

Relational sociology, pragmatism, transactions and social fields

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Starting from the idea that relational sociology has been founded on various and incompatible social ontologies, I argue that it is at risk of losing its *raison d'être* if we do not answer two fundamental practical and ontological questions: (1) Why do we need relational sociology? and (2) What do we study in relational sociology? In this respect, I propose a deep, transactional sociology partly and freely inspired by the work of J. Dewey which clearly detaches relational sociology from social determinism and co-determinism.

Keywords: determinism; co-determinism; pragmatism; social ontology; social fields; transactions

1. Introduction

A sociological manifesto could begin like this:

The history of classical sociology was the history of paradigms competitions. Marxism, functionalism, feminism and Weberian theory, system theory, rational choice theory and symbolic interactionism, in a word, different sociological theories and approaches stood in constant opposition to one another and carried on an uninterrupted hidden and open rivalry, a rivalry that each time was fueled by different or even contradictory views on fundamental issues such as the goals of sociology, what the social is all about, and what a good theory is. One of these fundamental issues concerned the relation between society and individuals or social structures and agency. One type of sociologist supported social determinism, while another type rejected the idea that individuals are determined by society or social structures. Many sociologists also oscillated from one position to another throughout their career or even in the same text.

The rest of the introduction of this sociological manifesto could move from the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels to *The Civilizing Process* of Elias as its main source of inspiration. It could go like this:

The contemporary sociology that has sprouted from classical sociology has not done away with the proliferation of theories. It has but established a new civilizing process based on a pacifying intellectual habitus – with no related theoretical monopoly. In congresses, classrooms, and publications, a great number of sociologists have learned to avoid controversies by accepting superficial or complicated compromises with respect to fundamental issues. Concerning the relation between social structures and agency, many sociologists accept the idea that social phenomena are made of *A* and *B* rather than *A* or *B*.

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This brief and caricatured introduction is somehow related to classical and contemporary sociology as we know it. It is worth quoting Martin at length since he unambiguously explains what I have in mind here:

Surveying the state of Western sociology at the dawn of the new millennium, what is most striking and perhaps troubling is the absence of theoretical crisis: even the most sour doomsayer cannot in good conscience point to any signs that there is a deep theoretical rupture or confusion in academic sociology as it currently stands, nor is there reason to suspect crisis looming in the near future ...

It is not that the fundamental problems in social analysis have been resolved, namely (1) the absence of a clear criterion as to what constitutes good theory (some frequently heard, but frequently incompatible, standards are prediction of future states, parsimony, explanation of variance, reproducible intervention, intuitive accessibility, and the ability to sponsor generative research); (2) uncertainty as to the ontological status of key theoretical elements, not the least of which is society; and (3) frequent translation of social and political disagreements into seemingly scientific disputes regarding matters of fact. And yet all is quiet on the theoretical front.

I argue that this quiet has resulted from two seemingly welcome, but deeply pernicious, trends: (1) widespread agreement to compromise on both false and true dualisms alike and (2) theoretical inflation. Regarding the first, it has been common for recent discussions of practically any conventional opposition (the list includes but is not limited to macro/micro, social/individual, nature/nurture, static/dynamic, structure/agency, quantitative/qualitative) to conclude with a resounding verdict of 'both.' *Both* the individual *and* the social are important determinants of X, Y, and Z. Without belittling the wisdom of such statements, such facile solutions (which Goldstone [1991, p. 49] terms 'wishy-washy') seem to allow the instantaneous dissolving of what for centuries have been understood as profound antinomies; ... (Martin 2003, pp. 2–3)

There are good reasons to stay away from an intellectual battlefield where aspiring 'paradigms' try to impose themselves. There are also very good reasons to criticize easy or complicated compromises coming from what I called co-determinism (Dépelteau 2008), especially because the so-called 'relational turn' has offered, I believe, an opportunity for another option. As Emirbayer recently reminded us, relational sociology (RS) was initially a *challenge* to some established ideas, theories, and methods in sociology:

When I first encountered the term 'relational thinking' back in the early 1990s, it had the quality of fighting words. Established social thinkers such as Charles Tilly, Pierre Bourdieu, and Harrison White, not to mention younger scholars such as Margaret Somers and Peter Bearman, among others, were deploying it as a weapon against alternative approaches and schools of thought, including statistical regression-based approaches (such as those prominent in status attainment research); rational choice theory and other economic perspectives; categorical approaches that highlighted shared attributes rather than location in relational settings or configurations; monological accounts (Bourdieu spoke of the 'village monograph') that failed to think in dialogical or field-theoretic terms; and any number of other conventional, dominant approaches to sociological inquiry. All who called for a relational reorientation of sociology were crafting sharply worded critiques. All regarded themselves as engaged in intellectual contestation. All were concerned to battle against intellectual opponents. (Emirbayer 2013, p. 209)

In his relational manifesto, for instance, Emirbayer (1997) referred to previous processual thinkers like Dewey, Cassirer, and Elias and argued that the social is made of processes rather than solid social structures. Indeed, RS was never a one-man show. For example, Elias has already published a relational book without utilizing this label in *What is Sociology?*; Donati was using this label in the 1980s in Italy; Bourdieu was slowly moving in this direction in the early 1990s; network analysts like White have developed relational concepts and methodologies to study connections between 'nodes'; Latour has

stated that sociologists could do their job just by looking at associations between human and non-human ‘actants’; and critical realists like Archer and Elder-Vass have also connected their theories to relational sociology. I could list further examples,¹ but the idea is that RS has taken many forms (Dépelteau 2013).

Even if RS can be linked to ‘fighting words’, it has evolved in a time where many sociologists have been looking for compromises rather than the ‘profound antinomies’ Martin talked about. Probably because of this, the potential originality of RS has been somehow diluted by vague statements such as ‘relations matter’, ‘everything is relational’, or a ‘society (or a social structure) is made by relations’. Pretty much everybody can agree with these general declarations, no matter if they are influenced by Marx, Parsons, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Elias, Luhmann, Bourdieu, structuralism, critical realism, and so on. In the last decades, all these social thinkers and theories have been associated to RS even if, and when, their explanations are founded on incompatible views or principles. In a nutshell, fundamental issues have been covered by a carpet made of vague and abstract affirmations. There are also complex compromises in RS coming from hard work, undeniable intelligence, and profound knowledge about social theory and the social universe. I do not have the pretention to submit a list of this kind of interesting work here, but the texts of Archer and Bourdieu are good examples, like the recent contributions of Donati (2011), Crossley (2011), Elder-Vass (2010), and Piironen (2014). Unfortunately, intelligent and complex compromises have the propensity to lead to multiple complications related to the dualisms they perpetuate (King 2004) or, again, what I called their various forms of co-determinism (Dépelteau 2008, 2013).

