

## Summer 2015

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# Editors' Introduction

Donald Levine passed away in April. Committed to the value of international dialogue among sociological theorists, Don was an active member of this Research Committee. He contributed to the pages of *Theory* on several occasions, most recently with a stirring memorial to Schmuël Eisenstadt (in 2011) and a call to critically recover crucial ideas from the sociological heritage about agency and emancipation (in 2012).

This issue of *Theory* is dedicated to Don's memory. We include articles that testify to his intellectual and personal impact on the field, in its content and form. The notion of dialogue is the keynote. Indeed, through his final days, Don was working on a book, *Dialogical Social Theory* (which Transaction Press will publish), that would forward the concept of dialogue as the emergent guiding idea of his own oeuvre and as a potential lynchpin to a powerful reinterpretation of the theoretical tradition writ large.

We are pleased to publish a brief selection from the introduction to *Dialogical Social Theory* here, and thank Howard Schneiderman and Transaction Press for permission to do so. Jon Baskin introduces this selection by way of an account of what it was like to work with Don towards its completion. A University of Chicago graduate student and one of Don's long-time friends, Baskin's piece offers a moving portrait of how thought, teaching, and friendship fused in Don's life.

Other articles in this edition speak to issues that Don held dear. He was intensively concerned with questions about how to teach social theory, and believed that doing so well required careful reflection on the aims of education together with the broader situations in which teachers and students find themselves. Wolfgang Knöbl's essay on his own practice as a theoretical educator ably demonstrates the importance of undertaking such reflection. Questions about the nature of social relations, processes, and structures also animated Don's work, especially given his life-long engagement with the thought of Simmel and Parsons. Such issues are central in the "invitation to an ongoing experiment" we publish here, which records an ongoing conversation about relational sociology among several participants, with François Dépelteau and Jan Fuhse at the center. That this conversation appears as an unfolding dialogue, in all of its fits and starts, gives and takes, nearing and distancing, would be highly congenial to Don, we believe. In a similar experimental and dialogical vein, we include a link to "Theorizing from the South," by Gabriel Restrepo. Finally, Don was a master at "inverting the lens" from the objects of social thought to its thinkers, their texts, and their relationships. The essay here by Cinthya Guzman and Dan Silver draws explicit inspiration from Don's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* in reporting ongoing work analyzing sociological theory syllabi in Canada and beyond.

One final matter—please take special note on page 67 of the announcement for our RC

16 conference June 27-29, 2016 at Selwyn College, Cambridge, U.K. We hope to see many of you there.

**Erik Schneiderhan and Daniel Silver**

# Theorizing from the South

Click [here](#) to link to a paper “Building General Theory from the South” by Gabriel Restrepo. (We are not publishing it in the newsletter itself due to constraints on length.) It is an ambitious piece that attempts to outline a general theory of society while at the same time ruminating on his own experiences as a social theorist in the South. It is a complicated piece full of poetry and mess, and still very much in the early draft stage. The Editors of *Theory* thought it might spark interesting conversation and feel it is important to include the voices of those who wish to participate in our conversations.

# On Don Levine

**Jon Baskin, The University of Chicago**

About eight weeks before Don died, I went to visit him at his house on Blackstone Avenue in Hyde Park. Don had been a family friend since I was a child—and it was his book about the history and future of liberal education, *Powers of the Mind*, that had convinced me to pursue a graduate degree in Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Having heard from my parents that things were bad, I expected to find Don in bed or otherwise incapacitated, possibly watching TV or listening quietly to music, possibly tying up loose ends and having somber conversations with friends and family. What I found was completely different. Don was in his study when I arrived, jabbing away at his keyboard. He was writing emails to the various team members of his current project, a book called *Dialogical Social Theory*, which he had been working on for at least the previous year. Much of the book was finished—or just needed to have footnotes and citations completed, but he still needed to write the “pivotal” fourth chapter, he told me. We went down to the kitchen and had some toast. Then we sat in his living room, where my attention was as always divided by the titles on Don’s bookshelf, a kind of keyhole for me into what it meant to be a serious intellectual, to devote one’s life to ideas. Don asked me about my dissertation for the next hour. By the end of our conversation, Don had persuaded me that the work I was doing was of the utmost importance—something I often doubted myself. I tried to convey to him how grateful I was for all his help over the years, how he was responsible for me having come to the university in the first place, for whatever I had developed into as a thinker. But the words felt out of place, since, having spent two hours with him, I was no longer convinced that Don was really dying.

Three days later Don called me on the phone: a brilliant idea had occurred to him, he said—I could help him complete his book. I agreed somewhat hesitantly. Just like everybody else, I was busy. More importantly, I didn’t know how I could help. I had little background in social theory and had not heard anything about Don’s book until earlier that week. Don already had assembled an impressive team of undergraduates and PhD students who were helping him. Don brushed aside such concerns; he wanted to tell me about the book. The book was about what Martin Buber had called “genuine dialogue” and its importance for the field of sociology. Had I read Richard McKeon on the difference between controversy and conversation? (Of course I hadn’t). No matter, I could easily catch up; he would send me a reading list, along with the first few chapters of his book. The key was to finish the fourth chapter, which would be a survey of the myriad ways in which sociologists dismissed, denied, or diminished the contributions of their predecessors and contemporaries. The amazing thing was that, despite myself, I found I was becoming absorbed in the project. The message seemed important, even urgent—and I could begin to see connections between it and some of my own work. But then again, Don’s mind was like that, contagious; this was how he often made people around him feel about the ideas that were important to him (I can only imagine what an incredible teacher he must have

been).

As it happened, I wasn't much help on the book. Nevertheless, I would never trade the experiences I got to have as a result of watching Don attempt, in the last month of his life, to complete it. Once I spent an afternoon with Don at his house, taking dictation and talking through the structure of the fourth chapter; when he got tired, he took a half hour nap while I caught up on my McKeon. Twice after that, I participated in meetings with the entire team, where we strategized about the fastest way to move things forward. The first of the meetings took place in a dean's office—possibly it was Don's last time on the campus where he had spent his entire adult life. The second took place around his dining room table, about three weeks before he died.

The second meeting—which included besides the four of us students, Howard Schneiderman, a sociologist at the University of Lafayette who had said he would help shepherd the book through to completion, and Don's son, Bill, who had handled the logistics in the run up to the meeting—was the more memorable one. Don had not gotten treatment for some time; he was barely eating and could no longer walk without help. He had nevertheless managed to set out a sensible agenda for the meeting, and he orchestrated us through it with his usual poise and passion. Indeed it took all of his discipline, and some prodding from his son, to keep him to the agenda. For dialogue was not just an academic topic to Don; it was a way of life, and it was difficult for him to resist entering deeper into conversations that sprung up around the table as we were talking—about whether the dismissiveness with which later sociologists treated Dubois had to do with the rhetoric of sociology, or was better explained as a product of simple racism, or about how the relationship between sociology and theology, evident in the works of Ernst Troeltsch, had been sundered. I thought I could see, each time such topics would be raised, something flash across Don's eyes: that desire to wade in, to struggle right to the heart of the matter. He knew he had just one good hour to give us, so he had to stay on task. But one could sense that nothing would have made him happier than to have been able to discuss each one of those matters for the rest of the day.

The meeting was a success. By the end of it, we each had assigned tasks and clear deadlines about when they were to be completed. We were each to communicate with an expert on a given sociologist who had been dismissed or diminished within the field; asking him or her to explain how the sociologist had been dismissed, and what contributions to sociology had been lost as a result. We would then edit their responses into two paragraphs and send them to Howard, who had graciously promised to take the lead on collating our contributions and submitting them to Don for his perusal. The meeting came in at just under an hour—I was told later that Don slept for the rest of that day and most of the next as well to recover.

When he had first called me, I had wondered by Don would put so much energy into finishing his book; his legacy was after all secure, he had already achieved so much. Why not allow himself to relax at the end? I recognized at the meeting the shallowness of the question. Writing books, talking about ideas: it wasn't about his career or his legacy; this

was simply what Don did. His life's work was also his life; it hardly made sense to separate them in his case, and sure enough he never did so, not until the very end.

A couple of weeks after the meeting, everyone on the team received an email from Don's son, thanking us for our efforts and informing us that Don now felt assured that the book would be published, whatever happened with his health. "He is now facing his death in a state of equanimity," Bill wrote of his father, "with little attachment or aversion." I do not know how Don's work will be incorporated into the conversations of future sociologists; but I can say for sure that his final weeks were spent in genuine dialogue, not to be diminished or dismissed.



# Dialogical Social Theory

\* This excerpt from Don Levine's Prologue to Dialogical Social Theory has been chosen and edited by Howard Schneiderman whom Don asked to edit the book, and to bring it to publication. Schneiderman is Professor of Sociology at Lafayette College, and the Editorial Consultant for Transaction Publishers, which will bring out Dialogical Social Theory as the companion to Don's recently published Social Theory as a Vocation.

## Prologue. The Idea of Dialogue\*

"The psychological phenomena of inter communication between two minds have been unfortunately little studied." — C. S. Peirce

The task of this book, then, is to import the dialogical theme into contemporary sociology. Its underlying assumption is that *destructively conflictual modes of discourse among social scientists need to be transformed into discursive modes that embody dialogue*. This is so for the sake of the advancement of valid knowledge. It is important no less as an educational vehicle, one that offers concrete models of dialogical conduct for the world. "The sociologist," Martin Buber counseled, "must educate sociologically"—must educate people in how to live together, not to be just like one another, but how to express and respect their differences.

To accomplish this, I consider historical conditions that promote the evolution of modern non confrontational modes of communication, and then offer a differentiated analysis of forms of dialogicality in social theory.

The first part of *Dialogical Social Theory* introduces our topic by contrasting dialogue with its opposite, the multitude of phenomena that embody human combativeness. It surveys the dominant theories about the sources of combativeness and attends to the explosions of violence throughout the past century. It turns then to review the many non violent breakthroughs of the twentieth century and analyzes a complex of historic developments that lay behind these breakthroughs. Part 1 also offers two case studies of this secular change. It describes the perceived obsolescence of received combative modes: in American adversarial litigation and in Japanese martial arts. Later in Part 1, I confront a well known claim that the post-Cold War international community would necessarily be marked by a "clash of civilizations" with arguments regarding ways in which all world civilizations contain inclusionary as well as exclusionary assumptions.

To my mind, the beginning of wisdom on the subject of dialogue versus combativeness follows from making two sets of distinctions. For one thing, the process of “intercommunication of two minds,” as Peirce put it, takes many forms. The subject really demands that we distinguish different forms of dialogical interaction. Second, some kinds of dialogue can actually involve conflict. Accordingly, we need to distinguish between what sociologists like Louis Kriesberg have described as constructive versus destructive conflicts. These distinctions are also treated in Part 1, in which I analyze a number of discursive forms in which proponents of different positions engage in destructive conflict, constructive conflict, and consensual diversity. More concretely, I consider critically styles of dismissiveness, unmasking, caricature, and disavowal in discourse among social scientists.

The remaining parts of *Dialogical Social Theory* present essays that embody modalities in which contrasting intellectual positions in the social sciences can be related in non adversarial ways. Thus, Part II represents forms of dialogue in which the parties, although holding different positions, nevertheless share common objectives. One chapter in Part II demonstrates how radically different assumptions about human nature and the social world held by the 18C French philosophes and the 19C Russian intelligentsia produced similar visions of the global community. In another chapter I revisit the work of Simmel, Parsons, and Merton—with their markedly varying assumptions and agendas—to find material that can be brought to bear on a single subject, the sociology of morality. Perhaps the intellectually most challenging chapter of the book, compares the complicated conceptual frameworks of Parsons and Richard McKeon, with an eye to finding ways in which the strong programs of each can compensate for the weak points of the other. These three chapters all illustrate the theme of dialogue as complementary contributions to a common problem.

The succeeding trio of chapters in Part II demonstrates ways in which the ideas of authors who know little or nothing about one another can be brought together to form a novel dialogue. In one of these I bring together some key ideas of the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and the Japanese martial artist Morihei Ueshiba. Another chapter represents an imagined dialogue among Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber on the subject of ambiguity in scientific discourse. Moving closer to the present, I include a chapter that considers statements about education by John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins. It shows that the much celebrated differences between them are overshadowed by what can be shown to be shared positions on a common topic.

Part III describes rhetorical forms that transfigure oppositional discourse into productive dialogue. It deals with two major ways in which parties displaying pointed confrontations with one another can contribute to ongoing dialogues that enrich the total discourse about a subject. The first three chapters in Part III do this for interlocutors from, respectively, the British, French, and German philosophic traditions. The next chapter schematizes three mutually exclusive interpretations of the somatic bases of social conflict, then moves toward a fourth interpretation that offers ways to connect them productively. The final chapter in Part III brings the discussion to a relatively recent political crisis, which took place in Ethiopia following the violent reactions to the national election of 2005. My efforts there as a

mediator between the Government and the imprisoned opposition leaders forced me to find ways to bridge what seemed like implacably opposed positions.

# Teaching sociological and social theory in Germany: A (not so) personal account

**Wolfgang Knöbl, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen**

As a young PhD student I started teaching sociological theory at the Free University of Berlin at the beginning of the 1990s. Although I was quite aware that my experiences there certainly could not have been typical of sociology teachers in other universities all over Germany, I quickly became convinced that a new generation had come to departments of sociology that already had different interests compared to the generation I myself belonged to. It was not so easy to point to the exact differences, but at least some ideas came up as to why the books and texts with which I was socialized into sociological theory didn't work any longer when I tried to present them to my students. *First*, in the 1970s and 1980s the generations of students who attended university in general and who studied sociology in particular were still rather politicized, although the height of the student movement was now over for quite a while. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s the rise of the environmental movement, the protests against nuclear energy, and the peace movement created a strong feeling that all these conflicts had to be theorized and that "Gesellschaftstheorie" was needed in order to understand them all. Thus political and theoretical interests went together for quite a while – with the effect that sociology students could easily be convinced of the crucial importance of sociological theory. *Second*, the belief in the crucial importance of theory was accompanied and, at the same time, fostered by the polarized theoretical debate in Germany, i.e. by the clashes between followers of Jürgen Habermas and Critical Theory on the one side and adherents of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory on the other. Habermas and Luhmann were *the* protagonists of a theoretical debate that dominated German sociology for almost two decades. In this oftentimes quite emotional debate one simply had to take sides. Not everybody was happy with this constellation, and at least some – and for good reasons – were afraid of the long term consequences of a discussion that tended to drift away more and more from empirical work. Nevertheless, at least the battlefield was well defined, and the debate within sociological theory had a clear focus. The result was that – whatever one's own theoretical conviction – one had to position oneself in this controversy. Sociological theory was not unitary, to be sure, but at that time it also would have been not very plausible to argue that sociology is a truly multi paradigmatic discipline: The theoretical arguments were too narrowly focused in order to allow such a statement that would become true only a decade later.

