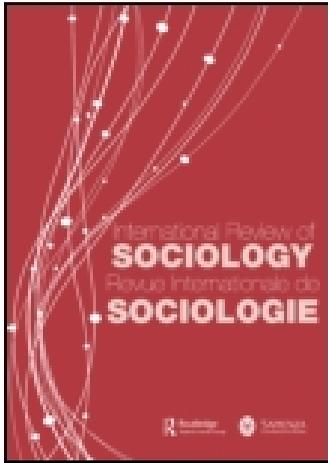


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Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology

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In recent years, many different versions of relational sociology have appeared. In this paper, I present a critical realist version developed since 1983, which is also called ‘relational theory of society’ (CRRS). It shares with the other relational sociologies the idea of avoiding both methodological individualism and holism. The main differences lie in the way social relations are defined, the kind of reality that is attributed to them, how they configure social formations, and the way in which their changes are conceived (morphogenesis and emergence). In particular, this approach is suitable to understand how the morphogenesis of society comes about through social relations, which are the connectors that mediate between agency and social structure. The generative mechanism that feeds social morphogenesis resides in the dynamic (that is, in their ways of operating) of the social relations networks that alter the social molecule constituting structures already in place. Social morphogenesis is a form of surplus of society with respect to itself. Society increases (or decreases) its potential for surplus depending on processes of valorization (or devalorization) of social relations.

Keywords: relational sociology; critical realism; social relations; social morphogenesis; social networks

1. The topic

In recent years, many different versions of what is called ‘relational sociology’ have appeared. In particular, the *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* published by Emirbayer (1997) has been very successful, and many scholars consider it as the basic reference for what they call ‘relational sociology’. To be specific, Emirbayer calls his approach ‘transactional’, a term that, for him, seems to be equivalent to ‘relational’. A recent collection of essays (in two volumes: Powell and Dépelteau 2013, Dépelteau and Powell 2013) provides clear evidence that the term ‘relational sociology’ is now used in a wide range of meanings, and in many cases it becomes an almost empty label. As Powell and Dépelteau (2013, p. 12) claim, the relational paradigm is now played by most scholars as ‘a language game’. It is transformed into a ‘deep’ and ‘radical’ *relationalism*. So that, in the end, ‘relational sociology cannot be an aspiring paradigm for now and maybe will never be’ (Dépelteau 2013, p. 164).

In this paper I wish to confront Emirbayer’s *Manifesto* and the transactional theories by showing that there is another version of relational sociology, based upon critical realism, that aspires to become a reliable paradigm (Donati 1983, 2011a). In my opinion, the basic differences between a transactional sociology and a relational sociology lie in what we mean by ‘social relation’ from the ontological, epistemological, and

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methodological viewpoints. Those who conceive of social relations as transactions (mere interactions, exchanges, interdependencies, as Emirbayer, Dépelteau, and others do) deny the fact that social relations are emergent effects stemming from morphostatic/morphogenetic processes in which substances and relations are co-principles of reality. Relations cannot fade away substances (layers of reality), although the latter are constituted by relations. From this assumption many other differences ensue in respect to what is deemed to be the reality (qualities, properties, causal powers) of social relations, how the latter configure social formations, and the way in which the social change is conceived.

In this paper, contrary to the transactional approaches, I argue that we cannot have a proper relational sociology unless we see the social relation as an emergent effect of a process of social morphogenesis. From the point of view of a critical realist relational sociology (henceforth CRRS), social morphogenesis is a form of surplus of society with respect to itself. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to invoke a general theory of social relations that is able to show how the molecular structure of social relations in different contexts is altered. The morphogenetic surplus is not the product of structural effects but of ‘emergent relational effects’. Society increases (or decreases) its potential for surplus depending on processes of valorization (or devalorization) of social relations. The empirical scenario to which I will make reference is the crisis of the typically modern societal arrangement (*lib/lab* understood as a compromise between the capitalist market = *lib* and the welfare state = *lab*) and the birth of an after-modern society that can be called ‘relational’.

2. Searching for a new theory of society

A critical realist version of relational sociology was advanced many years ago as an alternative to mainstream approaches of that time (mainly Marxism and functionalism, both in many different versions) (Donati 1983). The basic idea was that 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’). Relations are the very stuff of what we call ‘the social’. Differently from other approaches named relational as well, this theory assigns to the social relation neither an ideational nor a materialistic character, nor a mixing of ideal and material elements, and does not reduce it to a pure exchange or transaction.

According to CRRS, social relation cannot be reduced to a symbolic mediation, a projection of individuals, or the expression of structures. It is something more and something different. 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, as it was initially defined by Georg Simmel with the concept of *Wechselwirkung*.¹ Simmel was the first one to give sociology its ‘relational turn’ (Donati 1991, p. 23). Nevertheless, a CRRS should stand out from his ‘formal sociology’ and above all the formalist strand of his followers who have developed a sort of ‘geometric theory of society’ which reduces social relations to ‘pure forms’ (this applies not only to von Wiese’s sociology and the first structural network analysis, but also to certain aspects of Luhmann’s theory). Unfortunately, Simmel, like all other classical sociologists, did not articulate a generalized and sufficiently analytical theory in order ‘to get inside’ the social relation *qua talis* and see

what can be known from that viewpoint. An advanced relational sociology should exactly close this gap.

Relational sociology should be able to understand and explain infinite abilities of the human being to generate relations (as an *auctor*, 's/he who generates'). The individuals give rise to *social forms* that do not, however, depend on them, being the emerging product of their mutual acting in a situated context. To make a humanistic sociology means to make our representations and knowledge of reality apt to catch the deepest richness of human beings and of their coexistence differently from what happens in the world of non-human animals, that some people assimilate to the humans (for instance McFarlane 2013). Sure enough, it does not mean seeing reality through a-priori axioms. Neither does it mean privileging the individual or its inner reasons, nor presuming that the individuals always act based on the ethical dictates of conscience.

In searching for a developed relational paradigm, the basic issue to avoid any sort of conflation between agency and social structure (*upward*, *downward*, and *central conflations*; see Archer 1995). To this end, social relation is to be considered as 'the' basic unit of analysis, i.e. the main focus and the privileged analytical strategy to study reality.

The social ontology of CRRS (called 'relational realism') is distinguished from the ontologies of other relational sociologies insofar as the former refuses a radically nominalistic, pragmatistic, or constructionistic view. Therefore it disagrees with mainstream scholars, like, for example Bourdieu (1990) and Emirbayer (1997). Bourdieu's theory is misleading at least for three reasons: because it considers relation as a product of structures; it represents another sort of conflation between structuralism and individualism; it does not enter the social relation as such. Briefly, because it is a form of *relationism* (Vandenberghe 1999, Maton 2003). Emirbayer's theory is based on a relativistic pragmatism that fully belongs to post-modernism, placing itself opposite to critical realism.

Only a social ontology that observes social relations as proper to human beings (different from non-human relations) can understand whether, where, and how society *exceeds itself* beyond the recurring crises it goes through, creating new historical-societal configurations. To paraphrase Gehlen (1984, pp. 200–201), the essential of an institution, and of a social relation a fortiori, is its being above each determination: the institution, and the social relation alike, should not be only useful and adequate to the purpose in the most direct and practical sense, but it should also be a connecting point and a support behavior for higher (best) interests; it should give the right and the chance to exist to the most noble and demanding motivations. Only then will the institution, and its relational constitution, meet the deep, vital – and also spiritual – need of human beings to get stable duration, commonality, and safeness; and it can even make accessible something such as happiness, if this consists in not being alone when we exceed ourselves.

In short, I argue that many relational sociologies fall into some sort 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 (Coleman) and of neo-Marxist structuralism (Bourdieu), do find some convergences even starting from opposite points of view (Bourdieu and Coleman 1991). For this reason, I think that we have to distinguish clearly between relational (or *morphogenetic*) and *relationist* (or *conflationary*) theories.

