Review

Social Engagement: The viewpoint of relational sociology

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Modernity understood 'engagement' in individual or collective terms. Weber and Marx offered the best-known and exemplary paradigms. Since then, a great deal of sociologists have tried to combine them and have seen engagement as a co-determination between agency and social structure. Everybody knows that engagement entails acting *in* and *with* social relations, but the *intrinsically* relational character of engagement has remained obscure, largely implicit and unexplored. Engagement has always been a social relation, but nowadays it is taken on an unprecedented morphogenetic connotation. The proposals for devising a new 'relational sociology' of engagement are on the increase. Yet these proposals are very different in their theoretical, methodological and applicative aspects. We have to clarify what 'relational' means. The author believes a distinction needs to be made between *relational theories* (based on critical and analytical realism) and (relation)*istic* theories (based on constructivist and relativistic assumptions). The latter perform serious central conflations between subjective and objective factors, between the individual input and the historical configuration of engagement. A new conceptual framework is put forward here in order to understand engagement as a relational reality operating through reflexivity forms, especially focussing on the meta-reflexive one as distinctive of *after*-modern society.

Key words: Reflexivity, relational sociology, social engagement, after-modern society.

INTRODUCTION

THE END OF THE 'TYPICALLY MODERN' ENGAGEMENT

Modernity understood 'engagement' in individual or collective terms. Weber and Marx offered the best-known and exemplary paradigms. Since then, a great deal of sociologists have essentially held on to those models. Despite introducing significant changes, many contemporary theorists have produced engagement sociologies based on a mix of individualism and methodological holism, on the co-determination between agency and social structure.

All researchers, from classical to contemporary ones, have realised that engagement entails acting in and with social relations. Yet, the *intrinsically* relational character of engagement has remained obscure, largely implicit and unexplored. To quote Emirbayer (1997), "social actors' reflexive engagement with the problems confronting them in everyday life remains significantly under-theorized in recent studies of network processes.

In the present essay, the author assumes that the social world as described by classical theorists is falling apart before us. Individual engagement as described by Weber experiences increasing failures and the engagement of social and cultural movements no longer matches the collectivistic models derived from Marx.

There are some scholars who do take this state of affairs into account. Postmodern sociologists are looking

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for an appropriate paradigm to understand the dynamics of engagement in the emergent society. Unfortunately, though, they end up handling engagement as an idle circular relation.

For a number of years we have witnessed an attempt to work out a kind of sociological knowledge according to which social facts – such as engagement – have a relational character. Yet the proposals of a relational approach are very different in their theoretical, methodological and applicative aspects. One has to draw a distinction between *relational* theories, on one hand, based on critical and analytical realism, and relation*istic* theories, on the other hand, adopting some constructionist and relativistic assumptions. The latter perform serious central conflations between subjective and objective factors; between the individual input and the historical configuration of engagement.

In view of the obsolescence of classical sociologies and the profound weaknesses of relationistic ones, it becomes reasonable to claim that new engagement phenomena follow routes displaying a new reflexive relationality, which challenges modernity, and indeed proceeds along the way leading to after-modern or trans-modern society. To perceive such changes, one needs a sociological vision capable of handling engagement as a social relation through a framework inspired by critical, analytical and relational realism.

Here linguistic is not used (which is also a conceptual issue) to distinguish the words *engagement*, *commitment*, *involvement*. In actual fact, they are often used interchangeably. For instance, note that the English term *commitment* is translated into French as *engagement* and into German also as *Engagement*. The German word *Engagement* is often translated into English as *involvement*. This means that there are not only linguistic but also theoretical problems. In this discussion, the following distinctions are used. The word *commitment* (in Italian: 'impegno') is seen as a value orientation meant to achieve a certain objective (target, goal); it points to a relation from the referential point of view, that is, from the psycho-cultural reference point (*refero*). The term *engagement*, on the other hand, points to a commitment which entails confronting others, with an 'other', an *alter* (for instance, the partner one is engaged to, or the client or employer in a work setting) and having to overcome obstacles and likely conflicts to accomplish the goal of the engagement itself. At any rate it entails an effort beyond what would be the agent's mere desire or intention, which creates a bond with others. In brief, *engagement* is understood here as a commitment which is *lived out and acted out* within a relation which is not only a reference point endowed with a psycho-cultural value, but also a social bond (*religo*). The term *involvement* indicates getting involved in a (relational) *situation*, considered in a relatively objective and not necessarily personalised manner, rather than an ideal person or target; it does not entail creating relations understood as bonds.

THE MODERN WORLD AS AN ENGAGEMENT OBJECT (PRODUCT): HOW SOCIOLOGY HAS OBSERVED THE PHENOMENON

Engagement according to classical sociology

Every major revolutionary societal change can be described and interpreted as a change of the prevailing engagement type implemented by social groups (often active and creative minorities which have turned into *élites*), which have little by little or even abruptly gained a prominent role in leading the historical process.

In the case of the transition between the pre-modern and the modern worlds, there was a shift from a socio-cultural system endorsing a prevailing extra-worldly engagement to a socio-cultural system upholding a prevailing intra-worldly engagement. Though certainly questionable, Max Weber's well-known argument on Protestant ethics as a source of the capitalist, specifically modern spirit has some truth in it. So, though the end of the medieval set-up was marked by many causal factors which pushed towards a socio-cultural and structural change (think of 'civil' humanists in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, of the Renaissance, of the rising lay economy at the time of the Communes, of the philosophical debates on universals and of the *diaspora* of Scholastic philosophy), a strong caesura in the change in value and social practices orientation was undoubtedly marked by Protestantism, in its own very different forms. Though different, Protestant movements had a common feature: they encouraged a new engagement in the world as a place of eternal salvation and happiness.

In the same context and at the same time arose and spread out that acquisitive, individualist and self-reflexive ethics that gave rise to a specific civil society (made up of religion, culture, economy, politics, family) which has been called 'bourgeois'. We find it in the characters of the Manchester and then Schumpeterian entrepreneur (Schumpeter 1954), followed by the literature which has spilt so much ink on the so-called *need for achievement* and on the *acquisitive* or *achieving society* (Tawney, 1920; McClelland, 1961). In terms of the more recent reflexivity theory, it is an engagement form based on a self-centred reflexivity, as a distinctive feature of Weber's entrepreneur. As Schumpeter said (1954) when referring to the *Buddenbrooks*' story, the modern engagement motto turns out to be the one written on the door of a bourgeois palace in Bremen: "*navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse*". It matches what Archer (2003) has called 'autonomous reflexivity'.

Described in such a way, the modern world is born out of the victory of an economic-social structure dominated by the type of engagement we call 'capitalistic'. Of course it does not consist of a single dimension, but it is

multidimensional: in this revolutionary change, philosophy, science, the economy, politics and religion are mutually intertwined.

If we wanted to summarise Weber's view in a general outline, we could say that: the agents/actors, more or less affected by simultaneous social, economic and political structures, modify their choices on the values cultural horizon and thus generate a new society. Engagement is understood as a choice made by an individual and – by aggregation – collective agents/ actors, - which bears expected as well as unexpected effects on societal configuration.

One should ask why the engagement secularisation process, that is, a shift of fundamental concerns from otherworldly salvation to succeeding in life on earth affected Christianity rather than the other major global religions. There is more than one reason to believe that happened as a result of the particular type of reflexivity predicated by Christian thought.

Marx did not deny this reality; on the contrary he enhanced it, despite embedding it in his historical and dialectic materialism giving causal priority to the economic structures dynamics. He predicted that the bourgeois ethics of engagement would become ever more secular and turn into a universal lot.

Marx sought to understand what kind of society would be created by a bourgeois ethics of engagement. In his view, the capitalist class would bring about a polarisation of society between the few rich and the proletarian underprivileged masses. In so doing it would determine the necessary upturn in communism, 'crude' at first (Resnick, 1976) and then 'real' (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*). At this final stage in history, according to Marx, engagement ethics would coincide with the individuals' perfect expressive self-accomplishment as being both totally individuated and totally communitarian (he defines them as 'social singles'). To his mind, in the future engagement – understood as the individual's self-accomplishment – would not only define the bourgeois privileged class, but all men and women. It should become universal, with the abolition of social classes and social inequalities.