The situation already began to change in the beginning of the 1990s. Students who decided to study sociology increasingly did so for a variety of reasons (and not necessarily mainly for political ones), and the new world order after the fall of the Berlin Wall caused developments through which social theory lost its focus. The former Habermas Luhmann controversy was removed from the center of the debate. A truly multi paradigmatic situation emerged: In sociological syllabi a whole variety of (seemingly not interrelated) theoretical positions were offered. These increasingly created the impression of a fairly diffuse field that allowed students – for rather arbitrary and contingent reason – to become either followers of Bourdieu or of Lyotard, to see themselves either as disciples of Giddens or of Foucault, to go along either with Rational Choice theory or network approaches. The consequence was that, in general, it became increasingly difficult to convince students of taking sociological theory seriously.

In a more specific way teachers of sociological theory encountered basically two problems. On the *undergraduate level* the multi paradigmatic situation often gave students a kind of anomic feeling. Every sociological theory seemed to be as good as any other. Because theories all looked so disconnected, their strengths and weaknesses could hardly be discussed in a systematic way. On the *graduate level* often a different problem emerged insofar as one could meet quite a few students who self confidently and often enthusiastically declared their plans to study a particular kind of empirical object from, for example, a Foucauldian point of view. Presented with such a diffuse and complicated field, students at some point – often during their undergraduate studies – solved the problem by deliberately jumping onto one particular theory. A kind of ‘will to belief’ could be detected which was not too far away from some kind of religious conversion: ‘I am now a believer in Foucault and that’s what I will desperately defend against all counter arguments!’ It is obvious that this kind of attitude was and is certainly not very helpful in doing sociological research, no matter whether it is carried out in a more empirical or a more theoretical fashion.

This was the situation in which already in the 1980s Hans Joas, who at that time was my Ph.D supervisor, began to develop a lecture course on modern social theory. The course aimed to counter undergraduate’s feelings of being lost in a quagmire of different and hardly interconnected theories. The idea was to present a clear cut narrative which not only made sense of the overall development of social theory from the times of Parsons’s early work up to the 1990s, but also one which students could easily grasp in order to make sense of their own reading experiences. After having tested his arguments by lecturing to many different national and international audiences, Joas invited me to cooperate with him and to put these lectures into print. It took us quite a while to do so, especially because the number of lectures had to be increased considerably in order to give a truly comprehensive account of almost all major currents within social theory. In the end the book (around 800 pages long) was published in German in 2004 and in English in 2009 (*Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*, Cambridge UP) and

has since that time been translated (or is right now in the process of being translated) into a couple of other languages.

I used this book in teaching undergraduates quite a lot, both in Germany at the University of Goettingen and in Canada at the University of Toronto, but I am obviously not an unbiased judge in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of how we presented social theory to our readership and to our audience. Nevertheless, I have a rather strong opinion why students rather positively reacted to our approach. Three points should be mentioned here:

- A) To place Talcott Parsons and especially his *Structure of Social Action* (1937) into the center of the book (the idea was taken from Jeffrey Alexander's *Sociological Theory Since 1945*) offered students at least two things: *First*, students could understand why Parsons's action frame of reference became the focus of the action theoretical debate of the 1950, 60s and 70s for theoretical currents such as Ethnomethodology, Symbolic Interactionism and even Rational Choice, why authors such as Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu tried to improve on that scheme, and why Jürgen Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* took Parsons's early book as a starting point for his own theoretical enterprise. *Second*, students could also understand why Parsons himself became increasingly dissatisfied with his own action theoretical framework and began to build an alternative edifice based on systems theory – an important topic if one wants to understand why scholars such as Niklas Luhmann developed an even more abstract social theory decades later. In sum, making Parsons the starting point of the discussion enabled students to understand a great deal about theoretical developments after 1945: Different sociological theories do in fact have something in common, they are – in some way or another – interrelated.
- B) From my experience students appreciated the fact that in our book as well as in my own lectures it was never intended to hide our/my own preferences and theoretical predilections. Although we/I always tried to give a fair account of the theories under discussion, we/I made it quite clear that we/I believed some approaches to be better and more fruitful than others. Students always seemed to have liked such a stance because they learnt that doing social theory is not a sterile and abstract endeavor but one in which the passionate fight for the better argument rules the debate.
- C) From the responses to our lecturing and writing, we also know that students find our way of defining social theory at least interesting and stimulating. *First*, we tried to avoid too narrow a focus on sociological theory for the simple reason that sociology from its very beginning was always connected to debates in neighboring disciplines, be it economics, history or philosophy. But we decided to talk about “social theory” not only

in order to pay due attention to this historical fact; by using the broader term “social theory” we also wanted to address students from different disciplines. Writing and talking about “social theory” would also, so we believed, help us to attract the attention of students who are interested in a variety of public debates which are difficult to understand in terms of a rather narrow understanding of sociological theory. *Second*, our argument that social theories should be ready to answer three questions – “What is social action?”; “What is social order?”; “What is social change?” – allowed us to set boundaries in a meaningful way: As we/I made clear, theories that do not address all three of these questions are difficult to describe as comprehensive approaches, but that, of course, does not mean that sociology should not be open to authors who answer only one or two of the questions just mentioned. On the contrary, keeping the three questions in mind students were always quite keen to discuss approaches which obviously do not fit into our scheme, so that in the end they were provoked to think themselves about the merits and deficiencies of theories, something which – at the undergraduate level – is already quite an achievement.

Probably many more things can be said about the advantages and disadvantages of our approach, but since there is not enough space please let me once again emphasize the most important point. We/I strongly do believe that teaching sociological/social theory out of historical context does not make much sense. Students must get a feeling for how social theory has developed and why it happened as it did. Only by combining theoretical arguments with historical context can students convincingly legitimate the theoretical choices they make when doing empirical research. That’s how good research is done within sociology.

# Inverting the Lens

**Cinthya Guzman and Daniel Silver, University of Toronto**

From its very foundation to the present, sociology has been keenly concerned with the state of sociological theory and its position within sociology at large (Camic, Joas and Levine 2004; Levine 1995; Levine 2014). The boundaries of theory have always been contested, and while we share a discipline, we rarely agree about what it means to do so.

Recent discussions have highlighted the shifting role of the theorist in particular in American sociology (Lamont 2004, Lizardo 2014). However, discussions about the state of contemporary education in sociological theory rarely take place in the context of detailed empirical knowledge about how it is in fact practiced. To make a start toward remedying this situation, we collected theory syllabi from sociology departments in Canadian universities. Others are currently doing so in Germany, Turkey, and Colombia, and it is our hope that still more countries will join in this endeavor. Together we can build an international repository of sociological theory syllabi, which we can use to understand ourselves better – how approaches to teaching theory vary across countries, university types, instructors, and more. In this way we can illuminate the actual practice of theoretical education, and intelligently discuss its future.

Here we give a very brief summary of some of the findings so far from Canada. These are preliminary; the goal is to provide a flavor of the possibilities and initiate a conversation about possible questions and lines of interpretation. We cover 4 themes: 1) the overall prevalence of theory courses and their position within the typical curriculum; 2) patterns of authors assigned; 3) characteristics of theory instructors; and 4) typical narratives of the history of social thought.

## **How theory is taught in Canada**

Within Canada, there are 67 sociology departments among private and public universities, offering a minimum of a BA degree. 31 of these universities offer MA programs as well, while only 24 of them offer a PhD in sociology.

Theory is strongly and widely integrated into the institutional framework of the Canadian sociology curriculum. All Canadian sociology departments require some type of theory course. “Classical” vs. “Contemporary” is the most typical organizing principle. Out of 64 programs, 43 of them offer classical and/or contemporary theory as part of core degree BA requirements.<sup>1</sup> 36 programs require both, with some programs allowing students to choose between one or the other. When universities don’t require classical or contemporary theory, they often require a general theory course instead (23 programs). These courses often cover 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century thought. However, the time spent on each

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<sup>1</sup> 3 private universities don’t offer program details online.



course is limited to half a year, with very few universities offering full year general theory courses. Within graduate programs, Canadian universities seem to prefer general theory courses, which survey some classic and contemporary theorists. At the MA and PhD level, there are 14 and 9 programs that require general theory courses respectively. There are 5 MA programs that require both classical and contemporary theory, and 3 programs at the PhD level that share the same expectations.

Aside from these required courses, Canadian sociology departments may offer thematic theory courses, such as cultural, feminist, queer, and post colonial theory at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Some universities also offer author-specific theory courses, which usually cover the work of Marx, Durkheim, or Weber. These types of courses tend to be required electives or non requirements, and are not uniformly taught within these departments.

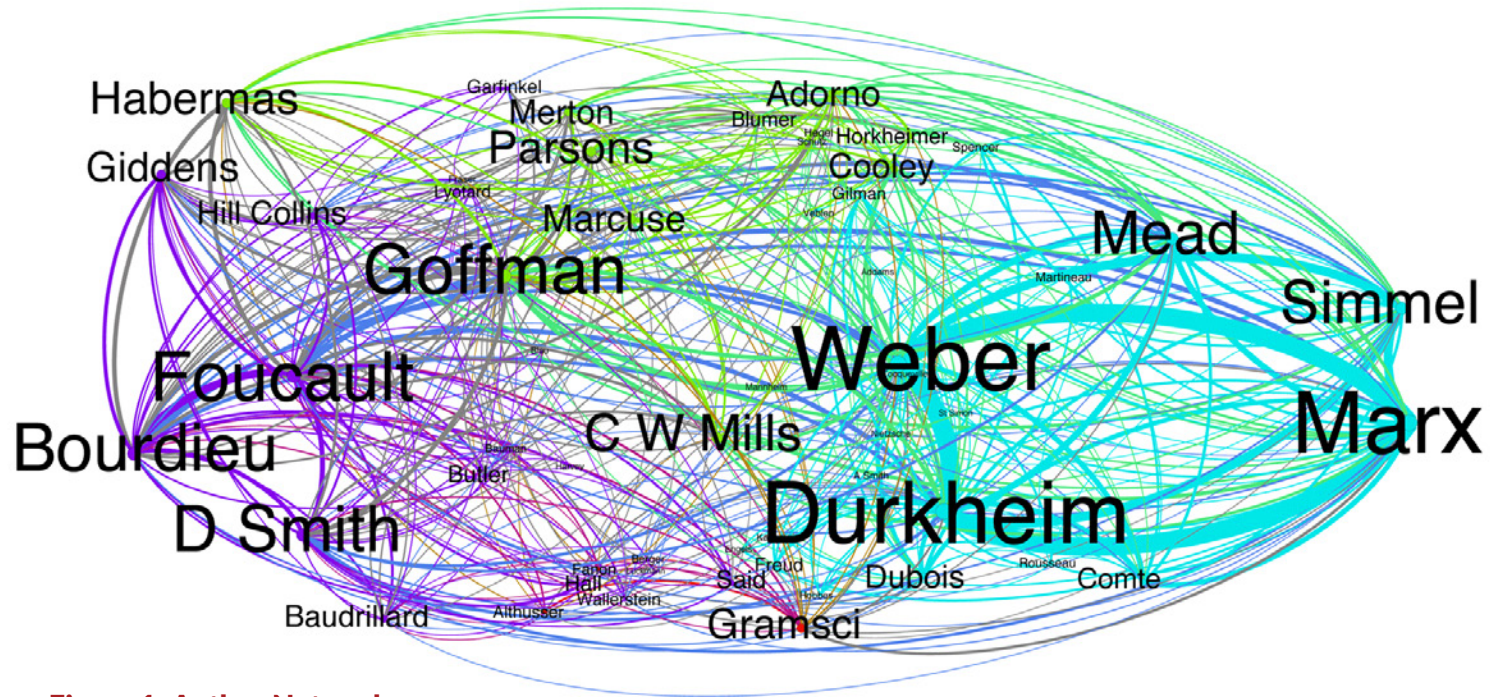
These patterns raise some intriguing questions. How common is it to organize theory education in terms of a classical vs. contemporary schema? What other schemas are there, and how do they vary across nations? What are the implications of adopting this framework -- what view of the theoretical tradition does it presume and sustain? What are the (possibly shifting) boundaries between "classical" and "contemporary," and how are authors placed into one category vs. the other? Analysis of syllabi provide some initial cues for this latter question.

### **Social Theorists Network**

Based on a collection of theory syllabi, we created a network of social theorists.<sup>2</sup> The names within the network are authors who are referenced within these syllabi. The larger the authors' names appear, the greater their "authority," that is, the more connected they are to other authors. The thicker the lines between authors' names, the more often they are assigned within the same course. Colour groups indicate "communities" classified according to Gephi's community detection algorithm, which identifies clusters of authors that tend to appear together at relatively high rates.

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<sup>2</sup> Most syllabi were available online through Sociology department's websites. Some were collected through administrators, and department chairs. Our overall response rate was 66 percent.



**Figure 1: Author Network**

This figure graphs authors who are co-listed in Canadian sociological theory syllabi. The graph was compiled from 286 theory syllabi from sociology departments in Canadian universities over 3 academic years.<sup>3</sup> To increase readability, the graph only includes authors with at least five edges.