With reference to the so-called ‘post-modern era’, ‘what happens is understandable as social morphogenesis under conditions of high complexity’ (Donati 1991, p. 11). The paradigm of social morphogenesis appears to be particularly suited to providing a way out of these difficulties in that it seems to be better able than other approaches to give an account of how the objective and subjective factors, internal or external to a given society, combine and interact with one another so as to generate a society that is different from the preceding one. As is well known, the morphogenetic paradigm was conceived as an explanation for the transformation of social and cultural structures in that it is a process that is mediated by human agency (Archer 1979, 1995).

The present contribution intends to deepen the analysis of the process of social morphogenesis in light of a generalized theory of the social relations that mediate between the initial phase and the final phase of each morphogenetic cycle. It is a matter of elucidating social morphogenesis as the surplus of society with respect to itself. The ontological and epistemological presupposition of this perspective lies in the fact that *relationality* is the mode of existing of that which belongs to the social order.

I assume that ‘*being in relation*’ is an expression which has three analytical meanings:

- (1) it says that between two (or more) entities there is a *certain distance* which, at the same time, distinguishes *and* connects them;
- (2) that such relation *exists* – i.e. it has a reality – in itself (from Latin ‘*ex-sistere*’, which means ‘to be out having its own consistency’ with respect to its generators) with its own qualities and causal powers;
- (3) that such a reality has its own *modus essendi* (the modality of *the* being which is *inside* the relation), i.e. a *structure*, be it more stable or more volatile.

These three meanings are analytical, because – from an empirical viewpoint – every relation contains all these aspects, which are closely linked to one another. This paper aims to translate this ontological view into a sociological discourse.

The difference between my theory and that of other authors lies in the fact that, contrary to radical constructionism, I maintain that there are connections between the social relation as social fabric and as expression of human nature in a biophysical environment. The majority of authors who understand relational sociology as a language game of network analysis – such as, for example, Crossley² – reduce the relation to a transaction, to a narration (the telling of stories), or to a structural network effect, and so on, while I treat social relations as a reality that interweaves elements that derive from nature (both the nature that is internal to human beings and that which is external, biophysical nature) with effects deriving from the networks connecting agent/actors.

For example: for some relational sociologists, ‘the leader’ as such does not exist because the leader exists if there are followers. Indeed, the leader is created by followers. What exists, they say, is the relation of leadership, and the latter emerges from a social network. This is undoubtedly true, but it indicates only a part of reality. It does not entirely clarify the structure of the relation that we call leadership. In order to understand this structure, it is necessary also to look at other factors. A person could not be a leader without certain qualities and without a certain internal reflexivity, which he/she pours out into the social relations with followers. Moreover, certain environmental conditions are often necessary (situations of crisis, catastrophes, revolutions, systemic changes). In short, leadership is certainly not an attribute of the person, and yet it does not emerge only from the structure of the relational network. It emerges from a more complex reality. It is constituted by a variety of factors. Let us think of charisma and the figure of the

charismatic leader. According to Max Weber (1968, vol. II, pp. 431–432), charismatic authority is ‘founded on devotion to exceptional sanctity, heroism, or the exemplary character of a single person and of the normative models or the orders revealed or handed down by such a subject’. Weber is an individualist: he does not see the relational constitution of this type of authority; he sees it as a personal attribute. Charisma and the charismatic leader are instead relations that emerge from a context. But there is not only the relational context, because the personal qualities of the charismatic figure and the appeal to an ideal, supernatural, or utopian vision also make decisive contributions. These factors are not produced entirely by the network between nodes. We have to consider the reflexivity and creativity of human subjects too. The network has boundaries with the outside with which there are exchanges. What we must address is the problem of understanding the intertwining between the factors inside and outside the network that cause these relations to emerge.

I claim that social change is a form of ‘surplus’ of society with respect to itself, produced through a new relationality in the structure of social relations. This surplus does not derive from structural effects as much as it is generated by relational effects,³ instead; that is, it is due to the added value of social relations. For instance, social relations do not create a leader alone, but they generate a leader by adding social value to the qualities and powers of particular people. It is this added social value that transforms society and makes it morphogenetic in that it produces ‘emergents’. In this contribution I propose some examples that, as a rule, have to do with overcoming the typically modern arrangement (that is, the *lib/lab* arrangement) of society and point to the birth of a ‘relational society’.

Along the whole text, the reader should keep in mind the *ambivalent semantics* of the concept of social relation, which has a double meaning as a *process* and as an *outcome* of that process. We can understand this ambivalence by analogy with the concept of ‘association’ which denotes both the process of ‘becoming fellows/members’ (joining) and the *outcome* of this process which consists in a certain organizational form (the association as a constituted entity, with a formal or informal regulation). In the same way, when we say that two agents/actors have or are in ‘a relation’ we can mean the process of *reciprocal action* (interaction is a reciprocal reference – the Weberian *refero* – that produces a connection or bond – the Durkheimian *religo*) or the product of this process, i.e. the emergent effect, which is the social relation as a new reality existing between the agents/actors, which we define as a social structure insofar as it operates a stable connection between the positions of those who are in relation (the social system is based upon these structures). Therefore, from the ontological point of view, the social relation can be viewed both as an element essential to the process of emergence and as an emergent (structural entity) in itself.

3. Relational sociology in the light of the morphostasis/morphogenesis framework

What CRRS calls ‘society’ is not a more or less orderly, more or less conflictual collection of agents/actors (whether individual or collective) that share an arena of actions and interact with their mutual expectations over time. For CRRS society is made *by* individuals but is *not* made *of* individuals. Certainly, only individuals can activate it, but society is another thing with respect to what individuals are and carry in society.

Society belongs to an order of reality that is relational (the order of the relation, by which I mean an order of *reality*), which is to say, the reality of concrete social relations

that exist and operate among those who acknowledge their reciprocal involvement in a social sphere that for some reason unites them. This sphere is configured as a social form based on the super-functional difference between ‘us’ and ‘others’. If the difference between one social sphere and another is purely functional, then we have not so much a society as an ‘organization’ (such as a firm, a school, or an army).

From my perspective, the social spheres that make up a society are situated at various levels that, from an analytical standpoint, go from the micro level (such as the family), the meso level (such as a local community), to the macro level (such as a national, pluri-national, or global society). It is evident that these realities are, respectively, micro/meso/macro in relational terms, that is, inasmuch as one and the other can coexist in certain relations. The family, for instance, is a micro reality with respect to the local and national community, but is a meso reality if we consider it as an intermediate sphere between the single individual and the State. And so on.

In short, a society is that order of reality that consists in the configuration that agents/actors give to their relations when they recognize themselves in their belonging to a ‘We’ (the We-relation) that delimits (defines the boundaries of) a certain social sphere that has ‘super-functional’ qualities and properties. The term super-functional indicates the fact that a certain entity does not exercise a limited number of functions and does not follow a logic of functional specialization. Civic associations, groups of families or firms, local communities, social networks, nations, and global societies can be societies or organizations. They are societies if these entities are lived and practiced as super-functional spheres.⁴ If they operate according to specific functions, then they become ‘organizations’.

Social morphogenesis can pertain to organizations or societies. For example, we can study the social morphogenesis of a national educational system (Archer 1979) understood as an organization. Nevertheless, this process of social morphogenesis takes place in a super-functional social context, and this context is a ‘society’.

In other words, ‘making society’ implies that the social relations among participants are conceived and lived as a *modus vivendi*, that is, as a way of conducting one’s existence with others in a social sphere that is not differentiated according to functions, but according to relations, instead: this is to say that it is distinguished by the *sui generis* qualities and powers that constitute it. Such relational modalities confer a specific configuration upon every ‘society’.

A society is not necessarily integrated and without conflicts. On the contrary, it normally has problems of both social and system integration. Belonging to a ‘we’ does not at all mean that internal diversities are lacking or negated. A society is a ‘plural subject’ in the sense of being a ‘relational subject’. Internal differentiation (among agents, their cultures, their relations) is necessary for the existence of a society.