Neither Weber nor Marx understood that social actors are always embedded in social networks which do not match either the socio-cultural systems studied by Weber, or the economic-social structures highlighted by Marx, since they lie at a different level of reality. Such networks affect individuals and modify social processes outcomes, whether these processes be seen as actors' own products (intentional or unintentional) (Weber), or understood as determined by structural laws independent of individuals (Marx). Hence, neither Weber's predictions (the iron cage) nor Marx's predictions (the advent of communism) have come true.

Durkheim has provided another engagement outline, which we may call *functional*, since, in his view, engagement is the product of individuals embracing shared values (collective conscience, mechanic solidarity) and their own functional role in the division of social work (organic solidarity). Durkheim presupposes the existence of a physiological (not pathological) synergy between the engagement regarded as a value commitment and the performance in a functional role. This perspective has become obsolete, despite an attempt by Parsons to make it relevant nowadays and predictive. As Luhmann points out, the functionalistic view of society, if it brings its premises to their final conclusions, can only come to a position for which personal engagement becomes an irrelevant, powerless and evanescent factor of social life, because it is replaced by systems (biological, psychic and social).

In any case, it is striking to see that the sociology classics just mentioned did not see the relational nature of engagement.

Beyond the classics

Weber's own outline is clearly too simplistic. Many scholars have advanced various criticisms.

A first shift was to conceive engagement as a free agency aiming at achieving certain goals which a subject chooses in a given constraining situational context affecting him/her[1]. Weber is reproached for not considering structural conditioning. This step was taken by Parsons, who took up Durkheim's (but not Marx's own) structuralist claim (Merton, 1968).

In Parsons' own version, the engagement outline becomes the one pertaining to an action system which pursues identified aims, legitimised by certain values, through a functionalisation of social means and norms (Figure 1). Parsons' theory assumes that engagement reproduces a homeostatic social and cultural system,

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[1] I would like to clarify why, on the one hand, I sometimes use the term 'subject' and some other times, on the other hand, I resort to the word *Self* or else to the terms 'personal and social identity'. In our modern vocabulary, *subject* is paired with *object*: on one side, there is someone who perceives, hears, thinks, wants, accepts, rejects, desires, fears, etc. (subject); on the other, necessarily, there is something that is perceived, heard, thought, wanted, accepted, desired, feared, etc. (object). Whenever such a 'someone' is a human person I refer to him or her as 'subject'. By analogy, I also speak of '*social subjects*' to refer to social bodies (such as a family or an organised social group), in so far as their actions and operations are inspired by solidarity (in sociological terms, they are second order relational goods). The 'subject' terminology has a long history going back to Greek philosophers and over the centuries has turned out to be highly ambiguous. For these reasons, English-speaking authors prefer to avoid this word and speak of 'Self' (as a sense of oneself, as a inner perception of the person who 'feels herself' in a certain way) and they distinguish it from personal Identity (which is the way in which the individual 'I' cognitively represents itself) and speak of 'social identity' (which is the way in which the individual 'I' defines him/herself in relation to others in society, as 'Me' and as 'You'). The Anglo-Saxon terminology gains in precision, but loses the sense of the person's own unity, which is a very complex entity and yet it is composed of all these aspects. In using the term 'subject', I want to point to this complex unity, although the human person can be and feel conflicting, multiple, dissociated, etc., within herself. In any case the Subject cannot be reduced to the Self only and this is why I shall use the wording Subject/Self to indicate that the Self moves the Subject, but it is the whole Subject who acts.
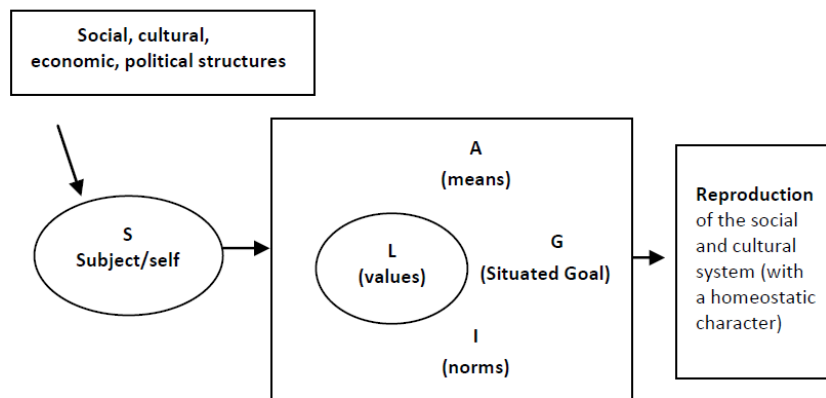
Figure 1. Engagement as an action system (Parsons). Key: L (Latency), value or value model pursed; G (goal attainment), situated goal which concretely enacts the value pursued; A (Adoption), means to attain goal; I (integration), integration norms of the various components within the action system.

which can be modified in the situated means and goals, but has to maintain the latent value model. From the normative point of view, it entails a prevailing form of socialisation based on the interiorisation of the gene-ralised *other*, hence a reflexivity depending on the match with significant others. In brief, Parsons' engagement tends to be aimed at reaffirming the basic values and to reproduce norms, leaving broad margins of freedom to the situated (practical and contingent) means and goals.

On the basis of the contribution made by American pragmatists (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey), the outline has been partially modified by attaching greater importance to the internal reflexivity of the individual self (Figure 1). The developments of these theories cannot be stated here. By critically reworking the input of American reflexivity theorists, Archer (2003, 2007) has proposed an original theory of engagement as a product of the inner conversation. She provides a new version of engagement as a personal agency shaping a *modus vivendi* in a relational context.

To be brief, this conclusion is summarized by means of an outline (Figure 2) which sees engagement as a complex agency in which subjects/selves – affected by structures (settings) – evaluate and decide on their own ultimate concerns ('*dovetail their ultimate concerns*'). Through a reflexive mental process, they discern alterna-tives, decide on their choices and then pursue them through agency in such a way that they can or cannot modify the initial structures. Each shift is seen in a relational sense, for subjects act – both within themselves and without - relationally (agency is relational)[2].

Compared to the previous outline (Figure 1), there are

quite a few novelties:

a) The self's engagement can continuously modify not only the situated goals, but also his ultimate concerns (hence his basic values), since the self continuously questions them.
b) No binding norms for actors are provided to determine their behaviours so as to make the action system fully integrated.
c) As to the means, they are conceived as opportunities to be selected contingently (they are not pre-given); moreover they are not necessarily consistent with norms, goals, values.
d) Agency's reflexivity entails that engagement can be both morphostatic and morphogenetic; in particular, unlike in Parsons, the subject/self is not supposed to necessarily seek to improve the same goals over and over again, or to act in view of getting personal success according to the 'achievement complex'.

It is worth noting that Archer makes a great deal of progress and does not confine herself, as Dépelteau (2008) holds, to providing a more refined *structure and agency co-determination* outline, but she introduces and develops the novelty of the relational character of engagement, according to what is said above. Archer's theory opens up to the idea that personal reflexivity can relationally interact with other subjects in many different ways. To her mind, reflexivity possesses an autonomous inner space (power) in the reproduction (morphostasis) or in the modification (morphogenesis) of social and cultural structures (Archer, 1995). Archer's outline is not structure → agency → structure, as held by Dépelteau, but it is structure → agency ↔ agency → structure.

