

## The Relational Ontology of Social Network Theories

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Many sociologists today subscribe to the idea that the kind of ontology, which is pertinent to social phenomena, is relational ontology. In his avid ‘manifesto for relational sociology,’ Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) describes relational ontology as the social ontology, which conceives the social world primarily constituted rather by relations than by substances. Although philosophically the idea can be traced back to the ancient times (Heraclitus), the relational perspective was posited among some of the founders of sociology and some prominent sociologists (from Karl Marx and Georg Simmel to Pierre Bourdieu). During the last few decades, this approach is followed in a good number of sociological studies of social structure and culture, social networks and in social psychology, social science methodology and historical sociology – to mention just a few names: Harrison White, Andrew Abbott, Mustafa Emirbayer, Margaret Somers (Emirbayer 1997). Beyond sociology, the relational thinking was developed in pragmatist philosophy (John Dewey), in anti-essentialist hermeneutics (Richard Rorty), in philosophy of culture and phenomenology of knowledge (Ernst Cassirer) and in science and technology studies (Bruno Latour) among other fields.

A way to describe the sociological concept of relationality is by resorting to a focus on action. For this purpose, it is interesting to recall a philosophical typology of action due to John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley (discussed in Emirbayer 1997), who distinguish between three types of action: *self-action*, *inter-action* and *trans-action* (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Entities in self-action are “acting in their own powers” independently of all other substances; things in inter-action are “balanced ... in causal interconnection” against one another; and in trans-action “systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’” (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 108). According to Emirbayer, self-action and inter-action instantiate the ‘substantialist’ perspective of sociology, while it is trans-action what gives rise to the ‘relationalist’ sociological approach (Emirbayer, p. 287). In the latter, things “are not assumed as independent existences present anterior to any relation, but ... gain their whole being ... first in and with the relations, which are predicated of them. Such ‘things’ are terms of relations, and as such can never be ‘given’ in isolation but only in ideal community” (Cassirer 1953, p. 36).

Apparently, in modern sociology, it is in the relational study of social structure, as in the logic of social network analysis, where the transactional perspective has been developing best and most widely. The general understanding is that a social network consists of actors and patterns of relationships among them – epitomizing, a social network *is* actors *plus* relationships. Then the relational context postulates that relationships, as relations

among actors, come first and actors, as entities carrying out action, follow subsequently. This is the ‘anti-categorical imperative’ (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994) of the logic of social networks, which concedes the primacy of dynamic relationships among actors over attributional categories and other substantive predicates that actors might possess. In Harrison C. White’s words: “*Without persons being presupposed as actors, attention necessarily shifts to confluences of observable processes-in-relations. Out of these emerge actors and locations of social action*” (White 1997, p. 59-60, italics in original).

At this point, we will attempt to summarize a few fragments from the ontology of the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou, which might be relevant to the philosophical assumptions and implications of the relationalist view, something that we will examine at the end. First of all, let us say that Badiou keeps up with a philosophical tradition that goes back to Plato and Aristotle, through Duns Scotus and Heidegger. In this tradition, ontology is part of metaphysics, often described as the science of being as such, being qua being. Therefore, the stake of ontology is to think the mere and minimal fact of being, what *it is* as pure presentation, in contrast to what exists in reference to various conceptual extensions. In that sense, the fundamental ontological inquiry is to investigate the existence of things exclusively in so far as they *are* and independently of any qualities that they might appear or be considered to have in the contingent mode of their existence. Thus, ontology is the metaphysical science that concerns itself with the question of what is, simply insofar as it is. And here are some answers that philosophers have suggested over the centuries: atoms and the void for Democritus, Ideas and Forms for Plato, substances and categories for Aristotle, God for Spinoza, minds and sensations for Berkeley, synthetic intuition for Kant, language games for Wittgenstein, pure Being for Heidegger, mathematics – and in particular the Zermelo-Frankel set theory – for Badiou.

