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Fluxes and Structures: Which Relational Gaze? A Comparison between Relational Sociologies

Abstract: Many scholars today share a view of relational sociology as a processual-transactional approach whose basic tenet is the fluid, relativistic, contingent, transactional character of social relations. They invite sociologists to see our so-called objects (societies, institutions, social patterns, conflicts, social movements, social classes, etc.) in a processual way. In this contribution the author objects that relationalism offers a reductive vision of social reality, because it supports a flat social ontology rather than a stratified social ontology. Relationalism reduces relationships to pure flows, considering structures as purely contingent, while relational sociology attributes a structure to relationships and gives autonomy to structures, even if they are produced by processes. We have to distinguish between different orders of reality: the processual-interactional (relationalist) and the relational orders. To see all of this, it is necessary to assume a relational gaze that is only possible if a supra-functional, morphogenetic framework is adopted.

Keywords: relational gaze, critical realism, social constructivism, relational sociology, relational reflexivity

Panta Rei (πάντα ῥεῖ, everything flows) said Heraclitus. As is well known, his argument was that it is not possible to enter the same river twice. Some objected that the water in the river certainly flows away, but the river as such is still there. Water can overflow from the river, but then returns to a bed of some sort. The river can encounter obstacles and change course, but is then reconstituted somewhere else. As Bateson (1972: 83) wrote: “The river shapes the banks and the banks guide the river. Similarly, the ethos models the cultural structure and is guided by it.”

I use this metaphor of the river to summarize the topic of this contribution, which consists in comparing Dépelteau’s sociology with the realist critical perspective (Porpora 2018; Donati 2018), focusing on what it means to adopt a “relational gaze.”

Dépelteau argued—as Heraclitus would say—that what we are seeing as the object of sociological work (i.e. ‘the river’) is nothing more than process and transaction flows (i.e. ‘water flowing past’). He believed relational sociology to be an invitation to see our so-called objects (societies, institutions, social patterns, conflicts, social movements, social classes, etc.) in a processual way, i.e. as being made of fluid, dynamic relations understood as processual transactions (Dépelteau 2018).

In this sense, social structures are fixed only in our imagination or on paper. In reality, «structures» are always in motion. In this respect, we are dealing with fluid social processes more than fixed social structures. Many of these processes may seem to be stable and simply reproduced because some transactions are more or less continuous

and similar. These similarities may create an illusion the illusion of a unity, as if a society or a family would have a fixed structure like a building. In fact, a society, a family, or a culture is always a «continuity of changes». (Dépelteau 2008: 69)

In sum, sociology does not need more epistemological discussions about the links between social structure and agency. We need concepts that can help us to see the evolution of social processes in a complex social universe. We need research on what are the main interconnected dimensions of empirical transactions. And we also have to develop methodological tools to deal with the high complexity of these empirical chains of transactions. (Dépelteau 2008: 70)

He used these ontological and epistemological premises to develop a processual-transactional sociology, via numerous phases and different types of relational sociology, in which, however, we find a permanent connecting thread: the relativistic, contingent, transactional character of social relationships:

... the name of this relational sociology has kept changing from 'radical' to 'deep', 'transactional' and finally 'process-relational' sociology." (Dépelteau 2018: 499) "*We never get involved twice in the same social process (in the same 'couple,' 'family,' 'classroom,' etc.). Everything is changing all the time, including ourselves. This is hard to accept since we are looking for some sort of stability often to reassure ourselves.* (*ibidem*, p. 503, italics mine)

In our on-line conversation I objected that it is certainly true that social relations are 'flows', in the sense that they consist of reciprocal actions (transactions) generating processes endowed with a certain fluidity (degrees of contingency). He is undoubtedly right here. However, processes and transactions (the waters) flow within a context in which they themselves are conditioned by structures (the river), that they themselves forge in turn. The structure (river) is the result of the flows of interactions (flowing water), just as in general a social structure changes through a morphogenetic process that starts from an initial structure at time T1, and through an interactive phase occurring between time T2 and time T3, generates an elaborated structure at time T4 (Archer 1995). Dépelteau is right in analyzing what happens during the T2–T3 phase (relations as the interaction of those elements making up the flow), but he fails to see the structure emerging at the end of each cycle of change. He does not see it for two reasons: firstly, because his ontology is flat ("single-level ontology"), not stratified, and assimilates relations-as-interactions to relations-as-structures;¹ secondly, because he does not distinguish between the temporal phases. It is important to understand that relationships are the object of sociology both as interactions-transactions (relationship as process), and as emerging effects that possess a structure (relationship as structure). We will see it in the next figure 1.

The structures (rivers) are emergent phenomena constituted by flows (relations in the temporal phase of interactions) through the cycles of morphogenetic and morphostatic processes. They regenerate continuously after the water (the flow of relations) has gone. So, at time T1 of the morphostatic / morphogenetic process, we can observe a certain structure (the river), while at time T4 we see another structure emerging from phase T2–T3 of interactions, transactions and exchanges. What happened between T1 and T4 is certainly dynamic and fluid, but this does not mean that structures are non-existent and canceled.

¹ Porpora (2018: 414): "By structure, we critical realists seem to mean a variety of different things, but they are all relational."

This happens in physical (quantum) reality as well as in social reality. For example, Bauman speaks of a liquid society, but then recognizes that behind liquidity there are precise structures of inequality, discrimination, and so on.

I would agree with Dépelteau's sociology according to which the relational order of society has a transactional character when we look at it in a certain temporal phase (the phase T2–T3, between time T1 and time T4 of the morphostatic / morphogenetic process). Surely, one cannot enter the same water at different times, because the flow of interactions is unceasing. However, one can enter the same river, where the term 'same' means the *ipse*, and not the *idem*, according to the distinction made by Ricoeur (1990). In sociology, the processual perspective cannot be intended as a 'metaphysics of becoming' based upon a radically flat ontology, because otherwise we could not account for the fact that social relations as transactions (the water) generate structures (rivers) that qualify, and cause the relational configuration of, the social fabric (the physical space, in the case of rivers).

