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## RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE GLOBALIZED SOCIETY

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### Abstract

A sociological theory that is appropriate to the processes of globalization has as its testing ground the ability to capture *the morphostasis/morphogenesis of relations*, which includes the morphostasis/morphogenesis of structures, culture and *agency*. This is the task that defines what a relational sociology has to be. The morphogenesis of relations is not the result of the morphogenesis of its individual components, but depends on the possibility of differentiation of social relations in their own right – that is as emergent phenomena with their own distinctive generative mechanisms. This leads on to the theory of social differentiation. The three well known forms of social differentiation (segmentary, stratified and functional) must be integrated with a fourth type: relational differentiation, which is held to emerge in the current globalizing society. The latter constitutes a new ‘social logic’ which is completely foreign to those who follow the Luhmannian scheme of social differentiation.

Key words: relational sociology; globalization; social morphogenesis; relational differentiation; relational society.

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### 1. Sociology and globalization.

The basic thesis of this contribution consists in claiming that globalization is bringing about a new society which needs a new sociology to be better understood and explained. Current sociology lacks a vision of how society can exceed itself.

To characterise globalization in terms of uncertainty, risk and liquidity, as is common to Bauman (1998), Beck (1998) and Giddens (1999), does not significantly extend our knowledge because every epochal crisis has always been accompanied by such ‘symptoms’. Although these features are particularly pronounced today and are structurally inherent in the emerging society, this does not alter the fact that they are merely symptomatic.

Four main sociological interpretations of globalization can currently be identified, but their common denominator is more important than their differences: i) globalization as the last phase of liberal capitalism (e.g. I. Wallerstein); ii) globalization as world interdependence (note the preference for the term *mondialisation* in the French

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speaking world); iii) globalization as standardization of the *Mind*, derived from the concept of the ‘general intellect’ formulated by Marx in his *Grundrisse*, or, more simply, as cultural homogenization; iv) globalization as a step toward a single ‘world social system’ (as accentuated by N. Luhmann). However, in all these cases, globalization is considered to be the fruit of modernity’s realisation. For this reason, none are able to break free from a vision of the past that prevents them from taking the qualitative epistemological leap now required.

In order to make that leap and thus to take into account the morphogenetic character of globalization and its transformations, sociology has to be able to formulate a new general theory (‘relational’ in kind) that enables us to distinguish one form of society from another. In particular, it should be able to specify in what respects ‘global society’ differs from all other forms of society - both past and potential ones.

The call for a relational sociological theory emerges from within this framework. Its aim is to avoid reductionism and, on the other hand, to overcome the *aporias* and difficulties inherent in postmodern theories, especially their imprisonment in what will later be discussed as the complex of ‘lib/lab’ thinking. The goal of a relational theory is to show that society is made-up of social relations in respect to which human beings are both immanent and transcendent. So, society is still *made by* human beings, but increasingly *it does not consist of them*, since it is made-up more and more of social relations created by human beings. Such an approach makes it possible to revitalise the human dimension of doing sociology and, in parallel, of making society, despite the apparent de-humanization of contemporary social life (Donati 2010).

In this text I argue that globalization means an exponential increase of sociocultural variability on a world scale, due to the fact that all populations become more and more heterogeneous (‘plural’) within and between themselves. As Blau and Schwartz (1985: 40-41) have claimed, when such an historical process happens, there appears an inherent paradox: “this is the paradox: structural differentiation and individual differentiation have opposite effects on social relation”, i.e. the more society increases its lines of differentiation (for instance in terms of multiculturalism on a world scale), the more individual differences decrease within in-groups, and heterogeneity promotes intergroup relations. “The very differences that inhibit social relations also promote them” (ivi: 40). But, contrary to Blau and Schwartz’s theory, which states that this processes confirm the tenets of structural-functional sociology, I will argue that globalization is causing the emergence of a new kind of social differentiation, which I call ‘relational differentiation’. Blau and Schwartz, as many other scholars, do not see social emergence properly since they do not consider the mediation of personal and social reflexivity (the subjective mediation between structures and interactions) within the process of structural elaboration.

My argument will touch on the following points. First of all, I maintain that classical conceptions of society cannot survive the impact of global society (section 2). To substantiate this proposition it will be argued that mainstream contemporary theories are unable to understand and to explain many contemporary social phenomena (section 3). It will be maintained that, in order to understand these phenomena, it is first necessary to redefine *what makes society* (sections 4 and 5). Only then can we compare different societies and identify the features of the new society (section 6).

This argument is intended to show that a relational sociological theory alone can understand and explain the specific type of society that is emerging. To theorise ‘global society’ satisfactorily requires a clean break with assumptions about the making of society whose reference point is modernity. The meta-theory to be presented is characterized by a radically different way of conceiving *what makes society* and advances a new representation of the social that is capable of capturing its object more adequately (section 7).

## ***2. The end of classical and modern sociological interpretations.***

It is worth recalling that the problem of how to conceptualise society and its changing features in a scientific manner emerged in Europe with the start of the industrial revolution and the rise of bourgeois capitalism. The birth of modern sociology was a response to these epochal transformations. It represented the way in which society began to reflect upon itself as the consequence of its own actions. Its aim was to formulate a far-reaching theory according to which human society was the immanent result of its own making.

Today, sociology should be able to understand and explain the changes which are leading to the transformation of modern society into a *trans*-modern society. And yet, it appears to be unwilling or unable to do so. This is because contemporary sociology is inextricably linked to modernity and cannot escape it. The only alternative left for those who abandon the idea of the modern is either to hark back to the pre-modern or to launch themselves into an unfounded, ungrounded and literally hopeless futurology.

From a system theory perspective, the question becomes: are we witnessing a genetic mutation in the way society is formed and built up? Is the emerging society a new *genus* endowed with a genetic heritage different from any previously known society, specifically one capable of obliterating human history?