My main argument here is that the emergence of RS is useful only if it can propose a new solution to some fundamental issues in comparison to previous theories. It must also assist all of us, social and reflexive animals, when we deal with social problems. In this respect, like any science (Latour 2004), sociology needs some order as a discipline, but it also needs a healthy dose of controversy. It cannot be too ‘civilized’. If RS cannot generate this type of healthy controversy, if it does not face fundamental issues but avoids them, or if RS is just old wine in a new bottle, it might be too much noise about nothing (Dépelteau 2013). Today, RS is at risk of losing its *raison d’être* if we do not manage to clarify its fundamental originality and clearly show how it can help non-sociologists to cope with their social problems.

Accordingly, I suggest a pragmatic RS freely inspired by Dewey. The relevance of this RS relies mostly or partly on its capacity to give distinct and improved answers to two types of interrelated questions:

(The practical question: Why do we need RS?) What kind of knowledge do we produce with RS? How is this knowledge useful for us in our daily life? Very bluntly, why should we invest resources in relational teaching and research?

(The ontological question: What do we study in RS?) What are social phenomena made of? Do we analyze how relations determine the individuals (RS as another version of social determinism), how social structures interact with agency (RS as another version of co-determinism), or how interdependent actors make various and fluid social processes (RS as a ‘deep’, transactional sociology)?

The future of RS is connected to other significant problems, such as methodological ones (how do we conduct relational analysis?). I will focus only on the two issues mentioned above. I think it is a good start to define what RS is all about. By ignoring the important and diversified work done by other relational sociologists, I do not pretend it is useless²;

however, in this short text, I barely have enough space to present this pragmatic and transactional version of RS, so I will have to avoid important discussions and references.

2. Why do we need RS?

The contemporary ‘relational turn’ has been closely related to controversies around dualisms such as the separation between social structures and agency. One of the key issues in these discussions is certainly the prevalence of co-determinism (Dépelteau 2013). In a few words, somehow, and consciously or not, co-determinists study interactions between social structures and agency, or if I can steal the words of Martin one more time, we deal with co-determinist explanations when ‘Both the individual *and* the social are important determinants of X, Y, and Z’. Some accept co-determinism very quickly, straightforwardly assuming this type of dualism is necessary if someone wishes to avoid being too determinist/objectivist or voluntarist/subjectivist; others recognize that this affair is not so simple and write entire books trying to explain how the interactions between social structures and agency should be theorized. A third type of relational sociologist has been looking for another orientation. For example, King proposed a hermeneutic sociology where social relations cannot ‘be comprehended independently of the way participants’ understand them (King 2004, p. 171). Kivinen and Piironen (2004, 2006) and Piironen (2014) presented a pragmatist critique of critical realism and its dualisms, arguing that we need an analytical distinction between social structures and agency, but no clear or unclear ontological separation between them. Even if I disagree with some aspects of the explanations of these sociologists, I wish for the relational turn to be made in a compatible way in sociology. Again, one of the biggest advantages of this approach is that we can reject the idea that the social is external to the individuals – analytically or ontologically speaking – without becoming a ‘subjectivist’, or an ‘individual methodologist’.

The goal is to move totally beyond the dualism of objectivity and subjectivity. Inspired by the works of Dewey, Latour, and many others, I do recognize the reality exists. Who does not? However, being a pragmatist at this level means that I do not think we can find the Truth about it. In this respect, one of the great outcomes that could come from RS could be that we all forget about the quest for absolutes. Discovering ‘social laws’, revealing the ‘pure forms’ of the social, finding ‘infrastructures’ or ‘mechanisms’ behind or beyond ‘conjectural’ events is simply impossible and out of place. Some of the reasons supporting the need to move beyond the Truth are our own cognitive limits and the amazing complexity of social phenomena. We can only see some parts of a totality and try to guess what it is from what we can see. Furthermore, social phenomena change all the time. They have no permanent laws, forms, infrastructures, or mechanisms. Somehow, Plato was probably right by saying that human beings can only see the shadows of real phenomena. However, adopting one pragmatic and transactional epistemology protects relational sociologists against the grandiloquent ambitions of Plato’s philosophers. Again, there is no pure form to contemplate and reveal. I will try to explain how relational sociology can be a relevant science in this logic.

Dewey and Bentley (1949) and Dewey (1958, 2008) explained at length that there is no possible detached ‘Subject’ observing an ‘objective’ reality. In the sciences, as Latour (1987) also showed, there are only biologists, astronomers, sociologists, etc., producing some scientific knowledge thanks to the translation of various phenomena into data. The processes of translation are done via the use of rats, tubes, software, money, publications,

citations, surveys, observations, concepts, tested or grounded theories, and so on. Of course, we can imagine dualisms between subjectivity and objectivity or the mind and the body. However, these dualisms simplify and distort what is going on when we do research. If one observes ‘science in action’, she will see various associations between scientists and rats, tubes, surveys, readers, articles, methods, theories, etc. This is what the (complex and dynamic) reality of the sciences is all about. Being pragmatic here simply means that we should avoid unnecessary analytical distinctions. We should stick to the only ‘level of reality’ we can see and know, which is made by complex transactions (or associations) between various human and non-human transactors.

The main point here is quite trivial, but it seems we have to repeat it over and over again since the temptation of the absolutes is a strong one: the *known* is always more or less incomplete and imperfect in comparison to the reality we cannot see. The imperfection of human knowledge comes partly from the usually accepted fact that scientific knowledge is never definitive. It is an ongoing process: ‘what is said to be factual or real occurs on a continuum of more or less warranted statements and is always subject to revision based on further inquiry’ (Spiegel 1983, p. 41). In this respect, it is worth quoting Spiegel at length when he presents ‘the fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ as explained by Whitehead:

His [Whitehead] attack was merely against taking the particular methods, findings, and generalizations of a science at a particular point of time (our time) too seriously, as having ultimate truth or value. He summarized his attack on the error of taking scientific abstractions as concrete facts in the slogan ‘The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.’ The error comes about when we take a theoretical generalization – like the theory of mechanics in physics – as having that status of a fact in the annals of truth. In actuality, they can be considered ‘true’ only in a qualified, limited sense – limited to the modes of abstraction of the scientific speciality in which they arise and by the degree of progress it has made at the time. (Spiegel 1983, p. 4)

