

# **A Sociological Odyssey into the Intricate World of Identity**

An essay on the possibilities of identity in the romantic hope  
of rediscovering our human sociality and a cosmic harmony

Akim Said Aalou

Supervised by Prof. Dr. András Kovács

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Identity is caught in a painful split between the popular and politicized substantialist understanding of identity and the empty, pure constructivist conception of identity prevalent in academia. Since identities are the empowering shackles of our times, I argue that scholars must reclaim identity theoretically, if they wish to rid it of its detriments for our lives. In an eclectic essay, I discuss a whole array of different thinkers and ideas to develop a conceptual framework which allows us to imagine the possibilities of identity. Crucial to imagine the richness of social life are Schinkel's speculative imagination and Deleuze's virtuality. By embedding this search for a re-imagination of identity into processual and relational sociologies, some fundamental sociological debates are encountered and dealt with. In this regard, I propose a theory of symbolic convergence in the attempt to reconcile the structural aspect of social life with a processual ontology. Finally, counter to consensus in social sciences which reduces identity to its actual-constructed dimension, I posit that we can rediscover our identities in difference or relation. Not(!) as expected, by connecting with those who are similar and distancing from those who are different, but in the counterintuitive phenomenological relation to the other. Simply put, we are the world we apprehend in the ways we relate to it. By discussing the often neglected or forgotten notion of sociality, this dissertation hopes to invigorate experiences of selfhood, otherness and a deep togetherness in ways that are beneficial to our lives.

# Table of Contents      A World of Chapters

<b>Prologue</b>	<b>A World of Sociologists</b>	<b>1</b>
	An a-sociological sociology	2
	Identity beyond identity	6
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>A World of Possibilities</b>	<b>8</b>
	Between a sense of reality and a sense of possibility	10
	The other-than-socially-constructed	14
	Identity through a preliminary conceptual framework	17
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>A World of Difference</b>	<b>21</b>
	An introduction to relational sociology	23
	Radical relational sociology	27
	The transcendental illusion	30
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>A World of Symbolic Order</b>	<b>36</b>
	Between processualism and substantiality	38
	Symbolic convergence	40
	<i>Tarde's sociology of the infinitesimal</i>	41
	<i>The qualities of symbols</i>	44
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>A World of Subjects</b>	<b>50</b>
	<i>La condition humaine</i>	51
	The first-order relation	54
	Ideal typical first-order (non-)relations	59
	<i>The (social) non-relation</i>	60
	<i>The negative relation</i>	61
	<i>The narcissistic relation</i>	63
	<i>The fully social relation</i>	64
	Conclusion	66
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>A World of Identities and Relations</b>	<b>69</b>
	Conceptualizations: self, identity, selfhood	69
	Identity in a relational web of relations	74
	<i>Intersubjectivity and self-identity</i>	75
	<i>A world of concrete ties and networks</i>	77
	<i>Objectified relations and the social construction of identity</i>	80

	<i>Social fields and homophily</i> .....	86
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>A World of Hope and Harmony</b> .....	<b>89</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>A World of Inspiration</b> .....	<b>94</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>A World of Nations</b> .....	<b>100</b>
	When the nation <i>suffers</i> narcissism.....	100
	<i>The nation as symbolic convergence</i> .....	100
	<i>A nation for narcissists</i> .....	102
	<i>Narcissistic forms of nationalism</i> .....	104

Identities are ubiquitous and their commands are absolute. Not only that, they also have become the empowering shackles of our times. They have been recognized as a source of empowerment, be it towards freedom or towards security.<sup>1</sup> The understanding of this quality has led to *identity politics*. Identities that constitute imagined *categories*, sometimes transmuted into imagined *communities*, repeatedly prove themselves to be the most valuable in this respect.<sup>2</sup> However, despite of this indispensable quality of empowerment, identity also functions as a power concept. Identity is a powerful abstraction that imagines “a thousand lines of life as a single vector, homogeneous and with a singular direction”.<sup>3</sup> By reducing the possibilities of experience it governs our lives, in the sense that our lives can hardly be lived differently.<sup>4</sup> Those who exist simultaneously inside and outside or perhaps in the ‘between’ of identity categories are the most obvious expressions of the violating (or reductionist) act of identity and its suppression of the richness of experiences immanent (and possible) in the world. Ultimately, however, no one escapes its governance over our lives, nor its detrimental consequences.<sup>5</sup> Because of this double quality of identities, as empowering shackles, I aim to explore the possibilities of identity in order to imagine identity differently to limit its detriments

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom and security are two sides of the same existential coin. Other political values could be identified as well, although one might argue that they are derivative. E.g., Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”, or in the case of categories, their similarity. Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Willem Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*, 2014, 18 own translation.

<sup>4</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>5</sup> Schinkel.

for our lives. To find the much needed inspiration to imagine identity differently, we set out on a sociological odyssey, and where else to start than in the world of sociologists.

### **An a-sociological sociology**

Sociology is strongly embedded within Western ontology, epistemology and metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, it upholds the belief in substantialism, essentialism, egologism and dualism. In brief, substantialism asserts that ‘things’ or substances are the fundamental form of life and that they “exist independently from each other”.<sup>7</sup> Essentialism attributes to those substances an essential nature,<sup>8</sup> while egologism puts the subject at the center of the world,<sup>9</sup> which is then separated from the world by dualism.<sup>10</sup> Originating from these presuppositions, classical sociology posits self-subsisting entities as the originators of social life. It assumes that entities have an existence in and of themselves,<sup>11</sup> and are thus “acting under their own powers”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> François Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology: Relevance, Concurrence and Dissonance,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 1 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 3–33.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Sébastien Guy, “Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 14 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 295; Mustafa Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (September 1997): 281–317.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity, Creed, Country, Color, Class, Culture*, First edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*; Andrea Doucet, “Shorelines, Seashells, and Seeds: Feminist Epistemologies, Ecological Thinking, and Relational Ontologies,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 19 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 375–91.

<sup>10</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology.”

<sup>11</sup> Lily Liang and Sida Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto: Mustafa Emirbayer and Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 20 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 395–411.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey and Arthur Fisher Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1949), 108.

according to their “own internal logic”,<sup>13</sup> completely “independently of all other substances”.<sup>14</sup> Dewey terms this approach to social life self-actionalism.<sup>15</sup>

This created a fundamental schism in sociology between holism and methodological individualism.<sup>16</sup> Holism basically asserts that social life can be explained by token of social entities that exert their power unidirectionally over individuals as an external force.<sup>17</sup> According to this perspective, the individual simply derives its identity from the structures it is embedded in.<sup>18</sup> Since such social entities are often considered to be bounded, so are individuals and their identities.<sup>19</sup> Concerning identity, these assumptions pose problems for the explanation of change and plurality.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it obfuscates the understanding of identity because of its empirical inexistence.<sup>21</sup> If we state that the “self reflects society” without the ability to account society, how can we then investigate identity?<sup>22</sup> Individualism is by no means

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<sup>13</sup> Guy, “Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?,” 296.

<sup>14</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 283.

<sup>15</sup> Dewey and Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*.

<sup>16</sup> They are also referred to as structuralism and individualism, collectivism and atomism, voluntarism and determinism et cetera.

<sup>17</sup> François Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 25 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 499–501.

<sup>18</sup> Nick Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes: Conceptualizing ‘Relations’ in Relational Sociology,” in *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology*, ed. Christopher Powell and François Dépelteau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 123–43.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 26 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 523–38.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Eacott, “Relations, Organising, Leadership and Education,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 32 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 641.

<sup>21</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology”; Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>22</sup> Jan E Stets and Peter J Burke, “A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity,” in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 48.

preferable, as it makes the social completely irrelevant.<sup>23</sup> In this perspective identities are pre-determined and not socially influenced. One's identity and agency over it lie completely within the individual. The premises of such an assertion are fundamentally flawed. If anything, "human beings become social actors always within and through" social life.<sup>24</sup> Identity cannot be understood if it is simply there, nor as the result of a pure free will. To sum up, both perspectives see social life as the result of mysterious, self-subsisting entities, be it the 'individual' or the 'society', without the ability to explain the them; and nor can identities be explained from these perspectives.

These issues have been taken on during the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>25</sup> and led to erudite developments in sociological theory.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary sociology could be characterized by interactionalism, co-determinism, and conflationism.<sup>27</sup> First, contrary to self-actionalism, interactionalism posits that "the relevant action takes place among the entities themselves",<sup>28</sup> as "thing balanced against thing in causal interconnection".<sup>29</sup> This inclusion of

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<sup>23</sup> Nick Crossley, "Networks, Interactions and Relations," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 24 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 484; Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>24</sup> Riccardo Prandini, "Relational Sociology: A Well-Defined Sociological Paradigm or a Challenging 'Relational Turn' in Sociology?," *International Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2014.997969>; Crossley, "Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes."

<sup>25</sup> Although I believe many of the classical ideas remain to a certain extent present, especially when popular concepts, such as 'identity', are uncritically employed.

<sup>26</sup> Among others, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, Pierre Bourdieu's social field theory, Charles Tilly's focus on social mechanisms, Norbert Elias' configuration theory, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, Luhmann's system theory, Harrison White's network theory, symbolic interactionism as followed from George Herbert Mead, poststructuralism, constructivism, the cultural turn

<sup>27</sup> Dépelteau, "Relational Thinking in Sociology"; Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology."

<sup>28</sup> Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," 285.

<sup>29</sup> Dewey and Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 108.



other substances takes the form of “empty settings within which causation occurs”.<sup>30</sup> The metaphor of billiard is often evoked as it shows how the billiard balls themselves “remain fixed and unchanging throughout such interaction, each independent of the existence of the others”, while its speed, location, value and other attributes inter-act with the other billiard balls’ attributes within the overall game.<sup>31</sup> Second, co-determinism posits that it is not the structure *or* the individual but *both* “the ‘agency’ of social actors” *and* the “‘causal powers’ of ‘crystallized’ structures” that ‘act’ (often in interaction and/or dialectic).<sup>32</sup> Third, conflationism outrightly denies the existence of both the individual and society *as self-subsisting or interacting entities*.<sup>33</sup> Concerning identity, these developments enable us to appreciate identity’s situational character.

Contemporary sociology thereby set crucial steps in the right direction, yet remains unable to account for the social as long as they neglect its constituent tissue. Conflationism, for instance, pays no “significant attention to the ontological and epistemological assumptions”, and consequently “blurs rather than overcomes the underlying separate entities”.<sup>34</sup> So, “unless the theoretical recasting of the entities negates the original separation (which most do not)”,<sup>35</sup> conflationism “meets neither the empirical virtues of the classic empiricist through fuzzy categories nor the theoretical sophistication of the social theorist”.<sup>36</sup> Also co-determinism errs as it is in a sense fundamentally a-sociological, for it undermines the primacy and a priori character of social life: ‘entities’ emerge from social life, *not* the other way around.<sup>37</sup> Because of this, the social remains an ‘empty setting’ which is neither accounted for, nor properly used

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<sup>30</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 286.

<sup>31</sup> Emirbayer, 285–86.

<sup>32</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” 502.

<sup>33</sup> Eacott, “Relations, Organising, Leadership and Education,” 650.

<sup>34</sup> Eacott, 650.

<sup>35</sup> Eacott, 654.

<sup>36</sup> Eacott, 651.

<sup>37</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology.”

in explanations. This issue expresses itself most clearly in sociology's difficulties to account for plurality and change. Nonetheless, some of its developments, often in the form of turns, push for a sociology that can live up to its name: constructivism, processualism and the cultural turn. Relational tendencies and arguments are already to be found in the great contemporary thinkers, but is only now gaining momentum as an 'ism'. Besides relationalism, I will also advance a phenomenological turn. These five – occurred, occurring and to occur – turns will be discussed throughout the thesis in order to reimagine identity through a thoroughly social logic.

### **Identity beyond identity**

Brubaker could be seen as one of the frontrunners in taking some of these turns with regard to identity. When he wrote his influential article *Beyond Identity* in cooperation with Cooper, identity found itself in a schism between substantialism and a constructivism that emptied identity out of its reality.<sup>38</sup> They attempted to bypass this issue by designating substantialism and the concept 'identity' to everyday life and constructivism with a whole array of different concepts to academia.<sup>39</sup> They must be commended for this important move, as they properly account for the social, and make sociology live up to its name. Nonetheless, it has three related problems, which form the point of departure of this dissertation.

First, this move condemns the sociologist to the actual-constructed world with nothing but scientific tools to analyze it, and stripped off of the possibilities that the other dimensions of social life have to offer. Counter to Brubaker, I plea to enrich our view on social life. Therefore, we begin our journey in a world of possibilities where we meet the *phenomenological* approach to social constructions of Berger and Luckmann, Willem

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<sup>38</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond Identity," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47.

<sup>39</sup> Brubaker and Cooper.

Schinkel's *speculative imagination*, and Deleuze's *virtual* reality. These insights will allow us to see, understand and access social life in its totality, its full richness of experiences, and as such free sociology from its exile, as we open up the whole social world for it. Second, I concur with Calhoun's repeated warning against the tendency "to see individuals as ontologically primary ... and social relations as secondary or derivative".<sup>40</sup> Our next destination is therefore the world of difference, as it is there that we will be introduced to relational sociology. This movement in sociology is makes relations primary in order to overcome the fundamental issues in classical and contemporary sociological theory. Third, while Brubaker attempts to counter fluidists who empty identity out, he ends up doing the same besides for the actual-constructed world, besides for identity as a category of practice. This essay could be understood as an attempt to make identity substantial again, yet not substantialist, in all its possibilities and within academia. Our third stop is therefore a world of apparent order. In this chapter I advance an idea or preliminary theory of symbolic convergence.

In the last two chapters, we finally move fully beyond Brubaker's *Beyond Identity*. By disentangling the web of relations in, by and through which identities are constituted, we will not only find identity but also (re)discover our human sociality. With the consequent renewed romantic hope we return in the *Epilogue* to our world of identities. Back 'home', we reflect on our journey and dream of a better future for our world of identities; a future in which identity is experienced fuller and richer, in which we find each other again (in each other and in oneself), and in which we achieve ataraxia as we learn to understand the cosmic harmony and beauty of *our* world.




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<sup>40</sup> Craig Calhoun, "The Variability of Belonging: A Reply to Rogers Brubaker," *Ethnicities* 3, no. 4 (2003): 562.

## Chapter One      A World of Possibilities

Our journey into the world of possibilities commences where Brubaker left off: the social construction of reality. I discern three general constructivist tendencies. First, constructivism often tends towards the refutation of social reality. Instead, either a *Hinterwelt* of some kind is considered to be ‘more’ real (cf., positivism), or (any epistemology of) reality is refuted altogether (cf., postmodernism). Second, Brubaker’s (more) ‘realist constructivism’ takes the actual-constructed reality to be real. I concur with him that social constructions are sets of cognitive or interpretative frameworks,<sup>41</sup> which shape, make comprehensible and give sense and meaning to our thoughts, feelings, actions, and more generally our experiences. The world is ‘really’ apprehended through social constructions. This also means that reality might well be different too. The sociologist must then study why the world is apprehended in certain situational temporo-spatial contexts in one way and not another.<sup>42</sup> This implies that social reality cannot be studied in its own terms, but requires a scholarly set of constructivist concepts. Such constructivism could be said to endow sociology with a sense of reality. It is a commendable move that came, however, due to a lack of carefulness, with a heavy price: it exiled sociology to the actual-constructed reality.

Besides a sense of reality, sociologists also require, what Robert Musil calls, a sense of possibility. He has the following to say about it:

*“the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than what is not. The consequences of so creative a disposition can be remarkable, and may, regrettably, often make what*

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<sup>41</sup> Needless to say, that cognitive, by no means, implies a pure subjectivism (as some critics would argue), but quite to the contrary makes it social all the way through.

<sup>42</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

*people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible, or, also, make both a matter of indifference ... It is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be more perverse than to deny it. Even so, it will always be the same possibilities, in sum or on the average, that go on repeating themselves until a man comes along who does not value the actuality above the idea. It is he who first gives the new possibilities their meaning, their direction, and he awakens them.*"<sup>43</sup>

Since a sociological sense of reality must be constructivist, a sociological sense of possibility must be regarded in opposition, and thus in intimate relation to it.<sup>44</sup> Phenomenological constructivism shows how a subjective sense of reality becomes a social sense for the socially constructed reality.<sup>45</sup> That 'what is not' could then be understood as that 'what is not *constructed*'. Sociology does not require sociologists "who cannot apprehend reality or who, in their melancholic condition, avoid it", sociologists who have a sense of possibility sociology in the form of fantasies or idle dreams.<sup>46</sup> It rather requires what Schinkel calls with Ingram a speculative imagination, a sociological imagination that does *not* value the actual-constructed above the other dimensions of reality.<sup>47</sup> It is an imagination that does not take admirations and taboos for granted (which is only 'regrettable' in its own terms), but questions them as well as its possible alternatives, before the sociologist chooses to repeat or awaken the real possibilities of social life. Deleuze's philosophy gives virtual substance to this unfolding of reality. To imagine the possibilities of identity, and to appreciate social life in its fullness, we need to make constructivism bloom in the sunlight of phenomenology, under speculative rain, and in the fertile soil of virtuality.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Musil, *Man without Qualities* (Picador Classics, [1930], 2017), 11–12.

<sup>44</sup> Sergio Tonkonoff, "Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference. Gabriel Tarde's Heritage," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 3 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 63–84.

<sup>45</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>46</sup> Musil, *Man without Qualities*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

### Between a sense of reality and a sense of possibility

C.W. Mills already understood that to be a sociologist, one requires a ‘sociological imagination’,<sup>48</sup> for the transformation of social reality into (sociological) images is “a crucial medium of access to the world”.<sup>49</sup> As an institutionalized scientific mode, the sociological imagination is a performative act through which social life is translated, represented and as such (re)produced.<sup>50</sup> Mainstream sociology, as described in the introduction, thus invokes individuals and social structures such as societies and nations as if they were real. Since it cannot account for them, they become divine, or some other transcendental, mysterious power. Dépelteau, among other out-and-out atheists of such god-like entities, considers them to be ‘unreal’.<sup>51</sup> To be more precise though, they are social constructions.<sup>52</sup> They cannot be taken as a “stable base of the social, but” should rather be understood as “a creative and mutable accomplishment [*veranderlijke verworvenheid*] of social life”.<sup>53</sup> The same is true of identities, both individual and collective: they are an *effect* of social life rather than *possessed* by mysterious, predefined entities. Thus, Brubaker rightly considers identities to be social constructions.

If sociology were to follow the sense of reality typifying Brubaker’s realist constructivism blindly – and it tends to do so – the constructed reality becomes prioritized. Even if it is not presented and reproduced in its own terms, the socially constructed reality appears as the only real possibility – not to mention the fact that underlying power structures are thereby

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<sup>48</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford [England] New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>49</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*, 93 own translation.

<sup>50</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>51</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology.”

<sup>52</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes”; Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>53</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*, 30–31.

maintained as well.<sup>54</sup> It thus does not suffice to merely denounce social construction as social constructions, for then one is either left with the social constructions we live by or following a rejection of such constructions with a sense of nothingness, a sense of lack, as if we were abandoned by reality. What is needed is a sense of possibility that rethinks sociology and by extension identity “in such a way that it contributes to the richness of life and the fullness of experience that the world knows in potential”.<sup>55</sup> This is why Schinkel asserts that “[s]ociologists and philosophers should not *limit* themselves to the description and explanation of what exists, that which is already dead the moment it is described”.<sup>56</sup> What we need, is rather a sociology that is guided “less [by] a descriptive than a *speculative* imagination”: not some sort of professional daydreaming but an informed way to access and transform the world in a way that opens up and actualizes potentials rather than buries them.<sup>57</sup> Such speculative imagination is “*a mediation in the imagination of what is and what is possible*”;<sup>58</sup> it is “*a paradoxical imagination beyond the narratives that precede all imagination*”.<sup>59</sup>

Phenomenological constructivism and its understanding of subjective experiences as well as how it relates to reality (as it is socially constructed) fosters our sociological sense of possibility (without succumbing to mere idealism or fantasy). I focus in particular on Berger and Luckmann’s phenomenological constructivism as they developed it in their classical work *The Social Construction of Reality*.<sup>60</sup> They premise their treatise on the phenomenological assumption that reality has no empirical status besides its subjective apprehension; for it is how we are-in-the-world. With regard to identity, one could state that ‘I am who I am, because I

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<sup>54</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>55</sup> Schinkel, 136 own translation.

<sup>56</sup> Schinkel, 14 own translation and emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> Schinkel, 12 own translation and emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Schinkel, 133 own translation, his emphasis.

