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Pierpaolo Donati, Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences. London: Routledge, 2010, 272 pp.

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Book reviews

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As the sub-title of the book indicates clearly, it outlines an ambitious project. In his bold enterprise to re-construct almost the whole bulk of contemporary social sciences the author begins by refuting ontological atomism as well as holism. Instead the author suggests a relational ontology in the sense that social relations should be treated by sociology as the prime reality and thereby as the principal object of inquiry. From this vantage point the established paradigms in social science are then criticised radically for committing the fundamental err of viewing social relations as a derivative category, derived from and/or generated by something else, that is individual beings or social structures. Stemming from a particular mode of thought associated with modernity, this err according to Donati permeates the whole ways of thinking about social relations presented in classical, modern and post-modern social thought as well as in the “re-constructive” perspectives of Giddens, Habermas and Alexander. Not even Simmel is immune to this criticism. Although Donati underlines that “Simmel’s relational turning-point can be considered the very beginning of a proper relational theory in sociology” [p. 6], it is dismissed because, failing to treat social relations as prime sui generis social entities, it regards them as emergent, that is, secondary phenomena.

On the basis of this critical evaluation Donati then suggests a relational paradigm which in more specific terms has two dimensions: First, in this paradigm all social relations are “accorded the status of an ontological ‘stratum’, that is a level of sui generis reality embodied in ‘social facts’; and secondly, it is a paradigm in which “every sociological object [is] defined as a social relation in a sensible manner” [p. 12]. The rest of the book is then devoted to an exploration of these two dimensions and their implications, with the aim of helping the reader enter more deeply into the new, relational mode of thinking. In this spirit then the remaining chapters are designed to demonstrate for instance how individual beings are relational entities in the sense that their selves are anything but secondary products generated through social relations [Chapter Two] and how society is anything but a mesh of relations [Chapter Three].

Given the grand project outlined in the beginning of the book the main question to ask is to what extent Donati succeeds in materialising his ambition. In my view the results are rather unimpressive, mostly because the book suffers from a general lack of specification, both conceptual and logical. Many interesting ideas that are put forth in the book remain unfortunately under-developed as the author addresses them only too broadly and too swiftly. Nor are the relations amongst these ideas explicated in detail or interwoven into some kind of coherent and explicitly presented framework. For instance two of the core ideas that constitute the initial premises of the whole embarked project are the proposals suggesting that “in the beginning is the relation” and that “the nature of social facts is a relational matter.” Neither are explored sufficiently and adequately in the book. The elaborations offered are too abstract and presented too briefly; and the example of family which is frequently used for making the notion of ‘relational reality’

more tangible is not of much help since to view family as a constellation of relations with clear boundaries brings hardly any novelty to the table.

Above all, the author declines to develop an explicit account of the central entities to which the book is devoted, notably social relations; and lacking a distinct and novel way of conceptualising social relations and pertinent typologies of ties and grounds of connectivity [Azarian 2010], the book falls short of making a clear conceptual distinction between on the one hand inter-personal linkages and on the other hand relations amongst constituent parts of social systems such as relations between social classes and/or relations amongst pre-defined positions and roles like in kinship structures. Finally, although the author does highlight the necessity of a relational methodology the book remains rather silent on the issue that constitutes the very methodological heart of relational sociology, notably the contextual analysis according to which the main causal and explanatory powers are the social forces which reside in and which operate through the relations that environ social actors.

On the whole however, the book is rich in stimulating insights and has the general merit of emphasising that relational thinking is the most promising direction for contemporary sociology to take; and in asserting this Donati joins a number of other sociologists who share the same aspiration [see for instance Crossley 2011]. Yet, unfortunately the theoretical framework outlined in the book remains rather unspecified with regard to the particular contribution it possibly makes to the advancement of such a sociology. A necessary part of the attempt to specify the tangible contribution of the book to the development of relational sociology and its leverage for empirical research would of course be the explicit positioning of the book in the field but whereas Donati devotes a relatively large space to Parsons' theoretical framework he does not take issue with social network analysis. Nor does he make one single reference to the theoretically more sophisticated work of Harrison White [Azarian 2005; White 2008] with whom Donati shares a considerable number of points, including both the overriding ambition and many of the properties of the proposed alternative framework.

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