Many social scientists usually reply that perfect knowledge might be impossible but we can certainly be more ‘objective’. They say knowledge is always more or less objective or subjective. Indeed, the quest for objectivity seems to make sense considering that with some good will, theories, and methods, sociologists can significantly ‘neutralize’ their subjectivity. This is where Dewey’s work becomes really interesting for RS. His pragmatic philosophy starts with an annoying but simple statement: we live in a tough universe for a relatively short period of time. As Dewey mentioned on many occasions, life experience is basically doing and suffering in a ‘world of hazards’ where human beings are ‘compelled to seek for security’ (Dewey 2008, p. 3). (There are also some moments of temporary happiness, I would dare to add.) In this rough universe, throughout various life experiences, we usually try to use and control other entities around us in order to make our life easier, achieve goals, fulfill needs and desires, and so on. Sciences are a part of this human condition. Sciences refer to specific types of experiences we have with the hope that their outcomes can make our lives easier, and that they are more efficient than praying, making sacrifices, magical cults, or supplication. Indeed, even when it seems to be ‘abstract’, scientific research is usually related to some problems faced by human beings in their life, such as: improving agriculture, going to the Moon, predicting earthquakes, reducing rates of suicide, or resisting exploitation. Of course, research is not always directly connected to one specific problem. Understanding the connection between the rises of Protestantism and capitalism, for example, does not fix problems related to poverty or exploitation. But it still deals with a problem – a cognitive and historical one in

this case, related to existential questions such as: Where do we come from? Why do we live in this type of world? Is this type of capitalistic behavior (greed for instance) related to some habitus coming from some Protestant values and views? As Weber wrote about in his own conceptual work in *Economy and Society*, even so-called theoretical work is usually done to make empirical research easier and more efficient:

An introductory discussion of concepts can hardly be dispensed with, in spite of the fact that it is unavoidably abstract and hence gives the impression of remoteness from reality. The method employed makes no claim to any kind of novelty. On the contrary it attempts only to formulate what all empirical sociology really means when it deals with the same problems, in what all it is hoped is a more convenient and somewhat more exact terminology, even though on that account it may seem pedantic. This is true even when terms are used which are apparently new or unfamiliar. (Weber 1978, p. 3)

The classical dualism between ‘theoretical’ and ‘empirical’ can also create more problems than anything else. However, for now the point here is that the main goal of scientific inquiry is not really to reflect an external Nature or Society, even if we all try to explain or understand some parts of this universe. We usually do scientific research because we wish to control or change one part of the reality. In other words, the sciences are primarily about experiences as Dewey understood the word ‘experience’. This is not only about laboratory experiences or making correlations between variables. This is also about life experience in relation to sciences. It is about *directed* or controlled experiences: ‘Knowing is itself a mode of practical action and is the way of interaction by which other natural interactions become subject to direction’ (Dewey 2008, p. 86). Beyond the classical problem of correspondence between the explanation and the reality, modern science is a set of ‘directed’ experiences; the value of its knowledge lies in its capacity to create new experiences made to achieve some ends chosen by us, human beings, living in a tough universe we only partially see. Doing science with consciousness is less about being aware that our subjectivity influences our knowledge and trying to control the distorting effects of our interests, desires, values, and so on. It is more about realizing, and accepting, that with our unscientific and scientific experiences we are a part of the reality. Knowing is doing like artists do to transform previous materials into something else in directed ways, by relying on their desires, impulses, visions, knowledge, and tools. Knowing is not really about reflecting the Reality. In this logic, the full potential of relational sociology resides in its capacity to help us, interdependent human beings, to develop our social intelligence by directing our complex social experiences according to some chosen goals.

In physics, biology, and chemistry, scientists conduct and control their experiences in laboratories. We cannot do the same in sociology. In some ways it makes our job more complicated, but the goal and the kind of work we do are relatively similar, even if trying to imitate the so-called ‘hard’ sciences usually brings another load of problems. Generally speaking, and in spite of important differences between different types of sciences, we all try to produce specific events by working on relations between entities such as gases, atoms, cells, individuals, or institutions. In RS, we try to affect specific social processes (or events) by working on relations between transactors (interdependent individuals). From wherever they are coming, efficient scientists transform uncontrolled processes into somehow controlled ones. In this respect, the intelligence of one scientist cannot be confused with his level of ‘culture’, his capacity to quote prestigious thinkers, his research grants, or the number of his publications: ‘we judge the work of a scientific inquirer by what he does and not by his speech when he talks about his work’ (Dewey 2008, p. 160).

It is important to avoid one possible confusion. Dewey was not lobbying for a strict version of applied sciences where the value of research is determined by its technological outcomes, its profits, or even its capacity to resolve one problem for specific organizations. I am not trying to transform relational sociology into one form of this applied sociology which is at the service of managers or technocrats. RS is for all of us, interdependent and reflexive individuals. Another important point is that there is no clear separation between knowing and doing. Scientific knowledge is a human *capacity* which is realized within the various social processes, and not outside of them as if scientists were neutral or detached observers. Like the two angels of the Wenders's classical movie the *Wings of Desire*, human scientists should want to be immersed, and the good ones manage to do it; they wish to give birth to new human experiences in this world, and they want to be in the world even if it means accepting that they are imperfect reflexive animals rather than detached 'Subjects'. This is one important epistemological reason why relational sociology can be different. It focuses on the transactions between the sociologists and social phenomena rather than separating, in a classical and dualistic way, the 'subject' and the 'object'. In this sense, the social is like nature:

Nature is capable of being understood. But the possibility is realized not by a mind thinking about it from without, but by operations conducted from within, operations which give it new relations summed up in production of a new individual object. (Dewey 2008, p. 172)

Like other sciences, good (relational) sociology is praxis: it is successful when it contributes, directly or indirectly, to altering the way we transact with each other in order to achieve some goals, even when its effects on social processes are barely noticed as is the case most of the time. When we say that sociology is in crisis, we should mean that sociologists have very little or no influence at all on our social experiences. The calls for 'public sociology' (Clawson *et al.* 2007), a 'moral' sociology (Seidman 2008, p. xii), or a 'social science that matters' (Flyvbjerg 2001) are very different in many ways from the pragmatic approach I suggest, but they can also be seen as attempts to solve the crisis of sociology by connecting our work to usually problematic social experiences of other people.

