

Pierpaolo Donati
University of Bologna

**Birth and development of the relational theory of society:
a journey looking for a deep ‘relational sociology’**

1. A sociological journey into the crucible of late modernity.

1.1. The choice to dedicate myself to sociology was strictly related with the fact of having deeply shared young people’s restlessness during the second half of the Sixties, having played an active role in the protest action of those days. I neither was a revolutionary, nor did I share Marxist or anarchist ideas. Simply, I wanted a better world. Sociology for me was a vocation to realize such world, of which I had a very vague idea.

Looking back, however, belonging to the “generation of 1968” meant something different, namely to live the destiny of a generation that witnessed the *success* and the *decline* of modernity.

I was born right after the Second World War, in an almost traditional society. I grew up in the modernization of the Fifties and Sixties. Today, I find myself in a globalized society that deletes traces of times past. To put it in another way, I was educated in the culture of classics and great storytelling (*grand récit*), while now I live in a society that is not able to self-represent anymore, celebrating the end of the great storytelling and stating the death of the human subject.

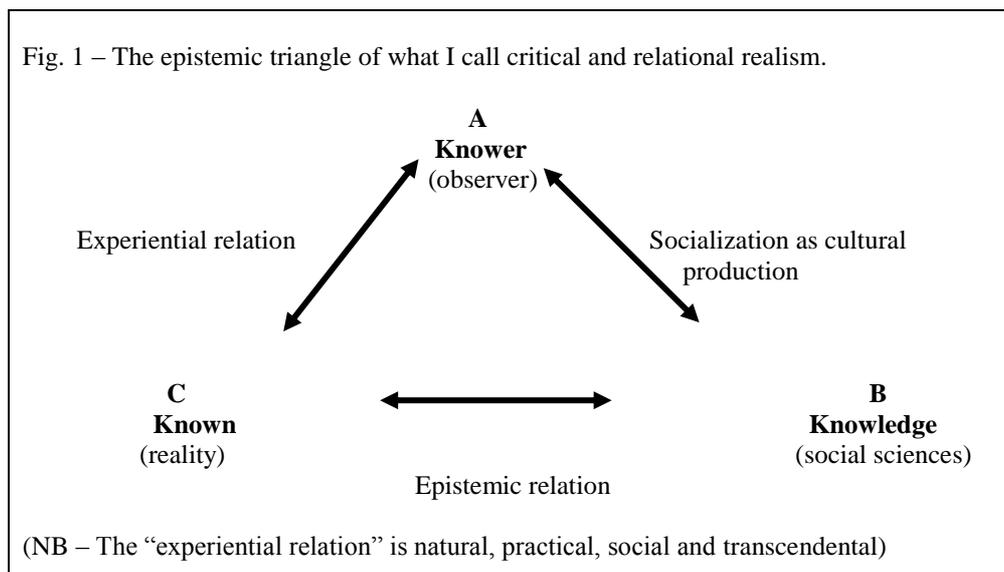
My researches started with the idea of building a useful sociology to reform the society. Actually, they became a reflection on the parabola – rising first, and then falling – of modernity. I had to rethink what “makes” a society, how and why a societal configuration is born differently from the former one, rather than study the possible reforms of the given (modern) society. While I was covering such journey, society became ever more fluid, uncertain and risky. But I did not change my aim. Without stopping to understand what postmodern society is, I tried to outline the characteristics of what I name “*after-modern society*”, of which I will talk later. Briefly, it may be intended as a society not representing anymore a variation (or an “advanced” way to be) of modernity, but basing on directive distinctions totally discontinuous in respect to modernity.

The bulk of sociologists do claim today the impossibility of building a “theory of society”. Others assert that, as society becomes liquid, we must build a liquid theory. I believe instead that sociology could and should

develop a theory meant as a learning process of social transformations which, as emerging from modernity's morphogenesis, outstep the very modernity.

1.2. In this brief contribution I will trace in outline the most significant developing moments of my sociological thought, informing that it took shape in steady comparison with the study of empirical phenomena and field research (¹).

To better understand what I will say later, it is advisable for the reader to remember the epistemic triangle that my sociology is based on (fig. 1).



The sociologist (A: the *observer*, the one who knows) must know the reality (C). From the one hand, it does it through a subjective experiential relation, from the other hand building a science (B: knowledge) representing reality (C) and allowing a more rigorous explanation and comprehension of it. Knowledge (B), mediating the relation between knower (A) and known (C), is surely a cultural production, namely the fruit of socialization, but it does not erase the direct relation (experiential) between knower and known.

There exist some interactions between the three terms (A, B and C) of the epistemic triangle (as in fig. 1).

Contemporary social sciences often commit one of the following mistakes (referring to fig. 1): (a) some theories do claim that social reality (C) may be known *only* as a product of knowledge (B); (b) other theories suppose that the relation between knowledge (B) and known (C) depends on

¹ Here, I limit myself to quoting only a few of my works, as the list is quite long (about 500). A list of my publications from 1971 to 2004 appears in P. Donati, P. Terenzi (eds.), 2005.

the culture's contingency, thus being relativistic; (c) other theories claim that the experiential relation of the knower (A) towards the known (C) is always reified and reifying.

All those positions deny knowledge as a critical and distanced relation between a knower, a known, and a knowledge (however limited and temporary).

The epistemic triangle I use, staying at the basis of what I name relational realism, avoids the above-mentioned reductionisms inasmuch as: i) it allows us to distinguish between knower, known and knowledge as different and stratified realities; (ii) it permits us to consider their relations as forms of reflexivity (inside each relation) rather than mechanical or reified operations (fig. 1).

Sociological knowledge is seen therefore as the product of a complex series of operations: (i) performed by the *self* as primary knowing subject; (ii) through a reflection on the reality to know; (iii) where the society's yet acquired knowledge (its culture) is nothing but a datum (in systemic terms, it is only an environment of the process of knowing).

In the following exposition I will say why sociological knowledge (B), which I found in classic and contemporary authors, was not enough for me to understand the reality of the society I was studying (C), also because of the experience I made of it as empirical observer (A). As reality changes, knowledge too should be changed. This does not entail a relativistic knowledge; it may be fit for reality. I believe that the more knowledge (B) becomes obsolete, the more it "reifies" its objects. On the contrary, the more it observes them as relational realities, the more comprehensive it becomes.

That is how I detached myself from modernist mortgages implied in classical and contemporary sociology. That is how my vocation – as a sociologist – to reform society tried to avoid stereotypes and unfounded myths, in order to pursue deeper human values. That is what I discovered during my sociological journey, gone past 1968's illusions and modernity's frustrations.

I will start remembering what was my "research track" (pr. 2). I will highlight then the passages that led me to understand society as a "relational reality", crossing swords with functionalism (pr. 3). I will trace a brief synthesis of my theory, which I name "relational sociology", whose core lays in catching post-functionalist (namely relational) forms of social differentiation (pr. 4). In my conclusions (pr. 5), I will briefly recapitulate my journey and the view of the emerging society offered by relational sociology.

2. Searching for a new theory of society.

2.1. When I started to study sociology, the prevailing theories were Marxism, functionalism and the critical theory (school of Frankfurt). They were 'strong' because they proposed a somewhat "all-absorbing" (holistic) idea of society. It was the time when sociology was elaborated within the

framework of the nation-State and the welfare state understood as a compromise between capitalistic market and political democracy. The issue at stake, for sociology, was to understand the possible evolution of that sort of society.

Marxism was then a dominant strand in Italy, as well as in a large part of Europe, but I considered it an ideology rather than a scientific analysis of the social reality. I guessed that, all alone, it would not have come a long way, while it would rather have strengthened in symbiosis with functionalism (a thing that, in my opinion, was later realized). Since I considered Marxism and functionalism as two considerably incomplete ways to interpret social reality, for me it was clear that the sociology to be built in the future should avoid both of them, as well as their mix.

In those years, I felt the Frankfurt theory as very attractive, most of all for its criticism towards positivism and capitalism. But I considered that theory very weak as scientific analysis, because it subordinated sociology to the dream of the “full accomplishment” of modernity’s ideals, thus destined to perish with the vanishing of such dream. Looking back today, I think that things went exactly as I foresaw.