Reference to ‘social time registers’<sup>2</sup> can highlight the answers to these questions through the three possible scenarios distinguished. Firstly, social time could be reduced to a merely symbolic and a-temporal register (as in interpretations which emphasize the increasingly homologous nature of cultural forms, such as the ‘MacDonaldization’ of society). Secondly, social time could be construed as a purely inter-actional register (as when the social dimension is confined to the level of events alone). A further possibility is to argue that today’s global society is built on *both* registers (symbolic and interactive) yet is stripped of its historico-relational dimension.

These scenarios are generally used to explain why the emerging global society requires us to abandon the historico-relational (and therefore fully human) dimension of society, as traditionally endorsed by sociological theory. The evolutionary perspective adopted in much of current sociology claims that ‘global’ society has no ‘alternative’ forms, but only a non-social ‘environment’ (in a Luhmannian sense) which, as such, cannot properly qualify as a ‘society’. In other words, world society is seen as the only

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<sup>2</sup> There are three main types of time registers to which I refer: interactive (or *événementiel* according to J.F. Lyotard), historico-relational and symbolic (cf. Donati 1994).

possible configuration to the detriment of any other societal configuration, precisely because it abandons the historico-relational register of time (or makes it purely residual).

In one way or another, most sociologies maintain that historico-relational time is disappearing and that society is becoming ‘unified’ and ‘purely interactive’. They maintain the plausibility of a ‘world society’ conceived of as ‘one (social) world with infinite possibilities of being otherwise’, instead of conceiving the world societal system as a multiplicity of many different *societies* (in other words, in their opinion, society becomes only one self-differentiating *system* instead of consisting of a plurality of societies competing with one another and differentiating both within and *between* them).

If one wants to escape from these ways of doing sociology simply because they are counter-factual and misleading, one has first to answer a more primitive and general question: how can we distinguish one society from other societies (i.e. how can we distinguish between a type of society and other types of society)? More specifically, how is it possible to distinguish the global (or globalized) society from other types of societies?

Until recently, comparative sociological analysis provided a number of methods for distinguishing between different types of society. The comparative methods introduced between (approximately) 1750 and 1900 were largely indebted to pre-modern, traditional cultures. Conversely, the more recent methods, emerging from contemporaneous debates on the *micro-macro link* and on *structure and agency* have not substantially altered the general epistemological framework and have not taken into account the profound changes brought about by globalization processes. The exception is Luhmann’s sociology (Luhmann 1984), the only theory that gave rise to a new epistemology. However, its revolutionary nature is debatable because it merely turns a *method* (that of functionalist analysis) into a *theory* of society. Moreover, after Luhmann the functionalist approach has become increasingly inadequate for conceptualising the social in the third millennium. A new epistemological turn is now needed and, indeed, is already taking place.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several new terms were coined in order to define contemporary society, such as post-industrial society, IT society, risk society, the society of uncertainty, network society, information society, *e-learning* society, and so forth. The majority of these definitions can be grouped under the umbrella of ‘post-modern society’ (a term already introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by avant-garde movements). However, this term soon became ambiguous and equivocal. On the one hand, ‘post-modern’ is a ‘residual’ concept that includes all which is ‘no longer modern’. On the other hand, it is a ‘paradoxical’ notion, because what is ‘modern’ – that is, ‘most recent’ and ‘most advanced’ – cannot be defined as ‘post-’.

The number of ‘post-’ definitions which have been introduced over the last thirty years (post-industrial, post-fordist, post-national, post-keynesian, post-hierarchical, post-welfare, etc.) revealed the inability of sociology to find a positive definition for it. In this context, many have envisaged either the end of the very possibility of doing sociology or the need for sociology to become another kind of science altogether. Most sociologists have tried to defend modernity and its theorization (e.g. Habermas, Alexander). Others have tried to dismantle modernist theory altogether (Baudrillard, Lyotard, Luhmann, and the followers of Derrida). Faced with the impossible task of defending the ‘modern’

vantage point, many have come to the conclusion that we can no longer represent society (we can only ‘appresent’ it, as Luhmann would say)<sup>3</sup>.

Is sociological theory in decline because it can no longer reinvent itself, or rather because its object as such (society *qua talis*) has disappeared?

It is possible to perform the necessary epistemological turn by assuming a relational stance towards social representations. This involves distinguishing and combining four dimensions of sociological knowledge: the approach (or meta-theory), the paradigm, the local or specific theory and the methodology (Donati 1991). In this *framework* what becomes both crucial and novel are the borders between social action and transcendence, on the one hand, and between social action and its instrumental environment (resources, tools, communication technologies etc.), on the other hand. In this way, *social* representations achieve a meaning that is neither individual nor collective, but relational. Social representation becomes the symbolic form that constitutes a “relational co-variation” between a subject and an object<sup>4</sup>, which is neither mechanical nor necessarily reflexive in a particular way, but one that always and necessarily presents itself as an emergent phenomenon.

### ***3. Globalization and social relations: some unexpected social phenomena.***

Sociological theory cannot always provide plausible explanations (or understandings) of social phenomena, unlike the natural sciences. On some occasions its ‘explanations’ are circular or consist of mere tautologies.<sup>5</sup> On others, not only is contemporary sociological theory unable to explain certain phenomena, but it then interprets them as irrational, unpredictable or ‘perverse’ effects. This is because these phenomena apparently fail to comply with the established explanations (the so-called ‘laws’) of modern sociological theory.

Some examples of the phenomena that appear to be ‘incomprehensible’ to current sociology are the following:

Example a) *Gesellschaft* produces *Gemeinschaft* (association generates community).

Modern sociological theory is unable to explain how relations of *Gesellschaft* can give rise to relations of *Gemeinschaft*. Yet, today we can observe several instances in which community relations are generated by contractual relations, initially based on instrumental rationality. This phenomenon takes place in firms, network companies, and voluntary contractual associations (e.g. in so-called ‘time banks’ set up to regulate the

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<sup>3</sup> “Appresentation” is a term used in phenomenology (by E. Husserl and subsequently A. Schütz, N. Luhmann and others) to indicate the way an observer ‘makes present’ an object which can never be fully and immediately present, e.g. the back of an object whose front is seen (whilst ‘representation’ is a way to describe an object which can be fully and directly apprehended).

