

RELATIONALISM IN SOCIOLOGY: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ELABORATIONS

UDC 316.2

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Abstract. *Relationalism, as opposed to substantialism and as a critique of the various essentialist and reificatory ways of doing science, has been always very pervasive in classical, modern and postmodern sociological thought. The principal aim of this paper is to investigate, define and demonstrate this profound pervasiveness with reference to specific influential epistemic issues and dilemmas in contemporary social/sociological theory and methodology. It thus comprehensively provides a critical overview of the relationalist mode of thinking about the crucial notions of performativity, reflexivity and the self, as well as about social network research, which is at the very heart of American sociology.*

Key words: *relational sociology, epistemology, social networks, methodology, reflexivity, performativity, social research.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Philosophically, the analytic emphasis upon the *primacy on relations* can be traced back to the ancient times (Heraclitus). To begin with, what is actually meant by the term "relationalism"?

In classical epistemology, "relationalism", or the so-called "relationalist mode of thinking", often implies that "the scientific concepts no longer appear as imitations of thing-like existences, but as symbols representing orders and functional links within reality" (Cassirer 1906/1971: 3).

In systemic epistemology, it is openly acknowledged and celebrated the very fact that we all "reflect on a world that is not made, but found, and yet it is also our structure that enables us to reflect upon this world. Thus in reflection we find ourselves in a circle: we are in a world that seems to be there before reflection begins, but that world is not separate from us" (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1991: 3).

Truth itself is rather relational; it does not signify "something absolute (this truth is *the* truth) or relative (you have your truth and I have mine). Truth [is] something lived in the moment and expressive of an individual's connection to the whole... and responding authentically to the present" (Briggs and Peat 1999: 20-21).

In modern sociology, furthermore, "relationalism" usually defines social human practices as ceaselessly re-constituted, re-shaped and re-organized by the on-going flow of the very structure of their reciprocal relations, and not merely by their respective personalities or identities (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 224-235). This subsequently resolves old theoretical dualisms and dichotomies, in so far as "the relation between the social agent and the world is not that between a subject (or a consciousness) and an object, but a relation of "ontological complicity – or mutual possession" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 20).

In relationalism, according to Stephan Fuchs, "things are what they are because of their location and movement in a network or system of forces; they do not assume a fixed and constant position in the network because of their essential properties. A network is a field of relationships between nodes that vary with their relationships. A cell becomes part of the liver, not the brain, not because its inherent nature is to become a part of the liver, but because a complex interaction between the selective activation of its DNA, and the network of other cells to which it becomes linked, makes it so" (Fuchs 2001: 16).

In the obsolete substantialist framework, social reality is preferably described as, or uncritically reduced to, a dense and seamless constellation of things (*reification*) or essences (*essentialism*), which allegedly possesses a very wide range of "intrinsic" or "natural" properties – something that perfectly corresponds to (naive) everyday experience (that is, the experience of the daily life-worlds).

On the contrary, sociological relationalism is primarily informed by the so-called "anti-categorical imperative" (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994: 1414), which actively rejects explanations of "social behavior as the result of individuals' common possession of attributes and norms rather than as the result of their involvement in structural social relations" (Wellman 1983: 165).

2. RELATIONAL THEORETICAL THEMATIZATIONS

Social reality (or social truth) is thus *both* real *and* constructed; it is an uncertain, mutable and contingent *relational effect* produced in real-time local arrangements generated in daily social activities *and* social science (see Law 2004). Actually, this turns our analytic attention into the issue of performativity. Performativity is generally defined as a useful mode of theorizing *and* practicing the multiple ways in which social reality comes into being (Tsekeris 2007).

It fundamentally lies in the widely accepted (post-structuralist) linguistic emphasis on meaning and the well-known "social constructionist" premise that acquiring knowledge (or truth) does not involve an accurate mimetic reflection (re-presentation) of the world, but is associated with a *relationally embedded human activity*, which substantially alters the contingent, fragile and interconnected "nature" of reality itself (see e.g. Gergen 1994). Knowledge is subsequently the uncertain (and unpredictable) product of the individual's relationships, in communication with others in the fluid and precariously negotiated world (Kiros 1998).

In direct contrast to the received structuralist model of communication, which sharply distinguishes between words and action, or between talking and doing/performance, any language-use, including science, can radically change the situation itself: "we as researchers construct that which we claim to 'find'" (Steier 1991: 1). As ethnomethodologists might simply put it, to describe a situation is to constitute it¹. Therefore, all social scientific statements, propositions and theories are performative, in the clear-cut sense that they have effects, they do things, and they make differences.