In a nutshell, as relational sociologists, our goal is to improve some unscientific experiences of non-sociologists in relation to some desired ends (less violence, less exploitation, decreasing rates of suicide, etc.), and we try to do so by: (1) doing controlled experiences we call researches based on various theories and methods, (2) diffusing the results of these researches, and (3) hoping they will change the studied social events in some desired ways. If it works, then we have increased one level of control on some social processes. The main goal of RS should be easy to agree on since it has been the main objective of classical and contemporary sociology: we wish our contemporary fellows to increase their control over their social experiences thanks to our sociological research.

In this sense, the goal is not only to interpret the world, but to change it. However, there are significant differences between the RS I propose and the ambitious goal of Marxism. Firstly, RS cannot lead to Heaven – the perfect society. Secondly, RS does not try to change the totality of the 'world', 'society', or the 'system'; it contributes to altering some of our social experiences in relation to specific social processes and some related problems. In this respect, we will see below that a pragmatic RS works more at the level of various fields of transaction than at the societal level. For the time being, it is enough to note that connections to social problems, and the related will to try to change

what has been already evolved, and what will continue to evolve, are fundamental dimensions for this type of RS. In Dewey's words:

The scientific attitude, as an attitude of interest in change instead of interest in isolated and complete fixities, is necessarily alert for problems; every new question is an opportunity for further experimental inquiries – for affecting more directed change. There is nothing which a scientific mind would more regret than reaching a condition in which there were no problems. That state would be the death of science, not its perfected life. (Dewey 2008, p. 81)

Again, RS looks more like an art (Dewey 1958) than a Kuhnian paradigm. The 'objects' of relational sociology are all these associations between interdependent human beings. When these associations are left on their own, life experiences are not 'directed'. Good or bad things happen, but life can be perceived as a long suite of transactions, where we act according to unscientific knowledge. In this social life without more or less efficient sociological knowledge, we are, indeed, like social *animals*. Somehow, human beings lose part of their humanity in this type of behavioral dynamics. We easily feel powerless yet determined, as if the associations in which we live would be external to us. We cannot see that we live in a constant state of interdependency. We can just see ourselves from an egocentric perspective (Elias 1978). Unfortunately, many social scientists have tried to transform this form of alienation into something like a natural, normal, or inevitable characteristic of human beings. We would be naturally determined by social laws, societies, social structures, social systems, social currents, or any other similar 'social things'. Paradoxically, positivist sociologists like Durkheim also hoped their science could help human beings to fix some problems.³ They were also explicitly or implicitly saying that we can increase our control over social experiences rather than simply being coerced by external forces or stimuli. This is what RS should show by making explicit this capacity of intelligent sociological experiences. One of the main challenges of RS is to show that we, as reflexive and interdependent human beings, can improve our control over multiple and specific social processes thanks to more or less 'directed', intelligent, social experiences.

There is still a lot of work to do to find out clearly how we can do this, but it cannot be done if we adopt ontological views which explain to the individuals that they are determined by social things, or even that they interact with social structures. You can develop your reflexivity as much as you can, but there is not much you can do against such powerful self-acting or interacting forces. You can only listen to deterministic or co-deterministic sociologists explaining how difficult it is to face these solid and external structures. Sometimes, there might be some hope for you, but only if you join some 'corporate agents' like social movements, or when the structures allow more 'agency'. One pragmatic and transactional sociology talks about having a better collective control of our various social experiences any place and whenever they happen, from love relationships to transnational relations. Therefore, sociological explanations are something else than simple stories, descriptions, or language games, even if they take the form of stories, if they are based on descriptions, and if they are made and diffused through languages. It is a praxis related to social relations, to the life experiences of people.

3. What do we study in RS?

Rethinking RS in a pragmatic way implies a deep transformation of our perceptions of our social experiences. By rejecting any form of dualism between the mind and the body, the

individuals and society, or the social structures and agency, a pragmatic, relational sociology redefines what social phenomena (redefined as social fields) are and what entities (perceived as transactors) are making these phenomena. I think the same is roughly true for many other compatible processual approaches such as symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (see Joas 1993, especially chapter 1), the actor-network theory of Latour, or the figurational approach of Elias – at least in *What is Sociology?* These approaches are somehow different from sociological theories which are founded on the classical assumption that sociology is the ‘science of the society’ – and the social structures associated to them (Dubet 2009, p. 38). In this logic, many sociological theories connect our social problems to the identification and the classification of types of society (traditional/modern/post-modern, feudal/capitalist/communist, pre-industrial/industrial/post-industrial, urban/rural, industrial society/risk society, etc.). Social dynamics, patterns, and problems are explained in relation to (and usually caused by) the type of society in which they happen. For example, it is explained that modernity leads to anomie or is characterized by bureaucracy; capitalism is founded on exploitation and alienation; urbanity creates criminality; patriarchy causes sexual domination; the risk society is founded on the distribution and management of environmental risks; and so on. This type of classification of societies and social problems often leads to general relations of causality (society or social structure → social problem) or to broad, impressionistic representations of societies describing their key features (de Gusmão 2012, pp. 19–20). The latter can be very useful representations in many ways, and highly qualified sociologists such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Beck, Bourdieu, Bauman, or Giddens made significant contributions in order to help us to understand (hyper-) modernity and, by doing so, to orient ourselves in our social worlds. However, and even if impressionistic representations can lead to various forms of simplification or the exaggeration of the importance of some social relations, I think it is the first type of large, causal theories which have created so many problems for sociology. Indeed, since we cannot develop universal theories leading to the discovery of social laws, we can argue that by emulating natural sciences many sociologists have condemned themselves to failure (Flyvbjerg 2001, Seidman 2008); it is shaky to define the object of sociology as the study of society when sociologists struggle to define what a society is or are debating if it still exist (for instance, Urry 2000, Bauman 2002, Levitt and Schiller 2004, Latour 2005, Dubet 2009). It has also been demonstrated that this type of approach does not correspond to the plurality of social experiences of the individuals. People live their life through various trajectories (Lahire 2001, 2006). They do not simply interact uniformly according to types of societies or social structures, even if we can *focus* on some social patterns, connect them to types of societies, and be influenced by these representations. The point here is that one large social field like a society is also full of differences in spite of perceived social structures. Once again, this is not a ‘subjectivist’ explanation of action as long as we remember that our perceptions are closely connected to the way we transact with other people and objects. It is not about objectivism or subjectivism. As we will see later, the *known* comes from transactions (relations based on interdependency) between the observers and the observed. In simple words, some modes of observations and theoretical orientations lead to the discovery of social patterns in one social field, but one could see plenty of differences by asking different questions, using other methods and theories. For instance, social processes such as couple life are full of patterns and differences depending on what is observed. There is no natural connection between sociology and patterns or differences, especially because we cannot understand the state and the evolvement of these processes by ignoring patterns or differences.