Such novelties point to a relational view of engage-ment. The relational nature of engagement concerns many aspects:

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[2] As Campbell (2009) has pointed out, we have still to confront the problem with distinguishing between different properties of agency (*power of agency*) and its power of producing changes in social reality (*agentic power*).
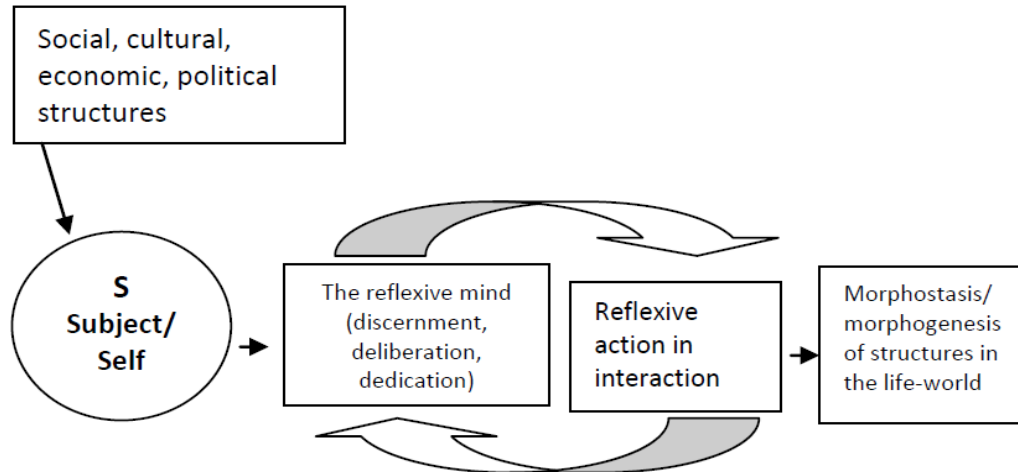
Figure 2. Engagement as a reflexive agency. N.B. The reflexive process (shaping a life) replaces Parsons' outline.

a) it concerns the relations between the self and his environment (setting),
b) it concerns the subject/self's mental activity;
c) it concerns the elements of the reflexive process and agency;
d) it concerns engagement outcomes in terms of structural elaborations (morphostasis or morphogenesis).

We can therefore refer to the relational character of engagement, but only at a first reality level regarding the self and his setting. It does not concern engagement as such (engagement *qua talis*, as the object of itself): for instance, not the engagement with specific job perfor-mances and their rewards, but engagement with an employer, clients and stakeholders (that is, with a relational setting as an objective). In the outline (Figure 2), engagement is relational since it entails a self-in-relation, but it does not concern the engagement relation as such yet. The self confronts with structures, things, other selves, not with his relations.

Archer's own outline is useful to understand that the current self who engages in the world is no longer the undersocialised one assumed by modern political economy, nor is it the oversocialised one of classical sociology in Marxian or Durkheimian terms. Quite rightly, Archer observes that the subject/self is not free to choose rationally on the basis of mere individual preferences, even if you take into account the context constraints. Equally the Self is not completely determined by an already given interest-based social structure (for instance the social class positioning) or impersonal mechanisms (for instance market laws or the iron laws of oligarchy).

Yet in Figure 2, engagement remains a question of individual reflexivity, though related to a context, both structural and interpersonal. Engagement *is yet to be seen as a commitment for/with/on the social relation in which commitment is made real*.

The problems seen are as follows.
What shall we say of those phenomena in which engagement has as its object/target a social relation as such? Think of the case where the agent/actor makes all possible efforts not so much to achieve a 'thing' (meant as an individual's or a corporate actor's situational target), but to pursue a relation; for instance how to create a friendship, to live as a couple, to create a family, organise a cooperative or a social network, to devote oneself to a caring relationship, and so on. In such cases, if the relation is handled as if it were an 'object' which matches a 'thing' or a function (a 'performance'), engagement runs the risk of being reified.

If, for instance, engagement is bringing up a child, it cannot be reduced to transferring to a child mere material things and notions, but it requires the care of a character-building relation.

The question is: in such cases, can we still use the outlines (Figures 1 and 2) analysed so far?

The question becomes ever more significant when one does not refer to specific relations (such as care for children or elderly people, friends, etc.), but concerns every kind if engagement is regarded as a social relation (for instance a job, a lifestyle, a role in public institutions, a membership in a voluntary organization, etc.).

THE END OF THE MODERN ERA AND THE EMERGENCE OF ENGAGEMENT AS A SOCIAL RELATION

Engagement according to postmodern scholars

In its progress, modernity generates a society in which the 'typically modern' understanding of engagement no longer works. The assumptions of acquisitive engage-ment fail, *both the cultural ones* (motivations and values),

and the structural ones (the related economic, normative and target structures). Collective engagement modelled upon the so called 'class agency' according to the Marxian theory also fails, just like the engagement of collective movements of an aggregative kind (such as those theorised by Smelser (1963). The reason is that the old interpretative models do not take on board the growing differentiation and individualisation processes.

Certain social groups' dynamics, such as fusional and tribal have to be discussed separately. In *fusional* phenomena (Alberoni, 1968, 1979), engagement is a commitment at the dawning stage which is essentially moved by emotional and symbolic impulses. In *tribal* phenomena (Maffesoli, 1988), engagement is a trendy or fashionable behaviour which is strongly hetero-directed[3].

Marx and Weber predicted the non-durability/non-sustainability of the typically bourgeois set-up in the long run, but then made predictions which turned out to be wrong. The defence pitched by Durkheim and Parsons of the typically modern social order as a paradigmatic order based on 'functional' and 'progressive' engagement has also been eventually defeated.

In any case, we now witness the disappearance of the typically acquisitive *homo sociologicus.* There are multiple causes, but in any case this is due to the fact that markets and the social, technical, organisational division of labour are no longer favourable to such a model figure. The classic Schumpeterian entrepreneur disappears. The economy is financialised. The social classes on which Marx had built his theory disappear. They first seem to be replaced by social movements fighting for the emancipation of oppressed minorities or for the so-called 'new rights' (feminist, gay, animal and land right movements, etc.). These movements too, after an exhilarating season (Alberoni, 1981), fall into latency. We are at the end of utopias and ideologies.

In such historical conditions, how can we configure (understand and implement) the engagement characterising the emergent society?

Here we find the theories of the so called 'reflexive modernisation' (Beck et al., 1994). Such theories define engagement, which, in their view, becomes *prevailing* in postmodern society, in various ways: as *sub-politicisation*, as *de-traditionalisation*, as *aesthetic reflexivity* (Beck et al., 1994).

All of these approaches share a configuration of engagement as a continuous problematisation of the world in which we live as well as of individuals' existence. Engagement comes to be seen as a necessary commitment to face the growing risks in conditions of uncertainty and want of firm value orientation. The self

spins around himself, and his social relations become purely communicative and transitory [4].

Is this engagement due to prevail in the society of today and of the near future?
Certainly the phenomena highlighted by the above-mentioned authors are already in progress. But they are phenomena which mark modernity's own crisis and the consequent historical phase; whereas they overshadow those forms of engagement that do not allow Modernity to define them or that seek to overcome the crisis it is going through.

It is then worth addressing those sociologies that have observed other forms of engagement and have developed a different argument.

Meta-reflexivity comes into play

We owe to Archer (2003) the merit of questioning the understanding of reflexivity in sociology and in particular of showing the shortcomings of the reflexive modernisation theories. She has proposed to reinterpret engagement as an individuals' reflexive self-socialisation process in relation to their own social contexts. In her research she has shown how different types of reflexivity are related to different types of engagement leading individuals to shape different lifestyles (*modus vivendi*) and different life paths.

Engagement, according to Archer, differs depending on whether one relates it to an autonomous or communicative reflexivity, or to a meta-reflexive one, whereas the fractured and impeded forms of reflexivity lead people to problematic and pathological forms of engagement.

Here, Archer's original arguments would not be dwelt on (Donati, 2011), but there would be an extension of Archer's theory: (i) firstly, by re-defining meta-reflexivity as a form of engagement which systematically uses detachment; (ii) and secondly, by showing that such a redefinition of meta-reflexivity leads to a view of engagement which is new because it casts a deeper light on engagement as a social relation.

The author's arguments are summed up in figure 3, which proposes the conceptual framework whereby the relational approach observes engagement as a social relation. The outline applies to all cases, but in particular it is functional to account for the most complex case, when engagement entails a meta-reflexive agency.

To understand the standpoint suggested by the author, one needs first to look at the Subject/Self (S) confronting himself ('engaging a confrontation') with the outside world. In the previous outlines (Figures 1 and 2), engagement is seen as a Subject/Self's agency towards an Objective O (ultimate concern)[5]. The act is seen as reflexive since the Subject/Self returns to himself to

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[3] In the phenomenona of a tribal kind, Maffesoli sees the predominance of 'custom' ('*La Coutume*') defined as 'l'ensemble des usages communs qui permet qu'un ensemble social se reconnaisse pour ce qu'il est' ['the set of shared habits which allows a social set to recognise itself as what it is'], i.e. 'le non dit, le résidu qui fonde l'être ensemble' ['the unsaid, the leftover which founds being together'] (Maffesoli, 1988: 6). In his view, custom is social life's key factor, in as much as it lies at the root (it is the root) of social power.