One society distinguishes itself from others by the way in which its relations are qualified and by the way in which the networks of relations that define it are configured. To speak of the morphogenesis of a society thus means speaking of transformations of the social relations that *make that* society inasmuch as they ‘exceed’ initial structures.

For CRRS, society is the enactment of associative and dissociative relations that arise from societal structures and continuously alter them. It is a matter of understanding how the structural dynamic of relations creates a society that is different from others due to the fact that the generative dynamics of the relations that characterize it are different. The objective that CRRS proposes to pursue is that of understanding and explaining the correlations that exist between the social morphogenesis of the relations that make a

society and the emergent structures that qualify a concrete society in terms of its difference from other societies. In particular, I will refer to the passage from modern society to *after-* (or *trans-*) modern society.

Many of the relations of everyday life become indeed more and more contingent (random) in their composition of motivations, desires, feelings, aspirations, plans, rules, interests, means employed. Relations seem to fluctuate in a similar way to air in that they are composed of a mixture of elements, which are scarcely or not at all ordered, that continually alter the relations' quality. Air can be more or less hot or cold, dry or humid, still or windy, clean or dirty; it can acquire various types of scents and odors, and so on. The same thing may appear to happen to social relations: they can be more or less warm or cool, stable or unstable, and so on. Thus, it would seem that there is a decided resemblance between air and the social relation. Marx said as much in his famous pronouncement (stated in the Manifesto of the Communist Party of 1848), which was taken up by Berman (1982) in connection with the experience of modernity: 'All that is solid melts into air'. But I wonder: is this how things really are?

My response is negative. I claim that, unlike air, the social relation has a 'molecular structure' that consists of elements that compose it and of the relationality that is exercised among them. The elements of the social relation are not of a chemical-physical order of reality. The sort of relationality that exists among the elements of the social relation is unknown in the chemical-physical world.

On the basis of its structure, the social relation adopts differing qualities and powers. In their turn, these qualities and powers of social relations decide the effects that the relations have on people and on social formations. Perhaps a virtual society is like air, but in a real society things are very different. Indeed, whoever claims that our society is becoming 'liquid' must then admit that, in fact, social structures exist that are endowed with great stability and influence over individuals' lives.

4. On the structure of social relations

If we want to describe and understand real, and not imaginary, social facts, it is necessary that analysis of the social relation's structure avoid a subjectivistic or purely constructionist approach. If social relations exist, that is, if they have their own reality, they must have a structure (social molecule) that is not that of air, even if it would appear that it is able to transform itself in a similar way to air.

Those who maintain the analogy between air and social relations evoke attractive images, but from an ontological and epistemological point of view the analogy is misleading. Air is a phenomenon of a chemical-physical order, while the social relation is a phenomenon that belongs to another order of reality, the one produced by the agency of human beings.

Let us try to enter 'inside' the social relation and see whether and how we can find a structure.

If we define the social relation as a reciprocal action between Ego and Alter in a social context, the relation can be seen from the subjective side (of Ego and Alter, respectively) or as 'object' (objective reality) between the two.

(1) From the subjective point of view, Max Weber's definition has remained classic and is at the origin of all action or 'actionistic' sociologies: 'social relation is to be understood as a behavior of more than one individual reciprocally established according to its content of meaning and oriented in conformity. The social relation therefore consists

exclusively in the possibility that one acts socially in a given way (endowed with meaning), whatever the basis on which this possibility rests' (Weber 1968, vol. I, pp. 23–24). Weber does not attribute to the relation its own reality. He sees two individuals and their behaviors, which conform one to the other in a certain way in giving meaning to their individual actions. For him, the meaning of the relation resides in the individual and does not have a causal relation with its object.⁵ The meaning is a mere possibility. The social relation with others does not have its own meaning; it is only a subjectively understood symbolic reference (*refero*).

(2) From the objective point of view, the relation is understood as a bond, connection, reciprocal tie between Ego and Alter. In this case, the relation is seen as the product of the objective conditioning that 'ties' together Ego and Alter. This bond (I call it *religo*) was analyzed by Emile Durkheim, in particular, who distinguished it into the two forms of mechanical solidarity (due to uniformity of consciences and low division of labor) and organic solidarity (greater individualization of consciences and strong interdependencies, in the wake of an elevated division of labor). In contrast to Weber, individual subjectivity does not count here.

(3) I propose to connect the *refero* and the *religo*, that is, to see them as interwoven dimensions giving rise to an emergent effect: the relation as 'effect of reciprocity' which I interpret as a generative mechanism that consists in operating in a combinatorial mode (i.e. as 'combined provisions'⁶) of *refero* and *religo*, that is, of the symbolic-psychological axis and of the instrumental-normative axis. These two axes structure the relation through the distinctions of time (present/future) and space (inside/outside) of the relation (Donati 1991, chapter 4).

In short, an analysis of the classical sociologists leads me to derive the following three semantics of the social relation:

- (1) the semantics of the relation as *refero*, that is, as a symbolic reference starting from a motivation;⁷
- (2) the semantics of the relation as *religo*, that is, as bond, structural connection made of norms and means;⁸
- (3) the generative semantics of the relation as an emergent phenomenon (relational effect). Here the relation between Ego and Alter is understood as an effect of reciprocity that takes on a form (its own reality) endowed with its own qualities and causal powers,⁹ which requires a reference to the specific social context in which the interactions take place. Interactions always take place in a relational context. The context can define the social relation as a simple event (for example, a person asks for a beer in any pub, pays, and leaves), or as a bond that was created through multiple reiterations over time (for example, the relation between a patient and his personal doctor), or a bond that derives from ascriptive factors (for example, the relation between parent and children).

Let us take a synthetic look at the relation's composition and form.

- (1) *Composition*. The relation is composed of elements that come from Ego and Alter's actions. These elements are those that give meaning to the action and are therefore very diverse: expectations, goals, means used, etc., with respect to certain individual affinities, utilities, needs, and values. Many authors define the social relation in terms of a structure of interdependence between mutual expectations and transactions.¹⁰ Of course, these definitions touch upon relevant

aspects, but they do not go far enough because they do not highlight the social relation's character as an emergent phenomenon. A way to conceptualize the *analytical* elements of each single action that I find interesting is to group them into four categories: the goal or target (T) in a situation, the means used to reach the goal (M), the norms that are followed in relating the internal elements to one another (N), and the 'latent cultural value' (C) that the relation incorporates. The 'cultural value' (chosen from among various opportunities) is not an abstract model, but corresponds to the criterion of valorization of the action's goal. It answers the question as to 'why' an agent/actor performs an action and seeks a relation. The relation as emergent can also be analyzed in its composition with reference to the same analytical elements, which are empirically different, however, from those present in the agents'/actors' single actions. The four orders of elements (goals, means, norms, values) are not necessarily congruent with one another; on the contrary, their coherence is always problematic.

- (2) *Form*.¹¹ This is the relational structure that organizes the elements coming from single actions and combines them in such a way as to impart to them a certain arrangement (relational effect) that has a causal power over the participants. It is important to emphasize from the beginning that the various dimensions of morphogenesis (structural, cultural, agential) are intertwined with one another within the social relation. This comes about through changes in the relation's internal components – culture (C), the axis of the internal adaptive structure (axis M–N), and the relation's goal/intentionality/target (T) – and the formation of new relations (connections, interdependencies) among these components. The complementarity or contradiction between these elements appears in the structural elaboration (at time T_4) following upon what is realized in the acting subjects' interactive network (in the phase T_2 – T_3).

In other words, the social relation, considered as resulting from Ego and Alter's reciprocal actions, is a mix of elements of Ego and Alter's actions that takes place subject to the social context's conditionings and alters it. In general, in a social network the mix is formed through the encounter-collision (that is, a certain combination) among the goals, means, norms, and values of single actions within the conditions at the network's boundaries. The combination in question has an autonomous relational structure with respect to the single actions that generate it. Read as a black box, this structure can be trivial or non-trivial (that is, it can generate always the same output, or it can generate always different outputs). Social morphogenesis can exist only if the black box is not trivial.