In many of my works I have tried to clarify the differences there are between diverse orders of social reality, that is, between the *interactional order* and the *relational order*, the latter being the outcome of processes that formulate structures (see figure 1 below; for more details, refer to Donati 2013, p. 19–25). I believe that this is the framework with which points of convergence between relational and processual-transactional sociology can and ought to be found (Vandenberghé 2016).

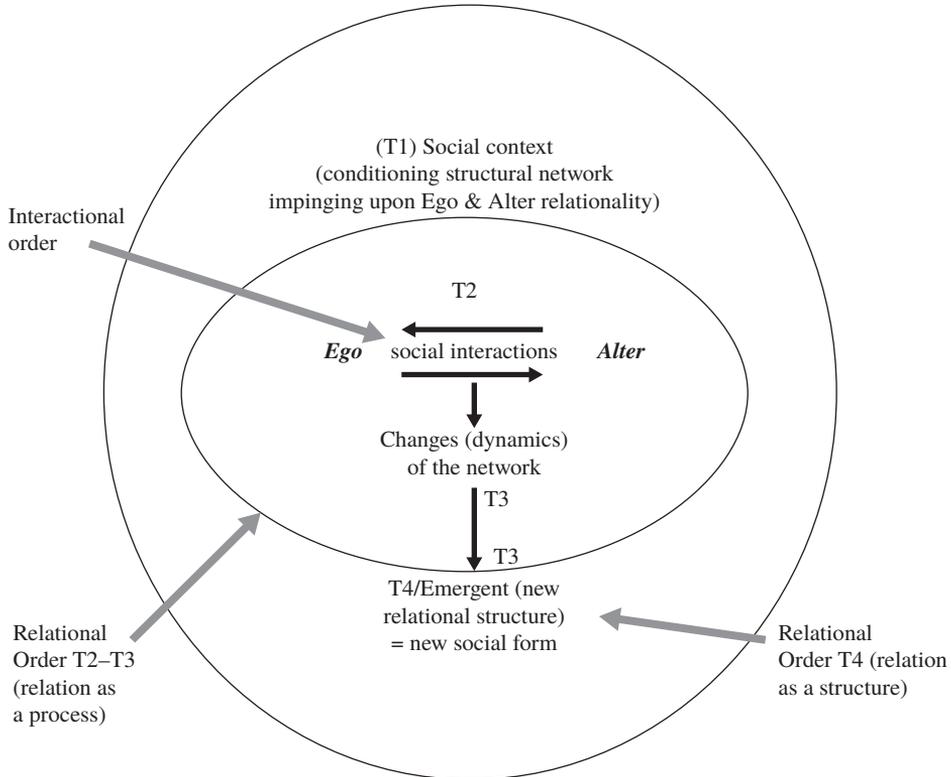
The social interaction of Ego and Alter always occurs within a specific social context constituted by a conditional structural network. If we look at the interactions within the temporal interval T2–T3, we observe the relational order of reality as a process (in which the structural network is questioned). However, when interactional networks stabilize, albeit temporarily, after a certain number of T1–T4 cycles, a new context is somehow generated. A new structural network emerges which, as a structural relational order of reality, will impact subsequent interactions.

If we want to understand the relational constitution of reality, as Dépelteau did, then we need to adopt a '*relational gaze*.' This means, first and foremost, observing social reality as a product of relational processes that are responsible for generating social structures and for reproducing or modifying them over the course of time. This viewpoint does not reduce relationships to structures, just as it does not reduce structures to relationships. *Relations work within a structural context, regardless of how fluid and dynamic they may be, and this context is relationally constituted.* Structures and relations forge a multilayered social world. Within a stratified social ontology, the assumption is that *social relations and structures are co-principles of social reality*, without there being a conflation of the two.

I would therefore like to discuss in what sense, and in what way, sociology can and should adopt a 'relational gaze', where the view of social relations as processes and transactions is balanced by a vision that focuses on their structures in a supra-functional, morphogenetic sense, rather than in a functional sense as some might think.² I speak of social

² For instance, Vandenberghé (2018: 637) claims that "Donati has produced a countermanifesto (2015) for a critical realist relational sociology with a functionalist hue." On the contrary, in that *Manifesto* I argue that "to speak of specificity [of relations] does not involve a mere functionalist view, because in the social field relations are suprafunctional" (Donati 2015: 97).

Figure 1

Three orders of social reality: interactional, relational as processual, relational as structural**The place of social relations in the making of the social fabric**

relations as “social molecules”, that is, as emergent effects that may change their shape and composition over the course of time (Donati 2015a).

The Issue of the “Scientific Gaze”

The scientific gaze tries to render the observer’s work “rigorous.” Exactly what the term “rigorous” means is somewhat debatable. For classical scientists it means that the work in question is appropriate to the observed object, and as such is controlled, replicable and devoid of any distortion; for those sciences based on constructivism, on the other hand, such terms lose their value since a gaze creates, even imagines, its object. In any case, each science has more than one way of looking at reality, depending on how it constructs its relationship with reality. Such a relationship is a gaze, called “knowledge.” Precisely because it is a relationship, a gaze represents a combination of the four components of any relationship, i.e. the value attributed to the gaze, its situational goal or intention, its means, and its norms of use.

What happens in the case of the scientific gaze is similar to what happens when a light is switched on in a room. What is seen depends on various factors: on what the person switching on the light wishes to see, on the observer's visual capacity, and on the characteristics of the device projecting the rays of light in terms of the rays' colour, their intensity, and their capacity to penetrate the observed objects. Each device possesses different qualities and powers, and each observer is interested in seeing different things.