<sup>59</sup> Schinkel, 57 own translation and emphasis.

<sup>60</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

experience and apprehend myself as such'. Interestingly, they then assert that the subjectively real becomes objectified through social interaction. Symbolic systems, such as language, are indispensable in this process, for they *detach* meaning from subjective experience and situational interactions by their fundamental "quality of objectivity".<sup>61</sup> As such they make "'present' a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from the 'here and now'".<sup>62</sup> As Berger and Luckmann eloquently put it, "through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment".<sup>63</sup> This also means that through language "regions that are not only *de facto* but *a priori* unavailable to everyday experience" become nonetheless part of one's world (and being).

Furthermore, through symbolic systems, institutions, that is, "reciprocal typification[s] of habitualized actions by types of actors", can emerge.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, due to their objectivation, they are "experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact".<sup>65</sup> Institutions then "must and do claim authority over the individual", which it realizes through the prioritization of its definitions of situations and experiences over "individual temptations at redefinition".<sup>66</sup> Concerning identity it follows that I no longer am who I am, but that I am certain types because I apprehend the world through certain typifications, and more generally through socially acquired frameworks, which have an objective quality.

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<sup>61</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 53.

<sup>62</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 54.

<sup>63</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 54.

<sup>64</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 72.

<sup>65</sup> Also note here, how the social order is not simply taken-for-granted, nor seen as self-subsisting, but explained by token of interactions and the qualities of symbolic systems. As such, it shows how holism makes the mistake to uncritically believe in the constructions it lives by. Berger and Luckmann, 76.

<sup>66</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 80.



This process of objectivation, the transformation of subjective meaning and experience into objective facticity, is furthered by the creation of legitimations, “whose meanings are not specific to the individual, but socially articulated and shared”.<sup>67</sup> Berger and Luckmann call this “‘second-order’ objectivation of meaning”.<sup>68</sup> Its function “is to make objectively available and subjectively *plausible* the ‘first-order’ objectivations that have been institutionalized”.<sup>69</sup> Plausibility here “refers to the subjective recognition of an overall sense ‘behind’ the situationally predominant but only partial institutionalized motive[s]”.<sup>70</sup> When these processes of first- and second order objectivation take an extreme step, the socially constructed reality becomes reified, that is, social constructions are then bestowed “on them an ontological status independent of human activity and signification”.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, social life *appears* to become a social fact: external, objective, structural and determining. And we all know that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as Berger and Luckmann realize, “[i]t becomes necessity and fate, and is lived through as such, happily or unhappily as the case may be”.<sup>73</sup> But what if we are unhappy with them, do we then succumb to its reality or imagine alternative possibilities? Or with a less melancholic sense of possibility, what if we become indifferent to them, what else becomes possible then?

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<sup>67</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 82.

<sup>68</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 110.

<sup>69</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 110 own emphasis.

<sup>70</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 110.

<sup>71</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 107.

<sup>72</sup> This is the Thomas theorem.

<sup>73</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 108.

### **The other-than-socially-constructed**

Social reality is “taken for granted [...] until further notice, that is, *until a problem arises* that cannot be solved in terms of it”.<sup>74</sup> Then, our sense of possibility, which makes the other-than-socially-constructed available, is fostered, and our experiences break through the social constructions. Such experiences could be understood as pertaining to – what I term – the *socially unarticulated* and (partially overlapping) the *socially unexperienced reality*. The socially unarticulated can be subdivided into those experiences that are expressed in ways that are socially senseless or absurd (cf., both leaking out and simply out-of-the-picture), and those experiences that are expressed in relation to the social constructions (they leak out from). The socially unexperienced can be subdivided into those experiences that are unrealized in the sense that they are not apprehended, unexperienced and/or unexpressed (actual beyond our life-worlds), and those experiences that are unrealized in the sense that they cannot even be imagined (virtual beyond our life-worlds). The socially unexperienced reality can well be the socially unarticulated which ends up unexpressed, and ultimately forgotten or lost. They become what I would call real non-experiences, in the sense that they are real, but cannot be apprehended because of the violent or reductive dominance of the social constructions we live by (cf., I cannot be what I do not know, even though I am). To make these experiences appear, available, apprehended, fully experienced and expressed they require quite some imagination – or rather a sense of possibility.

Gilles Deleuze has a sense of possibility par excellence and aids us to make sense out of the reality of experiences beside their social constructions. His philosophy is based on the processual ontology of the fold. Processual ontologies are premised on the simple idea that the

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<sup>74</sup> Berger and Luckmann, 58 emphasis added. See also pragmatists such as Dewey and Joas about the creative potential that is unleashed and the ‘horizon of possibilities that opens up in face of crisis.

world is in a continuous state of flux and becoming. But if the world is becoming, it implies that it becomes something and not something else, but also that it is no longer the same. As such, it must be based on the principle of difference.<sup>75</sup> Difference is here understood affirmatively, that is, not as a negation of sameness as it is commonly understood (cf. ‘two concepts are not the same, thus, they are different’), but rather with an independent or auto-referential meaning independent of sameness,<sup>76</sup> “as a positive and productive force”, in which “becoming amounts to becoming different ... the movement where being differs from itself”.<sup>77</sup>

Deleuze explains this force philosophically by means of the fold.<sup>78</sup> The fold must be understood as “the quantitative nature of intensive differences”: intensive since it is concentrated on one point, which is thus the point of folding, and quantitative for in this single point a multitude of (infinitesimal) flows come together.<sup>79</sup> Importantly, a fold cannot be singular, for it would not be folded then. It is thus in a sense *manifold* or a multi-*pli*-city.<sup>80</sup> (Please note that *pli* is the French word for fold, and how it is recurs in multiple terms.) The fold is then difference, for no fold is ever the same, nor can one ever be the same.<sup>81</sup> Each one is always folded differently, that is, it is qualitatively different as it consists of or involves (*enveloppe* in French) a different variety of flows.<sup>82</sup> This is furthermore ensured in the fact that

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<sup>75</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968).

<sup>76</sup> Deleuze.

<sup>77</sup> Olli Pyyhtinen, “Triangular Relations: Michel Serres on Parasites, Angels, Quasi-Objects, and the Virtual,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 8 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 177–78.

<sup>78</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli: Leibniz et Le Baroque*, Collection “Critique” (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988).

<sup>79</sup> Peter Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 7 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 148.

<sup>80</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>81</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology.”

<sup>82</sup> Lenco.

each fold leaves remainders or traces behind as it is always (and thereby) different from itself.<sup>83</sup> Folding thus is difference and creates difference. Deleuze calls this process differentiation.<sup>84</sup>

Difference is not only a positive and productive force in the fold (i.e., the virtual) and the process of folding, but also in the reverse process of unfolding and in the expression (i.e., the actual).<sup>85</sup> The expression is at once unfolding or developing (*expliquer*) as well as involving or implying (*envelopper*).<sup>86</sup> On the one hand, each expression *involves* (even though it does not express) the whole virtual content. All flows that came together in the fold are *implicit* in the expression. On the one hand, the expression of the virtual is an *explication* (literally an outward folding, or put differently, an unfolding). As *explication* it ‘differentiates’, as Deleuze termed it, since the One (fold) is manifested in the multiple, in a multitude of different expressions.<sup>87</sup> Importantly, this differentiation does not occur from actual to actual. It rather morphs through “counter-actualization, wherein an entity’s virtuality is further *differentiated* and subsequently actualized” or *differentiated* (it is *refolded* before it is *unfolded* again).<sup>88</sup> These processes of differentiation and differentiation thus account “for the often chaotic and non-linear nature of the world”, a world that is ever-becoming.<sup>89</sup> To conclude, Deleuze posits that reality “is at once both virtual and actual”.<sup>90</sup> The actual is the apparent characteristics, or better, the expressions of the world. The virtual is the other mode of reality, the mode that is not expressed; it is the totality of reality (or the world) that is *immanent* in the actual.<sup>91</sup> The basic idea is that the virtual

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<sup>83</sup> Lenco.

<sup>84</sup> Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*.

<sup>85</sup> Deleuze.

<sup>86</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*, 1968.

<sup>87</sup> Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*.

<sup>88</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” 148 own emphasis.

<sup>89</sup> Lenco, 148.

<sup>90</sup> Lenco, 147.

<sup>91</sup> Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, 269.

entails all the ways in which it (i.e., the fold) could have been expressed or actualized; it is the potentially real (and far from a fantasy, an illusion or ‘unreal’).

### **Identity through a preliminary conceptual framework**

At this point we can build a first, broad conceptual framework to approach identity in an alternative way (see Table 1).<sup>92</sup> The first axis concerns the virtual and actual dimension of reality. In terms of identity, the virtual denotes the totality of who I am (the folds and connections between them that constitute me), while the actual refers to how I am (the expressions of who I am, of the world from a particular point of view).<sup>93</sup> Crucially, I can never *actually* be all I am (e.g., at once a football player, a student, a brother et cetera). Nonetheless, my entirety is implicit in my expressions or actual being at a given moment in time, in every unfolding; and this is exactly why the virtual is indispensable. The other axis refers to the articulation (or frames) of experiences. In terms of identity, I am certain types (as is socially constructed), but I also apprehend and experience myself as different from those types. This does not mean, however, that somehow ‘in reality’ I am not those types. How I am different from the types must be understood with regard to the socially unarticulated.

First, identity can be studied as it actualized through social constructions (1). This is amply done in sociology and does not require further discussion here. The other three dimensions of reality are more difficult to grasp since they do not make sense socially as we

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<sup>92</sup> Perhaps important to mention is the fact that the virtual can be made empirically available by actualizing it through scientific methods (such as experimentation and thoroughly in-depth interviews). Moreover, in my understanding of Deleuze, the virtual is not only accessible for empirical investigations, but a must for any empirical inquiry. On the one hand, the virtual is immanent in the actual (both explicit as expression, and implicit, as folded within it). On the other hand, one can investigate the flows, relations and traces that constitute folds or foldings (the virtual).

<sup>93</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” 151.

literally lack the vocabulary to talk about them – which we must lack, or it would (in due time) become socially constructed again. Especially artists, but also intellectuals and sceptics, are indispensable in the articulation, expression and comprehension of other-than-socially constructed (non-)experiences. With their sense of possibility, sense of apprehension and expressive capabilities, they are the brokers of the lived and unlived realities beyond our (socially constructed) realities; not as the gatekeepers of a *Hinterwelt*, but as innovators, as creators of new realities that were already real, that already lie within reality.<sup>94</sup> They question and bring forth the world of possibilities, and its experiences and non-experiences that are, or rather at first might appear, absurd. As sociologist we should take this example, and follow up on our duty to *responsibly* transform our object, at large social life, for every intervention is transformative, and any action, but even more so institutional action, is intervening.

	Actual	Virtual
Socially Constructed	(1) experienced as actual-constructed	(2) (non-)experienced as potential construction
Socially Unarticulated	(3) actual-unarticulated (non-)experience	(4) virtual or potential (non-)experience

Table 1: Four dimensions of real phenomenological experiences

Second, social constructions that are not actualized are also of sociological interest (2). Of course, this is indeed a bit of a *contradictio in terminis*, for social constructions *must* be actualized to be considered socially real.<sup>95</sup> Nonetheless, one could study (a) social constructions

<sup>94</sup> Therefore, I believe art to be an empirical source of data *par excellence*. In particular the written word and even more so literature seems to be a treasure for sociological investigation considering the power of language (see Berger and Luckmann), the contemplation that went in during the creative process and its symbolic accessibility – although, by further reflection, this preference might be a mere indication of my lack of understanding of other forms of art, rather than the qualities I attributed to it.

<sup>95</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

that are not or alternatively actualized, (b) the ongoing enveloping of social constructions. One could study for instance how certain types are experienced in spatio-temporal contexts in which these types are not actualized, or reversely how they remain unexperienced because of the lack of constructions putting them into imagination (a). One could also investigate how certain types are alternatively actualized. Put differently, how do types consisting of different meaning structures in different temporo-spatial contexts influence the experience of these types differently (a). One could also study processes of identity (or in general experience) development where we, both subjectively and socially, are looking for the vocabulary to articulate our identities and the corresponding development and actualizations of potentially novel constructions to do so (b).

How I am different from social constructions, be it in potential (4) or violently experienced (3), I believe, cannot be articulated or expressed, nor experienced but (a) (negatively) in relation to the available social constructions of identity (e.g., I am not or I am different from that type), or – and this is way more difficult and intensive – (b) creatively by means of subversive and speculative imagination. Absurdity might, for instance, be an entrance to such thought (skepticism, irony, and other creative and subversive means are available as well).<sup>96</sup> What if I try to experience myself as a bird, for instance? Perhaps I am (like) a bird after all – and Nelly Furtado would presumably concur. And maybe I am also the color green. Indeed, after such a (thought) experiment I might *realize* that in some sense I experience myself sometimes and to some extent as the color green.

As absurd as it may sound, it opens up possibilities and modes of experiences that are already in the world, or as identity in myself, yet unrealized, and thus not lived. Just imagine

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<sup>96</sup> Absurdity means extraordinarily unreasonable. Insofar reason is socially defined (as is more or less explicit in Berger and Luckmann), absurdity is a form of *anti*-social thinking, and therefore of utmost use in going against the socially accepted or taken-for-granted.

the horizon of possibilities, the richness of experiences that awaits us if we dare to be absurd. In the end, the socially constructed reality is as absurd as any other; it is us who make sense out of it. And so, we could also make sense out of identity, in ways that at first might appear absurd.<sup>97</sup> What I wish to do here, is to develop a conceptual imaginary that allows us to investigate and hopefully also experience our plurality of being, our cosmic interconnectivity, and our romantic sociality; that is, to imagine identity in such a way that we find the other in me and as such, truly find ourselves.



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<sup>97</sup> Is the question ultimately not about the price we have to pay for the absurdities we choose(?) to believe in, about the benefits and detriments of life's absurdities that become socially meaningful?



## Chapter Two      A World of Difference

Besides constructivism, and already touched upon, also processualism aids the challenge of the implicit and highly problematic presuppositions that still “hold sway throughout much of the discipline”.<sup>98</sup> Processualism finds especially a strong ground in the principle of difference, which by principle refutes substantialism, essentialism, egologism and dualism. In turn, these presuppositions are respectively replaced by processualism, constructivism, ecologism and immanence, which allows for difference, interdependence, change, plurality et cetera. First, processualism shifts the focus and primacy from substances to processes.<sup>99</sup> According to processualists, “the whole universe” is “a vast process which is fluid and dynamic”.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, “everything is flux”.<sup>101</sup> If anything (but ontological grounds), this shift is practically necessitated by the need to allow for and explain change. As Abbott argues, “[i]t is possible to explain reproduction as a phenomenon sometimes produced by perpetual change; it is not possible to explain change as a phenomenon sometimes produced by perpetual stasis”.<sup>102</sup>

Second, constructivism posits a world of becoming, a world which is constructed through processes, as it folds, unfolds and refolds. Social life is then understood as “dynamic and continually reconstructive”.<sup>103</sup> Third, ecologism diverts from the (first-person) subject perspective and brings the totality of reality into perspective,<sup>104</sup> as it asserts that everything is

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<sup>98</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 281.

<sup>99</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology”; Peeter Selg, “Power and Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 27 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 539–57.

<sup>100</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology,” 18.

<sup>101</sup> Jean-François Côté, “G.H. Mead and Relational Sociology: The Case of Concepts,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 5 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 103.

<sup>102</sup> Abbott, 1997, 98 as cited in Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 305.

<sup>103</sup> Côté, “G.H. Mead and Relational Sociology,” 101.

<sup>104</sup> Doucet, “Shorelines, Seashells, and Seeds”; Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

“eminently connectable” and indirectly connected;<sup>105</sup> indeed, *everything*, non-humans included. As Doucet emphasizes, it not only reminds us of our interdependency but also our *intradependency* with others; or with Haraway, “nothing comes without its world”.<sup>106</sup> Fourth, with immanence (and monism) the totality of reality is not only put into our understanding of social life but also made ubiquitous. Indeed, “there is a oneness to the world of which all of the parts and variations are aspects”.<sup>107</sup> A last ingredient is missing for an account of social life that is social “all the way down”,<sup>108</sup> and this is relationism. As Emirbayer asserts, social reality is “dynamic, continuous, and processual” which is ought to be understood as “unfolding relations”.<sup>109</sup> *Indeed, it are relations that both constitute and give meaning to the social.*<sup>110</sup>

Relational sociology denotes this network of sociologists that acknowledge this quality of relations and develop sociologies that focus on relations. It sprung out of the structure-agency debates of the 80s and 90s as a reaction against sociology’s inability to account for change, pluralism and difference due to a lack of a social logic.<sup>111</sup> The ambitions to develop and integrate relational sociology, however, only emerged over the last decade or so.<sup>112</sup> Hence, it still is a “highly fragmented intellectual constellation of heterogeneous research by

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<sup>105</sup> Frédéric Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator: Overcoming the Divide Between Relational and Processual Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 2 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 39.

<sup>106</sup> Haraway 1997, 137 as cited in Doucet, “Shorelines, Seashells, and Seeds,” 383.

<sup>107</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” 144.

<sup>108</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, “What Is Agency?,” *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (January 1998): 974, <https://doi.org/10.1086/231294>.

<sup>109</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 281.

<sup>110</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology”; Pierpaolo Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 22 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 431–56.

<sup>111</sup> François Dépelteau, ed., “The Promises of the Relational Turn in Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, vol. Preface (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), ix.

<sup>112</sup> Dépelteau, ix.

individual[s], with little discussion between them”,<sup>113</sup> while it lacks “consensus on the ontological underpinnings, the epistemological premises or the proper methodological props”.<sup>114</sup> As Fuhse puts it, they “share little more than being centered on the term ‘social relations’, without even agreeing on its meaning”.<sup>115</sup> If anything, relational sociology can be characterized as an alternative “way of seeing (ontological) and knowing (epistemological) the world”, which puts relations into focus, and allows for social change and plurality.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, it can best be described as a turn, instead of a paradigm;<sup>117</sup> a turn, however, that might well have gained some momentum during the course of the last decade. While I take this turn since our critiques and ambitions align and the relational view is promising, I have no choice but to develop a relational position of my own. This position will be developed throughout this chapter and related to identity throughout the dissertation, but first let us discuss this relational(ist) outlook on social life.

### **An introduction to relational sociology**

In contrast with mainstream sociology as described in earlier, relational sociology fundamentally and radically rejects the “notion that one can posit discrete, pregiven units such as the individual or society [or identity] as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis”.<sup>118</sup> It thus seeks a third way, between individualism and holism yet without creating a new level in between (institutions) nor by conflating them into one as strategies to bypass the structure-

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<sup>113</sup> Dépelteau, vi.

<sup>114</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 37.

<sup>115</sup> Jan A. Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 23 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 457.

<sup>116</sup> Eacott, “Relations, Organising, Leadership and Education,” 655.

<sup>117</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 38.

<sup>118</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 287.

agency problem, but to eliminate the problem altogether.<sup>119</sup> Hence, relational sociology aims to “discuss, re-evaluate and reformulate our basic views of the social universe” as well as “the basic principles, ideas and practices of the discipline”.<sup>120</sup> To paraphrase Tilly, ‘substantialism stands as the thesis, constructivism as the antithesis – the seductive plumed tapir – and relational sociology as the hoped-for synthesis’.<sup>121</sup> I believe that is synthesis is to be found in difference defined as relation (as will be argued throughout this essay).

One of the few points most relational sociologists agree on is the fundamental premise that “[n]othing exists in isolation”,<sup>122</sup> nothing exists “anterior to any relation”, everything rather “gain[s] their *whole* being” from relations.<sup>123</sup> As John Donne reminds us as eloquently as one can find:

*No man is an island, entire of itself; Every man is a piece of the Continent,  
a part of the main; ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am  
involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell  
tolls; It tolls for thee.*

The fundamental point is that social life envelops and develops *as* relations, *in* relations and *through* relations. In short, relational sociology starts with the assumption that social life “is (not ‘has’) relations”.<sup>124</sup> They are immanent in all (forms of) social life. Relations are “what

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<sup>119</sup> Jorge Fontdevila, “Switchings Among Netdoms: The Relational Sociology of Harrison C. White,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 12 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 233; Natàlia Cantó-Milà, “Georg Simmel’s Concept of Forms of Association as an Analytical Tool for Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 11 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 217–30.

<sup>120</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology,” 5.

<sup>121</sup> Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 5.

<sup>122</sup> Spretnak 2011, 12, as cited in Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology,” 12.