<sup>4</sup> I am here referring to the understanding of the symbol as a “relational nexus” (Elias 1991) and as a form of connection in communication (Leach 1976). For a more general view on this issue see Donati (1991, *passim* chapters 1 and 4, and conclusions).

<sup>5</sup> An example of circular reasoning within sociological analyses is provided by Portes’ study on social capital (Portes 1998).

exchange of time spent by participants when offering services to one another). In a number of sectors, associations formed among unrelated individuals can give rise to a community whose aims are not merely instrumental. Can 'modern' sociological theory account for this phenomenon? So far, sociology has relied on explanations that appeal to a pendulum effect or depend upon the notion of a *backlash* between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. However, these cases defy such explanations (Teubner 2000).

Example b) *Religion re-enters the public sphere.*

Modern sociological theory perceives religion as a phenomenon that is progressively destined to be confined to people's private lives. Yet numerous empirical studies have revealed that in the West – and in 'advanced' modern societies in general – the religious dimension is increasingly regarded as relevant (and rightly so) not only to the private, but also to the public sphere (Seligman 2000). This phenomenon clashes with the 'laws' of modern sociological theory, specifically those of progressive 'disenchantment' or the inevitability of secularisation. A new post-secular public sphere emerges almost everywhere (Donati 2002).

Example c) *The de-rationalization of labour.*

Modern sociological theory sees labour as a service characterized by a process of progressive rationalization and commodification – a phenomenon related to the inexorable development of capitalist economy. Yet, in today's labour market we witness the rise of labour practices that seem to de-rationalize work. The post-fordist division of labour and the corporations which operate on the basis of a 'networking by project' (Boltanski and Chiappello 1999) are good examples. And so are those practices that do not represent utopian aspirations, but constitute the foundations for new forms of 'social' or 'civil' economies conducted according to the principle of reciprocity instead of the profit motive (Donati 2001). How can modern sociological theory begin to explain this?

Example d) *The diversification of the gift and the rise of organizations promoting disinterested behaviour.*

According to modern sociological theory, free giving is an archaic and primitive form of economic exchange. However, today, free giving represents a dynamic and diversified type of relationship characterizing several 'modern' social spheres. This is the case with the redistribution of citizenship (Caillé 1994) and within the spheres of private, civil or social economy (Donati 2003). In particular free giving underlies a number of social and economic undertakings, such as *community foundations*, seeking to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of disinterested behaviour.

Example e) *The emergence of 'ethical markets' as alternative economies, in contradiction with the modern paradigm of instrumental rationality.*

In addition to free giving – as an outworking of social integration that may also have economic value – we witness the rise of economies that tend towards new forms of 'ethical exchange' (*fair trade*, 'economies of communion', economies based on social solidarity etc.) (Donati 2003). The relational paradigm has already entered modern economics (Sacco and Zamagni 2002).

Example f) *The rise of new forms of multiple citizenship and non-state membership following the crisis of citizenship based on the nation State.*

According to modern social theory, single, dual and multiple citizenship are rooted in the state, as is illustrated by the issue of passports. Today we witness the rise of social citizenships that are not state-based and can be ‘multiplied’ depending on membership of non-state political communities, such as epistemic communities, super-national communities (post-national forms of citizenship such as EU citizenship) or cosmopolitan citizenship through the Internet. To my mind, this process is bound to develop because the globalization of social relations necessarily implies the multiple membership of social actors in associations which are increasingly differentiating themselves both within and between nation-states (Preyer 2000).

Example g) *So-called ‘virtual communities’.*

According to modern social theory, communities are based on cultural identity, whilst associations are based on interests. Yet, today we witness the emergence of societies that are based neither on identity nor on interests, but on virtual forms of communication (they are ‘virtual tribes’ according to Dell’Aquila 1999) such as virtual Internet communities (discussion groups, anti-global websites, social networks, etc.) – ones that cannot be assimilated to either of the above.

Example h) *The disappearance of class-based conflict and the rise of conflict over ecological issues.*

Social theory emphasises the centrality of conflicts over social rewards in modernity, as in the classic portrayal of *class, status and power* struggles. Increasingly, however, contemporary conflicts are centred on ecological issues: encompassing both physical ecology (concerned with the protection of the environment and of natural resources) and human ecology (concerning human relations and in particular intergenerational relations etc.).

To repeat, the social theory of modernity could not predict these phenomena and cannot adequately explain them. Other allegedly ‘new’ phenomena are the rise of new forms of warfare and terrorism, the emergence of new family models, of new approaches to risk and new learning practices. For some, the mobilization of 130 million people across the world, on 15 February 2003, who took to the streets in protest against the war in Iraq should be included among these new social phenomena. Indubitably, international social movements are innovative phenomena of great significance because they represent the birth of a new world civil society. But are they really different from and discontinuous with the paradigm of modernity?

In many respects, these movements can be seen as an extension of the classic paradigm of the relations between civil society and political society, now carried beyond the nation state. By contrast, what were defined above as ‘new’ phenomena (a-h) are genuinely ground breaking because they cannot be assimilated to expressions of modernizing processes or regarded as mere reactions to or effects of capitalism. In short, the above examples cannot be understood as simple reactions to modernity or as its continuation, since they do not conform to any of its ‘laws’ or tendencies. It is intriguing

that such phenomena have emerged at the same time as processes of globalization. Is this a coincidence or is there a causal relationship between the two?

To consider these new phenomena simply as an effect of the world-wide expansion of modern capitalism (Wallerstein 1991) is reductive and misleading. To regard these phenomena as only reactions to the spread of capitalism, or as alternatives to capitalism, amounts to explaining their existence in terms of capitalism and modernity. Instead, my contention is that they are radically discontinuous with modern society and with modern sociological theory, which are homologous with one another.

