There has been talk of relationalism in sociology for decades now. These two volumes, *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology* and *Applying Relational Sociology*, make an explicit play to capture the heart and soul of the discipline and send it on a relationalist trajectory. The attempt raises a series of linked questions: how relationalism should be defined, what is a relationalist agenda, and do these volumes advance that agenda?

The term relationalism is itself contested, even by the authors included in these two volumes. I have already taken a stand on this issue, so I should be clear that the way I see it, relationalism is a theoretical perspective based in pragmatism that eschews Cartesian dualism, substantialism, and essentialism while embracing emergence, experience, practice, and creativity. It includes some but not all social network analysts, field theorists, actor-network researchers, economic sociologists, a number of comparative-historical researchers, and of course card-carrying relationalists, such as Mustafa Emirbayer and Margaret Somers (Erikson 2013). These volumes are populated with a slightly different set of researchers: social network analysis and field theory are well represented, but so is critical realism; and there is an explicit attempt to draw in adherents to relationalism. In fact, reading the volume straight through felt at times like being sucked into a vortex: in the beginning you are circling at some distance around the central point, but gradually advance to denser pieces focused more precisely around key issues. Perhaps as part of this strategy, Depelteau and Powell seem hesitant to flesh out too strict a definition of relationalism in the introductions. It is after all a collection of volumes presenting a variety of perspectives on this problem and too strict a definition runs the risk of excluding contributors; however, this leaves us with slightly anemic descriptions of relationalism as based around the importance of relations (*Conceptualizing Relational Sociology*) and as challenging determinism and essentialism within sociological theory and research (*Applying Relational Sociology*). Fair enough. Movements need members, and members are diverse—but there are risks to this strategy also.

One of these risks is incoherence. It is fair to say that much of the usefulness of theory is based in logical consistency. Theory builds in drawing in adherents to relationalism. There are risks to this strategy also.


insight, reveals obscure connections, and drives research by generating new hypotheses. It does so largely through the logic stringing the elements of the theory together. Without the logic, theory is a set of unrelated observations about the world that does little to build the intuition necessary to interpret new events. The volumes and the project of relational sociology must necessarily navigate a tight line between embracing a large constituency and risking theoretical pastiche. And there is a little of the latter here, as many authors do not hesitate to draw a concept from Elias here, a concept from Bourdieu there, and a little from Dewey over here. There is a certain richness to this, and these touchstones also serve important legitimizing functions, but do all these bleeding fragments fit together into a coherent whole? Perhaps they do, but the reader deserves a more explicit investigation of this.

Christopher Powell offers the most explicit, comprehensive, and precise vision of relationalism included in the volume in his chapter, “Radical Relationalism: A Proposal.” He lays out nine proposals as a foundation for the perspective. In truth, I am something of a relationalist myself, so all of these proposals sound good in and of themselves. However, considering their relation to one another, I become less convinced that they make sense as a whole. For example, the guidelines posit relations as the elementary units of analysis, but then suggest that we “Treat the concepts of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ as opposed but equivalent” and further, we should “Treat macro and micro as relative, not separate” (pp. 197, 201). But what is structure and agency if relations are the elementary unit of analysis? Do relations have agency in that case? Are relations the agents? And how do micro and macro map on to structure and agency? Without making the links between these relatively complex theoretical concepts more explicit, it reads more like a list of (valid) complaints, than a generative basis for future investigation of the social world.

The volume also includes what I believe are potentially serious conflicts and inconsistent conceptual framing. The most important is in regards to the idea of duality. I find the word duality very problematic as it is one of those words, like sanction, that has evolved over time to mean both one thing and its near opposite. In this case, (1) the complete separation between two distinct parts (i.e., dichotomy), as well as, (2) the inseparability and co-constitution of two related parts. The history of this confusion is long and interesting to think through, but suffice it to say that it haunts this discussion. It is my belief that when network theorists such as Ronald Breiger, Harrison White, and John Mohr use the term duality, they mean the latter: the intertwined, co-constitution, and interaction between two parts (Breiger 1974, Mohr and White 2008). Mohr and White make this more explicit in their co-authored piece on institutions, where they write that structural duality “is a relationship that inheres within and between two classes of social phenomena such that the structural ordering of one is constituted by and through the structural ordering of the other” (2008: 490). This definition is very different from a Cartesian or Kantian mind/body dualism, where the mind is distinct from the world, of a different order and essence, and is definitively not constituted through interacting with the world because it is prior to experience of the world.