<sup>123</sup> Cassirer 1953, 36 as cited in Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 287.

<sup>124</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 433.

makes society and individuals possible”,<sup>125</sup> they constitute social life,<sup>126</sup> or as even Tilly buttressed, relations are the stuff out of which social life is made.<sup>127</sup> Ultimately, it follows that relational sociologists “explicitly challenge the core assumptions of” social life and especially of identity.<sup>128</sup> This challenge, however, is not the end of identity (as Brubaker thought), but opens up ways to imagine identity alternatively (both within and outside academia).

It is with this in mind and hand that relational sociologists walk the theoretical tightrope between holism and individualism with ‘relations’ as their balancing pole. They bring relations into the picture, value them and focus on them. Relations surely were already within the sociological framework, but relational sociologists aim to radicalize and “further the theoretical and methodological pluralism that is already the norm in sociology”.<sup>129</sup> It is for this reason that they take relations as the fundament of social life. This shift “affords a place to both individual actors (human and corporate) and societies [social fields, systems, etc.] but refuses to treat either as foundational”.<sup>130</sup> *They rather “reverse the order” and “treat what we take to be individual units [i.e., substances] as derivative of relational process[es]”.*<sup>131</sup> Or as Vandenberghe sums up the relationalist view on social life:

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<sup>125</sup> Cantó-Milà, “Georg Simmel’s Concept of Forms of Association as an Analytical Tool for Relational Sociology,” 217.

<sup>126</sup> Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” 523.

<sup>127</sup> Chares Demetriou, “Charles Tilly and Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 15 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 309.

<sup>128</sup> Eacott, “Relations, Organising, Leadership and Education,” 653–54.

<sup>129</sup> David Toews, “Pluralism and Relationalism in Social Theory: Lessons from the Tarde–Durkheim Debate,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 4 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 85.

<sup>130</sup> Nick Crossley, “Music Sociology in Relational Perspective,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 30 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 601.

<sup>131</sup> Gergen 2009, xx-xxi as cited in Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology,” 15 own emphasis.

*“In the beginning was the relation and in the relation is the beginning. Over and against holistic and individualistic approaches, it affirms the primacy of relations. Neither the individual nor society exist by themselves.”*<sup>132</sup>

To do this, means to radically break with substantialism, essentialism, egologism and dualism, as ways to enable ourselves to account for change, plurality, difference and the like. It follows that no “discrete pregiven units” can be taken “as ultimate starting points of sociological research”.<sup>133</sup> The relational turn rather prompts sociology to “be the discipline of the ‘in between’, of the invisible”,<sup>134</sup> to ‘start in the middle’,<sup>135</sup> and it specifies this middle as the relation. In other words, it invites us to “take relations as our fundamental unit” of analysis,<sup>136</sup> and relationalism “as the first general presupposition for sociological analysis”.<sup>137</sup> It adheres to the following imperative: “Do not treat social facts as things. Do exactly the opposite. Treat things as social facts and social facts as relations, processes, practices.”.<sup>138</sup> To put it succinctly, relational sociology asserts that social phenomena cannot be known, understood or explained but through the relations that constitute them.<sup>139</sup> The same is true for identity.

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<sup>132</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 39.

<sup>133</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 287.

<sup>134</sup> Cantó-Milà, “Georg Simmel’s Concept of Forms of Association as an Analytical Tool for Relational Sociology,” 219.

<sup>135</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology”; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>136</sup> Powell 2013, 190 as cited in Doucet, “Shorelines, Seashells, and Seeds,” 383.

<sup>137</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 433.

<sup>138</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 43.

<sup>139</sup> Prandini, “Relational Sociology”; Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology”; Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism”; Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto”; Cantó-Milà, “Georg Simmel’s Concept of Forms of Association as an Analytical Tool for Relational Sociology.”

## Radical relational sociology

Even though relational sociology is highly fragmented, two poles can be identified: a structural-relational and a processual-constructivist pole.<sup>140</sup> I start the development of my relational approach of identity with the processual-constructivist pole, which is also referred to as deep or radical relationalism.<sup>141</sup> This is because I concur with their processual ontology. By defining relations as transactions, it fuses processualism, constructivism and relationalism into a single one framework.<sup>142</sup> The sociology that follows from these philosophical presuppositions could be termed a “sociology of occasions”<sup>143</sup> or of ‘events’.<sup>144</sup> Its proponents tend to flows, associations, relations, practices and communication, although it is in particular (specified as) action that (it) receives special attention in this perspective; at least, in the way it was framed by Dewey.

In contrast to the two substantialist views, transactionalism “does not maintain a sharp separation between” entities (cf., self-actionalism), nor between their elements or attributes (interactionalism).<sup>145</sup> It rather posits an ontology of continuous (d)emergence of units through

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<sup>140</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator.” Besides the emphasis on either structure or process, there is also the sociological interest in power (cf., in some sense respectively Durkheim, Weber and Marx). Power is obviously of utmost importance in the discussion of relations. It therefore has more or less a prominence in either side of relational sociology. I reckon that this is why Vandenberghe does not recognize it as a separate approach. Also, needless to say that most authors would situate themselves somewhere between these poles or in a particular configuration of the arguments of either.

<sup>141</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology”; Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology”; Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator.”

<sup>142</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology”; Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator.”

<sup>143</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 295–96.

<sup>144</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology”; Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks.”

<sup>145</sup> Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto,” 397.

their interdependency,<sup>146</sup> in which they “can be considered separately, but not as being separate”.<sup>147</sup> As such, transactionalism learns us to see together “what before had been seen in separations and held severally apart”.<sup>148</sup> These relations are moreover seen as “preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances”.<sup>149</sup> In other words, social life develops “within fields of mutual determination and flux”.<sup>150</sup> Out of these dynamic, ever unfolding relations, “new actors, new entities, [and] new relations among old parts” emerge, before they transform and demerge again.<sup>151</sup> Such a thoroughly relational (or transactional) approach overcomes the structure-agency debate not by mere voluntarism or determinism, neither by a combination or conflation of both, but by embedding “both individuals and social formations [...] in the same relational order”.<sup>152</sup>

It follows that “the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and *identity* from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction”.<sup>153</sup> Put differently, “A is what she is and is doing what she is doing because she is ‘trans-acting’ with B, and vice versa”.<sup>154</sup> As Dewey and Bentley exemplified, “no one would be able successfully to speak of the hunter and the hunted as isolated with respect to hunting. Yet it is just as absurd to set up hunting as an event in isolation from the spatio-temporal

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<sup>146</sup> Liang and Liu, 397.

<sup>147</sup> Selg, “Power and Relational Sociology,” 542; Guy, “Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?”; Tõnis Saarts and Peeter Selg, “Mann and Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 16 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 325–41.

<sup>148</sup> Dewey and Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 112.

<sup>149</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 289 emphasis added.

<sup>150</sup> Emirbayer, 288.

<sup>151</sup> Abbott 1996, 863 as cited in Emirbayer, 289; Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology.”

<sup>152</sup> Saarts and Selg, “Mann and Relational Sociology,” 327.

<sup>153</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 287 emphasis added.

<sup>154</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” 502.



connection of all the components.”<sup>155</sup> Indeed, “the constant relations between different actors constitute and reconstitute their identities”.<sup>156</sup> To conclude, with Somers and Dewey, “[w]hat appear to be autonomous categories defined by their attributes are reconceived more accurately as historically shifting sets of relationships that are contingently stabilized”,<sup>157</sup> “without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities’”.<sup>158</sup>

Hence, radical relationalists tend to posit a ‘flat’ ontology in which there is only one level of social life, and it consists of unfolding relations,<sup>159</sup> which are often understood as nothing more than “the actual transactions ... in various fields”.<sup>160</sup> Three points are crucial here: radical relationalists generally (i) understand relations solely as transactions, (ii) tend to focus on the actual, and (iii) (only) acknowledge the situational emergence of social fields. The first point is very reductive but will be discussed later. I can be brief about the second since I have argued already how a focus on the actual at the expense of the virtual is detrimental for sociology and our social lives. Needless to remind ourselves that the fact that *le monde “n’existe pas hors de ses expressions”*,<sup>161</sup> does not imply that it “is limited to its actualizations”.<sup>162</sup> This brings us to the third point, which could be termed the problem of substantial emergence, and of which could be said that it has replaced the structure-agency and structuration debate.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Dewey and Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 133.

<sup>156</sup> Demetriou, “Charles Tilly and Relational Sociology,” 338.

<sup>157</sup> Somers 1995, 136 as cited in Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 300.

<sup>158</sup> Dewey and Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 108.

<sup>159</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology”; Christian Papilloud, “Bruno Latour and Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 9 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 183–97.

<sup>160</sup> Prandini, “Relational Sociology,” 6.

<sup>161</sup> Own translation: “The world does not exist outside of its expressions” Deleuze, *Le Pli*, 181.

<sup>162</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*, 63 own translation.

<sup>163</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator.”

Third, a flat ontology postulates that there can “be no difference or hierarchy of being, wherein some things are ‘more’ or ‘differently’ than others”, rather “they have the same ontological standing”, namely unfolding relations.<sup>164</sup> Radical relationalists conclude that since nothing can ‘transcendent’ this immanent whole, the existence of social structures and (/or as) entities must be refuted.<sup>165</sup>

### **The transcendental illusion**

The fundamental idea for relational sociologists is that existence precedes essence – to put it with Sartre – and since existence is all the way through relational, there is no essence but an emergent relational essence. As Donati notoriously put it, “at the beginning of every social reality there is the relation”.<sup>166</sup> Radical relationalists even go a step farther in asserting that nothing exists prior or anterior to its relations, thereby even denying existence but relational existence. From this position it follows that not even a relational essence can emerge, or at best only as a transactional or momentary relational identity. What does exist for relationalists, however, are relations. If its emergence beyond its initial and momentary emergence is accepted, it is attributed “a social and historical character” (cf., structural-relational pole),<sup>167</sup> otherwise it is purely processual in a transactional sense (cf., processual-constructivist pole). It is the latter I want to criticize, or rather nuance, here.

Radical relational sociology posits that what appears as stable entities are rather in fact the ‘constant outcomes of processes’ or ‘relational effects’.<sup>168</sup> This entitative appearance is

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<sup>164</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” 147.

<sup>165</sup> Eacott, “Relations, Organising, Leadership and Education,” 651.

<sup>166</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 434.

<sup>167</sup> Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” 523.

<sup>168</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology.”

sometimes called the ‘transcendental illusion’ by Deleuze.<sup>169</sup> Their apparent identities are not derived from some sort of transcendental essence, as somehow having an existence *beyond* the social world, but rather from difference, as it is literally a multiplicity.<sup>170</sup> White therefore stresses that social order is “messy and refractory, a shambles rather than a crystal”,<sup>171</sup> not to mention how different orders intermesh.<sup>172</sup> Hence, Tarde refers to apparent entities (or wholes or totalities) as ‘un-wholes’ or ‘ensembles’, which he specifies as compositions, convergence and decelerations of social flows, while Tonkonoff emphasizes that Tarde understands them as continuously “made, transformed and unmade”.<sup>173</sup> Entities and structures must thus be understood as ‘confictions’, both “a work of connection [cf., con]” and “a work of imagination [cf., fiction]”.<sup>174</sup> Through a transcendental illusion,<sup>175</sup> a plurality or multiplicity is taken together and imagined as singularity.

In spite of this common, transcendental apprehension of the world, entities and structures are, as Dépelteau emphasizes over and over again, “a capacity, a precarious *effect* of relations, not an external social ‘thing’”.<sup>176</sup> They exist “as emergent properties of interaction” or transaction.<sup>177</sup> And since “they emerge from interaction, which unfolds through time, societies are always in process”.<sup>178</sup> Dépelteau therefore argues that entities and social order(s) should be

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<sup>169</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology.”

<sup>170</sup> Lenco.

<sup>171</sup> White 2008, 18 as cited in Fontdevila, “Switchings Among Netdoms,” 233.

<sup>172</sup> Guy, “Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?,” 300.

<sup>173</sup> Tonkonoff, “Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.,” 77.

<sup>174</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*, 35 own translation.

<sup>175</sup> According to Deleuze because of faulty presuppositions in our culture. While I concur with him, I would not discard psychological explanations (both social and on the level of the mind). Either way, the world is indeed apprehended through transcendentalism. This alone, makes it already sociologically relevant.

<sup>176</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” 509 own emphasis.

<sup>177</sup> Crossley, “Music Sociology in Relational Perspective,” 602.

<sup>178</sup> Crossley, 602.

explained as constant social effects, rather than used as causes.<sup>179</sup> And as a radical relationalist, he asserts that they can be explained as emergent effects of *transactions*.<sup>180</sup> Lenco sums it this line of thought nicely up as follows:

*“the elegant notion that the more ‘fixed’ states of affairs that we observe and live are the results of intensive communications allows for both chaos and emergence as well as stratification and capture, but again what we call units or individuals are always the results, not the causes.”*<sup>181</sup>

There are several problems with the radical relationalist approach that have to be dealt with. In short one could say that I agree with the radical relational approach, yet wish to ‘deradicalize’ it as it went too far (which is typical for reactions, for the antithesis), and suggest some theoretical additions to make this step ‘backwards’ or synthesizing step tenable. Fundamentally, most of the shortcomings stem from a (radicalized) fear of anything substantial, entitative or structural; a recognition of its problematic character became a wish to annihilate it all together. Indeed, when radicalized, processual ontologies tend to become what Porpora calls a ‘lava lamp ontology’ which she describes as “all flows without structure or things ... trying to melt all that is solid into air”;<sup>182</sup> leaving “behind any idea of a substantial reality”, as Donati continues this critical realist complaint.<sup>183</sup> And as Vandenberghe realizes, “[w]ithout a solid concept of structure and social systems”, relational sociology “becomes idealistic and loses its critical edge (as is the case with structuration theory)”.<sup>184</sup>

<sup>179</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” 500.

<sup>180</sup> Dépelteau, 500.

<sup>181</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” 153.

<sup>182</sup> Douglas V. Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 21 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 427.

<sup>183</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 447.

<sup>184</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 45.

Radical relationalists thus make the mistake to throw the baby out with the bathwater, instead of accounting for the problems of substantialism in a processual-relational manner. Instead, they adhere to actualism, “an ontology that acknowledges only events or happenings” and dissolves everything.<sup>185</sup> Consequently, they assume (problematically) that there is nothing prior to the transactions they study. Moreover, the radical “insistence on flows, associations, relations and practices” ironically leads to the same “anti-humanism of the structuralists” they wish to fight, but now “at a molecular level”.<sup>186</sup> Hence radical relationalism tends to become reified into an approach of anonymous processes without subjects.<sup>187</sup> The problem lies not so much in the proposition that subjects are constituted by (processual) relations, but in the radicalization of this proposition which refutes that there is such a thing as a subject. Furthermore, and again ironically, while refuting the existence of the individual, it is as reductionist as individualism, for it chooses to focus only on the transaction at hand and neglects the simple fact that these transactions are embedded in indirect relations.<sup>188</sup> They tend to be so wary of reification, structures and (/or as) entities, that with their transactional acids they solve all that reeks of substance without any considerations into unrecognizable liquids.

From the rejection of any form of substantialism and predefinition, as well as from this reductive understanding of the relation as nothing more than a transaction also stems an uneasiness with temporal understandings beyond the transactional snapshot. This makes radical relational sociology inadequate and unable “to analytically theorize social interactions as a separate mediating temporal phase between a starting structure and an elaborated structure”.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, since it “treats relations as a circle of interactions that are an end in themselves”, they

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<sup>185</sup> Not unlike myself, he “defends a reality richer than just what happens or that can be observed” (419). Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology,” 417, 419.

<sup>186</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 39.

<sup>187</sup> Vandenberghe, 45.

<sup>188</sup> Fontdevila, “Switchings Among Netdoms,” 234.

<sup>189</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 436.

lose their sight on and understanding of history and continuity, of a reality (not behind but) beyond the transactional moment.<sup>190</sup> To be fair, processual relationalists (both radical and more structural) realize this problem, and readily admit that the past, present and future all meet in the transaction. But to call history into the transaction, they have to invoke concepts such as traces (e.g., Fuhse, Dépelteau, White and Serres),<sup>191</sup> remainders (e.g., Deleuze)<sup>192</sup> and processual memories (e.g., Dépelteau),<sup>193</sup> which gives away that there is a substantial component (i.e., a component that emerges beyond its transactional moment) to social life. Because of the overemphasis on transactions which in turn denies anything beyond transactions (which is sometimes called the ‘interactionist fallacy’), it thus fails to recognize that while transactions are without final attribution, they have lasting effects, effects that perhaps do not become external causal forces, but that do indeed keep flowing.

Once more, relational effects do not simple emerge and demerge, but as emerged effects become themselves flows: they are “ongoing histories, [that] manifest both an irreducible dynamic *and* emergent properties”.<sup>194</sup> These histories, emergent properties, and consistencies tend to get lost in radical relationalism.<sup>195</sup> In terms of identity, it means that there is no identity besides the moment of unfolding, the situational transaction (in which it emerges, before it demerges again). They thereby radicalize the situational approach to identity. This might be fitting for the study of *actual* identities – and I would argue that it is even preferable considering its solid presuppositions. The problem, however, is that individuals and their identities are understood as no more than an event, while at the same time, it neglects the emergence of

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<sup>190</sup> Donati, 436.

<sup>191</sup> Fontdevila, “Switchings Among Netdoms”; Pyyhtinen, “Triangular Relations”; Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks.”

<sup>192</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology.”

<sup>193</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology.”

<sup>194</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 125 own emphasis.

<sup>195</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism.”

identity beyond the transaction, its continuity, its tendency towards coherence despite of its plurality, its virtuality, et cetera. I therefore argue that this transactional view on identity is only useful within a broader framework of identity which allows for its more substantial character as well; and this substantiality must be and can be accounted for through a processual framework.



## Chapter Three A World of Symbolic Order

Most of the criticisms formulated in the previous chapter come from critical realist relationalists. They are ‘critical’ realists since they are ‘post-positivist’.<sup>196</sup> They uphold “a realist philosophy”, which “unlike positivism, [is] a critical rather than naïve realism”, which stands in “opposition to actualism”, and which is richer than ‘constructivism’.<sup>197</sup> More specifically, they believe in the reality of *sui generis*, transcendental emergence of social phenomena. While I recognize the importance of their critiques, I believe that their structural approach to social life is too radical in the opposite direction. Radical accounts are interesting as they are highly apt to illuminate certain aspects by opposition, but are problematic for synthesizing purposes since they do not allow for any compromises. Insightful indications can nonetheless be found in such accounts to develop more synthetic accounts. Other important sources of inspirations to reconcile processualism with substantiality are the relational sociologies of in particular Crossley,<sup>198</sup> Vandenberghe and the late Emirbayer.<sup>199</sup>

Not very dissimilar to them, I am not convinced that one can account for all social phenomena through transactions alone.<sup>200</sup> Ultimately, I argue that the acknowledgment of both the entitative *and* processual nature of social phenomena (that achieve a certain coherence), allows us to appreciate them fully. And these seeming entities and structural aspects of social life must be appreciated since (a) social life *tends* towards patterns and order (while

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<sup>196</sup> Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology.”

<sup>197</sup> Porpora, 418.

<sup>198</sup> Crossley is recognized by critical realist relationalists for his relational-structural accounts of social life, despite being a processualist - which shows to me how he has been successful in his integrative purposes. Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology.”

<sup>199</sup> Fuhse also developed a synthetic relational sociology based on network theory, White’s relational work, and Luhmann’s system theory, but could not strike any chords with me. He deserves a mention nonetheless.

<sup>200</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes”; Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator.”



paradoxically also being inclined towards disruption and chaos), and (b) they have to be known if one wishes to change them (which must be actively sought and fought for considering its persistency).<sup>201</sup> However, if one wishes to maintain the substantial in any tenable way, processual acknowledgements are indispensable – as even the critical realists recognize.

In this chapter I focus on this problem of substantial emergence, for the debate is not only important for our discussion of identity, but also fundamental to indicate, address and resolve the shortcomings of processualism. I do this by arguing for a more substantial (yet not substantialist) yet still processual approach to identity (and social life). This chapter can thus be read as an effort to reconcile the structural and the substantial with a processual ontology based on the principle of difference. Similar to Brubaker's attempt – in which I believe he did not fully succeed – it is an essay to avoid “both naïve realism and radical constructivism”.<sup>202</sup> First, I discuss how the processual and the structural relate to each other, how they are to side of the same coin both overemphasizing the importance of one side over the other. Second, I propose a theory of symbolic convergence that can give a processual account of the structural and the substantial. By addressing both sides of the coin simultaneously it will become clear how the structural and the substantial are paradoxically unwholes, ensembles or entitativities. On the one hand, they tend towards entitativity, while on the other hand, they only appear as an entity as a transcendental illusion. To develop this idea, we discuss the mediating role of culture between structure and process, sociality as the anthropological condition of man, Tarde's sociology which accounts for the convergence or confluence of social flows, and the ‘real’ and ‘apparent’ qualities of symbols.