Important questions of social ontology, epistemology and social practices emerge here.

As regards social ontology, the observer may adopt a realistic stance, which presupposes the existence of a reality beyond the observer, together with the possibility of distinguishing the observer from the observed. Alternatively, the observer may adopt a constructivist position whereby, in the words of Luhmann, reality is the observation itself (Rasch 2012). This approach leads towards deconstructionism, where the gaze is an expression of nothingness, of the void, of insoluble paradoxes, and thus a sort of optical illusion. On the other hand, "critical realism claims that it is possible to gain knowledge of actually existing structures and generative mechanisms, albeit not in terms of a mirror image—in this respect Rorty is correct in his criticism of the naive realists—but certainly in terms of theories, which are more or less truthlike" (Danermark et al. 2002: 10).

Critical realism, constructionism and deconstructionism are ontological positions implying very different epistemologies and practices.

The transition from the 20th to the 21st century was characterised by a boom in constructionist and pragmatist approaches that completely subverted the realistic perspective of the sciences. Tired of, and disinterested in, an understanding of the world based on structures and dynamics, these new approaches proposed a vision that constructs the world around selected values and self-referential operations, thus de-ontologising observed reality. Constructionism is sometimes a silent ontology, and at other times a flat ontology: "... constructionism is ontologically mute. Whatever is, simply is. There is no foundational description to be made about an 'out there' as opposed to an 'in here,' about experience or material. Once we attempt to articulate 'what there is,' however, we enter the world of discourse... The adequacy of any word or arrangement of words to 'capture reality as it is' is a matter of local convention" (Gergen 1994: 72–73).

According to critical realism, we need to distinguish three domains in the world (Bhaskar 2008): the observable domain of social phenomena (the '*empirical*' domain), where events are witnessed; a further domain existing beyond human experience, where the causal structures resulting in observable events interact (the '*actual*' domain); and a third, empirically undetectable domain where the potential, but non-actualised, underlying causal structures of objects are located (the '*real*' domain). This scheme of things represents a 'deep ontology,' unlike the flat, monovalent ontology offered by empiricism.

The gaze of a person adopting the social ontological perspective of critical realism, not only tells us what is 'real' insofar as we see it in its empirical manifestations and in its on-going causes, but also reveals the potential of that which exists within the depths of reality (reality as potential). It avoids ideological, abstract utopias, but offers a 'concrete utopia' instead.

Without doubt there are innumerable styles of gaze, just as there are innumerable ways of relating to the world. These include narrative, discursive, highly imaginative, dramatic, scientific and futuristic styles, among others. Nevertheless, ultimately we always end up

asking ourselves what exactly it is that our gaze gathers, and whether what is gathered is actually true or false.

Kenneth Gergen's proposed turbulent ontology suggests that diverse gazes can be seen as the products of different *confluences of relating* between people's different activities and experiences (Shotter 2012). While these confluences of relating undoubtedly play an important role, this does not mean that in a gaze reality loses its boundaries, its stratified structure, that is, the layers constituting that reality. Following on from Kenneth Gergen (2009), what is meant by the idea that an observer's view of relations, such as work or the family, reveals ceaseless, unrepeatable forms of life consisting of intermingling movements? If Gergen's perspective, according to which "we live our lives embedded in the turbulent flow of a number of intermingling activities" (Gergen 1973) is taken to the extreme, the result is a gaze that is incapable of identifying defined structures and processes, because that gaze only perceives confluences between elements and layers of reality.

Critical realism does not deny that the observer plays an essential part in perceiving and processing what is observed. However, it distinguishes between *strong constructivism* and *weak constructionism*, and only accepts the latter subject to certain conditions. As Bhaskar and Danermark (2006: 283–4) point out:

To weak constructionism, which involves the idea that there is a necessarily interpreted element in the construction of any theoretical understanding and any social object, a critical realist has no objection. However if... [constructionism] is taken to imply that the phenomenon investigated is just a theoretical interpretation or cognitive construction, or that a social phenomenon such as some specific form of disability exists only as an idea or belief, then it is clearly false.

A clear distinction needs to be made between the *relational gaze* and the *relationalist gaze* (Donati 2017). In recent years, many of those who have declared their adoption of a relational gaze, in truth have been relationalists insofar as what they adopt is a pragmatist approach that distorts the meaning of relational by transforming it into a mere interactive or transactional process. Emirbayer, in his *Manifesto for a relational sociology*, never defines what he means by 'relation' and 'relational sociology,' but instead talks of a 'transactional sociology'. Many authors followed Emirbayer's example by further radicalising his interactionist pragmatism. Considerable confusion ensued, to the point where Dépelteau and Powell (2013) came to the conclusion that relational sociology is nothing more than a play on words (Powell and Dépelteau 2013).

If one accepts these authors' approach, the relational gaze becomes a completely contingent, more or less random, turbulent transaction, with reality remaining inaccessible. The relationship between the observer and the observed risks being turned on its head: rather than being conceived as the observer's questioning of an observed or experienced reality, it becomes the exploration of what that reality could be in a purely contingent world. As Luhmann (2002) would say, that gaze is not so much concerned with understanding reality as it is, as with what 'could be otherwise' (contingency is, quite simply, the fact that things could be otherwise than they are). These authors' gaze, even when understood as a relationship, is driven by the desire to transform human beings and society. As Gergen says:

As I will propose, *when the logics of reflective pragmatism are fully extended*, we enter a new territory of understanding, one in which the vision of research is radically altered. *We replace the captivating gaze on the world*

as it is with value-based explorations into what it could be. This conception of a future forming orientation to research opens the way to new aims, practices, and reflections (Gergen 2015a: 287, italics mine).

