The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology

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In spite of their remarkable differences, we can argue that Marxism, Durkheimian sociology and Structural-functionalism have seen the individual/society polarity as the axis of the categorical framework by which social phenomena should be grasped. This framework is based on asymmetric polarity since it reduces the first term to a passive position in anything that could be sociologically relevant. At the meta-theoretical level, this entails reductive work which understands all individual action, every historical event and all social heterogeneity as irrelevant by themselves. In this logic, social phenomena had to be brought back to some (macro) deep structure to acquire significance, since the real (and only) social reality is alleged be at that level and scale. At the epistemological level, those phenomena are explained by independent causes or factors which are, in some way, external to them. Consequently and above all, sociological analysis must be oriented towards macro-objects such as social representations, classes and States. The designated enemy of this holism is an atomism according to which there would be nothing in the social world that could not be reduced to the calculated actions of independent and indivisible individuals.

In face of this option, which is still used today, Tarde’s call finds its place and its force. It consists in trying to carry out in the field of sociology the revolution that infinitesimal calculus brought to mathematics. In the first place, it means multiplying the agents of the social world, and accepting its irreducible differences as well as its relational constitution. It also means that the micro-level of the social processes has both ontological and epistemological prevalence over its results (the macro-social regularities). Therefore, society should now be understood not as a functional whole (mechanical, organic or dialectical), but as an open ensemble of associated elements; elements which are also open associations (small worlds, bearers of innumerable current relations and of an even greater number of virtual ones). This applies to international societies, nations, regions, cities and towns, but also to groups, families, couples and individuals. The genesis, form, stability and duration of any of these open systems refer to the “action at a distance” that mimetically relates the heterogeneous elements which compose them. By doing so, this action makes them function together in some way and at some level, producing them as specific organizations.

That is why it is necessary to consider Tarde’s sociology as different from both the holism and the atomism of his time (and ours). Its starting point is the variety and variation of impersonal micro-relations which produce social fields in their openness and infinity; micro-physical fields in which individuals, groups and social systems are generated, reproduced, transformed, and eventually, diluted. This is why it is possible to see Deleuze and Foucault as the best heirs of this micro-sociology.

The objective of the present paper is to critically reconstruct the fundamental syntax of Tarde’s social theory to show the possibilities it imply for a new basic description of the social world and its processes. To do so, it will be necessary to articulate the following conceptual series: multiplicity-invention-propagation-system. This articulation will also allow us to indicate to what extent Deleuze and Foucault share and develop this mode of understanding founded on the (poly)genesis, organization and transformation of the social ensembles and its subjects.

Chapter 7: Pluralism and Relationalism in Social Theory: Lessons from the Tarde/Durkheim Debate (D. Toews, University of Toronto)

Relationalist thinkers, I argue in this Chapter, ought to push further than merely asserting the primacy of relationality in social affairs, towards a franker acknowledgement of theoretical and methodological plurality, based on differences in perceptions and problems of care. The latter I trace in a certain loosening of the notion of ‘emergence’in contemporary social theory the significance for the category of relational sociology I attempt to discern. Critical realism replaced a dogmatic adherence to positivist tenets with an image of human beings as scientific observers, discovers, and classifiers of ‘emergent’ realities. More recently, Caille’
and Vandenberghe have argued for a revitalization of social theory around the problematic of care, articulated in terms of the purportedly socially unifying theme of the gift, claiming the latter can provide a compass for the “formulation of a historical grand narrative about the emergence, development and global diffusion of modernity”. Emergence seems to involve a knot of issues surrounding the normative, epistemological, and ontological dimensions of social theory. After examining some key contemporary uses of the term, I trace this knot of issues to the debate over the status of the social and the role of science in thematizing the social that took place between Emile Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde. From this debate I identify an opening in which it is possible to propose turning the theme of care away from reductionism into ‘sociality’ and toward a set of problematizations and questions about the exclusion of various aspects of care and sociality by the theme of scientific modern sociality. These problematizations and questions surrounding care, I suggest, can be seen as a basis for understanding the pluralism of theoretical and methodological perspectives in social theory.