Accordingly, for John Law and John Urry (2004), research methods in the social sciences do not simply describe or explain the world as it is, but also contingently enact it, in a wide range of locations. They actually help to bring into being what they also discover and they co-produce the objects they are supposed to objectively analyze. That is, the making of what we know in-here goes hand in hand with the making of what there is out-there².

The idea of performative reality-making, partially inspired by Austinian speech act theory, the Thomas/Merton theorem of the self-fulfilling prophecy, dramaturgical metaphors (Goffman, Searle, Turner, Schechner, and Schieffelin) and the poststructuralist inseparability of factual and value judgments in performative speech, strongly emphasizes the communicative powers of social research and the "natural" involvement of an "audience" (e.g., peers, students, readers, a physical audience or a cyber audience).

Of course, the definitively reflexive history of performativity, as *both* an essential linguistic capacity *and* a critical (genealogical) method of revealing hidden structures of oppression, or imagining the exciting possibility of "unsuspected modes of being" (Diamond 1996) and "innovative agency" (Carlson 1996), is yet to be written (see Tsekeris 2007).

In some sense, sociological relationalism can be perceived as especially inspired and illuminated by Karl Marx's materialistic method, which conceptually grasps "relations" as the very ontology of all beings and systematically locates concrete individuals within definite material *and* social relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1987). Concepts, symbols and ideas do not therefore constitute a closed, self-contained and self-referential world; instead, they are firmly rooted in the ensemble of the material conditions of society.

Sociological relationalism further asserted itself through Saussurean linguistics and semiotic theory, Lewinian field psychology, anthropological structuralism, and Mannheim's sociology of knowledge (or social epistemology). The "systemic", "configurational", and "generative" sociological perspectives of Niklas Luhmann, Norbert Elias, and Pierre

¹ Performativity explicitly champions the early ethnomethodological *relational conception* of "constitutive" or "radical" reflexivity, originally inspired by Harold Garfinkel, which comprehensively entails "the intimate interdependence between representation and represented object... such that the sense of the former is elaborated by drawing on knowledge of the latter, and knowledge of the latter is elaborated by that which is known about the former" (Woolgar 1988: 33).

² The silent performative effectiveness of scientific or political statements derives "naturally" from the relative "capacity of spokespersons or 'authorities' to enforce collective recognition and hence to realize their representations with the aid of an accredited and therefore credible language" (Pels 2002: 77). Any scholarly description of society can eventually "produce significant changes within society once this description reaches a certain level of acceptance. To have any influence on the practical job of modifying self-descriptions, theories must be able to gain recognition and circulation outside narrow intellectual circles. Then it becomes a description of society within society, and thereby changes society (the names of Marx, Kant and Freud may suffice to prove this point)" (Laermans and Verschraegen 1998: 128). This ultimately calls for the explicit celebration of the so-called "*theory effect*" of the sociological discursive construction of reality (Bourdieu 1991), which is often underestimated and erased (or just *methodologically neutralized*).

Bourdieu (or Roy Bhaskar), accordingly, represent a major European contribution to relationalist theoretical thought, which emphatically stresses the *mutual constitution of (externally determined and internally motivated) social actors and emergent structures* (see e.g. Bourdieu 1984, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

But sociological relationalism is also depicted and cultivated in the long debates on reflexivity (or self-reflexivity). Reflexivity profoundly involves the inspiring relational conception of "internal conversation" (Archer 2003) that theoretically describes the continuous self-confrontation of the individual (that is, *the self-self relationship*), as well as its complex "dialogical" interaction with the (ever changing) social environment.

It is hence "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa" (Archer 2007: 4). This inherent relational "mental ability" is nevertheless being seriously neglected within the flux of routine or habitual daily action. In response to such an unwarranted neglect, Gerald Myers (1986: 206) reflexively observes that the crucial importance of:

"self-dialogue and its role in the acquisition of self-knowledge, I believe, can hardly be exaggerated. That it plays such a role is a consequence of a human characteristic that deserves to be judged remarkable. This is the susceptibility of our mind/body complexes to respond to the questions that we put to ourselves, to create special states of consciousness through merely raising a question. It is only slightly less remarkable that these states provoked into existence by our questions about ourselves quite often supply the materials for accurate answers to those same questions."

Arguably, the relational sociological theorization of reflexivity as a "complex dialogical interaction" heavily draws from the famous school of American Pragmatism (mainly grounded on the original stimulating insights of John Dewey, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and George Hebert Mead)³.