#### **4. What trans-modern social phenomena teach us.**

It is maintained here that the common denominator of the examples mentioned above is that they are all based on ‘creative relationships’. These are such that neither action theories (based upon methodological individualism) nor system and structural theories (based upon methodological holism) can possibly understand and explain. In order to give a proper account of the above examples we need a “theory of emergent phenomena”.<sup>6</sup>

Action theories seek to explain these phenomena as the aggregate result of some individual ‘subject’ (e.g. Elster 1984) or collective ‘subject’ (e.g. Touraine 1984). Yet the phenomena listed above clearly *exceed* and transcend the qualities of the subject – whether individual or collective. Such phenomena are neither the sum nor the product of factors pertaining to the subject. In order to understand these phenomena as emergent ones, it is necessary to take into account structural and interactional factors which are more complex than those that can be conceptualized by action theory.

By contrast, structuralist theories and system theories explain these unforeseen phenomena as resulting from social dynamics that are independent of the intentions of the subject and operate in an impersonal, functionalist fashion.<sup>7</sup> However, this view is also one-sided in its exclusion of subjective factors (such as motivations and values) and leads to unnecessarily contentious conclusions by according causal powers to dubious social ‘forces’.

In fact, the vast majority of sociologists and sociological theories continue to oscillate between methodological individualism and methodological holism, in the fruitless attempt to strike a balance between the two. A few examples suffice. The work of Elster (1989) is emblematic, with notion of *rational choice* being held to produce collective norms. Even Boudon (1979), who claims adherence to methodological individualism, resorts to holistic explanations in *La logique du social*. Bauman (1998), who regards globalization as a process that makes individuals more individualistic, more insecure and more disembedded, simultaneously points out the development of new needs for community and thus attempts to counterbalance individualism with collectivism. Finally, Giddens’ sociology (1999) is a typical example of a sociological theory based on the conflation between the two paradigms (Archer 1995). As is well known, the so-called ‘Third Way’ he proposed in the wake of globalization has been

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<sup>6</sup> See Donati 1991, Chapters 1 and 3.

<sup>7</sup> In this connection, see Blau and Schwartz (1985), Hedström and Swedberg (1998).

short lived. In brief, almost all self-professed sociologists have failed to escape these paradigms. In general they have moved towards some combination of the two, which is what I characterise as the *lib/lab* complex.

Thus, the theory that is currently architectonic in sociology is one that holds some amalgam of methodological individualism and methodological holism to be constitutive of the ambivalence that makes for the social – and it regards this Janus-faced ambivalence as inescapable. Ironically, the antinomy between individualism and holism represents the hermeneutic circle *par excellence*; it appears that no one can escape it.

I define this architectonic principle as the “lib/lab complex” of sociology. ‘Lib’ stands for the liberty pole and ‘lab’ stands for the systemic control pole (Donati 2000). The ‘lib/lab complex’ dates back to the very beginning of sociology and was first introduced by Thomas Hobbes. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this complex took the form of the ambivalent relationship (portrayed variously) between the ‘state of nature’ and *societas civilis sive politica* and later took the form of accentuating the ambivalence between market and state. During the 20th century it was re-theorized by Parsons, who conceptualized it as the ‘Hobbesian problem of social order’. It was re-introduced by Luhmann (1992) as the complex made up of ‘system (lab) and environment (lib)’. Other schools of sociological thought conceptualized the ‘lib/lab complex’ differently, a typical example being the *agency* (lib) and *structure* (lab) debate of the 1990s.

The endurance of the ‘lib/lab’ complex explains why the elision of action theories and system theories nearly always results in the (central) conflation of *agency* and *structure* (Archer 1995). It also explains why the functionalist approach is currently faced with a brutal choice: either to dissolve into paradigm of communication that holds social relations to be a ‘non-concept’ (as in Luhmann’s case) or to concede its own failure (when discarding the neo-functionalist approach, as with Alexander 1996).

Functionalism remains the infrastructure of modernity’s characteristic mode of thought, despite being incapable of engaging with ‘emergent phenomena’. Parsonsian and neo-Parsonsian functionalism alike are grounded in an institutional individualism that, allied with a systems theory approach, contradicts the notion of voluntarism in social action. In empirical terms, this discourse means that contemporary sociological theory is also based on the ‘lib/lab complex’, because its descriptions of society are always cast in terms of some compromise between the state and the market as the driving force of the social system. The result is that it can only deal with innovation (*res novae*) from *within* the symbolic code of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

What all these reformulations have failed to rectify is the original sin of thinking that society is characterised by the essence (the inmost kernel, the cultural pattern) of modernity, which entails the *negation of the relational character of social relations*. Yet it is precisely when the Hobbesian model of social order is becoming exhausted that we leave modernity and enter a new historical phase.

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<sup>8</sup> In the words of H.M. Johnson (1973: 208): “In its latest expression, Parsons’ general theory of action is a generalization of economic theory”.

If the emerging phenomena – examples (a – h), which have already been introduced – share something in common that ‘something’ consists in the two following features:

i) These phenomena stem from the ‘latency sphere’ of society; instead of following the *lib/lab* value scheme, they introduce new criteria or cultural codes that valorise social relations.

ii) Such emergent phenomena, diffused through new means of communication, are ones that sociological theory hesitates to accept as being completely novel – both to epistemology and in practice. Yet, they are of a kind that modifies their own epistemological foundations and the more general assumptions upon which these rest. They do so by changing the meaning of traditional concepts and the possibility of using them.

It seems to be the case that these novel characteristics are linked to globalization, however globalization is defined.<sup>9</sup> They are related to globalization, although they are not its direct and immediate results but the outcome of a more complex series of factors. The forces that modify society are not merely a reaction to globalization and its most notorious characteristics: capitalism and commodification. Instead, they are also generative mechanisms that themselves result from morphogenetic processes. The problem with mainstream contemporary sociological theory is that it is unable to appreciate the morphogenesis undergone by social relationships. My argument is that this ‘blindness’ is the result of the *lib/lab* code. What remains to be understood is why social theory remains imprisoned by this code.