[4] I have drawn up a critique of Beck's, Giddens' and Lash's theories in Donati (2011).

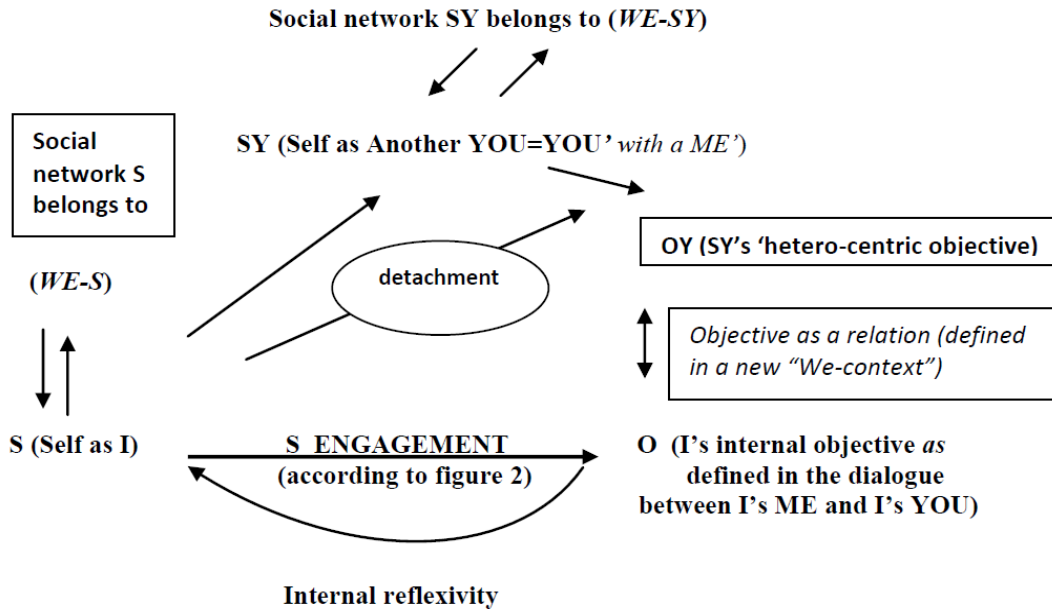[5] In psychoanalysis it is called 'objectual attitude relation'.

Figure 3. Engagement as a meta-reflexive agency according to the relational approach (Donati).

choose from the objectives and to decide on his personal devotion to the chosen objective.

If a Subject/Self always acts listening to himself alone, if he decides by himself and self-regulates himself, then reflexivity is called 'autonomous'. If the subject only acts after listening to other subjects who are significant to him/her, then reflexivity is called 'communicative' (or better called 'dependent reflexivity'). If the subject acts continuously questioning what he/she does and what he/she produces since he/she is driven by an ideal goal, which is never realized in a satisfactory way, then we refer to this as 'meta-reflexivity' (Archer, 2003).

If one remains confined within this conceptualisation, one runs the risk of becoming prisoner of the Subject's self-referentiality. It is true that reflexivity requires the Subject to take into account the social context and vice versa, but the context is considered as a structural conditioning rather than as a relational network of bonds and resources depending on the relationality of actors at play. Conditioning means above all constraints, whereas the network is also made of resources (social norms themselves are always ambivalent, being limitations and resources at the same time). In any case, thus far, engagement, even considered in the context, remains a personal project.

In Figure 3, on the other hand, the Subject/Self is reflexive since he does not confine himself to identify with its objective (*concern*), but performs a more complex operation. His problem is not to choose what engagement to take on and to pursue as the goal of his inner conversation: this is first-order reflexivity, within the subject. The subject engages in a close confrontation with the world and often has to perform a different

operation, being a second-order reflexive act.

It is in this operation that lies the difference between meta-reflexive behaviour and other types. Meta-reflexivity amounts to the fact that *the Subject/Self (S) detaches from himself* (*detachment*) and observes the Object from another point of view (SY), which is not his own Self seen as You (*Alter Ego*), but a You truly 'Other' (in German: '*Ich als Du*'), indicated as You'.

It is no longer the I/Self who judges himself objectivising in the You (I, Paul, say to myself: 'you – Paul - are tired and have to get some rest'; or: 'you – Paul – haven't got the problem'; or again: 'you – Paul – talk in a way that is incomprehensible to others'). Instead, the I takes the other's point of view (Paul says to himself: 'the doctor says you have to get some rest'; 'your colleague at work tells you that you haven't got the problem'; 'your interlocutor tells you that you talk in an incomprehensible way').

SY is a point of view critical to S, that is, it questions the Subject/Self (S) for the past (as *Me*) and/or for the future (*You*). You have to note that S does not dispose of SY, because SY is 'Other' than S, and in particular because SY judges as embedded in a different social network from that S belongs to.

Looking at the Object from SY's point of view, changes the engagement process of S. The Subject/Self *gets out of self-referentiality and his engagement becomes relational*, for the following reasons:

(i) Firstly, the context (setting) is no longer only the network S belongs to (the We to which S actually belongs, called *We-S*), but it is also SY's reference social network (called the SY's We, that is, *We-SY*).

(ii) Secondly, the Subject/Self (S) also has to observe the relationship between the *You'* (SY) and the Object (Paul has to ask himself: ' what the doctor says is it true?' 'Is it true that – as my interlocutor said - I have said something incomprehensible?').

(iii) Thirdly, SY's definite Object is not the same as the one defined by S (O), but it is different, hence called OY. The Subject/Self (S) thinks O, the Other (SY) thinks OY. S must confront both O and OY, that is, S must elaborate the Object (O) as a relation.

While O is *self-centred* (it is the Object seen by S, in his own reference system), OY is seen from another point of view, SY's own, that is, it is *hetero-centred*. This shift is crucial, because it entails the need to confront the Object (O) defined by the subject (I) with the Object (OY) defined by SY.

Take the example of Galileo who criticises his predecessors for having a 'geo-centred' view of O (the relative movement of Earth and Sun), while, by using SY's point of view understood as science and technology (physics calculation and the telescope) he's seeing O in a 'heliocentric' system. The difference (relation) between O and OY is the product of S's reflexive detachment from itself, which leads S to see the engagement process in a more analytical way (and not as a mere dissatisfaction of the Subject/Self with its kind of agency and influence on society).

Meta-reflexivity is then observed as the kind of agency that is never content with its own Object and always questions it *because the Subject detaches himself from his own Self and takes on 'another' point of view (SY), even though he remains the Subject of the engagement.*

This 'other' (SY) point of view is a 'third' viewpoint which makes the Self get out of itself. The You is really an Other than the I (not a projection or a construction thereof). But the You does not coincide with the generalised Other, because it is a personal Other defined by the relation (the Other is the physician, the colleague at work, the interlocutor). Later we shall see the example of a couple's own relationship, and other examples.

It must be noticed that by introducing the Alter's (SY) point of view it does not mean that one has to adopt the 'ethics in the third person' instead of the 'ethics in the first person', since the ethical judgment remains up to the Subject (S).

We have to make a distinction between meta-reflexivity as a mere dissatisfaction with an ideal you do not reach and meta-reflexivity as a 'method' to refine (re-distinguish and re-launch) one's own personal engagement in the relation.

If O (Object) is the same Self considered as a Me (engaged in a dialogue with its own You, that is, the You that is a projection of the Self), then reflexivity is set apart for having the following features:

(I) it is of first order, when it is an inner conversation, in which the I dialogues with the past's Self (Me) and the projected one (You) in a relationship which remains self-referential: here we locate communicative reflexivity (which remains *bound* to S's dependence on the significant subjects in the belonging context *We-S*) and the autonomous one (which does not take into account the social relations one belongs to, that is, when S is *indifferent* to *We-S*);

(II) it is of second order, when the *Me/You* defined by S (O) is confronted with the *Me'/You'* defined through SY (OY); this is the operation which sets meta-reflexivity apart from the other forms of reflexivity, because it is through it that the I can question himself and confront/compare the observation on himself from another point of view other than the merely internal one. With this, he can re-identify himself again and again *in relation to the social context* and in relation to the inner dialogue of Alter (You'), not only in relation to himself.