This distinction matters for reasons beyond the easily remedied fact that dualism is both summarily dismissed and embraced as a key mechanism by various contributors because they mean different things by the term. Relationalists like to emphasize relations rather than differences between the things that are interacting. This emphasis has produced a little fuzziness about the nature of the things that are interacting. For example, relationalists have claimed in several places that focusing on relations can dissolve the dualism between structure and agency. The question is whether this means showing that structure and agency are the same thing (presumably relations) or whether it means that structure and agency are related and co-constituted, but nevertheless also represent two distinct phenomena. This dilemma currently seems to have the most traction in debates between the critical realist school and the mechanism-based approach of analytical sociology, where critical realism champions emergence, which implies difference, and analytical sociology embraces supervenience, which
implies correspondence. It also has very real implications for what types of research are most likely to be the most promising (for example, the embrace of supervenience leads to a strong emphasis on computational modeling in analytical sociology). Rejecting dualism wholesale can lead to a position that emphasizes the unity of social phenomenon via social relations, where Breiger, White, and Mohr’s rehabilitation of dualism gives greater room for the emergence of difference in those phenomenon. Relationalists are going to have to come down on one side or the other, or come up with their own twist.

The way in which dualism is conceptualized suggests two different trajectories for a relationalist research agenda. Many dualisms import a totalizing quality into the perspectives that they inform. For example, everything is either in the material or the ideal realm. What is not of the mind is bodily and what is bodily is not of the mind. And similarly, the entirety of the world can be divided into structures and agents. At the core of this is the perception of the subject as distinct from the world they observe, which again is a duality that encompasses everything in the same way that what is inside this box and outside this box constitutes everything in the universe.

If the core of relational sociology is to focus on dissolving totalizing dualisms, such as mind/body, structure/agent, then the right thing to do may be to focus efforts on the perceptual boundary between the self and what is exterior to the self. In this case, it seems entirely appropriate to drill deeper down into the experience, constitution, and contents of social relations themselves. There are many reasons to believe that social relations (meaning relations between individuals) are exactly that which traverses this boundary, either because the individual recognizes itself in the exterior world through social relations (Simmel 1971, Levinas 1978) or because the mind is constructed through the experience of relations.

Debbie Kasper suggests this tack in her essay “Advancing Sociology through a Focus on Dynamic Relations” where she asserts fundamental principles of human relations and argues that establishing these premises will go “a long way toward remedying the seemingly intractable incoherence in sociology” (p. 76). Nick Crossley expands our sense of the ontological character of social relations by comparing them to field positions in his chapter “Interactions, Juxtapositions, and Tastes: Conceptualizing ‘Relations’ in Relational Sociology.” And Jan Fuhse extends work set out in his recent Sociological Theory article (2009) in the chapter, “Social Relationships between Communication, Network Structure, and Culture.” There he draws from Nicholas Luhmann’s communication theory to consider the problems of what “social relationships actually are, how they form and evolve, and how they connect to wider layers of the social” (p. 181).

The dualisms that Mohr and White describe do not split reality into two exhaustive categories. There are multiple dualisms that occur simultaneously within and across different cities, communities, and at all different levels of social, cellular, and physical organization. In the social world alone, there are countless institutions, and these institutions, according to Mohr and White, are all based on different dualisms. The agenda suggested by this approach is not so much “relations” as “mappings”—mappings that occur across many diverse phenomena. This move suggests an alternative agenda for relationalism, which does not focus on dissolving the boundary between the individuals and their environment (social or otherwise), but instead investigates how interactions between distinct systems produce dynamics, change, innovation, and difference.

The chapters in the volumes that exemplify this second trajectory mainly appear in Applying Relationalism. They are easy to pick out as the relations of interest in them are between non-human actors. Daniel Monterescu has a fascinating chapter (“Spatial Relationality and the Fallacies of Methodological Nationalism”) on Palestinian-Israeli interaction in Jaffa in which the relation of interest is between space and nationalism. In “Survival Units as the Point of Departure for a Relational Sociology,” Lars Bo Kaspersen and Norman Gabriel are centrally concerned with shifting relationalism from a focus on social relations to interactions between survival units, which are
autonomous and sovereign political communities. Osmo Kivinen and Tero Piirainen are concerned with the relationship between social groups and their environment in their chapter, “Human Transaction Mechanisms in Evolutionary Niches—A Methodological Relationalist Standpoint.” John Mohr focuses on the relation between practice and culture in his chapter, “Bourdieu’s Relational Method in Theory and in Practice”). And Harrison White, Frédéric Godart, and Matthias Thiemann as well as Jorge Fontedevila and Harrison White are concerned with the relationship between netdoms in their chapters, “Turning Points and the Space of Possibles” and “Relational Power from Switching across Netdoms through Reflexive and Indexical Language.” Although Margaret Archer’s chapter, “Collective Reflexivity: A Relational Case for It,” works through the perceptual boundary of human subjects by thinking through the process of “relational subjects being reflexive about their social relationships” (p. 145), she is not using relations to dissolve the difference between the self and the social, but instead to think through processes through which the social may emerge from a different phenomenon (i.e., the individual); thus putting her in the mapping across diverse, or distinct, phenomena camp.