- Chapter 9: Bruno Latour’s Relational Associology (C. Papilloud, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)

The relational scheme of Bruno Latour’s associology – as he calls the kind of sociology which he wants to promote – roots in his concept of association. With this concept, Latour wants to deliver a new theoretical perspective in sociology. In his theoretical works from 1986 until 1990, he gives to the concept of association a general meaning as how the social – for Latour, the residual metaphysical concept at the origin of sociologists’ views on society – should be understood. This general meaning of “association” has been progressively given some precisions in the flow of Latours’ work. He distinguishes three main features of associations. First, associations break the borders between traditional sociological categories, Latour saying that associations enable a symmetrical perspective on society. Second, associations means that networked social relations are relations of power. Third, associations supports the expression of the different forms of social life, i.e. of networks of actors which are constantly changing over time and space. In our contribution, we focus on the following question: How are these three features of associations interconnected within the concept of association? Or in other words: how does the relational scheme of Latour’s associology look like? Two further concepts of Latour should be considered in this regard: alliance and connectivity. Associations live from the interaction between these two concepts, which has two consequences for the relational associology which Latour promotes. On the one hand, Latour gets with his concept of association a relational structure enabling to consider society as made of several forms of social life along the networking operations of actors and their evolution in time and space. But on the other hand, everything becomes an association, which seems to blur the boundaries between different kinds of associations, and let unanswered the question of their corresponding weight in the development of social life. This observation leads to a critical discussion of Latour’s pluralistic view on society, and of its affinity with the psycho-sociological conception of society which Latour takes over from Gabriel Tarde.

Keywords: association, network, actor, alliance, connectivity, pluralism, Tarde.

- Chapter 10: Pragmatist Methodological Relationalism in Sociological Understanding of Evolving Human Culture (Kivinen, O., University of Turku, Finland and Piironen, T., University of Turku, Finland)

Among the significant intellectual contributions to a vast array of human pursuits made by the classic of pragmatism John Dewey (1859–1952), are for instance the conception of human culture as evolving organism–environment transactions and the related philosophies of community and education. Dewey's philosophy and methodology are relational all the way down, and without a doubt he can be seen as an eminent pioneer of relational social science. However, although relationalist social theorists today are to some extent drawing on Dewey's ideas, all too few contemporary social scientists seem to be aware of Dewey's role in paving way for the Darwinian theory of evolution in social sciences. This may partly be explained by the longstanding mistrust of evolutionary theory among social scientists – due to the notoriety of "Social Darwinism," overstatements of "sociobiology," and simplified versions of "evolutionary psychology." But unlike crude applications of evolutionary theory, Dewey's anti-nativist, anti-individualist naturalism of a Darwinian origin opens up interesting viewpoints on social life, especially on cultural learning as a cornerstone of modern humanity. In this article, methodological relationalism – opposed to ontological
relationalism – brings forth evolution-historically enlightened conceptual tools for social scientific work. The proposed solution revolves around the evolution theoretically topical notion of "niche construction" in particular, a notion which Dewey's thinking already anticipated.

- **Chapter 14: Georg Simmel: Relation as First Sociological A Priori (C. Papilloud, Martin-Luther-Universitat Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)**

Georg Simmel is undoubtedly the first classical sociologist who establishes a relational sociology which, on the one hand, takes place outside of organicism – the dominating paradigm in the 19. century sociology –, and which, on the other hand, leads to a significant theoretical development. Simmel is the first author to consider that relation is the most important a priori of sociological discourses, the second one being the uniqueness of the place which each individual takes in social life, and the third one being the possibility for each individual to develop a social personality, which later sociologists often translate into the social role undertaken by the individuals in society. Simmel has not a general conception of relation as something equivalent to the social, or to society. A relation depends on three concepts in order to enable social life. In our contribution, we first describe each of these concepts – the "Wechselwirkung", meaning the contacts with our environment, the "Vergesellschaftung" or the socialisation, and the "Tausch" or exchange. Each concept are relatively bound to the other, so that there is no strong relationships between them, but rather a convergence describing a process going from the Wechselwirkung to the socialisation, and to the exchange, before going back to the Wechselwirkung. Simmel sees in this process a general movement in social life between the forms which social life takes, and the contents built from social actors in order to give to these forms a meaning. In his more philosophical works, Simmel describe this process as the "Tragedy of culture", which is as the same time the formula of is sociological relativism, and of his pluralistic view on social life. Our contribution will discuss this dynamical view of relation at the heart of which an original conception of reciprocity takes place as a process emerging out of the interactions between fidelity and acknowledgement.

*Keywords*: Wechselwirkung, socialisation, exchange, culture, reciprocity, fidelity, recognition.

