 2012, 2014, 2018). This effort has now culminated in what is the third book in his Machine Question trilogy—*Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century and Beyond* (2023)—which deconstructs the person/thing dichotomy that has been the main organizing principle of Western moral and legal philosophy.

Coeckelbergh has put less emphasis on the moral standing of machines and has come to the topic from a partly different theoretical background. He argued for a transcendental approach that sees not only social relations but also language and technology as “conditions of possibility” for what he calls “moral status ascription” (Coeckelbergh 2012): at the moment when we ascribe moral status, our view of the entity is already shaped by preexisting social relations, linguistic frameworks (language games), and technological operations. More recently (and taking up the point about language again), he has also outlined a performative way of expressing the relational approach (Coeckelbergh 2023), partly inspired by theories of performativity in philosophy of language. Language, in his view, co-creates moral status by means of moral status declarations. We do not only recognize moral status we find in the world but also perform and reperform it within a world that is always already social and mediated by language. This is yet another way to achieve a more-relational and less-static approach to moral standing.

STRENGTHS OF THE RELATIONAL APPROACH

The relational approach offers several compelling advantages over traditional ethical frameworks:

Flexibility, Dynamism, and Situational Ethics

One of the key strengths of the relational approach is its flexibility. It allows for the moral consideration of a wider range of entities by emphasizing context, interdependence, and interaction. Rather than relying on rigid criteria, the approach adapts to the evolving nature of moral relationships, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of moral responsibility (Coeckelbergh 2020). Instead of applying fixed ethical principles, the relational approach sees moral standing as emerging from interactions rather than being predetermined by intrinsic properties such as consciousness and intelligence. This allows for situational flexibility, where moral responsibilities depend on the relation to the entity. Moreover, instead of categorizing entities into strict and fixed moral categories (such as person vs. thing), the relational approach is sensitive and open to different contexts. Meaning, agency, and moral consideration are co-constructed through relationships, for example human–animal relationships or human–technology relationships. This enables the relational approach to allow for evolution in time as social norms, cultural expectations, and technological capabilities change and have always been in flux.

Inclusivity: Avoiding Anthropocentric Bias

The relational approach avoids the anthropocentric bias that has traditionally plagued ethics, including decisions regarding moral consideration. The approach allows for ascribing moral status to nonhuman animals and even for considering what was previously seen as unthinkable: asking the question regarding the rights of robots and AI (Gunkel 2012). In this sense, the relational approach, as developed by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, is in line with (critical) posthumanism, which also argues for the inclusion of nonhumans into our moral and political world. By focusing on the relational nature of moral standing, the relational approach thus provides a more inclusive framework, addressing entities that have traditionally been the excluded other of Western moral philosophy, such as nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and artificial intelligences. These entities may not meet

the traditional criteria for moral consideration, but the relational approach suggests that their interactions with humans and other beings *could* give rise to moral duties and obligations.

Avoidance of Hierarchy, Hegemony, and Domination

Traditional essentialist views have often led to exclusionary practices, using characteristics like consciousness or rationality to justify the abuse and marginalization of certain beings (Singer 1975). Hierarchies based on intrinsic properties have been imposed on entities that were considered as having subhuman status. By rejecting these fixed traits in favor of dynamic relationships, the relational approach avoids perpetuating these hierarchical models, promoting a more egalitarian and context-sensitive understanding of moral standing. If moral standing is not dependent on preexisting qualities but emerges from relationships, then this enables us to question and disrupt assumptions regarding human supremacy. Humans need not be the moral reference point.

In so doing, the relational approach deliberately interrupts human exceptionalism by recognizing the diverse ways that moral significance arises out of different kinds of relationships and interactions. It therefore criticizes the traditional ways in which moral worth has been imposed and legislated. Moral status ascription has typically been shaped by social power dynamics, where certain groups have the power and privilege to dictate moral standing while others have been marginalized and consequently excluded from the moral and political realm. The relational approach thus enables the questioning and interruption of colonial, patriarchal, and technocratic power structures, replacing domination based on one-way imposition with mutual recognition based on relations and interactions.

More generally, the relational approach not only enables us to critically reflect on the standing of moral patients and moral objects but also turns our critical gaze to the moral agents and moral subjects—in other words, to us, to human moral thinking and the ethics of human practices. While initially developed as a way to better address the issue regarding the moral standing of nonhumans, the approach is not only about animals, AI, or robots, but also about humans and the way they think about, and relate to, others. Perhaps more than the properties approach, it functions as a mirror that reflects how we morally relate to other entities—including humans.

CRITICISMS OF THE RELATIONAL APPROACH

Despite its strengths, the relational approach has faced several important criticisms. In this section, we briefly characterize two of the most common and prevalent ones and provide our responses.

Relativism

One criticism is that by making moral standing contingent on social contexts and relationships, the relational approach risks vulnerability to the charge of moral relativism. Critics like Vincent Müller (2021), Kęstutis Mosakas (2021), and Anna Puzio (2024) argue that without fixed criteria for moral standing, the relational approach may undermine moral consistency, leading to subjective or inconsistent moral judgments across different contexts. The perceived problem with relativism is that it encourages and supports a situation where, it seems, anything goes and all things are permitted. But as both Gunkel and Coeckelbergh have argued in other contexts (Gunkel 2018; Coeckelbergh 2020, 2023), this particular understanding of “relative” is limited and the product of a culturally specific understanding of, and expectation for, ethics.

Robert Scott (1967), for instance, understands “relativism” otherwise. He sees it as a positive rather than negative term: “Relativism, supposedly, means a standardless society, or at least a maze of differing standards, and thus a cacophony of disparate, and likely selfish, interests. Rather than a standardless society, which is the same as saying no society at all, relativism indicates circumstances in which standards have to be established cooperatively and renewed repeatedly” (Scott 1967, 264). Charles Ess (2009, 21) calls this alternative “ethical pluralism,” which he distinguishes from “relativism” strictly speaking: “Pluralism stands as a third possibility—one that is something of a middle ground between absolutism and relativism. Ethical pluralism requires us to think in a ‘both/and’ sort of way, as it conjoins both shared norms and their diverse interpretations and applications in different cultures, times, and places.”

Coeckelbergh (2023) has argued that moral status that is established performatively and relationally also has a kind of stability since it then becomes a social fact. Within a particular social and cultural context, it is not the case that anything goes or is a matter of what individuals believe, think, or want. In addition, within a particular linguistic community only some linguistic utterances about moral status will make sense; this also

puts limits on what can be said and done about moral status within a particular context. Coeckelbergh's argument also relies on pragmatism to question moral fundamentalism: according to this view, moral status does not exist in a separate eternal realm of value as opposed to a realm of facts, but is a problem that we need to resolve in a social situation. While this position differs from Nietzschean perspectivism (which is arguably more radical), it also allows us to criticize hegemonic forms of exclusion and abuse in the name of moral fundamentalism.

Others, like Rosi Braidotti, call upon and mobilize a form of non-Western perspectivism, which exceed the grasp of Western epistemology. "Perspectivism," as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015, 24) explains in his work with Amerindian traditions, "is not relativism, that is the affirmation of the relativity of truth, but relationalism, through which one can affirm the truth of the relative is the relation." For this reason, Braidotti (2019, 90) finds that perspectivism is not just different from but is "the antidote to relativism." "This methodology," as she explains, "respects different viewpoints from equally materially embedded and embodied locations that express the degree of power and quality of experience of different subjects." Braidotti therefore recognizes that what is called "truth" is always formulated and operationalized from a particular subject position, which is dynamic, different, and diverse.

The task, then, is not to escape from these differences in order to occupy some fantastic transcendental vantage point but to learn how to take responsibility for these inescapable alterations in embodied perspectives and their diverse social, moral, and material consequences. The relational turn, therefore, does not endorse relativism (as it is typically defined) but embodies and operationalizes an ethical pluralism, relationalism, or perspectivism that complicates the simple binary logic that defines relativism in opposition to moral absolutism.

The Return of the Properties

The second major criticism concerns what might be called "residual properties" and is related to the challenge of rendering the approach practically applicable. There have been at least three different versions of this criticism developed in the recent literature on the subject. In his essay "An Outline of Enactive Relationalism in the Philosophy of Robotics," Abootaleb Safdari argues that relationalism—especially as it has been formulated by Coeckelbergh—remains "superficial." "By superficial," as

Safdari (2025, 15) explains, “I mean that Coeckelbergh’s version risks implicitly slipping back into the same properties-based approach that it originally aimed to avoid.” In other words, the relational turn is essentially incomplete and therefore, to borrow a phrase introduced by Puzio (2024), “not relational enough.”

A similar criticism has been advanced by Sætra (2021, 7): “My second objection is that relationalism is in reality a camouflaged variety of the properties-based approach. This is so because how we relate to other entities is determined by the properties of these others.” In other words, the relational turn can say that it puts relations before *relata* and makes determinations about moral status dependent on “how something is treated, and not what it is” (Sætra 2021, 6). But this is just patently false, because properties still matter. “How we relate to someone, and how an entity acts, is dependent on their properties.”

Finally, Sven Nyholm (2020) argues that even if the conceptual inversion instituted by the relational turn is persuasive and probably correct, properties still play an important role in shaping the relationship.

I think that Gunkel is probably right that we typically do not attribute purely descriptive, nonmoral properties to others first, and then, only after that, reason our way to what forms of moral consideration we think is appropriate ... However, I do not think that this shows that properties—and in particular mental properties—do not play an important role in determining what type of treatment or interaction is morally appropriate in relation to those around us. (Nyholm 2020, 197–198)

All three criticisms proceed on the assumption that the relational turn either wants to do without or even needs to purge itself of properties. But this is a mistake. The relational turn does not seek to avoid, deny, or completely do without properties. It simply alters their function. As Joshua Gellers has insightfully pointed out, properties are not antithetical to or excluded from relationalism; they are just recontextualized and understood in relational terms. “Coeckelbergh,” as Gellers (2020, 19) explains, “does not foreclose the possibility that properties may play a role in a relational approach to moral consideration. Instead, he leaves room for ‘properties-as-they-appear-to-us within a social-relational, social-ecological context’ (Coeckelbergh 2010, 219).”

This inverts the usual order of things, altering the way properties function in decisions concerning moral status ascription. In moral

philosophy—at least its standard Western varieties—what something is commonly determines how it ought to be treated. According to this largely unchallenged standard operating procedure, the question concerning the status of others—whether they are someone who matters or something that does not—is entirely dependent on and derived from what they are and what properties they possess (or do not possess).

The relational alternatives (which should be written in the plural to indicate that there is not one alternative but a multiplicity of different versions of this alternative) not only challenge this way of thinking but deliberately reverse its procedure. This does not diminish the role of properties it simply inverts the direction of the derivation, for example deriving the *is* from a prior *ought*. Thus, the morally significant properties—those ontological criteria that had been assumed to ground decisions regarding moral respect—are actually what Slavoj Žižek (2008, 209) calls “retroactively (presup)posed” as the result of and as justification for prior decisions made in the face of social involvements and interactions with others. Consequently, even before we know anything at all about what something is in its essence (e.g. what properties it has, can have, or does not possess), we have already been called upon and obligated to make a decisive response.