The author that attracted me the most was T. Parsons. Although, at that time, his thought was actually marginalized in the Italian universities, I perceived the charm of his theory because it introduced the sociological discipline in a systematic and rational way. It offered a very sophisticated theory of modernity. Therefore, I was compelled to consider it a staging post. My primal intention was to correct the defects of the Parsonian theory, thus “revising” it. It was about building a good theory of society by avoiding Parsons’ mistakes, notably the one to consider a model of society (the North-American one) as the most advanced (therefore the best) in a supposed evolutionary scale. I have been always against the idea that human societies may follow an evolutionary scale, as Darwin and his followers have hypothesized as for the animal kingdom.

I initially started a dialogue with the neo-Parsonians to verify their ability to surpass the deficiencies of Parsons’ evolutionistic and modernistic vision. In particular, I dialogued with J. C. Alexander (whom I met in 1978 in Uppsala). But unfortunately Alexander never abandoned the modern (Parsonian) idea of sociology, being tied to the classics and to the functionalist approach. His neo-functionalism, as exposed in the following years (Alexander, 1995) could not answer to my questions. Actually, especially as from the half of the Nineties, Alexander did not develop a new theory of society, but he cultivated the *cultural studies*. He culturalized the concepts, namely he led again the reality (C) to the symbols of knowledge (B) (see fig. 1).

Therefore, I addressed to a more intense dialogue with the other current of the so-called neo-functionalism, the European one represented by N. Luhmann, whom I met for the first time in 1977 during a seminar in Bologna and with whom I had many personal conversations in the 1980s. From the beginning, it was clear to me that Luhmann was completely

rebuilding the Parsonian theory in terms of the emerging global society (that he named *world system*). He was then the true interlocutor, because he proposed a theory that carried Parsons' functionalist nature to the extremes. Actually, my relational theory grew up as an *alternative* answer to Luhmannian sociology. The more Luhmann has engaged himself in doing an anti-humanistic sociology, the more I have tried to elaborate a sociology that could update a humanistic view of social reality. For me, to have a humanistic vision means to understand social reality not as a result of unintended (autopoietic) mechanisms, but rather as a human product, namely of the interactions between *agency* and social structure, even if social reality is neither an intentional outcome nor made up of people, but of social relations (that exceed the individuals' intentions). Therefore, I learned a lot from Luhmann, and I see him as the most brilliant theorist of the second half of the 20th century.

During this journey, I had a target in my mind that did not match any existing sociology. Like Parsons, I wanted to "cling" sociology to human reality (sociologically observed), and to conceive it as a knowledge being able to project itself into the future. I wanted to be realistic rather than positivistic. The analytical realism proposed by Parsons (*The structure of social action*, 1937) offered an interesting base of departure, but it was totally insufficient and misleading inasmuch as it ended building a constructivist, rather than realistic, sociology. To meet my needs, sociological realism should become critical and relational: *critical*, in so far as knowledge is an always-problematic relation between observer and observed; *relational*, in-as-much as the object to investigate is a reality made up of concrete social relations and not other things. Such realism should be able to keep open boundaries between social reality and transcendency (religion) on the one hand, and between the social arena and its material environment (biophysical) on the other hand. I had to leave behind the biological functionalist paradigm emerging at that time, in order to elaborate a paradigm being able to catch the *sui generis* reality (not biological and "more than" functional) of what is meant to be "social".

Therefore, I left Parsons, for whom sociology is a representation of *successful modernity*, sought according to schemes of social evolution (with strong affinities with the biological evolution). Similarly, I decided to criticise Luhmann, for whom sociology is an anti-humanistic and skeptical science, with the task to "enlighten" what simply "happens", leaving aside any human illusion and passion. Drifting away from all sorts of functionalism, a major role was played by the idea that social reality, as product and expression of what is human, contains a principle of transcendency (Donati, 2004a). As for the social actor, such principle means that every reality leads to another one that transcends it, because it gives it a meaning that refers to a reality "other" (of different kind) from the tested one. On an empirical level, such principle becomes evident because, in every sociological survey, the variable of religious faith (belief) is always the most discriminating one. From the theoretical point of view, I conceive

of transcendency as the latency of latency, within a process that may potentially go *ad infinitum* (L of L of L $\rightarrow \infty$ in the AGIL scheme). Functionalism leads to deny transcendency without considering the overfunctional character of social relations. Namely, much more than the function of a single element or relation within the social system is revealed and expressed in the social phenomena. Actually, Parsons had a very limited comprehension of the transcendent nature that is incident to social reality, while Luhmann has clearly erased the sense of transcendence from sociology.

In my researches, I tried to show that sociology could be no more the self-understanding of *adaptive upgrading modernity* (Parsons), just because such historical configuration is disappearing. As for Luhmann, his idea of Enlightenment sociology may be apt to provide technical instruments being able to deeper observe reality as a process (i.e., the concepts of self-reference, autopoiesis and re-entry), but it cannot provide an answer to the basic problem of the *significance* to the social actors of phenomena, forms and social relations. The problem of significance exceeds the one of *sense*, meant as sensible perception, because it transcends what has been given yet. The enlightenment of operative mechanisms introduced by Luhmann is an important cognitive element. But, beyond it, we must attach *meaning* to social facts, which are intrinsically open to ever-newer symbolic and structural relations.

Someone would say that maybe I might have searched elsewhere, for example among the so-called postparsonian or postmodern theories. It would take a long time to talk of my stances on all those theories. Even appreciating the work of many authors (like J. Baudrillard, P. Bourdieu, A. Giddens, U. Beck and Z. Bauman), I have always maintained that their theories are partial, reductive, conflationary and eventually misleading. These theories stay prisoner of vicious circles and lead to paranoia. To my mind, the so-called “postmodernists” do toss and turn in the late modernity’s Procuste’s bed.

2.2. The relational sociology, which I advanced as an alternative to mainstream approaches, is based on the idea that society basically means “relation”. Society is not a space “containing” relations, or an arena where relations are played. It is rather the very tissue of relations (society “is relation” and does not “have relations”). Differently from other approaches named relational as well, my theory is distinguished by the fact that it assigns to the social relation neither an ideational nor a materialistic character, nor a mixing of ideal and material elements. In my view, social relation is not only a symbolic mediation (Durkheim), a projection of individuals (Weber) or the expression of structures (Merton). It is something more and something different. For me, social relation is an invisible but real entity, which cannot be treated “as a thing” (as stated by the first rule of Durkheim’s method). Social relation instead is a peculiar effect of mutuality between the terms that it links (this has been defined by Georg Simmel in

the word *Wechselwirkung*). I consider Simmel as the first one to give sociology the “relational turning point”. Nevertheless, I stand out from him because I consider inadequate his geometric theory of society (i.e. the reduction of social relations to ‘pure forms’). Such inadequacy is due to the fact that not even Simmel, like anyone among the classics, did develop an analytical scheme in order to articulate the social relation *qua talis*. Relational sociology comes exactly to close this gap.

My sociology is conceived as a subject that studies all the human being’s infinite abilities to generate relations (as an *auctor*, “he who generates”). The individuals give birth to *social forms* that however do not depend on them, being the emerging product of their mutual acting in a defined context, starting from what they think it would make them happier (“*Who we are is what we care about*”). To make a humanistic sociology means to make our representations and knowledge of reality (letter B, fig. 1) apt to catch the deepest richness of human beings and of their coexistence. Sure enough, it does not mean to see reality through *a priori* axioms. It neither means to privilege the individual or its inner reasons, nor to presume that the individuals always act basing on the ethical dictates of conscience.

My way to answer the need to avoid any sort of conflation between agency and social structure (*upward*, *downward* and *central conflations*: see Archer, 1995) was to consider social relation as ‘the’ basic unit of analysis, i.e. the main focus and the privileged analytical strategy to study reality. Over the last years, I found a certain convergence with the sociology of Margaret Archer (2000, 2003). We share the same social realism, even if I would prefer to talk of ‘relational critical realism’.