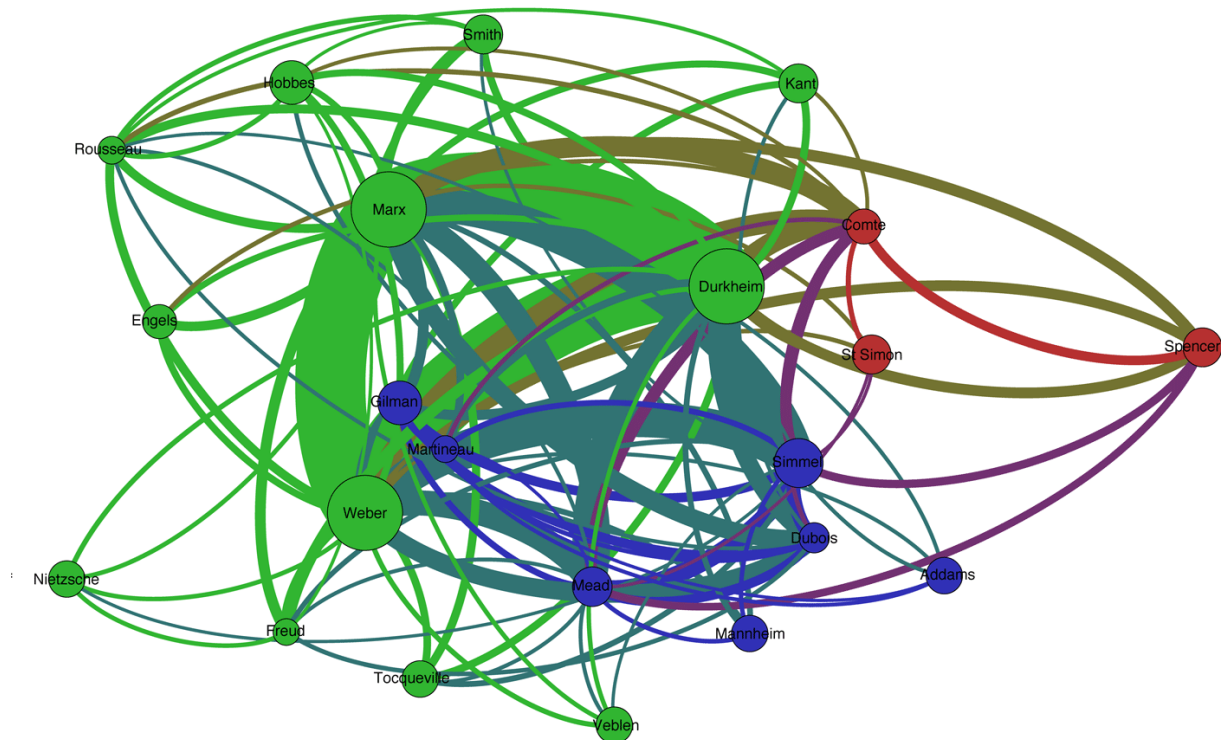
<sup>3</sup> Academic years: 2012 – 2013, 2013 – 2014, and 2014 – 2015. We decided to cover 3 academic years to ensure we had syllabi for as many theory classes taught in Canada. When an instructor has taught the same class for all 3 years, we kept the latest syllabi possible, and withdrew their earlier classes from our dataset.

As we can see in Figure 1, the common core of sociological theory education in Canada are the “Big Three,” Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. These authors form the center of a major “community” of theorists typically assigned together in theory courses, especially classical theory. Other major communities of authors (in blue) cohere around Bourdieu, Foucault, and Dorothy Smith; Goffman, Mills, Habermas, and Parsons (in purple), and Gramsci (in brown). The weight of the classics is evident: contemporary theorists make up the most total references overall, but the “Big Three” provide a common reference point. In fact, only a handful of classical theory classes break up the Big Three, and separate these readings.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault emerges as a particularly interesting figure. He is the fourth most commonly listed author in the dataset (about 85 times, after the Big Three, which are included in about 130 syllabi). But he is assigned in a less consistent way than are the Big Three, which are almost always included together (around 100 times). Foucault most frequently appears with Bourdieu (about 50 times) and Goffman (about 35 times), but is also listed frequently with Dorothy Smith (30), the Big Three (25-30), Habermas and Giddens (around 20), as well as Adorno, Marcuse, Baudrillard, Gramsci, Said, Lyotard, Horkheimer, and Butler (10-15). While the Big Three seem to occupy a relatively fixed position in the theoretical canon (almost always assigned as a group), Foucault’s is more mobile and multi-valent, capable of being joined with multiple traditions. It would be interesting to pursue this analysis further to unpack the many meanings of Foucault, examining how and why he provides such a fluid theoretical resource for theory professors.

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<sup>4</sup>When this is the case, the classical theory education of the particular department may extend over two classes, which divides the readings over two terms (separate classes). Also, a few departments dedicate courses on each classic theorist, which extends the classical theory education over 3 courses.



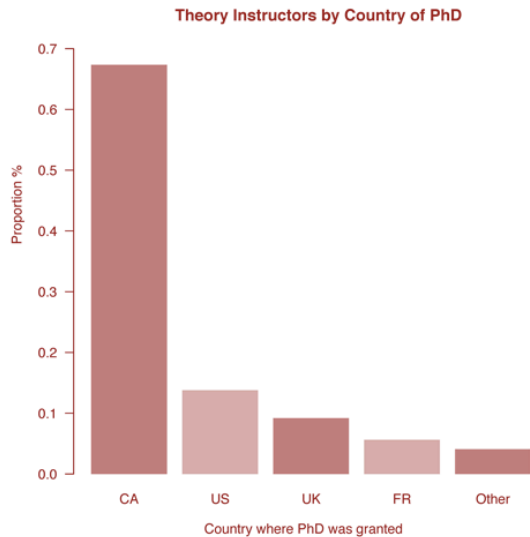
**Figure 2: Classical Author Network**

The values within the network are classical authors from 286 theory syllabi. The different colours within the network represent different communities detected within the “classical” community from Figure 1. That is, we isolated authors within the “classical” cluster from Figure 1, and then used Gephi’s community detection algorithm to identify clusters among those authors. See Figure 1 for more technical details.

Figure 2 isolates the “classical” community from Figure 1 and analyzes its own internal structure. This figure shows the centrality of the Big Three, but highlights the other authors they tend to be assigned with. Most commonly the Big Three are assigned along with sociology’s philosophical preb cursors, such as Hobbes, Smith, and Rousseau. Two other types of groupings appear: one includes “protob sociologists” such as Spencer and Comte; the other seems to revolve around alternative “classics” that cross gender, religious, and racial boundaries, such as Simmel, Dubois, Addams, Gilman, and Martineau, and suggest alternative theoretical trajectories (Mead and Mannheim).

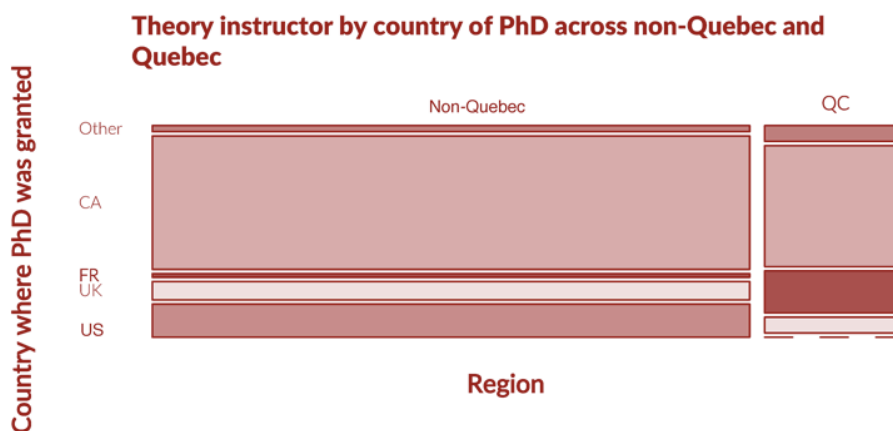
These results again raise many questions worth pursuing in future research. From an international point of view, how widespread is the organization of the classics around Marx, Weber, and Durkheim? What are the range of “others” and what selection criteria determine their inclusion as a classic? What various visions of the tradition of sociological theory flow from the selection of one set of classics vs. another, and what are the typical national, institutional, and social location of these visions?

## Characteristics of Theory Instructors



**Figure 3: Theory Instructors by country of PhD.** This figure displays the proportion of theory instructors by the country where they earned their PhDs. N = 258 instructors.

In addition to the syllabi themselves, we also gathered information about theory instructors, such as their rank, gender, current university's location and category (e.g. medicalb doctoral vs. primarily undergraduate). For example, about 60% of instructors were men.<sup>5</sup> Here we highlight: (1) where professors were trained, and (2) their research interests.



**Figure 4: Theory Instructors by country of PhD and where they teach** This figure displays the proportion of theory instructors by the country where they earned their PhDs and where they teach. N = 258 professors

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, we don't have access to the gender distribution of sociology instructors in Canada to give some context. However, by way of comparison about 35% of the ASA theory section are female. Please click [here](#) for more information.

In Canada, the majority of theory professors are trained within domestic universities. The next closest group is trained in the US, followed by the UK and France. Given the proximity and size of the US, it is interesting that there is little difference between the number of Canadian theory professors trained in the US and Europe. However, PhD location imposes a strong filter on where professors currently teach. For instance, only a handful of French PhD recipients teach outside of Québec, while, (in our dataset) no US PhD recipients taught a Québec theory course. UK PhDs by contrast are spread relatively equally between Québec and English Canada. These are striking differences, which inform divergent intellectual cultures that are in many ways tied as much (or perhaps more) to their French and US counterparts as they are to each other. These divergences have deep historical roots that we intend to explore as part of a larger project, and point toward intriguing connections between politics, culture, and ideas.

Michèle Lamont (2004) suggested that theory instructors at leading American departments rarely define themselves exclusively as theorists. As evidence for this claim, she points to the fact that relatively few professors who teach theory reference theory among their primary research interests. To her this suggests a decline in theory work for itself and an increase in theoretically informed research within American sociology's "theory satellites areas," such as the sociology of culture and historical comparative sociology. In Canada, a somewhat different picture emerges. Here, professors who teach theory often refer to theory in their research interests (about 170 references),<sup>6</sup> the third most common term in our dataset (the first and second most common being sociology (281) and social (242)). When instructors make this reference, other terms that are most correlated with it are: philosophy (0.43), critical (0.39), and Frankfurt (school) (0.36). Commonly, theory instructors also show interest in politics (ranked 6<sup>th</sup>, 104 references made), culture (7<sup>th</sup>, 94), and work (8<sup>th</sup>, 76), followed closely by interests surrounding: history (11<sup>th</sup>, 51), health (13<sup>th</sup>, 49), and gender (14<sup>th</sup>, 46). When instructors refer to particular theorists in their research interests, they reference Marx (12), Durkheim (9), and Foucault (8). There are some gender differences in research interests: female theory instructors are more likely (to a statistically significant degree) to refer to gender (37) or women (19) in their research interests, while males are more likely to refer to social (150), theory (106), and science (27).<sup>7</sup> We are also pursuing comparisons in research interests across university type, location, instructor PhD, and more.

Gendered interest in "science" and "theory" even among instructors of social theory is an interesting topic worth pursuing further. Similarly intriguing are the various ways in which theory teaching overlaps with different sub-disciplinary areas in different contexts – both in terms of areas theory teachers typically work in, and those from which they are separated. Cross-national investigation of rates at which theory instructors describe themselves as theorists is also a potentially useful ways to examine variations in how strongly institutionalized the role "theorist" is. This kind of analysis can provide a window

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<sup>6</sup> To gather instructors' research interests, we referred to university websites, LinkedIn, and CV information.

<sup>7</sup> Male references to gender = 8, and women = 1. Female references to science = 5, and social = 83.

into the (varying) structural positions of theory and theorists within the discipline at large, and raise questions about how the sub-disciplinary identities of theory instructors shape the sort of theory education students encounter.

### **Constructed History of Sociology**

Each syllabus has its own way of telling the history of sociology. This story is sometimes laid out as a narrative within the course objectives. Other times it is implicit within the required (and supplementary) reading lists. A starting point for getting a handle on the range of narratives is Levine's (1995) typology from *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*, which identified six different narratives of the history of social theory: positivist, pluralist, synthetic, humanist, contextual, and dialogical (12). These narratives have a role in the life of the discipline, by "provid[ing] coherence and meaning" to its practice (2). Each finds some resonance in how sociological theory is taught in Canada today.

Among the syllabi in our dataset, theory courses seem to be most often a mix between pluralist and contextual narratives. Instructors typically frame the emergence of sociology as a tense moment, the emergence of a third way between the natural sciences and the humanities. Overall, the implicit narrative of the history of social theory across the syllabi has something of a fountain shape. A small set of foundational figures blossoms out to a panoply of voices, expanding rapidly after the Second World War. Rather than pit theories against one other in competition for validity or a progressive narrative from error to truth, most courses present the various readings as instances of multiple perspectives, sometimes to be assessed for their "strengths and weaknesses," but usually to be understood as offering a range of potentially useful interpretative resources.

At the same time, the implicit histories of theory syllabi also seem to focus on the tensions that made sociology what it is today. They emphasize context specific details that shape the way people thought within particular eras. For instance, some syllabi stress how social theories shifted as a result of the industrial revolution and the Second World War.

Pluralism and contextualism are the main narratives through which sociological theory is taught in Canada today. Again more general questions emerge from these preliminary analyses. For instance, Levine claims that specific narrative forms emerge in response to specific disciplinary problems. In his account for example the pluralist narrative (exemplified by Sorokin) arose out of "the multitude of [...] contradictory systems" (Sorokin 1928 as cited in Levine 1995) flourishing in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a way to "provide the novitiate to this confusing field with a guide" while acknowledging that "these differences are valuable, not harmful." Is it possible to interpret the narratives embedded in theory syllabi as responses to such problematics? If so, which problems seem to be pressing and which seem to be on the wane? Can we detect new problems emerging, and with them new ways of telling the story of sociological theory?

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There is more work to be done to fully understand how sociology is taught in Canada, or in any country. But in turning the lens in on ourselves, we can see our role in directly informing perspectives that shape our discipline. With the help of others across the globe, we can also see how theoretical focuses may change or overlap across nations and regions, and most importantly, develop more refined and probing questions and interpretations.

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# Invitation to an ongoing experiment: discussing what relational sociology is

**François Dépelteau, Université Laurentienne**  
**Jan Fuhse, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin**

Several months ago, we created a research cluster on relational sociology (RS) through and thanks to the *Canadian Sociological Association*. The interest in this growing approach and a network on this topic is obviously strong: in April 2015, we were already 46 qualified members from 13 countries (April 2015). We wanted something interactive; something like a network which would not only reflect the state of development of RS, but which would also contribute to its development and diffusion. Personally, I was looking for different types of interactions with other social scientists; different from the typical and formal interactions through texts and congresses. I was looking for interactions which would be more direct, less formal or more “natural” if you wish. I was clearly not interested in “cocktail discussions,” which start and end with civilized but empty comments such as: “Fascinating presentation, dear colleague”. I was looking for conversations based on concise questions, answers and replies; where the participants would accept to be challenged and even change their views, concepts or methods. In brief, like my colleagues I guess, I was looking for substantial, vibrant interactions not for the sake of debates or controversies in themselves, but for identifying and clarifying our significant and superficial differences, maybe even agreeing on common solutions, concepts or orientations. In other words, we wanted to start from our common interest in relational thinking with the hope that by doing so we could move beyond the current state of knowledge of social relations more quickly and efficiently. I also suppose we all knew it would not be so easy -- not only because we are not used to do this, but also because most of us had, and still have of course, different epistemological, ontological, theoretical and methodological orientations. Maybe I exaggerate the level of difficulty of this experimentation, but I imagine you will probably realize quite quickly by reading these discussions that it is not so easy to start and maintain a dialogue with no common language. Anyway, we did it. This experimentation lasted from March 5th to April 8th 2015. I think it was the first phase of a longer conversation.