The fact of introducing the Self (S)'s 'detachment' from himself, having S to take on SY's point of view, makes the engagement process highly relational. And thereby it is highlighted that engagement can take on *different relational configurations* and be endowed with a *greater or lesser relationality* depending on whether it is performed in the first or second order of reflexivity.

In the second order of reflexivity, engagement turns into a social relation because the Subject/Self has redefined his own Object (engagement) turning his own involvement with the Object into a relation to an Other than himself which redefines engagement in a new 'We-context', which is neither the one S belongs to nor the one SY belongs to, but it is the good of S's goal as a relation (this is the Goal as a relation).

The SY (Other than itself) is not – necessarily – the *generalised Self* discussed by G.H. Mead, J. Habermas and many other authors. SY can be a generalised Other, but only in some specific cases. Generally, SY is the necessary reference-point of the relation (it is inbuilt in the relation, it is implied in the relation) that defines the Self/Subject's own engagement process. Instead of being an *Alter Ego* (a duplication of *Ego*), SY is *Ego* as an *Alter*.

Thus we *fill what I call 'Weber's vacuum'*, that is to say the difficulty unresolved by Weber of explaining how the individual's agency can become a social relation (inter-subjective or even impersonal) instead of simply being a choice, a property, a quality of individual selves and of their individual agency (Campbell, 2009). Max Weber typifies individual agency as having feelings (affective agency), or cultural models (traditional agency), or subjective reasons (rational agency towards value and rational-instrumental agency). For Weber, the relation is effected by the fact that the agent/actor (S) takes into account the Other's intentional sense and behaves accordingly. However, he does not define agency as directed to the relation between its own objective and the Other's. According to Weber, the social actor dialogues with the Other's mind to adjust to a mutual understanding,

but does not take into account the sequence whereby the Self redefines his own objective through the Other (that is, the sequence S → SY → OY → O).

In Figure 3, there is not only the Self which observes himself as an Other (SY, the Self observed by the I as different from the I), while he observes the object (O), and which then immediately returns to himself (according to Archer's I/Me/You outline). Weber's vacuum (I have just mentioned) is filled when the Self realises that SY observes the object O in a different way (that is observes OY) and *between O and OY there is a gap* which requires a 'relationing' operation.

For instance, Ptolemy observed the movement of the Earth vis-à-vis the Sun (the object O) from the Self's (geocentric) point of view, whereas Galileo – through telescope and mathematical calculation – observed the same movement from the point of view of the Sun (OY, heliocentric object), thereby discovering that the movement relation between the Earth and the Sun had to be reversed (because OY redefines O).

It is worth stressing that, abstractly speaking, SY can be different things. The outline in Figure 3 presents the highest possible degree of generalisation of the engagement process. SY can be the projection of the Self (S) in which case engagement's reflexivity will be autonomous. SY can be a significant Other S depends on, in which case reflexivity will be of a communicative kind. Yet SY can also be seen from the point of view of an 'Other' self, which is not the 'I' and it is not one you depend on: in that case the reflexivity process *turns* from personal to truly *social*. SY can also be an impersonal point of view, as in the case of the generalised Other [6], including the point of view of science, or of a techno-logical instrument, of culture, or of a social group, depending on how the Subject/Self (S) considers it; that is, where the Subject/Self locates himself (locates the Self as a *You'*). When the Other is an impersonal point of view, reflexivity depends on the generalised Other; which, however, is only a particular possibility (as statistically widespread as it may be). Meta-reflexivity, at any rate, does not depend on the generalised Other.
On these different choices depends the relational configuration of engagement.

Here are some examples.

First example

Let us take engagement *in the case of a couple starting*

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[6] Habermas (1992) refers to 'individualisation through socialisation' where socialisation is meant as an inner realisation of the generalised Other. In this case, engagement is configured as a lib-lab choice between constrained option. The logical model is still the functionalist one of 'modes of adaptation', exemplified by Merton's own classification of 5 'modes of (individual) adaptation' [Merton, 1968: 194, reference from R. Featherstone and M. Deflem. Anomie and Strain: Context and Consequences of Merton's Two Theories. *Sociological Inquiry*. 73(4), 2003: 471-489; 'Merton refers to the types of adjustment to anomic conditions as 'modes of individual adaptation, the differential distribution of which manifests the pressures exerted by the social structure (Merton, 1968:194)'.].

to go out. In a couple's relationship, David can always feel inadequate in the way he lives his relationship with Helen. We say that David is a meta-reflexive person, but David is not meta-reflexive only for being always dissatisfied with himself, for not managing to reach his targets and to influence his social context. Almost all individuals are dissatisfied with themselves and with their world, even though dissatisfaction differs in each individual. The dissatisfaction of an acquisitive Self using autonomous reflexivity is different from the dissatisfaction of one employing a communicatively reflexive self. The meta-reflexive self is dissatisfied because he has in mind a life ideal (in David's case: an ideal couple's life) which always lies beyond what he manages to achieve.

But if David is permanently dissatisfied, what couple relationship will ensue? If David goes on like that all his life and does not develop a *modus vivendi* which may be acceptable for him and relatively stable (that is, a satisfactory couple relationship) he will run the risk of becoming a flawed, frustrated and disoriented fellow. The couple will be shattered. There is a risk because David's own reflexivity, when he sees himself as a SY (*You'*) is led by a *Self* (S) which does not take the couple's enga-gement from an Other's (*Alter*) point of view, but observes the relation from a You which is the projection of the (often distorted) perception that his Self has of himself and of what he wishes. If he goes on like that, he will be an eternally dissatisfied person, who risks having a double personality, living in a continuous malaise, and therefore creating a couple that swings between ever uncertain options. To prevent such outcomes, he has to reach a *modus vivendi* in the couple's relationship which may qualify him as a meta-reflexive individual endowed with stability, self-control, an ability to go through experiences which fulfil at least some, if not all, his interests and aspirations in his being a couple with Helen.

To achieve a satisfactory *modus vivendi*, he has to take on SY's own point of view as an 'Other than himself', who can modify the situation granting greater experiential stability and richness to his Self (S). This Other than himself cannot be his own Self, but it is another point of view which is referred and connected to a social network different from that his Self has as a subject (S). In the case of the couple, SY (You) is Helen, who belongs to her own network. Only if David goes through S's detachment from SY a relational circuit is produced in which the couple's relationship itself appears as 'a reality other than' a mere projection of the self which reflects upon himself as an I/Me/You. This applies to David and, reciprocally, to Helen.

If SY is Helen, than David (S) has to observe the couple's relationship from Helen's point of view and this observation affects David's engagement to the couple's relationship which is David's object (as it is, reciprocally, Helen's).

Only if S's detachment from himself is used in a certain way, that is, 'objectivising' (but not reifying) the relationship with the Other (David's with Helen); and only

if the Other (Helen) does the same, there is a change in the relation sought by David as a highly desirable *modus vivendi*. Such a *modus vivendi*, then, appears as a *relational good/asset* (Donati, 2011).

The inner conversation (I/Me/You) of each partner cannot achieve a satisfactory relationship if Ego and Alter do not think of themselves as a We different from the networks they belong to. This new We (the relational Objective) emerges as a couple's relationship through the detachment from the network they belong to ratified by David and Helen, so as to build their own reference and connection network, that is, what we call 'the couple'.

Generalising, it is S's detachment from himself as an Other (SY) and the connection with the detachment ratified by the partner from his/her own network which enables one to prevent the individual from retiring into himself/herself, and then to open up to the engagement as a relation which – on certain conditions – achieves what the meta-reflexive individual pursues: in this case an ideal couple's life between David and Helen, which may be satisfactory for both. The same logic applies when the subject is a social group, as may be the case of an entire family, an orchestra, a scientific research group, a working group.

That is particularly important when we think of friendship as a primary relation which must not retire into self-containment, or when we think of the family as a social group which has to avoid 'amoral familism' In all these cases, the Objective (O) is a relation which has to be pursued in a meta-reflexive manner. This means that the Self cannot simply 'stand before himself' (Plato's *pros auton*), but must open up to the 'standing before an Other' (Aristotle's *pros eteron*), through a detachment enabling him to reach a higher and more complex integration level both with himself and with the Alter's Self, and then to let the relational good emerge. The relational good cannot be generated by the sequence by which the Subject/Self returns onto himself through the Object's definition (S → O → S), but only by the sequence by which the Subject/Self returns to himself through the Other and their definition of the Object, who redefines O as a relational objective between S and SY (S → SY → OY → O → S). In our case, the Objective is the couple's relationship between David and Helen. Only through this meta-reflexive pathway can the couple manage the risks of potential breaks, everlasting conflicts and continuous mutual misunderstandings. Individuals are geocentric, while the couple is only possible if individuals adopt the heliocentric observation. Yet David and Helen (as is the case for the Earth and the Sun) remain different subjects, who do not necessarily have the same ideas, opinion and preferences.

