

# Relational Sociology as a Form of Life: In memoriam François Dépelteau (1963–2018)

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RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY (RS) is a concept, a network, and a flag. Although it is hard to imagine a sociology that is not relational, there are gradients. However, one defines the concept of relation and whatever one understands under sociology, it is only too apparent that Weber and Durkheim are less relational than Marx, Simmel, or Tarde. Symbolic interactionism is more relational than functionalism, but slightly less than pragmatism, network analysis, or actor-network theory. As a structuralist, Bourdieu is more relational than Habermas, but in the same way as there is no sociology without *socius*, there is no communication without *alter*. It takes not only two to tango, but also to communicate, interact, and form an evanescent community of sorts. In his formal sociology, Simmel (1992:101–21) explored the difference between dyadic and triadic social formations. He did not sufficiently consider, however, that even connections between two people always presuppose a third element, namely the medium, channel, ether, culture, language, the spirit that relates both the elements into a social formation. The third element is at the same time a presupposition and a product of reciprocal action. Linguistically, the third element appears as the verb that connects two subjects into a properly formed sentence. Pierpaolo Donati, who has been developing his own version of RS in Italy since the 1980s, uses two different verbs in Latin (*referre* and *religare*) to refer, respectively, to the subjective and objective sides of the third element that interconnects the subjects: reciprocal action connects or structurally binds the elements through mutual intentional consciousness of a symbolic reference—“the Weberian *refero*”—and this consciousness produces an objective connection or bond between them—“the Durkheimian *religo*” (Donati 2011:124; Donati and Archer 2015:26–28). The outcome of

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reciprocal intentional action is the relation itself as a new, emergent reality that exists between the subjects. Without them, it would not exist. It transcends them as an emergent reality and a relational good that has to be nurtured if it is not to deteriorate.

We have been talking about subjects, but they are themselves the result of relations—relations with others, with the world, and with themselves. Without parents, without body, without consciousness, without world, we would not be here. The quality of the relations that connect us to the world makes us who we are, for the better or for the worse. We all know the difference between alienated and expressive relations to the world, strategic and communicative relations to others, unforgiving and supportive relations to self. Sometimes the world is just mute, or even threatening, and we are indifferent to it. At other times, we are in synch and feel carried by the relations that connect us to the world. Thanks to Bruno Latour, we now know that interrelations between humans are inseparable from relations between nonhumans. There's no intersubjectivity without interobjectivity. To underscore that the *relata* do not have to be individuals and that they can also be collectives, network analysis has introduced the concept of nodes. Things get even more complicated when one does not merely introduce the relation as a third element between the *relata*, but conceives of social formations as entangled, emergent complexes of relations of the *N*th order: in this hyperrelational perspective, societies are formed by interactions between people, things, or nodes (relations of the first order) who, together, form networks with variable geometries (relations of the second order: relations between relations) that compose themselves structures, systems, or fields (relations of the third order: relations between relations of relations) that can be analyzed, described, and observed (or not) by an observer (of the second order) who analyzes, describes, and observes the practices that constitute the world.

The definition of RS as a comprehensive approach that “at its broadest, investigates social life by studying social relations” (Powell and Dépelteau 2013:1) bears on the tautological and is, therefore, almost vacuous. To understand what RS is, one has to define it relationally in its opposition to categorical, essentialist, substantialist, atomist, and fixist approaches, like rational choice, normative functionalism, and positivist variable analysis, which conceive of the world as a hapless conglomerate of contingently related, free-standing entities. In his “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” which is one of the founding documents of the academic movement of RS, Mustafa Emirbayer, presents a stark choice: “The key question confronting sociologists in the present day is not ‘material versus ideal’, ‘structure versus agency’, ‘individual versus society’, or any of the other dualisms so often noted; rather is the choice between substantialism and relationism” (Emirbayer 1997:282). For relational sociologists, the world is not “the totality of things, facts and states of affairs” to use the language of the *Tractatus Logico-Filosoficus*. As a *Weltanschauung* that systematically