So, we created a group discussion on Google and invited all the 46 members of the new research cluster to participate. 27 of them joined the new club. This group discussion was initially based on 4 basic questions. So far, most of the discussions have been related to the first question (presented at the beginning of the text) and involved mostly – but not only – Jan (Fuhse) and myself. We have been more vocal than the other ones. Hyperactive a little bit maybe? But as you will notice, I am sure, other more discrete or busier colleagues made few comments, but they had significant impacts on the process. I do not want to forget anybody but Emily Erikson, Prabhu Guptara and Dan Silver certainly played this role.

Anyway, for better or worse, since we were more active, the discussions were shaped more by our views, orientations and concepts rather than anything else. Jan and I did not know each other and we still have never interacted face-to-face. I would probably not recognize him if I would meet him on the street. Welcome to the weird but wonderful virtual world. We also come from different sociological backgrounds. Jan is from Germany and heavily influenced by N. Luhmann's theory, as well as by Harrison White and Charles Tilly, with whom he worked during a post-doc at Columbia University. I live in Canada but beyond what is written on my two passports, I do not really know anymore what my national identity is. The major influences which lead me to RS have been mostly – but not only – the works of N. Elias, B. Latour and J. Dewey. As you will see by reading our exchanges, this type of interaction leads quickly to many disagreements, and then, to the slow, painful commencement of the discovery of some fundamental common ground. Maybe... And once again, I think it also shows how the lack of common theoretical orientations and concepts (the lack of a common language in social sciences) has serious impacts – not only negative ones I would add – on our capacity to implement a productive dialogue. It might also reveal that social scientists are better trained for monologues than dialogues – at least not this kind of dialogue.

But I think we are learning how to interact in this way, and we can see what kind of positive outcomes come from this experiment. For instance, we are discovering our similarities and differences in terms of content; we are now trying to find common solutions and also, maybe, to clarify the basic distinctions between relational sociologies. This kind of dialogue also obliges us to come back to basic issues and definitions. It is a formative process: we are learning how to interact with each other in this way by trying new dialogical methods and formats; and maybe more important, by being more humble about our own public image and more realistic about the limits of our respective approaches.

I really learnt a lot about the limits and silences of my own (transactional) approach, and this is very useful when you are trying to improve your stuff. For me at least, this type of process has been a wonderful complement to the usual intellectual interactions, reading books and articles, writing, teaching, and so on.

In any case, when Dan (Silver) offered to both of us to publish these discussions, I quickly believed it was a great idea. I still do, but my second reaction was to be anxious a little bit (more than Jan, I think). I was not so sure that these interactions were publishable. I cowardly thought and suggested we should polish – and even improve or change – these questions, comments and replies in order to make them more relevant, precise or accurate, if you see what I mean... Dan and Jan insisted that we should keep the original format and content: they wanted to present a lively

discussion with all its characteristics, including its weaknesses, rather than a polished text. They were as right as one can be. So, I painfully resisted to the temptation to “improve” my comments and replies, and limited editing to a minimum, just enough to eliminate some repetitions and specific comments which would be incomprehensible for the readers because they would be out of context.

What also matters here is the “nature” of the process. This is the main reason I agreed to make these discussions even more public than they were supposed to be. Indeed, beyond the content of our discussions (which might be useful in themselves) we could really leave a trace – as Jan would say, if I correctly understood some of his comments – if we could manage to successfully keep this process alive, dynamic, fluid and unpredictable. In other words, we are proving that social scientists with different approaches can have productive discussions based on real interactions, rather than simply presenting and defending their own theory or “paradigm” though was are mostly monologues, as we too often do in classrooms, texts and congresses.

Of course, the usual mode of making and presenting social science is very useful and even necessary, but I think we can also do much more by adopting other modes of interaction which reduce the “distance” between the participants, as our colleague Prabh Gupta would probably say. By doing so, we expose ourselves more than usual. We are kind of naked; we are left without the usual protection of the text or the hierarchy between the professor and the students; and we do it outside of the usually supportive “family” or the “tribes,” which produce all these quasi-paradigms, schools or theoretical currents in the social sciences. The show is live. It is more dynamic than usual, more open and fluid; the interactants take more risks than usual, by hoping that this kind of process may help everybody to better understand where we really disagree, where we do not disagree as much as we believed, and what kind of solutions we can find by working together even without any a priori consensus. Sorry for the repetition but this is an experiment, and as such it is made by mistakes. This is a work-in-progress, and hopefully, we are just at the beginning of this process. Let us see how far we can go. Personally, I wish the publication of these interactions will inspire other colleagues to start similar processes in relational sociology or in other social science fields, and see where it can lead us, as interdependent social scientists.

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If you want to join our research cluster and(or) our ongoing group discussion on RS, please contact F. Dépelteau ([fdepelteau@laurentian.ca](mailto:fdepelteau@laurentian.ca)) or Jean Sébastien Guy ([JeanSebastien.Guy@Dal.Ca](mailto:JeanSebastien.Guy@Dal.Ca)). If you are interested by these issues and processes, you will be more than welcome.

# Discussion on Relational Sociology

**Starting question (as formulated by François Dépelteau, March 4<sup>th</sup>):**

The first topic for discussion can be summarized in several words: What is the object of relational sociology? It DOES NOT mean why we need relational sociology or what we are trying to do with RS [relational sociology]. This is another topic for discussion. But it means: What is the social stuff we study? Durkheim attached sociology to the study of social things. In RS, various objects have been mentioned: social processes, configurations, networks, social fields, and so on. So, what do you think we (should) study in RS? If we study networks (or fields, configurations, etc.), how do we define them? Please try to keep your explanations short and simple. Usually, productive discussions start with precise and simple explanations. I guess the idea is to see if we can agree on something or if we have several incompatible answers.

**Jan Fuhse (March 5<sup>th</sup>):**

Hello everybody!

I might as well try to get this going, since I suggested (referring to Emily's review of François and Chris's books<sup>1</sup>), that we probably don't all agree with regard to the scope and aims of relational sociology. I try to offer answers to all three of François 's questions. Since they are connected to each other, I write only one e-mail, and I try to keep it short.

As far as I know, the social world is extremely complex, and all we can hope for is grasping and studying some aspects of it (just as the "world" is extremely complex, and sociology studies only the social aspects of it, with other aspects frequently interfering).

Therefore, relational sociology is concerned with studying (and conceptualizing) the particularly "relational" aspects of it, since they are by and large neglected by other approaches (individualist, culturalist, holistic, etc.). The particular relational aspects consist of patterns of relations and relationships that constitute an important and relatively independent layer of the social world (I think we can agree on this). This does not mean that there aren't other aspects or layers of the social world, or that these aren't important (at least not for me). One important task of relational sociology is to study their relevance for and interplay with the relational aspects, for example, how culture and networks are interwoven (see, among others, Nick Crossley's paper in IRS<sup>2</sup>).

So far for the first two questions. The third, what methods, is in principle an open one. Obviously, social networks analysis (and, to a lesser extent, statistical analysis of ego centered networks) focuses on the pattern of relations or relationships. But, for example, Matthew Desmond has recently convinced me that there is and should be "relational ethnography" (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11186-014-9232-5>). The recent discussion of the role of qualitative methods in network research is directly relevant here (see the contributions by Crossley, Bellotti, Hollstein, Fuhse / Muetzel, etc.<sup>3</sup>). Of course, not only the pattern of relations (networks), but also the reality of singular relationships, and the processes in them, make an important feature of the

relational aspects of the social world. These are often studied by way of qualitative interviews.

Does this make sense? All the best,  
Jan

**François Dépelteau (March 5<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi Jan and everybody,

In reaction to Jan's answers:

1) I agree on the high complexity of the social world and our related incapacity to grasp the totality of it (the Truth, the Reality...). In this sense, I always liked the Weberian difference between the Real and ideal types (representations of the reality based on the accentuation of some actors, actions or relations). Or the pragmatist idea that the Known emerges from transactions between the observers and the observed, and it is different from the Real (that we cannot see). Is it something like that that you have in mind, Jan? If yes, I am on board for this one.

2) About the object of RS, you said: patterns of relations as a specific layer of the social world. I would need more precision about two issues. First, do you restrict RS to the study of patterns and, therefore, exclude the study of more chaotic relations? If yes, why? Is it because a scientific sociology has to be related to the discovery of laws or social mechanisms? Second, what do you mean by layers of reality? As a reader of Dewey and pragmatism, I am always reluctant to divide the reality into layers, levels, etc. What are these layers? Is it the classical idea that the social is beyond (or beside) the individuals, for example? Do you study relations between layers or levels or relations between people?

3) Last one: for the same pragmatic reason, I am also reluctant to differentiate cultures from structures (or cultures from networks). It seems to me that these analytic distinctions do not correspond to any real layers, levels or realities. I know where it is coming from after reading your last article on H. White and RS<sup>4</sup>, but do we really need these distinctions? Does it cause more problems than anything else? Or more directly, what does it bring exactly in terms of analytical power that we cannot see or analyze by simply studying relations between agents which are oriented by values, norms, perceptions, etc.? (The interpretative sociology of Weber, for example, integrates values and relations without relying on any analytical dualism between cultures and networks or structures. There are various bearers of values, norms, perceptions, etc. which interact with each other, but no interaction between cultures and networks).

I hope my (many) questions make sense. Answer if you wish, of course. And thanks a lot, Jan, for starting the process.

François

**Dan Silver (March 9<sup>th</sup>):**

All,

I would like to return to some of the issues raised by Jan Fuhse and François Dépelteau, and to extend Nick Crossley's mention of Abbott.

On 1), (à la Abbott<sup>5</sup>) we could consider the Chicago School mantra, "all social facts are located facts." That is a seemingly simple but far reaching claim, worth elaborating. In brief, it is the idea that if I want to identify what is going on, I will invariably find myself doing so by reference to location, i.e., where and when the activity is occurring. To locate something is to situate it in reference to what surrounds and precedes it. Absent that relational context, we are dealing in empty abstraction. So on this account in relational sociology a primary task is to locate facts in time and place.

On 2) I would agree that one can be quite ecumenical methodologically. Even fairly standard regression-based techniques can be used to study the locatedness of social facts. For instance, one can compare neighbourhoods (to continue a Chicago school focus) that are seemingly similar in a number of respects, but differ a) with respect to their prior history and b) the character of their surrounding areas, and examine how their trajectories differ. You can see this kind of effort in Chicago School authors as well, in the various mapping exercises, the notion of neighbourhood careers, and the like. But also their quantitative heirs such as Duncan were sensitive to these issues.

On 3) the relevance of relational sociology. Here I would point again to the "social facts are located facts" formulation, and ask what a non-located social fact would be. It would be without time or place, i.e. an empty abstraction. If the goal of relational sociology is to locate social facts, then the importance lies in combating our tendency to empty abstraction, and to push us toward the concrete. Indeed, the root meaning of "concrete" is "having grown together."

Thanks for initiating a stimulating conversation,

Dan

**Jan Fuhse (March 10<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi everybody!

Just a short reply to Dan's point: Maybe we need a separate discussion about how we think "sociology" should be done, rather than what "relational sociology" is about. I like Abbott's excellent text, but I find the equation of "relational" with geographical and temporal context unfortunate (and the text sure contributes to that). In my view, the sequential analyses of Abbott or of Schegloff are often not tied to "social relations". Also, many cultural analyses of anthropology are very explicit about the geographical and temporal situatedness of their findings, paying little attention to social constellations.

Maybe we need to specify what "located social fact" means further than just pointing to spatial and temporal context.

A similar point can be made with regard to Bourdieu's notion of relational: If we agree that distributions of "more or less" of some resource (type of capital) across actors is a relation than all individualist empirical social research (the main target of Abbott's critique) becomes relational. In my view we need a more concise meaning of the term "relational sociology".

Trying to be provocative in order to spark discussion...

Best, Jan

**François Dépelteau (March 10<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi,

For some reasons, Jan's last reply did not appear on this group but on my gmail account. I copied it below with my reactions to his stimulating comments.

**Jan:** Dear all,

Thanks François for this reaction and challenge! I'd say, this discussion should not be about me and my obscure views. So everybody please feel free to jump in and offer their own take on things.

As for the three points:

1. Yes, François, pretty much so. I'd interpret Weber somewhat differently, but apart from that...

**François:** Ok, we agree on this one! I will do some self promotion here (sorry), but this is a point I tried to present in my last article on social fields and transactional sociology<sup>6</sup>. The Known emerges from transactions between the observer and the observed, and this is all we can see and talk about. There would be much more to say here, and I think Latour's texts can help a lot (with Dewey and maybe Weber). I guess the main idea is that relational sociology should be fully relational, starting at the epistemological level (once again, we have no access to the Reality but we can produce useful knowledge about it especially if and when it helps us, or some of us to deal with specific issues or problems in our life).

**Jan: 2.** My talk about a "layer" is notoriously imprecise, thanks for pointing that out. When I say "layer" I usually mean: We can look at the complexity of the social world from different angles (by way of different concepts and methods). What we see from this one particular perspective comprises only some aspects of it and remains necessarily blind to others. Relational sociology has pointed out just such a blindness to the relational aspects of the social world in individualistic and holistic approaches. In this sense, the "relational" constitutes an important "layer" (or "aspect") of the social that is interwoven (but not coterminous) with other aspects, such as culture, individual motivations, socio demographics etc.

When I say "relational patterns" I refer to relations (and relationships) between social



actors (individuals as well as corporate and collective actors). That is, regularities of transactions (or communication, or interaction, or social action, whatever our theoretical preference here).

Of course, we would then also be interested in when such regularities occur, and when not. But chaotic turbulence itself would not be the subject of relational sociology. (Overall, I follow Durkheim in saying that sociology is about discerning systematic connection between different social facts. The absence of regularities could only be an interesting object of study if we ask ourselves: under what systematic circumstances do we find such chaos, e.g. periodically in Mardi Gras. But other authors have other ideas about what sociology is, and this question is not itself important for determining what relational sociology is.)

**François:** I am not comfortable with the notion of layers. Too structuralist for me, I guess. It invites us to see a stratified Reality when, I think, the social universe is flat. More precisely, I am always under the impression that we are using one of those concepts which keep us at distance from concrete, specific relations between transactors (see the last comments of D. Silver on the need to be concrete. I will come back on this important one). But I agree with your main idea, Jan. Why not talking about foci rather than layers? Relational sociology is one general focus on relations between transactors (agents or actors if you prefer); and as such it does not offer any total theory of action. It is one focus which can complete other foci coming from psychology and its focus on the individual behaviors, for instance. I am too short here, but this kind of ideas have been developed by John Spiegel in one unknown book called *Transactions*<sup>7</sup> (yes, Dewey's influence again). Different theories, methods and disciplines offer various foci on different parts of the Reality (which does not mean that the value of all the theories, methods and disciplines is equal...).

On regularities... I am afraid that this focus on regularities prevents us from seeing and fully appreciating the creativity of action.

