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PART I

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## 1

*Introduction*  
*Relational Sociology: reflexive*  
*and realist*

PIERPAOLO DONATI AND  
MARGARET S. ARCHER

### The rationale for this book

Increasingly, theorists of many different persuasions are presenting themselves as ‘Relational Sociologists’. Yet it is difficult to see how there could be a sociological theory that was not concerned with relations in some sense of the term. The problem is that those appropriating this adjective for their theorizing mean very different things by it: ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically. When Relational Sociology is proclaimed as a ‘manifesto’, the expectation is that its signatories will be endorsing at least the main planks of an ‘explanatory programme’; but even this is not the case. Moreover, ‘manifestos’ issued in any domain are promissory notes; what they promise is to perform a task better than did their predecessors. The trouble here is that the best known versions of ‘Relational Sociology’ – largely North American – do not even address the scope of this enterprise as traditionally conceived in the discipline.

Sociology came into being to seek answers to four questions about the social order: ‘Where have we come from?’, ‘What is it like now?’, ‘Where is it going?’, and ‘What is to be done?’ These are all realist questions: there is a real social world with real properties inhabited by real people who collectively made the past and whose causal powers are already shaping the future. One way in which Weber expressed the vocation of sociology was to discover why things are ‘so’ and not ‘otherwise’. In other words, the purpose of the discipline was explanatory. Both authors of this book situate themselves uncompromisingly in this tradition and in their previous works have struggled to contribute something to answering all four key questions. This distinguishes us from nearly all of those today who term themselves ‘Relational Sociologists’ and who retreat further and further from trying to

explain anything. We can illustrate this most pungently by simply asking: ‘What do those proclaiming their approaches to be distinctively “relational” contribute to our understanding of what is happening today in our one global society?’ We are not exigently demanding a grand theory, but more modestly asking for a statement of their explanatory programme.

In our view, as the economic crisis of late modernity became entrenched, it accentuated the incongruity between the cultural ‘ideal’ of Individualism and the structural influences that preceded, precipitated and prolonged this state of affairs in the economy, which are irreducible to individualistic terms. The excesses of unregulated global finance capitalism were met by an intensification of bureaucratic regulation on the part of enfeebled nation states when implementing their politics of austerity, which further accentuated the incongruity. This is encapsulated in the generalized acceptance in the developed world that structurally ‘there is no alternative’ to the financialized economy, whilst simultaneously scapegoating particularly rapacious individuals (bankers) for its damaging consequences. Hence, the old oscillation between individualism and collectivism that had dogged modernity re-presented itself in yet another guise. This is the backcloth to the present book. We start from the assumption that behind the complex interactions generating the current crisis, what is at issue is the central nucleus of Western modernity: its characteristic compromise<sup>1</sup> between individualism, which ironically goes hand in hand with its characteristic collectivism, as manifest in the ‘*lib/lab*’ nature of government and governance that oscillate between the two.<sup>2</sup>

More pointedly the book is concerned with the way in which the social sciences have reflected the same ambiguity and incorporated it into their theorizing. Both authors, sometimes writing together, have

<sup>1</sup> ‘Compromise’ results from situations where *incompatible* cultural and structural factors that are *necessarily* related to one another, i.e. representing a ‘constraining contradiction’ (Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 148–153).

<sup>2</sup> This peculiar combination of individualism and collectivism is at the basis of the arrangement that in the following chapters will be called the *lib/lab* configuration of modern society: see P. Donati, *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 48; *Sociologia della riflessività. Come si entra nel dopo-moderno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), pp. 221–294.

criticized interpretations of the intensified morphogenesis in the Western world as a process of destructuring in which contingency, complexity, uncertainty, and risk are captured by the trope of liquidity.<sup>3</sup> We remain convinced that there are generative mechanisms that underlie the current state of affairs, but that is not our focus in this text. Instead, we concentrate upon the parallel crisis in current social theorizing, particularly as concerns the social subject – both singular and collective.

In a nutshell, we regard the European shift towards political centrism (where government and opposition are increasingly indistinguishable, where the practice of politics is without conviction and the preoccupation is with tactics rather than strategy) as having its parallel in social theory. Generically, this is the move towards ‘central conflation’,<sup>4</sup> in which the problems of Structure and Agency and of objectivism and subjectivism are supposedly ‘transcended’; flows replace structures, narratives displace culture, and human plasticity makes the fluidity of our putative serial re-invention homologous with the equally putative liquidity of the social order.