To formulate it in Kantian terms, we can say that what something is in itself—*das Ding an sich*—is forever inaccessible insofar as all we ever have access to is how something appears to be relative to us. Whatever we think it is in-itself is the result of something we project onto or into it after the fact. Thus, it is not accurate to conclude, as Sættra does, that “relationalism is in reality a camouflaged variety the properties-based approach.” Such a conclusion is possible if and only if one normalizes and naturalizes the standard derivation of “ought” from “is” (Hume 1980; Hudson 1969). It is just as likely—and maybe even more epistemologically honest—to conclude that what is actually an effect of embedded and embodied interactions with others has been mistakenly dressed-up and masquerading as a cause. This means, to repurpose and invert Sættra’s objection, that the properties-based approach is (and has actually always and only been) a camouflaged variety of relationalism.

SOME APPLICATIONS OF THE RELATIONAL APPROACH: ANIMALS, AI, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The relational approach offers a robust framework for addressing contemporary questions regarding the moral standing of nonhuman animals, the environment, and technological artifacts:

Animal and Environmental Ethics

The relational approach emphasizes the importance of relationships in determining the moral consideration of nonhuman animals (Nussbaum 2006). Rather than focusing solely on characteristics like sentience or suffering (Singer 1975), the approach highlights the ethical significance of the relationships human beings have with a wide array of nonhuman animals, such as domestication, environmental stewardship, and interspecies interaction.

An example of an application to this area is Coeckelbergh and Gunkel's (2014) paper "Facing Animals," which exemplifies a relational, other-oriented approach to moral status. Criticizing the assumptions shared by thinkers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, the paper mobilizes Levinas, Heidegger, and Derrida to argue that we should alter the question from "What properties does the animal have?" to "What are the conditions under which an entity becomes a moral subject?" The question, then, is not "Can they suffer," as Bentham (1780) put it; the ethical question arises in the concrete relation to the animal. My exposure to the animal as other is ethically prior to whatever ontological properties it might have (or lack). We begin, therefore, from the ethical relationship itself and its implications. Using Levinas but going beyond his anthropocentrism, Coeckelbergh and Gunkel talk about "facing animals" as an opening to the animal's otherness and the ethical appeal (or challenge) that calls for a responsible response. This way of proceeding, then, asks us to critically reexamine the conditions that deface animals, that exclude them from moral consideration. It is through language, technologies, and (the absence of) social relations we typically make animals into "what-s" instead of "who-s," objects instead of subjects, and things instead of persons. Consider, for instance, industrial agricultural practices that define animals as raw materials for food, clothing, and other products. A relational approach that considers the otherness of entities (Gunkel 2012) and looks into the conditions of possibility of their moral standing

(Coeckelbergh 2012) can thus fill an important critical role, next to exposing the limitations of properties approaches à la Singer.

The relational approach is also applicable to those areas of environmental ethics where the focus is on the relationships between humans and ecosystems (Coeckelbergh 2012). Here, moral standing arises from the interdependencies between humans and the natural world, which challenge traditional views that place human interests above environmental concerns (Nussbaum 2006; Singer 1975). In fact, the very possibility of an environmental ethics provides for a more substantive challenge to the properties approach, since the usual list of morally significant qualities and capabilities—such as consciousness, sentience, and rationality—does not apply to mountains, rivers, and forests (though there are some developments in plant science that have recently introduced interesting and important complications to this seemingly commonsense verdict; see Schlanger 2024). Consequently, environmental ethics unlike animal ethics has, from the very beginning, needed to be formulated in relational terms (Gunkel 2012, 143–144), and other researchers, responding to these opportunities/challenges, have taken up and further developed an explicitly formulated relational approach to environmental ethics (see Gellers 2020 and Puzio 2024).

Artificial Intelligence and Robots

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has raised ethical questions about the moral status of these entities. Following the standard operating procedure for deciding these matters, researchers have responded to these questions by mobilizing the usual batch of intrinsic properties such as consciousness, sentience, or rationality. Consequently, the questions that have typically been asked in the face of seemingly intelligent machines include ones like the following: Does a particular AI have sentience? Is it conscious? Does the AI have interests that need protecting? A good example of how this properties-based approach is already being mobilized for AI can be seen in Jeff Sebo's *The Moral Circle* (2025), which argues for the moral status of AI, or what he calls "AI welfare," based on the capacity—or even just a high probability of the capacity—for sentience.

In *Person, Thing, Robot* (Gunkel 2023) and earlier in *Robot Rights* (Gunkel 2018), Gunkel not only identifies persistent and seemingly irreducible problems with this properties based decision-making procedure but demonstrates how the moral and legal standing of robots and AI can

and should be determined by the roles they occupy and play in human society. Thus—and counter to the essentialist arguments made by Sebo and others—moral status is not something inherent to the AI because of its capabilities (or lack thereof) but is a socially constructed recognition that emerges from the relationships in which it is situated and operates. Consequently, the moral significance of an artifact, like a robot or an AI system, is dependent upon and derived from its integration into social reality and the responsibilities humans have toward these entities (Coeckelbergh 2010). What ultimately matters is how we interact with these technologies and perceive them. Gunkel has therefore criticized views of the moral status of machines that a priori exclude considering that they might have—or that we might need them to have—moral status as well as social responsibilities and rights.

Coeckelbergh emphasizes the social and phenomenological aspects as moral standing depends on human subjectivity in important ways. In “The Moral Standing of Machines” (Coeckelbergh 2014), he has argued that moral status depends on human language use and human thinking in a specific cultural and historical context; it is thus about a relation between moral subject and moral object. To assert, for instance, that an AI is “just a machine” neglects these complex ways in which moral standing is constructed. Based on his use of the later Wittgenstein, Coeckelbergh has argued that our moral experience of machines is shaped by our form of life: the specific way our culture constructs machines. He has therefore questioned the Western (in particular Cartesian) obsession with keeping up distinctions between humans and machines and has, like Gunkel (2023), explored non-Western and nonmodern approaches. For example, Coeckelbergh has explored what it would mean to create a robot that would be embedded in Ubuntu culture (Coeckelbergh 2022) and Gunkel (2023) has called upon the insights and wisdom of various indigenous traditions that focus on our shared kinship with the machines (Lewis et al. 2018).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The relational approach to moral standing as developed by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel opens several avenues for future research:

First, more fundamental research is needed to better understand and improve the ways we ascribe, think about, and decide questions of moral

standing and moral status in general. The relational approach is not only relevant within moral philosophy at large but also engages us in a potentially dangerous, albeit highly interesting set of philosophical problems that go beyond moral philosophy narrowly defined and reach into metaphysics, philosophy of language, epistemology, political philosophy, and other related domains. For over two millennia, Western philosophy has operated on the assumption that metaphysics is “first philosophy”, thus relegating ethics to a secondary position as a kind of applied philosophical thinking. The critical interventions released by the “relational turn” also turn this tradition on its head, making ethics first philosophy (see Levinas 1969).

Second, the relational approach to moral standing as developed by Gunkel and Coeckelbergh can be brought into further dialogue with other approaches within philosophy that call themselves relational, for example—but not limited to—feminism, posthumanism, Eastern philosophy, indigenous thinking, and so on. As indicated previously, some of these conversations have been started, also by Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, but more work can and should be done in this direction.

Third, as technologies like AI, biotechnology, and synthetic life continue to evolve, further research is needed to refine how the relational approach can account for these new developments. Specifically, research could explore how robotic entities or artificial life forms can be integrated into ethical and political frameworks without resorting to traditional essentialist and human-centred criteria. The need for this kind of innovative thinking has already been identified by both moral philosophers and legal scholars (Pietrzykowski 2018; Kurki 2019; Beckers and Teubner 2021).

Fourth, the relational approach offers a promising framework for addressing global environmental challenges. Research could further explore how more attention to the moral relevance of interdependent relationships between human beings, ecosystems, and the biosphere can inform more sustainable and ethical environmental practices. So far, for example, the relational approach has not been applied to respond to the problems of climate change. The alternative moral framework offered by Gunkel and Coeckelbergh could provide a more substantive and successful means for addressing and responding to these epoch-defining challenges.

Finally, relational ethics needs to become a fully interdisciplinary subject. So far work in this domain has been largely limited to moral theory. It

would therefore be important and useful to foster more interdisciplinary work on the question regarding moral standing from a relational perspective. Especially important here would be empirical investigations that study how different human subjects actually construct moral status and decide about the social significance and standing of others. Conducting this research would require combining theoretical work in philosophy with more practical efforts in the social sciences, including sociological work on interactions with machines, the institutional context of ethics, cultural variations, the question of power, and thinking about how to include nonhumans in our moral and political world and how to (re)integrate the natural and the social (see, for instance, Latour 1993 and Stengers 2010). There is already some evidence of success with these efforts (Küster et al. 2020; Banks 2021; Lima et al. 2021), but there is clearly a wide range of opportunities that have yet to be developed and pursued. Additionally, future work could (and should) also focus on how the relational approach can be applied to legal and policy contexts, where practical decisions about the moral/legal standing of entities often need to be made. Consequently, research is needed to begin bridging the gap between heady ethical theory and pragmatic policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relational approach to moral standing as articulated by David J. Gunkel and Mark Coeckelbergh offers a novel, dynamic, context-sensitive, and power-sensitive alternative to traditional essentialist views of moral consideration. By emphasizing the significance of relationships, interactions, and performances, the relational approach provides a more inclusive and flexible framework for thinking about moral status. Although it faces criticisms, particularly regarding the risk of relativism, the role of properties, and its practical application, Coeckelbergh and Gunkel's responses demonstrate the approach's potential for addressing contemporary practical moral challenges, particularly in the fields of AI and robotics, animal ethics, and environmentalism. Consequently, the potential reach of this theory goes beyond philosophical questions regarding moral standing and provides us with a robust moral framework that can respond to, and take responsibility for, the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

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PART IV

Coda



Diagrammatic Social Thought

Daniel Silver

This chapter advances the concept of diagrammatic social thought, drawing on the ideas of C. S. Peirce. I make four core arguments. First, I elaborate four approaches to the visualization of theoretical ideas: cognitivist, constructionist, justificatory, and pragmatist.

Second, I develop further the pragmatist approach, by joining Peirce's "pragmatic maxim" with his semiotics of diagrams. I argue that for theorists the pragmatic maxim is a maxim to draw. This maxim in turn implies that diagrams have an epistemic function: by manipulating and experimenting with them, we learn new things about their objects. In this pragmatist conception, diagrammatic thinking is a form of relational and experimental thinking.

