1) What is Deep Relational Sociology (DRS)?

- DRS = one type of relational sociology

- Words relational sociology really started to be used in the 1980’s by the Italian sociologist Pierpaolo Donati

- In 1997, Mustapha Emirbayer published his relational manifesto in *The American Journal of Sociology* ([link](http://ssc.wisc.edu/~emirbayer/Mustafa_Emirbayer/ARTICLES_files/manifesto%20for%20a%20relational%20sociology.pdf))

- Today, this short article has been cited almost 2000 times. This is what really initiated the relational turn in sociology.

- If we start from Emirbayer as I do, this intellectual movement is founded on one fundamental dilemma in sociology:

  Should we conceive social phenomena as substances (like the social things of Durkheim or solid social structures) or fluid and dynamic social processes?

- In this logic, relational sociology is an invitation to see our so-called objects (societies, institutions, social patterns, conflicts, social movements, social classes, etc.) in a processual way, i.e. as being made of fluid, dynamic relations.
Relational thinking has been an option since the beginning of philosophy (process philosophy) and social sciences

- It can be related to the micro-sociologies of G. Tarde, K. Knorr-Cetina or R. Collins for example; the genealogical approach of M. Foucault; the ANT of M. Callon and B. Latour; the figurational sociology of N. Elias; the pragmatism of J. Dewey and G.H. Mead; the symbolic interactionisms of H. Blumer, H. Becker and A. Strauss; or the processual philosophies of Heraclitus, A.N. Whitehead and others.

- Even sociologists previously influenced by structuralism, like P. Bourdieu, H. White and C. Tilly, have associated their work to relational thinking in the last phase of their careers.

- Critical realists like R. Bashkar, M. Archer and D. Elder-Vass have also connected their theory to relational sociology. There is even an alliance made by P. Donati and M. Archer (see The Relational Subject 2015); they both claim they are defining the real relational sociology in opposition to other relational sociologists like M. Emirbayer.
3) What is relational sociology today?

- Today, after all these associations and connections made between different approaches and theories, it is not so clear anymore what are the specific meaning and orientation of this relational sociology.

- This is a paradox because, at the same time, more and more sociologists are connecting their researches and publications to relational sociology.

- The recent literature (see Archer and Donati 2015; Crossley 2015, 2012; Dépelteau and Powell 2013; Dépelteau 2015; Donati 2012; Fuhse 2015; Powell and Dépelteau 2013) is showing this dispersion or fragmentation where relational sociology is linked to approaches and theories (Bourdieu, White, pragmatism, critical realism, etc.) which are not necessarily compatible.

- This is not a catastrophe in itself. Similar processes of fragmentation happened to other so-called paradigms in the past, such as: Marxism, Feminism, symbolic interactionism and critical realism.

- However, relational sociology cannot be only based on the shared feeling that it is all about social relations. If the label means something, it has to be based on similar and general principles, concepts and methods.
4) Bringing back relational sociology to order

• In the last years, I have been trying to move beyond the vague idea that relations matter in sociology, and to define distinct and deep relational principles and concepts.

• I have done this by starting from the dilemma identified by Emirbayer in 1997, but also under the influence of the works of sociologists and philosophers like H. Blumer, J. Dewey, N. Elias (What is Sociology?), B. Latour and M. Weber.

• By moving beyond the short text of Emirbayer, by going deeper in this processual direction, I am trying to see what kind of deep and distinct relational explanations we can produce in order to replace previous, non-relational explanations where social phenomena are seen as social substances (social things or pre-determining social structures).
5) Ontological and fundamental difference with social determinism and co-determinism

- If we take seriously the idea that we study fluid and dynamic social processes rather than social things or solid social structures, the main difference between relational sociology and other sociologies is this following and guiding principle:

  *Human behavior is not fully or partially pre-determined by pre-existing social structures or any other social thing.*

- The logical consequences of this relational principle are very important. These are deep, fundamental consequences because in this logic adopting relational sociology implies the rejection of two competing and incompatible modes of sociological interpretation:
i. **Social determinism** is rejected

(social structure → action)

- The idea that pre-existing social structures (or any other social things or crystallized social patterns) fully predetermine the actions of individuals and groups.