The ontology of relational realism distinguishes my sociology from other so-called “relational” ones, though these latter are based on a nominalistic or constructionistic ontology (and epistemology). I can remember only a few of them. For me, the relational sociology introduced by G. Bajoit (1992) is conflative because, relating to Touraine, it mixes Max Weber’s individualism with Marxist structuralism, a mix that does not explain the morphogenesis of social relations. Concerning P. Bourdieu (1990), while I appreciate some of his concepts, I do not agree with his theory (genetic structuralism) at least for three reasons: he considers relation as a product of structures; he represents another sort of conflation between structuralism and individualism; he does not enter the social relation as such. Briefly, because it is a form of *relationism* (Vandenberghe 1999; Maton 2003). I do not agree with the relational sociology of M. Emirbayer (1997), simply because it is based on a relativistic pragmatism that fully belongs to postmodernism, placing itself opposite to critical realism.

In short, I refuse all forms of *relationism*, because they consider the relation as a product of a mixing of individual actions and social structures, without seeing that the relation is a *sui generis* reality, not able to be manipulated at will, in terms of cultural relativism and constructionism. It is no accident that outwardly opposite authors, like the theorists of rational choice (J. Coleman) and of neo-Marxist structuralism (P. Bourdieu), do find

some convergences even starting from opposite points of view (Bourdieu, Coleman, eds. 1991). For this reason, I do clearly distinguish between relational (of *morphogenesis*) and relationist (of *conflations*) theories.

My sociology wants to open up horizons *beyond* modernity, basing on a social ontology that observes social relations as expressions of human logic (different from not-human relations, namely not specific of human beings). Thanks to the fact that human potential goes before and beyond the given social context, it is possible and reasonable to hope for a better society than the one we live into. That is the only way to observe whether, where and how society *exceeds itself* beyond the recurring crises it goes through, creating new historical-social configurations.

3. Discovering the relational being of society: why and how.

3.1. I would like to remember some of the most significant moments that gradually led me to leave the functionalistic theory (that most scientists reckon to be the backdrop of all sciences).

In my early studies, I coped with the sense and role of the *need for achievement* (as psychosocial motive and cultural complex) in the social and economic development. It may be said that my first criticism towards Parsons is based right on my experience as a student in 1968, because I interpreted the student protest movements as an expression of a new acquisivity, not corresponding to the Parsonian model. In my early publications (Donati 1972, 1973), I observed that the phenomena of student protest did not have only an “expressive” nature, as claimed by Parsons (according to whom they were emotional reactions against the primacy of instrumental achievement). Those socio-cultural movements did produce deep transformations of the whole society, not going in the direction of a higher degree of functional adaptation. To my view, they were rather modifying cultural and social structures (not only the educational system) in the name of a more substantial, rather than instrumental, rationality. Starting from the private sphere, they asserted a redefinition of the public sphere which was not understandable in terms of higher levels of Parsonian achievement.

These studies led me to cope with Parsons’ *pattern variables*. He structured them as five dichotomies (later reduced to four) analytically articulating the pair *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* introduced by F. Toennies. Studying the socialization processes occurring in the shift from one generation to another, during a community research in a little town of Central Italy called Montegrano (Donati, 1976), I saw that the dichotomous scheme of value orientations proposed by Parsons was not tenable. The reality I had in front of me was a “doing” of relations combining the *pattern variables* according to almost never coherent and stable modalities. Unlike Parsons, I was not concerned whether the balance of value orientations would tend towards one extreme or the other, or

whether it was more or less integrated. I was concerned in understanding the relation (the relational network) between the *pattern variables*.

That was how my concern for a “relational reading” of the *pattern variables* was born. In my opinion, they should be interpreted not as analytical and dualistic categories of values directing the individual actions, but as relational webs. Taken from the point of view of the concrete social relations, the *pattern variables* seemed to me like threads producing very different tissues depending on how they do combine. To the point that the ideal types of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, when they are meant as pure types, become pathological phenomena.

In the very Montegranaro survey, the empirical data showed – both among fathers and sons – that values were guided by rules and not vice versa, like Parsons hypothesized in his AGIL scheme (where *value commitments* legitimate and guide the social rules). In other words, Parsons’ cybernetic hierarchy did not work. It was clear that I should introduce more contingency in AGIL. From this, I got the idea to reformulate AGIL in a relational sense.

For me, AGIL does not describe an action system, but a relational form. In such form, there is contingency for each element that makes it up, and for each inner relation between elements. Their integration is neither caused by specific regulations (I of AGIL), nor by the system as such, but by the emerging effect coming from the elements’ combination (A, G, I, L). In Montegranaro, it was not possible to talk of an integrated action system. The socio-cultural integration of Montegranaro’s community was quite superficial. Actually, several sub-cultures (premodern Italic, catholic, communist, liberal) do merge and interlace. Right this merging of different and opposite cultures, with neither agreement on the ultimate values nor open social conflict, made Parsons’ theory of social order inapplicable. Social order was based on social relations where opposite values coexisted. There was no *American creed* to standardize the coexistent cultures. The order had a *sui generis* relational character that explained why, even in presence of a very strong industrial development creating deep psychological, cultural, social and political imbalances, however there was not an open social conflict. Such direct experience gave birth to the idea of “relational order”, not made up of shared values, but stemming from the fact that the relations between heterogeneous values are able to configure some sort of coexistence. In such order, the different elements (including values) are not functionally but “relationally” distinguished. In other words, the social order stands on ‘parallel’ symbolic complexes which never get a full integration between them, even if they are always connected one another.

The studies about family, which I conducted from the Seventies up to the present day, were another field where functionalist theory, like Marxism and the critical theory, received strong disclaimers. While, in the Seventies, Parsons talked of functional specialization of the family, I observed that the family (meaning all family forms) remained an overfunctional phenomenon (Donati 1975, fol. 1986, 1989). While Marxists

talked of the ‘death’ of family, I observed instead that family was becoming ever more an important reality to the individuals, as predictor of the most significant qualities and events of individual life courses. While the critical theory talked of the coming of an open, democratic and liberal family, I observed the tendency of the very modernization process to produce something different: the fragmentation of family networks and the birth of new asymmetries between genders and generations, together with a new family privatism. In my studies on family, I could notice that the sociological theories of those years did fail, because they did not see the very qualities of family relations. Most part of the sociological theories considered family as a structure of roles created by external factors (the social division of labour, the level of economic development, the type of political regime, communicative technologies, etc.), while it should be observed instead as a morphogenetic network of relations, or rather as a primordial and original network emerging from the mediations that the family, as a *sui generis* social relation, act between nature and culture, between public and private, between individual and society (²).

All those surveys set the problem of how the modernization processes would modify relations between public and private spheres. According to Parsons, as to many others, modern society reproduces itself and progresses using the public/private distinction as to distinguish more and more the polarities (then connecting them with a common system of values). For me instead, the public/private distinction should be read as a relation between two reversible and crossable sides. This set the more general theoretical problem of how the boundaries of a two-sided sociological distinction (e.g. public/private or collective/individual) should be treated. Differently from functionalism, which considers distinctions as binary dualisms, the social phenomena I was studying showed that the distinctions were actually relations, and that they should be treated as such. Whether this way was followed, it would become possible to catch realities kept hidden from functionalism. That was how I conceptualized the existence of social forms not seen by the mainstream sociology. I named them *social private spheres* and *relational goods*. I will try to briefly explain what it is about.

During the Seventies, particularly under the influence of functionalism, society was thought as a collective entity generating individuals. For the European sociology of that time, the public did coincide with the State, and the private referred to everything that the public sphere left to the individuals’ tastes and preferences. It seemed that nothing existed in the middle. I did elaborate then a concept that defied both holistic and individualistic sociology. This is the “social private” concept, which refers to those *independent* social spheres that do act neither under the State’s law,

² Here, I cannot even summarize the results of the researches contained in the nine two-year Reports on Italian family that I published from 1989 until 2005 (San Paolo Editions, Cinisello Balsamo, Milan), but those concerned may consult them.

nor for market's private profit. It has to do with all those organizations (formal-informal), provided with "social subjectivity", which are neither strictly public (in the European sense), nor strictly private, and which mediate the relations between the two poles of the State and the privatized individual (Donati, 1978).