Third, I turn to sociological theory diagrams. Drawing on ongoing collaborative empirical research, I catalog recurrent (a) elements (b), types, and (c) qualities that sociologists use to (d) represent social relations and processes. Elements include arrows, lines, circles, zig zags, boxes, and squiggles. Types include path diagrams, Venn diagrams, network diagrams, and cross-classification diagrams. Qualities include position, color,

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Switzerland AG 2025

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F. Vandenberghe, C. Papilloud (eds.), *New Directions in Relational Sociology, Volume Two*, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02413-8_13

thickness, proximity, and length. Relations and processes include influence, importance, interaction, growth, force, sequence, cyclicity, and motion.

Fourth, I explore illustrations of what Peirce termed “theorematic” reasoning: adding or removing or modifying elements or configurations of diagrams. These are among the most “daring” (Baldamus 1971), risky, and creative of operations one can perform on a diagram, in that they alter the theorizing capacities it affords. Theorematic interventions change relations among relations. I examine three techniques of theorematic reasoning with theory diagrams in sociology: adding forms, overlaying forms, and adding types. I conclude by noting the limited role of diagrammatic thinking in current relational sociology before exploring intriguing lines of research to carry the project of diagrammatic social thought forward.

FOUR APPROACHES TO DIAGRAMMATIC THINKING.

The literature on diagrammatic thinking is vast, too vast to survey in any systematic way here. Major discussions occur across psychology, semiotics, art history, anthropology, cognitive science, computer science, statistics, education, and beyond, with some sociologists contributing as well. While discussions about the distinctive role of diagrams across various phases in theorizing as such are rare, these multiple literatures provide a rich fund of examples and insights that can be adapted to this purpose and applied to social thought. We can distinguish four major approaches to the study of diagrammatic thinking: cognitivist, constructionist, justificatory, and pragmatist.¹

Cognitivist approaches. Cognitivist approaches tend to root diagrammatic thinking in some basic features of the human perceptual and cognitive apparatus. For example, the visual field has a center and a periphery; gravity operates vertically, and effort is required to overcome it. Hence, graphical circles mobilize the former to focus attention at a center amid a gradient of declining importance spreading outward; position on a vertical line draws on the latter to rank objects by such qualities as strength or

¹ I leave aside naïve realism, where figures somehow automatically and transparently correspond to the world, since nobody in this field seems to consider it a live option. Certainly, Peirce and Arnheim and related authors in Pragmatism and Gestalt theory were realists, but their realism was far from naïve.

power (Tversky 2011; see also Arnheim 1954). Graphical forms employed in diagrams are accordingly “microcosms of cognition” (Tversky 2011).

Such microcosms are valuable aids to thinking. They recruit humans’ very good spatial pattern recognition and processing (Gooding 2010; Larkin and Simon 1987; Roth and McGinn 1998; Cairo 2012; Tufte 2006) to make thinking available to sensory perception, even if the tendency to group things by shape and position can sometimes create errors (Tversky 2011). In this tradition, the distinctive power of the visualization of ideas in diagrams is often articulated by contrasting, on the one hand, “sentential,” and, on the other, “diagrammatic” or “spatial” reasoning (Larkin and Simon 1987; Griesemer 1991; Osborn 2005; Chandrasekaran 2011; Cheng and Simon 1995; see also Mitchell 1984, 530–531). Sentential reasoning generally works through the formal tools of symbolic logic, stipulating meanings of variables and rules of inference. In many cases, sentential expressions can be quite cumbersome and require large amounts of memory and effort to process. Diagrams of the same state of affairs can be easier to grasp and can facilitate search and pattern recognition through spatial proximity and form. Hence, “diagrams are sometimes worth 10,000 words” (Larkin and Simon 1987).

Gestalt theorists have stressed that the cognitive power of diagrammatic visualization is rooted in patterns of human action evolved through interaction with the environment. Tversky summarizes this line of research: “action underlies perception. The actions of organizing space for many ends into groups, hierarchies, orders, correspondences, continua, and the like create spatial patterns that are far more regular than those created by nature, thus a signal that they are created by sentient minds” (Tversky 2011, 504; see also e.g. Alperson-Afil et al. 2009; Kirsh 1995). An ordered environment tuned to humans’ excellent visio-spatial capacities reduces the cognitive energy required to navigate it, freeing us up for pressing demands and higher-order activities (cf. Clark 1997; Hutchins 1995; Krueger 2011). By the same token, we design (physical and social) environments that enhance and draw upon these abilities (Malafouris 2013, Krueger 2013). Forks are easily found when sorted near other forks; street grids and clear signage facilitate wayfinding; a cathedral makes it easier to let oneself go into contemplative meditation. Gestures integrate spatial perception into communicative practice (Arnheim 1969).²

²“Gestures go beyond pointing; they can show size, shape, pattern, manner, position, direction, order, quantity, both literally and metaphorically. They can express abstract mean-

Drawing diagrams on paper and screen utilizes these cognitive abilities and raises them to a new level. Experiences and thoughts that in everyday practice may be transitory, fleeting, or obscure become subject to a refined control, carried to completion, and placed before others for critical evaluation (Dewey [1934] 2005; Tversky et al. 2009). Enhancing the capacities of shapes and forms to express and evaluate and create thoughts becomes the subject of its own mode of practice. It has its own practical environment, such as the two-dimensional space of the page or screen, and works with its own materials, such as marks on pages and their relations (Arnheim 1954). Through practice, visual traditions and customs develop, rules for how to combine and work with figures grow, their constraints are charted, and their ability to encompass new arenas is tested.

Constructionist approaches. While somewhat peripheral to cognitivist approaches,³ this emphasis on the growth over time of distinctive visual interpretative traditions and collective practices is the centerpiece for more constructionist and hermeneutic approaches. Diagrams from various times and places may look quite similar. But in the hands of different interpretative communities, they acquire distinct meanings. A simple example of this kind of variability is in the interpretation of horizontal lines. Often figures for motion through time, horizontals tend to be interpreted left-to-right or right-to-left, depending on local reading conventions (Dehaene 1997; Zebian 2005; Santiago et al. 2007; Santiago et al. 2008). Thus, constructionist approaches often stress the ongoing process by which communities construct the meaning of their diagrams, and that these meanings are not inherent to the diagrams themselves but results of interpretative work.

Historical anthropologists and sociologists of science have pursued in more fine-grained detail the interpretative work that research communities do on and with various diagrams (Daston and Galison 2010). For instance, Eddy (2014) examines the diagrams of the eighteenth-century chemist Joseph Black to trace the “historical unfolding of the beliefs and values attributed to objects visualized by community” (Eddy 2014, 181). Black adapted lines and boxes and circles to the needs of early chemistry, building not only on basic cognitive processes but also on, for instance, the diagrammatic skills, conventions, and expectations cultivated by the

ings, mood, affect, evaluation, attitude, and more. Gestures and actions convey this rich set of meanings by using position, form, and movement in space” (Tversky 2011, 500).

³Cognitive archaeologists, however, have made such questions more central (cf. Malafouris 2013).

Scottish educational system and other chemists. In this context, though Black used circles to represent compounds, he developed local reading conventions according to which “reading the diagram was very much a rectilinear affair” (Eddy 2014, 192), running somewhat against the grain of standard Gestalt interpretations of circles’ basic cognitive properties. These local interpretations in turn structured the global transmission of Black’s diagrams.

Similarly, pioneering Science and Technology Studies research on visual representations in the natural sciences (e.g., Amann and Knorr Cetina 1988; Lynch 1991; Coopmans et al. 2014) has examined how visual representations such as photographs become interpreted as scientific figures (through, for instance, adding interpretative labels, creating composites to reveal a general type, and more). They also show how diagrams structure the characteristic talk that occupies research communities, providing a focal point for discussions. In many ways, to learn how to become a member of such a community is to learn its tacit rules for discussing its various graphical representations.

Justificatory approaches. In its stronger varieties, constructionism treats diagrams themselves as highly malleable blank canvases onto which a community projects its images. A basic insight of the Gestalt tradition, however, is that figures and shapes in general are not inert. Rather, they afford actions in ways that do not simply bend to the human will, via their own inner dynamics making certain thoughts imaginable (Arnheim 1954).⁴ For instance, “lines connect and bars contain” (Tversky 2011, 519)—that is, lines suggest entities with different levels of a common property; bars suggest discrete comparisons.⁵ One can work with or against these affordances, but regardless one is working with or against lines of interpretative action presented in and by the objects.

Yet even if diagrams are not inert screens onto which a community may willfully project any interpretation it wishes, the collective work of

⁴Turner (2015) notes a related irony with respect to Latour’s use of diagrams. Whereas Latour has stressed the agency of objects in his research, in his own practice he uses “devices such as metaphors and diagrams as passive instruments that bend to his theoretical will rather than tools that, owing to their own logic and agency, can only make certain things imaginable” (Turner 2015, 136).

⁵Tversky (2011) report an experiment that indicates the power of these tendencies. Subjects asked to use lines to compare heights of men and women interpreted the relationship as a trend, some even suggesting “as you get more male, you get taller” (Tversky 2011, 519).

articulating the meaning of diagrams may play a crucial role in the ongoing life of the group. Accordingly, we may ask what an interpretative community uses its diagrams *for*. Why does it adopt visualization at all, a given type of figure, or way of discussing figures? Only some of the seemingly infinite sets are in fact selected. Why these rather than others?

These sorts of questions and lines of thought guide approaches that stress the justificatory functions of diagrams. Communities use diagrams, and they use them for distinct purposes. Part of their value likely derives from how well they can legitimate those purposes. The analytical task from this point of view is then to articulate the nature of those purposes and to show how diagrams may justify them.

Diagrams may serve a host of activities. Some research stresses communication. By condensing thoughts into compact forms whose relations persist across space and time—“immutable mobiles” (Latour 1986)—diagrams provide objects around which far-flung scientific communities may cohere, not to mention something to fight about. They become foci for coordinating action.

In one of the few studies to explicitly examine diagrammatic representation in a community of sociological theorists,⁶ Joel Isaac (2012) shows the value diagrams provided to the group of social theorists that gathered around Talcott Parsons at Harvard in the mid-twentieth century. Their diagrams “wore their materiality on their sleeve, because they were also, by virtue of their very existence, proof of something: they were evidence that theorizing in the field of social relations could produce fruitful instruments and mechanisms for organizing the data of social science” (Isaac 2012, 186). Parsons and his collaborators’ diagrams were not simply the latest incarnation of a timeless mode of thinking, as a purely cognitivist approach might suggest. Moreover, their diagrammatic practices were more than interpretative. Rather, they served important legitimizing functions for the group, providing material evidence to themselves and others—including funders and administrators—of the collective productivity and ongoing creativity of their seemingly inward, ethereal, and solitary theorizing.

⁶Owens (2012) discusses the early Chicago School’s use of maps, highlighting not only how their various mapping projects were crucial tools for developing their specific theoretical ideas about cities and communities but also how their openness to multiple types of maps for different research goals illustrates their more general open-ended and pragmatic attitude.