In short, the social relation is the emergent effect of reciprocal actions reiterated over time among social actors/subjects occupying different positions in a societal configuration (system or social network). The relational analysis translates the network into a matrix ($i \rightarrow j/j \rightarrow i$) from which we infer that the relational effect is the result of Ego and Alter's contributions plus the contribution of the relation as such (Tam 1989).

Agents/actors realize exchanges (with means = M, and norms = N, i.e. the M–N axis) within a certain power relationship (which has a cultural legitimation model = C, and situated targets = T, i.e. the C–T axis). The reciprocal action (interaction), if stabilized in a certain period of time, causes an effect to emerge consisting in a structure of interdependence (or configuration of the relation),¹² which can be reiterated or changed over time.¹³

Let us consider, for example, the doctor–patient relation. Both the agents/actors have goals, means, norms, and values, which are in part convergent and in part divergent but, in any case, are understood subjectively in different ways. The relation that emerges is made of elements that come in part from the doctor and in part from the patient, and that materialize in an *activity-dependent* reality that is relationality effectively operating between the two. Although the relation is supposed to be of a therapeutic nature with a view to improving the patient’s health, it is possible that the actions’ elements do not lead to this type of relation but to another type of relation.

Another example can be the relation between couples. When Ego and Alter decide to form a couple, they try to adapt their respective situated goals, means, norms, and motivational values so as to create a relation from which each partner can receive what he/she expects, compatibly with the other partner’s needs. One supposes that the emergent relation is reciprocal love, but this does not always happen. Obviously, the resultant relation will almost always be asymmetrical. In any case, ‘being in’ this relation means pursuing some opportunities while accepting some constraints. Both the opportunities and the constraints are continuously renegotiated. The action of free giving, that is, the non-conditional acceptance of the other’s expectations enacted by one or both parties, is possible but is an exception because normally the two partners try to find an arrangement that satisfies their personal needs. The difficulty with such an arrangement arises from the fact that the relation is a ‘third’ that *mediates* between Ego and Alter. It has its own reality that is relevant not only for the partners but also for the actors/agents outside the couple who observe it, evaluate it, put expectations on to it. Whoever observes the couple attributes to it certain qualities and powers that are different from the partners’ qualities.

We could say the same thing about the relation between employer and employee (which is materialized in a contract that establishes the relation) or between teacher and student, and so on. The elements are those of which reciprocal actions are composed. The ways of combining them depend on the nature of the relation and the social context (boundary conditions). If the setting is a family context, we will have a family form; if it is a medical office, a school, a business, a public assembly, etc., we will have different relational forms for each of these settings.

The group relation can be seen as an extension of the dynamic between Ego and Alter to a plurality of subjects. Some examples come to mind, such as the case of the ‘reflecting team’ used in mental health services that conduct therapy with individuals and families in difficulty (Andersen 1991) or the case of the ‘Family Group Conferences’ (Seikkula and Arnkil 2006) that work to help parents manage problems with their children in situations of risk by building interactive networks between them from which a relationality can emerge that supports the parents in their tasks. In these group dynamics we can see that the network connecting participants is formed on the basis of a ‘social molecule’ (about which I will say more below), which is the reflexive modality in which the action of the group’s participants is structured.

5. The relation as generative mechanism

Social morphogenesis begins within relations, and it is through relations that new social forms are generated. It is in the social relation’s form¹⁴ that compatibilities, contradictions, and complementarities¹⁵ between the elements that compose the relation are, or are not, realized in varying ways and degrees.

When the social relation's form is a *habitus*, reciprocal action takes on an automatic character (based on negative feedbacks). Social morphogenesis comes about when the relation is enacted with a reflexivity of subjects entailing positive feedbacks, in particular, relational feedbacks. However, reflexivity can also be blocked.

In general, the relation is a generative mechanism because it contains reflexivity, and the latter makes the black box non-trivial. As such, the relation has qualities and properties that 'exceed' social interactions (which have an evenemential character: they are pure 'events'). Among various qualities and properties, I would like to point out at least two that are connected to each other.

- (1) First, the social relation is intrinsically reflexive, in the sense that it 'always circles back' on to the subjects that are in the relation. Naturally, reflexivity can be minimal, impeded, distorted, or fractured, and in that case so will be the relationality among the agents/actors. Precisely because they 'are (i.e. they exist, from the Latin *ex-sistere*, which means being *out* of themselves) in relation', agents/actors must think and act *into* the relation of one with the other. The structure of the relation is reflexive in that the axis of the *refero* (as discussed above) is not only a symbolic reference to the goal that Ego and Alter intend to realize (since they 'are in relation')¹⁶ but is also a *re-ferre*, that is, a carrying of what emerged from the interactions *back* to the prior motivations and a deliberating about the new action to be undertaken. In my opinion, it is in this quality that the ethical value of the relation resides inasmuch as the relation demands a 'response' (responsibility), i.e. being accountable to oneself and to others for the interactions' outcomes. Obviously, reflexivity will have quite different characteristics from one relation to another and from one context to another. In the market, for example, things happen very differently than in the family. In any case, the reflexive character of the relation is decisive for the social dynamic (Archer 2012). We can speak of the relation as the 'reflexive mechanism' (or instead, as a 'reflexive molecule', as I will explain below) of the social realm.
- (2) Secondly, and in parallel, the social relation can never be purely mechanical because it has a ternary, not binary, structure. Automatic mechanisms are binary¹⁷ and do not have finalities, while the social relation – if and inasmuch as it is configured as a *generative* mechanism – *contains a finalism*. Obviously, it is not a given that the relation's finalism corresponds to the ends of the single subjects in relation, even when they are in agreement. On the contrary. It is highly probable that the outcome caused by the relation distances itself from the particular goals (wishes, expectations, etc.) of the single subjects in relation precisely in that it is an emergent effect that must mediate between subjects. Nevertheless, in order for subjects to establish a generative relation, they must acknowledge a finalistic dimension to their relation. Finalism implies an ethical dimension.¹⁸

The types of reflexivity (Archer 2003) and of finalism decide the causal power that the different social relations have in being generative of social morphogenesis. Often the actors/agents that appeal to noble 'values' such as peace, justice, and solidarity are not efficacious in generating social morphogenesis because they do not see how to give form to the social relation that is meant to realize that value. In order to understand the problem of the relation's form, it is useful to think of it as a 'social molecule'. I use the term 'molecule' to state that the components of a social relation have to connect in a peculiar

way in order to produce an emergent effect endowed with a certain stability and causal powers, if the social morphogenesis has to generate an elaborated structure. Although a certain degree of contingency can and should be introduced in the process through which an emergent is made, not all possible combinations of the relational components can be effective in producing a specific kind of social relation. In general, every social sphere (like an organization, an association, a public office, a school, a hospital, a family, a pub, etc.) is identified by a species-specific kind of social relationality, with its correlated effects. To speak of specificity does not involve a mere functionalist view, because in the social field relations are suprafunctional. In talking about the social relation as a molecule of the social world, I consider that there is more than a metaphor for the molecule which exists in the physical-chemical world. In the latter, a molecule (elementary or composed) is the smallest particle which retains the characteristics and specific properties of a substance and is capable of autonomous existence. So it is, by analogy – as loose as it may be – with regard to the social relation which characterizes a specific social sphere or contest or fabric. We can think of the social molecule of a youth gang, a neighborhood, a voluntary association, a firm, a school, a cooperative, a bank, and so on.

6. The social relation as ‘molecule of the social’

Unlike air, the social realm tends to organize itself in ‘molecules’ that – if stabilized – generate the social structures that characterize a context. If I go into a pub, the social context that I find envisions certain goals (I cannot ask to buy a bicycle), certain means for achieving these goals, certain rules and values, not to mention certain combinations of these. In this, the social molecule of the pub is materialized; it can also, obviously, be changed, in which case the social molecule is moving toward a social morphogenetic cycle.