From a *relational social epistemological* analytic standpoint, the self (including the epistemological/philosophical or sociological self) is rather reflexively re-created; it is necessarily intertwined with the "real world" and dialectically re-constituted by the ongoing, mutual, synergetic and (chaotic) self-organizing interaction of the ego (1) with the emergent social structures and (2) with the significant others (actual, imagined, or implied)⁴. The very existence (or appearance) of these "significant others" is completely integral to the evolutionary reflexive emergence of selfhood. Yet, in the original social interpretivist sense of George Herbert Mead, the "other" is not only the other (significant) person, "but another *perspective*: another way in which the world is judged or appreciated" (Natanson 1956: 64).

³ According to Margaret Archer, "only if the 'internal conversation' can be upheld as an irreducible personal property, which is real and causally influential, can the exercise of its powers be considered as the missing mediatory mechanism that is needed to complete an adequate account of social conditioning" (Archer 2003: 16).

⁴ In parallel, what should also be reflexively recognized is the particular importance of the "I-thou" relationship (Buber 1970), which was the very essence of the great Socratic dialogues. This complex relationship has been involved with the original introduction of second-person inter-subjective methodologies, such as Bohmian dialogue, leading to innovative forms of "*dialogic consciousness*" (Bohm 1985).

The self thus appears *neither* as a mere "object" of knowledge, *nor* as an empirical ego, which somehow lacks autonomy, agency, imagination, choice, creativity, improvisation and spontaneity. In other words, the human subject is not passive, self-assured, atomistic, and narcissistically private any more (see e.g. Tsivacou 2005, Cilliers and De Villiers 2000, Briggs and Peat 1999)⁵. The *self-in-relation-with-others* (methodological relationalism) is now clearly prevailing upon the old *self-in-social-vacuum* (methodological individualism⁶) (Ho et al. 2001).

Instead of naively seeing subjectivity as an isolated, independent, self-contained and self-referred locus of individual experience (according to the classical Cartesian ego), the synthetic reflexive-relational logic, in the open spirit of Ludwig Binswanger (1963), fruitfully links it with objectivity and inter-subjectivity, through an (endless) *uncertain circular-dialectical (relational) process*, without however reducing ontological questions to epistemological ones (just as Kant did), or "facts" to performative descriptions and interpretations, symbolic categories and conceptual frameworks.

Within a relational-realist or reflexive-realist⁷ analytic framework, knowledge cannot and should not be erroneously confounded with the "recording and analysis of the 'pre-notions' (in Emile Durkheim's sense) that social agents engage in the construction of social reality; it must also encompass the social conditions of the production of these pre-constructions and of the social agents who produce them" (Bourdieu 2003: 282)⁸.

This is of course in line with Roy Bhaskar's or Pierre Bourdieu's stance of critical/relational realism, but not with Anthony Giddens's ultra-activistic structuration theory, or with Berger/Luckmann's subjectivistic accounts of social constructivism, which implicitly reproduce and naively celebrate the old tradition of phenomenological individualism.

3. RELATIONAL METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

For almost 20 years now, the relationalist *methodological* approach to social phenomena is increasingly at the very heart of American sociology (and rarely applied in European sociology). In methodological terms, relationalism mainly aims at *both* the theoretic-

⁵ Of course, it is almost a commonplace nowadays that the self is relational. In addition, it is almost a truism that knowledge cannot be analytically distinguished from its multiple complex cognitive-political practices, as well as from the multiple complex social relations that make it generally acceptable and legitimate. However, many of the so-called "situated" or "contextual" perspectives "still treat the environment as supplemental to the individual consciousness" and the "concept of autonomous individual mind – *learning to participate* – remains privileged and fundamentally unchallenged" (Fenwick 2001: 247). This implicitly reflects the continuing determination of social/sociological theory to be *strong*, on the varied basis of final analytic judgments, robust results, compelling arguments and inescapably powerful conclusions (Pels 2003). It is remarkable that hardly anyone in everyday performative practice actually sees knowledge as inherently circular! See e.g. Pels 2002 and Woolgar 1988.

⁶ Methodological individualism is fundamentally ill-equipped to recognize the individual's embeddedness in the social network and adequately reflect the complexities involved (see Cheng and Sculli 2001).

⁷ For the notion of relational or reflexive or circular realism, see Pels 2000.

⁸ Of course, this should carefully refrain from any sort of "last-instance" objectivism and decisively move towards a rather *never-ending reflexive dialectic* between micro and macro, action and structure, transformation and reproduction, individuality and sociality (or individual and collective action), randomness and simplicity, contingency and directionality, emergence and social causation (Sawyer 2007), as well as towards a generalized critique of naive/uncritical/unreflexive realism, reification and essentialism, at the level of *both* everyday world-making *and* professional scientific (sociological/organizational) analysis.

cal modeling *and* the empirical analysis of social networks as *complex socio-cultural formations*. This systematic combination between emerging cultural patterns and network structure eventually succeeded to fruitfully transcend the spectre of pure structuralism that persistently hunted most network research.