I did hypothesize that the very modernizing processes made the development of such spheres necessary, particularly in those areas of social life where the tension between public and private generates relational vacuum and pathology. A "third societal pole" should be developed, actually made up of relational spheres different from market and State (³). The reason of such hypothesis was strictly sociological: a modernizing society needed relational spheres not arising to support a political hegemony (as theorized by A. Gramsci), but to affirm the social autonomies of civil subjects. In my opinion, this expectation occurred seeing that, in the last decades, this sort of reticular organizations spread noticeably in many advanced countries (voluntary organizations, social cooperation, social promotion associations, civil foundations, consumers' associations, family associations, and generally the associational world named *nonprofit* by the Anglo-Saxon culture, a term that I reckon to be reductive and misleading because it does not catch the relational trait of such social spheres: Donati 1998). The concept of "social private" had a certain fortune, being now of common use in the Italian language. It is contained in many national and regional laws that concern the subsidiary role of social private spheres in social policies.

Therefore, the theory of the "social private" had remarkable developments. It lies at the basis of my theory of "*societarian citizenship*" as a form of citizenship made up by associational, and not State means (Donati 1993). Moreover, it lays at the basis of the "*relational goods*" theory, which I elaborated to name those goods and services being neither public (characterized by a positive sharing) nor private (enjoyed in a competitive way by the individuals as sovereign consumers). The relational goods are those that can be produced and enjoyed only together with the ones who are concerned in them (they are forms of voluntary sharing put in common between stakeholders) (Donati 1993, ch. 2).

This cluster of new concepts (social private, societarian citizenship, relational goods) led to a view of society radically different from the one, described by modern sociology as a compromise between capitalistic market (freedom to compete, that is freedom as lack of compulsions = *lib*)

³ In the Anglo-Saxon jargon, these spheres are named "third sector" and they are generally conceived as nonprofit organizations being part of the market. The American sociologists consider them generally as organizations that answer to the failures of the State and the for-profit market. Relational sociology showed instead, at least in Italy, that this sector does not arise because of failures of the market or the State, however moving with different logic both from the State and the market. In fact, those spheres are born because of specific motives of pro-social character that arise inside the associates network, and they may be more or less favoured (or obstructed) by the sort of network.

and political democracy (equality of opportunities, that is equity controls = *lab*). According to relational sociology, society is a cluster of spheres differentiating themselves according to their specific relations. In order to understand this way to read society, it is needful to get a new point of view. While, in the modernity, social relations do focus between public and private, in the after-modern society instead, social relations are subjected to morphogenetical processes between public (political-administrative system) and private (society's spheres). In other words, the basic distinction "public vs private" gives space to another guiding distinction between public-private mix (welfare mix, modernity's typical lib-lab), and "societarian pluralism" (or societarianism). I generalized such theory as a distinction between two relational configurations: *lib-lab* (typical of modernity) and *societarian* (typical of after-modern).

I guess that the emerging society puts in the background the typically modern opposition between *lib* (liberal or agency theories) and *lab* (socialist or systemic-control theories), although the lib-lab configurations are still prevailing today. Other distinctions become prevailing, generating new morphogenetical processes between public and private. Such dynamic is already in action. In my opinion, its emergence explains why the "third way" theorized by A. Giddens as a mix between social democracy and liberalism (one of the various versions of lib-lab) has been unsuccessful so far. I studied those processes in various researches, where I criticized the inadequacy of models (and lib-lab sociologies) when describing the emergence of a new civil society (Donati 1997; Donati, Colozzi eds. 2002, Donati 2004b), the reforms of the welfare State (Donati 1999), and the role of different forms of social capital in fostering social cohesion (Donati 2003a).

There is another basic field strictly connected to the survey on the relation between public and private, which gave birth to relational sociology: welfare sociology (Donati 1982, 1987). To say it briefly, when I started to reason on welfare state, the theories of T. H. Marshall and R. Titmuss were the prevailing ones. What was wrong with those theories? I saw two big faults in Marshall's theory on citizenship (joined in essence by Parsons). His theory about the claim of a historical sequence "in Indian file" of civil, political and social rights had no empirical basis, but rather it was controverted in many countries as Italy. The international comparative analysis showed that the temporal and empirical relations between different sorts of rights did have different logics from one Country to another. The various "complexes of citizenship's rights" needed a far more sophisticated analysis than Marshall's one. A second fault of such theory was that, read under the light of the AGIL scheme (supposing that A features civil rights, G political rights and I social rights), it was completely silent concerning the rights corresponding to the scheme's latency (L of AGIL): which were those rights? Parsons detected them as "rights to education". In my opinion, seen that AGIL should be interpreted as a scheme of generalized social relations, it was clear that those were far more general rights (that I named "relational

rights”) concerning the human being, namely human rights between latency and transcendency (or ultimate realities). Parsons’ AGIL scheme should be revised also in this direction. Concerning Titmuss, it was clear to me that his three models of welfare state (residual, acquisitive-meritocratic and institutional) were far too reductive, because they supposed the welfare politics to be essentially a direct or indirect doing of a State, rather than an expression of the complex and double-contingency relation between State and society. The entire welfare sociology should be revised, observing the welfare system not as a product of the political system, but as result of the relations between society and State. Like Marshall, Titmuss too should be reconsidered in a relational sense.

These are only some of the various observations and considerations that, during the 1970-1982 period, led me to “discover” that society is neither a cluster of individuals, nor a system of actions and/or structures, but rather a “relational form” that needs a sociological theory geared to its way to be.

3.2. Such theory was firstly expounded in the *Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale (Introduction to relational sociology)*, Donati, 1983). That book may be considered as my *Manifesto*. It comes from the criticism that I direct towards the modern thought, namely to have removed or twisted the ‘relational sense’ of the social life and the very profession of sociologist. The basic theory of this book is that modernity has been – and still is – a big experiment aimed at freeing individuals *from* social relations (first the ascribed ones, then also the acquired ones), namely to *immunise* the individuals from social relations, both as links and forms of symbolic reference ⁽⁴⁾. Such intended modernity becomes the refusal of the very assumption of shape (what Simmel called the crumbling down of the “principle of the form”). Inasmuch as it absolutizes its way to be, it is destined to become self defeating. Therefore, the answers to the problems created by modernity should be sought in a new social science, being able to observe and handle social relations according to “other symbolic codes”, different from those produced by modernity.

The *pars destruens* lies in refusing the contraposition between action and system sociologies, still dominating the sociological international scene. More generally, it expresses the refusal both of methodological individualism and holism. Such refusal is justified because of the mutual distorted and reductive vision that these two kinds of sociologies have of

⁴ With the expression “immunisation from social relations”, I mean that people have a growing negative liberty (meant as exemption from any bond and constraint) favoured by the political-administrative system, so that they produce a society where individuals may avoid to directly relate with each other. Indirect relations become more and more impersonal. The individuals’ individualization results in social atomization, meaning that individuals are not motivated to realize circuits of social exchange between them, thus progressively weakening the social integration (Donati 2000a).

social relation. The central point is that social relation cannot be explained neither basing on individuals' action, nor basing on structures' conditioning: it places itself in another reality compared to that of agency and of operations (mechanisms) of social systems. It is the point to conceive relation neither as a bridge between individual and system, nor as a mix of individual and systemic elements, as intended by the majority of the sociologists. Instead, it is the point to understand that social relation is the emerging effect of interplays between individual actions and social system (⁵), where actions, systems and relations are provided with inner characteristics and powers which are peculiar to them. The criticism towards every form of *sociologism* (⁶), mainly Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, is based on this.

The book's *pars construens* proposes a conceptual framework to analyze the structure and dynamic of social relation as a proper and specific object of sociology. Social relation cannot be considered as a spin-off, a contingent by-product, because it has a *sui generis* reality that may and should be studied in itself, not as a reality depending on something else. The most basic unit of social stuff is not the *unit act* (by analogy with the atom), as claimed by Parsons, but the social relation meant as a "molecule" made of elements (actions) and relations between them (as well as a molecule of water is made of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, and definite connections between them). Such epistemological decision will be later expressed through the set wording: "*at the beginning there is the relation*" (Donati 1991: 25).

It is a choice that stands out both against Goethe's *Diktum*, according to which "*at the beginning there was the action*", and against Luhmann's axiom, according to which "*at the beginning there is the system*". The Parsonian solution of the "system of action" always seemed to me as a terrible mess, obscuring the very "essence" of the social, i.e. its inner relationality. The theorists of action (as Max Weber or the supporters of *rational choice*) do certainly enlighten the social relation, but only as a projection of what individuals know and do. System theorists (as Parsons and Luhmann) do certainly enlighten the social relation, but only as an expression of the social system. My *Introduction* (1983) tells why and how we should enlighten the relation from both sides, without considering it as a bridge or a mix between them. A chapter gives an applicative example concerning the health/illness analysis. The social phenomenon of health is

⁵ At the beginning, I used Georg Simmel's notion (social relation as an effect of 'interchanging', *Wechselwirkung*) in order to define the relation as an emerging effect. Then, I reformulated it within the theories of morphogenesis and emergentism.