**Jan: 3.** White was (is?) more reluctant to differentiate between culture and structure than myself. First, if we fail to distinguish different aspects of the social world by way of different concepts, we cannot even hope for studying their systematic connections (and no, when I write about connections here, that is not what I mean by social relations). Second, culture, symbols, institutions are rooted in social relations, but not only. They have other ways of diffusing in modern society, for example education systems and mass media. So we could find that love relationships to varying degrees build on the myth of romantic love as spelled out in *Romeo and Juliet*. But nobody quite follows their example to the letter ... Also, marriage is a cultural institution with particular expectations tied to it, but actual marriages are variations on that theme.

Best,  
Jan

**François:** I am not sure I really understand what you are saying here. Can't we agree that

what you called the education systems and mass media (the examples you used) are nothing else than social relations (they are also what I call fields of transactions or social fields)? Can't we say that we always study specific social fields which are always made by relations? Now, there are more or less similar representations (varying from one group to another and one person to another) of these fields (such as a romantic marriages), and these representations are dimensions of transactions (or relations), but what is the utility of talking about relations between cultures and structures here? Is it not another way to create a distance between our sociological explanations and the concrete life of the people and its complexity?

This is all too short and a little bit frustrating, but still very interesting. Best, François

**François Dépelteau (March 10<sup>th</sup>):**

Ok, then what about: RS is the study of social fields, configurations or networks made by transactions, relations or interactions between human and non-human transactors, actors or actants?

This is simple, direct and it does clearly focus on specific relations between real actors (and not reified ones). Here, we assume that social fields (or...) take multiple forms and names (couples, peer groups, armies, corporations, nations, etc.).

François

**Prabhu Guptara (March 10<sup>th</sup>):**

Dear François,

This is good: it is simple, direct and clear.

But how, then, is "Relational Sociology" different from any other sort of sociology?

From my perspective, for any definition to be useful, it must not only describe what is inside the term, but also distinguish it from what is outside the term.

Prabhu

**François Dépelteau (March 10<sup>th</sup>):**

Good question Prabhu. I could write a full article to answer this one. I will try in several lines, and I like this kind of challenges. Sociology relational or not should always be direct and concise, I think. At least, sociologists should try. We are supposed to talk also to non-sociologists after all. Anyway, here is the short answer divided in sub-answers:

1) As Emirbayer and many others pointed out, relational sociology is processual sociology. Therefore, your question leads me to try to improve my definition, which could be reformulated in this way: Relational sociology is the study of various social fields (figurations, networks...) as dynamic and fluid social processes which constantly emerge

from transactions (relations...) between human and non-human transactors (actors...). (Does it make it more distinct or special enough?)

2) As such, RS excludes any entities or forces other than specific, concrete and visible human and non-human transactors. (Is it what you have in mind Dan Silver?) In other words, RS is a science of visible entities (people, objects...) and it excludes any reference to metaphysical forces or reified processes one can find in other types of sociologies (usually the society, social systems, social structures, cultures, etc.). Societies, systems, etc. are always studied as emerging, evolving or disappearing social processes; as outcomes and not social things with causal powers on their transactors. (This is where I cannot agree with critical realists, for instance; and I think this crucial point deserves to be discussed at length among relational sociologists).

3) RS presents human transactors as the co-producers of their social fields, and not as being fully or partially determined by them. Human transactors cannot inter-act with a social process in the same way that two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen cannot inter-act with the water they form through their association. In this sense, RS insists on the collective responsibility of these human co-producers in relation to success stories and social problems or disasters such as wars, poverty, domination, etc.

I think these brief clarifications can help to distinguish RS from other sociologies. It does not mean that these points cannot be found in other (compatible) sociologies, but RS can be seen and presented as one opportunity to reaffirm and clarify these points. By doing so, it can also reinforce contemporary sociology and the relative failure of previous forms of sociological imaginations based on social determinism and co-determinism.

I am not sure it is good enough to do the full job (it is not!), but it seems to me to be a decent starting point, no?

Best,  
François

**Emily Erikson (March 11<sup>th</sup>):**

Many thanks for this interesting discussion. There are lots of interesting threads to pick up, but I'll confine myself to two that I think are most important.

First I would like to reinforce François' emphasis on process. In my experience a focus on relations, patterns, configurations, or even networks is not enough to push research into an approach consistent with relationalisms underpinning assumptions. These can be very 'thinglike' and treated as such -- losing the static, processual characteristics so important to a pragmatist/relationalist ontology.

Network research is full of using configurations as fixed forms, not different from the dreaded personal 'attribute' in standard statistical approaches.

To me this suggests that relationalism is the study of innovation, transformation, and dynamics in the social realm, thus institutional transformation and group dynamics would be central topics. I am not quite so sure about individual transformation, such as belief adoption, but am thinking that this level may be better left as an explanatory tool, layer of mechanism, rather than an object of inquiry.

This does leave out broad areas of inquiry in sociology -- such as describing patterns of inequality. Now, I certainly think understanding patterns of inequality is important, but I believe that a relational framework is better poised to push forward research on understanding the emergence of institutions that create inequality (for example).

Second, I want to also pick up on this thread of emergence vis-à-vis critical realism. I agree the processual underpinnings (and really the advantage) of relational sociology make the emphasis on the reification of process untenable in critical realism -- and yet the idea of emergence seems also important to relational sociology -- because if this process of transformation is an important object of inquiry, it is because the transformations, once effected, do matter. So, I am wondering if there is a way to piece this out.

Very best,

Emily

**François Dépelteau (March 19<sup>th</sup>):**

Sorry... I do not know if this one was already sent (by me!). I am still struggling a little bit with this system. Just in case:

Emily, I am your friend! Your article in *Sociological Theory* (2013)<sup>8</sup> showed very clearly how relational sociology can be more deterministic than anything else when networks are presented as social things, or something like that. (I think Jan was the one who suggested to me to read this article). I tried to show the same thing in "What is the direction of the relational turn?" (in *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology...*<sup>9</sup>).

Your second point is very important, I would think. And at first sight, I fully agree with your formulation of the problem. Do I get correctly if I add that the challenge is to find a way to understand how relations create new stuff we have to deal with, which might influence our future actions and relations, etc., but we have to explain this type of emergent effect without reifying the social fields, figurations, networks or whatever we call these *processes*? If we could all agree on this way to formulae the problem (if I understood your point correctly, Emily), I guess we could have a common starting point at least some of us. I would dare to suggest that this is also what critical realists try to explain, and I could be their friend too if they would just accept to forget about the idea that once they emerge and are more or less similar, relations crystallized themselves into structures with causal powers. I also think relations have some effects on individuals (especially when they are more or less similar through time and space), but this influence should not be formulated as if they are external and constraining (or enabling) social things. We can and have to explain habits, routines, etc. in a processual, dynamic and non (co)deterministic way. Does it make sense?

**Emily Erikson (March 19<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi François and all,

Yes, I would definitely agree with this. I have been thinking about the idea of dualism and how it could function as an important conceptual tool. If it fits with the norms of the group, I could circulate a forthcoming chapter on network theory which tries to think through dualism and emergence to some extent.<sup>10</sup>

Very best,  
Emily

**Dan Silver (March 11<sup>th</sup>):**

All:

Bringing in process is a good idea, and it points toward something I wanted to raise vis-a-vis the effort to produce a definition of relational sociology. I also like how Jan starts to focus the discussion on examples, which is important in grounding our discussion in something concrete.

Regarding François ' definition, it may be a fine definition as far as it goes, or maybe better to say, as far as any definition can go. The question is how far a definition can go. I recall Dewey (maybe it was somebody else?) writing (something to the effect) that a definition should come at the end of an inquiry, not the beginning, as a consummation rather than a predetermination.

That might be good advice in our case. Stick to the phenomenon of relationally, get a feel for its phenomenology, and then work towards a definition of what it would mean to study that. Put differently (in the Dewey of *Art as Experience* style), we need to start with the qualitative experience of relatedness, and then key our sociology to that quality, as way of illuminating it. We succeed to the extent that our writings make us more alive to the relational quality of experience.

So a first step is to get the relational quality of experience into view. One way to do so would be to use a (late) Simmelian metaphor, and say that the quality of relationality consists in transcendence, i.e. becoming oneself in virtue of being more and more than oneself (yes that is obscure, sorry, trying to be brief). To take the example of reading the Weber wikipedia page...What are some of the relational qualities of that experience? There is my reaching out to something beyond me (the page) as part of my intellectual growth...there is the page as a moment in the growth and development of a community, traced through its past incarnations recorded in the "edits" page, so that what it says now is what it is as a response to past challenges...there are the other pages (or really, community discussions) it links to and which link to it, through which it reaches out to other topics and themes, which in turn reach back into it...and a lot more. To elaborate

those ways in which in my reading the page I and others are "more than ourselves" (and experience ourselves as somehow intertwined, mutually constituted) illuminates a distinct quality of experience (relationality), which it is the business of a relational text to evince. Whatever methods we use should be geared toward generating clearer and richer perception of such experience.

If we want to formulate a definition of relational sociology, I'm suggesting, we would have to do so as a summation of that type of experience, i.e. get from the experience of being constituted by more than yourself (where your "within" and your "now" is intimately open to your "without" and your "before" and "where to") to configurations, networks, fields, process, or whatever terms we favour. And if we think that definition is limited, the way to expand, enrich, or refine it would be to articulate the quality of the experience in an expanded, enriched, or refined way, rather than to (at least initially) pack it all into one sentence. That's at least what Dewey (of *Art as Experience*)/(late) Simmel might recommend.

Best,  
Dan

*[Please note that in the following discussion between Jan and François, the answers or replies of the latter (in italics) are right after the comments or questions of the former. I made this adjustment in order to save space, but the comments of Jan were made in one text. My replies came later. F.D.]*

**Jan Fuhse and François Dépelteau (March 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>):**

***Jan:***

Hi everybody!

Thanks François for your thoughtful response, and for your own take of the subject of RS. Unfortunately, we may soon have to agree to disagree... Instead of delving into your criticism of my third point, let me first argue against your definition of RS: To define RS as the systematic and non-metaphysical study of transactions, relations, fields between human and non-human entities does not really exclude much sociology (well, they just aren't doing it right, as you claim in your answer). It does not even exclude physics, medicine, agriculture, architecture... So in effect you are formulating a call for reflexivity of the own involvement of researchers with the objects they study, nothing particular to relational sociology. In my view, your definition (and your paper<sup>11</sup>) do a better job at a translational reformulation of ANT [Actor-Network-Theory] and STS [Science and Technology Studies] than in formulating what relational sociology (at least as I know it) is.

***François:***

*On the need to be distinct from other types of sociologies... Well, Jan, I think there are*

significant ontological differences in sociology. And the difference between the study of social things versus the study of fluid social processes is a key one. These differences can be found within RS (see the article of Emily Erickson in 2013<sup>12</sup> and my texts on determinism, co-determinism and deep relational thinking<sup>13</sup>, for instance) and outside of it. Is that right? I also think it would be surreal if each type of sociology ends up with its own and different conception of the social and consider that it does reflect some ontological diversity as if the universe could be filled by ether and empty at the same time. It would sound like another wishy-washy solution. There is only one social reality; by this, I mean the social has only one "nature", like it is processual and fluid or solidly structured. We should all discuss about what it is rather than simply adding another sociology to the existing list of sociologies. I do think all sociologists should study fluid and dynamic social processes. I think all the sociologists of the world should get united around the study of fluid processes we can call social fields (or figurations, networks, etc.), rather than looking for social things, solid social structures or networks with causal powers, and so on. Now, it is up to other sociologists who disagree to join the debate and prove that I, and other strange fellows like me, are wrong. This is the kind of game we are playing right now, and I think it is great and very productive. This is the main reason why I prefer to stay away from any paradigmatic quest: sociology needs some controversy and, therefore, it is healthy to have competitive social ontologies. But it does not mean that RS cannot or should not propose a universal social ontology, even if it is similar to what other sociologists have proposed before. This is how and why we can have these discussions. I guess the goal is to avoid a quest for distinction which could kill any productive discussion (what is the point to discuss if the idea is to be distinct?), but also to avoid the quest for hegemony (The Paradigm) which could also kill any significant controversy. Without any problem, there is no science (Dewey). So, Houston, we have an ontological issue within RS, and this is just fine. But I am quite sure we agree on this one (the need to disagree when it is productive to do so). How do we avoid to be stuck forever with the same issue: by discussing I guess, by thinking, re-discussing, re-thinking, and eventually, maybe, one or few solutions will become more important than others. A new one or one that is not so new. It could be done quickly or it might take a long while. We will see.

You added that my transactional definition of social fields (like the associations of Latour) "does not exclude much sociology". Well, this is great news! ;) Why would I want to exclude? And indeed, I think many sociologists have it wrong, mostly (but not only) when they reify social processes, and(or) explain that individuals or groups interact with social structures, networks or societies. I think RS can be useful and really brings something relevant if and when it helps us to clearly and fully move beyond social determinism and co-determinism. I think Emily (Erikson) made a similar argument in her article of Sociological Theory (2013), as well as B. Latour with his crazy Actor-Network-Theory (I am fine with being connected to this guy even if his texts can also be quite annoying in some ways), and A. Strauss to some extent, H. Blumer, H. Becker, N. Elias (in What is Sociology), etc. Am I just reformulating Latour? Maybe. I could do worse! Anyway, if it is I am doing, I hope I make it less annoying. But there is also some influence coming from pragmatism (Latour is more influenced by pragmatism than he admits, I would guess), symbolic interactionism, Elias (to some extent), and other similar stuff. But this is not really interesting stuff. Your comments are more interesting to discuss. So...

*You also added that my definition of the social does not exclude other sciences such as medicine, physics, etc. Hum... I am tempted to say once again: I hope so. But I do not know enough about these sciences to say anything really clever here. I will simply say that sociology might be just one specific type of focus, like psychology with its focus on the individuals, economics with its focus on the production and the distribution of goods and services, political science with its focus on power relations and the City, etc., etc. As far as I can tell, physicists focus on relations between material stuff like planets, atoms and so on.*

*As a sociologist, I focus on relations between these weird human beings. However, it happens that in order to understand human relations we have to include the analysis of non-human transactors such as computers, bacteria, weapons, books, etc. They also affect us and our relations. Environmental sociology, for instance, has reminded us this simple fact of life since the 1970's and 1980's. The division between Society and Nature is problematic to say the least. I do not want to be blind to the influence of significant non-human transactors in some social fields. Therefore, I think I have to follow Latour and many others on this one. It does not mean that I have to become a physicist or a biologist, and I do not have to if, for example, I want to see the crucial role played by viruses and bacteria in the relations between colonizers and aboriginal people in the Americas. In sum, I do not think sociology should be distinct from natural sciences. It is just another focus in the world of sciences – which does not mean that I proposing any form of naturalism. I just want to integrate non-human transactors when they are significant transactors in the social fields I study – with all the limits of my knowledge about their effects on this or that.*

*Now, it means that I am advocating to stay far, far away from any attempt to define the “object” of sociology against the “objects” of other disciplines. Once again, we should be more distant with the legacy of The Rules of the Sociological Method of E. Durkheim. For example, the social does not have to be opposed to the individuals; we do not have to “neutralize” them in order to see the social and justify the existence of sociology. (That opens the door for more discussions, I guess).*

**Jan:**

I am entirely on board with focussing relational sociology, actually all sociology, on transactions (though between human and social actors I would say, but leave that aside for the moment). However, you need to clarify what a transaction is and how we can identify and study it. What, then, are social relations and fields, precisely? (Latour also does a bad job at defining an association, something you build on.) In my view, social relations and fields are themselves not directly observable and have to be invoked as metaphysical entities, something you vehemently object to. Or are they mere aggregates of transactions? If so, is there anything that holds them together/connects them to relations/fields? What would that be?