Now, a fundamental ontological consideration is to examine the relationship between being and existence. This amounts to an investigation of the unity of the be-ing (in the verbal sense) of beings (in the substantial sense). Is there a predicated oneness or a singularized multiplicity of beings both in their individuality and their totality? According to Badiou’s argumentation to reconcile unity and multiplicity, if be-ing is one, then that which is not one, i.e., the multiple, must not be (Badiou 2005, pp. 23-5). But, since all beings presented to our minds and senses are multiple, if be-ing is one, then also presentation must not be. On the other hand, if be-ing is multiple, it seems impossible to conceive any presentation as one be-ing. Badiou’s solution is to accept that be-ing is not one (“the one *is not*”) and at the same time to recognize that the ones do exist (“*there is Oneness*”). In fact, although there is no one, for Badiou, there is an operation that constitutes oneness, which is the operation of the “count-as-one.”

Moreover, Badiou terms *situation* any being that “presents (itself),” i.e., any “presented multiplicity.” In this way, situation becomes synonymous to an infinite set, because whatever belongs to a situation should be presentable as existent. Similarly to sets, “every situation, inasmuch as it is, it is a multiple composed of an infinity multiplicity of elements, each one of which is itself a multiple” (Badiou 2001, p. 25). That is, similarly to sets, a situation is defined by only by the fact that it includes its elements, which could

be “words, gestures, violences, silences, expressions, groupings, corpuscles, stars, etc.” (quoted in Hallward 2003, p. 92). Thus, Badiou’s situation accommodates everything which is, regardless of its modality: it is prior to any distinction between substances and relations and covers both.

When next the question comes to the oneness, the unity or the distinctive individuality of a situation, Badiou returns to the fundamental operation of count-as-one. In fact, he calls *structure* of a situation what specifies it as a particular situation and characterizes its elements. A structure determines what belongs and what does not belong to a situation by counting-as-ones the presented multiples of a situation. In other words, a situation is the result or the effect of a structuration, not the other way around – neither a situation comes from an origin or an end. In particular, there is no exclusiveness in the multiples belonging to a situation; situations might share multiples; they do not have mutually exclusive identities.

Furthermore, since Badiou conceives a presentation uniquely thinkable as a multiple, only through the after-effect of the count-as-one, he distinguishes ontologically among two types of situations (Badiou 2005, p. 25). On the one hand, there is the situation before or without the effect of count-as-one; this is the ‘naked’ being of a situation that Badiou calls a non-unified or *inconsistent multiplicity*. On the other hand, after or with the effect of count-as-one, a situation is identified as a structured or *consistent multiplicity*.

However, Badiou also introduces a second or meta-structuring principle as a re-presentation of the multiples of the structure of a situation. This is a structuring of the structure, which unifies or counts as one every possible way, every combination, of arranging the multiples of a situation into groups of parts or subsets of the situation. For this purpose, he employs the set-theoretic notion of the power-set and he calls *state* of a situation that metastructure, in which now the counting-as-one “holds for inclusion, just as the initial structure holds for belonging” (Badiou 2005, pp. 104-11). For example, in the case of a situation presented as an infinite multiplicity, the power-set, i.e., the collection of all its possible parts or subsets has much higher cardinality ( $2$  to the power of the cardinality of the initial situation) and much higher complexity. Thus, the state is what discerns, clusters, classifies and orders the constituent parts of a situation – and Badiou uses the term simultaneously in an ontological arithmetic sense and a political normative sense. And this duality refers also to the representational or aggregative mechanisms that the state applies over a situation for administrative purposes.

So far we have seen that Badiou’s ontology extends in three levels: multiples develop formally from the absolute priority of nothingness up to the complexity of objects. A thing or an object is a multiple and ontologically what comes always first is its pre-objective basis (the being as such), what follows second is its presentation as a situation (inconsistent or structured multiplicity) and what comes third is its re-presentation as a state. Badiou names *singular multiple* any multiple that occurs at the level of presentation of a situation but it cannot be re-presented at the state of the situation; this means that a singular multiple cannot be arranged stably together with other elements of the situation

and, as such, it escapes the effect of a second count-as-one (Badiou 2005, 99). In set-theoretic terms, a singular multiple is an element of an initial set (the situation) but not one of its subsets – which means that some the elements of the singular multiple do not belong to the initial set. If all the elements of a singular multiple do not belong to the initial set, Badiou calls it an *evental-site*. However, in general, the existence of an evental-site in a situation does not guarantee that any change might occur. For Badiou, a proper *event* arises only when there is an *intervention* that has transformational consequences for the situation. Such a process of fundamental change should be grounded on a series of acts of enquiries into the situation in *fidelity* to the event. Badiou calls *generic truth* the procedure made up of such enquiries enacting fidelity. Thus, Badiou manages to construct the notion of the event as a becoming anew, as a recasting of the unrepresented, the undecidable and the indiscernible. And, for this purpose, he draws upon the notion of the ‘generic’ that Paul Cohen has developed in set theory (Badiou 2005, pp. 307-343).