Diagrams also serve as tools of persuasion (Latour 1986). For instance, several authors (Giere 1999; Krohn 1991; Rudwick 1976 among others) point to the key function diagrams have played in justifying resolutions to debates in the history of science, such as geology and limnology. “Visual representations are able to create in the minds of similarly informed readers similar images of ‘what must have gone on’” (Krohn 1991, 183). In these accounts, diagrammatic styles that have been better able to communicate, coordinate, and persuade tend to become more legitimate cognitive resources in the interpretative life of a group.

Pragmatist approaches. Examining how diagrams legitimate an interpretative community’s practices can be important, especially because it focuses attention on their practical “cash value.” In this respect, justificatory approaches raise practical questions central to pragmatism, not only about the practical background to but also about the practical utility of diagrammatic thinking. But carrying the underlying impulse toward considering the legitimizing functions of diagrams too far can also lead to unfortunate theoretical consequences. These issues stem from the tendency to treat the object (in this case the diagram) as determined by some externally set or latent purpose. Such approaches tend to obscure the substantive analytical and intellectual work that may be produced in and by engaging with diagrams.⁷

Lynch’s treatment of “theory pictures” in sociology is a case in point. Having decided that most theory pictures add no information to the written text, Lynch then asks why they nevertheless exist. With no manifest function in sight, he posits a latent function, scientism, or, more precisely, the legitimation of sociology as a (pseudo) scientific enterprise.

The intellectual consequence of this tendency is to deflect analysis from two interrelated questions. For one thing, granting for the sake of argument that many theory diagrams do have natural scientific resonances, on what basis, through what processes, and with what intellectual implications does this diagrammatic mapping of forms from one field to another occur? This is the question of visual metaphor, and positing a legitimizing function in advance will not take us very far into its inner operation. A

⁷This is the substance of Giere’s (1999) critique of Latour. Yes, figures may have persuasive power, but this is rooted, Giere argues, in their analytical power. In the case of the geological debates he examined, this persuasive power is rooted “in their power to suggest and to communicate a substantial image of underground, fragmentarily viewed geological structures and the dynamics which created them” (Krohn 1991, 183).

more fruitful approach is to adapt insights from the rich tradition of studying how linguistic metaphors map thought processes from one domain to another (Lakoff and Johnson 2008; Johnson 2008). For another, even diagrams with little to no informational content above and beyond the text can be useful for theoretical practice.⁸ Swedberg (2016), for instance, suggests theory pictures can help to clarify, remember, and express theoretical ideas, even if they have no further utility beyond visualizing the text.⁹

A certain type of reversal is characteristic of the classical pragmatist philosophers, who in many areas made last what seemed first. In pragmatist epistemology and psychology, mind and self become developmental outcomes of social interaction. In pragmatist action theory, a goal becomes the tentative result of action, not its precondition. In pragmatist organizational theory, an organizational mission is a (fragile, revisable) achievement rather than starting point, judged by how well it stabilizes and enhances rather than disturbs and stultifies organizational capacity (Joas 1996).

And so, it goes for diagrammatic thinking. Rather than presume visuals serve purposes such as communicating and persuading and legitimating, a pragmatist perspective suggests we first examine the practical capacities that make these uses possible (Stjernfelt 2007). To be rhetorical tools, diagrams must have publicly perceptible qualities. How do these qualities enhance the capacity to theorize, and ultimately to act? If a community forms itself through talking about certain diagrams, what is it about the figures and the demands they place on their users that makes this kind of

⁸ Turner (2010) argues that figures like John Scott's (1995) simple depiction of Marx and Habermas on base/superstructure and system/lifeworld are "hardly worth the effort." Yet even simplistic and informationally redundant figures can do analytical work, if we enter into their visual language. For instance, Scott arranges base and superstructure vertically, giving a spatial structure to their Marxian analytical relationship, and shows arrows leading up from bottom to top, showing an asymmetric relationship (albeit of an unspecified kind). By contrast system and lifeworld have double-headed arrows between them, showing some sort of mutuality. These are not revolutionary ideas, but the figures do present them in a visually clear manner that illuminates some aspect of their structure. They also create opportunities for critical engagement: for instance, one might wonder why "system" is shown below "lifeworld," which suggests that one is ground of the other.

⁹ Osborn (2005), examining closely a diagram by Stuart Hall, adds that in many cases the text to which a figure is supposed to relate is far from clear, and that, even when their contents are the same, often the text is structured as an articulation of the figure. Larkin and Simon (1987) show that informationally equivalent representations can sometimes be very different in the computational and memory demands they place on users.

binding commitment possible? Likewise, if certain figures recur and reappear across time and space, they do so because they enable their users to do something more easily that would be otherwise difficult. The pragmatist point of view makes the cognitivist, constructionist, and justificatory approaches subservient to the problems and processes of action.

THE PRAGMATIC MAXIM TO DRAW

The Pragmatic Maxim to Draw. Swedberg (2016) and Silver (2020) propose directions for adapting pragmatist insights to the study of diagrammatic practice in sociological theory, drawing especially on C. S. Peirce. Swedberg (2016) elaborates the practical meaning of theory images, theorizing diagrams, and visual sketches. Images aid in summarizing and recalling an existing theory; sketches are useful in the early phases of thinking through a problem and are often discarded and replaced throughout the process. “Theorizing diagrams” are working visual tools that aid theorists in making new theories. Silver (2020) examines the practical role of diagrams through all phases of the reasoning process, from abduction (the search for new ideas) to deduction (identifying their logical implications) to induction (evaluating their goodness of fit to their objects). Silver (2020) also draws on Peirce’s iconic semiotics to identify visual metaphors embedded in sociological diagrams, such as the path metaphor in path diagrams.

In this section, I develop further the implications of Peirce’s pragmatism for articulating the pragmatic basis of diagrammatic social thought. Specifically, I turn to Peirce’s essay, “How To Make Our Ideas Clear” (Peirce 1931–1958, 5.388)¹⁰. There, Peirce formulates his famous pragmatic maxim. Though the maxim does not explicitly mention diagrams, careful attention to Peirce’s discussion reveals that the pragmatic maxim is in fact *for theorists especially* a maxim to draw. For Peirce, not only can we think diagrammatically, but it is also *good* to do so, practically speaking.

Peirce formulated the pragmatic maxim to answer the question, “how do we make our ideas clear?” (ibid.). Neither an unreflective intuitive feel (“I know it when I see it”) nor an abstract stipulation (“let $A = B$ ”) can answer this question, Peirce argues. Instead, to clarify an idea, we must ask

¹⁰All references to Peirce are to the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, following the convention of referring to volume and paragraph numbers (e.g., 5.388 refers to volume 4, paragraph 533).

what *consequences* adopting an idea would have for our practical bearings. The meaning of the concept consists in the difference it would make if it were to inform habits of thought and behavior. Peirce spent much of his life reformulating the pragmatist maxim and defending it against critics (and supporters, for that matter).

A key aspect of the maxim that Peirce came to emphasize was that it does not imply that purely theoretical questions find their meaning in their “external” consequences. We do not justify logical or mathematical claims by their utilitarian or psychological payoffs. Yet, nevertheless, Peirce insists that we should evaluate even the most purely theoretical ideas by observing their consequences. The consequences we observe, however, occur not in “real things” but through diagrammatic experimentation. As one of Peirce’s leading interpreters puts the point as follows:

Peirce argues that there are two kinds of experience—“ideal” and “real”. The latter is sensory experience and the former is experience in which “operations upon diagrams, whether external or imaginary, take the place of the experiments upon real things that one performs in chemical and physical research [...] This sort of thought experiment or diagrammatic experiment is, he argues, at the core of mathematical and deductive inquiry [...] The mathematician operates or experiments on a diagram. For instance, he draws subsidiary lines in geometry or makes transformations in algebraic formulae and then observes the results. (Misak 2004, 11)

Peirce insists that, even though these diagrammatic experiments may operate on objects created out of our own imaginations, the results can surprise us (Otte, 2011). Surprise characterizes “the force of experience” (Misak 2004, 11)—reality impinging itself on us, even against our expectations. For Peirce, diagrammatic experiments can yield surprising experimental results that theorists must take account of, just as physical experiments can produce observations that scientists must deal with (Stjernfelt 2011, 397).¹¹

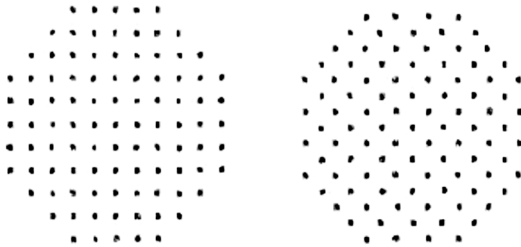
For Peirce, the meaning of an idea comes from its “practical bearing” on experience. But “experience” for Peirce is quite capacious. Theoretical contexts constitute their own domain of experience, and diagramming

¹¹ Stjernfelt articulates how Peirce’s maxim seeks to avoid psychologism. It does not matter whether a diagram and its object “on first (or second) glance seem or are experienced as similar; the decisive test [...] lies in whether it is possible to manipulate or develop the sign so that new information as to its object appears” (Stjernfelt 2011, 397).

allows practical consequences in this domain to be observed (Misak 2004, 18). Thus, those who wish to contribute to theoretical practice have a special duty to develop their ideas diagrammatically. In this way, they can discern the practical consequences of their theoretical propositions, by giving those propositions perceptible forms, performing experiments on them, and observing the results.

For theorists, then, the pragmatic maxim to clarify our ideas through observing their practical implications is a maxim to draw.¹² Can you diagram your idea? Does accepting your idea make a difference in how we would diagram it, or more broadly to our collective diagrammatic habits and practices? Even in his initial statement, Peirce illustrated a difference that makes no difference with two superficially different but basically identical diagrams (Fig. 13.1).

Rossella Fabbrichesi goes so far as to reformulate the pragmatic maxim to emphasize its diagrammatic implications: “consider what graphical effects, which might conceivably have practical (experimental) bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to be expressed in. Then our conception of these (sign, graphical, visual) effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Fabbrichesi 2011, 117). The imperative to think in figures is thus not only rooted in historical or psychological or genetic traits and habits. It is a maxim grounded in the practical demands of theorizing. Theories require external media that make available their



Different modes of arrangements of the same objects

Fig. 13.1 Peirce’s illustration of the pragmatic maxim

¹² Peirce developed this idea explicitly, but other pragmatists seem to have operated with it in practice. William James, for instance, notably included numerous diagrams in his *Principles of Psychology*, which he manipulated in various ways to illustrate how to conceive thought as a holistic flow rather than a series of discrete instances.

qualities to perception, observation, and experimental manipulation. By diagramming their ideas, theorists learn to draw out the implications of their ideas.