For now, I would like to insist on the idea that some problems coming from classical dualisms could explain the gap existing between sociology and many non-sociologists. Sociologists may reinforce their own legitimacy crisis by making promises they cannot fulfill (for instance, the discovery of social laws), by being too far away from the plural life experiences of the people. It is difficult for many non-sociologists to understand how sociological research can help them, in their specific social experiences, if sociologists explain that their society or some social structures self-act on them, or that they interact with such totalities. Many non-sociologists do not see how and when they can be involved in such relations, and what they can do to resist these external, large, powerful, and sometimes even almost mystical entities. At the worst, sociological explanations may look like metaphysical discourses where invisible entities make our world, rather than a scientific and pragmatic activity which can improve our control over our life in specific and diversified social processes. For example, saying that the ‘biography’ is connected to ‘history’ might be true generally speaking and was probably needed half of a century ago when social determinism was predominant, at least in North America; it obviously fueled the sociological imagination of many intellectuals for good reasons and with good outcomes; but, once again, many individuals might have a hard time to see how they can interact with ‘history’. As true as it can be, this is simply too vague as an explanation for individuals living their life and facing problems in various social fields.

In order to move away from these sociological problems, we have to define the ‘object’ of sociology in a different way. Rather than looking for absolutes like Society, ‘infrastructures’, or History, it might be better to respect the diversity of social life and to observe specific, various, and concrete fields where our audience – our ‘public’ – live. As Lahire (2001, p. 27) mentioned, many sociological theories are too general and too universal, as if the actors, at any time and any place, would always correspond to the actor the theory manufactured. I guess Becker defended a similar idea when he wrote:

I think it is generally true that sociology does not discover what no one ever knew before, in this differing from the natural sciences. Rather, good social science produces a deeper understanding of things that many people are already pretty much aware of. (Becker 2008, p. xxiv)

The challenge is to get closer to the social experiences of the people. We can reorient sociological inquiry, Bauman wrote, by looking at ‘common experience of being-in-the-world’ (2002, p. 26). The main suggestions of Latour (2005) in *Reassembling the Social* can be interpreted in this sense. Latour recommended staying away from the social as a totality and an external force in favor of ethnographical descriptions of ‘associations’ between ‘actants’. I could also quote Goffman, Blumer, some texts of Elias, Foucault maybe, and many others who adopted similar realistic ontological views on social relations.

Some sociologists might label this type of approach as a form of micro-sociology, meaning it is based on ‘the detailed analysis of what people do, say and think in the actual flow of momentary experience’ (Collins 1981, p. 1110). They might also oppose it to macro-sociologies founded on ‘the analysis of large-scale and long-term social processes, often treated as self-subsistent entities such as “state,” “organization,” “class,” “economy,” “culture,” and “society”’ (Collins 1981, p. 1110). Other impatient readers might even say it is a form of methodological individualism. I do not see these labels as being very relevant for the kind of approach I propose. I know we can identify some patterns of relations which last for a while in different parts of the world or in the whole

world. Once again, I just think these patterns do not self-act on, or cannot interact with, individuals. Therefore, I do not think we need these distinctions between macro, meso, or micro levels of analysis because the social universe is flat. There is only one level of social life for all of us – members of the elite and ‘ordinary’ people included. We all transact with other human and non-human transactors in various fields we call couples, families, workplaces, battlefields, nations, empires, global economy, etc. I can only see interdependent actions (or transactions) between human and non-human transactors in various fields of transaction (or social fields). Individual actions can be seen and analyzed as self-actions ($A \rightarrow B$) by observers; but, in reality, it is reasonable to assume that so-called self-actions are always part of transactions where the actions of A and B are interdependent. Like tango dancers, football players, or students and professors in their respective social fields, the actions of the transactor A can be explained or understood only in reference to the actions of the transactor B , and vice versa. This RS is based on specific descriptions of transactions (interdependent actions), but once again the intention is to produce pragmatic knowledge.

The notion of transaction

As I mentioned, thinking with a *transactional*, pragmatic sociology implies defining social relations as transactions rather than self-actions or interactions. These distinctions are inspired by Dewey and Bentley (1949). As philosophers of science, they used these three concepts to differentiate three different general views on how to perceive relations between observed entities or forces. As a sociologist, I simply adapt these concepts to the perception of social relations. As I mentioned before, it basically means that individuals usually do not *simply* self-act on other individuals. A does not simply transform, make, or shape B , even if transactors do influence each other when they transact, and, of course, even if power relations are unequal. One child certainly influences the actions of her father, and vice versa, when they play a game. We could say that they self-act on each other, or that they interact with each other. However, the notion of transaction allows us to see and remind us that if the child acts in *this* way, it is only and partly because the father is also there and he is doing what he is doing. They are interdependent, meaning for instance they do not simply act according to some pre-given, personal features – even if personality matters.

Again, these three concepts refer to three ways to perceive social relations. I think the first two concepts can be used in relational research. For instance, if one observer wants to reveal strong relations of domination, it might be enough to see the relations as if the dominant would simply self-act on the dominated one. However, the notion of transaction seems to be closer to the complex interdependency of actions in social fields because even extremely unequal power relations are transactions. The moves made the dominant ones, and the dominated ones, can be fully understood only as transactions: A is dominating B in *this* way for many reasons, one of them being that B is reacting in this way, and B is reacting like *this* partly because A is dominating him in this way. So, again, A is not simply self-acting on B , and A and B cannot be simply seen as pre-given entities. They are what they are and do what they do because they are transactors in this specific social field.

Other types of relations can probably be analyzed efficiently as if they would be self-actions even if they are also transactions, like when I hit someone by accident ($A \rightarrow B$). But this is not what sociologists usually study as Weber explained in *Economy and Society*: ‘Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes into account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course’ (1978, p. 4). It does not mean that

sociology should be restricted to stable relations based on shared meanings. This is only one type of social process. Transactional sociology can be more inclusive since sociologists are invited to study social fields founded on interdependency where the action of *A* cannot be disconnected from the action of *B*, and vice versa.