**François:**

*We agree on one more thing: my definition of social field is too simple; and you are right on*



*Latour: his definition of association is weak. It is not really that it is inaccurate, but it is incomplete. This is a work-in-progress.*

*On the notion of transaction: it took me a long while to figure out a simple way to explain what it means, and why it is so relevant, I think. Here is the double result. First, it means that our knowledge of the Reality is not objective or subjective, but it is transactional (see my article of 2015 for more detail). In very brief: the Known emerges from the relations between the observer and the observed, and the observed is also a transactor. As H. Becker said in reference to Latour (him again!): seeing the Moon as an actant (or transactor) helps us to understand why it would be really difficult for me to convince you that it is made of blue cheese (or what is green cheese?). Ok, you are right: it might be not much in itself, but it can help us to finally move beyond the old and useless dualism between subjectivity and objectivity. Second, ontologically speaking, the notion of transaction means one simple but big thing: A is not what it is and doing what it is without B, and vice versa. Why does it matter? Because with this simple idea you can understand A and B without seeing them as being fully or partially determined by the social field they co-produce. There is absolutely no need for the idea that the whole creates the parts to explain the force of the social. The force of the social (I hate this expression) simply means that transactors make each other, influence each other, etc. There is no voluntarism or (co)determinism here. Just the study of relations.*

*What hold these relations together? Nothing holds relations. Relations just happen and evolve. If the question is what holds couples or nations together, the answer is the same: couples and nations do not survive forever. Sometimes, they last a little bit longer, sometimes they do not. If we just think in terms of identities (and there is much more than identities in social relations), we can certainly say that the persistence of a "We" is a sign that the couple or the nation is surviving to its tensions, movements, paradoxes, etc. And this "We" has to be in the mind of the transactors who are making and reproducing the social field; they have to care about it... But again, transactions involve many dimensions and sub-dimensions and only empirical studies of more or less durable fields can reveal to us what is stabilizing this field for a while, and why or how this other field collapsed after 20 minutes. We have to be careful with the quest of any universal explanations or theories here. (But this is also another big topic for discussion, I guess).*

*Why do you think social fields are not observable and have to be invoked as metaphysical entities? Can you give more information here? Once again, I think we can produce some bad or better knowledge (the Known) about these fields by transacting with them with sociological tools, like through the observation of ongoing transactions (from conversations to soldiers fighting on a battlefield, for instance). From an historical standpoint, we can also see traces left from previous transactions. But why does it have to be metaphysical? I think this is just transactional since the production of this knowledge involves some specific problems and questions, the presence of observed and selected fields which are observed, concepts, methods, tubes, computers, texts, readers, citations, etc., etc. (Yes, Latour again... Sorry. But also Becker on the social worlds and many others).*

**Jan:**

As far as I can see, Dewey and Bentley's almost mechanical conception of transactions (untypical for pragmatism) invites material objects (a lot of other things, like symbols?) as transactors. But these transactions do not leave a trace apart from their mechanical effects of relative approximation/distancing. A billard ball does not remember which other ball hit it (and how). It is only left in a certain position, maybe close to another ball it never had any transactions with ...<sup>14</sup>

**François:**

*I will not really comment on this one because I am not sure I understand. More information? Just one point: the conception of inter-action is mechanical (Newton) with Dewey and Bentley, while the concept of transaction moves beyond it. But again, maybe I do not really understand what you are saying here.*

**Jan:**

For the fun part (and as a reply to your reply to me), let me construct two social situations, and you tell me what we should study as relational sociologists:

(1) I read a Wikipedia article on Max Weber on my computer. What are the relations realized that we should study? What are the transactors?

my relation to the human being Max Weber (he's dead, isn't he?)

my relation to the figure "Max Weber" (that would be a metaphysical being)

my relation to my computer

my relation to Wikipedia (again, metaphysical)

my relation to an anonymous group of authors (at least I don't bother to check their avatar identities)

I get smarter

I get hungry

my computer is running out of battery power

When I wrote about mass media as transmitters of cultural forms (which I would vehemently not see as dimensions of social relations, also they would be metaphysical entities, wouldn't they?), I referred to the "I get smarter" part. That is: cultural symbols/ideas/patterns. To me, this is a process that is not well conceptualized as a social relation.

**François:**

*Ah! A quizz!!! Ok. Let see what I can do.*

*(I am curious to see what is the trap here or maybe I am just paranoid.)*

*- M. Weber is dead?!? My God, what happened to the poor guy? Seriously, unless you are a medium or you are amazingly older than I think, you never transacted with M. Weber. You read his books. Two transactors here (at least): you and these books. (But I am talking to a guy who*

*had a barbecue with an elephant in South Africa here... So maybe you really met Weber).*

*- The figure M. Weber?!? What is it? You have a poster of him at your house?*

*- Yes, you can transact with your computer. Why? (Now, I am getting worried, Jan ;))*

*- Wikipedia is not metaphysical. It is a real website you can transact with, like you can transact with a movie or a book. I could also study this transaction.*

*- I could also study your transactions with the texts of an anonymous group of authors. If you transact with the authors, I guess there are not anonymous anymore. Otherwise, you are just dealing with people who want to hide their identity because they are weird, more paranoid than I am, activists or... I can also study these transactions.*

*- You got smarter? Good for you. I am working on it for myself. Can I study how you got smarter? Hum... Do you give me an IQ test or something like that? Here, the method of testing your (amazing) intelligence will be one of the transactors in the social field which is the study, with you, myself, etc., etc. Of course, you change the method (which is significant transactor here) and you probably get different results (but do not worry, you are still very clever).*

*- You got hungry? I can study why and how.*

*- Your computer's battery is low... Well, I am very probably not so interested by this huge problem in your life (as a sociologist) unless this poor battery is one key transactor in the field I am studying.*

**Jan:**

(2) I go into a supermarket, buy a chocolate bar, pay for it at the check-out, and leave (eating the chocolate bar).

my paying for the chocolate bar is clearly a transaction. It makes me poorer and probably fatter, and the supermarket (and its owners, but not the vendor) a bit richer. All of this we could measure as attributes of the various actors. What is the relation at play? My relation to the vendor at the check-out hasn't really changed as a result of this transaction. Rather the reliance on formal roles, the generalized medium of money, and on ritual politeness (hello, thank you, goodbye) ensures that the vendor will allow me to take the chocolate bar, whether he likes me or not. So the subject of relational sociology could here be: Under what circumstances and by what means do such transactions not leave a relational trace?

However, all of this leads to the metaphysical level that Latour opposes (formal roles, cultural rituals). Would you want to take such things in as a dimension of the social relation? Is my relation to the chocolate bar similarly imbued with a cultural dimension?

So, what's your take on this?

In any case, thanks a lot for the opportunity for this discussion, and for having read this lengthy e-mail up to now...

Best,  
Jan

**François:**

*Life is not always so exciting, hey?*

*Transactions can be based on rituals, habits, routines, etc. What kind of relational trace does it leave? Your receipt if you kept it, your belly is a little bit bigger, the garbage from the chocolate bar... This kind of boring stuff. And this is why sociologists usually do not study this kind of boring relations. They can, of course, if they find it problematic or interesting. I am sure it can be fascinating. It depends on what question you ask, what angle you use, etc. In terms of historical traces, not much; except that you participated to the co-production of capitalism (which does not mean that you have been determined by capitalism...).*

*Yes, I think habits, understanding of rules, roles, norms, etc. are dimensions of transactions; and yes, I think that we can identify types of relations (see Weber in Economy and Society or Marx in The Capital, and many, many others...). Some transactions are more reflexive, some are based more on habits, traditions... But these ideal-types of relations do not represent metaphysical entities or any structures with causal powers (see Weber again, and stay away from Parsons or Durkheim). Habits, for instance, do not float in the sky and enter in the mind of the people like demons possess people. The same is true about "culture". In my transactional sociology, for instance, I can explain how the socializations of the individuals happen through various life trajectories (passages from one social field to another, which involve many significant or not so important transactors such as friends, parents, books, movies, barbecues...). This is too short to really make sense, but in very brief, I clearly prefer B. Lahire to P. Bourdieu here to understand the complexity of diversified, complex, non metaphysical and non deterministic norms, habits, etc. which evolve in the social life of the plural men and women.*

*I hope it did make some sense and that I managed to answer to your clever questions. Anyway, it was a real intellectual pleasure, Jan. Really. Please find the flaws in these answers if you have the time and the energy, and bring them out. I am sure there are plenty of them. Same invitation to the others.*

*Very best, François*

**Jan Fuhse (March 16<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi everybody!

I wanted to keep quiet since I felt that I had already annoyed everybody. But now

François is picking up my threads, and the urge to respond takes the better of me. Since François has written at length, and I don't want to bore everybody, I split this up in two: Here is my short reply, trying to stay aloof of detailed questions and tricky riddles. The second e-mail (if I get to finish it) provides a more detailed response to François 's points. So here we go:

1. The discussion up to now confuses two things: (a) what we like, (b) what relational sociology is about. It's fine to confuse the two, as long as we only have to find out what we want. It's not good if RS is a pre established label we're trying to make sense of. I guess our discussion wants to do both, so we'll have to deal with it somehow.

I agree with pretty much everybody who's voiced an opinion here, that process is great and important. I disagree in that I don't see relations as coterminous with process. I see four possible combinations: \_

(i) processual relational thinking, as Jackson and Nexon conceptualize it (<http://ejt.sagepub.com/content/5/3/291.abstract>). The idea here is to ground relations in process, and to study the two in conjunction. I see François and Nick as advocates, also Leifer, Emirbayer, Tilly, Gibson, McFarland, Moody, Padgett (though the link between relations and process could be tighter), Randall Collins, Peter Blau, network exchange theory (Cook), myself, and many more. The 1992 White is not overly processual, from 1995 onwards he adopts a more processual stance (without succumbing to the idea that relations only exist in process).

(ii) processual, but not relational: most of conversation analysis, in particular the Schegloff branch, most of Abbott, Luhmann, and so forth (even some Parsons).

(iii) relational, but not processual: most of network analysis, Simmel (mainly), Elias (mainly), Donati, many more. I do not mean that these authors disregard process and change. But they conceptualize the social world as mainly composed of relations, and these are not disassembled into processes (rather: they are relatively stable structures subject to change).

(iv) not relational, not processual: bad bad bad! Like most empirical social research. Ideally, many of us would only see (i) as relational sociology. However, we would kick out much of what is currently subsumed under the label (ii). What I see as totally out of the way is to simply say that relational sociology is about studying social processes. This means equating relations with processes. This blinds us to the fact (pointed out by Donati and many others) that at any point in time, social relations are relatively inert social structures that exert considerable pressure on ongoing processes. Where does this reality of relations, and their structuring effect come from? They develop over past process, therefore we need concepts for these kinds of traces of process.

2. François favors conceptualizing the processes at play as "transactions" and to see them among all kinds of physical entities. This means that any form of influence between physical entities would have to be termed a relation, and that it is the subject of relational sociology. I do not think that most relational sociologists or most physicists, biologists, meteorologists would like to see the lines drawn in this way. But that's not the point here. If we adopt Latour's principle of symmetry, we not only have to treat all entities (human,

physical) alike in theory and in method. We also have to treat the relations between them alike. This means that conceptually, the relation between me and a fellow pedestrian, between me and my shoe, and between the sole of my shoe and the pavement it hits, have to be conceptualized in the same way. Unfortunately, we can then pretty much not say anything meaningful about these relations apart from: "they somehow influence each other". This means we have to disregard all symbolic aspects of these relations, since the shoe and the pavement do not influence each other by way of meaning. Also we cannot ask the shoe about its subjective meaning. Most importantly, the basic symbolic interactionist model of two actors interacting with each other by way of interpreting the signs sent off by the other and asking themselves how the other will interpret one's own signs, is gone. No internal dialogue, no build up of mutual expectations and expectations of expectations (as between the billiard balls in Dewey and Bentley's formulation). That's too bad, because this is exactly why social relationships are inert and exert considerable pressure on social processes.

Of course, physical objects do play an important role in social life. (So do symbols and ideas, rituals and categories, and our idea of "Max Weber".) But that does not mean that we have to conceptualize them similarly to social actors, and that we can no longer conceptually distinguish between the ways in which the various objects and actors influence each other. Much of recent relational sociology from White to Emirbayer, Tilly, Crossley, and myself consists precisely in attempts to make sense of the particularities of social relations, or rather: social relationships. Most of what we say is not compatible with non-social actors and would therefore be futile. So my personal hunch would be to urge for less scope of RS, not more, in order to attain more precision, not less.

I hope this clarifies things a bit, even if it sparks only more disagreement. And I hope that I get to write a second e-mail to answer François's well thought arguments. I would be very happy to have a discussion about our IRS texts. I also liked Prandini's introduction<sup>15</sup> and found that it does a good job at providing a structured overview.

Best from Berlin,  
Jan

### **Jan Fuhse's detailed reply (March 16<sup>th</sup>) and François Dépelteau's detailed response:**

*These detailed replies were initially sent in attached documents, and can be viewed [here](#).*

### **Jan Fuhse (April 6<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi everybody!

I wanted to reply to François, but not in detail, because I felt that we had steered into a dead end of discussion, and might have lost most of you. Also, it seemed to me that we were not as far off in substance as in vocabulary. François and I more or less agreed that the most interesting subject for relational sociological analysis are transactions between social actors (mainly individuals). If we confine our focus for a while to this, we're still

left with the question:

What is a social relation? (or a social relationship)

Given that we claim to pursue "relational sociology", I see this as one of the core questions to discuss. What are your answers to it?

Conversely, we also have to ask: What is not a relation?