Let us see what is meant by the assertion that we can think of the social relation as a ‘molecule’ whose elements, with their internal combinations, confer on it particular qualities and powers.

A tribe or clan exists inasmuch as whoever is part of it feels bound *within* the ‘tribal molecule’, that is, in that organizational principle of the tribal or clan structure that is totalizing in that it is the same for everyone and does not leave margins of variability.

Pre-modern societies that escape from the tribal structure are generally ‘stratified’. In this arrangement, each social stratum has its own ‘social molecule’, the molecule of that specific social stratum (or class). The social relations in the medieval aristocratic class have a social molecule that is different from the professional or artisan classes organized in corporations (physicians, notaries, carpenters, butchers, etc.), and from other classes (think of the peasants) as well. Each stratum or corporation has its own social molecule.

Modern societies break the molecules of the pre-existing social strata and inaugurate a type of social molecule that, in its own qualities and powers, is completely different as compared to all those that came before. This is a molecule that tends to nullify its morphostatic character. The form of the early modern molecule is based on the principle of continuous functional differentiation as its guiding distinction. Late modernity adopts the guiding value of contingency (the value of *the plural*, *pluralism*, or even *chaos*) as its superordinated value,¹⁹ which opens the door to the maximum possible variability of social relations.

In fact, we say that a society is ‘more modern’ in the degree to which its social molecule promotes pluralism, that is, the pluralization of all social forms as its guiding value. In late modernism the process is radicalized. The social molecule appears as an aggregation/combination of elements that is a sort of ‘form without form’, in the sense

that social forms reject any kind of 'canon', standard, truth, or unequivocally defined identity. It does this on the basis of principles of freedom and equality among all participants. In a certain sense, post-modernity can be defined as a form of society in which the structures of social relations are intrinsically (that is, normatively) morphogenetic in that social morphogenesis is simultaneously the value and the norm that guides all of society in all its expressions. The identity of the post-modern form is like that of the protagonist in Philip Dick's novel *A Scanner Darkly* who, in continuously adopting different identities, loses the sense of self.

The goals and means of the social relation follow a valorizing criterion that opens the door to the world of the possible. The criterion consists in the continual creation of variations and variability. This process is gradually extended to all social spheres, from politics to the economy and, finally, also to the family. Social processes make use of generalized symbolic means that can operate only on condition of being able to realize the normative value of maximum openness to the possible ('being politically correct' is its basic norm). The slogan is: creating ever new and ever greater opportunities as goods in themselves for the individuals irrespective of their relational consequences, except of course for damage to others. In the first place, money and political power do this. The same thing is required of all other generalized symbolic means; this happens, in particular, as regards the formation of public opinion (influence), advertising consumption, and commitment to existential values.

We can represent the social relation as a molecule whose structure consists in four elements (C = values, N = norms, T = targets, M = means) and in their connections (the six links or 'bonds'). Each element has a border with a specific environment: values with its environment of ultimate realities (or ultimate concerns), norms with the environment of collective rules, targets with the environment of the interests owned by others, and means with the environment of resources and opportunities.

It should be noticed that the component of 'norms' is to be understood not as a law constraint, but as the logic (rule) of composition between the elements of the social relation which enables them to connect and produce the emergent effect (in this regard, norms are not only restrictions, but also enablements). In the morphogenetic process, there can be norms which foster innovation. Indeed, such norms are required. Norms of this kind are, for example: the norm of reciprocity as symbolic (not utilitarian) exchange (e.g. in changing the distribution of resources between generations), the norm of subsidiarity (helping the other to do what the other has to do, without replacing her/him), or 'governing by networking' (when welfare services are to be changed from a vertical structure to horizontal configurations).

From a logical point of view, in the relation's structure, there are two basic relations, i.e. the symmetrical *exchange* among the four components (CNTM) and their hierarchical *order*, which combine in a new codifiable principle which may be called '*founding relation*'.²⁰ Clearly, this is a heuristic instrument aimed at simplifying our understanding of a form that is very complex in reality.

On the basis of this conceptualization, we can characterize the social molecule produced by late modernity in the following way. It is constituted by four base elements that are combined together:

(T) the *target* or *goal* of the social relation is to select a variation as a broadening of opportunities; to produce social morphogenesis, the variation must be freed from all ascriptive constraints (i.e. it must be maximally contingent);

(M) the *means* for achieving this goal can be of the most diverse kinds, but what is essential is that they be treated as ‘money’ because money is the generalized symbolic means of interchange that makes it possible to render all objects equivalent, depriving them of their constraints; as a matter of fact, money is the *trigger* of typically modern relationality, which renders social relations in-different, making their ascriptive character and intrinsic quality disappear;

(N) the *norms* of the modern social molecule are rules that must promote the production of variety; thus, they are typically acquisitive, which means that they valorize competition rather than concomitant complementarities;

(C) the relation’s guiding-distinction is its *in-difference toward values* (i.e. its polytheism of values, as Max Weber would say); this is to say that the relation assesses reality on the basis of values that are always negotiable and fungible, i.e. functionally equivalent to other values; the culture of the society of individuals is characterized by liquidity and the decontextualization of relations, and is fed by an a-relational theological matrix.

In this framework, money serves as a means (M) to address relationships with the social relation’s external environment where physical, scientific, and technological resources are found, while the social relation’s criterion as regards cultural value (C) reflects its relationship with a cultural matrix that considers society as an evolutionary process of individuation and rationalization (Parsons 1967).

If we observe things in this way, we can come to appreciate the truth and, at the same time, the fallacy of Luhmann’s thesis. It is well known that Luhmann (1995) maintained that the adaptive function of society, that is, the instrumental function performed by money as a generalized symbolic means of communication, is the dominant and specific function of the modern social system, in contrast to the systems of pre-modern societies. ‘A society’, Luhmann (1976, p. 517) asserts, ‘that gives institutional primacy to monetary mechanisms (that is, on a systemic level, to its economy) will therefore orient itself toward an “open” future and will conceive of itself as progressive (as moving ahead)’. In his opinion, modernity consists precisely in the creation of a continuous variability due to the fact that functional primacy is given to the economy, which disengages money from specific values and social norms.²¹ In this contribution, I turn his theses upside down. I maintain that even societal systems termed modern depend on a model of normative value. This model valorizes a type of ‘pure relationality’ (that of money, which is not tied to anything) understood as the possibility that social relations can be, or can become, immune to any social constraint. In such a case, it is not money – as the means – that makes society always otherwise possible but is, instead, the cultural value that is attributed to social relations in the typical molecule of modernity, and to resulting social norms. It is this normative value that legitimates the use of money as the universal converter, that is, the use of money as the abstract equivalent of everything, and even of human persons.

7. From the modern relation to the after-modern relation

Modernity has been interpreted as the dissolution of all that is solid. It has been said that the capitalistic market erodes ascriptive relations and promotes those of an acquisitive type. At a certain point, acquisitive relations, due to the logic that governs them, create an increasingly problematic context and encounter mounting failures. Beyond a certain

critical threshold, they no longer make sense.²² Neither individuals nor functional systems are able to tolerate the frustrations resulting from them.

We might wonder: when is it that the social morphogenesis of modernity comes about? From the point of view of relational sociology, this happens when the relationality unique to its social molecule finds itself confronting 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 failures. The collapse of the social molecule that structures society becomes possible. This happens in the spheres experiencing the most radical processes of modernization. Many emergent phenomena signal the advent of a turning-point, which is indicated by the formation of another social molecule, of an after-modern type, beginning from the sphere of cultural latency (change of values). Obviously, there is a modernity that continues and a modernity that collapses.

If we think of social relations as 'social molecules' whose elements combine so as to confer particular qualities and powers on a specific social domain (which could be a caste, a clan, a certain market segment, a mode of production, the specific citizenry of a national State, etc.), then we can try to understand the morphogenetic passage from modernity to after-modernity in terms of a mutation of the modern social molecule.