There may seem to be a degree of inconsistency in Gergen's perspective. The idea that the researcher's gaze has to change the world rather than merely reflecting it, does not seem to be consistent with Gergen's professed Buddhist ontology. On the one hand, he rejects western traditions—both the Christian religious tradition and the secular Enlightenment worldview based on reason—and proposes a pantheistic, humanitarian, pacifist view of the world. On the other hand, however, he claims that “human nature is a cultural construction” that can and must be changed with a view to building a new “relational humanism” (Gergen 2015b: 151). To put it bluntly, this sociological gaze reminds me of Shiva's dance, where human nature is perceived as the product of a network of constantly changing relations.

Given these characteristics, it is easy to see why Gergen's humanism, like that of all radical constructivists, leaves ample room for some version or other of post-humanism or trans-humanism. It ends up negating the boundaries between the human and the non-human, and as a consequence the distinctive character of the human gaze is lost. So, is there no difference between the gaze as a human relationship, and the gaze as an actor-network relationship? Perhaps we need to look a little closer at what we mean when we say that a gaze is a relationship; in other words, we need to further examine what we mean by the term ‘relational.’

The Difference between Seeing and Gazing

The sociological gaze is not simply observing something / someone from a distance; it is not an aseptic, emotionless operation devoid of momentum (as in Luhmann, for example), but is an ‘involving operation,’ that is, an operation in which the observer is involved in what is being observed. For this reason, it possesses a theoretical value (the search for the truth) and a practical value (insofar as it is a critical action in regard to the world), that is quite unlike that of impersonal observation.

Hence the idea that a gaze, unlike mere seeing, is not something offered by a third person, but requires the viewpoint of the first and second person; indeed, it often involves the perspective of the interplay between the latter two. The problem is how these two perspectives are to be combined.

Margaret Archer has criticised the use of the third-person perspective in sociology, and has suggested that an explanation of social phenomena must involve the adoption of the first person's perspective, based on the fact that socio-cultural structures do not operate without the mediation of the personal reflexivity of individuals, meaning their internal conversations. However, I believe that the relational gaze implies something more than just first-person reflection, as it also involves the opening up to the Other's point of view, and thus to reflexivity in regard to the relationship with the Other.

The paradigm of morphogenesis, according to which social processes develop on the basis of the structure-agency-culture triad (SAC), was proposed by Archer in order to avoid the fallacious sociologism of impersonal, third-person observation (Mead's ‘generalized other’) that sometimes prevails in the social sciences. A new version of this paradigm con-

sists in the idea of a collective intelligence involving stigmergic communication. However, Archer failed to go beyond the gaze based on individual reflexivity, and thus took no account of the second-person perspective.

What is required here is a general framework embracing all three perspectives. In order to understand social facts, we need to see how the three perspectives operate together. What is missing is a sociological outlook achieved through a complex relationality that is not limited to the first, second or third person. In other words, we need to understand the complexity of the “relational gaze.”

This is not taking the middle ground between objectivism and subjectivism, since it presupposes ‘another’ viewpoint different from the objectivity-subjectivity dualism. The relational gaze is based on a social ontology, an epistemology and social practices that are all relational because they have abandoned both holism and individualism. This gaze applies to all realities, but is particularly significant in the case of sociology where the ‘object’ consists of social relations, their genesis and morphogenesis, their processual dynamics and their established structures.

For example, when we encounter a group of people, it is normal for us to wonder who they are; that is, whether they are members of a professional team, an informal group of friends, the members of a club or association, simply a group of tourists on holiday, and so on. In attempting to establish the nature of the group, we inevitably identify the group in terms of the relations between the group’s members. The identity of the group does not correspond to individual characteristics, but to relational characteristics. In practice, if we wish to answer the question “who are they?,” we have to carry out three operations: (a) acknowledge the group of people we see (the *empirical* phenomenon); (b) ask ourselves what structures and mechanisms are generated by the interaction and relations between the group’s members (the domain of the *actual*, that is, what it is that makes the relationship between these individuals social); (c) and ask ourselves which *potential* structures and mechanisms are not revealed (that is, are not empirically visible), but could underlie the dynamics of that group (the domain of the ‘real’ as a latent structure).

We can adopt this gaze in regard to all social phenomena, such as work, the family, health, well-being, solidarity or conflict, domestic life, friendship, trust, and so on. Take the case of work, for example. The three phases of a person’s gaze when observing this phenomenon consist in the observer focusing on: (a) work as the performance of services by one or more persons (*empirical*); (b) which social structures and mechanisms give rise to said services, and what and/or who renders them such (*actual*); (c) the potential capacity for change possessed by those structures and mechanisms giving rise to the activities observed. This is how the relational gaze encourages us to transcend the present.

A gaze becomes relational the moment that it focuses on the relationship between the observer and the observed, and identifies the terms of the relationship on the basis of its causal properties and characteristics, rather than on the mere appearance of interactive processes. In fact, interactional pragmatism goes no further than the first two operations (*a* and *b*), thus failing to reflect on the latent structure of the relationship between agents / actors, and on the potential mechanisms of that relationship.

A gaze thus becomes truly relational when it employs meta-reflexivity in the form of relational reflexivity. Relational reflexivity is defined here as the reflexivity that an agent exercises

not on him / herself in relation to the context (inner conversation: Archer 2007), or on what the Other thinks or does, but *on the relationship* with the Other (Donati 2011). It is therefore an act that operates as a relationship-steering mechanism, as opposed to automatic or non-relational social mechanisms (Donati 2015b). Let us now examine what this means exactly.

What do We Mean by “Relational”?

The concept of relation is widely considered problematic, in that it is polysemic and is used at various levels of reality, with diverse meanings, and often in a confusing, indiscriminate manner.

I propose to distinguish between five different meanings of the term relation, based on the ontological status of the term (*logical, empirical, actualised, regarding a latent reality or regarding a meta-reality*), and on the setting in which the relation is observed (in *natural, practical, social or transcendental* reality).