⁶ In general, with *sociologism* I mean all the hyper-socialized conceptions of the social actor (Donati 1983, ch. 3). These are theories explaining the social in a circular way, basing on the sole social, meaning that the relation is an end to itself (it is the *eschaton* of social processes). This is exactly the distinctive feature of *relationism* (for example, M. Emirbayer's sociology).

not observed as a biopsychic condition of the individual (as Parsons maintains), or as a product of a health system (as Luhmann contends), but as a social relation between lifeworlds and social institutions.

4.2. Many works followed such *Introduction*. Between 1983 and 1991, I conducted several researches whose main theme has always been the same: to redefine every sociological concept (or research theme) as a social relation, and to see what such approach is able to understand and explain.

When it was clear that such approach could be applied to the whole field of sociological studies, I formulated the relational theory of society in a systematic way (Donati 1991). This theory has been further improved (Donati 1998) and it is still open to future developments. Needing to expose it ever more concisely, we may structure it in three parts: epistemology, methodology, and pragmatics.

a) Relational epistemology is based on a central theorem, that I name *theorem of relational identity*. What is it about? It claims that the (social) identity of any agent or actor is mediated by the relation, or rather the identity develops through the relation with the *Other than itself*.

To understand this assumption, it should be reminded that, from the 19th century to now, sociological theories have used two other identity theorems. (i) The first one is the theorem of classical philosophy: $A = A$ (subscribed by Durkheim and Parsons), according to which every social identity is defined in and for itself. (ii) The second one is the *theorem of identity through denial* or binary distinction: $A = - (- A)$ (namely, A's identity consists in denying everything that is not A). In some ways, the latter is the overturning of the former principle. It comes from idealism (F. Hegel), being largely used by K. Marx, and it became the basic theorem of N. Luhmann's sociology.

(iii) Relational sociology suggests another theorem being the base of the whole sociological theory, the one of *relational identity*: $A = r (A, -A)$, according to which A's identity is a relation between A and what is not A. Such relation is a *mediation*, exactly the mediation acted by actors when they define (build over time) their identity in every situation. Such identity grows "by relating", or rather it is not immediate (as in $A = A$), but it is not even build on a principle of dialectical denial. The relation between A and not-A is a *social* one, or rather multidimensional and reticular (in mathematical terms, $r = R^n$, namely r equals to a Hilbert's space).

The consequences of such theorem are enormous, because every sociological concept is redefined by it. For instance, let us take the concept of "generation", which is defined neither by the sole family descendance (within the private sphere, Attias-Donfut), nor by age groups (according to Mannheim, as demographical cohorts or cultural units), but *as a form of relation between the position of family descendance and the membership to a demographic cohort*, which is mediated by the public sphere (Donati, Colozzi eds. 1997). Another example is given by the categories of public and private, which are not defined in themselves, but rather relationally by

means of the sphere (border) that splits them and, at the same time, links them. The strategic role played by the “social private” spheres as something that stays in the middle (not being their mix), and that independently regenerates the terms of the relation (namely, public and private), comes from here (Donati 1996).

Another example consists in the way (social) “time” is conceptualized. In fact, time may be distinguished in three registers, according to their way to consider and realise the social relation: interactive, historical and symbolical. In the *interactive* register, time is the one of the relation as communicative interaction, which lasts as long as the communication lasts. In the *historical-relational* register, time is the one of “relation’s history”, which has a beginning, a development and an end. In the *symbolical* register, time is the one of symbols’ duration, which last very long and go beyond historical time, namely being meta-historical (Donati 1994). Since time is a crucial element in shaping the characteristics that a social relation (and a whole society) may assume, it is clear that we may fully understand the social phenomena only if we are able to understand the time register that they use.

b) The methodology proposed by relational sociology for the empirical analysis of social facts is based on two fundamental passages. First and foremost, we should define the Y phenomenon observed (being a knowledge problem) as a social relation (e.g. unemployment or deviance). Second, we should express the Y phenomenon as a phenomenon emerging from a black box, where the empirical scheme of investigation does condense; the black box is configured as a system of elements answering the requirements of means-goals-rules-values necessary to explain the emerging Y phenomenon. In short, considering AGIL scheme as a “compass” for the sociological analysis, Y phenomenon is showed as the result of a morphostasis/morphogenesis process. The relational redefinition of AGIL is quite complex (Donati 1991: ch. 4). We may briefly summarize it as follows. The four letters (A, G, I, L) are interpreted as functional requirements (means, situated goals, rules, values) operating like the four cardinal points of a physical compass, where there is no structural primacy of a function over another (contrary to what Parsons and Luhmann have reckoned). The question is the relational consistence of the four dimensions between them (making the *sui generis* relation) and with the outside (what is different from the phenomenon or the observed Y relation). The L-G axis (values-goals) corresponds to *refero* (namely, the symbolical reference, as present in the sociology of Max Weber), while the A-I axis (means-rules) coincides with *religo* (it is the connection or *bond*, as found in Durkheim). The social relation is interpreted as an *emerging effect* of the ‘set out arranged’ of *refero* and *religo*. Therefore, the AGIL scheme does apply neither to the *unit act* (as in Parsons), nor to the system (as in Luhmann), but to the social relation. AGIL is interpreted as a recursive acronym (an acronym containing itself, thus meaning that each component A, G, I, L

contains AGIL and distinguishes itself – both internally and relating to the outside – as AGIL, according to a process that does not go on and on, limiting itself when it produces social forms unable to reproduce themselves or to evolve).

This leads to observe society as a network of social spheres that “relationally” distinguish themselves in an overfunctional way. It is useful to introduce the concept of *relational differentiation* as a different modality compared to the already known forms of differentiation (segmentary, stratified and functional) (Donati 2004c).

The analyses of the different forms that labour, meant as social relation, may assume is an application of this. While some authors (i.e. J. Rifkin) claim that we are entering the age of the “end of labour”, the relational theory instead is able to show the emergence of new labours (in the plural, to embody its differentiation) and, at the same time, the birth and diffusion of new sorts of contracts (named relational contracts, because they deal with social relations rather than concrete and discrete performances) (Donati 2001, 2002a).

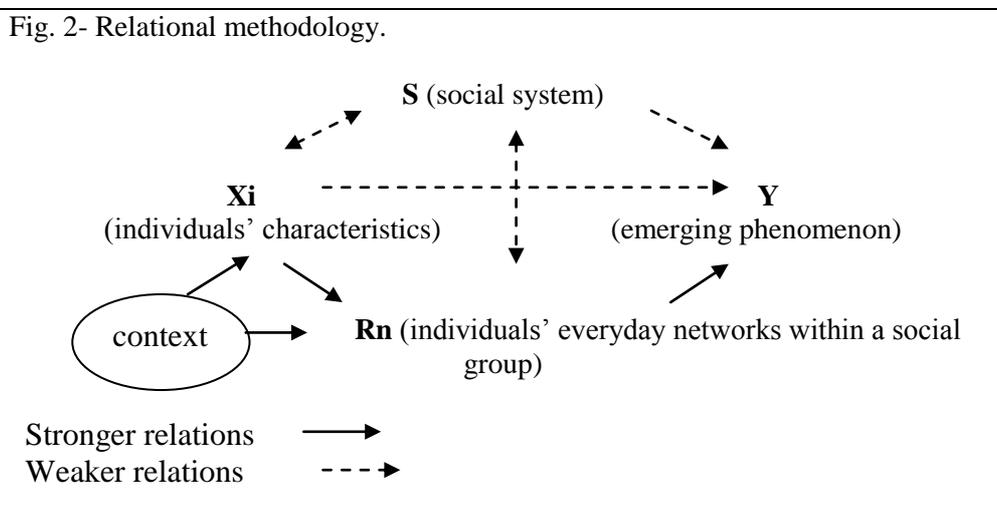
c) Pragmatics of relational sociology concern the applicational opportunities of sociological knowledge to the interventions on social issues. I assume that sociological research may be aimed to the social intervention in the light of human emancipation. In that case, the analysis and the intervention must be conducted through procedures following a model, elaborated by relational sociology, which I named ODG system (*relational Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance* system) (Donati, 1991, ch. 5). The characteristic of ODG systems is to observe in such a way as to highlight that the social phenomenon causing problems consists in a particular relational configuration, and it is produced by a well-defined relational context. E.g. we should understand why, as the income of an individual or a social group increases, a corresponding increase of subjective happiness does not follow, or rather why the same couple of parents gives birth to sons with strong psychological problems and some others that do not have them. The diagnosis is made basing on what does not satisfy the actors from the point of view of their relations. Besides, an intervention is outlined, with the aim to modify the relational context through the activation of “relational potentials” (namely, the abilities to actuate, change and promote relations) from the actors being at stake.