The collapse of the modern relation can be described as the fading of the concomitant complementarities between culture and social structure based on an individualistic (transcendent) matrix. This configuration is followed by the birth of experiences in which a different synergy emerges between a new culture and a new structure, both characterized by the relational meaning of values as well as social roles/functions/performances.

The social avant-gardes that operate this passage are those that depart from the arena governed by the principle of functional (monetary) equivalence. They alter the social relation's molecule by changing the relational combination of elements that form it. The structural principle of the passage to after-modernity is that of a social molecule that rejects functional equivalence. The features of the emergent molecule can be roughly depicted as follows:

(T) the social relation's target/goal is to select variations according to the type and degree of relationality that they entail, with a view to producing relational goods;²³

(M) the means for achieving the goal can be extremely diverse, but they must be such as to allow for the production of relational goods; they must promote a network of social exchanges that confer a relationally satisfying identity upon the agents/actors;

(N) the after-modern social molecule's norms promote meta-reflexivity insofar as they involve the search for a non-fungible quality in social relations (there are relations which cannot be exchanged for other relations);

(C) the relation's guiding distinction is its difference in terms of 'value', that is, the relation is evaluated on the basis of the meaningful experience that it can obtain in contrast to what can be offered by other types of relations.

Confronted with society's possible collapse, that is, with a crisis in its integration on both social and system level, significant parts of society activate morphogenetic processes that consist in creating networks of relations in which the functionalist principle is replaced by other principles. Money is replaced by other generalized means of interchange and communication, or by other generalized means of social relationality. For instance, money can be replaced with time. The structure of the cultural matrix changes in order to acknowledge and promote the value of social relations as the distinctive criterion of the new social molecule in which the means no longer have a pure

functional primacy. The new molecule gains ground if and to the extent that the primacy of the adaptive function is replaced by the criterion of the cultural value (C) of social relationality.

On the grounds of this conceptualization, let us have a look at the passage from the modern structure to the after-modern structure.

We know that modern society is based on the State–Market binomial: it is a societal system that is based on the compromise between liberal and socialist culture, which I call the *lib/lab* structure. The social molecule of this structure leaves individuals free to act within an arena of competitive opportunities regulated by political power. The means–target axis prevails and makes the normative and value components of every social relation functional in and of themselves.

Precisely due to the way in which it is configured, this structure neutralizes the relationality of civil society where a Third Sector is operating in an attempt to privilege the values–norms axis. The latter seeks to develop new forms of sociability that have difficulty in becoming institutionalized. There is thus an open conflict between the State–Market binomial, on the one side, and a new civil society, on the other. Where is this conflict headed? Is it possible to believe that a society different from the modern one can emerge?

My hypothesis is that a *societal* morphogenesis is in fact being produced, which is making the Third Sector emerge in such a way as to alter the *lib/lab* structure. To verify this hypothesis, it must be demonstrated that in important sectors of society the binary *lib/lab* structure is being replaced by a triadic structure in which, in addition to the *lib* and *lab* components, the Third Sector component is gaining ground so as to give rise to a new social molecule that goes toward forming a new relational system on a societal level.

I wonder: is this process of social morphogenesis possible and realistic? We know that the market and the administrative political system consume the social relation's dimension of bonding and belonging while they valorize the dimension of the subject's autonomy in social relations. In terms of relational theory, agents'/actors' autonomy is considered to be an essential dimension of the relation, but it is necessary that this autonomy not be played out in an individualistic manner but, rather, in a 'relational' way. This means that the dimension of reference to meaning (*re-fero*: the subjective motivation oriented toward an autonomous symbolic intentionality) is combined with the dimension of the reciprocal bond (*re-ligo*) in such a way as to produce an emergent effect endowed with some stability.

Therefore, if we conceive of the State and the market as institutions that promote the subject's autonomous intentionality (a precondition for unimpeded reflexivity in the subject and for a free and responsible relation) by removing constrictions that limit subjects' autonomy, it is also necessary that this process does not destroy the social bond. In short, it is necessary that the *lib/lab* structure acknowledges and promotes the regeneration of social bonds, which is the work of civil society and cannot be accomplished by the market or State.

Many empirical studies have shown that this dynamic is effectively underway. The deficits and failures of the State–Market binomial are being confronted by creating new social forms that are the work of civil society. The distinctive qualities and powers of these social forms are based on relations of reciprocity and social solidarity that generate social bonds in a context in which agents/actors enjoy conditions of liberty (*lib*) and equality (*lab*).

Let me give some examples referring to the spreading of initiatives ‘generating the civil’ and the emergence of civic entrepreneurs catalyzing social innovations. As to the former, one can quote the renewal of self-sustained community foundations, the creation of ethical banks, the adoption of communitarian economies (like the economy of communion), the non-governmental organizations based upon the principles of social solidarity and extended reciprocity between insiders and outsiders, the production of commons in internet, the processes of civil constitutionalization of human rights (Teubner 2012), the civic networks providing welfare services by adopting neither market criteria nor public administration standards. As to the social entrepreneurs, the starting-point consists in observing that ‘government reforms will continue to fail if they are aimed simply at improving the same old activities. We cannot solve complex horizontal problems with vertical command-and-control solutions. The speed of change toward third-party provision of all types of public services continues to outpace the ability of most public officials and agencies to manage these collaborations effectively’ (Goldsmith *et al.* 2010, p. 8). Therefore, ‘growing cadres of civic entrepreneurs eager for change bring bold interventions that push the bounds of how to address public problems. They are a savvy, motivated, and results-oriented group of individuals who, through disruptive innovations, create opportunities and hope’ (Goldsmith *et al.* 2010, p. 25). The basic idea that pushes civic entrepreneurship is to combine communal ideals with the efficiency and technological know-how of business, which produces effective community change. To my mind, the normative impulse supporting social innovation is the following: any civic entrepreneur should enforce a social morphogenetic process which has to change the given hierarchical governmental (conditioning) structure by setting up partnerships among a variety of stakeholders, so to create a network which generates social innovations (elaborated structure). ‘Create an environment for social change’ is its slogan.

It is essential to keep in mind that these innovations, and in particular the role played by the Third Sector, do not replace the State–Market binomial, but change it, precisely by causing its morphogenesis. The shift to *a new social formation* happens through morphogenetic cycles in which the conditioning structure (State–Market arrangements at time T_1) cannot work without introducing a ‘third actor’, which means that the hierarchical and mercantile codes²⁴ have to relate to (and interact with) the networking code that forces and binds them to include relational imperatives (in T_2 – T_3). E.g. the State has to adopt a social governance style of action, implying more civic participation in designing and implementing its plans, instead of using a pure authoritative style; and the market has to consider the relational dimensions of its modes of production and consumption, implying, among other things, an active, symmetrical and non-instrumental role for the non-profit sector within it. The triangulation State–Market–Third Sector produces then (time T_4) an elaborated structure constituted by new configurations at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

If we analyze the social processes in which modernity is going into crisis and becoming newly reflexive, we see that the emerging social forms are arising in those areas where Market and State generate gaps which cannot be dealt with without changing the social relationality involved in such situations. Although this societal morphogenesis is uncertain as to its future outcomes, anyway it is generating appreciable discontinuities with modernity rather than proceeding toward infinity in a functionalistic manner, as Luhmann claims.

The discontinuities are coming about under the aegis of a new ‘relational thinking’. I pointed out this new turn of events many years ago, supporting it through massive

empirical research. Today, in many places, we witness its spread and practical implications. For example, Jonathan Rushworth and Michael Schluter (2011) share the view that:

learning to think relationally is the first step towards building a more relational world. There are three main elements to Relational Thinking: a) learning to see public policy and personal issues through a relational lens, b) changing goals, values and practices of organizations, and c) developing an analytical framework appropriate to relationships. (Rushworth and Schluter 2011, pp. 25–26)

In my perspective, this configuration can be called ‘relational society’.

An instructive example can clarify the arguments of CRRS. I am referring to the international debate on social capital and its connections with the relational goods.