As I have already briefly mentioned, transactions are not simply interactions, meaning that the actions of *A* and *B* are relational – they are not just caused by some pre-given essences or characteristics, even if the personal characteristics of *A* and *B* (their respective moods, values, interpretations, knowledge, bodies, etc.) can certainly be important dimensions of their transactions. I do not transact in the same way with others when I am in a bad mood or have a terrible headache, for instance. Another example: as Blumer explained, ‘human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them’ (1998, p. 2), and, as we all know, these meanings vary from one individual to another, and are not simply predictable, even if we can also focus on some similarities based on class positions, gender, age, and so on. The point here is quite simple: individual characteristics are key dimensions of actions and reactions, but actions and reactions are also interdependent ones. This daughter does what she does in her relations with her father because she is what she is (impulsive, passive, courageous, a caring person, individualist, etc.), but also, of course, because her father is what he is and does what he does. There is no possible theoretical isolation of actors with Dewey’s notion of transaction. Pure psychological explanations and sociologisms are too limited, too narrow-minded. By seeing individuals as transactors, we cannot forget they are social entities because we always remember they transact with other specific human and non-human transactors. In this logic, *this* small or large social field is always the social field of *these* interdependent individuals; it does not exist before or outside of them. And individuals have been and are still socialized in specific, more or less similar and different social fields; they transact(ed) with other specific individuals; and they have developed various memories, traumas, knowledge, social skills, etc., throughout all these multiple social experiences. Saying they are socialized by a pre-structured society is simply too vague to be relevant in relation to the real social life of people. Reducing sociology to the study of large similarities connected to variables, such as structural positions, gender, etc., is somehow losing touch with the complexity of social life, even if this type of knowledge can be useful if, *and only if*, we always remember that we can do much more.

In sum, the notion of transaction can be seen as a reminder that social relations always refer to a complex state of interdependency. This is basically what the word *social* means. These explanations might also seem to be too vague for some colleagues. One can read the books of Dewey and Bentley (1949) and Spiegel (1983) to complete my brief presentation, although the general idea here is to present this concept as being connected to another perception and definition of the social, and therefore as another possible (relational) sociology.

The notion of social field

The notion of field has been used by other human scientists. Due to a lack of space, I will not review the literature on social fields but rather try to define some of their characteristics in relation to the pragmatic and transactional sociology I propose.⁴

Specific and multiple social processes

From birth to death, the social experiences of individuals happen in multiple social fields (or fields of transaction, transactional fields ...) such as their mother's womb, their family, games played with other kids at the schoolyard, conversations with co-workers at the shop, meetings at the department, discussions at the restaurant with a lover, fights in a battlefield, work at the assembly line, trafficking women in a transnational field, making love in the bedroom, and so on. Human beings also have transactions with non-human entities like books, weapons, food, money, movies, computers, animals, plants, planes, tables, walls, bacteria, etc. This is what our social life is all about: transactions happening within various social fields. These fields are social processes which may be as short as a conversation on the corner of the street or as lasting as states like France or Great Britain. However long they may last, social fields are never eternal. From a socio-historical perspective, they are shorter or longer chains of transaction which last as long as the transactors co-produce them. Social fields are also social spaces, meaning their 'borders' are made, transformed, or destroyed by the relevant transactions between the concerned transactors. Social fields exist for real but they do not self-act on, or interact with, individuals. They are made, transformed, or destroyed by transactors. This is how and why they are *social*. Another preliminary note: as we will see below, as far as they are *known*, the borders of social fields emerge from transactions between the observer and the observed transactions.

Thus, social fields refer to these multiple social experiences people have in their life. These social experiences have complex effects on what we became or are becoming. We should avoid the classical causal logic when we think about this type of social phenomena. We can say that these experiences make us, but this is just an expression. In reality, these experiences are not external to us. We co-produce(d) them throughout our various transactions. Furthermore, the idea that the past self-act on us, or interact with us through pre-existing social structures, should be rejected in favor of the study of past or ongoing social fields as fields of transactions. Some insignificant social experiences leave no trace at all or close to no trace at all (like when I avoided someone on the sidewalk last month). Others change our self, our body, and our life in significant ways (going through a tough divorce, having a child, getting a new job, going to war, being invaded by bacteria, winning the lottery, etc.). Lahire (2001, pp. 53–56) offered relevant explanations about the complex relations between past experiences and the socialization of the individuals. In a nutshell, by starting from the individuals rather than structural positions, as Lahire did, one realizes that the same individuals have plural worldviews and practices depending on the specific social fields they are engaged in at one specific time. Workers, for instance, do not necessarily or always have uniform practices they carry from one field to another. One worker might favor beer over wine in one social process and prefer to visit a museum than watching a football game on television in another process. Social life is more fragmented or plural than many sociological theories can reveal when they are only looking for similarities, especially when they are searching for universal *explanations* such as: similar possession of capitals → similar habitus → similar action, or similar level of social integration → similar rate of suicide. Of course, social life is full of similarities (and differences), and it is useful for all of us to know about these similarities. As a pragmatic person, I like to know that usually car drivers do not stop at green lights or that rich people generally live longer than poor ones. However, universal sociological theories of structured actions can be supported by 'facts' only if

one can find a way, usually a methodological one, to ‘neutralize’ – as Durkheim said in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* – the diversity of individual experiences. By doing this, the sociologist ends up with ‘normal’ (average) behaviors which support the idea of clear structured and similar practices, and usually, or too often, the transformation of these averages into ‘social things’. This is one way by which a sociologist can detach himself from the complex social life of non-sociologists, and avoid reminding us that drivers do not always stop at red lights – which is also very useful knowledge for people.

Sociology should be able to integrate the complexity of social life (including individual characteristics and differences) without losing its ‘object’ – the study of social relations between real, interdependent individuals. This is a crucial issue for contemporary sociology, especially if we are dealing with a legitimacy crisis. Indeed, the closer sociologists are to universal theories and various forms of (co-)determinisms where totalities self-act on, or interact with, homogenized individuals, the further they are from the social experiences of individuals, and the more difficult it is to connect to them. This connection is essential if sociologists aspire to help people to deal with social problems.

Fields as (known) transactions between the observer and observed relations

Individuals transact in various and ephemeral social fields at a specific time, but RS should not be a-historical or present-centered. As Elias showed, transactions at T^x are always somehow connected to various past experiences through dynamic, heterogeneous memories, knowledge, views, habits, etc., involving long chains of transactions. Therefore, the emergence and transformation of social fields should be seen in relation to longer chains of transactions which started before the observed transactions, especially if and when the relevant past transactions left traces one can find by using various methods and tools such as content analysis of documents, interviews, statistics, and so on.