The semiotic implications of the pragmatic maxim to draw. That the pragmatic maxim is for theorists a maxim to draw joins it with Peirce's semiotics. If we are to think, we must find signs capable of expressing our theories. To do so, they must in some way share qualities with our ideas. In terms of Peirce's semiotics, they must be iconic signs. But they also include signs drawn so that we can work with them, and in working with them reveal something in our ideas that we would not have otherwise thought. In Peirce's terms, they must include diagrams: representations of the skeletal relations of their objects, in which by manipulating the diagram we also learn about the object. The pragmatic maxim to draw is thus also a maxim to draw iconic signs upon which we can perform experiments.¹³ It is a maxim to think iconically and diagrammatically.

The practical implication of Peirce's semiotics for sociological theorizing is that to "make our ideas clear" and live up to the pragmatic maxim to draw, we need to make diagrammatic icons of theoretical ideas. Exactly what this means is an open question. This is because Peirce's conception of icons includes not only diagrams but also what he called "images" and "metaphors."¹⁴ What these "iconic signs" have in common is that they represent their objects through resemblance: images in a direct way (e.g., pictograms), diagrams through abstract structural relations and arrangements, metaphors through transferring meaning from one object to another. The result is that Peircian iconicity is much wider than our standard notions of "visuals" as graphics built out of lines and shapes that use spatial relationships such as proximity to convey ideas. In fact, for Peirce there can be artistic and musical icons. Grammar and algebra have iconic properties (Stjernfelt 2007; Arnold 2011)—they encode relationships shared with their objects and can be manipulated to make discoveries

¹³Peirce's distinction between icon, index, and symbol is well known. Icons are determined by some qualities or formal features they share with their objects. Indexes are determined existentially; as their objects change, so do they. Symbols are determined by conventions.

¹⁴In Peirce's technical vocabulary, these are "hypoicons." Peirce uses the term "hypoicon" because he is talking about signs, and no signs are purely iconic. Hypoicons, however, are more iconic than other signs are; hence, he sometimes refers to them as iconic signs

about them (Stjernfelt 2011, 397).¹⁵ The classic contrast between algebra and geometry helps to show the kinds of trade-offs involved in choosing a diagram. Algebraic diagrams have their advantages, such as precision and completeness. Any geometric version of $x=y^2$ by contrast is restricted to a specific subset of the equation. Yet geometry also has its advantages. For instance, you can easily read off the solution, and observe the shape of the curve, and its various properties.

The Peircian pragmatic maxim therefore does not imply a single-minded commitment to graphical representation. Rather, the pragmatic maxim implies two related commitments. The first is that to clarify our ideas we cannot avoid the question about how to represent our thoughts. The second is construct representations that allow us to learn about the objects of our thoughts through manipulating them directly.

Peirce offers some guidance as to what these commitments imply in that he does distinguish among degrees of iconicity, what Stjernfelt (2011) calls their “optimal iconicity.” The nature of optimal iconicity emerges clearly in Peirce’s discussion of logical notation. Consider the way he contrasts how his system of existential graphs and standard sentential logic display the logical notion of identity. In the sentential notation (Fig. 13.2, left), we have to use three Xs to show that X is identical. This makes X graphically discontinuous, and thus clashes with the central characteristic of identity: continuity.

The existential graph (Fig. 13.2, right) instead uses a continuous line to express the continuity of “millionaire” and “unfortunate,” and then a cut in space to represent that there is some millionaire who is not unfortunate.

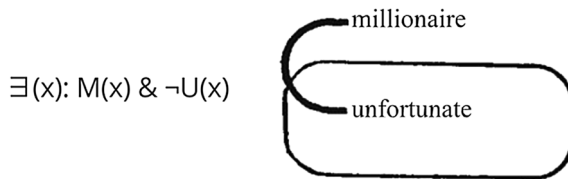


Fig. 13.2 Sentential vs. graphical logic

¹⁵The classic contrast between algebra and geometry helps to show the kinds of trade-offs involved in choosing a diagram. Algebraic diagrams have their advantages, such as precision and completeness. Any geometric version of $x=y^2$ by contrast is restricted to a specific subset of the equation. Yet geometry also has its advantages. For instance, you can easily read off the solution, and observe the shape of the curve, and its various properties.

The guiding ambition of Peirce's logical notation is that the properties of the graph can be used more easily to learn about the properties of logic, since the latter may be more directly perceived in the former. The existential graph is more iconic than the algebraic sentence, and it is this more optimal iconicity that underlies the cognitive value that later analysts have attributed to spatial and diagrammatic reasoning (cf. Larkin and Simon 1987).

The semiotic implication of the pragmatic maxim is that in considering how to represent our ideas, we strive to find signs that incorporate an optimal level of iconicity, whatever that may be in a given case. This does not mean only drawing figures: Peirce himself was a very prolix user of words. Nor does it imply avoiding images and metaphors: those are icons too. Rather, it implies considering a fulsome set of expressive possibilities, and, as part of that broader practice, creating diagrammatic representations that exploit the full semiotic potential of diagrams as objects for observing the implications of our thoughts through experimentation and manipulation. While this might sound like a rather trivial commitment, in fact it is quite exacting and difficult. This difficulty becomes clear by examining the actual diagrammatic practice of sociological theorists.

HOW SOCIOLOGISTS THINK TO USE DIAGRAMS

How can social theorists live up to the pragmatic maxim to draw? One option is to simply dive in and start to experiment with figures as we teach theory and theorize ourselves. As exhilarating as this might be, it would ignore the fact that we inevitably work within intellectual traditions, and that these traditions include untheorized graphical practices such as path diagrams or fourfold tables. We lack a shared inventory of graphical methods and forms whose properties are systematically understood. We each start out as if for the first time, with only our native design abilities, bits of wisdom picked up elsewhere, or some untheorized common stock of symbols and forms from the broader culture or the history of sociology (Turner 2010). It is possible to approach the matter in a more reflective, systematic, and observational way.

Gordon Brett and I have been pursuing this direction, by building and analyzing a database of sociological theory figures (Silver 2020; Brett et al. 2020; Brett and Silver 2024). Our database includes articles from seven journals: *The American Journal of Sociology*, *The American Sociological Review*, *Sociological Theory*, *Theory and Society*, *The European Journal of*

Social Theory, Theory, Culture, and Society, and *The European Journal of Sociology*. We chose these to include both leading generalist journals in North America and Europe and major theory journals. We collected every article from these journals, extracted the images, and connected them with the digitized text of the articles as well as essential bibliographic details such as date, author, and citation counts. This allows us to analyze the formal characteristics of the figures as well as place them in the broader context of the articles' objectives.

To extract insights from this database, we began by selecting a random sample of 20 articles featuring diagrams from each journal. We recorded the total number of figures and the quantity that qualified as theory diagrams—defined similarly to Swedberg (2016) as diagrams either devoid of empirical data or incorporating such data in a stylized manner to conceptualize an idea, rather than for organizing facts or data, erring on the side of inclusiveness. After evaluating each sample and identifying trends across the journals, we replicated this process, extending our review to 40 articles per publication. We then qualitatively examined a third sample to ensure consistency with the initial samples.

We coded the collected diagrams along several dimensions: the figures' type (e.g., path diagram, flow chart, Venn diagram), shape and structure (e.g., box, cross, triangle), qualities it employs (position, proximity, length, color), and associated text and numerical elements (e.g., captions, legends, instructions for reading). We also codify the nature of depicted relationships (e.g., influence, exchange, temporal dynamics) and the diagram's role in articulating the article's core theory or argument, representing social phenomena, or portraying social structures. In addition, we took detailed notes on particularly compelling diagrams and situated them within the context of the article's narrative and central thesis. We use quantitative counts to ground our analysis in broader patterns yet generally refrain from making conclusive interpretive judgments based solely on counts. Instead, we consider coding as a tool for refining our understanding of theory diagrams across various dimensions as part of a holistic interpretation.

Previous work has examined how sociologists undertake abductive, deductive, and inductive reasoning in sociological theory figures (Silver 2020), common graphical pitfalls (Brett et al. 2020) that sociologists regularly fall into (such as unwanted spatial inference or visual ambiguity), and the relationship between graphical and textual representations of causality (Brett and Silver 2024). Figure 13.3 summarizes some of the major

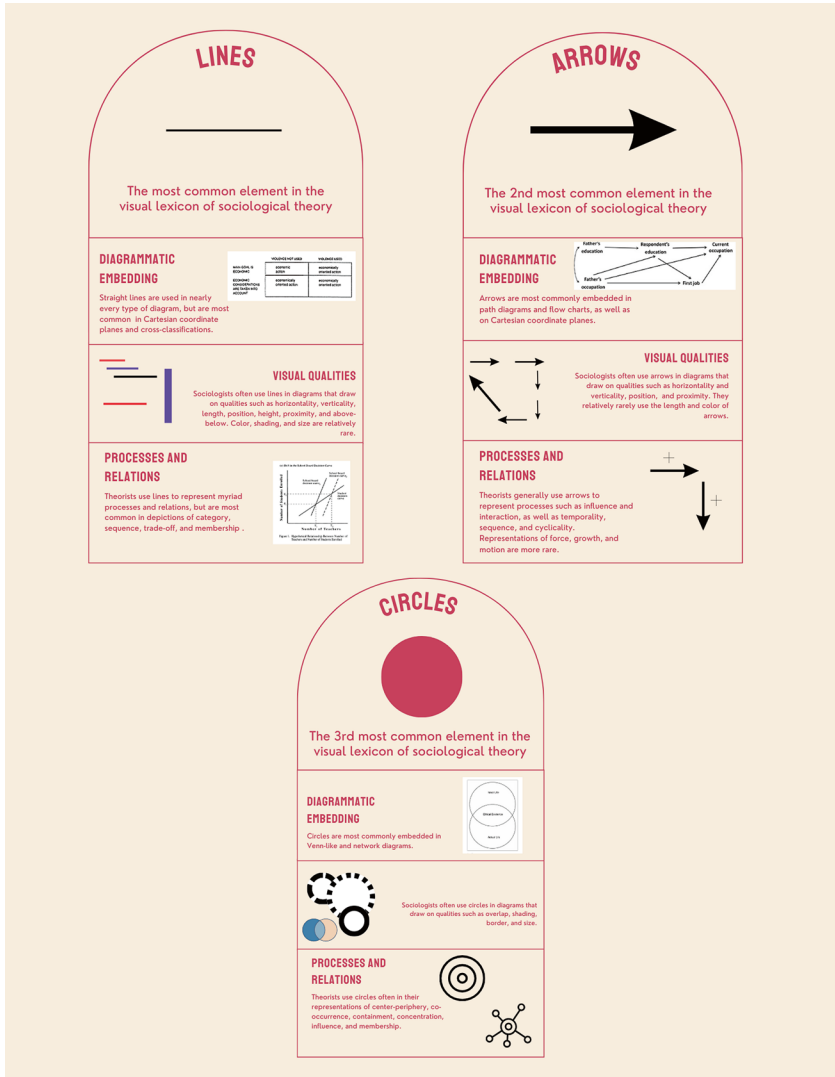


Fig. 13.3 Common visual elements in the visual lexicon of sociological theory

patterns that have emerged from this research, focusing on the three most common visual elements in sociological theory figures: lines, arrows, and circles.