Among the scholars there are different views about what social capital is. Sometimes it is defined as civic culture and other times as a specific type of social relations. At times, moreover, it is considered as an *explanans* and at other times as an *explanandum*. The solution that I propose lies in observing social capital inside a morphogenetic sequence with respect to its products, that is, relational goods.

According to CRRS, social capital *is a product of relational goods and, in its turn, is a regenerator of relational goods*. The recursivity between social capital and relational goods is only *apparent* in the sense that it can be resolved by introducing the morphogenetic scheme that takes into account the temporal phases and the autonomous (‘stratified’) contribution of each element in the single phases of the process. Whether it is social capital that generates relational goods or whether the opposite happens depends on the phase in which we observe the social process.

Let us look at an example.

Time T_1 : the beginning of the process is when an intervention (an action among different subjects) is organized activating/mobilizing relation(s) among actors as a good to be pursued, as a good in itself, or as a relational good. For example, faced with the need to organize a care intervention (a day care service for children, home care for the elderly), one designs and realizes it by mobilizing relations among the individuals who require assistance and the actors in their primary and secondary networks. This generates a situation from which more or less social capital, or even no social capital, can emerge in terms of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity among the actors.

Time T_2 – T_3 : the fact that more or less social capital is generated depends on the actors and the network that is created and mobilized. Here the actors’ and their networks’ reflexivity comes into play.

Time T_4 : if, in the network interactions of the second phase, the dynamic generated social capital, then the initial relational good is regenerated or even enhanced; while if, in the second phase, social capital was only consumed or destroyed, then relational goods are not produced, or the initial good even disappears.

From time T_4 another morphogenetic cycle will begin. The network of relations existing at time T_4 will have to address the interactions between subjects so that the social capital will be put into play once again.

It is important to underscore that in the interactive phase actors’ personal reflexivity and their networks’ relational reflexivity have a decisive role while the structural context is influential in promoting one type of reflexivity instead of another (it is system reflexivity or, better, system *reflectivity*; Donati 2011b).

This framework avoids conflation between relational goods and social capital, keeping them distinct yet also relational with one another.

So we can speak of an 'added social value' of the social relations constituting social capital (i.e. trust, cooperation, reciprocity) that: (1) consists in (re)generating (rather than consuming, annihilating, etc.) relational goods; (2) can be measured with the associative network's capacity to produce internal and external relations that act in a reflexive manner (Donati and Solci 2011) in such way that the shared relations are made more efficacious, i.e. they increase the network's operative efficacy (the strengthening of the target T applied to the associative network).

Thus, this is the added social value of relations that we call social capital, the capacity to generate public relational goods starting from an organizational context with a view to producing relational goods. In a social intervention that functions well (because it really produces public goods), there is no confusing circularity between social capital and relational goods, but we find a morphogenetic process that follows a precise time sequence.

The added social value of social relations is the difference between the initial situation (at time T_1) and the situation at the end of the morphogenetic cycle under consideration (at time T_4). Of course, instead of a positive added value we can find a reduced social value (a decrease of social capital and relational goods at the same time). The added social value measures the capacity of an associative network to be efficacious *qua talis* (thus, not to be subject to something/someone other than itself) in that it measures the capacity of a network to produce sociability as the enhancement of its relational parameters: for example, the degree of reciprocity, cooperation, trust. In other words, if and to the degree in which the network succeeds in creating synergy between its (internal) relational good and social capital (in all of its dimensions: bonding, bridging, linking), since the one has need of the other in order to produce the fruits of prosociality (Donati 2013b).

An example can be that of the *Tagesmütter* (the so-called 'day mother'). This figure is created with a contract issued by the municipality to the mother of a young child (0–3 years old) who takes on the task of caring for other children (two or three of them) of the same age in her home (it is a family day care). The contract creates a relation among the involved families which assign themselves a shared objective or task (the care of their children, entrusted to the *Tagesmütter*). In this action of trust and reciprocal cooperation, there is the premise and promise of a relational good. It depends on the second phase (how the interactions among the families go) as to whether their interactions will operate so as to generate, and not consume, social capital. In other words, if a relational context is truly created consisting in trust, cooperation, and reciprocity among the children's parents (who, due to the type of relation established, know and spend time with one another in keeping with qualities and powers that a day care center organized in a bureaucratic or mercantile manner would not produce), then social capital generates a network of families in which relational goods flourish; otherwise, the social intervention takes another path.

More generally, organizations can be considered as being of the Third Sector when they are configured as social spheres that produce relational social inclusion through a virtuous interaction between relational good and social capital. The interaction is virtuous both because it enhances each of them in turn and because it operates with prosocial, civic, or civil finalities.

The conceptualization that is being presented here solves the aporias that hold research on social capital hostage because it shows that this entity is a variable, whether

dependent or independent, context-dependent or activity-dependent, cultural (actors' norms, values, attitudes), or structural (made of networks, organizations, and linkages) without conflating all of these elements and dimensions. To discuss all of this thoroughly would require an entire book.

8. Conclusions

CRRS is a critique not only of methodological individualism and holism but also of the failures of the formalist approaches in the field of social network analysis. These failures were pointed out by many other authors, including White (2008) and Azarian (2010). With respect to these authors, CRRS is characterized by its attempt to deepen understanding of the fabric that effectively constitutes the social relation as an orderly process that takes place within social morphogenesis. I call this the 'relational order of reality'.

The fundamental thesis presented here is that the morphogenesis of society comes about through social relations, which are the connectors that mediate between agency and social structure. The generative mechanism that feeds social morphogenesis resides in the dynamic of social relations networks. In order to observe this phenomenon, it is necessary to invoke a general theory of social relations, which I presented here from the point of view of relational sociology.

For a long time now, a naturalistic view of social relations has become increasingly untenable. Modernity opened the Pandora's box of social relations, taking them from the world of the probable to the world of the possible – or, rather, of the possible 'always otherwise' (always possible in another way). The social realm (relationality) has come increasingly to find itself between the levels of nature and artificiality. The tension between the two poles has grown. But precisely this tension between nature and the artificial world, far from erasing nature, is today generating a new social relationality. There are those who think that this relationality can be a 'rational reconstruction' carried out under the aegis of rational choice (Coleman 1993) or of self-organizing complex systems (Günther 1962). In my opinion, these approaches can easily end up in a form of upward or downward conflation, respectively.

When the question of meaning that is inherent in the social relation does not find an answer in what is offered by nature (things and human persons), it must necessarily build a social world that does not exist in nature. Human nature thus comes to be subjected to the tension of the artificial (the so-called 'post-human', trans-human, hyper-human, cyborg). But if the artificial wants nothing to do with coming to terms with human relationality, it generates the non-human. This is demonstrated by the cases of genetic manipulation that go as far as cloning human beings or by the use of communication technologies that produce psychic and social pathologies because they do not take into account the needs of human relationality. In this tension between the *relational* nature of human beings and a purely *rational* or *functional* construction of society that disregards the former, spaces open up from which the relational forms that characterize the social morphogenesis of contemporary society are generated.

Notes

1. In his *The Philosophy of Money* (1907), Georg Simmel (1989) uses the term *Wechselwirkung*, which is usually translated into English with the terms 'interaction, correlation, reciprocity, interdependency, interplay, reciprocation, reciprocal action'. Simmel tried to clarify this concept

all his life. In a letter to Rickert, he applies it to the sense of the truth. According to Simmel, '... relativism of truth [...] does not at all mean for me that truth and non truth are relative one to the other; rather that truth means a relation of contents [that] the one [has] with the other, neither of which possesses in and of itself the truth just as no body is heavy for itself but only in reciprocal relationship of one with the other' (Brief Georg Simmel an Heinrich Rickert vom 15 April 1917 [Letter by Georg Simmel to Heinrich Rickert of 15 April 1917]). The example indicates that the weight of a body is a relational concept because its content (its measurement) emerges from the relation between that body and another body with which it is put into relation (a table has a different weight on the earth or on the moon). In comparison with Simmel, CRRS accentuates the emergent character of weight as an effect of reciprocity between two bodies, attributing weight to their relation rather than to the body in itself, not because weight is outside the body (without bodies there is no relation), but because the property and causal power of weight depends on relation.