- **Chapter 17: Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist? (J.-S. Guy, Dalhousie University, Canada)**

Niklas Luhmann never called himself a relational sociologist. Throughout his career, he consistently worked on elaborating a theory of social systems understood not in terms of relations (between parts), but in terms of differences (starting with the difference system/environment). Therefore the association between Luhmann and relational sociology is not the results of Luhmann’s own efforts. Jan A. Fuhse ascertains such a connection by using Luhmann’s concept of communication to study relations. Much less explicitly, Harrison C. White assesses Luhmann’s ideas positively in the second edition of *Identity and Control* (2008), leading his reader to assume that Luhmann’s systems theory is compatible with the project of relational sociology. At that time, Stephan Fuchs and Dirk Baecker had already explored the connection between Luhmann and White himself, but without referring to relational sociology. Since relational sociology covers a variety of positions, it is useful to ask which sort of relational sociology would prove to be most compatible with Luhmann’s systems theory. It would have to be a relational sociology that emphasizes both order and disorder simultaneously, that is, a relation sociology for which social relations are never ready-made or ready-to-use, but must be forged and sustained in real time under conditions of instability, uncertainty and unpredictability.

- **Chapter 21: Bourdieu: The Reality is Relational (C. Papilloud, Martin-Luther-Universitat Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)**

Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological works is probably the best example of a current relational sociology. Bourdieu considers that the reality is a relational one, meaning that every characteristics of social life are bound together, and lead to the description of social positions in the structure of society. These bounds are relationships of power, and Bourdieu gives in his major work *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* their general formula: \((HxC) + F = P\), which means that the force of the Habitus – of dispositions which actors inherit and shape during their socialisation – multiplied by economic, cultural, social and symbolic Capitals (or resources) in a Field of society condition the practice.
of actors in this society. In our contribution, we particularly take into account the first inquiries of Pierre Bourdieu in Kabylia, as well as his theoretical considerations in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in order to deepen the meaning of his relational sociology. This leads us to consider the double dialectical relationships which Boudieu uses in his work – the dialectic of distinction/pretension – or the question of the social position of actors within the social structure of society –, and his linkage to the dialectic of acknowledgment/misjudgment – or the question of the social legitimacy bound to the position of these actors. The consideration of his Kabylian studies and of his theoretical purpose in his *Outline* enables to point out the monopolistic mechanism at the articulation of these two dialectics, which we show the extend to his concepts of habitus, capitals and fields. We come to the conclusion that the meaning of Bourdieu’s sentence “The reality is relational” supposes that individual as well as collective actors develop a practice leading to the formation of monopoles within society, as well as corresponding oligopolies within the fields of society. We illustrate our contribution with examples of Bourdieu’s inquiries in the fields of culture and of economics, both of these fields reflecting the two most important dimensions which give to Bourdieu’s relational sociology its shape.

*Keywords*: dialectic, distinction, pretention, acknowledgment, economics, culture, practice.

- **Chapter 26: British Critical Realism and Relational Sociology (D. Porpora, Drexel University)**

  Although British Critical Realism (CR) has been opposed to some versions of relational sociology, it is closely aligned with others. Actually, critical realists differ even among themselves in their understandings of social relations. All in all, it is very appropriate to consider CR as a form of relational sociology. This chapter will encapsulate the main positions of British CR; review its origin and spread; delineate its internal differences concerning relationality and social structure; and in those terms situate CR vis-a-vis other versions of relational sociology.

- **Chapter 27: An Original Relational Sociology Grounded on Critical Realism (P. Donati, University of Bologna)**

  This chapter presents an original version of relational sociology grounded on critical realism (CRRS), developed since 1983, which is also called ‘relational theory of society’. It shares with the other relational sociologies the idea of avoiding both methodological individualism and holism. The main differences lie in the way social relations are defined, the kind of reality that is attributed to them, how they configure social formations, and the way in which their changes are conceived (morphogenesis and emergence). In particular, this approach is suitable to understand how the morphogenesis of society comes about through social relations, which are the connectors that mediate between agency and social structure. The generative mechanisms that feed social change reside in the dynamics of the social relations networks that alter the social molecule constituting structures already in place. Empirical evidences of this paradigm will be given with reference to field researches that have shown how new social formations are created, changed, or destroyed depending on different processes of valorization or devalorization of social relations.