From the above, we see that Badiou reverses the traditional context in which the relationship between agency and subjectivity is commonly conceived. Instead of examining how a subject or an actor can initiate action in an autonomous way, Badiou is concerned on how a subject or an actor emerges through an autonomous chain of actions which radically transform a situation (Feltham and Clemens 2003, p. 5). In fact, Badiou focuses on those exceptional or generic decisions and actions, which make a human being a subject or an actor, whenever these actions manifest a fidelity to a contingent encounter with an event that disrupts the situation in which the human being is submerged.

In other words, in Badiou’s philosophy, there is no subject without or outside of any process of subjectivization and no individual actor without or outside of any process of individuation. From this point of view, Badiou’s metaphysical approach is a theoretical alternative to the sociological perspective of relationality. Although Badiou’s formalization is extremely difficult to be translated in empirical terms, it may offer a theoretical framework to resolve some of the blind-spots of the sociological relational model. For instance, if relationships determine or come first than actors, then the question is what determines relationships. If one wants to escape from any substantialization and to apply reflexively the same relational logic, then one falls on the impasse of an infinite and endless series of regressions. This is where and why the theoretical resources of a philosophical ontology are needed in order to break the vicious circle of the self-perpetuated empirical relationality. And Badiou’s conceptualization of multiples, situations and events may offer an ontologically grounded basis for a processual theory of identity, encounters and “occasions” (as explored by Goffman).

However, it should not escape us that Badiou’s philosophy is intrinsically anti-relational, because Badiou keeps on asserting the delusive character of relations. The only tie that Badiou accepts is in the moment of a decision, when thought is tied to being. So, by tying the nature of existence to the axioms of set theory, Badiou has decided – putting it bluntly – that relations do not exist and that existence becomes a function of belonging alone (Badiou 2005, p. 275). This is why, for Badiou, truth is unrelated, autonomous and self-constituent, while the idea of a link or a relation is fallacious. Exactly it is at the point

where a link is undone or deconstructed or freed that a truth procedure operates. Thus, access to truth is nothing but a situated production of radical autonomy and self-determination, i.e., pure freedom from any relation (quoted in Hallward 2003, p. xxxi). For Badiou, the critical element in the process of becoming-subject or becoming-actor is a generic and self-referential notion of “confidence,” where “the essence of confidence is to have confidence in confidence” (quoted in Hallward 2003, p. 38). Furthermore, for such a process to become a truth procedure, it should necessarily be “generic, because, if we wanted to describe it, we would simply say that its elements *are*,” in the absence of any differentiating relation (Badiou 2005, p. 365). In this way, Badiou returns after Plato to a conception of truth as a self-sufficient “purity,” where “purity is the composition of an Idea such that it is no longer retained in any relation.” True thought is “thought without rapport, thought that relates nothing, that puts nothing in rapport” (quoted in Hallward 2003, pp. 273-4).

Although through a strong anti-relational flavor, Badiou’s generic declarations clearly reveal a “passion for the real” and a persistent faith in the resources of pure formalization as the only medium to express such passion adequately. The way Badiou (influenced by Lacan) understands the real is nothing other than an active encounter with the generic as such. And the generic can be rendered only in terms that are indifferent to any “specifying” or “relationalizing” signification, i.e., to any signification at all. Paradoxically, here we have dared to hint that it could be prolific to think of a possible common plan between the sociological relational perspective and an idealistic and formalistic ontology like Badiou’s. According to Max Weber, one of the fathers of sociology, subjectivist methodological individualism “put[s] an end to the mischievous enterprise which still operates with collective notions” (quoted in Roth 1976, p. 306). Now that the achievements of social network theories seem to triumph over individualistic conceptions, it might be again provocative to think of putting an end to the relationalist pragmatist notions and to revisit the generic and formal resources that traditional philosophy might offer to sociology.

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