interrelates entities into complex, dynamic, evolving totalities of interdependent beings, RS conceives of the world as an open system of relations, processes, and practices. Some approaches, such as critical realism, Bourdieu's critical sociology, systems theory, and network analysis, are more structural and focus more intently on relations, while others, such as pragmatism, actor-network theory, and others that are inspired by Tarde and Deleuze, focus more on processes and practices. Depending on the level and unit of analysis, relations can be seen as interactions, networks, fields, structures, systems, or even world systems (Crossley 2011:22–45).

RS may aim to transcend dichotomies; these inevitably creep back in at another level. If we use new dichotomies, such as the one between substantialism and relationism, to transcend the older ones, such as agency and structure, these may well make their “re-entry” and “fracture” the new camp from within (Abbott 2001:3–33). Within RS, the old opposition between agency and structure has made its reappearance as a fracture between critical realists such as Archer, Donati, and Porpora who believe in emergence, and transactionalists such as Dépelteau, Kivinen, and Piironen who work with flat ontologies. Although Emirbayer's version of RS spans the gap between Bourdieu's critical sociology and pragmatism via Harrison Whyte's network analysis, Donati has produced a counter-manifesto for a critical realist RS with a functionalist hue (Donati 2015). In spite of the tensions between emergentists and processualists, realists and pragmatists, relationists and transactionalists, it should be noted, however, that all relational sociologists are united by a common belief in the interdependence of human beings and a commitment to consciously foster social relations that nurture common values. Dépelteau's (forthcoming) plea for an active interdependence and relational democracy can be considered an axiological platform of RS. In times like ours, where we all have become involuntary witnesses of a continuous degradation of the civic decorum and an accelerated unraveling of the social relations that keep society together, the axiological position takes inevitably a political form. As Hartmut Rosa says in his sociology of world relations, which is also a contribution to sociology of the good life: “Another relation to the world is possible” (Rosa 2016:541).

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I wrote this little text in dialogue with my friend François Dépelteau who is no more. He died peacefully on August 3, 2018, in Campinas, Brazil, of cancer. He was a decent man. I thank him for his generosity, spontaneity, and informality. We shared a language (French), two countries (Canada and Brazil), and a worldview (Convivialism). Without him, RS would not have been so relational, and the international network he weaved together would only have been an academic network and not a friendly society. Through his marriage with Tatiana Landini and their son Daniel, François had a strong connection with Brazil. We first met in Rio de Janeiro in 2015. Together, we organized a round table on RS at Anpocs (the equivalent of the

ASA) in 2016. François, Gabriel Cohn, and I presented papers in Caxambu. We were all surprised with the interest in RS. That is how the project for our book *Sociologia relacional: Uma DR teorica (Relational Sociology. Talking about the Relation)* got going. François was a visiting professor at the Department of Sociology of the Federal University of Santa Catherina in 2018. He was happy there. When he announced at the end of June that he was suffering from a second cancer with multiple tumors and that he had six weeks to live, I immediately decided to organize a conference for him at Florianopolis, which seemed the right thing to do. I proposed a title: “Relational Sociology as a Form of Life,” and a date (August 15 and 16). I contacted Marcia Grisotti who was working with him in Florianopolis, and we invited the friends, who had written a chapter in the book, to the conference. Even if we were not sure that we would find the funds for travel, they all graciously accepted our invitation. I thank my friends for that. François was working on a manuscript and sent us the title of his paper: “Processual-Relational Sociology with . . . Love.” We hoped that he would make it. He hoped it too. Till the end, we worked with the hypothesis that he would not be able to come because of illness. Not with his passing. Our only consolation is that the idea of the last conference was a source of joy and hope for him. The conference we organized for him has taken place, regrettably without him, but as a tribute, thanks, and a final adieu to the man who put RS on the agenda.

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