Lines are the most common element in the theorist's graphical lexicon. They are used across nearly all diagrammatic forms. Sociologists usually work with qualities such as their length, position, and height to represent relationships and processes such as membership, trade-offs, and sequences. The prevalence and wide-ranging utility of lines is also why they are so likely to create visual ambiguities, as sociologists frequently do not specify what type of relationship they seek to depict with a straight line between two entities (Brett et al. 2020). Equally important is the fact that theorists are so drawn to straight lines, while curves and zigzags are relatively rare (curves appear about 20% as frequently as do straight lines in our dataset, and only five instances of zig zags, with three of those coming in a single article). The assumption of "general linear reality" (Abbott 1988) is embedded as much in sociologists' standard graphical practices as it is in the assumptions of our standard statistical methods.

Arrows and circles are similarly interesting as much for how they are not used as for how sociologists typically draw them. Arrows are the sociological workhorse for representing causal influence, especially when embedded in path diagrams. But they also are vehicles for depicting temporality, cyclicity, and sequence, often in ways that are not clearly distinguished from causal relations. While varying the length and thickness of arrows easily suggests variation in the strength or meaning of a relationship, sociologists rarely make use of these qualities and frequently vary them without having any intended significance (Brett et al. 2020). At the same time, relationships of growth, force, motion, or lineage are mostly ignored.

For their part, circles are used to represent an array of sociological phenomena. These include depictions of membership, co-occurrence, and center-periphery relations, often drawing on their shading, size, and degree of overlap. If arrows tend to feature in path diagrams and lines in Cartesian coordinate planes, circles are most common in Venn-like diagrams. Circles are the centerpiece of one of the most famous sociological diagrams of all time, the Chicago School zonal representation of urban growth processes. This diagram uses circles not only to assert that cities are divided into zones defined by their relationship to a center, but by varying the distance between concentric circles, it represents cities as dynamic, propulsive forces in which what is happening in one part is always

deeply enmeshed with what is happening elsewhere (Silver 2022). If circles are used to represent processes such as cyclicity, membership, growth, they rarely are used to depict rank or force.

THEOREMATIC REASONING WITH THEORY FIGURES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The graphical lexicon of sociological theory is relatively sparse. Lines, arrows, boxes, and circles abound, while triangles, curves, spheres, crosses, pyramids, and squiggles are rare. Path, Cartesian, cross-classification and network diagrams dominate the scene. Qualities like position, proximity, intersection, overlap, and horizontality are used to depict relationships and processes, especially influence, containment, centrality, importance, and membership. But color, length, shading, framing, and distance are often ignored, and along with them, motion, force, opposition, rank, and growth.

This sparse lexicon has however been an opportunity for creativity. Specifically, it enables what Peirce termed “theorematic reasoning.” Theorematic reasoning adds some new elements to a diagram that permit one to reach a new conclusion or perform different operations, such as in Euclid’s proof that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles. The proof is theorematic in that it involves adding new lines and extending the triangle’s sides.

Peirce considered theorematic experiments to be among the most daring and creative operations of graphical reasoning, and for that very reason the most likely to go awry. Baldamus (1992, 106) made a similar point in his examination of Habermas’ creative adaptations of the cross-classifying diagram, noting that the seemingly simple addition of a diagonal in the upper-left corner “ranks among his most daring ventures.” This addition, Baldamus argues, both allowed Habermas to theorize in the fundamentally dichotomizing mode that cross-classifying diagrams most readily afford (no matter how many rows and columns they include, they still are comprised of a series of dyadic comparisons), even as he introduced triadic distinctions into them, most notably between culture-society-personality and cultural reproduction-social integration-socialization. Yet when Habermas added an additional diagonal to the upper right, he also introduces repercussions to the “entire system of fundamentally dyadic schemes ... Do we now have to face the methodological perils of a

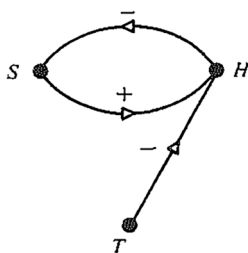
three-dimensional topology” (ibid.). Theorematic reasoning is where graphical and theoretical daring meet, and like any genuine adventure, the result is of necessity uncertain (Simmel 1971).

Adding forms. Habermas’ theorematic experiment is an instance of a category of such experiments. In this mode, the theorist adds some form to an existing graphical template that is already well-established in an intellectual community. Such additions can open new avenues for deduction, as well as opportunities to represent new theoretical objects.

An example of the former—opening new avenues for deduction—comes from Stinchcombe’s *Constructing Social Theories*. To illustrate “functionalist causal imagery,” Stinchcombe uses linear directed graphs (Fig. 13.4) to show “the overall structure of a theory in an intuitively easy fashion” (Stinchcombe 1987, 131). Stinchcombe’s diagrams require one to formulate a theory on a model of functionalist causality: you must posit a homeostatic variable that does not maintain itself (such as confidence); some tension that reduces this variable (such as danger); some structure that counteracts this tension (such as magic); some process that selects structures capable of functioning in this way (such as choosing highly energizing vs. demoralizing rituals). If you are drawn to statements about how a given practice functions to maintain some situation (such as the powerful remaining powerful and the rich remaining rich), you must be able to draw it in the form of a functionalist causal diagram.

Experiments in social theory can be pursued by adding elements to this sort of deductive diagram. Stinchcombe provides a relatively simple example of such an addition (for an application to theories of neighborhood change, see Silver and Silva 2023). To be able to undertake certain transformations with linear graphs, one must add a “source” and a “tap” to the

Fig. 13.4 Stinchcombe’s diagram of functional explanation



The elementary causal structure of a complete functional explanation.

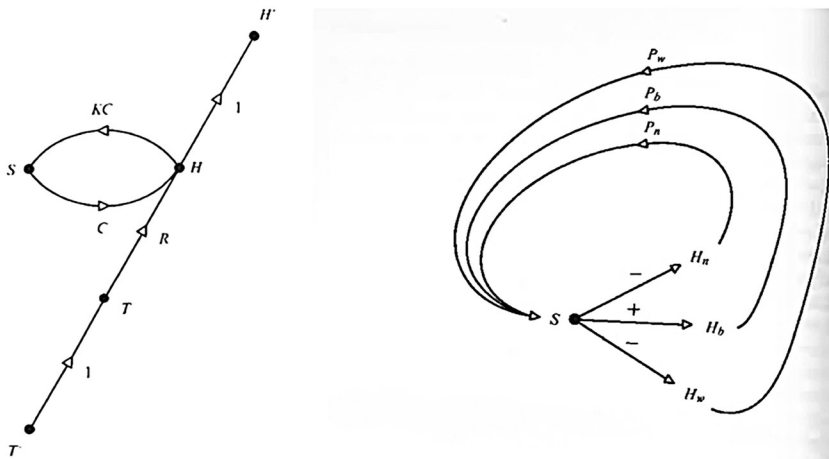


Fig. 13.5 Theorematic reasoning by adding forms to functionalist diagrams

diagram (Fig. 13.5, left). A “source” is some outside influence on a particular variable, x , in a system; a “tap” “draws off the effect of this on y ” (Stinchcombe 1987, 137). Adding sources and taps (left panel) allows one to make inferences about how a change induced at one point of the system ought (logically) to be transmitted to other points therein.

Stinchcombe’s diagrams of functionalist causality also illustrate how additions to a diagram can allow the theorist to incorporate new objects or processes into their thinking. Stinchcombe’s basic diagram affords theorizing how a structure maintains a certain state of affairs in the face of disturbances or tensions. This diagrammatic setup, however, does not permit functionalist thinking to refer to power differentials. To orient a functionalist diagram in that direction, Stinchcombe adds new elements to it: multiple loops indicating different groups (in this case classes) with different power.

Figure 13.5 (right) shows this addition in practice. It includes loops for nobles (n), bourgeoisie (b), and workers (w). Each one has some capacity (power) to maintain the existing social structures (in this case parliamentary democracy). These loops enable one to construct theories about the effects of power differentials on the stability of a given political structure. We can assign numbers indicating the different power levels of classes and the consequences of the structure (in this case parliamentary democracy)

for each class, to derive the causal force of each class supporting or undermining the structure, as well as net overall support or opposition. Varying the numbers varies those outcomes. This is a theoretical exercise: Stinchcombe imagines various values for each class and shows how the picture changes. But both this kind of imaginative experimentation with possible values and empirical assignment of actual values from different times and places are only possible by adding the loops.

Overlaying forms. If the formal relations encoded in two different types of figures afford different forms of thought, then *combining* them promises to generate theoretical potentials available in neither alone. In practice, this means overlaying components of one type of figure onto another. Fossum (2005) shows the potential of this technique of theorematic reasoning in his study of the EU’s “social constituency,” by placing overlapping ovals atop a Cartesian coordinate plane (see Fig. 13.6).

In Fig. 13.6, the y-axis represents “catness”—the degree to which membership is defined by categorical properties—while the x-axis represents “netness”—the extent and strength of interpersonal networks. The use of ovals rather than the more traditional points indicates that for

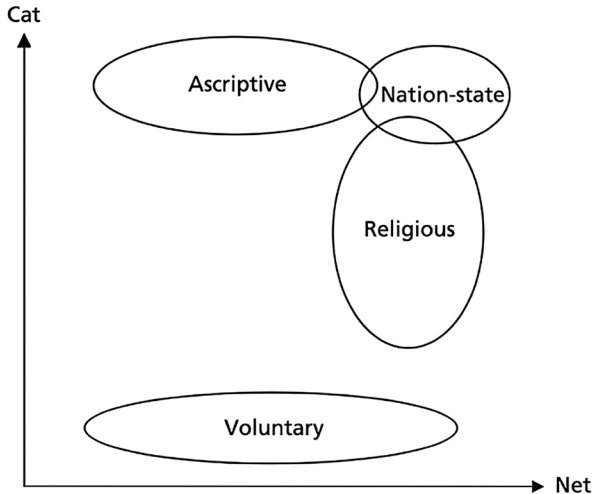


Illustration of the combined catnet strength of the nation-state

Fig. 13.6 Theorematic reasoning by overlaying diagrammatic forms

Fossum a given type of entity can span a large local region of each dimension: voluntary organizations range from low to high netness, even as they are in general less categorically defined. Ovals also allow one to indicate regions of overlap, such as where the nation-state—defined in this conception both by categorical membership and by rich interpersonal networks—is like some religious organizations.

The distinct potentials of this combination of graphical forms become clear in contrast to the more famous use of coordinate planes by Pierre Bourdieu. As Ollion and Boelaert (2025) show, Bourdieu's diagrams of fields over time became more and more shaped by the limitations and features of the statistical methods of Geometric Data Analysis (GDA). Specifically, GDA requires that an entity appear at one and only one point. Moreover, it cannot easily capture how people similar in many ways may acquire very different outlooks based on one or a few differences.