2. For instance, Crossley (2011), following Emirbayer and White, argues that social worlds 'comprise' networks of interaction and relations. It seems that society is like a 'space' where relations happen over time. He asserts that relations are lived trajectories of iterated interaction, built up through a history of interaction, but also entailing anticipation of future interaction. To him, sociologists should focus upon evolving and dynamic networks of interaction and relations conceived as transactions. In my opinion, this approach avoids the analysis from within social relations, their own internal constitution, and ultimately does not deal properly with the 'nature' of social relations.
3. Structural effects are those that derive from the conditioning structures impinging upon the agents at the beginning of a morphogenetic process (cycle) (T_1). Relational effects are those that emerge from the interactive networks of agents in the intermediary phase (T_2 – T_3) and constitute the elaborated structure at the end of the process (cycle) (T_4); see Donati (2013a).
4. Every society lets itself be understood based on a fundamental criterion of a super-functional nature, which defines its operating modalities (that is, how that society draws its structural distinctions) and, thus, its qualities (how it conceives its difference as compared to other societies) and its powers (that for which it causes certain outcomes and not others). The fundamental criterion can obviously be articulated in a complex of sub-criteria. Among these sub-criteria, there can obviously also exist some functional criteria. For example, we could speak of archaic, pre-modern, modern, and post-modern societies if we identify a basic criterion that distinguishes them and identifies their specific qualities and powers. Such a criterion is – for example – that of social differentiation, which characterizes the various types of society: segmentary differentiation, stratified differentiation, functional differentiation, and *relational differentiation* (Donati 2011a, pp. 203–207). As I have attempted to clarify in previous writings (Donati 2011a, 2011b), by after-modern society I mean a society that radically alters its guiding distinctions as compared to those of modernity. For example, the past/future (before/after) distinction is no longer synonymous with backwardness/progress because the future can also be a regression. This implies that the temporal distinction between past and future opens itself up to contingencies and must be managed in relation to what happens.
5. For Weber's followers, meaning is a complex form of conscience that is elaborated by the subject in him/herself, taking into account his/her life experiences. It is thus a relation that a subject has with a 'subjectively understood' object; for this reason, no causal relation exists between subject and object. This is to say that the meaning of a thing (for example, that of having success in life) is not a relation that the subject elaborates on the basis of an objective reality but is a relation that the individual elaborates in him/herself from among the life experiences which that certain idea (for example, of having success in life) provokes in him/herself.
6. 'Combined provisions' is a juridical expression indicating that two norms must be interpreted and applied together in that the one is necessarily combined with the other.
7. Here the entire sociology of Max Weber is decisive (in particular, his research on Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism).
8. Here the entire sociology of Emile Durkheim is decisive (in particular, his theory of the division of social work).
9. Here the entire sociology of Georg Simmel is decisive (in particular, in his works on the philosophy of money and social differentiation).

10. For example, Azarian (2010, p. 326) defines the relation in this way: ‘Mutual expectations are inherent to ties and represent one of their most fundamental properties. These expectations are indeed a defining criterion of social relationship, and constitute the very core of the connection between the interlocked nodes. In fact a social tie is but a relatively durable match of mutual expectations, and it is justified to speak of the existence of a relationship between two parties only to the extent that their individual arrays of expectations dovetail and fit into one another in the sense that a relatively sustainable agreement is reached between the parties with regard to the contents and terms of the connection between them’. In this definition, I believe, the social relation is absent, since it is reduced to what Ego expects from Alter and vice versa, i.e. to a double contingency of actions lacking an emergent connection. To me, social relations are something different from transactions between individual expectations. The transactional frame cannot account for the emergence of relational goods and/or relational evils.
11. According to several authors, ‘form’ is a type of socially codified identity. Polos *et al.* (2002, p. 85) assert: ‘Social codes specify the properties that a social entity can legitimately have. The existence of a social code becomes evident when it is observed that the deviation of an entity from the configuration that is considered to be normal for it leads to the devaluation of that entity on the part of insiders and/or outsiders’. This definition is too rigid and reflects an organic-systemic type of formulation in which identity is conceived as being unambiguous and functional. The definition of form as identity can be useful on condition that the social code is understood in a relational sense, as will be discussed below.
12. *Configuration* in Norbert Elias’s (1978) meaning of the term.
13. The elaborated structure can be a (relational) good or a (relational) evil depending on the (positive or negative) influences that it has on the subjects/actors of the relation and depending on the consequences (outcomes) that it has on the broader network of interdependencies (social networks) in which it is integrated (for example see Weaver 2012).
14. The form of the relation answers the question: ‘What type of relation do we have/want between us?’
15. According to what Archer theorized (1988, pp. 219–226, 258–273).
16. Of course, no relational goal can be present or effective, in which case there is only a (contingent) interaction, not a social relation, properly speaking.
17. ‘The formula of the purpose is ternary, that of the mechanism [is] only binary’ (Simmel 1989, p. 258).
18. Finalism can be intentional or not (the latter is usually subsumed under the label of ‘unintended consequences’). In order to clarify this statement, I could say that morphogenetic society is an expression that indicates the originality of a society insofar as it adopts – intentionally or unintentionally (in a latent way) – morphogenesis as its basic value pattern, i.e. as its guiding distinction, by re-entering the binary code (morphostasis/morphogenesis) in every process of social differentiation. That is why there is an inherent contradiction between morphogenesis and *habitus*, if *habitus* is understood in terms of reproduction (of attitudes, behaviors, value orientations, etc.). A question arises here: can ‘*being morphogenetic*’ become a *habitus*? The answer can be positive on the condition that we can admit the existence of a society where personal and social identities can be widely lost.
19. The term ‘superordinated value’ is from Berger and Luckmann (1995).
20. *Grundverhältnis* or ‘basic relationship’ (see Günther 1976, p. 349). Following Hegel, Günther talks of a ‘dialectical synthesis’ between the two basic relations (exchange and order). In my view, there is no synthesis at all, but a *sui generis* relational configuration.
21. Luhmann (1995) takes up and carries to its extreme consequences Georg Simmel’s perspective according to which the exchange of objects always entails a sense of loss in that objects are perceived as irreplaceable. The more they are perceived as exchangeable and not in their irreplaceability, the more they are perceived as abstract entities. Money represents the purest form of the interaction, a form that is divorced from the contents of the interaction itself. In the monetary economy all relationships between people tend to be measurable and able to be calculated, and calculation prevails over feeling.
22. The crisis in modern acquisitive relations is a crisis of instrumental rationality (post-modern culture no longer attributes a meaning of success – value C – to certain purely instrumental accomplishments once called ‘successful’) and thus puts into crisis the referential axis (the *refero*) that connotes acquisitive relations.

23. Rushworth and Schluter (2011, pp. 2–3) write: ‘This means learning to see life from the perspective of relationships, as opposed to seeing it from the viewpoint of materialism or individualism. Instead of assuming that income or profit should generally be the ultimate goal for personal, corporate or government decisions, we argue for relational wellbeing instead – since ultimately our relationships are what matter most in life. Learning to think relationally calls for a Copernican revolution: instead of placing material wealth, or individual rights and freedom, at the centre of our metaphysical solar system, with all other things – including relationships – revolving around them, we place relationships at the centre, to reflect better what we ultimately value. As an example, take the decision to buy a microwave oven: we may consider the decision financially (can I afford it?), or spatially (is there room in the kitchen?), or environmentally (how does this affect my carbon footprint?) – but what about relationally? Having a microwave could either enhance or lower relational wellbeing in the household. Reducing the time spent on preparing food could either permit more time for talking together over the meal, or else lead to family members eating at different times and not talking together at all. Looking at the decision through a relational lens will bring this dimension into perspective’.
24. Here, ‘code’ means symbolic, communicative, and operative distinctive ways to manage social relations – i.e. their constitutive ‘molecules’ – within each field (bureaucracies, markets, and networks).

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