What is the connection with the conceptualization of human subjects, both singular and collective, that are central to this book? Not so very long ago the conflicting claims of individualism and collectivism dominated the philosophy of social science in the embattled positions of methodological individualism versus holism. Until quite recently *homo economicus* pursuing ‘his’ lone and individual preference schedule through instrumental rationality confronted *homo sociologicus* as ‘organizational man’, the puppet of rule and role requirements. Neither has become extinct despite postmodernism’s proclamations of the ‘death of the subject’. Rather, the equivalent of political centrism was again fostered. The ‘institutionalized

<sup>3</sup> For our latest contributions see the three books edited by Margaret S. Archer (Dordrecht: Springer): *Social Morphogenesis* (2013), vol. 1; *Late Modernity: Trajectories towards Morphogenic Society* (2014), vol. 2; *Generative Mechanisms Transforming Late Modernity* (2015), vol. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency*, chapters 2, 3, and 4, and *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 79–89. Bourdieu provided a clear statement of central conflation in the first sentence of *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 25 (italics added): ‘Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, *the most fundamental, and the most ruinous is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism.*’

individualism'<sup>5</sup> (of Ulrich Beck rather than that of Talcott Parsons) presented us with *homo inconstantus*, a subject freed from traditionalism's 'zombie categories' of class and gender, now enmeshed in a plethora of bureaucratic regulations yet free to embrace their self-reinvention, change their identities, and rewrite their biographies according to current whim and devoid of durable commitment, thus yielding *provisional* men and *pro tem* women. With a handful of exceptions,<sup>6</sup> the human subject's real, objective capacities for flourishing and liabilities to suffering faded into sociological insignificance. What remained was the 'ability' of fluid subjects to make what they would of social liquidity. Such was the 'transcendence' of the central problems of social theory in the hands of the central conflationists.

Breaching the theoretical tenet that every social phenomenon comes in a SAC and can only be explained by unpacking its contents – 'Structure', 'Culture', and 'Agency' – and examining their interplay, these main constituents of the social order were increasingly conflated with one another.<sup>7</sup> For the majority of social theorists, the resulting soup had one distinctive flavour: despite its colouring, the pervasive taste of the *social* – after all ingredients had been through the Moulinex.<sup>8</sup>

Although this tendency fell short of homogenizing different theoretical approaches, it became an increasingly potent strand of thinking within them. With little exaggeration, this trend could be called 'the socialization of everything personal'. The 'Individual' – who had remained robust since the Enlightenment – was the obvious victim and one whose demise we welcome. However, there is a crucial difference between insisting that the social order was not only 'outside' us but also 'within' us and the insidious assumption that the social

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> D. V. Porpora, *Restructuring Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Colin Campbell (in *The Myth of Social Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) had traced precisely the same misguided transformation of all 'action' into 'social action'.

infiltrated every nook and cranny of the human person, thus reduced to zombie status. Most sociologists could agree that thinking in terms of the ‘Individual and Society’ – as many teaching modules used to be entitled – implied a highly misleading separation of the two. Nevertheless, some of us resisted the steady encroachment of the social upon human personhood and the progressive reduction of personal properties and powers that it implied. Our resistance was just as strong towards the parallel implications for ‘structure’ and ‘culture’ entailed by this tendency to endorse central conflation. These similarly underwent the erosion of their distinctive properties and powers, which were reduced to the products of ‘interaction’ among (over-) social agents. In turn, this subtracted *sui generis* constraints, enablements, and sources of motivation from structure and culture alike, as these became the plasticine of interaction. Pushed to the extreme – and not all were such extremists – the result was a sociology of ‘actants’ and their networks making up a social world with a completely flat social ontology.

Certainly, there are ‘old’ representatives of this position (interpretivists) and ‘new’ ones (actor-network theorists), but we are more concerned by the less articulated and generally rather diffuse creeping forward of this tendency. Let us consider some of its indicative traits before we come to the growing popularity of the label ‘Relational Sociology’.

To begin with, we note the *grounding* of ‘Relational Sociology’ in the revival of George Herbert Mead, especially his view that selfhood is completely derived from the social order and subsequently regulated by the ‘generalized other’. However, in the nascent globalized world that he detected, early in the twentieth century, Mead also feared that the ‘generalized other’ could not survive the loss of familiar geo-localism.<sup>9</sup> In addition, note that Mead was a theorist who fully endorsed ‘emergence’, although this is rarely mentioned by those rediscovering him. After all, the defence of emergent properties and powers is subjected to widespread hostility, in part at least, because this concept is the

<sup>9</sup> Mead admits that ‘the community in its size may transcend the social organization, may go beyond the social organization which makes such identification possible. The most striking illustration of that is the economic community. This includes everybody with whom one can trade in any circumstances, *but it represents a whole in which it would be next to impossible for all to enter into the attitudes of others*’ (George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1934, pp. 326–327; italics added).

strongest bulwark against those denying the relative autonomy, temporal priority, and causal powers of Structure and Culture in relation to Agency. In equal part, this is because the relations between human agents are also denied the power to generate emergent relational phenomena themselves. In this connection, Part II of this book is devoted to how the capacities and liabilities of human persons are affected by the structural and cultural contexts into which we are ineluctably born and that we necessarily have to confront. Part III examines our ineradicable human powers to transform these unavoidable, inherited aspects of our natal contexts.

### Neo-liberalism, centricism, and central conflation

North-American ‘Relational Sociology’ is marked by two distinct responses to the liberalism of modernity and the neo-liberalism of late-modernity: virulent antagonism towards the Individualist patrimony of pre-twentieth century social thought and uncritical receptivity towards the destructured portrayal of late modernity as fluid flows and formless complexity, which does sterling service in muting the critique of mutating capitalism.