Relations in the logical sense

This is the primitive meaning proposed by Aristotle as a logical category. Saying that there is a relation between something (or someone) and something (or someone) else implies that a certain distance or proximity (*to pros ti*) exists between the two. The ‘structure’ of the relation is that of a logical entity (of the observer’s thought) of a ‘spatial’ character, that does not have any consistence in itself, but depends on substances, that is, on the terms that are placed in relation to one another. A relation as such is an accidental property that needs substances (the terms of the relation) in order to exist. As I have explained elsewhere (Donati 2013), this classical idea of relation is totally inadequate when trying to understand the meaning and weight of the modern concept of relation as the emergent effect of the mutual action of two or more agents.

Physical relations with the natural world (physical setting)

These are physical relations impacting the subject. For example: a child touches something very hot, this causes the child pain and he / she pulls his / her hand away and becomes aware of the fact that very hot things should not be touched; we notice a beautiful sunset and we stop to contemplate it; if a storm strikes accompanied by thunder and lightning, our reaction is to seek shelter. A relation dictated by the physical senses, which signals pleasure or pain, is a pre-social relation; but this relation is then processed in the mind through cultural mediation, meaning that this processing is conditioned by cultural habits and manners acquired from previous interactions. For example, when looking at a beautiful sunset, a person may experience feelings that translate into previously-acquired images which the observer may reflect on through the mediation of previous experiences. The view of a tornado arriving triggers relations mediated by what the observer has discovered in the past. In any case, the relationship with the natural world is not a reciprocal action between subjects. It is a subject-object relationship. The relational gaze here consists in the way in

which the subject processes the response to physical stimuli on the basis of his / her own acquired socio-cultural experience.

Relations with the practical world

In the practical world, a relationship is a position adopted in regard to things, situations and contexts insofar as they are human artefacts or the products of society. As Archer (2010: 294) writes:

in the Practical Order, tacit skills are emergent from the affordances and resistances presented by objects and the assimilation of and accommodation to them on the part of the subject. Activities such as competently playing tennis, a musical instrument, touch typing or driving all depend upon ‘catching on’ and, at more advanced levels (such as improvising at jazz or manoeuvring an articulated lorry), upon acquiring a real ‘feel for the game.’

From my point of view, in this order of reality, the use of objects constitutes a social practice that implies a specific relationality (for example when we prepare a family lunch, go to the gym, drive a car, or interact with a robot). What is of fundamental importance if we are to understand the meaning of these relations, is that their referent is an ‘object’ which encapsulates the representation of actions previously performed by human beings, and therefore it incorporates a relational message so to speak. The relational gaze upon these ‘object relationships’ requires a sort of relational ‘dialogue’ with objects, and not just a physical relationship as in the previous world. For example, if somebody receives notification of a message on Facebook, that person’s mind will respond to the message on the basis of the relationship that the message implies. In this world, specific mention should be made of relations with smart AI and robots, since they are not inert objects. A relationship with objects possessing their own ‘autonomy,’ such as sophisticated robots, raises specific problems in those cases where the agent treats such robots as if they were ‘people.’ In these cases it is necessary to distinguish between human and non-human relationships (Carrigan, Porpora, and Wight 2020).

Relations with the social world, that is, with human beings and groups of human beings

In this world, a relationship is both an *orientation* or *symbolic reference* having a reciprocal meaning (as defined by Weber, which I shall shortly explain), and a *bond* between people and their social roles underlying morality and social integration (according to the sociology of Durkheim as set out in his 1897 [1951] work *Suicide*). It may initially consist of a meaningful orientation that generates a bond, or a bond giving rise to an inclination; in either case, the two components (symbolic reference and social binding) are connected and interwoven. I have called these two elements *refero* (reference) and *religo* (tie), and I would argue that their combination produces an emergent effect, that is, a social relationship in the strict sense of the term, with its own characteristics and causal powers. Here, the nature of a relational gaze is that of an effect deriving from the contributions of the related subjects, who generate an *emergent*.

(Latent) relations with a reality that transcends the empirical and the actualised

Relations with realities that are hidden from view because devoid of all materiality—such as virtual, religious or supernatural realities—are what we may call latent; however, they

are no less real as a result of their latency. They possess their own potential. They connect us with a world that we cannot experience through the physical senses, but that includes important realities (called ‘values,’ ‘ultimate concerns,’ ‘symbols’ or something similar), which we cannot measure using quantitative methods, but which are key to the forging of the subjects’ identities and the structure of such relations. These values include trust, peace and fraternity, which are of an invisible, intangible nature. The symbolic relationship with a secular or religious ideal possesses the latent structure of a primary relationship on which the identity of the subject depends. The relational gaze goes beyond any socio-cultural interaction here, reinterpreting the cultural system in order to reach a meta-reality.

I have distinguished between these five types of meaning of the term ‘relation’ in order to avoid any generic definition, and any confusion between the different layers of reality (stratified social ontology).

An example of such confusion can be seen in the cultural fashion whereby ‘things speak,’ as if things — non-human objects—were capable of relating to us humans. Of course, when we see great works of art or a beautiful sunset, this triggers feelings and emotions in us, and these stimulate thoughts which have a relational character *for us*, but which in reality are processed by our *Self* (von Scheve 2018).

Objects offer us perceptive stimuli, memories, signs and symbols which we ourselves give meaning to, and which we mentally ‘converse’ with / reflect on in order to relate to them. The relational gaze is necessary if we want to understand the contribution to the relationship made by the observer and by the observed, respectively.