Fossum's overlay solves both problems. It solves the first by allowing an entity to be located not at an individual point but within the entire space within the oval. It solves the second by using overlap to identify where otherwise similar entities may vary in a few respects, potentially generating significant differences—such as similar religious organizations that overlap with the nation-state or not to varying degrees.

At the same time, placing ovals on the coordinate plane reacts back upon them. In most sociological Venn-like diagrams, the relative positions of the ovals or circles have no meaning. Placing them on a plane forces the theorist to consider the effect of moving an oval to the left, right, up, or down not only in terms of overlap with other ovals but also in terms of their axial dimensions. This transforms what is usually a continuous comparison along two-dimensional comparison (how much overlap between two entities) into a four-dimensional comparison (the two axes plus the two ovals).

Increased or transformed dimensionality is both the allure but also the danger of overlaying graphical forms onto one another. A particularly jarring form of theorematik experiment involves efforts to simultaneously express dyadic and triadic thinking. In the sociological context, the former tends toward conceiving society as a set of binary oppositions and the latter as a dynamic process of synthesis and transformation (Silver 2020; Levi Martin 2025).

These two forms of thought are difficult to entertain at once, and figures that attempt to represent them simultaneously usually enact this difficulty. Fuchs' (2013) effort to draw the difference (Fig. 13.7) between his

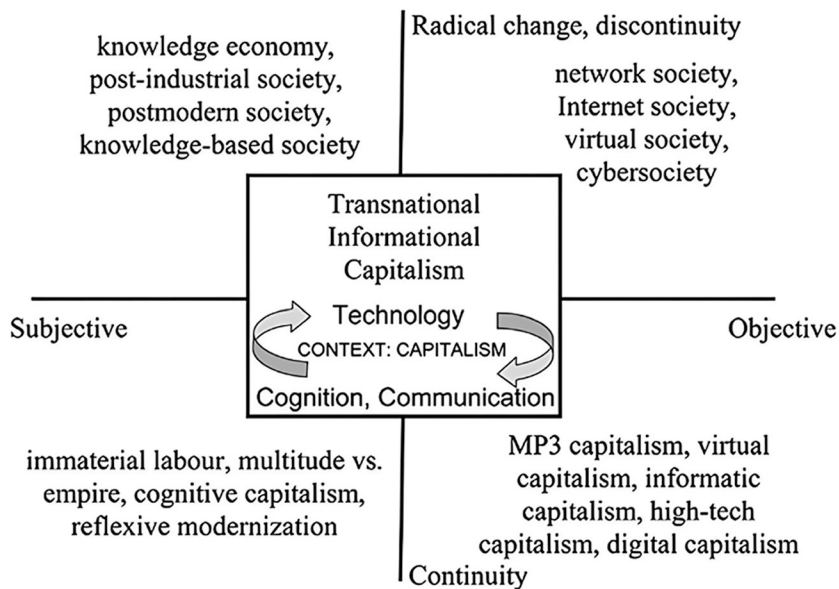


Fig. 13.7 An attempt to overlay dyadic and triadic diagrammatic reasoning

own dialectical theory of “transnational informational capitalism” and other information society theories is a case in point.

In Fig. 13.7, dyadic and triadic thought patterns coexist. The two axes create a standard cross-classification figure, dichotomizing theories of informational society into subjective–objective and discontinuous–continuous. In this conception, the structure of theories comes from where they sit among these dichotomies. Yet at the center is a totally different type of graphical form: a box that spans all the dimensions, with arrows that represent that box as somehow turning around them on another plane. This is Fuchs’ attempt to show that transnational informational capitalism is a dialectical theory: including continuity, change, subjectivity, and objectivity all at once.

Fuchs’ overlay of dyadic and triadic thinking is relatively innocuous. It is in effect a somewhat more visually cluttered version of incorporating a line emanating from and sweeping around the origin. A somewhat more fraught example comes from Parsons’ essay “Religion in Postindustrial America: The Problem of Secularization,” in *The Human Condition*

(1978). The basic Parsonian diagram is dichotomous: it operates in 2ⁿ dimensions. But in *The Human Condition*, Parsons was audacious enough to attempt to orient his fundamentally dyadic mode of thinking toward perhaps the most triadic context imaginable, Christian trinitarianism.

The resulting diagram (Fig. 13.8) shows signs of a tremendous amount of imaginative experimentation with and straining against the basic form of the Parsonian diagram to make it reach out toward this fundamentally three-dimensional world. It departs from the underlying subsumptive logic of the AGIL diagrams that Parsons typically used: the mundane sphere is not a subsystem of the transcendental; they relate not by subdivision but through love, grace, and redemption. Parsons shows this relationship with a line crossing from the transcendent to the mundane and back again, seeking to capture diagrammatically the simultaneous separation and continuity of the Christian transmundane order. The diagram stages the “human drama” of the Christian quest for salvation. But in seeking to do so it also becomes a tension-ridden field in which a fundamental dissonance between dyadic and triadic thinking plays out.

The moment of synthesis, when first and second are joined in a third, is a basic feature of triadic thinking, but is difficult to conceive in dichotomous terms (Baldamus 1992; Levi Martin 2024). Parsons’ diagram tries to cope with this challenge in many ways, not always successfully. He adds a three-way movement to the inner box, from birth to death through life. Yet “life,” the middle term—the crucial moment in triadic thought—dangles limply in the diagram, not logically or graphically interfacing in any clearly comprehensible way with the major dyads that give the diagram its overarching structure, male/female and mortal/immortal. Most strikingly, Parsons simply turns the Christian trinity into a quadrinity: Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and Divinely Inspired Prophets. This is imposition of the theoretical will onto material that will not bend so easily.

Parsons’ diagram thus provides an example of the perils of the theorematic reasoning. Experimenting with techniques for opening the diagram to novel corners of the world can be an occasion to open the diagram (and by extension our thinking) to revision and reformulation. It can also induce us to force the world to fit into the schema we demand of it.

Adding new types. The examples of theorematic reasoning we have considered so far primarily involve adding to or combining the types of figures most familiar to sociological theorists. A different and potentially more radical form of experimentation involves introducing new or more rarely used forms. As we saw above, sociological theorists tend to think in lines,

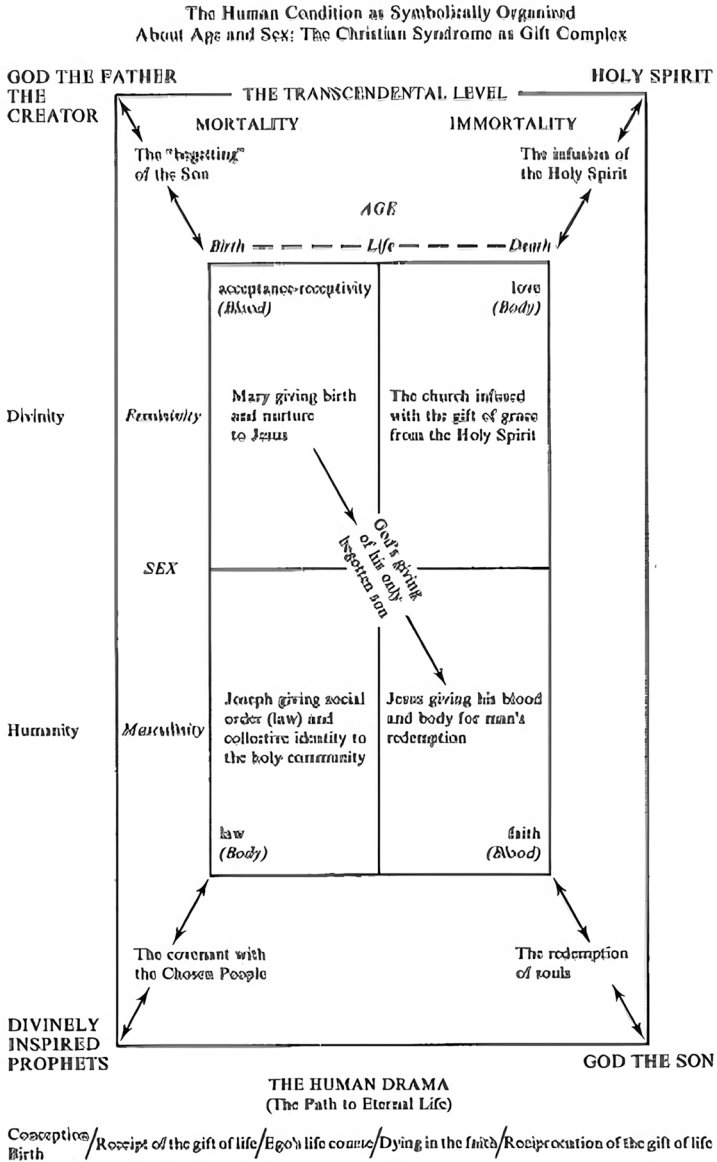


Fig. 13.8 Parsons' attempt to overlay fourfold and trinitarian thinking into a single diagram

arrows, circles, and two-dimensional planes. They avoid triangles and pyramids. Not incidentally, representations of society itself as a hierarchical pyramid are correspondingly rare (but not of course nonexistent). Represented as a two-dimensional plane, society is more readily conceived as a flat surface in which groups oppose and align around dimensions that are not inherently higher or lower than one another. Represented as a cross-classification of binaries, society is more readily conceived as structured by dichotomies that have no ordering among them.

To represent society as a pyramid involves a fundamentally different picture of the social world, in which there is a wide base and a narrow peak. Indeed, there is a tradition of conceiving and drawing society as a pyramid (Turner 2010), usually associated with an elite on top on a mass as the base (cf. Runciman 1999; Mills 1959). The figure's perceptual-Gestalt properties and its wider cultural resonances also likely play a role. There is a stable base on the bottom, and a point that rests on it. If society is like a pyramid, it will exhibit similar properties.

John Levi Martin's *Social Structures* (2009) illustrates the diagrammatic potential of this mode of representation (Fig. 13.9). He develops a pyramidal theory of social structure, building on a conceptual metaphor identified by Lakoff and Johnson (2008), that "theories are buildings." This is a structuralist metaphor, concerned with notions such as architectonic relations, foundations, solidity, support, and form (ibid., 469)—fitting for a theoretical work searching for "simple [social] structures that can form the building blocks of larger structures" (Martin 2009, 223). In contrast to path diagrams, which encourage theorizing in terms of stations and obstacles on the way to a destination (Silver 2020), theorizing in architectonic terms encourages social thought in terms of how various elements and relations combine in stable structures that avoid breaking down or falling apart against various environmental pressures or internal weaknesses.

