

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Nick Crossley, *Towards Relational Sociology*. International Library of Sociology. New York: Routledge, 2010, 228 pp. \$US 160.00 hardcover (978-0-415-48014-7)

More than 20 years after the publication of M. Emirbayer's relational manifesto, there is a need to clarify the fundamental issues, principles, and concepts of relational sociology. Everybody more or less agrees that the goal is to move beyond the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism in order to analyze fluid social processes, yet beyond this general goal, relational sociology remains unclear. In 2010, two sociologists attempted to clarify relational sociology in books published by Routledge.

In *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm*, P. Donati bases relational sociology on critical realism. In *Towards Relational Sociology*, N. Crossley integrates approaches such as game theory, exchange theory, network analysis, and symbolic interactionism, in addition to "relationists" such as H. Becker, G. Simmel, H. White, E. Goffman and M. Merleau-Ponty. There is not adequate space here to delve into the finer details, but in a nutshell, Crossley specifies the goal of relational sociology as the discovery of "mechanisms" defined as "relational/interaction conditions and dynamics that recur in social life, with relatively predictable outcomes." Continuing within this definitional framework, he adopts the general view that "agency and structure are effectively co-existing aspects of the social world which assume greater or lesser salience in different contexts." Structures are networks, conventions and resources which emerge from interactions, but once established, they more or less constrain or enable the actors. A social world has to be seen as "a *process* arising *between* social actors." When they interact with each other, actors "are 'movers' in the social drama but not prime, unmoved movers"; they are "always agents-in-relation," and these "inter-actors" "take shape... within interaction." Within this perspective, society is not a social thing, "but rather a state of play within a vast web of ongoing interactions." A "whole" emerges from the interactions between actors, a whole that none of them control, since it comes from their interactions. These general ontological viewpoints are familiar to readers of G. Simmel and N. Elias, for instance. Once again, this book should be read as an attempt to clarify what relational sociology is, by selecting and using preexisting ideas,

principles and concepts, although the book also makes original contributions by reorganizing these preexisting ideas, principles, and concepts. Two examples of this clarifying process are notable.

In the first example, Crossley wisely makes a distinction between *interaction* and *social relation*, whereby social relations are “lived trajectories of iterated interaction.” This distinction allows us to see how the memorized past and the expectations of “related” people (friends, relatives, employees, etc.) shape “their current interactions.” In the second example, Crossley identifies five dimensions of interaction: symbolic, affective, convention-innovation, strategic, and exchange-power. This conceptualization allows him to adjust well-known and pre-existing theories, such as game theory, exchange theory, and symbolic interactionism, to relational sociology. While this approach leads to somewhat lengthy explanations where the main ideas and concepts are introduced to the reader, it is a sound approach. It allows him to integrate these different theories and make them compatible to relational sociology, rather than proposing a “theoretical salad” composed of incompatible ingredients. This conceptualization also allows us to see how each of these theories can be useful — provided we do not try to reduce real people to their basic assumptions. From that perspective, this book could well be seen as an ecological enterprise, recycling pre-existing theories by transforming them into key dimensions of a larger relational approach.

I am sure that many readers will find some flaws in this attempt to clarify just what relational sociology is. Personally, I think Crossley too easily dismisses the suggestions made by B. Latour and others who have proposed that there is a need to integrate nonhuman actors into sociology. I also have some major concerns about the notion of *causal* social mechanisms. It seems to be a soft version of the old deterministic structures. In this respect, it is worth considering whether relational sociology should move beyond the positivist principle of causality, rather than adopting a soft form of determinism. It is not clear that relational sociology and any form of determinism are compatible.

No matter what flaws this book may contain, there is no doubt that N. Crossley has made a significant contribution to relational sociology. This is exactly the kind of work we need at this point, if we want to move it forward. Any social scientist interested in relational sociology should read and criticize this book carefully.

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