Non-human entities, be they animate or not, cannot ‘converse’ with us; on the contrary, it is us who talk to them, even though they do send us messages that contribute to forming the relationship: like in the case of our relationship with a pet dog or with the garden plants that we lovingly care for. What can be said of sentient robots attributed with feelings, and even with a moral conscience? Will there be no difference between relationships among human beings and humans’ relations with such robots? The answer to this question is of vital importance in terms of the future possibility of developing androids that are “more human than human beings,” like the character Roy Blatter in the film *Blade Runner*.

Bruno Latour’s *Actor Network Theory* (ANT) currently lends support to the argument that the human / android distinction will gradually cease to exist, insofar as it sees the network of relations between humans and non-humans as a subject-agent acting on its own behalf (the *actant*). What kind of relational gaze can there be if, as Latour argues, the distinction between humans and non-humans gradually ceases to exist?

As Whittle and Spicer (2008: 611) claim, the “Actor Network Theory, otherwise known as the sociology of translation, rejects the idea that ‘social relations’ are independent of the material and natural world.” Latour’s view, like that of all relationalists who eliminate the aforesaid distinctions, leads to one losing sight of the unique nature of social relations. If we lose the specificity of the different relationships and their own contribution, we can no longer see the responsibilities of the network’s various agents.

As Graham Harman (2009) has pointed out in his object-oriented philosophy, the ‘relationalist’ metaphysics of Latour cannot properly accommodate the capacity of ‘objects’ to cause or mediate ‘surprises’ for other objects. In other words, the way Latour treats objects

becomes its own form of reductionism, and by not recognising the independence of objects it does not enable us to account for the way objects cause surprises.

At this point, I wonder what kind of gaze and what type of relations can be attributed to the *actant*? What relations can human beings have with the *actant*? Latour suggests that we adopt a ‘hybrid gaze’ that eliminates the subject-object distinction (Blok and Elgaard 2011). The social (that is, the relation) takes the form of indistinct interactions, and eventually vanishes, the moment the human subject disappears. The relational gaze of sociology no longer possesses human characteristics, becoming as it does a hybrid thing.

At this point, the problem is that of understanding what is meant by a sociological gaze that has been rendered so ‘hybrid’ by technological progress that human beings now question their own identities and capacities. In order to understand such changes, a truly relational gaze is required.

The Sociological Gaze Needs a Relational Reflexivity

If the sociological gaze is a way of reflecting on what surrounds us, bearing in mind our own inner reflections, then we must understand what it means to be reflexive ‘in relation’ to a context. Let us take the definition of reflexivity given by Archer (2007: 4): “reflexivity is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and *vice versa*.” What does ‘in relation to’ mean here?

If we accept this (mental) definition of reflexivity (and Dépelteau [2013] accepted it), then it is difficult to understand what role the relationship plays as an entity distinct from the self that thinks within itself. The concept of relationship seems to play a purely logical role, or rather it seems to be a channel through which the Ego mind receives stimulations and reacts to the context through the relationship. The Ego’s gaze seems to be sociologically relational because it takes into consideration what comes from other people, together with the opportunities and constraints offered by the situation, and reacts reflexively from its own viewpoint. ‘Reflexively’ here means that the Ego pursues what it believes to be a good life through an internal conversation that firstly defines and dovetails the Ego’s own concerns (internal goods), then develops practical courses of action (individual projects as micro-politics), and finally establishes sustainable practices (*modus vivendi*) that can satisfy the Ego itself.

What this definition of reflexivity fails to account for is the role that the *social* relationship plays in the reflexive process, as an emergent reality with its own causal powers and properties. In my view, the relational gaze requires relational reflexivity because the correctness and reliability of the cognitive process is guaranteed by rendering the relationship with the object of investigation reflexive,³ and not by the correspondence (or symmetry) between the mind of the knowing subject and that mind’s object.

For example, one may wonder why parents who themselves are good people who vest great importance in the education of their offspring, have children who are socially deviant (or vice-versa, how it is that individually deviant parents manage to have honest, successful children?). Empirical research shows that such outcomes can be ascribed to the fact that

³ Reflexive is not the same as reflective (as in a mirror), because reflexivity, unlike reflectivity, includes the agency of the subject in the relationship.

children are socialized not so much by their individual parents, but rather by the relationship that their parents have with one another. The socialization of children is a result of the relationship between parents, *ceteris paribus*. Different outcomes depend on how relational reflexivity works within the family. While in the first case, well-meaning / good parents may have deviant children because they, the parents, fail to be reflexive in regard to their mutual relationship, in the second case deviant parents (such as drug addicts, criminals, etc.) may have successful children because, albeit unconsciously, they actually exercise a positive relational reflexivity between themselves. On a practical level, by reflexively modifying the relational dyadic or group network, deviance can be prevented (Weaver 2016).

What gaze do individuals adopt on the basis of their inner reflexivity? Let us examine the ideal types of reflexive mode identified by Archer. The gaze of communicative reflexivity is dependent on the outside world, and is mediated by family attachments because the Self is incapable of separating itself from such attachments. The gaze of autonomous reflexivity is self-centred (or self-referential). The gaze of meta-reflexivity is prompted by an individual's dissatisfaction with the existing situation, and by criticism of what that individual's action has achieved. The gaze of fractured and impeded reflexivity is wholly disoriented and leads to inaction, since such people find it very difficult to make decisions, to establish courses of action to be consistently pursued, and above all to engage in anything more than survivalist day-to-day planning; their internal conversations cannot lead to purposeful action, but tend to exacerbate personal distress and disorientation resulting in an inability to think or take action.

In developing her analysis of these different types of personal reflexivity, Archer examines how social structure (continuous or discontinuous, etc.) conditions individuals (without determining their courses of action however); yet there is no focus on the role played by the social relationship that mediates between the structure and the specific modes of reflexivity characterising different people. It seems that this social relationship plays a secondary role derived from the inner conversation. Perhaps this is why Dépelteau criticizes Archer for justifying the irrelevance of social structures in this manner.⁴ Hence Dépelteau's belief in the need to abandon the concept of structure in order to resolve the question in terms of pure interactions and transactions.