First, its refusal to tackle the macro-level at all and its failure to recognize any distinctive properties and powers of emergent social structures (which it shares with the revival of neo-pragmatism)<sup>10</sup> means that the machinations of financialized banking, multinational corporations, digital technology, climate change, warfare, and so on are subjected to silence, as are associated failures in health care delivery<sup>11</sup> and growing differentials in income distribution. Of course, the studied absence of these major politico-economic features of the USA’s social landscape makes the endorsement of ‘destruction’ considerably easier.

Second, and more directly relevant to this book, is the conceptualization of the social ‘relationship’ – or rather its absence. People do not stand in close relations with one another – as friends, parents, fellow workers, team players or supporters, members of the same church

<sup>10</sup> See Neil Gross, who deals with this problem by invoking the (supposed) homology between the three ‘levels’: N. Gross, ‘A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms’, *American Sociological Review*, 74 (2009), 358–379.

<sup>11</sup> The world’s most expensive, yet the mortality rates for children are the highest in the developed world. Doug Porpora, *Restructuring Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach*.



or voluntary association, and so forth. Instead of warmth, caring, and commitment, which motivate their actions, generating ‘relational goods’<sup>12</sup> and promoting social integration, they feature as nodes in networks of connectivity or represent its ‘holes’. There is no coalescence into groups, significant to the subjects involved; no social movements committed to any cause and hostile to their opponents, and no parties or interest groups with social agendas. In place of personal concerns and collective conflicts, social relations are merely the site of an infinite series of ‘transactions’. What a transaction is remains without definition and is as indefinite as ‘everything’. As a portmanteau term, it certainly steers clear of the foundational imagery of the exchange of equivalents – of apples for bananas – in classical economics but fails to reveal when a transaction is successful (or a failure) and under what conditions and with what consequences. In all the approving references to transactional relations, without love or hate or even instrumental indifference, we find an overzealous reaction formation against the heritage of modernity’s individualism. Persons are shorn of their intrinsic personal powers, but the social relations that now subsume those previously attributed to the individual in no sense generate recognizable human relationships. Instead, we are increasingly encouraged to become anti-humanists.

The connection between neo-liberalism and individualism is well-known in the history and philosophy of political economy, dating back to the utilitarians and *philosophes*<sup>13</sup> and constantly receiving new shots in the arm throughout the twentieth century. This needs no rehearsing. Neither does its percolation into social theorizing as the philosophical individualism that accounted for the resilience of methodological individualism. Specifically, rational choice theory and rational action theory are its fully fledged representatives. The pernicious irony was that intensified attacks upon the individual and upon emergence left millennial forms of Relational Sociology without the conceptual resources to mount a critique upon the damaging consequences of neo-liberalism.

<sup>12</sup> P. Donati, ‘Capitale sociale e beni relazionali: una lettura sociologica delle reti associative a carattere cooperativo’, in V. Pelligra (ed.), *Imprese sociali. Scelte individuali e interessi comuni* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), pp. 135–153.

<sup>13</sup> C. Gide and C. Rist, *A History of Economic Doctrines* (London: G. Harrap, 1932 [1915]).

An important forerunner as to where this version of Relational Sociology would end was Giddens' 'structuration theory', as the acme of 'central conflationism'.<sup>14</sup> The bridge was that 'structure' and 'agency' were systematically elided and held to be even analytically inseparable, as each necessarily drew upon the other in the conception, conduct, and consequences of any action. This was followed by Giddens' work on 'self and society' in late modernity developing his notion of the 'pure relationship', which remained a relation only as long as the two participants derived personal satisfaction from it.<sup>15</sup> All the same, some kind of subject remained, if the capacity for subjective 'personal satisfaction' did, just as some kind of *virtual* structure and culture did, if they were elements that could be drawn upon. As a theoretical backcloth, structuration theory might have been more prominently foregrounded in relational sociology were it not contaminated by Giddens' venture into *realpolitik* in publishing his *Third Way*.

Instead, the same assumptions were taken from other sources, most importantly Bourdieu – after his works arrived in translation. Even Beck's version retained too much of the human subject because he stressed progressive 'individualization'. The latter was induced by the free flow of information and media representation, meaning that 'traditional' categories guiding self-direction, such as class and status or norms and values, were superseded by new notions of 'living a life of one's own', serial personal reinvention, familial experimentation, and kaleidoscopic biographical revision.<sup>16</sup> This preoccupation with the individualized 'life of one's own', negotiated and renegotiated among our new 'precarious freedoms', was held to underpin various contributions to the major loss in social solidarity: the attenuation of intergenerational social solidarity, the demise of the durable family, the reduced salience of class (now a 'zombie category'), indifference to party politics, and the vanishing of normative consensus. For the Becks, 'the human being who aspires to be the author of his or her life, the creator of an individual identity, *is the central character of our*

<sup>14</sup> Margaret S. Archer, 'Morphogenesis versus Structuration', *British Journal of Sociology*, 33 (1982), 455–483; *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> J. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization* (London: Sage, 2002).