Ideally, the sociologist would include all the relevant transactions related to the analyzed social field. Unfortunately, most of the time the observer cannot see the totality of a social field in terms of space and time, or even all the significant past and ongoing transactions. There are many reasons that explain this incapacity. Past transactions do not always leave traces; ongoing ones are invisible due to theoretical and/or methodological limitations; the transactors hide themselves from any external observation (like with criminal activities); or maybe there are just too many significant transactions which make the observed social field (the global economy, for example) too wide for the eyes of one or a few sociologist(s). Tools can help, but they are always also limited. In one way or another, observing a social field is always a process of selection of transactors and transactions. Therefore, our observations cannot be simply objective, and they cannot be subjective stories either. Here again, Dewey – with the contribution of Spiegel (1983) – can help us to find a solution to this apparent dilemma. As they are *known*, social fields are transactions between the observer and the observed transactions. Observers use different theories, methods, and tools to picture a social field. They usually try to focus on the most important or typical transactions in the most accurate possible way, considering the limits of their theories, concepts, methods, and tools.

Generally speaking, the transactions between the observer and the observed are processes of selection partly based on naming and associations between transactors, and it is this kind of work which delimits one social field. What is left in the dark, and there is

always something in the dark, is the *unknown*. In this respect, what Maxwell said about physics is also correct for a transactional sociology:

In all scientific procedure we begin by marking out a certain region or subject as the field of our investigations. To this we must confine our attention, leaving the rest of the universe out of account till we have completed the investigation in which we are engaged. In physical science, therefore, the first step is to define clearly the material system which we make the subject of our statements. This system may be of any degree of complexity. It may be a single material particle, a body of finite size, or any number of such bodies, and it may even be extended so as to include the whole material universe. (Maxwell cited in Spiegel 1983, pp. 21–22)

In this pragmatic RS, the work starts with the identification of some specific experiences and problems some people have to face, such as: Why is the rate of suicide higher in the community *X* than in the community *Y*? Why is the development of capitalism more advanced here than there? Why were so many workers dominated and exploited in England at the end of the nineteenth century? The choice of a social problem implies some foci in terms of space and time. By doing so, it also implies selecting and identifying significant transactors and transactions, such as the capitalists exploiting the workers in Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. The same people could be identified and connected as husbands dominating their wives if the observer is looking at different social fields (the patriarchal family rather the capitalist society). Everything else being equal, none of these observations is more real, objective, or scientific than the other. They are both different and as real as they can be because they emerge from different transactions between the observer and the observed. Learning one human science like sociology, psychology, economics, political science, or history incites to define social fields in specific ways by using some theories and methods and not others, and to focus on some phenomena like institutions, groups, symbolic interactions, modes of production, the psyche of the transactors, production and consumption of goods, cognitive capacities, past social experiences, the State, power relations, international relations, and so on. Each discipline refers to types of focus; and, at the end of the day, its relative value depends on its relative capacity to solve various problems that some people face in this weird universe.

For now, it is enough to say that social fields (as knowns) are transactions between observers and observed transactors. A field ‘is a portion of the universe that we make the subject of our investigations’ (Spiegel 1983, p. 39); it ‘is an extent of the universe covered by our investigations’ (Spiegel 1983, p. 40). It does not mean that a social field in sociology can be reduced to the subjectivity of the observer. Good relational sociologists do not simply construct social fields. Scientifically known social fields emerge from rigorous and more or less scientifically regulated *transactions* between the observer and the portion of the universe she is working on. For those who are worried about the existence of the Reality, the idea is quite simple: the Reality of the realists is postulated (it does exist), but we cannot know what it is. What is *known* for us are the results of our investigation and of the work and the transactions we make to produce these results. And of course, in sociology like elsewhere, there are good and bad scientific researches (pragmatically speaking, it means reliable or unreliable knowledge for the concerned people).

The frontiers of the known are constantly changing due to the transactional nature of sciences and the fields they study. Different scientific experiences allow us to see transactors and transactions we could not even imagine before. Furthermore, in this

universe everything moves all the time: significant transactors appear, are transformed, and disappear continuously. The limits of the fields we know fluctuate with all these scientific and non-scientific transactions. Furthermore, all the transactors we used to call ‘entities’ end up being social fields themselves when we focus on them and the smaller entities, like atoms, organs, fluids, or cells, which co-produce them. In other words, it is always more complex than anything we can imagine, and we are dealing with a double complexity: the complexity of our scientific transactions between the observer and the observed, and the complexity of the highly dynamic social fields we observe. In this sense, sociology might be condemned to struggle to produce relevant knowledge for non-sociologists. It might give the impression of being in a constant state of crisis, especially if, and when, other people ask for the Truth and sociologists try to find it. Nevertheless, sociology might be one of the best tools we have to orient ourselves in this messy social universe, especially if, and when, it is a pragmatic one. This is especially true because, as Giddens explained, sociological representations may contribute to the constant ‘structuration’ of social fields.

The open social fields

In this transactional sociology, we should not try to unveil the ‘nature’ of social fields. This is one major difference between this RS and many relational sociologies also based on the concept of field. The most famous sociologist who used the concept of field is certainly Bourdieu. His fields have something like a universal nature or structure. They are essentially multiple social spaces referring to structured relations fueled by quests for power and distinction. The actors and their actions are largely oriented by the structural positions they occupy in one field or another (economic, political, social, and cultural; or other types of specific fields). Each field is always based on the unequal distribution of capitals (for example, wealth in the economic field); and the positions of the actors are determined by the type (economic, cultural, social, and political) and amount (+, +/- or -) of capitals they have. It is not clear how deeply the actions of the actors are determined by the possession of capital(s) in Bourdieu’s theory. The capitals can be seen as assets like aces in a card game. In this sense, Bourdieu’s fields have been defined as spaces of structurally determined actions, but also spaces of strategic behaviors where the actors do their best with what they have in a pre-structured world. The second view on fields is usually used as a counter-argument against critiques that insist on the unclear social determinism of many explanations of Bourdieu. However, there is no doubt that for Bourdieu the objective distribution of types of capitals has a strong influence on the habitus, and therefore on the interests, desires, expectations, tastes, etc., of the actors. This is why many readers of Bourdieu have repeatedly claimed that this theory is more a deterministic one (or a co-deterministic one) than anything else, even if Bourdieu claimed at the end of his career that his theory was relational. This confusion is a significant problem for those like me who try to develop a ‘deep’ RS (see Dépelteau 2013). But the main point here is that his fields are seen as having a universal structure. They have an a-priori or a postulated structure which seriously limits the kind of transactions one can observe in sociology.