Various authors acknowledge this tension, if in passing. Margaret Archer notes that her approach may be “unpopular among relationalists who want to keep their ontology flat” (p. 146). And Craig McFarlane, in his chapter, “Relational Sociology, Theoretical Inhumanism, and the Problem of the Nonhuman,” criticizes relationalism generally for a humanist social ontology that ignores the importance of sociality in animals as well as humanity’s relations with animals. This criticism might be extended to include materials and environment, and important factors such as the distribution of natural resources or the structure of river networks get short shrift in relationalism despite their significant impact on social organization.

The question of which agenda to pursue hinges upon both the importance of understanding our own subjectivity and perceptual apparatus in order to explain social outcomes, which is related to the extent we think of the social as an emergent phenomenon, as well as the urgency of the social questions we need to address.

Will these two volumes push relationalism to the center of sociology? First it should be stated that Depêteleau and Powell acknowledge the possibility that this goal may not be entirely suitable and that perhaps a Donald Levine-esque vision of multiple theoretical perspectives best suits sociology (Levine 1995). I believe they would still, however, argue that relationalism should be a larger component of the overall discipline. This, however, begs the question of the extent to which relationalism already dominates sociology. The volumes represent relationalism as a minority position, but is that the reality? Students of Harrison White are faculty members at most major universities, and their students fill many other spots (I am both a student of White’s and a student of one of White’s students). The editor of the most prestigious journal in the field speaks openly against simple linear models (Abbott 1988). The field of social networks is expanding at a rapid pace. Economic sociology, which was founded on a relationalist text by a student of Harrison White (Granovetter 1985), is an extremely healthy section of the discipline. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell’s 1983 article bringing field theory to organizations has been cited more than 26,000 times. And John Padgett and Walter Powell’s new book, The Emergence of Markets and Organizations (2012), promises to be extremely influential. There is a strong argument to be made that the new institutionalism, organizational ecology, organizational studies, economic sociology, social networks, and comparative historical sociology are all strongly relationalist. Perhaps an important step for advancing relationalism is going to be working to incorporate much of this already extremely influential work into an explicit and overarching theoretical framework. We might ask of these authors, for example, what is the difference between Elias’s figuration (which is mentioned by several as a key relational concept) and an institution? They seem very similar to me. Perhaps we do not need a new word, and relationalists will find that they have conquered vast new territories in one small step.

Either way, these two volumes do valuable work in beginning to chart an explicit
framework for relational sociology. Mustafa Emirbayer’s essay, “Relational Sociology as Fighting Words,” ends the first volume by calling for relationalists to recall their reactionary roots and a past grounded in the criticism of mainstream sociological thought. But Emirbayer’s own relationalist manifesto was solidly grounded in a wonderfully coherent interpretation of pragmatism. He did much more than merely criticize, and indeed I am not sure why we would need an overarching theoretical framework for sociology if the framework lacked consistency and a clearly recognizable logic, that is, was more than mere criticism. That is not necessarily easy to achieve, but it is a project well worth undertaking, and I am grateful to the editors and contributors for making real progress in this task.

References

Democratic Ideals and Sobering Realities: The Lifeworks of Philip Selznick and Amitai Etzioni

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While there is a constant output of books and articles about the founders and classics of the sociological discipline, much less attention is being devoted to the crucial figures of later phases in the history of the discipline. The two books under review here indicate a certain change in this respect. Two of the towering American sociologists of the first decades after the Second World War who later became major public intellectuals of international influence are the subject matter of these two thorough and well-researched monographs: Philip Selznick (1919–2010) and Amitai Etzioni (1929– ). There are interesting parallels in the biographical developments of these two scholars that could nourish debates about the present state of the discipline. The


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