In my view, if we adopt a processual approach (as François, Emily, I and others have done), we have to see a social relation as a trace of social processes. I would argue that not all social processes leave a relational trace, in the sense of changing something systematically about the relation between the actors involved. And not all traces left by social processes are relational in nature. For example, wealth, as such, is not relational but tied to individuals (or to corporation, or states). Similarly, a cultural idea (or a scientific theory) might be produced relationally, and might have relational effects, but in itself, it is not relational.

Also, we need a rough idea of what exactly this trace is, and what it does in the process of communication. My take is that this trace can be seen as a "relational definition of the situation", as "relational expectations" that sometimes get explicitly formulated, but often only implicitly features in communication. Thus I locate this trace on the level of communicated meaning. But, of course, it could also be situated in actors' minds. François would probably have it (following Latour) embodied in physical objects (like a wedding ring), but is that all there is to relationships?

What do you think?

Best from Germany,

Jan

**Prabhu Gupta (April 6<sup>th</sup>):**

Dear Colleagues

Might it be helpful at present to get away from abstractions for the moment, and to introduce greater granularity into the discussion by mentioning the Relational Proximity Framework which considers relationships to have five key dimensions: directness, continuity, multiplexity, parity and commonality?

Click [here](#) for more information.

Relational sociology could then be defined as the exploration of relationships on the basis of these (or such) key dimensions?

Prabhu

**François Dépelteau (April 6<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi Jan and the others (if you are still there),

I think the format of the discussion and our respective (and long) answers create half of the problems here. The fact that we all bring our own concepts create also problems, I feel. And Prabhu is right, it leads us to quite abstract discussions. So, I will try to provide a simple, concrete answer to your fundamental question: what is a social relation? But before I want to be sure we agree on two things:

- 1) RS is the study of social relations (involving human beings);
- 2) Social relations with human beings are processual (dynamic, fluid) by nature (they are not social things).

Can you confirm Jan (and the others if you want to participate) that we agree on these two general principles?

Jan, in your texts, you define a social relation as basically a process of communication (which necessarily involve meanings). Right?

If you do, then I partially disagree. Very concretely speaking, like you, I think communication is very important in human relations, but 1) all human relations are not always processes of communication (a war for instance is more about dominating and destroying than communicating); 2) human relations also involve non-human actors (human relations in a war involves weapons as significant actors, for instance).

So, at this point, I just propose: 1) to include other human relations which are not only or mainly processes of communication (such as wars), 2) sociologists should include non human entities when they are significant players in the studied configuration (such as weapons in a war).

Can we agree on these points? If not, why?

All the very best,  
François

**François Dépelteau (April 6<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi again,

I did not address the issue of the traces of... I propose we come to it later, maybe right after we deal with the previous questions. In other words, we might be more efficient if we go with one question (or two) at a time. Like step by step.

Best again,  
François

**Normand Carpentier (April 6<sup>th</sup>):**



Yes, we are still there...

**Prabhu Guptara (April 7<sup>th</sup>):**

I have always found the use of the word “actor” strange when applied to inanimate objects (whether weapons or anything else)

Surely, inanimate objects are acted on but cannot act themselves...

The same is the case with animals. Dogs and horses, for example, can certainly “act” but usually do so only because they are trained and “acting” to orders – in that sense, they are like “living machines” rather than “actors”

The notion of an “actor” includes the notion of free will....

**Normand Gabriel (April 7<sup>th</sup>):**

Hi Prabhu and everyone,

I agree and I think we should go even further and not use 'actors' for human beings.

It can suggest that we do not live in a real world!

Best Norman

**Jan Fuhse (April 7<sup>th</sup>):**

Hey François and fellow "relational sociologists",

Yes, our own concepts always create problems. I guess that's why we should be trying to discuss them. That is true, Prabhu, if we decide to measure the social world with them. If we try to measure something but don't know what it is (or what we expect it to be), how should we know what to measure and how to interpret our findings?

Ok, I turn to François :

But before I want to be sure we agree on two things:

1) *RS is the study of social relations (involving human beings);*

Yes.

2) *Social relations with human beings are processual (dynamic, fluid) by nature (they are not social things).*

I agree with social relations being processual. Others in the arena probably don't agree as much. I don't think we have to agree on this before discussing it.

As for the second sentence: they are not "social things" – I would claim that everything that is social is processual in nature (as you do). So if we started talking about social things (a state, a relationship, power, wealth, poverty – not that I would say that all of these should be called "social things"), we would have to find a way of saying that they can acquire (and lose) a certain thing-like quality in social process.

My own take is (following Weber and Parsons, oh no!) that relationships, states, relationships and so on are structures of expectations that emerge and change through social processes, but that they are relatively inert and can not be changed at will. For example, people cannot just say: "I don't want the state to be there!", and stop paying taxes without facing consequences (though some people would like that). If that, for you, is a way of saying states and relationships are social things, then we disagree on this. Also, we can reasonably claim that human beings, volcanoes, a river, the ocean, the sun, a car are processes. Does that mean they do not have thing-like qualities?

François then picks up on my notion of communication and proposes not to use it. Yes, not everything relevant for the social can be captured as communication. For example, in war, ballistics and the banging of cannon balls on city walls can be important. But if we wanted to capture everything with the same conceptual framework without allowing for different words for different processes, we might not be able to say anything meaningful with it. So my proposition is that social relationships and all social structures are made of communication, and that we might still have to draw on ballistics in order to explain why A was able to invade B. But you always prove me wrong: What can you say about social relations with your conceptual framework?

As for the concept of communication:

If A gives B a ring, I can interpret it as a way of communicating and changing something about the relationship between A and B without invoking the ring as a separate actor / transactor / communicator. Saying "I love you!" or "I'm sorry!" might have done the same job.

If A shoots B in the leg, we can also say that this is a way of communicating, and it changes something about the relationship between A and B. And interpretation ("it was an accident.", "B provoked A.", "A could not control his jealousy.", "A shot B because they are soldiers on different sides.") plays a central role in how the relationship changes. Also, B's leg is hurt and will take time to heal. We would not call this aspect communication, but ask a physician about it. If A then has to take care of the immobile B, this is communication again (but the leg healing isn't).

If A shoots B dead, it could arise out of previous communication, but we couldn't really call it communication. Since B is dead, so is the relationship between A and B. Observers, say the members of their respective gangs or the media, could still interpret the shooting as a communication between different ethnic groups, between states (Ukraine and Russia), or between gangs. In this regard, A's shooting of B would change something about these relations / relationships, even if the relationship A / B is dead.

Anyway, that's how I think we can use the concept of communication for making sense of social relationships, without disregarding that there are also other processes at play.

Does this help? But I don't really want to turn this into a discussion of my approach. That's why I'm interested in the answers of others.

Best,  
Jan

**François Dépelteau (April 8<sup>th</sup>):**

Hello!

Content de savoir que tu es toujours là, Normand.

Jan, sorry but I will not answer to your reply right now but I will come back later. This is clever, as usual, and I need more time to think. (For your comment that I always prove you wrong, I am sure you were ironic here ( I hope you were). If you were not, then I strongly disagree with you, again. ;)

I would just like to answer to Prabhu and Normand (Gabriel) on the non human actors. For now, I am trying to build some momentum based on what we seem to agree on.

Ok, it seems we agree on two basic principles:

1) In RS, we study social relations, and we focus on relations between human beings. (Please, correct me if there is anything wrong according to you with this formulation. Then, we can adjust it if we agree on something else).

2) In RS, we see human relations as social processes, meaning they are fluid and dynamic (Again, correct me if...)

Now, I think we disagree on two other issues. I will try to propose acceptable solutions:

3) In RS, we recognize the effect(s) of non human entities on social processes, meaning that these entities can have some significant effect(s) on the ongoing becoming of social processes (like weapons in war). (Is it ok with you if we replace the concept of non human actor by non human entities?)

4) In RS, we make a distinction between human interactants (this concept is from I. Burkitt, I am quite sure; if you do not like this one what could it be? Interagents? Why? What else would you use?) and non human entities (or... ?). The actions of the former are partly influenced by meanings, whereas the effects of the non human entities in social processes (or...?) have less or nothing to do with meanings of their own. (Again, correct if...; I said less because I assume that many animals also based their actions on some meanings).

I suggest we try this format and see where we can go. Once again, we can address the other important issues raised by Jan and others (like communication, etc., etc.) after we are done with these four. Just a proposal to be more specific, I guess.

Very best,

François

**Prahbu Gupta (April 8<sup>th</sup>):**

Dear François

Many thanks.

Yes, from my point of view, that is a reasonable way of expressing it.

However, I wonder, once we have agreed that RS sees human relations as social processes, what has actually been achieved in terms of helping us study RS relevant phenomena – which is why I had interposed in our discussion the mention of the 5 dimensions of the Relational Proximity Framework – that framework is somewhat deficient, in that it seems to focus on one to-one relationships; we probably need to build on those 5 dimensions to enable us to look at larger numbers, multiple relationships and networks; but I do think it gives us a good place to start.

Warmly

Prabhu

**François Dépelteau (April 8<sup>th</sup>):**

Sorry, I forgot... I feel the fundamental disagreement turns around the ideal of social things (social structures with causal powers, etc.). I propose to keep this one for later (but soon) in order to see what kind of common principles we can share before we try some potential solutions for the old dilemma of social things.

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*Please note that our discussions will start again and, hopefully, will allow us to address the issues identified at the end of this first round. You are more than welcome if you want to join us. In order to do so, please contact [depelteau@gmail.com](mailto:depelteau@gmail.com).*

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<sup>1</sup>Jan Fuhse refers to the book essay “Relationism Emergent” from Emily Erikson (2014), *Contemporary Sociology*, 44(1): 3–7. This book essay is on Powell, C. and Dépelteau, F. (2013) *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology: Ontological and Theoretical Issues*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, and Dépelteau, F. and Powell, C. (2013) *Applying Relational Sociology: Relations, Networks, and Society*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Crossley, N. (2015) “Relational Sociology and Culture : A Preliminary Framework”, *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1) : 65–85.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion on Nick Crossley's paper "The Social World of the Network" in *Sociologica* 1/2010; J. Fuhse / S. Mützel (2011): "Tackling Connections, Structure, and Meaning in Networks: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Sociological Network Research", *Quality & Quantity* 45: 1067-1089; S. Dominguez / B. Hollstein (eds.) (2014): *Mixed Methods Social Network Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Fuhse, J. (2015) "Theorizing Social Networks: The Relational Sociology of and Around Harrison White", *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1) : 15-44.

<sup>5</sup> Abbott, A. (2001) *Chaos of Disciplines*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>6</sup> Dépelteau, F. (2015) "Relational Sociology, Pragmatism, Transactions and Social Fields", *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1): 45b-64.

<sup>7</sup> Spiegel, J. (1983) *Transactions : The Interplay Between Individual, Family, and Society*. New York: Jason Aronson.

<sup>8</sup> Erikson, E. (2013) "Formalist and Relationalist Theory in Social Network Analysis", *Sociological Theory* 31(3): 219-242.

<sup>9</sup> See Dépelteau, F. (2013) "What is the direction of the relational turn?" in Powell, C. and F. Dépelteau, *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology : Ontological and Theoretical Issues*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 163-186.

<sup>10</sup> Erikson, Emily, "Networks and Network Theory: Possible Directions for Unification" *Social Theory Now*, Claudio Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac Reed, eds. Under Contract, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Fuhse, makes a reference to Dépelteau, F. (2015) "Relational Sociology, Pragmatism, Transactions and Social Fields", *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1): 45-64.

<sup>12</sup> See note 8.

<sup>13</sup> See notes 6 and 9.

<sup>14</sup> J.F.: To my embarrassment, I referred to the Dewey / Bentley text here (and later) without a good recall of it, and I relied on some bad memory based on a different discussion of the "transactions" concept. After a close re-reading, I have to admit that the conceptualization by Dewey and Bentley does involve cultural framing, but I still don't entirely understand it – especially their example of the billiard game, which has to be described in conjunction with the cultural framing, leaves me a bit baffled. However, Dewey and Bentley insist on not invoking intra-individual, subjective processes in scientific accounts – something quite strange for pragmatism, and something a lot of authors would vehemently object to (not me, though).

<sup>15</sup> See Prandini, R. (2015) "Relational sociology: a well-defined sociological paradigm or a challenging 'relational turn' in sociology?", *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1): 1-14.

# Announcements

## ***The George Sarton Medal for History of Science 2015 awarded to Helmut Staubmann***

**By Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki**

George Sarton (1884-1956), one of the founding fathers of the history of science as an academic discipline, was an alumnus of Ghent University. He established two leading journals in the field (*Isis* in 1912 and *Osiris* in 1934) and the History of Science Society in 1924. In 1984, at the centenary of Sarton's birthday, Ghent University decided to establish the George Sarton Medal for History of Science. The George Sarton Medal has since been awarded to researchers who have made important contributions to the history of science.

In 2015, Helmut Staubmann became the fifth sociologist to receive this award. He received the prize, among others, for his work on the unpublished legacy of Talcott Parsons. Below are some excerpts from the laudatio that I read on that occasion.

In 1913, George Sarton published the first issue of the journal *Isis*, which was itself one of the first journals explicitly devoted to the history of science. On the front cover of this issue, Sarton listed *Isis'* patrons, among whom the famous French sociologist Emile Durkheim. In his opening essay, Sarton put forward his view on the identity of a yet to be established scientific specialization. He defined his specialization as a "psycho-sociological investigation". A former Ph.D. student of Sarton at Harvard University, named Robert King Merton, became Associate Editor of *Isis* in the late 1930s, first responsible for what was called "the social aspects of science" and, as of 1942, for "sociology". In 1952, only a few years before his death, George Sarton, who was by then generally respected as the dean among the historians of science, still referred to what he called "my sociology of science" (Sarton, 1952, p. 94; see also Merton, 1985).

These few facts are a few indications of the close historical affinities between the history and the sociology of science. I may add that Robert Merton was in the academic year 1986/87 the first recipient of the Sarton Medal for the History of Science of Ghent University. And I may add that the Ph.D. dissertation of Robert Merton (titled *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*) was supervised by two Harvard Professors, George Sarton and Talcott Parsons.

These few facts also allow me to point to the importance of the work in the theory and history of sociology of Prof. Helmut Staubmann. Over the years, Prof. Staubmann has made a great number of pertinent contributions that deal with

various themes in sociology. In 2013, for example, Prof. Staubmann published a book titled *The Rolling Stones – Sociological Perspectives* (Staubmann, 2013). Over several decades, however, he has also done pioneering work on the history of sociological theory, in particular by providing new entries to Georg Simmel's work on aesthetics (see, e.g., Simmel, 2005) and by working on the unpublished legacy of Talcott Parsons, which consists of unpublished manuscripts, unpublished working papers, administrative documents or reports, and professional correspondence (see, e.g., Staubmann & Wenzel, 2000; Staubmann, 2015).