I criticize both Archer and Dépelteau for their failure to see that social structures influence individual reflexivity by acting not directly on the individual's mind, but on the social relationships that make up his / her identity. In short, neither Archer nor Dépelteau perceived a form of relational reflexivity in which the existence of social structures (and the structure of social relations) is revealed.

⁴ Dépelteau (2013: 818) writes: "Archer's last book (*The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*) is showing the irrelevance of the concept of social structure more than anything else—she is giving us many reasons to abandon this concept by saying that contemporary society is made by 'discontinuities' and the decline of habits, individual trajectories are now affected by various forms of relations (the solid structures are fragmented into various fluid networks, others would say), 'communicative' reflexivity is declining, individual behaviors are more unpredictable than ever, and so on. I guess this is enough to conclude that it is difficult to find social structures in this 'liquid' world. One cannot seriously argue that we need the notion of structure because the lack of structure is a 'structural condition.' Even at the theoretical level, Archer is now presenting conceptual elaborations which make the externality of structures, even at the 'analytical' level, more and more difficult to understand. And, as symbolic interactionists have mentioned many times, she still does not seriously address the fact that people do not interact with a totality but with other specific entities in contextualized fields of transaction."

According to my relational sociology, the gaze becomes relational if the investigator observes the contextual relations as such, together with their independent dynamics, in order to perceive how relations—as real entities existing outside of the observer—modify the mental activities (reflexivity) of the individuals concerned and their re-actions. This is what I mean when I say that a relational gaze is achieved through a *relational* reflexivity (Donati 2011). We need to understand the limits of a vision of reflexivity consisting of an individual's internal conversation, if we are to see the difference between the kind of reflexivity inherent in an individual gaze on the one hand, and the relational reflexivity that is necessary in order to achieve a relational gaze on the other.

I believe that the concept of *social* relation employed by Archer in her definition of personal reflexivity is insufficient when applied to relational reflexivity. The same can be said of the definition of social relation proposed by Max Weber

“The term ‘social relationship’ will be used to denote the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. *The social relationship thus consists entirely and exclusively in the existence of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action—irrespective, for the time being, of the basis for this probability*” (Weber 2013: 26–27, my italics).

In other words, the social relationship is traced back to the actions of individual agents, since the action of each actor, to be meaningful, takes account of the actions of the other actors and is oriented in such terms. The relationship is not a real entity existing between them.

As I have shown elsewhere (Donati 2013: 74–5), this definition is partial, and insufficient for the purposes of a comprehensive sociological analysis. It fails to offer an in-depth view of social phenomena, since it only grasps the referential orientation of the relation (the *refero*), whilst ignoring its binding structure or structuration (the *religo*), and does not account for the emergent impact of their combination.

Weber does not mention the subject's acknowledgement of the worth of the relationship itself. The worth of the relationship is given by the individual subjects concerned, and does not possess its own ontological status. Even when Archer talks about relational reflexivity, the internal evaluation of the relation or relationship is the one given by the person concerned; that is, it is how the agent sees, considers and values that relationship subjectively.

This is confirmed by the way in which Archer defines the identity of a human being as the subjective cares of the individual agent. In reference to Frankfurt (1988: 91), Archer states that “we *are* what we care about.” This statement could be interpreted in the sense that our essence, as human persons, consists ontologically in our concerns. Strictly speaking, we should say, instead, that as human beings we become what we care for. In short, our socio-cultural identity is certainly shaped by our subjective interests (concerns), which can be changed subjectively but must come to terms with human nature, just as Archer herself explained in her brilliant work *Being Human* (Archer 2000), where she states, with good reason, that each and every one of us has to develop a (working) relationship with every order of natural reality, that is, with nature, practice and the social.⁵

⁵ On the concept of human nature, see Smith (2010) who is broadly in line with Archer (2000). In the English version of her preface to the Italian translation of *Being Human*, Archer writes: “This means that each and every

It seems to me that in more recent writings Archer has changed her thinking. Take, for example, the problem of sexual identity. Following the philosophy of Lynne Rudder Baker (2000), Archer (2019a) observes that the body belongs to the biological world, and as such only comes within the bounds of an individual's identity by a process of socio-cultural mediation which, in any case, does not affect the Self that reflects in the first person. To affirm that sexual identity is completely cultural, leaves open the problem of the relationship between culture and human nature.

Basically, Archer sees relational reflexivity as nothing more than the individual reflexivity that takes account of the individual's relationship with the social context, in the practical and social worlds, on the basis of that individual's own inclinations rather than on any intrinsic features of the relationship itself. Reflexivity remains a mental activity of the individual, who thinks in the first person. The only thing that changes compared to individual reflexivity is the object itself. In individual reflexivity, the Self thinks of itself (the Self thinks of itself as a Me, a You, and a We, like when it thinks of itself in relation to its family or to a civic association). Basically, Archer believes reflexivity to be relational because the Self thinks of the relationship insofar as it implies constraints and resources for the individual him / herself when dealing with the world and others. The subject thinks of the social, of the context, and acts by responding to the conditioning context, but always from his / her own point of view (his / her ultimate concerns). The structural tie inherent in the relationship (the bond) is only constitutive of the individual's identity insofar as this represents a constraint (a conditioning of individual freedom), which derives from the fact that the Self has to deal with the ties and constraints inherent in the social world (that is, the 'irritating' fact of having to live in society together with other individuals).