Coming from the allegedly obsolete structuralism of network analysis, the main proponents of relational sociology (Harrison White, Mark Granovetter, Peter Bearman, Paul DiMaggio, Charles Tilly, Roger Gould, and Ann Mische) proceeded to variously model social structures *neither* as patterns between individuals (in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown and Nagel) *nor* as meaningless entities, but as *meaningful dynamic networks*. In specific, Harrison White's *Identity and Control* (1992) triggered a long chain of seminal empirical studies on the central theoretical and methodological assumption that "a social network is a network of meanings" (White 1992: 67).

This central assumption also implies that the (reciprocating) identities of social actors, individual or corporate, gradually emerge from the multiple roles these actors actively perform in their particular networks (which inherently contain social dynamics and are the essential sites of co-evolutionary meaning-formation). That is why the social researcher's analytic framework must now strategically move from the traditional atomistic "focus on the individual to a relational analysis" (Morris 2004: 2). The person then ceases to be the fundamental, unquestioned and unproblematized elementary building block of social analysis (White 1992: 197)⁹.

In the same line with Harrison White's (1992) original notion of the fluid relational spaces of publics, actor-network theory (ANT) sees topology as concurrently interweaving time and space with *heterogeneous and hybrid networks of actants* (humans and non-humans), which are functionally differentiated into regions, networks and fluid spaces (see e.g. Mol and Law 1994). In general, actor-network theory, as enthusiastically developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich, John Law and others, has exhibited a deep creative focus on complex relations *as productive of action*, including technological (or "socio-technical") objects and sites in its imaginative, adaptable, mobile and multiple "networked" universes (or *hybrids*)¹⁰.

In a similar vein, Mustafa Emirbayer's (1997) famous "manifesto for a relational sociology", heavily drawing upon pragmatist, linguistic and interactionist philosophies, as well as upon historical and network analysis, arguably promotes a *non-substantive* ontological conceptualization of our social world, where human relations tend to dynamically shift and change. From this analytic viewpoint, social actors do not have fixed attributes although collective (structured) configurations can potentially achieve conditions of stability.

In his overwhelmingly influential manifesto, Emirbayer analytically co-relates the theoretical relationalist vision to specific programs of empirical research (at the levels of

⁹ However, instead of a strategic analytic understanding of networks as basic units of modern societies (Castells 2004), other scholars primarily look at them as a distinguished form of sociability (see e.g. Holton 2005).

¹⁰ Reality is extracted, in Bruno Latour's terms, "not from a one-to-one correspondence between an isolated statement and a state of affairs, but from the unique signature drawn by associations and substitutions through the conceptual space" (Latour 1999: 161-162). This directly refers to the so-called "mobility turn" in the contemporary social sciences: "The new mobility paradigm argues against this ontology of distinct 'places' and 'people'. Rather, there is a complex relationality of places and persons connected through performances" (Sheller and Urry 2006: 214).

social structure, culture, individual psychology and social psychology). The systematic study of culture, for instance, does not involve a myopic focus on individual attitudes or values, but an advanced analysis of complex figurations of patterned relationships, networked communications, or transactions.

In turn, the relational logic further promotes and renews the particular sociological and interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary¹¹ methodology (rather than technique) of *social network analysis*, which has significantly blossomed in recent years. The strategic focus is now increasingly placed on the *density and reach* of network relations (*rather than on the strength of ties*), as the current analytic interest in "small worlds" (see Barabási 2002) clearly indicates, as well as on the innovative study of *egocentric* (or personal) networks, particularly defined from the standpoints of egos (or *focal individuals*).

Analysts here typically "use survey research to gather information about the networks' *composition* (e.g., percent gender), *structure* (e.g., the density of interconnection among members), and *contents* (e.g., the amount of support provided to egos). This is useful for studying far-flung communities, the provision of social support, and the mobilization of social capital" (Wellman 2007).

Moreover, the rising analytic interest in the relationalist mode of thinking seems to be very relevant with the advent and pervasive introduction in the 1990s of the Internet, or the World Wide Web, which is supported by fluid interconnected networks of users, computers and computer grids¹².