When Parsons (1902–1979) fully retired from Harvard University in 1973, he was no longer the leading theorist of sociology he had been in the mid twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, it had rather become common currency to depict Parsons as an out of this world theorist, whose work was void of empirical relevance. Various theoretical alternatives competed against 'Parsonian hegemony'. As Jeffrey Alexander, for example, noted a few years after Parsons' death about the relationship of sociological theory to Parsons: 'If sociology were to be free to develop, this [i.e. Parsons'] domination had to be overthrown. The attacks on Parsons, which spanned the three postwar decades of his life, were often significant. Anti Parsonian attacks spawned every major movement of theoretical reform, each of which initially presented itself vis à vis some particular dimension of Parsons's work' (1984, p. 410). As a consequence of these 'attacks' and associated 'paradigm shifts', Parsons' writings have since the 1960s and 1970s never again received much attention within sociology. It became in fact very unfashionable and very unproductive (in terms of career prospects or reputation mechanisms) to devote serious attention to the work of Parsons. Negative comments about the Parsonian hegemony still abound.

Only in recent years, there has emerged some serious scholarly interest in Parsons' work. Prof. Staubmann is one of the leading figures in this regard; over many years, he has fought with much dedication against the tide. His work relies on extensive periods of study within The Harvard University Archives, to which Parsons' unpublished manuscripts, working papers and professional correspondence were bequeathed. Often in collaboration with Parsons' former student and assistant Victor Lidz, he has edited several unpublished documents of Parsons, thereby facilitating discussions about and interpretations of Parsons' work within the academia. His efforts now make it possible to discuss the historicity of Parsons' work – instead of just dismissing a particular period of sociological theory as outdated, overruled, replaced by something better, etc.

From personal experience, I may tell that usage of the Talcott Parsons Papers of The Harvard University Archives is very laborious and time consuming – as there is as yet but minimal chronological and alphabetical ordering of the many bequeathed documents. It may also be added that Parsons was a compulsory writer of – often many page – letters (and many page means 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 or more densely printed pages). For Parsons, as well as for many other mid twentieth

century academics, the letter to an esteemed colleague was more or less equal to a publication. Such correspondence was part of the communication system of the discipline. This practice is very different at the moment. In the current academic climate, very different expectations and imperatives exist regarding communication and publication within the scientific system. Much of the work, which Prof. Staubmann has devoted to Talcott Parsons and the Parsons Papers, goes uncounted and hence in important administrative regards unnoticed. But it constitutes a difference which really makes a difference for the history of sociology. For this work, we would like to honour Prof. Staubmann with the Sarton Medal for the History of Science.

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**Raf Vanderstraeten**  
**Director Center for Social Theory**  
**Ghent University (Belgium)**

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Ian Woodward has moved from Griffith University in Australia to take up a position as Associate Professor within the 'Consumption, culture and commerce' unit in the Department of Marketing and Management, at University of Southern Denmark. Email: iawo@sam.sdu.dk

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Our Laboratory for Comparative Social Research has announced a new call for international members which may be of interest to the RC-16 members:  
<http://lcsr.hse.ru/en/announcements/151168926.html>

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An important « honor »: Marcel Fournier was nominated this year by the Quebec Government knight of the National Order of Quebec (chevalier l'Ordre national du Québec), the highest honour in Quebec.

And in 2013, Marcel Fournier also received the « Léon-Gérin Prize (Prix du Québec in human sciences)

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Dmytro Khutkyy has been awarded the Fulbright Faculty Development Award to conduct research at the University of California, Riverside, USA

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**SOCIAL IMAGINARIES** is a new peer reviewed journal published by Zeta Books. The first issue just appeared (May 2015). Social Imaginaries inquires into complexes of cultural meaning and cultural projects of power. It presupposes an understanding of society as a political institution, which is formed – and forms itself – in historical constellations, on the one hand, and through encounters with other cultures and civilizational worlds, on the other. An emphasis on “imaginaries” points to several interrelated trends: it reveals the modern concern with – and emphasis on – the social imagination as truly creative rather than reproductive; it highlights the phenomenon of collectively instituted meaning and its inter-cultural variations; it provides a corrective to a one-sided focus on ‘reason’ as the central tenet (or promise) of modernity; finally, it underscores the ongoing, albeit incomplete, hermeneutical turn in the human sciences. Social Imaginaries reflects on the human condition in modernity, which, amongst other things, ought to be centrally concerned with theoretical elaborations of and responses to the ecological devastation of the natural world. It pursues intersecting debates on (inter)cultural and historical varieties of meaning, power and socially instituted worlds.

Social Imaginaries invites contributions from social theory, historical sociology, political philosophy, political theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and, more broadly, cultural studies, anthropology, geography that critically advance our understanding of the human condition in modernity (for submissions: [social.imaginaries@zetabooks.com](mailto:social.imaginaries@zetabooks.com)).

The Editorial Collective consists of: Suzi Adams (Flinders University, Australia); Paul Blokker (Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic); Natalie Doyle (Monash University,

Australia); John Krummel (Hobart and William Smith Colleges, USA); Jeremy Smith (Federation University Australia, Australia). The Editors at-Large are: Johann P. Arnason (La Trobe University, Australia/ Charles University, Czech Republic); Craig Calhoun (LSE, UK); Fred Dallmayr (Notre Dame University, USA); Vincent Descombes (EHESS, France/ University of Chicago, USA); Charles Taylor (McGill University); George Taylor (University of Pittsburgh, USA); Peter Wagner (University of Barcelona, Spain); Bernhard Waldenfels (Bochum University, Germany).

For further info, please click [here](#), or onto the [Social Imaginaries](#) website.

For the first issue, please click [here](#).

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### **ISA Journal Current Sociology**

Special issue on *Future Moves in Culture, Society and Technology*

*Edited by Markus S. Schulz (USA) with further contributions by Natàlia Cantó Milà and Swen Seebach (Spain), Frédéric Claisse and Pierre Delvenne (Belgium), Mariolina Graziosi (Italy), Lars Geer Hammershøj (Denmark), Timothy W. Luke (USA), Giuseppina Pellegrino (Italy), Emma Porio (Philippines), Alexander Ruser (UK), Christina Schachtner (Austria), Hebe Vessuri (Venezuela)*

Forward oriented sociology explores the trends, processes, and forces that shape futures from tiny micro situations of everyday life to the broad macro dynamics of our increasingly globalized planet. It analyzes the assumptions in the discourses about the future, its risks and opportunities that limit or expand social imagination. Listening not only to elites but also to subaltern actors challenges technocratic closures and uncovers alternative possibilities.

The concern for the future was once at the core of sociological endeavors but it had been marginalized by one sided professionalization. Theoretical and methodological innovations allow the future moves needed for the renewal of sociology's public relevance.

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# New Articles and Books

**Baert, P. (2015). *The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*. Cambridge: Polity Press.**  
[Link to book.](#)

**Bandeli, N., Spillman, L., & Wherry, F. (2015). Economic culture in the public sphere: Introduction. *Special Issue of the European Journal of Sociology*, 56(1), 1 - 10.**

Includes articles by: Includes articles by Simone Polillo, Rachel Harvey, Stephanie L. Mudge, Sascha Munnich and Nicole Lindstrom.

**Bartmanski, D., & Woodward, I. (2015). *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.**  
[Link to book.](#)

Recent years have seen not just a revival, but a rebirth of the analogue record. More than merely a nostalgic craze, vinyl has become a cultural icon. As music consumption migrated to digital and online, this seemingly obsolete medium became the fastestb growing format in music sales. Whilst vinyl never ceased to be the favorite amongst many music lovers and DJs, from the late 1980s the recording industry regarded it as an outdated relic, consigned to dusty domestic corners and obscure record shops. So why is vinyl now experiencing a 'rebirth of its cool'?

Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward explore this question by combining a cultural sociological approach with insights from material culture studies. Presenting vinyl as a multifaceted cultural object, they investigate the reasons behind its persistence within our technologically accelerated culture. Informed by media analysis, urban ethnography and the authors' interviews with musicians, DJs, sound engineers, record store owners, collectors and cuttingb edge label chiefs from a range of metropolitan centres renowned for thriving music scenes including London, New York, Tokyo, Melbourne, and especially Berlin, what emerges is a story of a modern icon.

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**Susen, S. (2015c). Une réconciliation entre Pierre Bourdieu et Luc Boltanski est-elle possible ? Pour un dialogue entre la sociologie critique et la sociologie pragmatique de la critique. In B. Frère (Ed.), *Le tournant de la théorie critique* (pp. 151 - 186). Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.**  
Link to *book*.

**Virdee, S. (2014). *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.**

Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider offers an original perspective on the significance of both racism and anti racism in the making of the English working class. While racism became a powerful structuring force within this social class from as early as the mid Victorian period, this book also traces the episodic emergence of currents of working class anti racism. Through an insistence that race is central to the way class works, this insightful text demonstrates not only that the English working class was a multi ethnic formation from the moment of its inception but that racialized outsiders – Irish Catholics, Jews, Asians and the African diaspora – often played a catalytic role in the collective action that helped fashion a more inclusive and democratic society.

**West, B. (2015). *Re-enchanting Nationalisms: Rituals and Remembrances in a Postmodern Age*. New York: Springer.**  
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# Call for papers

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## **3<sup>rd</sup> ISA Forum of Sociology**

Michael Blain is organizing two sessions on the War on Terror” at the 3<sup>rd</sup> ISA Forum of Sociology (Vienna, Austria: July 2016). Papers submissions on theory are welcome until 30 Sept. 2015:

RC 14 Committee on The Sociology of Communication, Knowledge, and Culture: “The Future of the “War on Terror,” Session # 5215

RC 18 Committee on Political Sociology: “Political Sociology and the War on Terror,” Session # 5216

Deadline: Sept 30, 2015

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## **Session on Analytical and Rational-Choice-Oriented Sociology: Friends or Foes?**

Gianluca Manzo will chair a session on "Analytical and Rational-Choice-Oriented Sociology: Friends or Foes?"

A description of the session can be find here: <http://www.isa-sociology.org/forum-2016/rc/rc.php?n=RC45>.

Deadline: Sept 30, 2015

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## **DIGITHUM**

THE HUMANITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

For more information on the journal, please see: <http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Digithum has opened the call for articles for issue 18, scheduled for January 2016.

Articles should focus on the role that emotions play in our social bonds, as well as on the way in which our socialization and our interrelations shape the ways in which we feel, understand, experience and make sense of our emotions. Especially welcome will be those contributions that focus upon:

Linking emotions: shame, pride, ... love?

Feeling rules

Rituals, Myths and Emotions

Emotions and New Technologies of Communication

## Submission and publication guidelines

Articles should not exceed 6000 words and must contain the following information:

Title

Abstract (200 words) with the essential features and results of the work

Keywords (4 to 6)

The body of the text, structured into sections and subb sections

Bibliography

Author details (name and surname, professional affiliation, professional postal address, electronic address)

Brief CV (100b 200 words) and photograph

Articles can be written in Catalan, English or Spanish.

You can find more information in the journal's author guidelines

<http://journals.uoc.edu/index.php/digithum/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>

You need to register as an author on the journal's website in order to be able to submit work (<http://journals.uoc.edu/index.php/digithum/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions>).

Once registered, enter the username and password you receive during the registration process to begin the submission process. In Step 1, select the Miscellany section, and accept the prior conditions for submission and copyright. In Step 2, enter the metadata (title, abstract, keywords). In Step 3, attach the original. You can leave Step 4 empty if there are no more files, but you need to go on to Step 5 to complete the process.

## Peer review

The articles selected by the editors will be reviewed before publication by at least two members of the Editorial Board or renowned experts in the field chosen by the editors.

## Indexing

Digithum is the openb access scientific eb journal produced by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia, UOC) Arts and Humanities Department each year in May.

This journal is listed in the sector's leading scientific journal impact and assessment databases:

Deadline: October 30, 2016

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# Resilient Europe?

Resilience is the capacity to bounce back and innovate in the wake of extraordinary stress or crisis. Psychologists have long viewed resilience as a human character trait, but today, researchers increasingly consider it to be a quality of societies as well.

Thus, for its **23rd International Conference of Europeanists**, the Council for European Studies (CES) invites proposals that reflect on Europe's capacity for resilience. How will Europe's economies confront slow growth and austerity? How will changing demography and immigration combine to affect European populations and cultures? How will secular Europeans confront the challenges of religious mobilization?

To be held in Philadelphia, PA, April 14-16, 2016, the conference will explore these questions and more. **All proposals are due October 1, 2015.**

For more information visit our website:  
[www.councilforeuropeanstudies.org](http://www.councilforeuropeanstudies.org)



## Research Committee on Sociological Theory (RC16) Conference

27 - 29 June 2016  
Selwyn College, Cambridge UK

### Call for Papers

The conference continues the RC16 tradition of encouraging submission of abstract and session proposals on the entire range of topics under the general heading of sociological theory.

### Submission Details

Proposals should be submitted to [rc16conference@sociology.cam.ac.uk](mailto:rc16conference@sociology.cam.ac.uk), strictly by 30 November 2015. The proposal consists of an abstract of maximum 300 words and a short biographical note (including your ISA & RC16 membership details if applicable). Acceptance will be confirmed by 15 January 2016.

### Registration

The conference will begin at 5pm on Monday 27th and end at 5pm on Wednesday 29th July 2016.

Registration for the conference will open Monday 1st August 2015, and you must register before 15th February 2016 ([www.rc16conference.org/registration](http://www.rc16conference.org/registration)). The conference fee includes access to all sessions, lunch and refreshments, and Monday evening drinks reception.

A conference dinner will take place on Tuesday 28th evening, and bookings can be made at the time of registration.

|   |      |
|---|------|
| <b>Conference fee</b>   |      |
| ISA RC16 members  | £100 |
| Non-members   | £140 |
| Optional 3 course conference dinner at Selwyn College             | £25  |
| Optional accommodation at Selwyn College (2 nights - 27th & 28th) | £144 |

### Accommodation

A limited amount of accommodation has been reserved at at Selywn College, and is bookable at the time of registration by 15 February 2016. Accommodation will be allocated on first come basis. A full range of other accommodation options are also available in Cambridge, we recommend [visitcambridge.org](http://visitcambridge.org) to help you find suitable accommodation.

### Organising Committee and Contact

The organising committee for the conference is: Kate Williams and Patrick Baert.

Queries and submissions should be directed to Kate Williams: [rc16conference@sociology.cam.ac.uk](mailto:rc16conference@sociology.cam.ac.uk)

Further details are also available on the website: [www.rc16conference.wordpress.com](http://www.rc16conference.wordpress.com)

# THEORY

**INTERNATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION**

The Newsletter of the Research Committee on

Sociological Theory

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