- **Chapter 34: Self, Identities and Relational Sociology (C. Tsekeris, Panteion University, Greece and L. Stylianoudi, Academy of Athens, Greece)**

  Our chapter will pertain to the relational co-construction and reciprocal disintegration between selves and local community networks, drawing from empirical material on the Greek crisis (and elsewhere).

- **Chapter 35: Marcel Mauss, the gift and the current alternative conceptions of relational sociology (C. Papilloud, Martin-Luther-Universitat Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)**

  In his essay *The Gift* (1924), Marcel Mauss, the nephew of the father of the French academic sociology Emile Durkheim, introduces a relational conception of social life based on his work in the field of the sociology of religion. Social life and society can be seen as large circulations of gifts of variable forms, bringing together social groups as well as entire societies in exchanges expanding in time and space. Mauss sees gifts as a process of giving, getting, and
returning presents at variable times between actors. This process involves the obligation to give, to get, and to return present, and when these obligations have not been respected, sanctions may be applied. Therefore, gifts involve sacrifices and debts which warrant the homeostasis of social groups and societies. In current French sociology, there have been numerous debates about the gift, asking for instance if the gift can be seen as the founding relational phenomena of societies and cultures – following Mauss’ consideration that gifts are “total social facts” –, or if it is a kind of rationalization of past social relationships. Particularly sociologists gravitating around the Anti-Utilitarian Movement in Social Sciences (in French M.A.U.S.S) discuss in this regard the possibility to open a “third way” in sociology, beyond holistic and individualistic views on society. In our contribution, we describe Mauss’ conception of the gift, and how it has been undertaken in these debates. We particularly focus on the contributions of Alain Caillé, the founder of the M.A.U.S.S, as well as the maybe less known – at least at an international level – contributions of Michel Freitag and Aldo Haesler to the M.A.U.S.S. If the gift and the debates it has generated in contemporary sociology is probably one of the most original contribution to a current – and critical – relational sociology, we underline the difficulties it faces when it comes to extend it at the level of a theoretical frame able to solve classical sociological issues. In order to try to overcome them, we suggest that a deeper look at the meaning of reciprocity is needed.

**Keywords:** Mauss, gift, present, reciprocity, exchange, obligation, circulation.

- **Chapter 36: The Medical Field and Relational Sociology (Øye, Christine, UC Bergen, Norway, Sørensen, Nelli Øvre, UC Sealand, Denmark, and Glasdam, Stinne, Lund University, Sweden)**

In this chapter we will highlight the relevance of relational sociology in the medical field by illuminating how human beings are constituted by and constitute themselves and others by engaging in healthcare discourses, institutions and services. That is, how human beings are constituted by and constitute themselves by engaging in healthcare contexts and circles of different kinds and settings (e.g. in family relations, network relations, associations, institutions etc.) (Donati). In the first part of the chapter we will give an outline of how relational sociology has contributed in analyzing healthcare issues (the state of the art). In that regard we will use examples from different healthcare research fields carried out in different parts of the healthcare sector, for instance psychiatry, elderly dementia care, oncology. The application and relevance for using a relational sociology framework studying health issues, will be done by drawing on a wide range of theories to illuminate how relations in healthcare contexts and circles are constituted. Firstly, we will shortly outline Foucault’s concept of power relations, with examples from his healthcare institutional work and his thoughts on bio-politics, in order to show the historical rise of subjectivities in the field of health. Secondly, we will draw on Bourdieu’s concept of relational praxeology and show how fields, relations, positions and habitus are significant in order to understand the medical field and the different practices in this field. Thirdly, we will shortly give an outline on how symbolic interactionism by Goffman is relevant in understanding the relationship between micro-sociological conduct and frames shaped and re-shaped in health institutions (e.g. asylum). Simultaneously, through existing healthcare research inspired by Foucault, Bourdieu and Goffman we will discuss how this theoretical perspective can supply and challenge healthcare research in general. In the last part of the chapter we will illuminate how relational sociology is relevant for studies in healthcare implementations by drawing on the realist evaluation tradition (Pawson). That is, how relational sociology can contribute with explanatory relational power understanding the mechanisms of implementation in the healthcare sector; discerning what works for whom, in what circumstances, in what respect and how for whom. Finally, we will sum up the overall contribution relational sociology has had on healthcare issues, as well as the possible contributions in times to come.

