

# СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ТЕОРИЯ

*P. Donati*

## AN OUTLINE OF RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY FROM A CRITICAL, ANALYTICAL AND REALIST VIEWPOINT

*In this paper, the author presents his original version of relational sociology (critical realist relational sociology-CRRS), which is also called 'relational theory of society'. It shares with other versions of relational sociology the aim to understand social facts as relationally constituted entities stemming from the dialectic between structures and interactive processes. But it differs from the radically constructivist and relativistic versions (here referred to as 'relationist sociologies') as regards the way in which social relations are defined, the kind of reality that is attributed to them, how they configure social formations, and the ways in which they are generated (emergence) and changed (morphogenesis). The paper clarifies the advantages that this original perspective offers in explaining a series of social issues. In particular, it can orient social research toward unseen and/or immaterial realities. Empirically, it can show how new social forms are created, changed, or destroyed depending on different processes of valorization or devalorization of social relations. Ultimately, the task of this approach is to point to the possibility of envisaging those social relations that can better realize the humanity of social agents and give them the opportunity to achieve a good life.*

**Keywords:** *relational sociology, relational social theory, emergentism, relational goods, humanistic sociology.*

### 1. What is 'relational sociology'?

This contribution is meant to present a short outline of my 'relational theory of society' (also called 'relational sociology') which originated as a sociological approach aimed at overcoming the limits of classical and contemporary sociologies with a more general theory able to include partial points of view and, at the same time, to connect them with one another (Donati 1983; 1991).

---

Пьерпаоло Донати — профессор социологии, Школа политических наук, Университет Болоньи, Италия ([pierpaolo.donati@unibo.it](mailto:pierpaolo.donati@unibo.it))

Pierpaolo Donati — Professor of Sociology, School of Political Sciences, Professor Alma Mater, University of Bologna, Italy ([pierpaolo.donati@unibo.it](mailto:pierpaolo.donati@unibo.it))

In particular, I wish to differentiate it from other, so-called 'relational sociologies,' which, as a matter of fact, should be more properly defined as transactional (Emirbayer 1997), figurational (Bartles 1995), inspired to network analysis (White 2008; Crossley 2011) or to generative structuralism (Vandenberghe 1999), and so on.

My 'critical realist relational sociology' (CRRS) shares with the other relational sociologies the idea of avoiding both methodological individualism and holism. The main differences reside in the way social relations are defined, the kind of reality that is attributed to them, how they configure social formations, and the ways in which social relations are generated (emergence) and changed (morphogenesis). In particular, my approach is suited to understanding how the morphogenesis of society comes about through social relations, which are the mediators between agency and social structure. The generative mechanisms that feed social change lie in the dynamics of the networks of social relations (not simply networks of nodes), which alter the molecular composition constituting structures already in place. The scope of CRRS is threefold. Theoretically, it can orient social research toward unseen and/ or immaterial realities (the same relations are intangibles). Empirically, it can show how new social forms/ formations are created, transformed, or destroyed depending on different processes of valorization or devalorization of social relations. Finally, it can help us design and implement social policies and welfare services based on networking interventions.

My initial inspiration was the criticism of action sociologies and system sociologies in as much as they are reductive views of social reality. I proposed that such a critique would benefit from the adoption of the category of the social relation as the basic concept that designates the smallest unit of the social fabric and, *therefore*, of sociological analysis. For me, the social relation is simultaneously 'the great unknown' and the unifying principle of reality, containing within itself a unique and fundamental property: that of connecting (uniting) the elements of the social sphere while *at the same time* it promotes their differentiation. It is in this property that we find what I call the 'enigma' of the relation (Donati 2015a), which consists in the fact that it connects diverse terms (or entities) through differentiation processes that are, at the same time, conflictual and integrative.

The challenge that I set for myself was that of developing a theory that is open to all possible social dynamisms but that is also endowed with a solidity of its own. Briefly, to my view, the consistency of theory must be based on the relationality among the elements that make up the social fabric, and not on some integrationist principle (such as the systemic inertia in Talcott Parsons'

‘general unified theory’ or Niklas Luhmann’s ‘autopoietic self-referentiality’), nor, at the opposite extreme, on some principle of radical relativism.

My approach relies upon a kind of realism that I name “relational realism” (Donati 1983: 10; further developed in Donati 2011: 97–119). It is intended to be an *alternative* to those relational approaches that are founded on a flat ontology, but it is not an attempt to unify all sociological approaches around the notion of relationship as a replacement category of other categories (such as system or network). Bagaoui’s (Bagaoui 2007) criticism according to which I proposed a ‘unifying’ theory in order to replace all other theories is misleading, since, from the very start, I conceived of my relational sociology not as a *reductio ad unum* but as a general framework to connect the best of all other theories (Donati 1983: 11–12). In order to avoid a unifying theory, Bagaoui (ibidem: 173) proposes a “plural relational sociology”. While I agree that we must avoid a unifying theory, which would be constrictive and restrictive, I do not think that we should label the relational sociology as ‘plural’, given that, on the condition that the theory is truly relational, then it should be necessarily pluralistic, provided that it can understand and cope with the essential property of the relation, which is to join the terms that it connects while, at the same time, promoting their differences (what I have called the ‘enigma’ of the relation: Donati 2015a). It is precisely the absence or rejection of the relation that undermines pluralism.

## 2. The architecture of CRRS

The architecture of CRRS rests on three major pillars that are rooted in a realist relational ontology: relational epistemology (knowledge is relation to a relational reality), the methodological paradigm (relational analysis), and social practice (network intervention). Let us look at them one by one.

### *Relational Epistemology*

The idea at the basis of CRRS is that sociological knowledge consists in understanding and explaining social facts as effects that emerge from relationally contested contexts.

The fabric of social reality — that is, whatever constitutes a ‘social fact’ — is neither the action (single or aggregate), nor a supposed system with its impersonal mechanisms, nor simple communication, but the social relation. It is the *sui generis* processual structure of relations that characterizes the emergence of every social form. A couple, an economic enterprise, a voluntary association, a school all exist to the extent to which their actors practice a certain relational structure of belonging and processually generate and

regenerate it over time. Social institutions are formed as specific relational contexts that emerge from particular networks of relations and change according to the process dynamic of networks. We can think of how the changing social relations in a local community elicit the decline and then death of the commons (from Karl Marx to Elinor Ostrom: Carlsson, Sandström 2008). We can think of the qualities and properties of relations that diversify the forms of social circles (concentric or intersecting) studied by Georg Simmel. We can think of how the networks within an organization lead to the formation of oligarchical rule (Robert Michels' so-called 'iron law of oligarchy'). In all of these cases, it is a precise processual structure of relational networks that does, or does not, elicit the emergence of a social fact. The structure is not independent of agency, and the problem is to understand how structure and agency are interacting in the network of social relations. The mediation process on the part of the social relations is of course a dynamic process of a reticular nature due to the subjects' relationality. The social system is a 'condensation' of social networks: that is, we can observe a network as a 'system' only under particular conditions.

A growing number of sociologists have realized that in order to 'see' the relation, a third point of view is needed, one that is neither individualistic nor holistic, but that considers relations to be its primary object and focuses on relations as the objects that it seeks to explore. This exploration entails second and third order observations, that is, the activation of a reflexivity *on the* relations as such (which I call 'relational reflexivity': Donati 2011: xviii).

Consider friendship, for example. What makes friendship a social reality? Friendship emerges from human persons and only from them, but it cannot be an individual-level fact. We cannot be friends as individuals. To be friends is to share 'something' which is not a material or ideational entity, although it is powered by the exchange of material things, feelings, and reciprocal aids of various kinds. We cannot explain it in terms of individual contributions (as a matter of fact, it requires reciprocity) or holistic factors (in fact, neither of the two friends can live their friendship as an external imposition). Two or more people have created a relationship that depends solely on them, but which has assumptions that do not depend on them and involves things that go beyond their own individuality. This implies a togetherness (a 'we-relationship') that calls into play more than the friends' own individuality.

Over recent decades a growing attention to the category of relationality has emerged, but one that empties it of a meaning of its own. A vast literature calls itself 'relational' today, but, to me, this is a label that, most of the time, covers nominalistic and indeterminate conceptions. As Dépelteau and Powell (Dépel-

teau, Powell 2013: xvi) rightly note: “for now, relational sociology is something like a patchwork of knowledge about social relations that are seen as dynamic, fluid processes.” From my point of view (as I will explain below), most sociologies that focus specifically on the category of the social relation are based on a flat ontology and have recourse to a more or less radical relativist epistemology.

What I call ‘relationism’ in the strict sense blends together structure and action, defining one in terms of the other in the manner that Archer (Archer 1995: 93–134) calls ‘central conflation’. The result, as in Anthony Giddens’ theory, is an inability to analytically theorize social interactions as a separate mediating temporal phase between a starting structure and an elaborated structure.

Explaining a social fact in relational terms means giving an account of how that fact (for example the increase in unemployment or violence) emerges from the interdependence between the actors who are in relation in a certain spatial-temporal context; meanwhile, these actors alter their identity and their way of acting in relation to the interdependence between them. The task of relational sociology is to analyze the process through which this structure of interdependence is generated, reproduces itself, and changes. This involves entering ‘inside’ the social relation and seeing its internal morphogenesis, which is structural, agential, and cultural. In order to carry out this analysis, I found it useful to reformulate in relational terms the *multidimensional interchange model* (AGIL) as a methodological tool (Donati 1991: 175–303).

In short, knowing a social relation means observing how the elements qualifying what is required by the relation itself for its own realization (i.e., what is required to make that specific relationship exist) are combined: its situated purpose (G), the means (A) and norms (I) to achieve it, and the latent value of the concrete relation that one is observing (L). To determine whether a committed relationship does or does not exist between David and Helen, it is not only a question of knowing the individual expectations of one vis-à-vis the other, and in which way and to what extent their expectations are shared, but it means observing how their relation is configured as a We-relation (Donati, Archer 2015: 70–71). The relation is a ‘third party’ with respect to the interests, feelings, and expectations of the two partners.

The elements that qualify (configure) a social relation derive from the contributions that the actors inject into a relation through their interactions (reciprocal actions). The point is that their relationality is not simply a matter of a recursive process of transactions, of give and take, between Ego and Alter from which a certain interdependence between the subjects arises. Seen in this way, the relation becomes a circularity that defines the subjects’ identity

(as White (White 2008) claims). Unlike relationist approaches, I maintain that it is possible to distinguish: (a) the distinct contributions that Ego and Alter give to the relation and (b) the contribution of their relationality as such (as demonstrated by: Tam 1989). The social relation is the reality that exists 'between' the two. The emergence of the relation as a third party does not imply that the self-identity (of Ego and Alter) gets lost in the flux of social interdependence, as many network analyses and transactional sociologies often seem to suggest. The relational logic of networking is neither a negation of the subject nor a pure phenomenological circularity. It is, instead, the path for observing, describing, and defining how each agent individually redefines his/her identity in a networked situational context. Realist epistemology observes the relation in order to explore its terms (agents' actions), but does not annihilate their autonomy. It is in this framework that Cook and Dreyer (Cook, Dreyer 1984) formulated the 'social relations model' for the study of the family, and Fiske (Fiske 1992; 1993) and Haslam and Fiske (Haslam, Fiske 1999) proposed the 'relational models theory'.

Obviously, in acting between each other, the actors reflect their social positions (status-roles) in varying ways and degrees. Nevertheless, they can also ignore or change their positions. Everything depends on how the subject (Self) interprets its own position, that is, what it entails and the opportunities for alternative relations that it offers.

The social relation unfolds between subjects that enter into the relation and redefine it constantly, taking into account all of its environments. In short, *the human subject is both outside and inside the relation*, of course in different ways. This perspective allows us to study social relations using an analytical scheme that is more complex and sensitive to the agents' subjectivity\*.

The idea that the social relation (not the unit act) is the minimal and qualifying element of the social fabric suggests analogies, which are obviously only conceptual. As the chemical molecule characterizes a chemical substance and in biology the genome specifies the bios of a living individual, so we can say that, in sociology, a specific social relation characterizes a certain social form. For example, a network of friends, a hospital, a class, a family, a software laboratory, a gang, a lobby, a group of human traffickers are all characterized by a specific relational structure that I call the 'social molecule.' Obviously, any literal chemical or biological analogy must be avoided because the 'social molecule' that characterizes the social fabric as such is made up of elements

---

\* Due to limited space, I cannot include here and comment on figure 1 in (Donati 2015a: 43), which explains this complexity.

that come from human actions that are relatively free and takes on stability through relational mechanisms (Donati 2015c).

Following this conceptual framework, we can enter ‘inside’ the social relation and observe how its *sui generis* structure (its social molecule) characterizes an entire social formation and mutates over time: for example, the transition from a modern form to an after(or trans)-modern one (Donati 2015b: 99–103).

We can ask: when is it that the social morphogenesis of modernity happens? From the point of view of relational sociology, it happens when the relationality of its own social molecule finds itself faced with a type and degree of contingency that it is no longer able to manage. Society approaches a breaking point in which agents/actors experience increasing numbers of failures. The collapse of the social molecule that structures it becomes possible. This is happening in the spheres that are modernizing the most. Many emerging phenomena signal the advent of a turning point that is marked by the formation of *another social molecule*, of a *trans-modern* type.

The typically modern relation is characterized by the following combined elements: (G) the goal of the social relation is to select a variation as an expansion of opportunities by freeing it from all ascriptive constraints; (A) the means for achieving this goal can be extremely diverse, but what is essential is that social relations are treated like money because money is the generalized symbolic means of exchange that allows us to render all objects equivalent, removing their constraints; in fact, money is the trigger of a typically modern relationality, rendering social relations in-different and making their ascriptive character and intrinsic quality disappear; (I) the norms of the modern social molecule are acquisitive rules that must foster the production of variety, valorizing competition in order to produce continuous innovation; (L) the relation’s guiding distinction is its in-difference toward values (i.e., the polytheism of values); thus, the relation evaluates reality on the basis of values that are always negotiable and fungible, in other words, which are functionally equivalent to other values; the culture of the society of individuals is characterized by liquidity and the decontextualization of relations and is nourished by an a-relational individualistic matrix (L).

On the other hand, the typically after-modern relation is characterized in the following way: (G) the goal of the social relation is to select variations according to the causal qualities and properties of the relations, in particular, generating relational goods whenever it is possible and desirable; (A) the means for achieving the goal can be extremely diverse, but they must be such as to allow for the production of qualitatively satisfying relations; (I) the norms of the after-modern social molecule, owing to the fact of having to promote

the non-fungible qualities of social relations, must employ a specific reflexivity (for example, working in a non-profit organization entails a type of relations that are qualitatively different from those involved in working in a for-profit company, and the two normative environments are not interchangeable; (L) the relation is evaluated on the basis of the meaningful experience that it produces differently from other types of relations; this cultural orientation replaces an individualistic cultural matrix with a cultural matrix that allows the human person to transcend him/herself in and through the relation.

In the social relation that we qualify with a certain name, there are both necessity and contingency (Morandi 2010; 2011). The necessity refers to the need to be structured so as to match the agent's purposes; the contingency concerns its situational configuration, that can be articulated in many different ways. For example, the relation that we call 'free giving' is different if practiced in the family or on the part of a charity or a company or by a non-profit organization. The friendship relation is different if practiced among classmates or on Facebook. The citizenship relation is different if it refers to the city in which one resides, the nation, a super-national community, or the entire world.

#### *Methodological paradigm*

*(the relational analysis of society as a network of social networks)*

My relational analysis follows five methodological rules, which correspond to just as many phases of the cognitive process (Donati 2006; LSR 2016: 15–18).

1. The researcher needs to spell out what he intends to know. He must choose between questions based on descriptive needs and questions that problematize the object, introducing a paradoxical point of view (descriptive observation or problematizing observation). For example, if the problem is unemployment, one can ask about which configuration the unemployment in a certain geographical area has (descriptive question), or why it is this way and not another way, or why unemployment is increasing while there is economic development (an instructive question because it confronts one with a counter-intuitive phenomenon that is an enigma).

2. It is necessary to define the fact that is being observed as a social relation and, where appropriate, problematized as a social relation. For example, unemployment is not a thing or a state of things, or simply a form of transaction, but a type of social relation that, in order to be seen, requires a 'relational observation'. Relational observation begins by defining its object of knowledge as a social relation among actors (A and B) belonging to diverse socio-economic-cultural structures, and continuing with the observation of phenomena from the perspective of an outside observer (O) who examines the behavior of actor

A in relation to actor B, and vice versa, in order to explain why their interactions produced the effect Y (emergent relation) under certain conditions.

3. The emergent fact is configured as a black box (AGIL) within which the generative process of the fact itself unfolds starting from a series of relevant variables; obviously, the choice of objective and subjective variables is a creative act on the part of the researcher. For example, in the case of unemployment, the characteristics of the work required by the employer as well as the worker's qualities can be important, but, above all, it is the relation between objective and subjective factors that must be the object of investigation.

4. The social fact has a *sui generis* reality of an emergent nature that derives from processes of morphostasis/ morphogenesis (M/M) (Archer 1995; 2013). For example, the use of the M/ M scheme makes it possible to see how the initial structure of the job market was altered by the interactions between the actors and by external and intervening factors in the intermediate temporal phase T2-T3 so as to produce a structure at arrival in which that particular configuration of unemployment, and not another one, emerged.

5. The fifth rule is applied when the research has the practical goal of social intervention to remediate the social problem in question: in such a case, the methodology for devising an ODG (relational Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance) system is applied, which I will explain below. For example, unemployment is observed as a specific social relation in a relational context, an assessment diagnosis is made of the problems posed by these relations, and then a process of relational (not directive) guidance is designed for the involved actors so that the actors themselves solve the problem by altering their relational context.

To put it in simple terms. We begin with the observation that there exists a social fact Y. We cast it as a problem (Why does it exist? How is it possible?). We define it as a relation. We ask why it has emerged. We devise a research design by identifying relevant factors, both subjective (values and attitude orientations) and objective (adaptive conditions, that is, means and norms that are independent of the subjective will), which could have generated the observed fact, and then we put them into a system of relations, the black box, that should offer an explanation for why the phenomenon Y has been generated.

The black box is configured as a network of relations among relevant factors that are, moreover, influenced by their environments, which are, in turn, networks of relations among interests, means, norms, and values that have an impact on the phenomenon that is the research object. For this reason, if generalized, relational analysis leads to the observation of society as a network of networks of relations that changes through the processes of M/M (an example is given in Donati 2017).

*Relational practice (social interventions as networking)*

My relational approach envisions the possibility that relational analysis can be useful in designing and implementing interventions aimed at solving social problems in all areas (Donati 1991: part 3).

Social practices consist in activating networks that produce changes generated by the stakeholders interested in solving a social problem assisted by social actors (social workers, catalysts, supervisors, promoters, etc.) who stimulate and guide a process of change by working on the relations. Relational guidance consists in enabling actors to change their behaviors by leveraging their personal and relational reflexivity through the mobilization of new relations. The guidance is not directive but consists in appealing to the natural potentials for change inherent in the networks of relations among the actors. For this reason, it is called *relational steering*, widely used in action research\*.

These practices are conceptualized as ‘relational observation-diagnosis-guidance systems’ (see the entry for ‘ODG systems’ in: LSR 2016: 283–287). They are responses to crisis situations. A certain social policy is an intervention into a state of things that is considered to be unsatisfactory. Each social intervention thus presupposes a definition of the situation that contains an ethical or political value judgment. We can summarize the three phases of the ODG systems as follows:

i) *Relational observation* is a delicate operation because there is the risk that the researcher may observe his/ her mind rather than the objective reality. One must be cognizant of the paradoxes of observing systems and have appropriate tools for addressing them. For this reason, the observation of social needs must be based on continual interactions between the intervening system and the target subject. The interactions that make it possible to learn about the situation must seek the maximum of relational reflexivity for all the actors.

ii) *Diagnosis* is relational in as much as it seeks to show that the social problem arises from pathological and unsatisfactory social relations. Diagnosis is a special case of description that condenses the general observation of a situation by focusing on the difference between a normal or satisfactory state and a pathological or unsatisfactory condition. Diagnosis is therefore more than linguistic observation-description-communication: it is an elaboration of sense (as meaning and intentionality). Sense is a relation and, as such, should be thought and acted. Expert systems can give important cognitive support

---

\* As examples see: Weaver (Weaver 2012) and the welfare interventions for families and social groups at the local level quoted in LSR (LSR 2016).

in making a diagnosis, but they cannot replace the giving of meaning, which is peculiar to human relations.

iii) *Relational guidance* is an alternative to directive interventions (authoritative, conditional, preceptoral, procedural) and to paradoxical interventions (for example, those based on the positive connotation of symptoms); these have been shown to be inadequate to today's complex social systems, which behave in a counter-intuitive way. Examples of relational programs are all those interventions that, based on a network map, have the goal of activating the natural potentials of networks of relations through an array of different methodologies such as: forms of partnership between public and private actors, whether formal or informal, cooperative or competitive; peer-to-peer production; co-production, dialogic-relational methodologies (such as family group conferences: Seikkula, Arnkil 2006), and so on. To the extent that relations become the object of new ways to enact policies of relational inclusion and investment, they become the fulcrum for many new relational professions, especially in the area of social work (Folgheraiter 2004). An example of application is the relational intervention aimed at making youth gangs desist from committing crimes (Weaver, McNeil 2015).

### 3. The advantages of CRRS

We could say that the advantage of CRRS lies in seeing empirical facts that other sociologies do not see or do not explain. Let me give some examples.

1. *Types of Welfare*. In the field of welfare studies, the theory of R. Titmuss (Titmuss 1974) is often cited as the paradigm of reference. Titmuss distinguishes between residual welfare, acquisitive-meritocratic welfare, and institutional welfare. On the theoretical level, the CRRS paradigm shows that these three types of welfare correspond to three types of social formations in the AGIL scheme: respectively, residual welfare corresponds to families and informal networks (L), acquisitive-meritocratic welfare to the market (A), and institutional welfare to the political-administrative system (G). The social integration (I) component of AGIL is missing. We ask ourselves: are there social formations that address needs for social integration differently from the other types of welfare? The answer is affirmative. Such formations are identified in civil welfare (or the welfare of civil society), understood as the well-being generated by the community's own voluntary, civic, and associative organizations. Titmuss simply ignored this extremely important sector. Not only: he did not see the inter-relations between the four sectors that are so distinct from one another and, therefore, ignored the many possible combinations of the different types of welfare that can arise from these differentiated (and self-

differentiating) sectors (today these combinations include various forms of public/ private partnership, mixed form of for profit and not for profit organizations, co-production, etc.) (Donati, Martignani 2015).

2. *Citizenship and rights.* The theory of citizenship referenced by most sociological studies as their benchmark is that of T.H. Marshall (Marshall 1950) who distinguished three types of rights: civil, political, and social. Based on my relational methodology, it is evident that they correspond, respectively, to the rights to the individual freedoms of the market (A), to democratic electoral rights (G), and to institutional welfare rights (I). The fourth dimension (L) is missing. Relational theory fills this gap by identifying this dimension in human rights. There are many advantages to this move. First, civil rights, which are those typical of the liberal bourgeois culture of the 18th century, are distinguished from today's human rights, which instead make reference to the human person in his/ her relational dignity (for example, the right of the child to grow up in a context of family relations rather than in an institution, or the right to the recognition of relations of mutual love between persons of the same sex). Secondly, while Marshall maintains that rights develop historically 'in single file', one after the other, the historical-sociological analysis of CRRS shows that this is not true given that in many cases the pathways taken by the development of rights are not linear and arise from combinations that are very different from one another.

3. *The third sector.* On the basis of the aforementioned considerations, relational theory has sought the relational specificity of each social sphere, both theoretical and empirical, especially that of the Third Sector. While American research considers the Third Sector to be the compassionate and philanthropic side of the capitalistic market (equating the Third Sector with non-profits), CRRS has revealed the peculiarity of the relations and networks that characterize civil associations and organizations (Donati 2008). This peculiarity resides in the generation of social capital that consists of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity.

4. *The theory of social goods.* The aforementioned investigations have led to the enucleation of an original theory of relational goods that is different from approaches that follow rational choice (for example, Uhlener 1989). It has been shown that relational goods are distinct from both public and private goods, and consist of shared social relations (not of aggregations of individual choices) (Donati, Solci 2011). These goods are characterized by the fact that they can only be produced and enjoyed together by the participants (Donati, Archer 2015: 198–228). Various forms of social capital (bonding, bridging, linking) and of sharing economies are examples. Today this vision of relational

goods is applied to the new commons on the Internet (for example, peer-production and social streets). On the other hand, just as relational goods have been revealed to be specific to the Third Sector and a source of social integration, relational evils that create social disintegration have also been underscored in many fields of research. Most of them are generated by systemic compulsions to an underlying self-destructive growth that produces catastrophes (poverty, massive drug addiction, wars, mass migrations, etc.) through information flows responding to economic and political interests and, ultimately, to the addictive imperatives of globalized capital.

5. *The theory of the Relational Subject.* The convergence between critical realism and my relational sociology has led to the formulation of a new vision of acting subjects as 'relational subjects' (Donati, Archer 2015). The relationality of subjects does not entail the same way of thinking ('we think') or a necessarily convergent thought ('joint commitment'), as M. Gilbert claims, or a 'group belief' or a 'shared point of view', as R. Tuomela asserts, but rather is expressed in a we-relation. It is the relation that unites the subjects, not the fact of having a mind that thinks the same things.

6. *Relational analysis of social networks.* On the methodological level CRRS contributes to a revision of the excessive determinism of structuralist network analysis. A relational methodology (sometimes called 'structural interactionism') is proposed showing how social relations mediate between constraining structures and individual choices so that structures are explained as outcomes of relational dynamics in which individual choices play a fundamental role (Tronca 2013). Without resorting to this principle, the network remains a sort of black box because one cannot explain in what way an actor chooses to stabilize or change, in a pre-existing structure, one type of relation rather than another. For example: acting for the common interest of a civil association, organization or social movement rather than for a narrowly defined individual interest. The use of this methodology in empirical studies has demonstrated the fallacy of E. Banfield's well-known claims that 'amoral familism' is typical of Southern Italy. Amoral familism is widespread throughout Italy and is also found in many other cultures and contexts.

The studies carried out in line with CRRS have led to new results precisely because they have entered inside the structure of relations and analyzed their morphostasis/ morphogenesis with an analytical epistemological and methodological framework that is more sophisticated than other sociologies. In this way, the *sui generis* qualities and causal properties of different types of relations in different environments of social life have been revealed. On the level of social policies, CRRS has brought about profound innovations in intervention

styles for the resolution of social issues in many areas. For example, it has contributed its own definition of the principle of subsidiarity in conjunction with the principles of solidarity, the common good, and the valorization of the human person. It has contributed to innovating the strategies of equal opportunities and interventions for reconciling family and work. It has oriented policies to fight poverty through the practices of 'relational inclusion.' It has overhauled social policies to prevent violent behaviors and forms of addiction. It has redefined social and health services organizations, academic organizations, family policies, and participatory processes that create civic common goods. For a wide-ranging review of all these researches, I must refer the reader to LSR (LSR 2016) which contains an extensive bibliography.

### 5. CRRS as a humanistic point of view

In my view, the 'relational paradigm' should be conceived differently from Kuhn's. I do not understand a sociological paradigm as a hard, constraining, normalizing, hegemonic or dominant theory, as it is sometimes understood in positivistic natural sciences, but precisely the opposite, as an open, dynamic, relational point of view. "The relational paradigm analyses social reality from a point of view which is neither that of methodological individualism nor that of methodological holism, but from that which I term 'the relational point of view'" (Donati 2011: 56). Following Luhmann (Luhmann 1995), I conceive of a sociological paradigm as a 'guiding-difference', but, differently from Luhmann, I understand difference as a relation and not as a binary distinction (Donati 2009).

To conclude. My relational sociology can be called humanistic in as much as it argues that the destiny of the human being is connected to the future of the social relation. Human flourishing or alienation cannot depend on individual rational choices, on technological progress, on Industry 4.0, or on a materialistic ecologism that assimilates human qualities to those of all other existing beings in the animal and vegetable world, as many people believe, but depends on how society will configure social relationality.

In contrast to theories of the post/ trans-human or the hyper-human, CRRS emphasizes the fact that the human person does not transcend herself through acting (as the old personalism claims), nor through new technologies that enhance a person's capacities and frees them from obsolete burdens and constrictions: rather, the human being transcends and realizes him/ herself *in the relation* with the Other. However, the relation with the Other is not a pure flux of communicative events in which the human person is dissolved in her personal identity, as the relationists assert. For CRRS, the social identity

of a person is constituted through a dialogue between her internal conversation (with herself in relation to the social context) and her 'relational reflexivity' exerted on the external relations in which and through which she lives.

With modernity, the world of social relations has been opened like Pandora's box. All modern social life is marked by a paradoxical ambivalence. On the one hand, modernity exalts social relations as the way by which society continues to expand and develop. At the same time, conversely, every effort is made to control, limit, and regulate social relations and the possibilities they might open up. The theories in each of the human sciences (anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology) can be read as so many different discourses on the ways in which social relations come to be created, destroyed, and recreated.

The modern ambivalence about social relations continues. Thus, whatever can be said of society in the future, we can at least say it will accentuate its features of being 'a relational society', subject to the creative and destructive effects of social relations at all levels — the micro, meso, and macro.

The problem of society, understood as a form of association, always becomes something of a double conundrum. On one side, there is the imperative to know how to manage disruptive social relations so as to reduce their relational evils. The problem, on the other hand, is to continue to foster those relational goods needed to nurture human well-being in every sphere of social life, from the small experiences of everyday life to international relations.

We have reached a point where neither social relations nor society can be conceptualized as immediately human: in other words, the qualities and causal properties of individual actions (their 'intentionality') cannot be immediately transferred to social forms, and, vice versa, the qualities and causal properties of social forms cannot be transferred to the individuals without relational mediations. In late modernity, the social is increasingly becoming an ever more intricate tangle of the human and non-human while at the same time the human and non-human elements of society have come to diverge to an extent that is unprecedented in human history. This paradoxical condition can only be clarified by a relational sociology capable of handling the distinctions between the human and non-human without conflating them.

The task of a relational sociology, then, is to point to a different possibility, the possibility of social relations that can better realize the humanity of social agents and give them the opportunity to achieve a good life. The good life (eudaimonia), in this vision, consists in participating in the creation and enjoyment of relational goods rather than relational evils. Of course, in my view, relational goods are morally good when they feed a civilizing process. This fact implies that sociology cannot be value-free. It cannot avoid evaluating

social processes in the light of ultimate human concerns, which, to me, basically are relational justice, relational freedom, and a relational democracy.

### References

- Archer M.S. (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer M.S. (2013) (ed.) *Social Morphogenesis*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bagaoui R. (2007) Un paradigme systémique relationnel est-il possible? Proposition d'une typologie relationnelle. *Nouvelles perspectives en sciences sociales: revue internationale de systématique complexe et d'études relationnelles*, 3(1): 151–175.
- Bartles H.-P. (ed.) (1995) *Menschen in Figurationen. Ein Lesebuch zur Einführung in die Prozess- und Figurationssoziologie von Norbert Elias*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Carlsson L., Sandström A. (2008) Network governance of the commons. *International Journal of the Commons*, 2(1): 33–54.
- Cook W., Dreyer A. (1984) The Social Relations Models. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 46(3): 679–687.
- Crossley N. (2011) *Towards Relational Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Dépelteau F., Powell C. (eds.) (2013) *Applying Relational Sociology. Relations, Networks, and Society*. New York: Palgrave.
- Donati P. (1983) *Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Donati P. (1991) *Teoria relazionale della società*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Donati P. (2006) L'analisi relazionale: regole, quadro metodologico, esempi. In: *Sociologia. Una introduzione allo studio della società*, P. Donati (ed.). Padova: Cedam: 195–251.
- Donati P. (2008) The Emergent Third Sector in Europe: Actors, Relations and Social Capital. In: *The Social Generative Action of the Third Sector. Comparing International Experiences*. H. K. Anheier, G. Rossi, L. Boccacin (eds.). Milan: Vita e Pensiero: 13–47.
- Donati P. (2009) Beyond the dilemmas of multiculturalism: recognition through 'relational reason'. *International Review of Sociology/Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 19(1): 55–82.
- Donati P. (2011) *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Donati P. (2015a) *Lenigma della relazione*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.
- Donati P. (2015b) Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology. *International Review of Sociology/Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 25(1): 86–109.
- Donati P. (2015c) Social Mechanisms and Their Feedbacks: Mechanical vs Relational Emergence of New Social Formations. In: *Generative Mechanisms Transforming the Social Order*. M.S. Archer (ed.). Dordrecht: Springer: 65–92.
- Donati P. (2017) What Does a 'Good Life' Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology. In: *Social Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, M.S. Archer (ed.). Dordrecht: Springer: 23–40.

- Donati P., Archer M.S. (2015) *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Donati P., Martignani L. (eds.) (2015) *Towards a New Local Welfare. Best Practices and Networks of Social Inclusion*. Bologna: Bononia University Press.
- Donati P., Solci R. (2011) *I beni relazionali. Che cosa sono e quali effetti producono*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Emirbayer M. (1997) Manifesto for a relational sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2): 281–317.
- Fiske A.P. (1992) The Four Elementary Forms of Sociality: Framework for a Unified Theory of Social Relations. *Psychological Review*, 99: 689–723.
- Fiske A.P. (1993) Social Errors in Four Cultures: Evidence about Universal Forms of Social Relations. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 24: 463–494.
- Folgheraiter F. (2004) *Relational Social Work. Toward Networking and Societal Practices*. London: J. Kingsley.
- Haslam N., Fiske A.P. (1999) Relational models theory: A confirmatory factor analysis. *Personal Relationships*, 6: 241–250.
- LSR (2016) *Lessico della sociologia relazionale [Lexicon of relational sociology]*. P. Terenzi, L. Boccacin and R. Prandini (eds.). Bologna: il Mulino.
- Luhmann N. (1995) *Social Systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Marshall T. H. (1950) *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Morandi E. (2010) Introductory Outlines to Pierpaolo Donati's Relational sociology. Part 1. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 9(2): 208–226.
- Morandi E. (2011) Introductory Outlines to Pierpaolo Donati's Relational sociology. Part 2. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 10(1): 100–121.
- Seikkula J., Arnkil T.E. (2006) *Dialogical Meet Social Networks*. London: Karnac Books.
- Tam T. (1989) Demarcating the Boundaries Between Self and the Social: The Anatomy of Centrality in Social Networks. *Social Networks*, 11(4): 387–401.
- Titmuss R. (1974) *Social Policy: An Introduction*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Tronca L. (2013) *Sociologia relazionale e social network analysis. Analisi delle strutture sociali*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.
- Uhlener C. J. (1989) Relational goods and participation. Incorporating sociability into a theory of rational action. *Public Choice*, 62: 253–285.
- Vandenberghe F. (1999) «The Real is Relational»: An Epistemological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Generative Structuralism. *Sociological Theory*, 17(1): 32–67.
- Weaver B. (2012) The Relational Context of Desistance: Some Implications and Opportunities for Social Policy. *Social Policy & Administration*, 46(4): 395–412.
- Weaver B., McNeill F. (2015) Lifelines: Desistance, Social Relations, and Reciprocity. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 42(1): 95–107.
- White H. C. (2008) *Identity and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.