The application of relational pragmatics occurs above all in the field of services to people (relational services, as education and *care*), but also in all those activities (labour organization, social policies, implementation of rights and duties of citizenship, etc.) where an inter-human relation is at stake.

4.3. There are several comparative advantages of the relational theory compared to the other sociological theories. Here, I keep it down to remember what I reckon to be the most important one. The relational theory

provides an alternative to the *dilemma between methodological individualism and methodological holism*. While most sociologies search for an explanation of social facts as *combinations* of individual and structural factors, relational sociology shows that the social factors to explain (diffusion of a certain lifestyle, new forms of violence, etc.) are as such because they have their own relational (molecular) feature that transcends the qualities of individuals and the structures of the context, being generated as emerging phenomena (Donati 1995).

Here, the comparative advantage of relational methodology consists in the fact that it can overcome the limitations inherent in the explanations of social phenomena (Y) as a product of the characteristics of the individuals (Xi), or as a product of a combination of characteristics of the individuals and the social system (S) to which phenomena are referred (which is a feature of lib-lab sociologies). Think, for instance, of the learning processes in a class of students (individuals in a school system): the achievements are heavily dependent not only on the individual students and the school system, and their reciprocal adaptation, but above all on those interactive networks that students have between them and with the external social world. Phenomena are rather explained as coming from relational processes including the individuals' everyday networks (Rn), whilst the individuals' interactions between them and with the social system do produce emerging effects of morphogenetic nature too (fig. 2).



To better explain the meaning of fig. 2, let us quote two examples, namely health and unemployment as social phenomena. The health levels (Y) in a social group are surely the product of individual conducts and health system. But, if we use only the equation $Y = f(Xi, S)$, we come to almost nothing. We must introduce social networks where individuals live in (networks having only feeble relations with the health system), while they

depend on a social context (which I do not consider here). The sorts and degrees of health are explained as features of inter-subjective relations within the lifeworlds, better than as a product of individuals that occupy certain roles within a social system. In the first resort, the equation becomes: $Y = f [Xi, S, Rn]$. In the same way, the unemployment levels within a social group (Y) are not explainable only as the result of individual conducts or of the so called labour market's "system", but rather and basically as a product of everyday life networks' configuration (family life's organization, formative paths, network's social capital, lifestyles, etc.), where individuals do act one another and interact with the labour market: $Y = f [Xi, S, Rn]$.

4. The perspectives of a relational theory of society.

4.1. To understand the logics of the relational sociology's development, we should ask ourselves: is there any social phenomenon (emergent today) that is not explained or understood by modern sociology? If it exists, what sort of sociology do we need indeed?

During my researches, I came upon a series of phenomena that are not explained by any modern-inspired sociological theory. I will give only a few examples.

Example a) There are *Gesellschaft* relations generating *Gemeinschaft* relation. This is unthinkable by modernity, but we see it realized in formal organizations (i.e. companies) adopting criteria of social responsibility and creating a membership community. We see it as well in time banks, in some professional organizations, in associations doing civic activities, and generally in those life spheres where the primacy of instrumental interests is balanced little by little, or rather replaced by the primacy of community's identities (such process is obscured by the sociological idea of a growing individualization of individuals: Donati 2001).

Example b) *Religion re-enters into the public sphere*. While the modern sociological theory sees religion as a phenomenon progressively and inexorably nearing privatization and secularization, we are spectators instead of a vast phenomenon where religion becomes a very important dimension or criterion of conduct, not only concerning the private, but also the public sphere (Donati 2002b).

Example c) *Labour's de-rationalization*. While, in conjunction with the relentless development of capitalistic economy, the modern sociological theory reckons labour as an ever rationalizing and commodifying performance, today we see that, within the labour market, there are organizational conducts that de-rationalize labour, because they treat it as a social relation whose value is not only or primarily utilitarian (Donati 2001).

Example d) *Gift's differentiation, and the emerging of organizations that make productive and efficient a not self-concerned acting*. According to the modern sociological theory, gift is an archaic form of exchange and

economy, but today we see that gift becomes a very dynamic and differentiated relational form, which shows up among the most various – political, economic, social – and modern social spheres (Donati 2003b).

Example e) *Emerging “ethical markets” as alternative economies, which gainsays the modern paradigm of rationality.* The modern split of economic rationality (individual acting, basing on utility) and ethical rationality (acting basing on commitments, ultimate concerns, etc.) is put in a difficult position: economy discovers the paradigm of relational sociology (Sacco, Zamagni 2002).

Example f) *The birth of new forms of not-state citizenship, after the crisis of the State-nation citizenship.* According to the modern theory, citizenship is the individual’s membership to a State-nation, and it is multipliable only on a State basis. Today, there are new forms of not-State citizenship (i.e. political citizenship of EU, or civil citizenship of epistemic communities), which may be made multipliable basing on the membership to not-State communities. More generally, social *membership* distinguishes in forms that have never been tried before, following the relations’ globalization (Donati 1993, Preyer 2000).

Example g) *Disappearing of contradictions based on class structures and the emerging of conflicts focused on “ecological” (of physical and human ecology) and civilization themes.* Modern sociology emphasizes that the internal conflicts of each society are focused on social payoffs (class, status and power). But today we see that the biggest conflicts have their rise in other areas, in physical ecology – safeguard of environment and natural resources -, in human ecology – biotech, bioethics, equity between generations, etc.-, and also in themes as human rights, implying civilization’s conflicts (Donati 2000b).

The question is that the phenomena just mentioned are not explicable as modernizing processes or as mere reactions to them. Neither Marxism nor functionalism may explain those phenomena. Not even the concept of “rationalization of lifeworlds”, dear to the critical theory, catches the sense of such metamorphoses.

I refer to phenomena that show peculiar relational processes, which must be surveyed through a new conceptual *framework*. It is a limiting and misleading interpretation to reduct them to the worldwide expansion of modern capitalism (Wallerstein 1991).

What does not work among the mainstream of contemporary sociological theories? *They do not see social relations’ morphogenesis.* I reckon that such blindness must be attributed to the fact that current sociologies are prisoner of the lib-lab symbolic code.

According to relational sociology, all unexpected phenomena have a different logic in common, supported by a symbolic code different from the past:

(i) no more one dominant logic (monistic, as in the ideologies or political religions of XIXth and XXth centuries, or as a logic of functional primacy of one function over the others), but a plural logic, differentiating

universal values not through dichotomies, but through relations, with no pretension to reconstitute them *ad unum* (⁷);

(ii) a logic of development that do not follow mechanistic cybernetics anymore (as AGIL hierarchy, according to Parsons, and autopoiesis, according to Luhmann), but is a *relational* logic, meaning that it follows the needs of inter-human relations instead of being guided by impersonal mechanisms.

The phenomena above mentioned show the decreasing marginal utility of functionalism, and at the same time they indicate that global societies are activating their latent dimensions (as in the collective movements) where the need for an overfunctional meaning is emerging. Modern semantics based on the equality/inequality couple give place to semantics of identity/difference. Lib-lab logics of social inclusion give place to what I name “relational inclusion” (Donati 2005a): this means that individuals are included in social relations not on the basis of abstract or standardized rights (or other entitlements), but on the basis of the acknowledgement that their differences are legitimate aspirations to belong to identities, groups, and cultures that cannot be assimilated or translated into one pattern. These differences cannot be properly treated neither as negative liberties (absence of constraint), nor as formal procedures, but instead as positive and substantial freedoms (they affirm a project and unconditional values). By this way, social relations are sustained and improved rather than removed.