In particular, the Internet potentially offers a huge capacity for looking at and modeling (in a *both flexible and accurate* way) surprising combinations of strong ties, weak ties, and structural holes that decisively transcend the well-defined modern order (once figured out by formal functional analysis). It also offers an ever increasing *interconnectedness* of system components through software, cybernetic architecture and the general "networked" character of life¹³. This in turn produces increased, far-from-equilibrium and highly unpredictable "system" effects (Barabási 2002). Relationalism's fruitful and versatile

¹¹ In addition to sociology, as Barry Wellman sums up, "network analyses are often found in management studies (mergers; organizational behavior); anthropology (kinship, urban relocation); geography (dispersion of network members); communication science (virtual community on the Internet); information science (information flows); political science (political mobilization); psychology (small groups; social support); social history (social movements); statistics (multilevel analysis); and mathematics (graph theory)" (Wellman 1997). Since the mid 1990s, in particular, social network analysis has been rapidly maturing as an interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary (or even non-disciplinary) scientific research field, with the publication of many handbooks and edited volumes, and the development of new advanced software packages. However, it is often still accused of seriously lacking specific analytic attention to complex intersubjective processes of symbolic interpretation and meaning-construction. For instance, A. Stinchcombe strongly criticizes social network analysis as follows: "One has to build a dynamic and causal theory of a structure into the analysis of links ... We need to know what flows across the links, who decides on those flows in the light of what interests, and what collective or corporate action flows from the organization of links, in order to make sense of intercorporate relations" (Stinchcombe 1990: 381).

¹² Web 2.0 (also known as the social Web, read/write Web, or wisdom Web), the latest phase in the rapid Web's evolution, as perceptively anticipated by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, is right at the very forefront of real/virtual political life, international relations, governmental projects, decision-making processes, and public debate. It is perhaps the most people-centric, interactive and creatively participative technological enterprise in human history, giving substantial relational impetus to emerging socio-political movements. For the first time, humanity is spontaneously moving so fast towards the non-linear self-organizing model of democratic governance.

¹³ As Barry Wellman concisely concludes, "Network rudimentary Internet software has proliferated, attempting to connect people who know each other directly and indirectly" (Wellman 2007).

character still promises new and exciting intellectual developments within the wider diverse fields of sociological theory and methodology.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In our contemporary "speedy", "risky" and "globalized" social world, *everything is inter-related to everything else*, in one way or another (on a *both* vertical *and* horizontal level). We should thus permanently suspend the "old", "traditional" or "received" (substantialist) notion that anything can be merely understood and explained in isolation from anything else.

All life is truly, irrevocably and unpredictably interconnected. From this analytic viewpoint, we can clearly see that "particular tensions and dislocations always unfold from the entire system rather than from some defective 'part'. Envisioning an issue as a purely mechanical problem to be solved may bring temporary relief of symptoms, but chaos suggests that in the long run it could be more effective to look at the overall context in which a particular problem manifests itself" (Briggs and Peat 1999: 160-161)¹⁴.

The on-going playful interdependency of all being surprisingly gives us enormous hope that there is indeed something beyond the myopic (short-sighted), fragmented, reductionistic and exploitative view of human nature¹⁵. It is exactly this "on-going playful interdependency" that profoundly guarantees us the very possibility of human cooperation, synergy, synthesis, critical reflexivity, creativity, spirituality, free will and choice. Let's openly recognize, acknowledge and celebrate *interconnectivity, emergence and change*, so that we can become active co-participants rather than arrogant masters of our world.

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¹⁴ In some sense, "we are always a part of the problem" (Briggs and Peat 1999: 160).

¹⁵ See Sandra L. Bloom's (2000) innovative thoughts on chaos, complexity, social self-organization and human life. The chaos/complexity innovative analytic framework might possibly help us to further understand and explain (in a non-reductionistic way) the overwhelming, speedy, interdependent/interconnected and "relational" phenomena that increasingly surround us, such as globalization, cultural diversity (multiculturalism), religious or national fundamentalism, ethnic conflicts, technoscientific change, etc.

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RELACIONIZAM U SOCIOLOGIJI: TEORETSKA I METODOLOŠKA DOSTIGNUĆA

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Relacionizam, kao suprotnost supstancijalizmu i kao jedinstvena kritika esencijalizma u nauci, oduvek je bio složena pojava u klasičnoj, modernoj i postmodernoj sociološkoj misli. Osnovni cilj ovog rada je da istražuje, definiše i odredi složenost s osvrtom na određene uticaje i dileme u savremenoj društvenoj/sociološkoj teoriji i metodologiji. Rad tako predstavlja kritički pregled načina razmišljanja o relacionizmu i važnih pojmova izvršnosti, refleksivnosti i bića kao društvene mreže istraživanja, što je u suštini američke sociologije.

Ključne reči: *sociologija relacionalizma, epistemologija, društvena mreža, metodologija, refleksivnost, izvršnost, društveno istraživanje.*