Second example.

Engagement at work. The underlying logic is the same as in the previous case. In this case, what has to be

generated is a business or work relationship, not the work seen as a performance or a set of functional performances. The employee takes David's place (it is the Subject/Self S) and on the other side there is the employer (SY). The relationship to build up is a peculiar reality: it is not a couple's relationship, but a business relationship.

This remark on the different nature of the relationship that represents the Self's concern, leads us to have to face a specific problem regarding the object seen in a relational sense: business and not the couple. How shall we handle the object of a reflexive engagement (when we say that the Objective, in this case work, is a relationship)? We need an analytical outline to define the Object as a relationship from a sociological point of view.

Here, it may be useful to resort to an instrument which enables us to respond to this issue: relational AGIL (Donati, 2011). The object of a reflexive engagement has to be observed as a social relation having four fundamental dimensions, that is, a situated goal, means, norms and a value commitment. It is these dimensions which, combined in various ways, define the object we are dealing with. In the case of work or business, we can for instance define the object on the basis of the following dimensions: work as a goal understood as activity/ performance (G), work as a source of income (A), work as a relationship with significant others (I), work as a value attributed to the working activity. Comparing O's AGIL with OY's AGIL makes the analysis even richer and more complex (as we shall see in section 4).

Third example

Engagement as a commitment to have children: Having children is a commitment which may be handled based on the logic already discussed above (Figure 3). In this case the relational AGIL of the Goal to have a child can be configured according to the four dimensions: as affective/sentimental goal (G), as a convenience or utility means (A), as a relational asset since children are a source of relations which enrich parents and family life (I), as an ideal value on the basis of the acceptance of a certain value system (L). At a practical level, one has to see whether the child, by matching these dimensions, is an engagement as a commodity, as an investment, as a relational asset, or as a deserved asset.

If we observe empirical behaviours, we may ask ourselves: how much reflexivity is involved and what is the kind of reflexivity in the engagement taken on by the subjects in question for these reasons, taken separately or variously combined?

Fourth example

Engagement as a commitment made within volunteering organisations: Particularly in this case, the Subject/Self's

engagement cannot be his own individual self-accomplishment, but the production of a relational good/asset as may be a voluntary service, a civic good, the social capital of a local community. Let the readers practice by themselves how the logic of Figure 3 may be applied in these cases and how to define the relational AGIL of the Goal to be pursued.

ENGAGEMENT ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY IN THE DIFFERENTIATING SOCIAL SPHERES

Relational and relationist theories

So far it is argued that engagement turns into a relational, critical and reflexive commitment in a more complex manner than in Modernity [7]. Engagement shows more than in the past its character as a social relation and, moreover, it defines its object as a social relation in so far as society becomes an unbound morphogenesis of social relations.

The question that turns out to be the crucial one is: in this context, how do we conceive (observe, implement, configure) the social relation?
A number of sociological theories attempt to answer this question. It is good to highlight their differences by making a distinction between relational and relationist theories.

A satisfactory theoretical digression should start from the classical authors that have set social relation at the heart of their analysis, starting with Karl Marx, Max Weber and Georg Simmel. In fact, it is only Simmel who begins the real relational turn in sociology with the absolutely groundbreaking notion of Wechselwirkung (effect of reciprocity).

The author's criticism of these authors is that none of them has really got 'into' the relation. Some attempts in this direction only started in the second half of the 20th century. The work of Ernst Cassirer (1953), Norbert Elias (1978, 1983), Bourdieu (1992), Bajoit (1992), Emirbayer (1997), and others are referred to.

Elias' sociology has been called 'relational', but it would be more precise to use the term 'configurational'. His background assumptions are only partially relational. Let us consider the main ones:

(a) Elias claims human beings can only be understood in their interdependences with other human beings; sociologists, thus, do not need to study individuals, but the 'relations' between individuals; in such a claim there

is some truth, for individuals exist 'in relation' to others than themselves; but you cannot get to the point of replacing individuals with relations;
(b) Elias claims that sociologists need to study processes in society — 'relations' rather than 'states'; one can agree with this claim but only provided that society' own 'states' or conditions are relational set-ups;
(c) Elias claims that human societies need to be studied in their historical context, consisting of long-term processes of development and change;
(d) Elias claims that societies are composed of individuals who engage in intentional actions, but the whole outcome of their action is often unintended; the task of sociologists is to analyze the transformation of the action from 'intentional' to 'unintended'; this claim is also acceptable, but only as a partial truth, because sociology does not only study unexpected effects;
(e) Elias claims that sociologists need to detach themselves from emotions involved in the analysis of certain sociological problems — the process Elias called the 'destruction of myths': a claim which is acceptable, but only to a certain extent, for the object of sociological analysis cannot be merely rational, lest one fall into rationalism.

There are certain aspects which form the shared basis of sociological knowledge. Just as, abstractly speaking, one can agree with Bourdieu (1992) when he claims that 'le mode de pensée relationnel est la marque distinctive de la science moderne' ['the relational way of thinking is the distinctive feature of modern science']. Provided, though, you agree on how to handle relation.
In fact, it must be pointed out that very few authors have delved into structure and properties of social relation as such. Almost all have dealt with relation as a tool to analyse the social actor's behaviour, both individual and collective (for instance social classes). Emirbayer (1997) has provided a long list of quotations thereon.

An example of instrumental use (in an epistemological sense) of relation is to be found in Norbert Elias, who has dealt with relation giving priority to the power aspect. As Emirbayer reminds us (1997), in Elias' figurational approach, 'the concept of power [is] transformed from a concept of substance into a concept of relationship. At the core of changing figurations – indeed the very hub of the figuration process – is a fluctuating, tensile equilibrium, a balance of power moving to and fro …This kind of fluctuating balance of power is a structural characteristic of the flow of every figuration…' (Elias, 1978).

Bajoit (1992) analyses social relation mainly as a connection or bond, within which he locates the relation intentional and value dimensions. That way he fails to see the relation complex articulation and does not observe it as a source of creativity (that is, he does not see is as emergent fact).

In 1997, Emirbayer launches the Manifesto for a Relational Sociology featuring an important list of the

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[7] Here we have to discard the metaphysical (Aristotelian) idea, whereby only the simple unit ('the immovable mover') is perfect, whereas, inasmuch as the being becomes more complex you enter the realm of increasing imperfection. On the contrary, as Thomas Aquinas has shown, the simple unit is actually a 'relational unit', for the minimal (simplest) entity existing in reality is not the individual, but is relation.

authors who, in his mind, have contributed to outlining a relational perspective in the social sciences.[8] He argues that the relational perspective is defined as an opposition and as an alternative to the substantialist perspective ('the choice is between substantialism and relationalism': 1997). Social relation is defined as trans-action. Relations are seen as 'transactions unfolding within social networks' (ibidem: 299; also see Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994, Emirbayer, 1996). To his mind, taking on the relational point of view means holding that 'the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) *functional roles* they play within that transaction' (ibidem: 287, my italics).

The point is, despite all these contributions, social relation remains to date 'a great unknown'. There is no sufficient room here to comment on all of these authors, but the study shall be confined to sketching the essential differences between them on the basis of the distinction between relationist and relational theories.

Relationist theories

These are the ones which deny the peculiar, ontological nature, of social relation whereas they emphasise its features of contingency, more or less absolute (that is unbound), and of processuality.

Emirbayer may be considered to be an exemplary author. His theory is based on the assumption whereby the concept of substance needs to be *replaced* by that of relation. As a consequence, hetero-reference prevails on self-reference, instead of seeing the mutual relation between them. *Autopoiesis*, [or autonomous self-making] by (social and non-social) entities is removed, in the sense that entities – being the objects of knowledge of sociology and of other sciences – are no longer seen as moved from the inside, by their own dynamism independent of the relational setting, but they depend on, and are entirely defined by the latter (the so-called 'relational setting' is discussed by Somers and Gibson, 1994). Among other consequences, the notion of human person as intentional (self-teleological) entity is dissolved. In parallel, engagement as a reflexive activity of the Self melts into air.