More recently, these problems of Bourdieu’s theory of fields have been partly addressed by Martin (2003) and Fligstein and McAdam (2011). In both cases, the explanations are more malleable, but their social fields are still associated to universal structures. Fligstein and McAdam, for instance, propose a ‘general theory of strategic

action fields' (SAFs) which is more dynamic than Bourdieu's theory, thanks to its focus on collective actions, strategies, and the formation of the fields. I do not have the space to criticize this text, but I will briefly raise two issues. Many explanations of Fligstein and McAdam are useful and compatible with a pragmatic, transactional perception of social fields. Nonetheless, because they rely heavily on Bourdieu but also on 'social movement studies' and 'organizational theory', their concept of field is mostly reduced to social spaces defined by 'issues at stake', where the distribution of power is unequal, where the rules are understood by the actors, and where the actors are fundamentally strategic 'incumbents' and 'challengers' trying to maintain or improve their positions.

The definition I propose is an open one: the 'forms' of social fields are made by the transactors and their transactions. These 'forms' should not be defined by some postulates, theoretical views, or background assumptions about the society as it is or as it should be. One sociologist can always decide to focus on some types of social fields like the ones that Bourdieu or Fligstein and McAdam have in mind, as long as they remember they are not defining *the* universal structure or form of social fields.

To cut a long story short, social fields are too dynamic to be reduced to universal structures or forms. Even when they seem to reproduce themselves, social fields are 'in a continuous state of change' (Wilkinson 1970, p. 313). Of course, we give names to some social fields such as a family or a country, and we can tell the history of these fields, partly because they last more than other fields like short conversations. Wilkinson (1970, p. 318) called these fields with names, histories, norms, rules, roles, justifications, etc., 'community fields'. But sociologists should never forget that even in these cases we are always talking about temporal continuity and not eternal structures and cultures:

A field is dynamic in the sense that it is in a continuous state of change. Change in both structure and process is such that the field exists through time with elements continually realigning themselves with one another and with elements entering and leaving what is operationally defined as the field at a given moment. (Wilkinson 1970, p. 313)

Even the most enduring, 'structured' social fields last only for a while. Transactions are always more or less creative. In spite of the appearance, we never make love exactly in the same way; we never have the same conversation fueled by the same energy and emotions; people never kill each other in the same way or for the same reason(s); the reaction of a worker to the order of the foreman is never simply predictable. In brief, the level of resemblance or difference of specific transactions, or their level of creativity, which is never at zero, is a problem which can be resolved only through empirical comparisons of specific transactions. Once again, there is no place for universal conclusion here.

4. Conclusion

In the last years, I have seen many strong reactions against the kind of ideas proposed in this text. Based on my experiences in the social sciences, two ideas are almost sacred ones for many colleagues: the causal power of social structures and the discovery of the Truth. For example, one day a colleague told me we would run out of business in sociology if we would stop explaining similar behaviors as effects of social structures. Beyond the fear of losing sociology (as we know it), this type of reaction is fueled by the type of background assumptions I (with others) want to question. Maybe our social universe is not founded on repetitive and similar actions and relations interrupted by some moments of agency. And even when we focus on similarities, maybe we can explain them

in a different way – with no ‘social things’, by analyzing transactions in various social fields, for instance. Maybe sociological knowledge can help us to live together without trying to discover some universal ‘conditions of order’. Maybe (precarious and temporary) social orders are not founded on social structures. These are the kind of fundamental questions I insist on in order to develop a transactional sociology. Similar ideas have been proposed for years by other sociologists, and too many times these options have been quickly rejected as anti-sociological approaches – as forms of ‘methodological individualism’, for example. Latour was also exposed to quick, strong, and negative reactions for saying we should forget about the discovery of the Truth and pure, ‘hard’ facts. In brief, he basically said: If one observes ‘science-in-action’, he will see different associations between ‘actants’ using various methods, tubes and machines, publishing in journals, making citations, and so on; this is how scientists produce data, and it has nothing to do with the Philosophers of Plato or seeing the Reality as it is. Paradoxically, for many sociologists and epistemologists, by observing science-in-action in a scientific manner, Latour became a radical relativist or constructivist who attacked the legitimacy of sciences, whereas in fact he is attacking the legitimacy of Science by suggesting being more realistic when we talk about what scientists do.

I would be inclined to think these harsh reactions come more from the attachment to some sociological habitus more than from the radicalism, or even the novelty, of the questions and ideas I raise and suggest. Many sociologists are used to justifying their work as being Scientific, which means for them that they can see entities or forces other people cannot see. They think other people will listen to them only if they are the Philosophers of Plato who can reveal the pure forms or the infrastructures of the social. However, I have met few sociologists who seriously believe they can do this job. Most of them are much more modest and realistic. I have also heard and read a lot on society, systems, or the social structures, but I saw more sociologists doing empirical research on what I call various social fields even if they do not use this concept. In addition, I am not aware of many sociologists who do not hope that their sociological research can help some other people to deal with specific social problems. What I am trying to say here is that in spite of all the resistance these ideas might create, they are somehow close to the scientific practices of many sociologists. In this sense, I would think that many of us are ready for the critical revision of some dimensions of our intellectual habitus which emerge, roughly speaking, from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This is probably the main reason why the label RS has become more popular since the end of the 1980s. They are ‘fighting words’ as Emirbayer reminded us (2013).

In this text, I suggested we can start this difficult but, I think, needed and ‘deep’ relational turn by:

Connecting our sociological research to some specific social problems people are facing in their life. By doing so, we should clearly and openly try to help other individuals to deal with their social problems by producing some pragmatic sociological knowledge;

Staying with the individuals at the only ‘level’ they can be in their social life, meaning in multiple and specific social fields;

Recognizing that social fields have no intrinsic or universal structure. As transactors, the individuals co-produce these temporary and highly dynamic fields as they are, for what they are. The job of sociologists is not to define these fields in any universal way but to observe, describe, compare, etc., them as they are, with all their diversity and complexity.

Non-sociologists co-produce the world as it is in all its complexity; sociologists can contribute to this ongoing, endless process by facilitating social intelligence thanks to some

directed social experiences. Hopefully, and once again, this type of sociological knowledge can help us to improve our social intelligence and life in this rough universe.

My last general suggestion is to see what can be done with this approach in a context of multiple crises in this world; a context where sociology might be ready for a major shift after the eras of social determinism and co-determinism.

Notes

1. For another presentation of relational theories, see Mishe (2011).
2. For recent illustrations of this type of work, see Powell and Dépelteau (2013) and Dépelteau and Powell (2013).
3. 'Why strive for knowledge of reality if this knowledge cannot serve us in life? To this we can make reply that, by revealing the causes of phenomena, science furnishes the means of producing them' (Durkheim 1938, p. 48).
4. Readers can consult Martin (2003) for a general presentation of what he calls 'field theory'.

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