In the light of the AGIL diagram (in its relational and post-Parsonsian reformulation: see Donati 2000), the elaboration of these new social relations stems from the zone of latency (L), through the interaction between its transcendental values and society’s instrumental means of adaptation. Spreading out from there, the norms of social integration are re-shaped and then modify the *lib/lab* apparatuses of government and governance. This can be illustrated by reference to the earlier example of *Gesellschaft* producing *Gemeinschaft*. In the case of a time bank, what changes most of all is the way in which the time devoted to social relations is valued intrinsically, that is an ‘internal good’ whose external expression is as a cultural *pattern* (L): time becomes less and less a ‘currency’ of exchange and is transformed into an expression of inter-personal relations (entailing an historico-relational dimension). Although the people involved make use of a ‘bank’ (A), their exchange rules (I) are not based on monetary exchange but on an enlarged system of reciprocity – which, in turn, means that the bank’s management is also regulated by social criteria rather than by any version of the *lib/lab* scheme (G).

What is wrong with current theories? As has already been emphasized, current sociology depends on categories derived from modernity and therefore fails to appreciate newly emergent phenomena. As a result, these theories fail to recognize the morphogenesis of inter-personal relations as the effect of globalization. This transformation means that all the newly emergent phenomena share *a different logic*,

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<sup>9</sup> Held and McGrew (2000) provide an extensive range of definitions of globalization, although they fail to conceptualize them and compare them within a theoretical framework.

*guided by a different symbolic code.* This is no longer a hegemonic logic, unlike the monism of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> ideology and religion, which stood in a zero-sum relationship to one another. Instead, it is *plural* in kind and irreducible *ad unum*. These phenomena also share a cybernetics that is no longer *mechanistic* (as in Parsons' AGIL scheme) and no longer involves a second order *reflexivity* (as in Luhmann's scheme), but a *relational* cybernetics which goes beyond Parsons and Luhmann.

The decreasing marginal utility of functionalism (which parallels the declining marginal utility of the capitalist components of globalization) mirrors the emerging new needs of a "supra-functional latency".<sup>10</sup> Illustrative examples include substituting the concept of the person for modernity's notion of the 'individual' and replacing modernist semantics, based on the opposition between equality and inequality, with the distinction between identity and difference, thus pointing to a new logic of social inclusion (Donati 2002/2003). Failure to recognise the emergent phenomena under discussion means that their interpretation tends to oscillate between a defensive and obsolete position (positivism) and a paranoid position, which typifies theories of deconstruction (see Teubner 2001). Both positivist and anti-positivist theories – however different in their approach – deny reality. How can this denial be avoided?

### **5. Redefining 'what makes society'.**

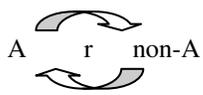
Each civilization (and within it, each historical period) has its own specific way of conferring meaning (legitimacy), which shapes the regulative forms governing social relations. This configuration is homogeneous in each society, at a given historical time, and makes it unique. In short, each civilization distinguishes itself from all others by its manner of 'making society'.<sup>11</sup> In ancient Egypt under the Pharaohs, all social relations were subordinated to the over-arching theocracy of the God-Pharaoh. In ancient Greece, the *polis* displayed a configuration derived from regulative principles dialogically established in the *agora*. In ancient Rome, power was stratified on the basis of belonging to the judicial and political state apparatus. In medieval Christendom it can be seen in the relation of society to transcendence – the latter expressed, though not fully encompassed, by the Gospel – that rendered all social relationships contingent (in a double sense: contingent as 'dependent upon' and as 'possible in a different mode'). In the Islamic *umma* (the community of believers), it lies in the relation between each individual and the Koranic law (*sharia*), interpreted as the 'tribal' response to all the issues of everyday life. In the Protestant world, characterized by capitalist modernization, it can be seen in the interpretation of the individual's earthly success as a sign of divine election. These are all examples of 'typical' ways of 'making society' that are associated with an 'ideal-typical' relational *pattern* characteristic of that civilization.

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of supra-functional latency refers to the latent sphere of society ('L' in the revised relational AGIL scheme), when it operates not in order to maintain the existing cultural pattern of society (as Parsons claims), but to give a new cultural meaning to social actions and relations, a meaning that cannot be reduced to a discrete number of functions and has no functional equivalents in the existing system.

<sup>11</sup> Technically speaking, each society is characterized by a Gaussian redistribution of the specific ways of 'making social relations', which are qualitatively and quantitatively different from the others.

What follows is a brief summary of how we can re-formulate this task of why and how a society *sui generis* ‘makes itself’ through the emergence of a new relational pattern, which then serves to characterise it. To begin with, Figure 1 distinguishes three groups of sociological theories: 1) classical modern sociologies (dominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; 2) post-modern sociologies (developing towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); and, 3) trans-modern sociologies (now being elaborated).

Figure 1 – The basic assumptions of modern, post-modern and trans-modern sociologies.				
Three paradigms	<i>Representation of the social world</i>	<i>Symbolic code</i>	<i>Main methodological tools and schemes</i>	<i>Mode of conceptualisation of the ‘social’</i>
<b>I) Modern (classical) sociology</b>	The social world as a formation of social structures, defining and distinguishing themselves through evolutionary competition	A = A (principle of identity)	- Binary and ideal-typical concepts - Pattern variables - Parsonsian AGIL	By analogy with nature (the social is homologous to organic nature in so far as it is the product of human beings as bio-psycho-socio-cultural units)
<b>II) Post-modern sociology</b>	One world society (society becomes one <i>self</i> -differentiating system instead of being constituted by different societies in competition with one another and differentiating both within and <i>between</i> them)	A = non (non-A)	- System/environment scheme (A/non-A) - Second-order cybernetics	By negation of nature (the ‘natural’ character of the social is replaced by symbolic constructionism, treating transcendence and humanity as metaphoric)
<b>III) Trans-modern (global) sociology</b>	A plurality of ‘relationally possible’ social worlds (non pre-determined)	A = r (A, non-A)	- Society as a network of relations articulated in social systems - General scheme: 	The social as a relational and morphogenetic <i>sui generis</i> reality (embracing structural, cultural and agential morphogenesis)