If we accept the idea that a gaze, including a sociological gaze, is the product of the observer-agent's mind, then we risk adopting a radically constructionist position whereby the individual may take on any sociocultural identity he / she chooses. In fact, many current-day scholars, including certain critical realists, accept the constructionist approach in regard to gender roles, as if these roles were fully editable, and entirely equal to, or interchangeable with, any other social role. They believe that male and female are merely biological qualities relating to reproductive functions, and do not indicate the social identity of the persons concerned or their social roles as men and women. In this regard, Archer argues that the identity of a human being (human personhood) does not concern that person's bodily constitution, but consists in the fact that the individual, in addition to the capacity to adopt a first person perspective, also has a mind capable of reflexivity and concerns. Although a physical body is required in order for a person to actually exist, the form of that body is irrelevant for the mind (Archer 2019a: 29). From my standpoint, if the body becomes irrelevant to social relationships, then the latter become pure mental entities, or with the advent of ICTs, they can be identified with internet connections.

This approach results in the social identity of a human person becoming a purely socio-cultural product. 'Personhood' no longer requires any given relationship between body and mind. Consequently, if the existence of a human body is no longer required to be in the

one of us has to develop a (working) relationship with every order of natural reality: nature, practice and the social."

presence of a person, then in theory a person could exist with the body of a robot, if the robot's mind were capable of thinking in the first person, of possessing reflexivity and its own interests.

Thus one can understand Archer's (2019b) statement according to which relational reflexivity, which regards social interaction, "is not different in kind" from personal reflexivity. In this way the relational gaze is dependent once again on the subjectivity of the agent, and does not concern the relationship between the subject and the Other, while from my point of view relational reflexivity is, on the contrary, of a *different kind* from personal reflexivity.

To understand relational reflexivity, one may ponder the question: "am I willing to be questioned by reality or by the Other?". The willingness to be questioned thus means changing one's reflexivity because of the relationship, that is, because the relationship raised by the question changes the context itself so that a new relationality is required. What reality and the Other communicate to me may change my perspective, that is, my manner of thinking in the first person. The Self becomes involved by what is not the Self. In other words, the Self must consider the existing relationship with reality and with the Other, while bearing in mind a point of view which is not its own.

A relational gaze—the relational perception of things—clearly means questioning reality on the basis of one's own interests; however, this operation is not confined to within the observer. The fact that the relational gaze adopts the viewpoint of the relationship, means that it is the result of a combination of first-, second- and third-person perspectives. One perspective does not suffice if one wishes to grasp the relational nature of reality. The relational gaze avails itself of all three perspectives. Of course, exactly how these three perspectives are utilised will depend on the narrative context.

For example, if John turns to a friend and says: "Why don't we go for a walk together on Sunday?", John's gaze is on his friend in the first person. The 'We-relation' (going for a walk together as a 'We-relation') is only a possibility, a symbolic reference, and not a certainty, a binding tie. If, on the other hand, John is invited by a colleague to a party to be held the following Sunday, and in reply to the invite says: "Ah, next Sunday I'm going for a walk with my wife," then John is speaking in the first and second persons, since he is also speaking on behalf of his wife and including her in the We-relation of the Sunday walk, and replies to his colleague from the point of view of that relation. If John is telling his friends how he spent the previous Sunday, and says: "Did anyone see my wife and me together last Sunday?," he is adopting the perspective of a third person, because it is the viewpoint of an impersonal gaze, that is, it refers to what happened in the third person.

The first-person perspective is clearly unavoidable, since the gaze is that of the observing subject. The second-person perspective entails dealing with the Other's concerns, which means adopting the view of a reality that goes beyond one's own interests, that is, the *relational good*, which transcends and resolves the problem of the dual hermeneutics (Donati 2014, 2019). The third-person perspective renders the observation impersonal. This third-person perspective in some way represents the implicit or explicit finalism of the relationship that the observer is observing from the point of view of the sociocultural context. I believe that there is no reason to negate the role played by the third-person perspective: this term can be interpreted as the reference to the objectivised 'we-ness' of the relation,

that is, to the actualisation of the being together, which goes beyond both Ego and Alter, from the viewpoint of the impersonal sociocultural context. The third-person perspective expresses an impersonal gaze which is common currency in everyday conversation. However, it has to be combined with the first and second-person perspectives if it is not to reify and depersonalise the gaze. For example, the gaze of a person who wishes to see the 'relational reality' of an institution (such as family, school or company) as a social phenomenon that goes beyond individual, contextualised cases, needs to adopt the third-person perspective. However, this gaze, if it is to provide any meaning in the lifeworld, must be interpreted also from the first and second-person perspectives.

Conclusions

I have tried to argue that in sociology, as in other sciences, the diverse ways of observing reality should not entail the adoption of a purely relativist, processual or transactional point of view. There is another way—through the relational gaze—of seeing and appreciating reality in its true 'being,' that is, in its ontological essence, which is not fixed but which unfolds within the framework of the contingencies that arise. I have discussed the conditions under which the relational gaze may be distinguished from other gazes, such as objectivising and subjectivising gazes, or combinations of both, or from other types of gaze altogether. The relational sociological gaze makes intelligent use of first-, second- and third-person perspectives, without relying on just one of the three. In other words, it is capable of distinguishing between personal reflexivity (internal conversation), relational reflexivity (meta-reflexivity concerning the relations) and systemic reflectivity (the reflective mechanisms of relational networks), and recognises the role that each plays.

The relational gaze focuses on the relationship between the observer and the observed, by adopting the point of view of the relationship and rendering the relationship itself reflexive. It cannot be restricted to the viewpoint of the observer, whose mind constructs its chosen object of observation; neither, indeed, is it simply the viewpoint of an external world that is introjected in the observer's mind. It is not a mechanical operation, but neither is it pure interaction or transaction. More specifically, it cannot be defined merely as the 'observation' of an autopoietic, self-referential system. The relational gaze is the triggering of a relationship that is responsive to sense perceptions and emotions, and thus to feelings, which constitute a comment on its ultimate concerns; but it is certainly not passive. It is a complex activity triggered by a person's relational reflexivity.

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