On the same wavelength, we find authors such as Dépelteau (2008) and Nick Crossley (2010), who share the claim according to which the social world is made up of interaction networks and relations, and that relations are lived trajectories of iterated interaction, built up through a history of interaction, but also entailing anticipation of future interaction. They hold that social networks are composed of multiple dyadic relations, which mutually transform one another through their

combination.

Such claims can in some respects be shared but the key issue remains open, that is, whether, on the one hand, social relation has its own reality order or whether, on the other, it is, as Emirbayer claims, an 'event' or a 'moment' of actions and reactions between actors.

Emirbayer quotes Goffman (1967): 'Not, then, men and their moments. Rather moments and their men' (wherein 'moment' is defined as: 'shifting entity, necessarily evanescent, created by arrivals and killed by departures'). A statement that means: engagement comes to be a pure event 'without subject', in the sense that the event defines the Self and not vice versa. Having the human person depend on the 'situational moment' is tantamount to dissolving it.

Let us take the example of an action of stealing (theft). It is true that, as an Italian saying has it, 'è l'occasione che fa l'uomo ladro' [it is the opportunity/occasion which turns one into a thief]. But not everyone, given an opportunity to steal, does. Many people do not. It depends on their reflexive conscience. The existence of this reflexive conscience is heavily diminished, if not denied, by Emirbayer and by relationists (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), whereas it cannot be discharged or denied by relational sociology.

The point is that these theories, which would rather go back to Eraclitus' pre-Socratic philosophy ('everything flows', *Panta rei*), deny the individual reality of the entities they discuss. Engagement is reduced to an event deprived of any stability and continuity over time. It is true that, in acting, each entity has to take into account the setting and relate to the other entities involved, but drawing from there the conclusion that the entities in question (such as engagement) have no substance (essence, nature) seems to be too long a shot. One ends up falling into a relativistic metaphysics and a radically constructionist epistemology. Social entities become a product of the force field they are in. Individuals turn into a mere social construct and into an expression of the field they operate in (see Bourdieu's sociological theory). By an unjustifiably forced extension, physics' field theory is imported into sociology and it is claimed that, just as the electron is an emanation of the electromagnetic field, so too the human individual is an emanation of the setting (network) in which he or she lives. This is relation*ism*. To the author, its fundamental error lies in setting substances on the same plain as relations and in replacing the former with the latter, whereas, on the other hand, we are dealing with two incomparable orders of reality. One also needs to realise that reality is made up of different 'plains' or 'layers', each endowed with its own properties and qualities, with its own powers (Archer, 2000). Figure 3 expresses this actual fact as to what regards engagement.

Relationism removes the properties and the autonomy (autopoiesis) of the various orders of reality. Instead of observing the social relation as an emergent effect in an order differing from the items it is composed of,

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[8] Emirbayer does not mention Bajoit (1992). I would not know why: either because he does not know him or because Bajoit expresses a non-relationist (non-pragmatist) point of view.

Emirbayer does away with the other orders of reality, that is the mind, the individual, rational conscience, norms, social structures, institutions, and so on, by claiming that their reality is made up of the relation between the items.

From a different perspective, partially convergent with a relationist standpoint, Luhmann (1995) says: 'there are no items without relational connections or relations without items (…) Items are items only for the system that uses them as units and they are as they are only through this system'. According to this perspective, the system replaces human agency: Luhmann declares the end of the agential dimension of engagement.

Such a perspective is applicable at all levels: macro, meso and micro. And it applies to all the human and social sciences, even to psychoanalysis, when the individual person is resolved into its relational setting (Bromberg, 2009).

Relationism can then be defined as an 'absolutisation' of relation. It makes all the engagement ethics relative, for it understands social relation as a circular transaction, a concept chasing its tail. Thereby, the reflexivity of engagement spins idly, in the sense that it is seen as a way of continuously questioning the world, the Self, his personal and social identity and outer reality. Relation turns into an *eschaton* (an ultimate goal in itself), also in the sense that it dissolves every other reality.

Relationism sees meta-reflexivity as a continuous dissatisfaction and as a permanent instability – 'total processuality' – of the situated engagement.

Relational theories

These are the theories that understand social relation as a peculiar entity, having its own existence order. Its specific and setting-based qualities and properties depend on the subjects/selves implementing it, but relation goes beyond them, because it is an emergent effect of theirs. This happens in different social spheres. Relational theory highlights that the peculiarity of social relations varies according to the setting. What results from this is a view of society as a differentiation of social spheres, where such a differentiation has a relational character both within the different spheres and between them (Donati, 2011).

What is relevant in this perspective is the fact that the social relation is seen as having a structure which has an ontological reality. From the sociological point of view, the structure of a social relation consists in being an emergent effect of the inter-action between the poles (A ← relation → B) which is a 'border' between them.

Engagement is therefore seen as a real relation, not merely contingent and circular, which arises, develops and can be successful or unsuccessful, though always within certain time constraints, in the different social spheres. The meta-reflexivity of engagement is seen as a continuous reconfiguration of the relation in which the

Self time after time fulfils some dimensions of his ultimate concerns.

In the author's theory (Figure 3), it is the Subject/Self who generates relations (which are new, different from pre-existing relations) and the new relations create a reality which in turn affects the subjects involved in the relation. All this, however, does not happen by dissolving subjects and things. Relational theory observes subjects and things in/with/through relations, which give a peculiar light and colour to actors and things, endow them with a specific contextual identity, but do not make them evanescent, because the event/moment consists of relations which have a reality of their own.

We can then sketch the analytical dimensions of engagement as a social relation (Figure 4):

(G) the finalistic dimension of engagement concerns the identification of goals/interests which are 'situated' (related to a setting); it employs autonomous reflexivity;
(A) the instrumental dimension of engagement concerns the search for the means; this is where we place instrumental reflexivity as a way of looking for the most appropriate or significant means to achieve a given goal;
(I) the normative dimension of engagement concerns the norms/rules which have to relate to the other components of the engagement: this is where we place relational reflexivity;
(L) the ethical value dimension of engagement concerns the care for relation as a value and as a value carrier; this is where we place reflexivity as the ultimate value which engagement embodies as a peculiar relation (if it is the doctor-patient relation it will be health, if it is the teacher-pupil relation it will be education, etc.).

The different engagement ethics

Parallel to the analytic dimensions of engagement, we find different engagement ethics. Relational theory identifies different engagement ethics, different possible combinations and different forms of reflexivity connected thereto (Figure 5).

We can analyse the different social spheres on the basis of their engagement ethics and of the type of reflexivity which they encourage. Ethics and reflection modes alone are not sufficient to understand social changes. A relational coordination of them is needed.

More generally, social dynamics (in culture, in the economy, in politics, in religion, etc.) depend on how one configures the three following aspects: (i) engagement ethics, (ii) type of reflexivity being facilitated, and (iii) the interpretation of the relations that connect subjects and their engagements.