The rising society is *after-modern* because it does not follow anymore the modernity’s directing distinctions. There is a new “symbolic order”, with other guiding-distinctions, marking new historical *discontinuities* (fig. 3).

⁷ To claim that those values’ generalization and differentiation happens *per relationem* means that those values are generalized and differentiated in their reference and connection with each other. Globalizing processes enhance such principle. It is a transcendence principle, according to which the more we discover similarities between the two terms of a relation (generalizing: Ego/Alter), the more those terms seem to be dissimilar and distant. But with that, they do not oppose antithetically, but rather they get their identity just through such relation of dissimilarity and distance, uniting (generalization) and separating (differentiation) them at once. This is the meaning of a social world no more *uni*-verse, but *multi*-verse, namely of a social world integrating through a relational differentiation of the universal (Donati 2000b).

Fig. 3 – The guiding-distinctions of modern society (and sociology) vs after-modern.	
MODERN (classical sociology up to Parsons)	AFTER-MODERN (relational sociology)
Linear and indefinite progress	Sustainable and delimited development
Environment depletion (Faustian spirit)	Human ecology (respect of physical and human nature)
Society as dialectical system between State and society	Society as network of networks
National state	Global multicultural society
Political constitutionalization	Civil (societal) constitutionalization of private spheres

4.2. We need a new theory of social differentiation to understand global society. Figure 4 synthetically shows the difference between premodern (segmented and stratified), modern (functional) and after-modern (relational) forms of social differentiation.

The relational differentiation distinguishes itself from the segmentary one because it is open and acquisitive (it is accessible on voluntary and not ascriptive basis); it is different from the stratified differentiation, because it is not bound to social status-roles. It differentiates from the functional one because it distinguishes the relations not basing on their specific functions, but basing on their ability to provide overfunctional performances. This is a *sui generis* ability with no functional equivalents. The relational differentiation is clear today in the establishment of reticular organizations substituting those based on functions (⁸). Actually, the relational differentiation corresponds to the phenomena of relational morphogenesis proper to the age of globalization.

⁸ For a concrete empirical analysis of relational differentiation applied to the case of conciliatory measures between family and labour, cfr. Donati 2005b.

Fig. 4 – Four types of social differentiation (distinctions basing on which the differentiations between social forms is acted)		
Segmentary morphostasis	Segmentary differentiation	Basing on ascription to tribes
Stratified morphostasis	Stratified differentiation	Basing on belonging to closed strata, classes or communities
Functional morphogenesis	Functional differentiation	Basing on: - functional performance - functional equivalence - functional organization
Relational morphogenesis	Relational differentiation	Basing on: - overfunctional performance - <i>sui generis</i> quality of every social relation (without functional equivalents) - reticular organizations

At the beginning of modern age, the great philosopher Spinoza used to write: “*omnis determinatio est negatio*”. We could say that, upon the door of the after-modern age, it is written: “*omnis determinatio est relatio*”. This is the guiding-criterion proposed by the relational sociology in order to catch the spirit of the “globalization” age.

This new way to handle complexity becomes possible when we assume that *the distinction “is” a relation* (not a denial or a binary opposition, as claimed by Luhmann). Global society does not differentiate and socially integrates in the same way as modernity did (using the *lib-lab* code). Global society must proceed by “relational inclusion”, and not by (functional) dialectics between individual liberty and system control because, at global level, liberties and control are no more manageable through a state order of Hobbesian nature (Donati 2000a).

The deriving network society may be named relational because it enlaces “local” with “global”, generating life contexts where decisive is *the quality of the relational patterns which constitute them in a peculiar mode*. Global society must be conceived as “relational society”, because it is characterized by a social differentiation ever less guided by the abstract form of modernity, namely the functional one. The human dimensions of social relations correspond no more to the “organicistic” sense given by the Old Europe to the social relation (when relation was meant as direct expression of individuals’ human qualities). But the human within social phenomena does not even correspond to the metaphors dear to postmoderns (as Derrida’s *le différand*), namely as place of paradoxes and unsolvable aporia. What is human in social relations must be generated anew *via* more reflexive and mediated processes.

The relational theory of society may be therefore formulated as the theory of those societarian forms that are generated by the relational differentiation where (and through which) the human being can express their ultimate concerns, although society as such is made neither of human beings nor of their concerns, but of their relations.

4. Retrospects and prospects.

Reviewing my journey, I realize that my answers to the '68 restlessness took a very different direction compared to the other sociologies that reacted to the problems posed by modernity ('68 petitions), elaborating neomodern, antimodern, and postmodern theories (⁹). My relational sociology leaves all these theories behind, because they remain somehow prisoners of the debate on modernity. In order to understand which sort of society does emerge, we must leave modernity's vicious circle behind, where the current theories, which talk of *plural modernities*, *multiple modernities*, and *reflexive modernity*, get entangled. To make this leap of perspective, we must choose an observatory system escaping the modernity's points of view. After-modern society substitutes the directive distinctions and the leading themes of modernity with *other* distinctions and themes.

In my opinion, the turning point between modern and after-modern is that, while modern society becomes immune from social relations, after-modern society must act and build up with and through social relations. The modern considers liberty as something existing only outside the relation, while the after-modern must inflect it inside the social relation. The theme of *individualization* of individuals (as meant today by A. Giddens, U. Beck and many others) is put in its right perspective by the theme of *personalization* of individuals, where "person" suggests that particular communication form of a human (and only human) being, which is activated through its own reflexive relationality. Functional differentiation is restricted to its own field, while after-modern sociological forms grow up in the field of relational differentiation. So, the political constitutionalism is limited to the new nation-States, while new forms of constitutionalism (societal: Sciulli 1992: civil: Teubner 2003) are born. The latter concern the governance of supernational entities and world society. They stem from civil subjects and networks of discursive communities that cross national States. In my parlance, the lib-lab structures meet insurmountable limits. In order to cope with these challenges, new societal arrangements are created, which are morphogenetic configurations inspired and driven by an unprecedented understanding of fundamental human rights (¹⁰). The

⁹ J. C. Alexander (1994) made a report of them. It is clear that my relational sociology does not belong to anyone of the types considered by this Author.

¹⁰ Limits of lib-lab structures are met when social problems cannot be solved through the typically modern configuration between more individual liberties and more social controls, namely when society must find social forms able to avoid what I have named modernity's relational hyperbole (Donati 2000a). This is realized through new configurations of direct and indirect relations between social actors, where such relations are built and enforced through new links between liberty and responsibility (both individual and collective) within relational networks instead of having such links under the Leviathan's authority (as in the Hobbesian conception of social order).

building of new relational forms of “glocal” society is counterpointed to the “abstract globalization” driven by the financial economy. For me, these are the main themes of *after*-modern age.

After around 40 years, I am convinced that the three main currents (Marxism, functionalism, and critical theory) could not find an answer to the growing up of a new society. Therefore, I reckon that it would be fatally wrong to build a sociology posing again whichever combination of those three major approaches, even if revised and corrected.

From the relational sociology’s point of view, the mistakes of all those theories lie on the fact that they conceived modernization as a process bringing to “*just one* world always possible in another way”, reducing societal complexity through selections which are internal (endogenous) to Western modernity. Such vision has restrained mainstream sociology from seeing beyond modernity. Relational sociology shows how and why the modern form of society is unstable in itself, leading again and again *beyond* itself, towards new society’s configurations where living together is the result of new ways to think and act social relations.

“To make society” does not mean anymore, as claimed by modern sociologies, that the individuals may act freely within structures that allow bound plays. Social order is generalized, but also differentiated, basing on relational qualities of each lifesphere coming to emergence. There is no more only one order of socio-cultural integration (also the modern one is somehow as such), but a social and cultural pluralism grows, which must show its capabilities to survive.

What this perspective can mean for present sociological research is the main concern that nourishes my work as a sociologist today.

The sociologist may produce an original sociology only whether it has an ultimate concern about society, and whether such *concern* becomes a *vision*. My ultimate concern is that of a society subsidiary to the human being. A society is subsidiary when it develops the virtuous qualities of the human being through proper social relations, i.e. when it configures relations in order to enhance the positively synergetic relationality (instead of humiliation or exploitation) between Ego and Alter. The symbolic code of subsidiarity differentiates itself from other ones (functionalist or of other kind), because it does not confer the primacy to a systemic function, but to the dignity of the human being. Subsidiarity means concern for social relations, which favour the maturation of human beings’ inner thoughtfulness.