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<sup>201</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 47.

<sup>202</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 447.

## Between processualism and substantiality

The reconciliation of processualism and substantiality is built upon the simple premise that human behavior tends towards habitualization and patterns.<sup>203</sup> As Berger and Luckmann explain, this is the case on a subjective, intersubjective and social level.<sup>204</sup> Relational sociologists emphasize that on all these levels (which ultimately appertain to the same flat ontology of streams), relations can be(come) patterned,<sup>205</sup> as they emerge for real in the form of social fields, networks, figurations, ‘societies’ et cetera. By redefining these ‘social structures’ as patterned relations, their recursive ‘nature’ is emphasized; that is, they are only ‘real’ insofar they are recursive, insofar they emerge continuously through the relations they are constituted by. Processualism thus reminds us that “structures are not stable, but have to be enacted and reproduced”.<sup>206</sup> As such, they cannot be external to its constituents elements; “their existence is the effect of their assemblage, not its cause”.<sup>207</sup> It is therefore important to stress that it does not follow that they can self-act or inter-act; they are rather constant “social effects, not interactants”.<sup>208</sup> Processualism also asserts that they constantly “emerge, change, and potentially wither away”.<sup>209</sup> The structural and the substantial is then to a certain extent tenable, even from a processual stance. Indeed, counter to radical relationalists’ beliefs, none of this denies the existence of the structural and the substantial and rather remain to be accounted for – and it is here that a purely transactional approach falls short.

I take issue with the primacy of substances, as do all relationalists, but like more structural relationalists I do not wish to rid sociology of substantiality. This is not the case

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<sup>203</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>204</sup> Berger and Luckmann.

<sup>205</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 292.

<sup>206</sup> Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks,” 462.

<sup>207</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” 500.

<sup>208</sup> Dépelteau, 500.

<sup>209</sup> Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks,” 462.

because structures and (/or as) entities would be real, as for instance critical realists argue, but because they are useful and real in their consequences; indeed, social life is structured and substantial, even if some imagination is needed to assert this. Hence, I contend that researchers should alternate between more structural and more processual accounts of social phenomena, while continuously emphasizing the processual nature of seemingly fixed or durable entities and structures – as I will later showcase for identity.<sup>210</sup>

The question is then about how we imagine structures and how we have to remain critical of our imagination. Many relational sociologists instate for this reason “a duality of structures and events”,<sup>211</sup> although I would stress that this should be no more than an analytical duality, a duality of perspective and imagination rather than an ontological duality or a dualist view on social life. Indeed, structures and (/or as) entities are always the result of an imaginative act which neglects differences. Not dissimilar to Weber’s idealtypes, they can be analytically useful as it enables us to see ‘things’ that remain otherwise out of view, in particular when interested in the more patterned, seemingly entitative and structural aspects of social life. But, not to fall into the trap to take them for ‘real’, one must maintain “a continuous work of heresy”,<sup>212</sup> and keep challenging these useful confictions by focusing on the processual. Indeed, *counterbalance* with heresy, rather than *refute* them with the atheism of the radical relationalists which simply kills all the gods (here everything substantial).<sup>213</sup> In sum, when dealing with the substantial and the structural, one has to keep remembering that “[t]he ‘structures’ of the social are never as stable and solid as they appear to us or as we wish them to be”,<sup>214</sup> while maintaining the recognition of the aspects of social life that tend towards structurality and its persistency.

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<sup>210</sup> Guy, “Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?,” 295.

<sup>211</sup> Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks,” 462.

<sup>212</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*, 18 own translation.

<sup>213</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>214</sup> Dépelteau, “From the Concept of ‘Trans-Action’ to a Process-Relational Sociology,” 515.

## Symbolic convergence

The paradoxical relation between structure and process remains to be explained. To solve this paradox I propose a theory of symbolic convergence. I depart from Vandenberghe's formula "[s]tructure is processes and process is [cultured] practice (process-in-practice)".<sup>215</sup> He explains himself as follows:

*[t]he distinction between structure and process is temporal: the past versus the present; the longue durée of institutional time and the temps court of interactions between people ... To zip structure to process, one needs the mediation between culture and practice ... Practices are structured, which means they are regulated by culture, and they reproduce and transform social structures. The reference to culture is essential, because thanks to culture, the relations between people become symbolic interactions.*<sup>216</sup>

Structure and process thus relate to each other "through the mediation of culture".<sup>217</sup> Indeed, culture is the "source of both social order and social change", and thus indispensable for relational accounts.<sup>218</sup> To avoid the trap of determinism, however, we need to reconceptualize culture in a processualist manner. For this we need Gabriel Tarde<sup>219</sup> who's sociology could be seen as Deleuze's sociological complement.<sup>220</sup> To be more precise than Vandenberghe, we could state with Tarde that imitation translates the social world into culture while it keeps the flows flowing; it is the social motor of social folding.

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<sup>215</sup> Vandenberghe, "The Relation as Magical Operator," 47.

<sup>216</sup> Vandenberghe, 47.

<sup>217</sup> Vandenberghe, 45.

<sup>218</sup> Vandenberghe, 46.

<sup>219</sup> Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) is a contemporary of Durkheim, and could be seen as the one who, for now, lost out in the history books. Although, Tarde might not have had his last words yet on the development of sociological theory.

<sup>220</sup> Interestingly, Deleuze never failed to acclaim Tarde's works. Lenco, "Deleuze and Relational Sociology," 145.

The propagation of social flows through imitation is only possible by means of communication. At the basis of imitation therefore lies the anthropological condition of man: sociality (this will later be conceptualized through processualism). While the world is a priori flowing, it is not communicative prior to our sociality; this ontological condition that makes us assume that the world 'tells us something'. As communications, the flows of the world become social flows, that is, injected with a message or utterance, which is possible to comprehend and relate to, in short to be social with. As communications, flows can subjectively be picked up and disseminated.<sup>221</sup> Tarde refers to this process with his concept 'imitation', but today we would presumably rather speak of 'internalization' and 'externalization' as the mechanism(s) of sociality.

Implicit in both internalization and imitation is the notion of 'direct translation' or subjective interpretation (even if unconscious or unreflexively) crucial. Direct *translation* for it points towards its inherent difference, that is, every imitation or translation is unavoidably different from the preceding or original.<sup>222</sup> But it is also *direct* (translation) since flows do not only passively become part of one, but are actively enmeshed in one's being while flowing through. Put differently, flows are not simply stored in one and as such keep their own existence, but rather become something different as it passes through, among others, the subject. Although, it must be duly noted that they also leave remainders or traces behind, that are consequently picked up and transformed by subsequent flows.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Tonkonoff, "Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.," 71.

<sup>222</sup> Tonkonoff, 69; Pyyhtinen, "Triangular Relations."

<sup>223</sup> Tonkonoff, "Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference."

However, Tarde does not simply state that social life flows “from one body to another”, but that through this process of imitation they produce “in them individual and group ‘identities’”.<sup>224</sup> He refers to this process more specifically as “the streaming *and* the *confluence* of multiple flows” into identities.<sup>225</sup> Imitation indeed makes and keeps social flows flowing (socially). But he then goes on to argue that these flows ‘converge’ and ‘integrate’, thereby creating “particular mode[s] of integration”.<sup>226</sup> So, on the one hand, the points of convergence are made “socially similar to themselves and to others”,<sup>227</sup> while on the other hand, “each one is a multilinear set of social flows integrated in an original manner”.<sup>228</sup>

As such, these points of convergence and integration appear (or emerge) as ‘entities’, individuals and social order alike, and could then best be described as “integrations or co-adaptations of flows of diverse origins and directions”.<sup>229</sup> They are, in other words, “the provisional and unstable coadaptation of chaotic and scattered social flows which, logically and teleologically integrating themselves, achieve a certain coherence, organization and regular speed”.<sup>230</sup> The appearance of identity and integration (or rather ‘assimilation’?) of flows then stems from “[t]he universal tendency toward colonization and homogenization present in each”.<sup>231</sup> In these moments in which imitation achieves coherence and a regular speed, Tarde speaks of ‘traditional imitation’. It is important to note that the consequent seeming ‘identities’ should rather be understood as ‘repetitions’ since they are “iterated propagations of a difference” rather than simply becoming the Same – which is by principle impossible.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Tonkonoff, 71.

<sup>225</sup> Tonkonoff, 68 emphasis added.

<sup>226</sup> Tonkonoff, 68.

<sup>227</sup> Tonkonoff, 71.

<sup>228</sup> Tonkonoff, 72.

<sup>229</sup> Tonkonoff, 79.

<sup>230</sup> Tonkonoff, 76.

<sup>231</sup> Tonkonoff, 73.

<sup>232</sup> Tonkonoff, 77; see also Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*.

However, to paraphrase Tonkonoff, this tendency unavoidably fails because of the interferences social streams find in their path (differentiation and differentiation in Deleuze).<sup>233</sup> These interferences “can assume the form of oppositions, or can give rise to new co-adaptations”.<sup>234</sup> The former are the source of ‘struggles’ and the latter of ‘inventions’.<sup>235</sup> In terms of identity, they could be described as respectively ‘identity crises’ or troubles, and the emergence or *development* of new identities. These interference can, furthermore, cause “more rapid and intense flows able to destabilize” entities and their continuously pursued and achieved coherence.<sup>236</sup> Tarde calls this rapid imitation ‘fashions’.<sup>237</sup> In contrast to traditions, fashions give rise to multitudes and account for change.<sup>238</sup> In other words, fashions are radically different folds that are exponentially being unfolded. However, these fashions can in turn “take root and reproduce as custom”, tradition, institution or culture (to ascend the stairs of generalization).<sup>239</sup> Moreover, “through the co-adaption of inventions”, the disperse multitude of infinitesimal social streams can be systemized into a coherent subjects and ensembles, and the antagonisms or struggles caused by interferences can be disarticulated.<sup>240</sup>

In sum, the world of becoming is continuously flowing and folding, at different speeds, and creating at moments and to some extent coherence, before destabilizing and changing again. The entities that appear during these processes can then “be thought of as *an open set of blurred, moving and unstable contours produced in a somatic singularity by the mimetic playing out of*

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<sup>233</sup> Tonkonoff, “Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.,” 73.

<sup>234</sup> Tonkonoff, 73.

<sup>235</sup> Tonkonoff, 73.

<sup>236</sup> Tonkonoff, 77.

<sup>237</sup> Tonkonoff, 77.

<sup>238</sup> Tonkonoff, 77. Unrelated but perhaps interesting nonetheless, one could argue that what many scholars identify as postmodernity, late modernity, liquid modernity and the like, is above all a period in time characterized by an increase in fashions and decrease in traditions. This insight might give another outlook on the diachronic understanding of our and preceding times.

<sup>239</sup> Tonkonoff, 73, 77.

<sup>240</sup> Tonkonoff, 76.

*social life*".<sup>241</sup> And their identities are then nothing more than the "*compromise solutions* which are constantly challenged and put in communication by the impersonal social flows that fold and unfold them".<sup>242</sup> The individual is thus "conceived both as an intentional unity and as a building block of the social, *a narcissistic chimera*".<sup>243</sup> Despite this narcissistic tendency, "[w]e also ought to accept that no set (no whole) is able to close over itself and totalize the elements which compose it".<sup>244</sup> Lastly, to understand social life and the emergent entities within it, in its coherence and instability alike, Tarde concludes and asserts, one should explain it by the infinitesimal out of which it is made.<sup>245</sup> And as said earlier, I understand and specify the infinitesimal as the social relation – as I will explore in the next chapter.

### *The qualities of symbols*

Likewise to Berger and Luckmann's phenomenology, the subjective relation to the world becomes social through interaction. In this process symbols and symbolic systems emerge that transform the world as well as its propagation and availability, whilst also shaping our relations to it.<sup>246</sup> As social flows become symbolic, our relations in and to the world (or practices) become cultured and thus structured and shared. Symbolic interactionists tend to conclude that through the structural-social aspect of culture and its symbolic systems, they constitute "a societal community of shared meanings, norms and values" and "form a collective subjectivity of sorts".<sup>247</sup> While I concur with these premises, I come to another conclusion.

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<sup>241</sup> Tonkonoff, 72 own emphasis.

<sup>242</sup> Tonkonoff, 72 emphasis added.

<sup>243</sup> I will come back to this idea of identity as a (possibly) narcissistic relation in *Chapter Four*. Tonkonoff, 72 own emphasis.

<sup>244</sup> Tonkonoff, 80.

<sup>245</sup> Tonkonoff, "Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference."

<sup>246</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Walter Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit* (Antwerpen: Intersentia, 2017).

<sup>247</sup> Vandenberghe, "The Relation as Magical Operator," 44–45.



I would downplay the constitution of something called *a* culture, *a* society or whatever integrated structure implying some kind of unity and boundedness (of meaning and being). These supposed entities only appear as a transcendental illusion to any of its faithful believers (be it the sociologist, the populace or anyone else), even though some coherence can indeed be discerned. The problem lies in the exaggeration of unity of meaning and the overplaying of its boundedness, which, in turn, leads to the reification of the idea of groups, societies, cultures et cetera. I would even go as far as to argue that there is no such thing as society – unfortunately paraphrasing Margaret Thatcher while my ideas might well be the opposite of her intended message. The question then begs itself how social order can be possible at all. This paradox is possible due to what I term ‘symbolic convergence’.

This ‘theory’ of symbolic convergence is built upon one of the fundamental qualities of symbols that seems to be often overlooked:<sup>248</sup> its capacity to disguise polyvocality and ambiguity in an seemingly univocal and clear symbol.<sup>249</sup> Symbols are abstractions that transform an infinite number of differing meanings (even if only differing ever so slightly) into a single symbol. For this, there must be to some extent coherence and convergence of meaning, but more importantly also abstraction (detachment of the concrete reality that was meaningfully apprehended by the subject and socially objectified) and obfuscation. Through these processes symbols are apprehended as a vague sense of a clear, univocal and shared symbolic meaning (symbolic here in the sense that it is attached to a certain signifying symbol). Put differently, these apparent qualities of symbols are presumed.

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<sup>248</sup> Not in the least by Berger and Luckmann for instance in spite of their extensive discussion of symbols and their qualities. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>249</sup> Katherine Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?,” *Daedalus*, 122, 3 (1993).

This presumption is furthered by the objective quality of symbols, which makes them taken-for-granted and thus uncontested ‘until further notice’.<sup>250</sup> As a result, more often than not we simply presume its qualities and fail to reflect about the symbols we live by, ultimately leading to the fact that have no idea of their meaning (besides a vague sense, that is). Sociologically speaking this is desirable as it enables us to interact most of the times without any problems on the simply presumption of consensus, the idea that the other knows what I mean and that I know what I mean (e.g., Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology). This belief, however, is only possible by the fact that we most often ignore the multiplicity and ambiguity of symbols. Rather symbols are understood as univocal on a social level (each symbol has one or a few clear meanings and this is shared by everyone) and on a subjective level (I have one or a few clear meanings for each symbol). At the same time, the idiosyncratic differences (between social and subjective meanings) are ignored as well.

It is through these symbolic qualities (of objectivity and unity) and the presumptuous social belief in its apparent qualities (shared, clear and univocal) that practices can be(come) structured. Indeed, in most practices or interactions, the undoubtful presence of discrepancies in meanings are never realized, or at the very least do not become acute or problematic, and can therefore become structured – that is, besides the moment some of them become contested, and their meanings are discussed deliberatively. The creation of symbolic systems and universes leads then to apparent social orders, such as groups, societies, cultures et cetera. Abbott, a processualist *pur sang*, states that ‘entitativity’ is characterized by coherence and causal authority; and Emirbayer emphasizes that neither can be taken for granted but must be explained.<sup>251</sup> What happens, I reckon, is that social flows enter into the centrifugal process around points of convergence which creates seeming entities with a certain coherence by

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<sup>250</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>251</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 304.

revolving the flows around the point of convergence while converging them. Metaphorically, this can be imagined as a whirlpool (if possible imagined multidimensionally). These entities nonetheless always have to be understood as (entitative) transactions, not really in themselves, but rather directed towards themselves, towards their point of convergence. And as Vandenberghe reminds us that “[s]tructure is processes and process is practice (process-in-practice)”,<sup>252</sup> one can understand how it can be attributed ‘causal authority’ through the social flows and practices caught within such entitative transactions from which seemingly and to some extent undeniable structural effects emerge.

So, it is in this processual way that structures must be understood, as practices that tend to converge through symbols and tend to enter into centrifugal streams achieving certain entitativity (coherence and causal authority). Similarly, Tonkonoff emphasizes with Tarde that there is no “sui generis and transcendent collective conscience”, but rather a convergence of flows that decelerate into apparent ensembles.<sup>253</sup> It follows that there are no social orders *stricto sensu*; they are rather transcendental illusions that deceive us by its convergent and symbolic qualities, while producing structural effects through the mediation of culture (which, in turn, enables convergence, or the reproduction of and inclination towards seemingly the same, even if never truly the same). Social orders must thus be seen as de facto not coherent wholes, but rather as big, vague, messy, *porous* and incomplete unwholes.

As discussed earlier, symbolic meanings and orders are only “taken for granted [...] until further notice, that is, *until a problem arises* that cannot be solved in terms of it”.<sup>254</sup> It is at such moments, when symbol meanings and universes come under scrutiny, that their appearance of being univocal and univocally shared is shattered. In these less likely events

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<sup>252</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 47.

<sup>253</sup> Tonkonoff, “Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.,” 76.

<sup>254</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 58 emphasis added.

where discrepancies in meanings are apprehended they become not only contested, but also a space for change. At the same time, these discrepancies counteract the convergent quality of symbols and (the unintended) centrifugal forces of symbolic universes. Social orders are thus porous in both directions, through divergent flows that leak out of entitative transactions and through radically new flows entering these transactions, causing a loss of entitativity.

This threat lurks constantly as humans are not embedded in “unitary societies but [rather in] a diversity of intersecting networks of social interaction”.<sup>255</sup> Consequently, transactions are always embedded in several, overlapping points of convergence, literally embedded in a multiplicity. Hence, transactions are plural, and as such threaten the entitativity of ensembles that emerge around such points of convergence, lead to transformations of these ensembles and ultimately their dissolvements. On the other hand, the transactions themselves are never fully converged, thus remain different from the point of convergence, and as such threaten the entitativity from ‘within’ as well. That is to say, ensembles may appear as wholes, but are in fact un-wholes. As Papilloud summarizes my argument: “[t]he unpredictability of associations is directly connected with the heterogeneity of the associated elements and the associations themselves”.<sup>256</sup>

To conclude, while Donati complains that radical relationalists cause emerged structural effects to “lose their boundaries and, therefore, their sui generis reality”,<sup>257</sup> I believe this to be a good thing, something that must be acknowledged. My challenge on radical relationalism is rather on its overemphasis on the processual nature of social life which leads to the negligence of the entitative, structural and substantial aspects of social life (and identity). I therefore tried to reinstate these aspects with the theory of symbolic convergence. In sum, as long as one

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<sup>255</sup> Emirbayer and Mische, “What Is Agency?”

<sup>256</sup> Papilloud, “Bruno Latour and Relational Sociology.”

<sup>257</sup> Donati, “An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism,” 446.

emphasizes and accepts that apparent entities are rather entitative open transactions directed towards points of convergence, it should be possible to make use of entities as analytical tool. The aim for relational sociologists is then to show the ways in which some degree of coherence is achieved, as well as a work of heresy that nuances such entitative findings by showing its differential and open character too. And this can be done for identity as well. This way, we might find identities in a world beyond identity.



## Chapter Four      A World of Subjects

My relations can tell more about my identity, than I ever could. As relational sociologists argue, there is “no identity outside” relations.<sup>258</sup> And indeed, as we went beyond identity, we found it again in the principle of difference, which enabled an understanding of the ‘pure’ relation. Radical relationalist specified this relationality as transactions, because of which identity became yet again elusive, for in its fluidity, it slipped like water through the cracks. This radical understanding of relations thus proved to be inadequate for the study of identity beyond its situational actualization. To get a grasp on identity again, one must recognize that there is an attribution beyond the transactional moment (even though it is not final), and that the subject achieves some coherence (even though it is upheld by a combination of symbolic convergence and a transcendental illusion).