I) The classical sociology of modernity represented society by analogy with the natural and the historical world, that is, as any number of social structures or systems, in competition with each other for evolutionary success. The corresponding conceptualisation of society is guided by analogical reasoning and its symbolic terminology is largely based on the identity principle ( $A = A$ ). This form of sociology seeks ‘laws’, determinants and stable, regular connections within a Darwinian evolutionary framework. It presupposes that different forms of society compete and survive only if they are able to adapt successfully to the surrounding environment. A concrete example of this type of conceptualisation is the family, theorized in various

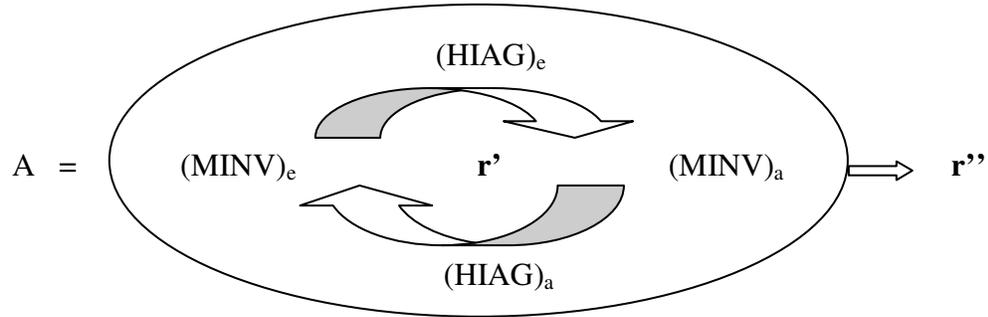
distinctive social forms, with the aim of identifying an optimal form for the survival of society. The heritage of the classical approach reached its climacteric in the work of Parsons.

II) In post-modern sociologies, evolution is not ‘finalistically’ oriented, it does not have to achieve the best possible form of adaptation; to a large extent its development and its forms are contingent and accidental. Such sociologies put an end to the idea of ‘constant progress’ which dominated the first phase of modernity. The evolution of society is conceptualized as permutations upon a symbolic code within which any identity is (i.e. is made/makes itself) the negation of everything that is other-than-itself [ $A = \text{non}(\text{non-}A)$ ]. Despite employing a formula that is ideologically charged – via the influence of ‘negative’ liberalism, in which freedom is defined as ‘freedom from’ bonds and constraints, forgetting positive freedom as ‘an opportunity for’ – it is claimed that any ideological element has been eliminated. Instead, refuge is sought in autopoiesis and self-referentiality. The social is everything that constitutes itself through the negation of that which is non-social. Thus, society ‘makes itself’ by negating all that is different from itself. This is a formula for total indeterminacy. Thus, post-modern sociology represents the family as a form that is plastic and thus given to unpredictable relations between the sexes and between different generations.

III) Trans-modern sociologies have to seek a new identity for society that does not rely on classical or on post-modern categories. The symbolic code on which identity is built is relational [ $A = r(A, \text{non-}A)$ ] (where  $r = \text{relation}$ ). Identity is defined in relation to the other – be it by relations of separation, exchange, combination or fusion. The key point here is that this formula can also indicate the conditions for the realisation of new, positive possibilities, ones that are morphogenetic in the sense of being re-constitutive.

Within this framework, society is conceptualized as a network, though not a network of objects or of individuals, but as a network of relations. Each node of the network represents a social order (conceived as a combination of established relational links). The basic formula is the following (Figure 2): every agent/actor/social system/social sphere (= *ego*, internally constituted by different relational configurations of means-intentions-norms-values = MINV) shapes its social identity through interactions with the other agent/actor/system/social sphere (= *alter*, internally structured in terms of its own MINV complex). The interaction between *ego* and *alter* is regulated by HIAG relations (based on four dimensions: heteronomy, instrumentality, autonomy and gratuity = HIAG), which are different for *ego* and *alter*.

**Figure 2 - The basic scheme of the constitution of an actor's (A) social identity in trans-modern society ( *e* = ego; *a* = alter).**



**KEY:**

MINV = internal structure of an actor's social identity based on four dimensions: means, intentions, norms, values (*ego* and *alter* have their own separate MINVs)

HIAG = external structure of the relations of an actor (or social system), based on four dimensions: heteronomy, instrumentality, autonomy, gratuity (*ego* and *alter* have their own separate HIAGs)

$r'$  internal reflexivity of actor A

$r''$  external relations of actor A

Let us read Figure 2. The figure simply says that actors' social relations are managed by ego's self, and therefore are based upon her own internal reflexivity, but self-reflexivity is a complex process of relating oneself to the other (*alter*). Here I include the theorem of 'double contingency' in social interaction and Max Weber's definition of what a social relation is. But also Edith Stein's studies on empathy. Action, as an 'external' relation, is made up of a stuff which is elaborated in the internal conversation (as you think of it) of ego, taking into account the other's MINV and her HIAG, since they are part of the definition of the situation by ego (and therefore must be taken into consideration by ego when she redefines - in a reflexive way - her MINV and HIAG). Each agent/actor (A), be it individual or collective, is relationally constituted (internally, within the ego-alter relation) and operates relationally ( $r''$ ) with the outer world (other agent/actors, systems or sectors of society). The internal relations ( $r'$ ) (operating within A and conceived of as system of action), as well as the external relations  $r''$ , can involve conflict, separation and distancing or complementarity and reciprocity, in any of their possible combinations.

The example of the family is again useful here. In this framework, the family is no longer considered – as in classic sociology – to be a well-defined structure, a model or an ideal-type. Nor is it considered – as in post-modern sociology – to be an

indeterminate system. Rather, trans-modern sociologies consider the family in 'relational' terms, that is, as a form allowing for a variety of different relations of reciprocity between sexes and generations. These are elaborated through morphogenetic processes that valorise the elements constitutive of relations between genders and generations. The family, like society, operates according to the  $A = r(A, \text{non-}A)$  code. Families present a non-predetermined plurality of social systems (worlds) that are 'relationally possible', that is, pertain to the family as a *sui generis* reality (a *sui generis* social relation, with no functional equivalent).

Paralleling the different ways in which the social system (e.g. the family) has been conceptualized, the human dimension of what is social varies. (I) Within the framework of classic sociology, the human dimension of the social is treated as analogous to organic nature. (II) In post-modern sociology, the human dimension of the social is metaphorical, and is defined through negation of what is 'natural'. (III) In trans-modern sociology, the human dimension of the social is relational, that is, it lies within the relationship and originates from relationships: to be human means to exist in a social relation, in the tension between solitude and being with others. To the extent that society becomes more and more complex ('globalized'), social relations increase their importance as constitutive of what is human within the social. The main reason for this is that social relations become more and more crucial to the development of what is human in the person – from his or her original (pre-social) self, to the way he or she becomes an agent, then a corporate 'we' and, finally, an individual actor who is not only reflexive in him/herself but 'relationally reflexive'<sup>12</sup> (Archer 2000).

### ***6. The globalization of social relations and sociological theory.***

Around the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Parsons (1961) devised a powerful theory of social change, which could be called the functionalist theory of social evolution (Alexander 1983). However, today it has become increasingly evident that the Parsonian approach is unable to capture the phenomena associated with the global era. There is a vast literature on this subject, which can barely be touched upon here. Instead, the following comments merely underline the main reasons why *the functionalist theory of social change has failed*. These are neither that it is conservative, as many have – erroneously – maintained, nor that it is too rigid and unable to accommodate ambivalence, deviance, or anti-social behaviour. Its failure can rather be attributed to the fact that the Parsonian theory of social change is *not relational enough* and, more specifically, that *it does not envisage a relational morphogenesis* such as that emerging from the processes of globalization.

What Parsons' theory is able to capture is globalization as a process in which the driving force derives from the sub-system of adaptation (i.e. economy) to affect all other sub-systems (G, I, L). Certainly, the process of globalization relies upon the circulation

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<sup>12</sup> Drawing on Archer (2000, 2007), I have developed the sociological theory of reflexivity with reference to social relations, and not only within the 'subject' (be it individual or corporate), by elaborating the concept of 'relational reflexivity' (see Donati 2011).

of generalized means of exchange and because of this the function of adaptation is modified through the symbolic contributions to the other (non-economic) sub-systems. Most crucially, Parsonsian theory relies upon the existence of a latent value system (L) that is also dispersed throughout the social system without restriction. However, it is precisely these prerequisites that are lacking in the global era. The phenomena mentioned above could not be foreseen by Parsons' theory of social change, yet demonstrate that: (i) the central value system (effectively the L of AGIL) of modernity can no longer be upheld and that (ii) its attempted generalization (both symbolic and functional) encounters obstacles that cannot be surmounted.

What changes society manifests itself firstly in the latent sphere of society (the L of any social relation/system/actor), it is re-elaborated there and subsequently spreads out and influences A, G, and I. The internal crisis of each of the functional spheres of society, and in particular of the economic capitalist market (A), the political system /G) and the institutions of social integration (I), derives from the relational dimension of culture (L). In particular, the present crisis of what I term the *lib/lab* complex (i.e. the rule of society guided by compromise between market and state) is because the symbolic codes of the market and the state (money and power) alienate people from the relational character of their life, and thus colonize civil society without achieving any real success in terms of social cohesion and cultural integration.

It follows that the 'globalization of relations', within the newly emerging society, themselves need re-formulating 'globally' (within the A-G-I-L scheme) as a result of three processes:

- i) An intensified interaction among the internal components of action (MINV);
- ii) The increase in external interchanges (HIAG) (affecting each type of relation: for instance work/non-work, family/non-family, citizenship/non-citizenship, etc.);
- iii) The transcendence of the newly-formed relations over the former ones.

The emerging society is genuinely *trans-modern* because it no longer follows the dominant distinctions of modernity. The key terms of contemporary society have changed and given way to a new 'symbolic order'. Modernity's slogans were 'linear and limitless progress', 'exploitation of the environment' (in Faustian spirit), society as a 'dialectic between state and civil society', and politics confined to 'constitutionalism within the nation state'. Conversely, the mottos of trans-modernity are 'sustainable and limited development', 'human ecology', society conceived as 'network of networks', 'multicultural society', and 'politicisation of the private domain'.

Furthermore, each symbolic code (money, power, influence, *value-commitment*) has undergone a threefold process of intensified interaction – internal, external and transcendental, with emergent consequences. As a result, time and space categories have become social relations. Simultaneously, social relations themselves, previously regulated by the generalized symbolic means of exchange, have been transformed by relational dynamics (cf. 2.3). This consists of: a) a plurality of meanings, which is more than mere structural differentiation within symbolic universalism, of b) relational cybernetics, and c) hyper-functionality (rather than functional specialization) of meaning. These three transformations have re-defined 'L' as 'other' than the 'L' of

modernity (in sociology and in society). This ‘other’ does not stand for contingency (as in Luhmann), but as a ‘relationally possible other’.

These are the referents of ‘globalized’ social relations. They occur when social relations become atemporal, non-spatial, abstract and systemic, rather than interpersonal or face-to-face, and take place in a virtual reality (i.e. where they are ‘virtually real’), rather than in a reality experienced as concrete and situated. In consequence, global society is more unstable and chaotic than all past forms of society. Global society consists of a set of possibilities that have to be ‘relationally’ selected.

‘Real’ society responds to contingency on the basis of its specific needs and in relation to its own goals. It achieves this by activating the properties of globalization that are necessary to these ends (thus linking needs to responses or solutions). However, globalization and the attendant escalation of the function of adaptation (‘A’) at the macro-social level is not exercised by the entirety of the social system. For example, when perceived needs are local, the global dimension affects local responses but, at the same time, it derives its form and meaning from the local setting, giving rise to the so-called ‘glocal’ (Mander and Goldsmith 1996).

### ***7. Global society requires a new theory of social differentiation.***

A sociological theory that is appropriate to the processes of globalization has as its testing ground the ability to capture the morphostasis/morphogenesis of relations, and not only the morphostasis/morphogenesis of structures, culture and *agency*. The morphogenesis of relations is not the result of the morphogenesis of its individual components, but depends on the possibility of differentiation of social relations in their own right – that is as emergent phenomena with their own distinctive generative mechanisms.

This leads on to the theory of social differentiation. The three well known forms of social differentiation (segmentary, stratified and functional) must be integrated with a fourth type: relational differentiation (see Fig. 3). The latter constitutes a new ‘social logic’ which is completely foreign to those who follow the Luhmannian scheme of social differentiation.

Segmentary (tribal) morphostasis	Segmentary differentiation	Tribe or clan membership
Stratified (status) morphostasis	Stratified differentiation	Membership of closed social strata (status)
Functional morphogenesis	Functional differentiation	Membership according to functional performance and organization
Relational morphogenesis	Relational differentiation (according to which 'parts' of society are not specialized in a functional manner, but relate to each other by networking)	Membership based on participation in social networks which have a suprafunctional meaning and no functional equivalence

Relational differentiation is distinct from the segmentary because it is open (i.e. based upon intersecting circles and not upon closed/concentric circles as the segmentary differentiation), voluntary (not ascriptive) and morphogenetic (not morphostatic). It differs also from the stratified differentiation because it is not constrained by a hierarchy of status-roles. It is different from the functional differentiation in so far as the social process does not happen in order to provide more specialized and efficient performances, but in order to create suprafunctional relations between the agents/actors or 'parts' involved. These relations are a *sui generis* reality which has no functional equivalents. The emergence of relational differentiated social forms is apparent in the creation of networking organizations which substitute function driven organizations. As a matter of fact, relational differentiation corresponds to the relational morphogenesis inherent in the era of globalization.

An example of how one can apply figure 3 to social reality is given by referring to the family/work reconciliation issues. The measures which are introduced in most advanced countries in order to balance family life and work time, not to mention the target of achieving equality of opportunities between men and women, represent new forms of arranging the differentiation of family care and work performances. In trying to do that, new differentiated relations are generated between the family and the work place, with repercussions within both of them. Why is such a form of social differentiation new? My answer is: because it operates through devices which are functional as they were in the industrial division of labor, when the family and the work place were supposed to meet an increasing separation and specialization. The reconciliation policies are bound to create new exchange structures which redefine the poles of the relation by changing the space in between them. This space must be built up on its own qualities and properties, it substitutes the old primary networks (where the grandparents and other community agents took care of family matters) and must take its peculiar 'constitution' (recall the 'civil constitutions' envisaged by Teubner as recognition and implementation of new human rights). In other words, the two subsystems (family and work) do not specialize by self-reference or autopoiesis, but through a new relationality between them. Instead of re-entering their internal

distinctions, they operate through a relation of reciprocity, where self and other-referentiality is implied. Instead of behaving according to a functional symbolic code, they behave (or try to behave) according to a relational symbolic code. They negotiate their internal needs in the intermediary (relational) space between them. Other stakeholders can come into the game. This is what happens in what we call social governance through the co-ordination of many public and private networking institutions, when social policies have to pursue the new 'civil welfare' beyond the old industrial and bureaucratic (lib/lab) welfare state.

At the beginning of the modern age, Spinoza wrote: "*omnis determinatio est negatio*" (every determination is a denial). On the threshold of the trans-modern era and of global sociology we could re-write this as "*omnis determinatio est relatio*" (every determination is a relation).

Globalization is not the complete 'erosion' of all social ascription, despite modernity's consistent emphasis upon achievement. Globalization is not a process of individualization carrying on *ad infinitum*. Modernity's functional differentiation has reached its limits and with these comes the realization that neither is the extrapolation of its premises unlimited (as Parsons fundamentally believed). Many social phenomena seem to demonstrate that functional differentiation cannot continue as the leading form of social differentiation.

Globalization is accompanied by the 'principle of transcendency' according to which the more similarities we find between the terms of a relation (i.e. the more we treat certain social relations as functionally equivalent), the more these terms appear to be different and distinct (i.e. new instances appear to differentiate them relationally). This is what a *pluralized* world implies, that is, a relational differentiation of the universal. This new way of managing complexity becomes possible on the assumption that every distinction consists of a relation (not a negation). Global society does not need to separate and to manage social differentiation and social integration in the same way as did modernity (i.e. by oscillating between the two poles of the *lib/lab* complex). Global society operates through relational inclusion, rather than through the (functional) dialectic of freedom and control.

The new, emergent network society (Castells 1996) derives from a network of 'local' societies that are no longer defined according to a territorial principle, but on the basis of the symbolic and communicative codes that regulate them. This form of society can be defined as 'relational' because it interlaces local societies and global society, giving rise to contexts for living where what is crucial is the quality of the relational *patterns* prevailing in the social spheres which constitute these contexts. In that way, the relational society is characterized by a form of social differentiation that is increasingly less determined by the pure (or abstract) form typical of modernity, that is, by functional differentiation. The human constituents of society can no longer be interpreted in organic terms, as in 'old Europe' (against which Luhmann launched his polemics), nor by employing a postmodern metaphor (Derrida's *différance*). Rather, the relational meaning of human action fully acknowledges the power to translate itself into social forms as yet unknown.

Consequently, the theory of society should be formulated as the theory of those social forms that express what it is to be human, despite the fact that society is not exclusively made up of that which is human.

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