Throughout *Social Structures*, Martin often returns to a triangle diagram to show the interactions among various pure types of social structures. The thrust of the figure is to portray trade-offs between structural principles in a set of actors: "maximizing the value of any one involves minimizing the value of others" (Martin 2009, 69). These figures afford thinking through the oppositions and trade-offs that arise when different structural principles are adopted. "There are limitations to the number of principles that can simultaneously structure relationships" (ibid., 221). For instance, "to the extent that there is a pre-existing ranking of

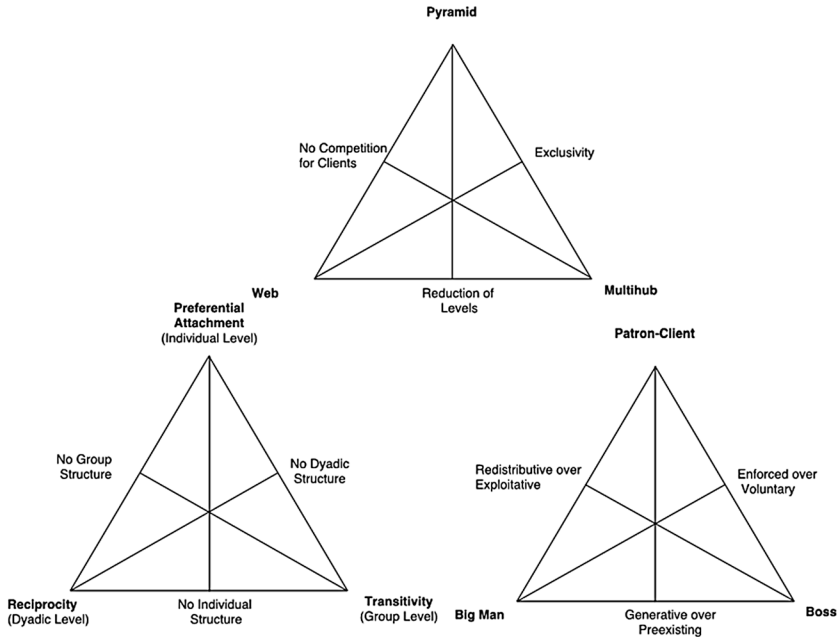


Fig. 13.9 Introducing new forms: society as a pyramid

inequality, it is both easier for the structure to be enforceable with regard to outside sanction and more or a need for redistribution” (ibid.).

Neither Martin’s theoretical structure nor the formal conventions of the pyramid figure seem to require placing any specific structural principles at the base or peak of the pyramid. Early in the book, he places the more individualistic principle of order (preferential attachment) at the peak. Yet as the book progresses, the principles of hierarchical order move to the top, as institutions such as patron–client pyramids, armies, and political parties prove to embody the most architectonically powerful principles of social structure. Indeed, it is in fact the pyramidal, patron–client structure that, Martin argues, is capable of concatenating from small-to-big to cover vast spaces and endure environmental pressures such as war. And, working from an established patron–client pyramid, it is the command-and-control structure of armies and parties that can introduce the principle of “transitivity” into society, where orders flow down from a

central position of authority to a wide base, with relatively little interruption en route.

The structure of the diagram comes to mirror the structure of the theory. Here the architectural resonances of the figure—its pyramid shape—encourage one to transfer structural qualities both to its object—society—and to the process of theorizing. Theorizing is building up architectonics of strong and stable social structures that do not easily collapse under their own weight.

CONCLUSION

A central proposition of this chapter has been that diagrammatic thinking has a crucial relational component. To think in diagrams is to think relationally. Diagrams represent their objects as a skeletal set of relations, and thereby allow us to learn about those relations by altering and adding to them directly. In a diagram, the relational character of social life becomes tangible and perceptible.

To be sure, it is possible to make verbal statements about relationality. Sociology is littered with ever new ways to say how A is constituted through its relation to and interaction with B, and so is not an independent prior entity outside of that relation—even if the structure of that very statement leads one to think of A that way. As Susanne Langer (1953) noted, the reason we cannot make anything more than the most generic statements about such matters is that they are not stateable in propositional, discursive language. Discursive speech for Langer culminates in a set of clear and precise definitions, a lexicon. Each statement points to a single concept. Atomism and singleness are essential, unambiguous definition the goal.

Within the limits of discursive speech, any effort to represent the relational character of social life will fall short or remain at a highly superficial level. Given this conundrum, there are only so many theoretical paths available. The logical positivist path is to write off as nonsense anything beyond what can be expressed discursively. The Romantic option is to celebrate the ineffable. One can also pursue the distinct expressive potentiality of ambiguity itself, and identify situations in which ambiguity is, paradoxically, clearer than clarity, and highly functional even for scientific purposes (cf. Levine's *The Flight from Ambiguity*, 2022).

Langer recommends a different course, what she terms “presentational symbols.” These are symbols that constitute precisely that mode of symbolic expression suited to presenting those dynamic and relational

qualities of social life: movement, growth, development, progress, tension, climax, holism, interpenetration. The creation of presentational symbols is for Langer the work of art, but what she says of art applies just as well to diagrams, conceived in the Peircian mode.¹⁶ Diagrams express the relational character of social life directly, in lines and shapes, not as an indirect pointer, but as a direct perception, through what Langer terms “abstraction,” “plasticity,” and “expressiveness.” Abstraction miniaturizes large and complex systems into objects that human perception can get a handle on, take in all at once, and gather around to contemplate. Plasticity makes lines and shapes and colors malleable to manipulation, experimentation, and learning. Expressiveness puts graphical elements into a larger whole, placing them not just side by side but in some form of mutual support, where the idea of the figure as a whole is present throughout.

In this chapter, I have attempted to ground such semiotic statements about diagrams in Peirce’s pragmatism. Continuing to operate in a pragmatic mode, I sketched the outlines of a glossary of graphical elements and types by which sociological theorists have in practice sought to present social life in nondiscursive form. While the standard graphical repertoire is relatively sparse, nevertheless, social thinkers do use that repertoire in creative ways, most notably in their experiments with theorematic reasoning: adding forms, overlaying forms, adding types.

Given the close ties between diagrammatic and relational thinking, one might well imagine that those writers who explicitly identify themselves as “relational sociologists” would be expert in diagrammatic thinking. Yet, while some classical authors much discussed by relational sociologists have produced seminal diagrams—Bourdieu, Archer, Tilley, the Chicago School—overall, contemporary relational sociology does not seem to be pursuing diagrammatic thinking in a concerted way. For example, the 686-page *Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* includes only 13 figures. Of these, perhaps six could be considered theorizing diagrams in Swedberg’s (2016) sense. And most of those six are quite simple diagrammatic summaries of arguments via boxes and lines. None of them actively utilize the diagram as part of a constructive theorizing process, moving lines or boxes or circles around to make discoveries about whether their ideas make a difference.

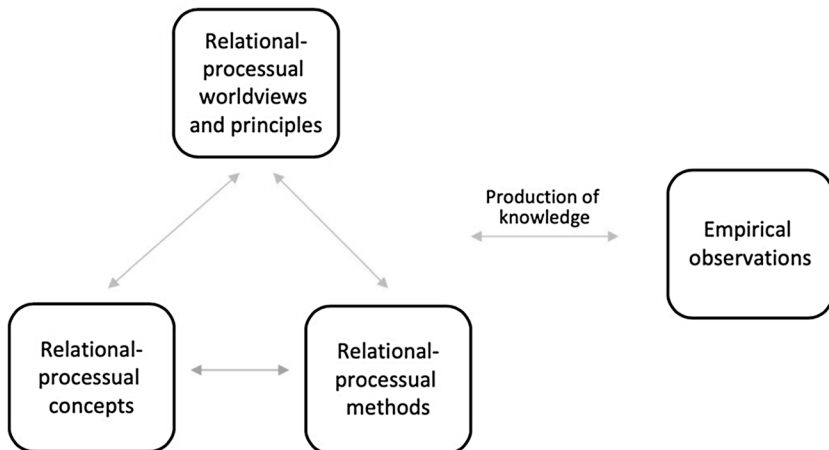
In fact, one of Dépelteau’s (2018) contribution to that volume makes the lack of serious consideration of diagrammatic thinking clear, while also pointing toward directions for improving this situation. Consider his

¹⁶ For more on the relationship between art and diagrammatic thinking, see Stjernfelt (2007).

diagram summarizing the elements of what he calls the “deep” process-relational approach (Fig. 13.10).

Notably absent from this diagram are relational-processual representations. While we might include this in the “production of knowledge,” the relegation to the label of an arrow rather than its “own” box suggests lower relative importance. In any case, when Dépelteau elaborates the notion of “modes of production of the known,” it is clear that he has in mind theoretical frameworks such as Marxism, functionalism, symbolic interaction, and the like. Yet the question of how to represent and learn about social relations through those representations cuts across all such schools (Bargheer 2021). Nevertheless, this figure also illustrates the power of even very simple diagrams to compress an argument and to make evident both what it includes, and what it does not. There is an opportunity here for relational sociologists to take on more explicitly the challenge of creating diagrams suitable for not only summarizing but experimenting on their theories of social relations.

Having identified the centrality of diagrams in social theory, whole new fields of inquiry open up. Perhaps one of the most fruitful is to retell the history of social thought in terms of its basic figures rather than only its verbal expressions. Indeed, Bargheer (2021) observes that graphical forms



Worldviews, principles, concepts, methods and observations

Fig. 13.10 A diagram of relational-processual sociology without relational-processual semiotics

often span seemingly discordant theoretical schools. Marxists and Parsonians alike often think in cross-classification tables. Their differences in terms of what goes in the boxes—the content—are in many ways eclipsed by the fact that the form of their thought proceeds according to the same method—the production of dichotomies—which in turn reproduces the same basic conception of social life—society as a set of binary oppositions (Alexander 2003).

Accordingly, the most significant changes in social thought may occur when new diagrams become predominant. If the path diagram becomes the taken-for-granted way to express a theory, this requires all theoretical schools to bend their thoughts into its shape: a path flowing from a beginning to an end through distinct stations. Similarly, if a Bourdeusian coordinate plane grows in prominence, this means social thinkers are becoming disposed to think in terms of the positionality, alignment, and opposition of distinct groups along axes of distinction (Silver 2020).

Taking these transformations not so much in the content but the forms of social thought points toward an alternative account of the development and possibilities of theoretical ideas in sociology, which adds a new dimension to the standard contrast between “internalist” and “externalist” accounts (Abbott 2001). If “externalists” focus on the impact of groups, networks, status, social position, or, more broadly the “life and times” of individual thinkers, “internalists” have generally focused on the substantive content of theoretical ideas, often providing historical or genealogical accounts of their lineage and evolution. Far fewer have attended the formal structure and development of social theory, focusing not only on the development of “ideas” but their relational properties. Examples mostly focus on language, attending to the metaphorical nature of theoretical language (Brown 1989; Lopez 2003; McKinnon 2014), its conceptual structure (Lizardo 2013) or conceptual networks or architecture (Lopez 2003), or syllogistic, propositional, or logical form (Stinchcombe 1987). A new history of social thought in terms of its diagrammatic forms promises to reveal the deep fault lines, tectonic movements, and revolutionary transformations of the field that take place before our eyes and with our hands.

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