Now that this has been established, it remains to be explained how identities exist in, through and as relations, for besides the important idea that it are “relations between actors that temporarily coalesce into the units that we recognize as” entities or substances,<sup>259</sup> it is simply postulated that “the nature of being is relational”.<sup>260</sup> In this and the following chapter, the relational web is disentangled into three order relations. This chapter begins with a discussion of sociality and internalization as crucial processes in the first-order relation and the development of a self-identity. Next I discuss the first-order relations. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the four ideal types of the first-order relation.

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<sup>258</sup> Demetriou, “Charles Tilly and Relational Sociology,” 333.

<sup>259</sup> Emily Erikson, “Relationalism and Social Networks,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 13 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 273.

<sup>260</sup> Dépelteau, “Relational Thinking in Sociology,” 13.

### *La condition humaine*

Following other relational sociologists, I assert that the self cannot be understood or found in “some ghostly substance or entity knocking around inside us” with a certain pre-existing essence,<sup>261</sup> but rather as an ‘embodied mind’ in and through which an identity emerges.<sup>262</sup> Even if the self is ‘all the way down’ relational, as is anything, it can gain entitativity and substantiality, and thus an identity (beyond the transaction). More specifically, I argue that the embodied mind functions as the point of convergence around which an identity emerges – sociologically speaking a probable point of convergence (see shortly). And to reiterate my earlier argument, entitativity is a precondition for the transcendental illusion that there exist such things as self-subsisting entities. The self can only appear when the embodied mind achieves a certain entitativity. To sum up, on the one hand, I concur with ‘ontological monism’, the idea that everything is made of the same, namely (relational) flows.<sup>263</sup> It follows that we must reject the notion “that individuals are in the world but somehow apart from it”.<sup>264</sup> On the other hand, I am also an ‘emergentist’ who holds to ‘attribute dualism’, the idea that entities with specific attributes or simply with an identity emerges.<sup>265</sup>

In the first place we are beings in the world, that is, we are always affected by it.<sup>266</sup> Put differently, the subject can be understood as an attractor of social flows, a point of convergence

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<sup>261</sup> Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology,” 422.

<sup>262</sup> In Côté’s reading of Mead, the “I” refers to ‘the body of the individual’, while Mead is obviously a sociological psychologist of the mind. This, and as suggested by Jenkins, is why I locate the point of convergence in the embodied mind. Furthermore, there are also many phenomenological argumentations to take the mind and its embodiment as one. Côté, “G.H. Mead and Relational Sociology”; Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, Fourth Edition, Key Ideas (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014); Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes.”

<sup>263</sup> Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology,” 420.

<sup>264</sup> Lenco, “Deleuze and Relational Sociology,” 156.

<sup>265</sup> Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology,” 420.

<sup>266</sup> Crossley, “Networks, Interactions and Relations,” 488.

creating the entitativity I would call self-identity. This attraction follows from humans' innate sociality which transforms the world into communications directed towards the self (even if only perceptually, and thus possibly unreflexively). The world is already becoming and flowing, before our intervention in it, but it is not yet communicative; it remains 'raw data' as Crossley calls it.<sup>267</sup> However, as he realizes, socially the world "exists for perceiving subjects and only for them".<sup>268</sup> Due to our being in the world, which is thoroughly social, the flows of the world become social flows, an object of our sociality. That is to say, the world becomes intentional (as well).

As the world becomes social and intentional, it becomes communicative, it tells us something (actively or passively). What is told, must be picked up. In other words, it comes from 'somewhere'. It is in this sense that I can concur with Fuhse's statement that "communicative events have to be seen as emanating from some identity".<sup>269</sup> As such, it already involves the possibility of meaning. I therefore call these 'communicative indications'. As Fuhse understands it, identity "serves as projection point in naturally occurring communication", regardless of action (be it trans- or inter-), but as a unilateral communicative event.<sup>270</sup> Flows that are already in the world become in the simultaneous social world seemingly indicative as it communicates to us, as it calls to us and wishes to tell us something. Because of our sociality, which makes the world not only communicative but also specifically calling to us, to our-selves, we are affected by the world. This is what I term the 'first-order relation', our most fundamental relation to the world.

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<sup>267</sup> Crossley, "Music Sociology in Relational Perspective," 605.

<sup>268</sup> Crossley, 605.

<sup>269</sup> Fuhse, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks," 272.

<sup>270</sup> Fuhse, 272.



Before I turn to the unavoidable question how we (specifically) relate to the world poses itself, I must stress that as we are affected by the world, our identities are constituted. And since the world is a plurality (since it is based on the principle of difference), so does the individual become the embodiment of the chaos and the plurality of the world. As such, individuals cannot be but plural and fragmented; they are *de facto* individuals, as Nietzsche put it. Hence, Schinkel's assertion that by no means is indivisible (in-dividual), it is rather "an operational and productive concept ... that presupposes a unity that is not there".<sup>271</sup> This is correct, I concur, albeit an overstatement (which can readily be found in most radical processual accounts).

I rather follow Weyns' understanding of individuals as being at once bounded and unbounded, internal and external, inward and outward.<sup>272</sup> That is to say, they exist both as subjective entitativity as well as ecologically. Because of this '*condition humaine*', "people falter between 'being' and 'non-being'", characterized by an expected ontological and existential insecurity.<sup>273</sup> Our sociality, which could be defined as a "constitutionally given world-openness",<sup>274</sup> not only causes us to a state of 'non-being', the plurality and dispersion of social flows which denies the emergence and existence of a self, but it lies paradoxically also at the basis of our continuous effort against this condition, the possibility of the tendency towards and pursuit of coherence and convergence. The first-order relation must be understood with regard to this paradoxical condition characterized by on the one hand a converging and centrifugal force which creates the entitativity of the self and its identity and on the other hand a counterforce which acts as dispersing and fragmenting force in relation to the former

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<sup>271</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>272</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

<sup>273</sup> Weyns, 113; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>274</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 121; Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

(although it could be itself converging and centrifugal).<sup>275</sup> Or as Chodorow put it, individual ‘being’ follows from “the greater or lesser fragmentation of his or her inner world and the extent to which the core self feels spontaneous and whole within, rather than driven by, this world”.<sup>276</sup>

### **The first-order relation**

To discuss the first-order relation, one must first discuss the meaning of ‘relation’. Etymologically it can be traced back to the Latin word ‘*relatus*’ which is the past participle of ‘*referre*’, that is, to ‘bring back’. To bring back is in other words to put in a referential relation (to use some sort of pleonasm or tautology). As such, it establishes a connection. In turn, this implies both communication and a power differential. These are, I reckon, the four essential and crucial meanings of ‘relation’. Those meanings of relationality are inherent to all-order relations, yet play out differently in each. To discuss the first-order relation, let us start with the thought experiment of a world that knows no social organization, a world in the ‘state of nature’.

The referential relation refers to the process of ‘relating’. The Dutch word for ‘relate’ is ‘(*zich*) *verhouden*’. ‘*Houden*’ can be translated as ‘to hold’,<sup>277</sup> while the prefix ‘*ver*’ signifies change. It is with this in mind that I regard the first-order relation as a struggle of possession.<sup>278</sup> It is a struggle over what appears to our (perceptual) awareness as communicative indications, and is won by attributing it meaning. In Dutch I would state that ‘*de wereld een zinvolle invloed*

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<sup>275</sup> As Burkitt, for instance, realizes “the polyphony of voices that populate each person” can create divided perspectives on our own self that can cause inner conflicts which is illustrative of a fragmented self-understanding. Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” 535.

<sup>276</sup> Chodorow 1989, 159 as cited in Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 297.

<sup>277</sup> Interestingly, ‘*houden van*’ is translated as ‘to love’. Literally it would be to ‘hold of’. It shows that at least in Dutch, loving is understood to be a form of possession, not in the misogynistic sense, but as a form of knowing. In a sense you possess what you know – I would even say that you are what you know.

<sup>278</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

*heeft op ons-zelf*, which can roughly be translated as ‘the world affects our-selves in meaningful way’. ‘*Zinvol*’, however, is poorly translatable to meaningful. More accurate would be a literal translation into ‘senseful’, in the sense that ‘sense’ does not only have ‘meaning’, but also ‘direction’. To sum up, *the world affects our-selves meaningfully, that is, this affection (in the archaic sense) has a direction, namely towards one-self and is subject to its meaning-making process.*

This is to say, due to our awareness, the communicative indications that call to us as they tell us something are not simply picked up – indeed, by our ‘senses’, in its double Dutch sense – but in this process directed towards our-selves. This relation is thus mediated or channeled. Indeed, it is a precondition of communication.<sup>279</sup> This relation occurs in what Serres calls the *hors-là*, which, as Pyyhtinen stresses, “ means not so much ‘out there’ but literally ‘outside-of-there’ ”.<sup>280</sup> He further describes it as the “here and there”, this “in-between”, “a virtual space, a path of movement and renewal, a non-site, a nowhere or a non-place, a place outside all places”.<sup>281</sup> It is crucial, however, to note the “duality of any mediator: the mediators establish the relation, but also intervene, interfere, and disturb”.<sup>282</sup> As Pyyhtinen, explains himself, “[t]he communicated message never travels through neutral and empty space, but the space in-between is a ‘space of transformation’ ”.<sup>283</sup> There is thus “no mediation without translation”.<sup>284</sup>

To briefly reiterate, our sociality, this innate or ontological drive to relate to the world, transforms this world into a social world, a world that exists out of an infinite series of

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<sup>279</sup> Pyyhtinen, “Triangular Relations,” 166.

<sup>280</sup> Pyyhtinen, 175.

<sup>281</sup> Pyyhtinen, 175.

<sup>282</sup> Pyyhtinen, 179.

<sup>283</sup> Pyyhtinen, 166.

<sup>284</sup> Pyyhtinen, 166.

communicative indications. It is through this communications that we can relate our-selves to the world. This relation, however, is mediated or channeled, and thus translated. With regard to identity and the first-order relation, I then consider Serres' 'parasite', the "figure of the third" which interferes and intervenes in the channel, to be Mead's 'I', and his 'angel', the messenger that appears only to disappear before the message which he brings, as the angelic self (to merge Mead and Serres).<sup>285</sup> The I, this (necessarily) undefined individuality with creative (and logically thus also destructive) force,<sup>286</sup> could be understood as the attracting and centrifugal force that draws social flows in and keeps them in the individual's entitativity. It thus gives 'sense' to the call (*l'appel*, in Levinas' his French) of the communicative indication. Because the I is undefined, however, it also senseless. Put simply, the channels are put in place by our sociality, become 'directed' by the I, yet remain meaningless in relation to this I. I have to correct myself, it does not simply remains meaningless, it becomes void of meaning due to the parasitic nature of the I that empties the communication of any meaning.

This socially detrimental, nihilistic tendency of the I is countered by the self which serves as the guarding angel of the channel. While Serres' angel is "a metaphor for effective and neutral mediation",<sup>287</sup> I would rather speak of a guardian angel since, as Serres and Pyyhtinen know all too well, any "translation is a new creation that is also bound to betray the original to a greater or lesser degree".<sup>288</sup> Translation are never without a base of reference, something against which is translated. In the case of sociality and the corresponding constitution of identity, this base is the self. The self does not guarantee mediation without intervention, as Serres would have it, but it strives towards comprehension rather than absorption. The angelic self watches over the channeled otherness, it recognizes and guards its radical otherness. As

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<sup>285</sup> Pyyhtinen, "Triangular Relations."

<sup>286</sup> Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

<sup>287</sup> Pyyhtinen, "Triangular Relations," 171.

<sup>288</sup> Pyyhtinen, 167.

such, the mediation becomes a respectful interpretation, a translation of the other into a Me. In other words, the attribution of meaning to communicative indications results into Me's,<sup>289</sup> which can be understood as an other(ness) or difference which is put into one's own logic, and more specifically, in the logic of the self.<sup>290</sup>

Even though both the self and the I are self-referential in relations to communicative indications,<sup>291</sup> the self is, in contrast to the I, not undefined, nor narcissistic, but rather thoroughly social and respecting. But what is this self? Mead understands the self as the dialogical (and dialectic) result of the relation between the I and the Me's. This is easy to recognize as we often catch ourselves talking to internalized others, as having 'inner dialogues'. More fundamentally, however, I would speak of transactions rather than mere dialogues occurring between our Me's and our I. Out of these continuous transactions continuously emerges a self. At the same time, it leaves traces behind in the form of new Me's and transforms the already present Me's, while the I refuses any definition. I thus make a distinction between the self as a set of relations (and transactions) and the first-order relation to the world; both of which are related to each other. As argued already, it is exactly the I that serves as the attractor and motor of the social flows that might achieve the entitativity we deem the individual. The motor is refrained from stuttering however by the self which ensures the internalization of the

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<sup>289</sup> Like Donati, I assert that Ego, Alter and the relation as such (to use his terminology) all contribute to the relational effect: here the 'Me'. Donati, "An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism," 437.

<sup>290</sup> It is because of this crucial attribution of meaning that I locate the point of convergence in the mind. As Fuhse states, I follow in it many other perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, which do the same. Why the mind must be understood to be embodied has been dealt with in *Chapter One*, and will be further discussed below. Fuhse, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks," 463.

<sup>291</sup> Christian Morgner, "The Relational Meaning-Making of Riots: Narrative Logic and Network Performance of the London 'Riots,'" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 29 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 587.

world as Me's, as a difference, and allowing flows to flow, it is the oil that the I necessitates to achieve entitativity and as such individual existence (albeit never absolute!).

To come back to the apprehension and internalization of the world, it always occurs on the basis of the self. Even the first internalization, is on the basis of the self, which is an empty self. This empty self is different from the I, because it does not absorb otherness in its own emptiness, but rather internalizes the communicative indication without logic, an empty logic, and thus simply takes it for what it is, without much comprehension that is, at least at first. This then becomes a Me, or rather an other-than-I which consequently transacts with the I as the process which is the self. This gives substance and thus a logic to the self, which allows for subsequent interpretations of the internalized others and the internalization of otherness, and thereby for their transformation into Me's.

This self is then plural and fragmented as it exists out of Me's, yet kept together by the I, and emerges as a relational effect of them. It then shapes the channel in a subjective, unique and idiosyncratic manner. This channel can be understood to be "shaped by our 'perceptual interests' ... and by perceptual habits formed through previous experience";<sup>292</sup> or in short, on the background of our self. And since everyone's (perceptual, but secondary also reflexive) awareness develops idiosyncratically, we apprehend and internalize (even) the (same) world differently from each other. It follows that we become different from each other, that is, we are constituted by different Me's out of which different selves emerges, and at the same time similar through each other through the second- and third-order relation. In sum, through these virtual first-order relations I am projected into the world, while my world (that is the world I am related to) becomes implicit in my-self (it is indeed folded in the fold that constitutes me).<sup>293</sup> Indeed, I

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<sup>292</sup> Crossley, "Music Sociology in Relational Perspective," 605.

<sup>293</sup> Pyyhtinen, "Triangular Relations."

*am* in the world while I am my world.<sup>294</sup> As such, being in the world is thoroughly relational (and social),<sup>295</sup> Borrowing from Burkitt, I would call it ‘being-in-relations’.<sup>296</sup>

### **Ideal typical first-order (non-)relations**

The first-order relation refers to the way we are-in-the-world; the way we relate ourselves to the world. As this definition already implies, there are different ways of being-in-the-world, of relating to it. While sociality is innate, it remains an open potential to be shaped socially. In a sense it sets its own rules: as we relate to the world, we also learn to relate in certain ways to the world, and as such our sociality is shaped. This determination or better (un)foldings of sociality can be discerned from an evolutionary-historic framework, but also between ‘societies’, or even in the personal development from baby to adulthood.<sup>297</sup> A sociology of our sociality, of the first-order relation studies how the first-order relation is shaped sociologically, its sociological consequences and the sociological conditions it sets for our other-order relations – with sociological referring to the social logic of a particular relational context (which is always spatio-temporal).<sup>298</sup> In this essay I have to limit myself to a preliminary exploration of the more fundamental question how we can relate the world. Important to emphasize perhaps is that this world is apprehended as a difference with regard to our-selves, while our-selves are characterized by the aspiration, pursuit and to some extent a delusion of sameness, coherence

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<sup>294</sup> Crossley, “Networks, Interactions and Relations,” 486.

<sup>295</sup> Crossley, 486.

<sup>296</sup> Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” 531.

<sup>297</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

<sup>298</sup> The general tendency of the first-order relation that can be discerned is a decline in sociality, or better a specification or limitation of our sociality. As we ‘mature’, we learn that we cannot relate to most ‘things’ and ‘people’ in the world. This might be even more typifying for times characterized by high levels of ontological and existential insecurity, as might well be the case in ‘high-modernity’. Weyns; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

and unity. Inspired by Weyns mytho-poetic phenomenological exploration of sociality,<sup>299</sup> I identify several ideal typical first-order relations (to otherness) that are crucial for our balance between ‘being’ and ‘non-being’, for our sense of selfhood and identity.

### *The (social) non-relation*

Firstly, one can identify a lack of relation or a non-relation. This relation is splendidly captured in the myth of Echo and Narcissus.<sup>300</sup> In this myth, Narcissus fails to perceive Echo, the beautiful nymph. As such, to her sorrow, she is not able to relate to him, and ends up as a mere shade, unacknowledged and non-existent. In my terminology, the channel of Narcissus, through which he becomes aware of the world, fails to turn Echo into a communicative indication. In turn, she becomes subjectively non-existent. This seems to be a harsh verdict, but think about the feelings of the child in the back of the car who gets ignored by the persons in the front for instance. This child undoubtedly feels as if he does not exist or at the very least doubts his existence as he struggle for recognition, and being.

But even beyond this purely perceptual non-relation, there is also the social non-relation. This lack of social relationality is easily perceived in adult relations to non-humans in contemporary western societies, *although far from exclusive of non-human relations(!)*.<sup>301</sup> The tree, the closet, the sandwich, the teddy bear and the goat are all perceived, yet do often not become *social* communicative indications. Adults’ sociality in the temporo-spatial context I (and I suppose we) find myself in is shaped in such a way that its channel makes the perceived

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<sup>299</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

<sup>300</sup> Weyns.

<sup>301</sup> As I will argue later, I believe this social non-relation to be at the core of many intergroup conflicts and of detrimental group logics (as I wonder if we can imagine identity differently, I also wonder if we can imagine groups, such as the nation, differently, see conclusion).



communications (the tree, closet, etc.) socially non-indicative. That is, their being (identity and selfhood) assumes the inability to relate to these communicative indications.

It is clear, however, how a gardener, an interior designer, Joey from *Friends* (or another sandwich-lover), a child and a farmer would relate differently to these same communications. They become truly a part of themselves, as they perceive them and pick them up as socially indicative communications to which they can and do *relate*. To give but one example, if they would stop making Joey's favorite sandwich, he would feel as if he loses a part of himself. Obviously, he *is* not his favorite sandwich, but it is part of his being in the way he relates to it (i.e., 'Me'). Important to note already is that communicative indications are not simply internalized as 'Me', but *relationally* internalized as Me's, as Me's to which I have a relation. These relations are implicit in one's Me's. In short, one only develops an identity as *and* in the way(s) (s)he socially relates to the world.

### *The negative relation*

The first way of relating to the world is the ever-lur(k)ing possibility of absorption by other(nes)s.<sup>302</sup> From the subjective point of view, it could be termed the negative relation. Negative does not refer to a normative judgement, for when the self is experienced as a problem, this can even be desired. This is found in escapism (such as in drugs, work or sports) as well as in the pursuit of spiritual 'transcendence' (which, I contend, is actually often an experience of immanence constructed as transcendence), to name only a few examples. Negative rather refers to the direction and the consequence for the self. This relation refers to the ways of relating in which one voluntarily or unwillingly loses oneself in the other. Two obvious examples can be found in Durkheim's *effervescence collective*, but also in a romantic relationship in which

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<sup>302</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

individual boundaries are not kept. In such cases, the embodied mind no longer functions as point of convergence, and one loses entitativity, and as such one's selfhood.

Indeed, as my re-interpretation of Mead learns us, one cannot maintain selfhood without a forceful 'I', that creative individuality, that attracts and centrifuges otherness to the same that the self aspires and proclaims to be. Without such an I, or when this I is less powerful than other attractors (for instance the mass), the self is transformed, dispersed and redirected towards the plurality of the world, towards certain points of convergence outside the embodied mind. Those who did not lose their entitativity completely can still be perceptually be aware of these point of convergences as differences, different from the – to some extent lost – self, and as such relate themselves to it. Put differently, as long as some entitativity is upheld, one can nevertheless maintain a sense of selfhood, which now appears and becomes experienced as the sense of 'losing oneself' (as performers for instance are well aware of). In contrast, once one's 'I' is completely denied, the self is lost beyond memory, I become non-existent. Or at least in this moment, for it can be retrieved retrospectively as the experience of losing oneself when the self is reassembled from the traces it left behind and its processual memory,<sup>303</sup> that is, when the self is folded again as a self.

The negative relation can also be experienced as leaving a part of oneself behind, as externalization oneself. In this second negative relation, the self is not lost, since both the I and self are retained. In this process of externalization, rather than losing ourselves, we express ourselves, and as such 'impress' the world, we leave a mark behind. In our actualization and expression we affect the world, more so than that it affects us. In this case, we strive to sustain ourselves, while we interact with the world. This often (although far from necessarily) results

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<sup>303</sup> Dépelteau, "From the Concept of 'Trans-Action' to a Process-Relational Sociology," 515.

in the world recognizing us, our utter individuality, our-selves. This will become clearer in the subsequent discussion.

### *The narcissistic relation*

The reverse possibility, the narcissistic absorption of otherness (instead of *by* otherness), is or can be as great a risk for one's selfhood and identity as absorption *by* otherness is (i.e., the first negative relation).<sup>304</sup> In the same way as Echo was unable to resonate with Narcissus, he was not able relate to her. Forcefully withdrawn to *himself* by his inability to relate to anything, to anyone, he was left with himself, and when ending up seeing himself in the pond out of which he wanted to drink, he fell in love with himself, tried to kiss his image, and drowned *in himself*. In terms of my account of identity, I understand this to be the consequence of the narcissistic (first-order) relation. Narcissism is a set personality traits, and sometimes a disorder, which is characterized by among other an extreme egocentrism. The narcissist does not only put himself central, but, more importantly, all others in relation to its centrality, to himself. As such, the narcissist possesses them, reduces them to himself, eliminating or at least neglecting the absolute or radical otherness of these others.<sup>305</sup> As Friedrich Hebbel puts it, "who does not know boundaries is inclined to reduce the universe to its individuality".<sup>306</sup>

What appears to the narcissist as difference, is fully transformed to itself, to the nihilistic tendencies of the I, for the I of the narcissist is so afraid of its own nihilism (the ontological and existential insecurity which is typifying for the ontology of mankind), so insecure about the capacity of its own attracting and centrifugal powers that he fails to relate to otherness. Instead

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<sup>304</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*.

<sup>305</sup> Weyns; Jan Keij, *De Filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas: In Haar Samenhang Verklaard Voor Iedereen* (Kampen : Kapellen: Klement ; Pelckmans, 2006).

<sup>306</sup> Hebbel 1995, 105 as cited in Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*, 118 own translation.

of internalizing communicative indications as Me's, the narcissist excessively seeks and absorbs all otherness as its own I. The narcissist thereby does not only deny the difference (the 'identity' of otherness), but also its own possibility of selfhood. In turn, the narcissist always necessitates other others, in the hope to find him-self. Yet because of the narcissistic inability to relate, the narcissist ends up drowning into its self-image, in the undefined I whose creative potential cannot be utilized without otherness, cannot amount to a self without the productive force of difference.<sup>307</sup> Instead, the narcissist is absorbed by its own individuality, losing its entitative selfhood since the narcissistic relation empties the self out, becomes unsubstantial as if it is a black hole. Indeed, one cannot *be* without relations, without otherness.<sup>308</sup> All one is *without otherness*, without the internalization of Me's, is the undefined sameness and continuity of the I, of this force that went out of control. If one only relates narcissistically to the world, one ends up with a nihilistic self-awareness that one amounts to nothing. The utter desperation of feeling as if I have no identity; I am no one, not even my-self. As Deleuze understood well, identity is only possible by principle of difference.

### *The fully social relation*

Lastly, in the fully social relation with others (in contrast to the other ideal types discussed above, beside), one does not coincide (*samenvallen*) yet does go together (*samengaan*) with the other.<sup>309</sup> Indeed, every 'true' relation is at once separating and connecting (as is realized with an affirmative conception of difference).<sup>310</sup> Hence, Pyyhtinen asserts with

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<sup>307</sup> Lenco, "Deleuze and Relational Sociology."

<sup>308</sup> Alfred Schütz, *Collected Papers* (Netherlands: Springer-Science+Business Media, 1964); Frank Welz, "Rethinking Identity: Concepts of Identity and 'the Other' in Sociological Perspective," *The Society* 1 (2005): 1–25.

<sup>309</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*; Keij, *De Filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas*.

<sup>310</sup> Donati, "An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism."

Serres that all communication necessitates a separation which must be overcome.<sup>311</sup> Put succinctly, one cannot connect nor separate that which is the same, that which coincides. However, what goes together, what tends towards the same yet remains radically different, is connected yet separated. As Levinas suggests, this means that the individual is simultaneously connected to and separated from otherness; they exist both in each other and separated from each other.<sup>312</sup> The social relation then implies an interdependency built upon a mutual and simultaneous independence and dependence.

This separation is guaranteed by the I which can never be absorbed as it is a radical and absolute difference. Surely, it can be ‘overpowered’ in the sense that its attracting and centrifugal force can be denied, but it cannot be appropriated, it cannot be totalized. I understand this ‘I’ as the utter sociality of the *Mängelwesen* that is man, the potential that is folded within what we recognize as its biological ‘structure’ (which always folds differently, even if this difference is only infinitesimal). This potential of sociality, together with the (potential of) perceptual consciousness of entitativity creates the possibility of the self being separated from the world, from otherness. At the same time, however, this sociality paradoxically functions as connecting force, producing internalization. This internalization occurs in the first place as a difference. Sociality is the transformative process which makes the world as difference communicative, before it makes its otherness one’s own. It is connecting, instead of absorbing, when the ‘I’, the absolute individuality, the radical alterity of difference or otherness is recognized in the process of internalization (in contrast to the ideal typical relations described above). When the radical difference is recognized, it does not become absorbed into the emptiness, the undefined void of the I, but becomes a ‘Me’.<sup>313</sup>

<sup>311</sup> Pyyhtinen, “Triangular Relations,” 166.

<sup>312</sup> Keij, *De Filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas*.

<sup>313</sup> This void is known in Levinas as the ‘there-is’, ‘il-y-a’. Heidegger speaks of *Dasein*. Keij.

I thus understand the ‘Me’ as the idiosyncratic internalization of otherness, the translation, and thus interpretation, of otherness into myself. More specifically, otherness as attributed meaning and internalized as such through a process of subjugation to the sense or logic of the I, through the channel of the I.<sup>314</sup> In this sense, nobody picks up communicative indications “in the same manner”, as Tonkonoff emphasized.<sup>315</sup> Furthermore, the recognition of the radical alterity of difference not only guarantees that it is internalized as a difference, as a Me (indeed a Me, not a We or an It), but also that the communicative indication becomes and remains meaningful. For, when one tries to put the radical alterity, the I of the other, into one’s own logic, it becomes incomprehensible. As Levinas puts it, in the nudity of otherness, one can only find “the absurdity of the thing that loses its system”.<sup>316</sup>

### Conclusion

To conclude, a distinction can be made between a first-order social relation and a first-order (social) non-relation. In the latter case, one’s identity does not develop. In the case a first-order social relation can be discerned, one must understand the direction. Indeed, first-order relations are always power relations, in which flows are directed to points of convergence by its force (which is a process as explained before). It is in this sense that I understand the individual to be (an) intentional (‘unit’).<sup>317</sup> In the case of an outward relation, one either loses oneself, or leaves a mark, a part of oneself behind. If one loses one-self completely, such an outward relation becomes a non-relation as well. Important to emphasize perhaps, I refer here to the outward

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<sup>314</sup> This is what is so wonderful about Mead’s Me. It lays the other in ‘Me’, as an interpretation of the other (or otherness) as the other (in Me), while its radical difference always remains beyond myself, beyond my comprehension (i.e., the other beyond Me).

<sup>315</sup> Tonkonoff, “Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.,” 69.

<sup>316</sup> Levinas 1971, 47 as cited in Keij, *De Filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas*, 145.

<sup>317</sup> Tonkonoff, “Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.,” 72.

relation of the I, for the outward relation of one-self is not only inevitable but also necessary to be recognized. To be or to exist is to be bounded, and to be bounded is to have an outside. This outside, which emerges through the externalization of oneself, become communicative indications itself which can be picked up and as such recognized as difference. The self can as such be maintained and supported. In this sense, unfolding is as important as folding for the sense of a self, as well as to become (in actuality) what one already is (in virtuality).

The inward relation can be characterized by either a totalizing absorption or by connection and comprehension. Absorption in contrast to comprehension denies the radical alterity of otherness and thus become a non-relation since difference is reduced to the same and consequently relationality becomes impossible. As we know by now, without relations, no identity can emerge, whilst one's selfhood becomes characterized by a desperate expression of nihilism. Comprehension, to the contrary, is characteristic of the ideal typical relation, the idiosyncratic interpretation of otherness into one's own logic whilst recognizing its absolute difference. In this case an identity is developed and emerges as the relations and transaction between the I and the Me, resulting in different selves in the sense of an ever-becoming self. Tonkonoff therefore describes the individual as a 'narcissistic chimera': on the one hand, constituted by a multitude of social flows, and on the other hand, intentional, that is, appropriating the world as the individual relates to it.<sup>318</sup> I must give the last concluding words to Weyns who captured most of the ideas I defended in this subchapter as eloquently as one can find:

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<sup>318</sup> Tonkonoff, 72.

*“Only when you know something well, will you know that you do not know it and can never know it, and will you begin to realize that you can never own nor want to own it, and that it rather possesses you than the other way around, or anyway: that it permeates you, nestles itself in you, becomes part of your inner landscape and forges an intimate bond in you with the other things that are part of your existence. Such a hospitable, non-possessive form of knowing keeps, to cite the key phrase of Yves Bonnefoy once more, ‘the things together in us that keep us together’.”<sup>319</sup>*




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<sup>319</sup> Weyns, *Van mensen en dingen een verkenning van onze socialiteit*, 108 own translation in a futile attempt to save its beauty.



## Chapter Five      A World of Identities and Relations

In this last chapter, it is time to precisely conceptualize self, identity, selfhood and related concepts. Next, the two other-order relations are discussed in relation to the all too often neglected first-order relation. I will deal more specifically with intersubjectivity, concrete ties and networks, the social construction of identity and finally social fields.

### Conceptualizations: self, identity, selfhood

The strictly essentialist definition of identity as sameness (*mêmeité*) and continuity (*ipséité*)<sup>320</sup> can only be uphold as ‘selfhood’, as *the subjective sense of an entitative self*, for only this sense can be characterized by sameness and continuity. More specifically, selfhood emerges from the *undefined* awareness, apprehension and/or experience of sameness and continuity of entitativity and being (in opposition to our other ontological inclination towards dispersion and non-being). This awareness comes into being in spite of the obvious lack of an essential, a priori identity. Indeed, selfhood itself is void of any identity in the strict, essentialist sense, as the self is ever-changing. This is also why selfhood must be defined as an ‘undefined’ awareness – even though selfhood is facilitated by the fact that “the changes are generally small and slow, so that one is mostly aware of the stability”.<sup>321</sup> Levinas put this logic as follows: “the I is not a being that always remains the same, but the being [...] that rediscovers its identity through everything that befalls it [...]. The I is identical up to its changes”.<sup>322</sup> For now, one could read this I as the ‘individual’, but one might already notice that selfhood is indeed closely related to Mead’s I.

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<sup>320</sup> Zygmunt Bauman and Benedetto Vecchi, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*, Themes for the 21st Century (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>321</sup> Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, “The Development of Identity Theory,” in *Advances in Group Processes*, ed. Shane R. Thye and Edward J. Lawler, vol. 31 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014), 76, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0882-614520140000031002>.

<sup>322</sup> Own translation of Levinas 1971, 6 as cited in Keij, *De Filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas*, 110.

However, in order not to fall into the desperate nihilism of the I, it requires (to discover one's) self-identity. 'Self-identity' could be described as *the content of the process resulting in the 'self'*,<sup>323</sup> which momentarily and situationally informs one's selfhood (and by extension the possibility of others to gain an informed awareness of your self).<sup>324</sup>

I understand the 'self' as *the continuous emergent effect of the entitative relations between the I and Me's and the ecological relations between the self and its environment* (which includes second- and third-order relations, see later).<sup>325</sup> Metaphorically, I regard the self as a whirlpool, a point of convergence which attracts social flows within a larger context of flows. The I is the (necessarily) undefined individuality, the attracting and centrifugal force which creates the entitativity of the self. The Me's are the emergent effects of the virtual relation between communicative indications and both the parasitic I and the angelic self in the process of internalization, but also the emergent traces of the processes of the self, as well as the results of the transformations through the processes of the self. Mead's well-known 'generalized other' can be understood as the emergent effect of the transactions around internal points of convergence. The attracting and centrifugal force of these points of convergence are meanings, which are most often abstracted and unified through symbols. For instance, all internalized

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<sup>323</sup> The self, which is itself a relation, is illustrative of "the ambivalent semantics of the concept of social relation, which has a double meaning as a process and as an outcome of that process". Pierpaolo Donati, *Transcending Modernity with Relational Thinking*, 2021, 5.

<sup>324</sup> This is often facilitated by the social translation of meanings into symbols. As it becomes objectified in the process, "one may respond to itself as an object [...] the self has emerged", Stets and Burke conclude. This objectivation of the self is what enables the self to be self-reflective. Stets and Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity"; Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224.

<sup>325</sup> It is in this sense that Burkitt emphasizes that "'both at the level of social relations and at the level of self-dynamics that agents should be regarded" relationally. Burkitt, "Relational Agency," 536; George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris, Works of George Herbert Mead 1 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1934).

particular otherness that have been attributed the meaning of ‘motherhood’, and this is then the symbol, converge symbolically around it as it becomes a ‘generalized other’. I prefer to refer to particular otherness (rather than others) in this process, for not only are ‘mothers’ of all kinds internalized as ‘mothers’ of all kinds and in general, but so are communicative indications of motherhood that do not necessarily indicate mothers internalized.

The ‘self-identity’ is then *the folded totality of meaningful social flows constituting the self at any given moment*. It is a “set of meanings”, as Stets and Burke put it,<sup>326</sup> or even better, as Emirbayer refers to it, “an ongoing ‘semiotic flow’ of *meaning*”.<sup>327</sup> Identity change occurs continuously, although it could be considered to be significant when the meanings constituting the self have changed significantly (to use a tautological reasoning). Occasionally this can occur abruptly and suddenly, but most often it is the result of infinitesimal changes that amounted to significant changes when considered over a considerable timeframe.<sup>328</sup> Identity changes can also *appear* as the expression (in the Deleuzian sense) of considerable changes in terms of self-identification. ‘Self-identification’ is *the subjective identification of the self with some of the meanings that constitute the self-identity*. As Brubaker already stated, self-identification is a ‘dispositional term’, both cognitive and affective, referring to a ‘*situated* subjectivity’.<sup>329</sup> Many (role) identity theorists, but also scholars of social identity theory, tend to limit themselves to this process of self-identification and the activities to control meanings in order to sustain one’s self-identity,<sup>330</sup> by bringing the three moments of identification into alignment (i.e., self-identification, self-presentation and identification by others).<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Stets and Burke, “A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity.”

<sup>327</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 297 own emphasis.

<sup>328</sup> Stets and Burke, “The Development of Identity Theory.”

<sup>329</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity” own emphasis.

<sup>330</sup> Stets and Burke, “A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity.”

<sup>331</sup> Moments of the self-identity refers to the simultaneous aspects of the self-identity. Nathalie Heinich, *Ce Que n’est Pas l’identité*, Le Débat (Paris: Gallimard, 2018); Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

Self-identity and by extension identity could be further distinguished into the virtual and the actual identity: that is, between who we could be at a given moment in time and who are in that moment, who we are implicitly and how we express ourselves. The distinction I ultimately draw between virtual and actual identity is a distinction between virtual and actual relations. It is important to emphasize with Deleuze, however, that reality is at once both virtual and actual, and stress that reality continuously folds, before it unfolds, and refolds again. The virtual and actual identity thus have to be understood in relation to each other. The actual identity then refers to the aspects of the identity that are actualized in situations, in empirical transactional relations. The virtual identity refers to the result of the virtual transactions that go on in these situations, or, in short, to one's self-identity as defined above. It signifies my world, or more specifically, the world as I relate to it. Together with the actual transactions it sets the limitations and the possibilities of one's expressions (in the Deleuzian sense), one's actual identity in these actual situations (which is, to be clear, characterized by a multitude of transactions). In sum, the virtual identity signifies the possibilities or potentials of the actual identities, which could in turn be described as identity-in-action (instead of identity-in-potential).

My understanding of self-identity is thus closely related to the notion of the (cultural) repertoire<sup>332</sup> and not all too dissimilar to Bourdieu's habitus as I concur that it does not imply full awareness of it (but rather a vague sense or situated identification).<sup>333</sup> Different from Bourdieu, however, I attribute this unawareness to the fact that in the process of (un)folding most remains implicit and thus not fully apprehended nor fully experienced, that is to say, most flows and transactions remain virtual. The notion of a repertoire has two fundamental problems,

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<sup>332</sup> This work has been of great influence on my thought on culture and identity. Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (April 1986): 273, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095521>.

<sup>333</sup> Christian Papilloud and Eva-Maria Schultze, "Pierre Bourdieu and Relational Sociology," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, ed. François Dépelteau, 17 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 345.

which I hope have been countered by my conceptualizations above. Firstly, often metaphorically understood as a toolbox, it conveys this image of a set of tools, which are perceived to be fixed entities, while they should rather be seen as ever-transforming flows. Indeed, as already hinted to earlier, within the broader entitative transactions constituting the self, also other entitative and non-entitative transactions occur. Secondly, it evokes a too instrumental and agentic idea of identity. It draws an undesirable disconnection between selfhood and identity as a stock of ‘resources’. The kind of repertoire I proposes must thus not be understood as a stock in which stable ‘identities’ are piled up, but rather a fluid repertoire that is in constant flux. Indeed, some internalizations transform into unrecognizable instances, while others are forgotten (although remain in one form or another implicit in other flows or identities), et cetera.

Lastly, I must emphasize how past, present and future are included in these transactional relations and thus identities.<sup>334</sup> While we express ourselves only in one way at a certain point in time, implicit in this expression are our past selves, present selves and future selves, and also our irrelevant (to the actual) selves. All these ‘selves’ of this sentence should as a matter of fact rather be considered to be different sets of Me’s. The inclusion of temporality in the conceptualization of the self-identity provides a continuity beyond simple succession; not in the sense that we are simply a stock or repertoire in which flows are piled up, but that the past is involved in our state of becoming. Indeed, the past changes in this process of becoming (which does not deny it, nor its importance).

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<sup>334</sup> Côté, “G.H. Mead and Relational Sociology,” 102.

## Identity in a relational web of relations

I believe the self to be like “*an Ausgeburt des Felds*”.<sup>335</sup> The basic idea is that we are our world, that is, the world we apprehend in the way we relate to it. I contend, however, that this field, or better my world, must analytically be distinguished into several orders of relations which themselves relate to each other and occur all at once. It is in this sense that I understand social life with Côté as a ‘relational set of relations’.<sup>336</sup> In these three orders of relations, the meanings of relations play out differently with regard to identity and self – this is also why the analytical distinction is necessary. Similar distinctions to my distinction between the second- and third-order relations can be found in many works, while the first-order relation, seems mostly neglected or analytically conflated with the second-order reality. I was especially inspired by Bourdieu’s distinction between empirical (or concrete) and objective (or real) ties.<sup>337</sup> The distinction I ultimately draw is between those subjective relations as they are intersubjectively and symbolically experienced (i.e., second-order), and those objective relations that influence the accessibility and probability of these subjective relations (and consequently the development of the subjective relations as well) (i.e., third-order).

Metaphorically, I would refer to the first-order relation as the subjective life-world, the second-order relation as the colliding of subjective life-worlds and the cosmic experience of intersubjectivity, and the third order relation as the interactive gravitational forces which are dependent on the ever-changing composition of the life-worlds, their relations to the world or universe it apprehends, and relations to of the life-worlds to each other, while creating at the same time structural convergence, before supernovas imbalance even faraway orders once

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<sup>335</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 288.

<sup>336</sup> Côté, “G.H. Mead and Relational Sociology.”

<sup>337</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

more. As any metaphor it has its shortcomings. Not in the least because planets conveys this image of predefined, fixed entities that I fiercely refute. But is this not more of a transcendental illusion than anything else, considering the amount of social scientists and others that are expressing the experience of living in our rapidly changing world? That said, the universe does convey an image of a law-like deterministic order (although this might be due to popular and presumably very outdated conceptions of astrophysics). I hope nonetheless that my description could convey an image of a much more chaotic and ever-changing universe. In this universe everyone is embedded in several subjective and objective networks which crosscut and are themselves multiple (an effect of symbolic convergence, that is).

### *Intersubjectivity and self-identity*

Our subjective relations begin in the consciousness of the other, the simple recognition of the other is radically different.<sup>338</sup> Importantly, and counter to the thought experiment of the ‘state of nature’ used earlier, self-consciousness is not possible without consciousness of the other in the first place.<sup>339</sup> Not only do subjective relations require the consciousness of the other, but also of the self, which itself stems from the experience in relations (before they become subjective) that ‘I’ am.<sup>340</sup> In other words, it stems from the recognition of the presence of this I which aspires for entitativity and ultimately allows its possibility. The body is according to many phenomenologists indispensable in this experience of the I, in the ability to locate the I. This is why I posited the point of convergence as the embodied mind. The fact that the self is embodied does not make it separate from the world as individualists would like to believe.

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<sup>338</sup> Keij, *De Filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas*.

<sup>339</sup> Schütz, *Collected Papers*.

<sup>340</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 1995): 257.

Rather, it makes the self public or intersubjective, for the world is not only accessible to *me*, my *self*, as embodied mind, is also accessible to the world.<sup>341</sup> To be more precise, as embodied minds, we subject both ourselves and others to our perceptual and reflexive awareness, and become an object of theirs.<sup>342</sup>

Our intersubjectivity then starts in our concrete interactions and ties. In this collision of life-worlds the possibility arises that we become aware of each other, that we apprehend each other and relate to each other, and ultimately that we become each other. I speak of collisions of life-world because entire worlds can actualize themselves throughout their interactions, even though most often large parts of the life-worlds remain implicit (i.e., virtual) and non-actualized. A collision brings this image to the mind that life-worlds only meet each other partially. We then become each other insofar we relate to the communicative indications that emerge out of the interactions between each other, out of the particular situational actualizations of themselves. What I would like to term ‘significant encounters’ refers to these encounters or collisions that are significantly world-changing. As Crossley argues, “[a]lternatives are a source of exposure to cultural forms that actors might not otherwise encounter”,<sup>343</sup> which, I contend, can introduce completely new worlds.

One of these communicative indications are the ways others perceive us. The internalization of the accumulation of this sort of communicative indications of multiple others can converge to what Cooley calls the ‘looking glass self’. This concept refers to the shaping of our self-concept by the way we believe others perceive us. Similarly, many authors speak of external identification or ascription by others as a moment of self-identity (besides the

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<sup>341</sup> Crossley, “Networks, Interactions and Relations,” 487.

<sup>342</sup> Crossley, 487.

<sup>343</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 129.



simultaneous moments of self-identification and self-presentation).<sup>344</sup> It is clear, however, that all external identifications are equally relevant to our self. Many authors refer therefore to the role of the significant other.<sup>345</sup> I prefer the notions of significant encounters, as described above, as well as ‘significant relations’, which implies that others are significant in certain relations. My mother’s appraisal of my actions in academia or on the football pitch, do not matter as much as those of my professors and my football coaches. And even then it depends on my relations to them. In other words, it depends on the way our ties to each other are internalized, and the meanings it is attributed in the process, and the subsequent continuous folding of the self.

#### *A world of concrete ties and networks*

The previous discussion points out to the importance of concrete ties in the second-order relations. I cannot stress enough that second-order relations are in the first place interactions, or as I prefer even encounters; interactions cannot be neglected, both within and outside of ties. That said, (even if not necessarily) many interactions and encounters only become significant – that is, insofar indicative communications emerge to which one relates itself – as well as intersubjectively and symbolically constructed through and within ties, that is, through the repeated interactions with others. With history, which “ensure the active presence of past experience”, the ties themselves gain meanings and subjective meanings become intersubjective (through symbolic convergence rather than truly shared).<sup>346</sup> As such, the collision causes us to share life-worlds, or at least insofar they collided. A concrete tie can then

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<sup>344</sup> Heinich, *Ce Que n’est Pas l’identité*; Jenkins, *Social Identity*; Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity.”

<sup>345</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*; Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

<sup>346</sup> Crossley, “Music Sociology in Relational Perspective,” 614; Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks”; Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto,” 401.

be defined as “a lived history of interaction between two actors, coupled with mutual anticipation of future interaction, which affects current interaction between them”.<sup>347</sup>

In collisions life-worlds intermesh, they become shared (if only momentarily) and must become organized. Symbolic convergence emerges which create a socially constructed reality, with its “schemes of perception, thought and action”, and as such a culture or shared meaning universe, at least as far as life-worlds collide and must be reconciled.<sup>348</sup> In the process ties are attributed objective meanings which we internalize, and as such tend to become multiple and dynamic types of ties (or ‘relationships’).<sup>349</sup> However, simultaneously, we also attribute subjective meanings to both particular and general ties, meanings that are related to our subjective experience of these ties.<sup>350</sup> The indicative communications of ties are attributed these meanings when internalized, and further developed convergently through subsequent relations. In other words, I suggest that meanings come into being in order to comprehend experiences, and thus emerge and develop through interactions,<sup>351</sup> subjectively, intersubjectively and socially. However, not only their meaning, but also their structures must be studied, especially since ties, which are repeated interactions, tend towards convergence and thus tend to become to some extent structural.<sup>352</sup> As Emirbayer reminds us about the structure of relations, for instance, relations can be “‘directional’ in content and intensity”, and thus asymmetrical and

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<sup>347</sup> Crossley, “Networks, Interactions and Relations,” 481.

<sup>348</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto,” 401; Crossley, “Music Sociology in Relational Perspective,” 607; Porpora, “Critical Realism as Relational Sociology.”

<sup>349</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 124; Burkitt, “Relational Agency.”

<sup>350</sup> I was inspired to make this distinction by Burkitt’s distinction between impersonal and personal ties. Because of several shortcomings, I propose the somewhat derived distinction between subjective and objective meanings, which in turn was inspired by Berger and Luckmann’s treatise. Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” 529.

<sup>351</sup> Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe, “Identity Theory,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. John DeLamater and Amanda Ward, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 33, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6772-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6772-0_2).

<sup>352</sup> Erikson, “Relationalism and Social Networks,” 282.

not necessarily reciprocated.<sup>353</sup> This convergence is symbolic though, or at the very least guided by meanings. As Fuhse argues, ties and by extension networks have a “‘phenomenological reality’ or ‘meaning structure’” and are characterized by a certain regularity in interactions.<sup>354</sup>

Ties themselves develop into networks. Erikson defines a network as “a set of relations that link actors”.<sup>355</sup> Emirbayer adds that we are “embedded in complex relational networks that are both intersubjective and public”.<sup>356</sup> Interestingly, White baptizes networks, or as he understands it, “social spaces with broader temporal relational extensions than any smaller abstraction of momentary dyads”, in the phenomenological holy water of domains, “the *lifeworlds* constituting the phenomenological contents and horizons of those relational spaces”.<sup>357</sup> White’s network are consequently reborn as *netdoms*, relational or social life-worlds.<sup>358</sup> These netdoms are ought to be understood as meaning structures of concrete ties within a broader narrative or story.<sup>359</sup> Indeed, the collision of subjective life-worlds not only leads to intersubjectively shared life-worlds, but become a cosmic experience within a broader network of directly and indirectly shared intersubjective life-worlds. As such, subjective life-worlds, or identities are embedded within larger stories that inform the own life-world, as it has never been possessed or been individually, purely subjectively. On the level of ‘society’, the largest network of networks that can develop and maintain an overall self-narrative, this is

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<sup>353</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 299; See also, Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes.”

<sup>354</sup> Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks”; Prandini, “Relational Sociology,” 4.

<sup>355</sup> Erikson, “Relationalism and Social Networks,” 274.

<sup>356</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 300.

<sup>357</sup> Fontdevila, “Switchings Among Netdoms,” 232.

<sup>358</sup> Fontdevila, 231 emphasis added.

<sup>359</sup> Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks,” 459; Fontdevila, “Switchings Among Netdoms.”

termed by Berger and Luckmann the ‘symbolic universe’, in which a continuous effort is made to put the multitude of stories into a coherent and orderly whole.<sup>360</sup>

White is mainly preoccupied with switches between netdoms. A very interesting pursuit, as we are, even on the ‘universal’ level, often embedded in a multitude of networks. In other words, our life-world, our self enters into several galaxies, universes and dimensions through the course of time. Sometimes, this is characterized by switches, which provides in the difference between the netdoms the opportunity between identities as well, to fold the self differently, and as such “counteract that very difference” and maintain one’s selfhood (from mother to worker for instance when going from house to work).<sup>361</sup> Nonetheless, “networks are always leaking into one another”, and meshed together.<sup>362</sup> Think for instance of parents who are the football coach of one of their own children. Their struggle with their identity in the netdom of football relations is constant. In this situation, the switch between parent and coach is complicated by the multiple meanings that are actualized in tie between the parents and his/her child in this situation. What I find a particular interesting question is how this conundrum affects the self-identity, not only in terms of switching between constructed identities (here, role-identities), but also in the ways in which one’s virtual and actual identity folds throughout these experiences.

#### *Objectified relations and the social construction of identity*

As subjective and intersubjective meanings become objectified, they become available beyond the subjectively and intersubjectively experienced world.<sup>363</sup> By this objectivation, our

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<sup>360</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>361</sup> Guy, “Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?,” 301.

<sup>362</sup> Guy, 301.

<sup>363</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

phenomenological life-worlds are vastly expanded and merged into social life-worlds. Important again, is to see how the communicative indications that emerge out of this expansive life-world (beyond the purely phenomenological experienced) are related to and thus how they are internalized, but also how they subsequently transform the communicative indications of one's expanded life-world and the relation to it.<sup>364</sup> Less abstract, out of the 'relational sets of relations' in which we are embedded emerge social constructions, a "repertoire of cultural models for relationships", also simply called culture.<sup>365</sup> It mostly consists of discrete categories, which tend to become social and role identities as they are internalized, and with which one can identify oneself.<sup>366</sup>

Social and role identity theorists tend to limit the self to the identification with such constructions.<sup>367</sup> Hogg and colleagues argue for instance that "the self is structured into *discrete* identities".<sup>368</sup> Identity is then considered to consist of 'a shared set of meanings' in terms of both groups and roles.<sup>369</sup> In the end, this is not so far-fetched since in everyday life the self becomes "assessed along culturally shared dimensions".<sup>370</sup> As part of our self-identity and 'shared' interpretative frameworks, we tend to rely on these constructions and their vocabularies.<sup>371</sup> And indeed, the question 'who am I?' is incredibly hard to answer without the

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<sup>364</sup> It could be interesting, for instance, to re-write Berger and Luckmann's parts on socialization in light of the first-order relations. I believe that this could significantly reframe contemporary ideas on primary and secondary socialization. Berger and Luckmann.

<sup>365</sup> Fuhse, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks," 468.

<sup>366</sup> Hogg, Terry, and White, "A Tale of Two Theories," 260–61; Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory."

<sup>367</sup> Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," 225; Hogg, Terry, and White, "A Tale of Two Theories"; Gazi Islam, "Social Identity Theory," in *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, ed. Thomas Teo (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2014), 1781–83, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7\\_289](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_289).

<sup>368</sup> Hogg, Terry, and White, "A Tale of Two Theories," 263.

<sup>369</sup> Stets and Serpe, "Identity Theory," 31.

<sup>370</sup> Stets and Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity."

<sup>371</sup> Fuhse, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks," 469.

constructions we live by, even though these constructions can only poorly or partially express who I am. It is by means of such institutions and the internalization and subsequent externalization (with converging pressures,<sup>372</sup> and ignorance of divergences) that networks of networks structure themselves (as it differentiates itself from each others).

Insofar we apprehend the world through these constructions and become these constructions,<sup>373</sup> convergences in being emerge, which we end up calling role identities (e.g., teacher) and collective identities (e.g., national identity). This has implications for the ways we experience ourselves and our self-identity, as well as how we experience each other. To begin with our self-experience, social identity theorists point out that identification with one's groups leads to 'depersonalization'. Depersonalization refers to the self-understanding "as a category representative rather than a unique individual".<sup>374</sup> They argue that this does not lead to 'deindividuation', to the loss of identity under conditions of anonymity (or narcissism, I would add).<sup>375</sup>

First of all, it clearly refers to a limitation and loss of identity. But if they mean that it does not lead to a loss of self, then I must concur. However, as a mere representative, the I is completely bared of its own individuality, it is rather the I, the point of convergence of this collective point of convergence, that nestles itself in me, that takes over the embodied mind. Or rather, it is on of your Me's that seduces and subjugates your I with the promise of security (yet behind which hides and even greater insecurity) and takes over the parasitic quality of the I. While the self might be safeguarded in this process, the I is most certainly not. It leads to the

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<sup>372</sup> As Stets and Serpe argue for instance, yet end up overemphasizing it. Stets and Serpe, "Identity Theory," 35.

<sup>373</sup> Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, ed. Peter J. Burke, 5 (Stanford University Press, 2018), 124.

<sup>374</sup> Hogg, 118; Hogg, Terry, and White, "A Tale of Two Theories."

<sup>375</sup> Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 118; Hogg, Terry, and White, "A Tale of Two Theories."

feeling that if I am not a good representative, I am nothing; rather than the understanding that I am simply different from that group proto type. At the same time, the angelic self becomes more and more like the Me('s) in question, until it simply gives over to its rule. Once it had to protect against the I, but before long it became unable to protect the parasitic interpretation of the internalized other.

What interests me even more is its implications on the experience of the other. As we internalize, experience and live through social constructions that posit discrete categories, we come to understand identities in terms of similarity and difference. I argued earlier that this is the fundamental or 'enigmatic' quality of any (pure) relation.<sup>376</sup> What occurs here, however, and is clearly discernable in the study of these discrete identities, is that both concepts become separated from each other.<sup>377</sup> That is, we become connected to some without separation, indeed we become absolutely the same, while we become separated from other without connection, indeed completely different. In neither cases, is the I recognized, but more fundamentally, neither is the relation, it becomes an absolute, irreconcilable opposition. The narrative becomes "whatever they are, we are not", and 'whatever we are, they cannot be'.<sup>378</sup> It leads to group differentiation and comparison.<sup>379</sup> They becoming competing, and "governed by the principle of metacontrast", that is, the minimalization of intragroup differences and maximalization of intergroup differences.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Donati, "An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism."

<sup>377</sup> Matthew J. Hornsey, "Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory: A Historical Review: Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 1 (January 2008): 207.

<sup>378</sup> Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 124.

<sup>379</sup> Rupert Brown, "Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30, no. 6 (November 16, 2000): 757.

<sup>380</sup> Hogg, Terry, and White, "A Tale of Two Theories," 262.

The problem here is not so much the groups themselves exists and are maintained, but rather the, relationally speaking, highly problematic way they are. Collective identities become dependent on the other in a negative sense, by striving for maximal distinctiveness.<sup>381</sup> The problem here is that one does not develop a secure and full sense of self. This would require an acknowledgment of one's relations and similarities (beyond simply the being of the same 'kind') with the other. If one wishes to protect to defend one's own 'culture', 'nation' or whatever collective identity, I would not argue to emphasize how one is absolutely different, but rather how one resembles and relates to one another, *and how it is precisely in these relations that one finds its difference and as such its identity*. If we want to find ourselves, we should find the other first. Only then will we be able to find our I in a meaningful way; and this applies on the individual and collective level.

That said, it is important to stress once more that the actual-constructed world is only part of our stories. First of all, not all our experiences fit into this constructed life-worlds. Or put differently in terms of the constitution of one's identity, the angelic self mediating the interpretation of the communicative indications it picks up is not solely constructed. On the other hand, neither are the communicative indications themselves always understandable in the vocabularies of our social constructions. Furthermore, we are often not only embedded in one meaning universe, but in multiple meaning universes. Next, there is also this problem of regarding the self as existing out of multiple identities which are understood as discrete sets of meanings. Surely, symbolic convergences occur and multiple points of convergence can be located in the self, but by no means are they pregiven and separate from each other. Rather, they should be understood as being in constant transactions both within the self and in ecological relations. And lastly, as (role) and social identity theorists admit yet barely cope with and

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<sup>381</sup> Brown, "Social Identity Theory," 747.



account for, meanings are always idiosyncratic and are thus only ‘conventional’ (i.e., coming together) to a certain extent.<sup>382</sup>

It therefore remains important to continuously emphasize the plurality of the world (or the communicative indications), the plurality of the socially constructed world (as it the result of symbolic convergences), and the plurality of the self (in the plurality of orders of experiences and in the plurality of its relational embedding). So when Stets and Burke, who remain faithful believers of the society, argue that “self reflects society”, I would correct them and state that ‘self reflects social life as it apprehends and relates to’.<sup>383</sup> This is why I argue that it does not suffice to acknowledge the fragmented or intersecting character of society, as “a differentiated but organized mosaic”, for instance.<sup>384</sup> No, this remains a confiction, even if fragmented and multiple. As Emirbayer puts it, they might “add considerable complexity to the picture, yet still do not escape the difficulties that pertain to all categorical, substantialist thinking”.<sup>385</sup> There is no such thing as a society in the first place. And neither can we believe to inherit our identity from predefined identities of clearly delineated cultural groups.<sup>386</sup> Insofar one can speak of symbolic convergences (and thus some entitativity), it does not follow that they are representative of the individual self. This could be regarded as both an ecological and deterministic fallacy.

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<sup>382</sup> Hogg, Terry, and White, “A Tale of Two Theories”; Stets and Burke, “A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity”; Hornsey, “Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory,” 209.

<sup>383</sup> Stets and Burke, “A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity.”

<sup>384</sup> Hogg, Terry, and White, “A Tale of Two Theories,” 263.

<sup>385</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 308.

<sup>386</sup> Bourdieu’s lack of acknowledgment of plurality has been identified as one of the shortcomings of his theory, Papilloud and Schultze, “Pierre Bourdieu and Relational Sociology,” 345.

The only thing left to discuss is how third-order relations, the so-called objective relations, influence the probability of second-order relations (and as such also of first-order relations). We are always embedded in “a multitude of overlapping [objective] relations”.<sup>387</sup> As Prandini summarizes Crossley’s argument, “[t]he methodological tool of ‘social space’ is useful to show the existence of peculiar foci which pull similar actors (in terms of social homophily) into the same ‘world’”.<sup>388</sup> As a methodological tool it recognizes that social spaces are the result of a transcendental illusion. The attracting foci refer to what I call ‘points of convergence’ (the other side of the story of structures). And in the end, this creates a shared world, for those who are (in part) embedded within this whirlpool of the point of convergence. What it adds is the notion of social homophily, although I believe we could also discover other mechanisms (as I showed for instance with sociality and the I on an ‘individual’ level, but also with symbolic convergence on the level of symbols).

Life-worlds can then be understood as “juxtapositions in a ‘social space’”.<sup>389</sup> In these spaces actors are ‘positioned’ in relation to each other dependent on the volume and composition of their ‘resources’.<sup>390</sup> Actors must thus be understood “as occupants of positions within broader relational configurations”, since their positions can change without changing the over ‘structure’.<sup>391</sup> These positions or worlds are “formed in networks, through mutual influence, and formative of them, by way of foci and the force of attraction that cultural similarity exerts”.<sup>392</sup> We can thus *not* accept “the rhetoric of mysterious ‘fields of forces’”,<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Burkitt, “Relational Agency,” 530.

<sup>388</sup> Prandini, “Relational Sociology,” 9.

<sup>389</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 131.

<sup>390</sup> Crossley, 131; Papilloud and Schultze, “Pierre Bourdieu and Relational Sociology.”

<sup>391</sup> Emirbayer 2010, 406 as cited in Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto,” 402.

<sup>392</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 140.

<sup>393</sup> Crossley, 135.

and rather emphasize that social fields are ‘structured relations’ that emerge out of convergence through symbolic interaction. One important human tendency, according to Crossley, that leads to such convergence is ‘status homophily’. This term refers to greater likelihood to engage in interactions with persons to close oneself in social space. And it is precisely this ‘force’, which is simply a human tendency that realizes itself in relations and interactions, that leads to convergence of being (rather than Bourdieu’s understanding that each position comes with a particular habitus).<sup>394</sup> Put differently, our identities shape the selection of our ties and our ties shape our identity. In this whirlpoolesque process, juxtapositions emerge in what we come to see as social fields.<sup>395</sup> Crossley thus concludes:

*“Neither networks nor social space are primary. Both are connected in an ongoing cycle, each feeding back into the other. Social space contributes to the shaping of networks of interaction and vice versa.”*<sup>396</sup>

If we can then discern social groups, this is the case because its ‘members’ are confined to processes of mutual influence since their “proximity in social space makes them more likely to interact”.<sup>397</sup> This has the important implication, as Fuhse notes, that “social categories can only convince if, and to the extent that, actual network patterns conform to them”.<sup>398</sup> When they do conform, reproductive (‘convergence’) mechanisms are in play.<sup>399</sup> However, it also implies a potential for change, reconstruction and transformation.<sup>400</sup> As we can beat the odds, and develop relations outside these groups, possibly even indirectly through others within the same group who have direct relations outside the group, new horizons of possibilities open up, and

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<sup>394</sup> Crossley, “Music Sociology in Relational Perspective,” 614–15.

<sup>395</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 130.

<sup>396</sup> Crossley, 142.

<sup>397</sup> Crossley, 140.

<sup>398</sup> Fuhse, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks,” 470.

<sup>399</sup> Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto,” 402.

<sup>400</sup> Liang and Liu, 402.

the structured relations can change.<sup>401</sup> Needless to say, that most of the time, one does not even need to develop relations outside of their group, but are already embedded in several (often overlapping) networks of relations in the first place.<sup>402</sup> And not only that, both the spaces and the world within to do not possess clear-cut natural boundaries.<sup>403</sup> Nonetheless, some “rough and fuzzy boundaries suggest themselves”.<sup>404</sup> So, similar to my notion of entitativity, Bourdieu therefore suggests the draw the boundaries “where the effects of the field cease”.<sup>405</sup>

To conclude this whole chapter briefly, the discussions in the first and second subchapter put the most fundamental argument forward of this thesis. Ultimately, I argue that we are our worlds. If we want to know someone, if we want to understand ourselves, we must study how this subjective world is apprehended and related to. This can, however, only be understood in the larger relational web of relations. Our self-identity is then dependent on the other in two fundamental ways. First, we need the other to find ourselves, and this in a harmonious rather than competitive logic. Second, we share our world with others, they shape the world we apprehend and our relation to it. Only a view that subscribes to our plurality in all its senses and on all relational levels (from self, to ‘society’) can fully appreciate the richness and fullness of our identities and experiences. And I wonder, is it not time to live this fullness, to live in harmony and plurality?




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<sup>401</sup> Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto”; Burkitt, “Relational Agency.”

<sup>402</sup> Liang and Liu, “Beyond the Manifesto.”

<sup>403</sup> Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” 303.

<sup>404</sup> Crossley, “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes,” 135.

We are finally back home. This sociological odyssey into the intricate world of identities came to its long awaited end. Now that we are back home, it is time to reflect back upon our travels, for a new journey already awaits us. This time it is not us who are ought to go beyond our life worlds, but it is our world that should go on an adventure. It is time to turn this seemingly fictive sociological story into a non-fiction, to tell the narrative of the romantic rediscovery of sociality and cosmic harmony as a real possibly. Both sociology and everyday life should no longer be violently reduced to the actual-constructed world. We can be so much more. We are so much more. What are the possibilities of our world? Can we turn our world of identities into a world of hope and harmony? To this end, this dissertation set on an odyssey through different worlds and a eclectic array of theories. As Vandenberghe asserts “[t]he point is not to develop a single theory to which everyone has to subscribe, but to introduce some markers into the discussion and bring the whole debate to a higher level of theoretical abstraction and conceptual integration”.<sup>406</sup> Whereas he aims to do this for social and sociological theory as such, my focus is on the notions of identity and self, as I develop an essayistic “theoretical or conceptual framework rather than a testable theory”.<sup>407</sup>

Our journey commenced in a world of possibilities where we found out about the phenomenological aspect of social construction, a speculative imagination that goes beyond all narratives that precede our imagination, and Deleuze’s philosophy of the fold with its virtual and actual reality. With this in mind, a conceptual framework could be developed which allows us to analyze identities and its experiences in its different dimensions. In a world of difference, difference was transformed into a positive concept. Here, relational sociology ridded us off the

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<sup>406</sup> Vandenberghe, “The Relation as Magical Operator,” 51.

<sup>407</sup> Peter J Burke and Sheldon Stryker, “Progress in Relating the Two Strands,” in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, 2017, 25.

problematic presuppositions that haunt sociology in one form or another. We came to fully understand social life through the lenses of processualism, constructivism, ecologism, immanence and relationalism. These lenses allow for the fundamental experiences of difference, interdependence, change, plurality et cetera, and their explanation. The structure/agency and structuration debate of sociology thereby became a debate about substantial emergence. This debate could not be neglected if we wished to get a hold on identity. By adding culture and its symbolism to the picture, we were able to reconcile processualism and structuralism based on the processual ontology of the world of becoming. With a theory of convergence we could understand how (both self and collective) identities could emerge.

In the final two worlds, we were finally able to conceptualize identity and related concepts. This notion of identity, however, is radically different from the essentialist and etymological notion of identity. One could wonder why I still insist to keep using the term. This is because I believe that identity as developed throughout this essay actually tells something about us: about who are and who we can be at any given moment in time (both of which are an ever-changing synchronic and diachronic accumulation of meanings). To understand these concepts, we had to disentangle the relational web we live in, to recognize and understand our human sociality and our cosmic harmony with others. The most fundamental conclusion of this thesis is that we are the world we apprehend in the ways we relate to it. This is the first fundamental way in which we are dependent on other(nes)s for our identities. The second fundamental way stems from the fact that our apprehension of the world and the ways we relate to it is shaped by the subjective and objective relational sets of relations we are embedded in. In the recognition of this deep ecology of our identity, we might discover a cosmic harmony to our world.

Back in our world of identities, this dissertation can be seen as a success insofar it encourages to imagine – and what is science but a particular mode of imagination – identity in

a way that allows for plurality, underlines our innate sociality, and directs or attention to our social relations. In this way, identity might brings us closer together as we find the Other in Me, as well as open up subversive spaces for possibilities and alternatives of experiences that remain violently experienced as long as we imagine identity reductively. Insofar it convincingly opens up (some of) the possibilities of identity, it has been a success. Nonetheless, without any doubt this dissertation also has its fair share of limitations, as its ambition was far greater than a master's dissertation could ever be – not to mention the shortcomings of the author in terms of genius, expertise and general knowledge. That said, if I was able to put forward some interesting and useful insights – which I believe I did – then it is a price that I am willing to pay.<sup>408</sup>

For as far as I am concerned, this thesis cries for empirical supplementations and consequent theoretical adaptations. This points out another provisional limitation: this broad conceptual framework must be adapted in ways that it can be empirically adopted. Nonetheless, I believe this potential already lies within it. In terms of 'methodologies', three come immediately into mind for me, even though there are undoubtedly a whole array of other possibilities. Qualitative and ethnographic studies of subjective experiences of transgressors (at first, as they are the most obvious expressions of the problematic nature of violent constructions, such as discrete categories). Studies of child development in various environments. The study of artistic sources complemented with qualitative and perhaps even ethnographic research with artists. Especially interesting would be artists that seek the boundaries of themselves in new or absurd situations, how they experience it, and how they subsequently express themselves.

Now as a scholar of nationalism, and soon to be Master of Arts in nationalism studies, I cannot conclude without a word or two about its possible implications for nationhood and collective identities. I could cut off the discussion early by simply stating my believe that no

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<sup>408</sup> Vandenberghe, "The Relation as Magical Operator," 51.

one is a national. Often when people speak of their nation, they end up referring to their hometown, to the places they lived in, and to be more precise to the significant relational webs and corresponding precise locations they were embedded in. I believe that a renewed vocabulary to talk about our experiences could benefit greatly. But obviously, there are also convergences to be discerned, which might well be beneficial for the political organization of solidarity on the level of the nation-state (although this is a discussion without an end). And ultimately, I do not argue that it is bad to live by the construction of nationhood. What is detrimental, however, is its reductionist self-understanding which follows from the inability to come to terms with difference, and the inability to relate to other 'nations'. I believe that if we were to develop national narratives of how intimate our relations are, a positive national self-conception could emerge in which we find our I in the recognition of our Me's. This positive national self-conception, however, can only be uphold as long as we keep relating to other(nes)s. I would thus also argue to develop new intimate relations. And as many know of romantic relations (often the most intimate relationship in certain spatio-temporal relational contexts), this can be scary, yet very rewarding; especially when developing a pure relation.

More problematic, I contend, is the reductive self-understanding in pure prototypical terms: I am a representative of my nation, and nothing besides that. Such forms of identification, I would argue, are detrimental for the self, for in spite of the great promise of security, there lies an even greater insecurity hidden in this promise. I believe that in all its forms these kind of reductive and violent imaginations are detrimental, dangerous, deceitful and ultimately undesirable. Nonetheless, it remains interesting to study how they pan out. I wrote an essay for instance on how the so-called 'new forms of nationalism' are expressions of the narcissistic relation to (the symbol of) the nation (see *Appendix*). This essay requires empirical back-up, yet shows one of the ways in which this dissertation can be put to use in nationalism studies, besides its subversive quality. In the end, I would argue that nationalisms that (wish to) come to



terms with the plurality of the world require at the very least a pure relation to its own symbol, and preferably to other nations as well. More fundamentally, be it with or without nationalism, the romantic in me hopes that with this dissertation and other efforts of heretics seeking for the richness and fullness of the world we will be able to rediscover our human sociality and a cosmic harmony. This is not only a plea for my-self, and not even for all our-selves, but for our social lives. May we find a future together.



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## Appendix                      A World of Nations

### When the nation *suffers* narcissism.

Broadly, three different core meanings of nationalism can be discerned: nationalism as (i) politico-philosophical doctrine (or ideology), (ii) national experience (i.e., identity, consciousness, feeling etc.), and (iii) as political realization (i.e., political movements and institutional).<sup>409</sup> All of them are obviously connected to the conception of the nation. My main argument is that new forms of nationalism are expression of a ‘novel’ *relation* to this conception of the nation (rather than new conceptions of the nations), thereby creating the so-called ‘new forms of nationalism’. For nationalism obviously changes through spatio-temporal contexts, but to deem a certain form of nationalism ‘truly’ new, a significant transformation must be discerned; and this, I argue, can be found in a renewed relation to the nation.

### *The nation as symbolic convergence*

In this essay I want to discuss how this novel relation to the nation transformed the realization of the three core meanings of nationalism. But first, what is the nation? Besides the different forms in which the nation is conceived (and is thus secondary), the nation is thus foremost conceived. It must be understood as “both a stock of generalized knowledge that shapes common-sense understandings of reality *and* a cultural frame enacted by individuals in everyday practice”.<sup>410</sup> However, it is also important to underline the symbolic power of the

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<sup>409</sup> Akim Said Aalou, “Het nationalisme voorbij de waan van homogeniteit [Nationalism beyond its delusion of homogeneity]” (Antwerp, University of Antwerp, 2021).

<sup>410</sup> Bart Bonikowski, “Nationalism in Settled Times,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 42, no. 1 (July 30, 2016): 440, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081715-074412> own emphasis; See also, (national) identity as a category of practice (i.e., an cognitive, interpretative framework) in Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity.”



nation as a symbol, that is, its capacity to integrate polyvocality and ambiguity into a singular, (apparently) simple, clear and recognizable symbol.<sup>411</sup> Indeed, Berger and Luckmann already posited the fundamental “quality of objectivity” inherent in symbolic systems which makes the nation a powerful symbol in the first place (as a stock of knowledge and as a cultural frame). But such symbols are not simply shared by mere interaction (as they and many symbolic interactionists believe); this would be a stark underestimation of human misunderstanding – and as Wittgenstein already argued, language would be abundant without such fundamental misunderstanding.<sup>412</sup>

That communication is possible at all follows from the capacity of symbols to bypass the realization of idiosyncratic differences in meanings. Derived from Tarde’s theory of social life,<sup>413</sup> I assert that meanings are shared only insofar there is at once a convergence of meanings by token of generalization and abstraction, as well as an obscuring of these meanings by token of its acquired symbolic quality. I term these process ‘symbolic convergence’. In this sense, polyvocality, nuance and clarity are reduced to a vague sense of a shared and univocal symbolic meaning (symbolic here in the sense that it is attached to a certain signifying symbol). And it precisely this ignorance of difference (both as idiosyncrasies and as lack of a univocal collective) that makes an apparent continuity and consistency to a certain extent possible. The nation only exist insofar we all call it the nation, have a vague sense of what the nation is, and remain as much as possible vague about it – in the social expectation that we understand each other (let alone ourselves) anyway.

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<sup>411</sup> Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?”

<sup>412</sup> Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>413</sup> Tonkonoff, “Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference.”

In other words, everyone has to some extent a different understanding of the nation (and I disregard for a moment that even individuals have a variety of ambiguous understandings)<sup>414</sup>. Nonetheless, meanings are also socially distributed which in turn creates different social points of symbolic convergence. Kalb saw such convergence, for instance, in the working class.<sup>415</sup> Similarly, I would relate the social points of symbolic convergences of nationhood to positionality in the Eurocentric episteme of coloniality.<sup>416</sup> Interesting here, is *how*, in the social point of symbolic convergence that lies at the basis of new forms of nationalism, idiosyncratic meanings of nationhood are related to the nation as social or shared symbol. The social point of attraction for this symbolic convergence can be characterized by feelings of, as Hochschild put it, “a frightening loss – or was it theft? – of their cultural home, their place in the world, and their honor”.<sup>417</sup> This can, indeed, be understood within the overly broad framework of globalization,<sup>418</sup> but more fundamentally, it follows from the combination of contemporary tendencies of (hyper-)individualization and ontological insecurity (stemming from a sense of emptiness).<sup>419</sup> What follows for some, and in particular those individuals *de jure* who are not able to be individuals *de facto*,<sup>420</sup> is a search for oneself as oneself outside oneself. Ultimately, it could be said that individualization leads paradoxically to perverse forms of communalism.

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<sup>414</sup> Swidler, “Culture in Action.”

<sup>415</sup> Don Kalb and Gábor Halmai, eds., *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class: Working Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

<sup>416</sup> Akim Said Aalou, “An Essay on the Core of Racism and the Periphery of Europe.” Unpublished 2021.

<sup>417</sup> Arlie Russel Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York London: The new press, 2016), 48.

<sup>418</sup> See for instance Kalb and Halmai, *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class*.

<sup>419</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

<sup>420</sup> Bauman, *Community*.

The disconnection to the social world here is two-fold. On the one hand, the (inter)subjective meanings that achieved factual objectivity,<sup>421</sup> are at odds with their own experience (cf., ‘what the elites are babbling about cannot be true’). So, on the other hand, they fall back on their own subjectivity and the common sense as the everyday truth-world (cf., ‘what I experience is true, and only my experiences can be true’).<sup>422</sup> But falling back on oneself, means reverting to one’s fragmented and incoherent being (as Nietzsche understood like no other).<sup>423</sup> Thus, to achieve the much needed coherence,<sup>424</sup> they look for the unity of their selves in a collective self (e.g., the nation), and appropriate it narcissistically.<sup>425</sup> *This narcissistic relation to the nation* as a social symbol has three consequences for its conception. First, what one believes to be the nation, *is* the nation. The meaning of the nation cannot be contested; no, it is subjective and absolute. Please note, it is not subjective in the sense that everyone is free to hold their notion of the nation, but rather only the meaning of the narcissist subject reigns supreme; all other meanings are discredited. Symbolic convergence remains nonetheless tenable because of the two other consequences which function as this vague sense of shared meaning; the belief that my understanding of the nation is also yours: the nation is greatest, and all otherness is a threat to its greatness.

So, second, narcissistically appropriated, the nation becomes self-inflated and entitled (and this is understanding shared, but positively: ‘our nation is the greatest’). As argued earlier

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<sup>421</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>422</sup> Termed I-pistemology by Liesbet van Zoonen, “I -Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture,” *European Journal of Communication* 27, no. 1 (March 2012): 56–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323112438808>.

<sup>423</sup> See also his notion of “dividu”. I read this in this work, if one wishes for a reference. Schinkel, *Over nut en nadeel van de sociologie voor het leven*.

<sup>424</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

<sup>425</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 1979; Walter Weyns, *Het Tijdperk van de Maatschappij*, 1. druk (Leuven: Acco, 2004).

with Hochschild, this development stems from a feeling of unjust loss (or theft). It is with regard to this that I believe that positionality in the Eurocentric episteme (of coloniality) is better suited than Kalb's working classes' explanation. Either way, self-inflated and entitled, the nation becomes greedy and egocentric. The world revolves around herself, and she merits everything by the mere fact of its greatness – what a lucky coincidence that the subjective self happens to be part of this wonderful collective and by consequence deserves nothing less. But do not dare to question her greatness; not of the collective, and certainly not of the individual insofar she is the collective, insofar she is national. The threat is already ever-present for the narcissist. She remains wary, and ready to attack. This is the third consequence. All otherness endangers oneself: those others, such as cosmopolitans, dual citizens and mixed 'bloods', that discredit and disvalue the national being, those others, such as liberal elites and derogatively called 'cultural Marxists' that have another notion of the nation, and many more. As a matter of fact, all others are a threat but those who recognize and accept 'my' unilateral claim on nationhood and on its promised security. The nation, then, becomes as exclusive (and small) as is possible without losing the claim on the majority, the collective (and thus its power).

### *Narcissistic forms of nationalism*

Nationalism as a doctrine is often regarded as a child of the French Revolution and thus strongly related to its trinity of '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*' (which could be seen as its *Leitmotifs*).<sup>426</sup> Of utmost interest here is its notion of liberty through *self-determination*. The

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<sup>426</sup> Elie Kedourie, ed., *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London: Cass, 1971); Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, 6. print (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994); Jürgen Habermas, "The European Nation State. Its Achievements and Its Limitations. On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," *Ratio Juris* 9, no. 2 (June 1996): 125–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9337.1996.tb00231.x>; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998); John Breuilly, "Nationalism and the History of Ideas," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 105, 2000, 187–223.

nation has thus always been understood as a self. This was indeed often connected to the majority (rule) and ‘*la volonté générale*’ – and its problems from a liberal point of view are well-known. In the new forms of nationalism, it takes a peculiar turn, however. It is still argued that the majority should rule. But this majority is I (since it has unilaterally been appropriated as such). Thus, my will must be law, and no concessions can be made. Whereas majority rule was built upon the premise that sometimes one would get political governments, rules or policies according to their choices and favor, and sometimes not, but in the end one would never lose out all the time, now one must win all the time (or there are traitors within our midst and the narcissist will undoubtedly throw a tantrum).

Ultimately, I argue that, despite of the claims on the nation, the narcissist is through-and-through an egoistic and egocentric *individualist*. He does not find solace in the liberal-individualist solution of (the nation as) association, for his and only his will must rule. Thus, he finds his power (and greatness and coherence) it in the national collective. However, this does not stem from the genuine concern of old for the community, but for a deep concern for oneself above all else. For, if the community would have truly mattered to them, would they have made the world revolve around themselves (which is understandable however considering their sense of insecurity)? The reason they are so concerned about the unity and perseverance of the national community, lies in the fact that they attached their being and destiny to it. They are themselves thus only as coherent, secure and united as the community they equated themselves with. As such, the national experience (as identity, feeling and consciousness), is one of survival, of self-protection and self-maintenance. Not the survival of the nation is endangered; mine is. These experiences are then politically translated and realized in far-right nationalist movements and governments through authoritarianism, populism, anti-immigration policies, chauvinism et cetera. Politics exist for me and my will. And the nation? The nation may suffer.

To conclude, this essay is by no means a condemnation of nationalism in general (for it was only preoccupied with new forms of nationalism), nor does it denunciate new forms of nationalism. The purpose of this essay was rather to show how the detriments of new forms of nationalism might be retraced to the subjective relations to the nation as social symbol. It might then make more sense to treat the pathological relations and support socially beneficial relations, as well as attend the conditions from which these relations stem, instead of challenging and refuting new forms of nationalism as such (which appears as, and with time seemingly proves to be, ignorant efforts in vain). Lastly, I hypothesized and theorized about a narcissistic relation to the nation, but empirical investigations (and theoretical criticism) might point towards other relational forms. But this does not matter, for if anything, this essay was meant to stress that subjective relations to social symbols are worthy of scientific inquiry.