Book Review/ Compte Rendu

Dépelteaux, François and Christopher Powell, *Applying Relational Sociology: Relations, Networks, and Society*. New York: Palgrave. 2013. 229 pp., $95.00 hardcover (9781137379917)

In this edited volume, Canadian sociologists François Dépelteaux and Christopher Powell offer a selection of nine chapters exploring the depth and scope of relational sociology. Numerous contributors are already known internationally. Overall, the level of discussion is high and the quality of writing is good. As a whole, the book will appeal mostly to post-graduate readers for whom dissecting theoretical problems produce no less sociological knowledge than collecting empirical data through conventional methods. Dépelteaux and Powell have simultaneously released another edited volume entitled *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology* with the same publisher.

In their introduction, the editors explain that relational sociologists seek to avoid voluntarism as much as determinism, or subjectivism as much as objectivism. This is not to imply that nothing is subjective in the social world (like human emotions or cognition) or that nothing is objective (like social structures). But whatever turns out to be either subjective or objective in the social world should not be seen and admitted as pre-given. Relational sociology gives primacy to relations between social actors as a central strategy for understanding the emergence of both human emotions and cognition (within us) and social structures (outside of us). What is subjective is not always innate, but often learned through interactions with others, whereas what is objective does not exist above and beyond social actors, but through their on-going relations.

The editors add that: "For now, relational sociology is something like a patchwork of knowledge about social relations that are seen as dynamic, fluid processes" (xvi). As a stream of literature, relation sociology lacks one central historical figure, even though some influential sociologists like Bourdieu and Elias are repeatedly mentioned as key relational thinkers. The expression "patchwork of knowledge" is therefore significant. Indeed, despite their common will to avoid the subjectivism/objectivism dichotomy, the contributors seem to understand relational sociology in slightly different terms. As the reader goes through the chapters, she comes to distinguish between four brands of relational sociology. If

this feels like a weakness of relational sociology as a tradition-in-the-making, it may prove to be a strength of the book. Or at least, it makes for an interesting reading.

A first brand of relational sociology is found in the chapter by Pierpaolo Donati. Donati argues that the rise of globalization marks the beginning of a new social order, which he calls trans-modern, and the need for a new form of sociology. Relational sociology is of course this new form breaking up with previous paradigms, both modern and postmodern. It takes us beyond the lib/lab problem or the contradiction between individual freedom (expressed by the market) and collective control (assumed by the state). Using Parsons' AGIL model, Donati explains that relational sociology directs our attention on culture as latency function in the system of social action. What globalization reveals to us is a new set of cultural relations in which people invest themselves for the sake of these relations, therefore by-passing adaptation (economy) as well as goal-attainment functions (politics).

The chapter by Lars Bo Kaspersen and Norman Gabriel develop a second brand of relational sociology. Contrary to Donati, they do not think about relational sociology in light of recent history and for this reason in opposition with older models. They see the ideas of Norbert Elias as a proper expression of the ideals of relational sociology. However they recognize that reimagining social reality solely in terms of relations makes the problem of demarcating actual research objects especially salient. On this issue, Elias provides valuable insights by noticing that some networks exercise more gravitational pull than others. Elias call them "survival unit" (60). They are the only networks that can successfully offer protection in cases of aggression. Thus, any survival unit exists alongside other survival units and locked in a Hegelian struggle for recognition with them.

A third brand of relation sociology is developed in the chapter by Osmo Kivinen and Tero Piiroinen. For these authors, sociology can reinvent itself as relational by borrowing the concept of niche from neo-Darwinian evolution theory. Evolutionary mechanisms operate not only on a genetic level, but also on the level of niches which organisms build to create a livable environment for themselves. All organisms are organisms-living-in-relation-with-an-environment, so that the environment (shaped as niche) is an intrinsic part of what an organism is. As for humans, the niche they have carved out is characterized above all by the intensive use of language.

Leaving behind the organism-environment frame, the last brand of relational sociology, found in four different chapters, explores the question "what is a social relation?" First, John W. Mohr reformulates this

question by posing the problem of structure and culture. It is not enough for an external observe to draw a connection between two actors (structure). She must also determine what this connection means for the actors themselves (culture). Mohr feels that Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field offers a convincing solution to this problem, although Bourdieu's own use of the concept must be improved. Second, Harrison C. White, Frédéric C. Godart and Matthias Thiemann explain that the organization of social relations within networks take place under conditions of uncertainty. This uncertainty is experienced as "ambage" at the level of structure and as "ambiguity" at the level of culture. Furthermore, uncertainty coming from outside a network is described as "contingency." The interface between ambage, ambiguity and contingency allows for a classification of social activities. Third, Jorge Fontdevila and Harrison C. White observe that most of the work going into social relations is carried out through language thanks to its recursive or self-referential properties (otherwise ascribed to the process of communication in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory). Finally, Jan A. Fuhse argues that social relations in networks (again, structure) often take on the form of personal relationships between concrete individuals (culture again, inasmuch as meaning is involved in the form of frames) in which case they should be studied as such.

The volume includes two additional chapters. Daniel Monterescu offers a case-study of Jaffa as an example of mixed (Israeli-Palestinian) town. Jaffa is a place where spatial heteronomy, stranger sociality and cultural indeterminacy prevail to the point that methodological nationalism collapses. Outside the formula "one state = one society = one culture," local city life is rediscovered as a dense nest of interdependent yet unbalanced relations. Heather E. Price discusses the technical difficulties there are in interpreting data from a survey about social relations among community school staff in Indianapolis. Price identifies some dangers to be aware of and compares different types of measure against each other in search for the best one. As a whole, the volume makes a stimulating contribution not only to sociological theory, but also to the entire discipline by reminding us of sociology's basic intuition: there can be no human life without human relations. Life is relational. Life is social.

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Jean-Sébastien Guy is interested in classical and contemporary social theory. He has published articles in *Current Perspective in Social Theory* and *Current Sociology*. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on metric and

nonmetric as a new pair of fundamental concepts based on Manuel DeLanda's interpretation of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, introduced as a solution to the problem of structure and agency and further developed through critical discussions with a series of major thinkers in sociology (Weber, Durkheim, Luhmann, Bourdieu, Giddens, Goffman and Foucault).

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