- **Chapter 37: Relational Sociology: contributions to understanding choice and decision-making in later life (Sarah Hillcoat-Nallétamby, Centre for Innovative Ageing, Swansea University, UK)**

The increasingly globalized emphasis on casting individuals as consumers, empowered with choice and decision-making strategies which enable them to exercise individual agency in diverse markets has been reflected in both Western policy discourse and service provision targeted at older citizens; increasingly characterized as independent, informed consumers, they are ascribed the freedom to choose and select products and services, notably when it comes to their health and social care requirements. This emphasis finds its routes in neo-liberal thinking which gives
primacy to individualized, atomistic rational choices embedded within decision-making behaviour predicated on intentional, consequential action (Marsh, 1982). Whilst this is a welcome move from the long-standing, dichotomous social representation of older people as either “dependent-disempowered”/“independent-empowered” social agents, it nonetheless overlooks the possibility of a more nuanced construction of their agency, as the product of temporal, transactional processes involving exchanges and engagements with others, facilitated through complex figurations of interdependent relationships (Hillcoat-Nälltämby, 2011; Elias, 1978).

This chapter will aim to demonstrate the relevance of relational sociology as an ontological orientation which has the potential to provide renewed understanding of choice and decision-making in later life as dynamic, trans-actional rather than self-actioned/ego centred processes. Viewed through a relational lens, emphasis will be placed in particular on concepts of temporality, process and interdependencies as configurational elements of relational sociology (Depelteau, 2008), and empirical validation of these principles will be explored by examining the social phenomena of decision-making processes involved in choice of care arrangements in later life, as depicted through older people’s narratives. It is hoped that the chapter will enhance theorizing in the field of ageing studies, where the dominance of political economy perspectives has shaped a powerful explanatory paradigm of later life, by focusing on the structural determinism of socio-political and economic systems in constraining individual agency and exacerbating social divisions1 or where more integrative approaches have been taken to unravel the inter-relations of agency and structure (as for example in the analysis of lifestyle choices2), but with resultant theorizing still tending towards personal, behavioural – hence agentic – explanatory frameworks.

The field of critical social gerontology has therefore yet to explore in any depth, the ontological insights provided by relational sociology in understanding social phenomena within the temporal gaze of later life.


There is an almost unanimous reaction by politicians, the media and even social scientists in using the label ‘riot’ for what happened in early August 2011 in several cities in the UK (see Briggs, 2012; Benyon, 2012; Gorringe & Rosie, 2011; Greenslade, 2011a and 2011b; Murji & Neal, 2011; The Guardian/LSE, 2011; NatCen, 2011; Angel, 2012). The most common narrative when telling the story cites the killing of Mark Duggan as a trigger that sparked violent behaviour in deprived areas of London. This included clashes with the police and lighting cars and buildings on fire. From here, the violent events (including an enormous amount of looting) spread not only in London, but also to other cities in the UK, putting Britain into a state of shock.

The most surprising fact is that virtually no one questioned the use of the term riot and its narrative, nor discussed the inherent (political) meaning and application or addressed the analytical and conceptual qualities of the term riot. This chapter asserts that the use of the label riot, by social scientists in particular, channelled their explanation and focus in a specific direction, which provides a limited conceptual comprehension of what happened. Therefore, the paper will begin by questioning the use of the term riot and outlining its problematic consequences for social research. The second part will then raise a different theoretical and analytical vocabulary, which enables us to cope with greater social complexity. Thus, not a coherent and fully integrated theory but a number of theoretical arguments that derive from relational sociology will be presented. Nevertheless, this part will highlight Harrion C. White’s conception of networks as narrative or communicative entities, which is then also the underlying force, linking the different concepts and empirical observations. The paper will make use of a range of different theoretical terms from theories and concepts such as network, narration, motive talk, attribution, conflict and carnivalism. These theoretical considerations are embedded in empirical material, for instance statistics, media coverage, secondary analysis of interviews and social media. Overt reductions to simple labels and categories are to be avoided in order to gain a more differentiated and balanced picture. The terms and concepts being developed will pay attention to a

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range of other secondary concepts used by social scientists, such as the notion of triggers and motives. The paper will make a strong claim that such ‘events’ cannot be studied as if they occur outside of social reality, exist somehow apart from it or are even unsocial, but will stress their relational construction and normality of how this form of social reality unfolds and its particular relational structure and meaning-making. The third part of the paper will summarise these different ties and strings of the narrative called ‘riot’. This chapter aims to advance our understanding of the phenomenon of riots and the study of riots by introducing a relational perspective that demonstrates the complex relationships, narrative and stories that enact the meaning of rioting.