- For examples: structuro-functionalism (the social things of E. Durkheim; T. Parsons) and structuro-Marxism (L. Althusser; N. Poulantzas)

ii. **Co-determinism** is also rejected

(social structure ↔ agency)

or,

(social structure → actors → no agency or agency → reproduction or transformation of social structure)

- Rejection of the idea that the social universe is made by interactions between social structures and agency.

6. One basic ontological principle: the shape of the social universe

• With others, I think many sociologists have been wrong about the shape of the social universe: it is not made by two or three layers (micro and macro layers, or micro, meso and macro layers)

• The social universe is flat!

• This is another important guiding principle of DRS, and also the most provocative one for many sociologists who are used to think in terms of a multilayered social universe, and with classical dualisms such as Society/Individuals or Social structures/Agency
7. Main concepts of DRS coming from these general principles

i. Social fields

• Our social universe is composed by a multiplicity of more or less interconnected social fields (also called networks, configurations, assemblages, social joints or social worlds by other sociologists – more or less similar)

• By social fields, I do not really mean these hierarchical social spaces made by individual or collective actors who constantly try to distinguish themselves or imitate others (like in P. Bourdieu’s theory).

• By social fields, I mean all these temporary, fluid and dynamic social processes made by interactions between human and non-human interactants, that we call couples, families, corporations, governments, states, nations, empires, wars, genocides, peer groups, schools, universities, classrooms, armies, and so on.
• By using a simple and abstract illustration where there are four interactants (A, B, C and D) and two social fields (a couple made by the interactions between A and B; and a group of friends made by the interactions between B, C and D), we can visualize how DRS presents our social life:

To simplify the graphic, I did not include any non-human interactant even if significant non-human interactants often play a key role in the emergence, the transformation and(or) the disappearance of social fields (such as weapons in wars or viruses in the colonization of the Americas).
• Please note how this flat social ontology is different from the typical multilayered ontology one can find in so many sociological theories (since Durkheim).

• By following R. Bhaskar, M. Archer proposed an excellent summary and illustration of this type of mode of sociological interpretation:
From (Co)Determinism to (Deep) Relational Sociology

•Basically, dualistic sociological theories like critical realism invite us to study the interactions between social forces (such as crystallized patterns of relations or social structures as we say today) and agency:

Object of sociology

Social structure ↔ Agency

• While (deep) relational sociology invites us to study interactions (or transactions) between interactants:

Object of sociology

A ↔ B = Social field
• DRS is the study of the emergence, transformation and(or) disappearance of various social fields.

• Social fields emerge, are more or less reproduced, transformed or disappear through the interactions between human and non-human interactants.

• Social fields are always effects (and not causes) of interactions between interactants.

ii. Interactions/Transactions: Following the conceptual distinctions proposed by J. Dewey and A. Bentley in Knowing and the Known (1949), interactions should be seen as transactions.

➢ It basically means that the actions of the interactants are always in a state of interdependency (see also N. Elias in What is Sociology?, but also H. Blumer, A. Strauss and others).

A is what she is and is doing what she is doing because she is interacting with B. and vice versa. (A is a sister and acting as a sister because she is interacting with her brother B. The same is true for B. When A changes from this social field to other ones, she changes her identities and actions).

Slaves are slaves, and act as slaves, as long as they interact with their masters, and vice versa. The emergence, so-called reproduction, transformation or disappearance of slavery as a social field always depend on these interactions (and other related interactions in other interconnected social fields).
Dimensions of action: Within this constant state of interdependency, the actions of the interactants are fueled or linked to various dimensions of action, such as:

- **Self**: The reflexivity of the human interactants; our capacity to see ourselves as objects (Mead), and to see us as interacting with other interactants in specific social fields (connected to perceptions of others and social fields).

- **Me**: This is the socialized Self, i.e. our capacity to see ourselves through the eyes and the typical expectations of the Others (the slave sees himself through the eyes and the typical expectations of his master).