The *vision* of the relational sociology is that of enlightening such processes. It aims at understanding to what conditions living together in a society may help individuals to make their life journeys, life chances, social roles, and self identity *personal*, namely to give a relational sense to social forms they live in. As sociologists, we know that new forms will always have their reality, namely emerging features, mechanisms and powers that would not be necessarily more human. For this reason, sociology must take it upon itself to understand how such forms may be re-humanized ever

again, the moment the emerging unexpected or undesired effects are produced. This is the utopia of the “relational society”.

NOTE

This text has been written in the year 2007. Afterwards, a book has appeared in which the relational paradigm is extensively presented. See: P. Donati, *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011.

Bibliographic references:

Alexander J.C.

1994 *Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How Social Theories Have Tried to Understand the “New World” of “Our Time”*, in “Zeitschrift für Soziologie”, vol. 23, n. 3, June, pp. 165-197.

1995 *Neofunctionalism and Beyond*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Archer M.

1995 *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

2000 *Being Human. The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

2003 *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bajoit G.

1992 *Pour une sociologie relationnelle*, Puf, Paris.

Bourdieu P.

1990 *In Other Words. Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Bourdieu P., Coleman J. (eds.)

1991 *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, Westview Press, Oxford.

Donati P.

1972 *Sulla crisi della scuola: dal "successo" alla "autorealizzazione"*, in "Sociologia", a. VI, n. 1, pp. 83-149.

1973 *La socializzazione secondaria dell'adolescenza fra momento privato e momento pubblico*, in "Studi di Sociologia", a. XII, n. 1, pp. 73-120.

1975 *Sociologia della famiglia*, Clueb, Bologna.

1976 *Orientamenti acquisitivi e crisi d'integrazione (in situazioni di sviluppo economico) secondo le risultanze di un'indagine*

- campionaria su padri e figli*, in A. Ardigò, P. Donati (eds.), *Famiglia e industrializzazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, pp. 155-366
- 1978 *Pubblico e privato: fine di una alternativa?*, Cappelli, Bologna.
- 1982 *Natura, problemi e limiti del welfare state: un'interpretazione*, in G. Rossi, P. Donati (eds.), *Welfare State: problemi e alternative*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, pp. 55-107.
- 1983 *Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano (2nd edition 1986 enlarged).
- 1986 *La famiglia nella società relazionale. Nuove reti e nuove regole*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.
- 1987 *Traditional Political Theories and New Social Options: Replies to the Crisis of the Welfare State*, in A. Evers et al. (eds.), *The Changing Faces of Welfare*, Gower Press, Aldershot, pp. 24-45.
- 1989 *La famiglia come relazione sociale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.
- 1991 *Teoria relazionale della società*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.
- 1993 *La cittadinanza societaria*, Laterza, Roma-Bari (2° ed. 2000).
- 1994 *Tempo sociale, famiglia e transizioni*, in E. Scabini, P. Donati (a cura di), *Tempo e transizioni familiari*, "Studi interdisciplinari sulla famiglia", n. 13, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, pp. 61-80.
- 1995 *Social Change and Sociological Thought: Towards a Relational Theory*, in V. Vazquez de Prada, I. Olabarri (eds.), *Understanding Social Change in the Nineties. Theoretical Approaches and Historiographical Perspectives*, Variorum, Aldershot, pp. 51-87.
- 1996 *Che cos'è il terzo settore: cultura, normatività, organizzazione, ruolo societario*, in P. Donati (a cura di), *Sociologia del terzo settore*, Nis/Carocci, Roma, pp. 25-42.
- 1997 *Alla ricerca di una società civile*, in P. Donati (ed.), *La società civile in Italia*, Mondadori, Milano, pp. 21-80.
- 1998 *How to build an independent branch of social-private welfare and why do so*, in L. Tavazza et al. (eds.), *Studies of - and Prospects for - the Revision of the Tax Laws Governing Non Profit Organizations*, Fivol, Roma, pp. 103-122.
- 1999 *Il welfare del XXI secolo: perché e come dobbiamo inventarlo*, in P. Donati (ed.), *Lo Stato sociale in Italia: bilanci e prospettive*, Mondadori, Milano, pp. 19-72.
- 2000a *Freedom vs. Control in Post-Modern Society: A Relational Approach*, in E.K. Scheuch, D. Sciulli (eds.), *Societies, Corporations and the Nation State*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 47-76.
- 2000b *The Challenge of Universalism in a Multicultural Postmodern Society: A Relational Approach*, in E. Halas (ed.), *Florian Znaniecki's Sociological Theory and the Challenges of 21st Century*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M., pp. 31-47.
- 2001 *Il lavoro che emerge. Prospettive del lavoro come relazione sociale in una economia dopo-moderna*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.

- 2002a *The Changing Meaning of Work: Implications for the New Society*, in "Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali", Milan, a. CX, n. 3, pp. 333-366.
- 2002b *Religion and Democracy: The Challenge of a "Religiously Qualified" Public Sphere*, in "Polish Sociological Review", 2 (138), pp. 147-173.
- 2003a *La famiglia come capitale sociale primario*, in P. Donati (a cura di), *Famiglia e capitale sociale nella società italiana*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, pp. 31-101.
- 2003b *Giving and Social Relations: The Culture of Free Giving and its Differentiation Today*, in "International Review of Sociology", vol. 13, n. 2, pp. 243-272.
- 2004a *Etica pubblica, mediazione simbolica e trascendenza nella società dopo-moderna*, in R. Segatori, C. Cristofori, A. Santambrogio (eds.), *Sociologia ed esperienza di vita. Scritti in onore di Franco Crespi*, il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 221-253.
- 2004b *Esplorare una galassia: il privato sociale come fenomeno emergente*, in P. Donati, I. Colozzi (eds.), *Il privato sociale che emerge: realtà e dilemmi*, il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 21-54.
- 2004c *La teoria della società di fronte ai processi di globalizzazione*, in "Sociologia e Politiche Sociali", vol. 7, n. 3, pp. 7-30.
- 2005a *Nuevas políticas sociales y Estado social relacional*, in "Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas", Madrid, CIS, n. 108, Octubre-Diciembre 2004, pp. 9-47.
- 2005b *Quale conciliazione tra famiglia e lavoro? La prospettiva relazionale*, in P. Donati (ed.), *Famiglia e lavoro: dal conflitto a nuove sinergie*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo.

Donati P., Colozzi I. (eds.)

- 1997 *Giovani e generazioni. Quando si cresce in una società eticamente neutra*, il Mulino, Bologna.

Donati P., Colozzi I (eds.)

- 2002 *La cultura civile in Italia: fra stato, mercato e privato sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna.

Donati P., Terenzi P. (eds.)

- 2005 *Invito alla sociologia relazionale: teoria e applicazioni*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

Emirbayer M.

- 1997 *Manifesto for a relational sociology*, in "American Journal of Sociology", vol. 103, n. 2, September, pp. 281-317.

Maton K.

2003 *Riflexivity, Relationism and Research: Pierre Bourdieu and the Epistemic Condition of Social Scientific Knowledge*, in "Space and Culture", vol. 6, Issue 1, February.

Preyer, G.

2000 *Globalization and the Evolution of Membership*, in "Associations", vol. 4, n. 1, pp. 97-112.

Sacco, P.L., Zamagni, S. (a cura di)

2002 *Complessità relazionale e comportamento economico. Materiali per un nuovo paradigma di razionalità*, il Mulino, Bologna.

Sciulli D.

1992 *Theory of Societal Constitutionalism. Foundations of a Non-Marxist Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Teubner G.

2003 *Societal Constitutionalism: Alternatives to State-centred Constitutional Theory*, in C. Joerges, I.-J. Sand, G. Teubner (eds.), *Constitutionalism and Transnational Governance*, Hart, London.

Wallerstein I.

1991 *Geopolitics and Geoculture. Essays on the Changing World-System*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Vandenberghe F.

1999 *"The Real is Relational": An Epistemological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Generative Structuralism*, in "Sociological Theory", vol. 17, n. 1, March, pp. 32-67.