For instance, when studying social and religious movements, one needs to analyse not only the symbolic system that defines their 'ethics', but also and above all what their reflexivity in engagement is, and then how the
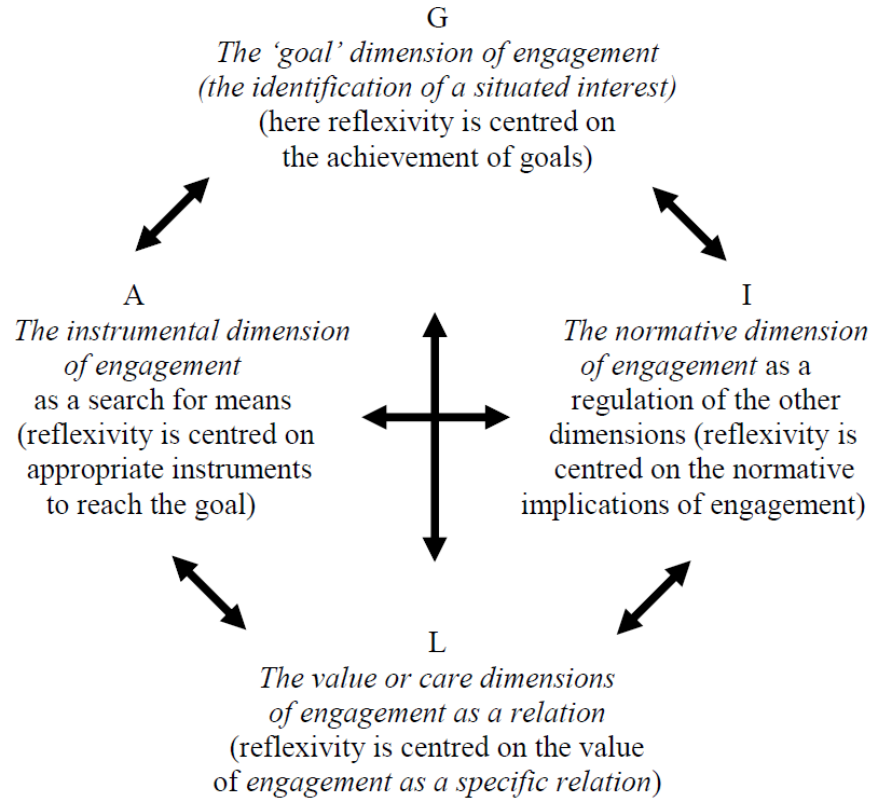
G
The 'goal' dimension of engagement
(the identification of a situated interest)
(here reflexivity is centred on
the achievement of goals)

A
The instrumental dimension
of engagement
as a search for means
(reflexivity is centred on
appropriate instruments
to reach the goal)

I
The normative dimension
of engagement as a
regulation of the other
dimensions (reflexivity is
centred on the normative
implications of engagement)

L
The value or care dimensions
of engagement as a relation
(reflexivity is centred on the value
of *engagement as a specific relation*)

Figure 4. The component of engagement understood as a social relation.

G
Engagement ethics as an
intention (intentional ethics)
(autonomous reflexivity)

A
Engagement
instrumental ethics
as means adjustment
(communicative reflexivity)

I
Engagement
normative ethics as
a relational responsibility
(relational reflexivity)

L
Engagement
value ethics
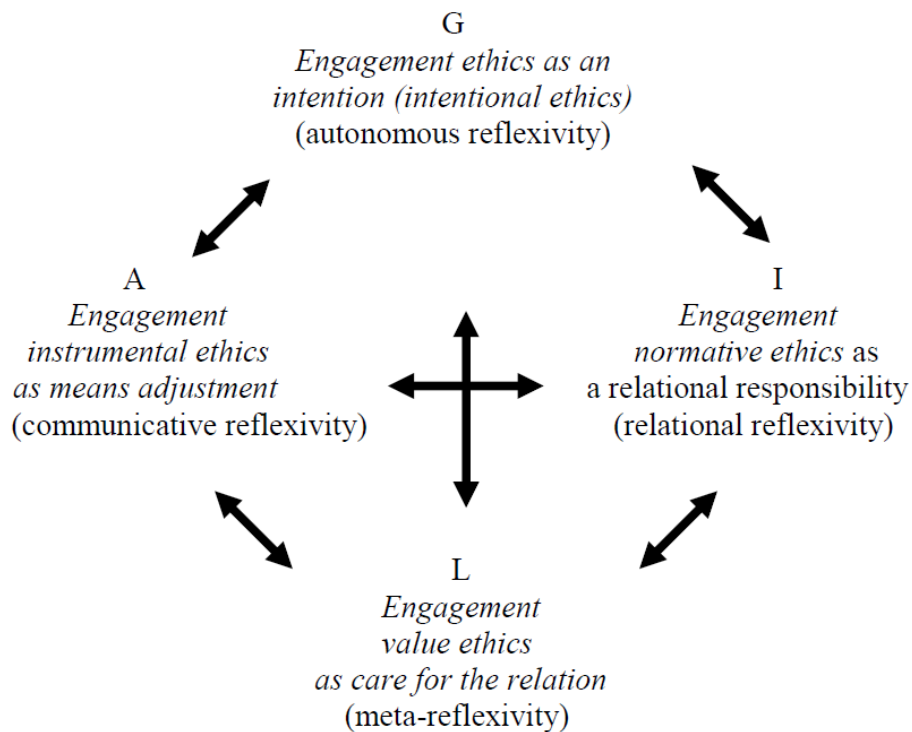*as care for the relation*
(meta-reflexivity)

Figure 5. The different ethics of engagement, their possible combinations and connections with different forms meta-reflexivity

combination of ethics and reflexivity affects the relations between the subjects**.** Social movements are very different in this respect. Their effectiveness in affecting social life depends above all on the way that, and degree to which they nurture (or else do not nurture) a relational engagement in their use of meta-reflexivity.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE ENGAGEMENT REFERENCE-OBJECT BECOMES THE CARE FOR THE SOCIAL RELATION?

How does engagement change if the ultimate concern is no longer the subject's self-accomplishment (as in Modernity), but the care for his relations, because it is in relations that lies the Self's accomplishment?

This question entails a redefinition of a century-long debate. The debate concerns the problem of whether agency, being intentional, has to pursue a precise object as its goal or should rather pursue a generic one, not pre-determined in its specific object. For instance: everybody looks for happiness, but how do we 'objectivise' happiness?

This debate, as is well-known, has been particularly lively in phenomenology and psychoanalysis (the issue of objectual attitude relation).

The point is, if the engagement object is a relation, it does not bear objectivisation as a thing does.

Let us give some examples with regard to various fields.

(A) In the 'economic' field of means.

For instance, in the choice of a job the ultimate concern does not regard the functional performance as such, but the job/work as a relation and its setting. In consumption choices, the ultimate concern is not looking for an object which is a *status symbol* (a branded product), but it is the reflexive relation with the object.

(G) In the 'political field' of situated goals.

Let us think of the person's happiness or wellbeing, as goals situated in space-time (i.e. within a given setting). The ultimate concern no longer regards happiness as the possession of a thing, or as enjoyment of a 'status', but regards happiness as a relation with significant others and with the surrounding world.

(I) In the field of social normativity.

Work, just like happiness or wellbeing, depends on the relations subjects have with the surrounding world. In this category falls the regulatory importance of social net-works, in particular civil associations, networks of civic participation, social solidarity, mutuality and co-operation (Lichterman, 2006). They have some rules based on which one belongs or does not belong in associations and networks which make up social capital, social coherence and integration (Reimer et al., 2008).

(L) In the world of personal life values.

Let us think of personal decisions such as the choice of the partner or of having children. These concerns are related to the above-mentioned ones (work, social partici-pation), but have their own specificity. And therefore they have their own specific engagement pathways.

More generally, the relational perspective contributes to shed light on the shift from an acquisitive engagement logic which dominated Modernity, interested in material objects and conditions, to an after-modern logic of the quality of life (opportunities), which is evaluated for the characteristics of the social relations it can offer.

With the shift from engagement as an individual enterprise to engagement as care for social relations, one anticipates the after-modern, or trans-modern world, in which the individual's primary need, in unbound morpho-genesis conditions, is engaging with significant relations with his own world.

Society is social relation because it is made *by* (not 'of') selves who are engaged in a reflexive manner. Pursuing a sociology of engagement means pursuing a sociology concerned with the relation between two objects which mediate the Self's return onto himself, that is to say the object O of the Self's involvement (as the Self's approach to and projection onto his concerns) and the object OY which is the expression of the self's detachment from himself (Figure 3). It is where meta-reflexivity arises as the prevailing mode of reflexivity characterising the un-bound morphogenesis which Archer talks about (2007).

That way, the two involvement and detachment acts are not the poles of an oppositional or rationalistic dialectic (as in N. Elias), but are acts which are mutually connected by a relation which has a meaning for the acting subject/self (S) (Figure 3).

This relation is necessary to get to know how people want society to be, which does not mean that society actually becomes what people wish. In fact, society often goes in another direction. In that case, not only does a new detachment arise, but also a new engagement which produces new relations.

Getting out of modernity means to introduce social relations *ex novo* into the configuration of society, whereas modernity has dissolved or distorted them, leaving the 'immunised individual' alone and replacing the human agency with a phantom system.

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