- **I**: This is the capacity of the Self to see ourselves in a different way in comparison to the eyes and typical expectations of other human interactants (slaves have the capacity to see themselves as non-slaves, as rules breakers, escapers or even destroyers of the plantation and slavery).
• Other typical significant dimensions of action are the goals, emotions, values, interests, habits, and the capacity to mobilize resources.

• Note that social actions are also linked to contextualized perceptions of:

  ➢ The other human and non-human interactants. The actions of slaves were commonly influenced by their perceptions of their masters (Is he cruel or a decent human being?; fair or unfair?; dangerous or not for the safety of my wife and children?; etc.), and their potential access or lack of access to useful non-human interactants such as food or weapons.

  ➢ The perceptions can be accurate or wrong, but they do influence the actions of the human interactants (among other dimensions of action).

  ➢ The state, the form, the becoming, etc. of the social field in which they interact or other connected social fields (Is this plantation or slavery on the verge of collapsing?; can I expect some help from other slaves in other plantations or in a quilombo?; is there any accessible forest around I can escape and hide?; etc.).

• All these dimensions of action (and many others) are in a constant state of interdependency. The action of one human interactant is usually not determined by one isolated dimension of action.
iv. Social fields are characterized by various types of interactions based on:

- The intensity of the interactions (collective revolts or escapes of slaves were often characterized by higher levels of interactions between the slaves in order to make plans, develop strategies, collect information, mobilize resources, etc.).

- The modes of interaction (masters and slaves did not interact in the same ways from one plantation to another: for example, some interactions were more repressive, others were more liberal or even based on respect, friendship or love).

- The duration of interactions (some quilombos lasted few days, others several decades).

- The space of interactions (plantations and quilombos were of different size; some plantations have very few slaves, others hundreds of them).

- The level of creativity (interactions between slaves and masters could be more repetitive due to repression, habits, over-inflation of the Me, lack of resources to act in a different way, etc.; or more creative).
• In sum, sociological explanations of the emergence, the so-called reproduction, transformation and/or disappearance of social fields is based on the analyses of interactions between human and non-human interactants, the dimensions of action and the characteristics of interactions.

• It works much better than the alternative and incompatible deterministic and co-deterministic explanations.
The so-called causal powers of social structures: illustrations with the slavery plantations

- Deterministic and co-deterministic sociological theories have been based on the general principle that our social actions are fully or partially determined by social things such as social structures, institutions, social currents, societies, and so on.

- The typical social mechanism invoked by deterministic and co-deterministic sociologists is founded on the principle of social emergence (Durkheim, Berger and Luckmann, etc.). It looks more or less like this:

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Interactions between actors
↓
Repetition/Habits
↓
Institutionalisation of interactions (social things)
↓
Self-control/Control from others
↓
Fully or partially determine coming social actions
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Agency
• DRS denies any significant causal powers to any so-called social things, such as social structures, institutions or societies.

• Social phenomena like social patterns or institutions exist, but they are social processes; they emerge from interactions, are more or less reproduced or transformed through interactions, or are destroyed by interactions between interactants.

• I will use one illustration: the slavery plantation during the colonization of the Americas.

• This is the kind of social situation where we would expect that millions of people (the slaves) were heavily determined by the solid and durable social structures of this total institution.

• In other words, it is reasonable to think that if we cannot clearly see the causal powers of social structures in action in these extreme situations, we cannot see this kind of causal powers in other social situations.
• First question: Can we identify the social structures of slavery plantations in the European colonies of the Americas?

• The answer is yes.

• Many sociologists are used to design the social structures of many types of social fields. T. Durant did it for the slavery plantations in the Southern USA, in his text called *The Slave Plantation Revisited: A Sociological Perspective*.

• The result is the following:

  ➢ The slave plantation is defined in this way:

  
  (...) a slave plantation may be defined as an organized system of agricultural production that incorporates slaves as the basic source of labor primarily for the attainment of economic goals. (Thomas J. Durant and J. David Knottnerus. *Plantation Society* and *Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality* (Kindle Locations 160-161), Kindle Edition).
Durant identified nine structural characteristics (or elements):

**Structural Elements**

1. **Knowledge**: Beliefs about what is thought to be true. