RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY PARADIGMS

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/// Introductory Remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

/// Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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/// Abstract

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

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

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

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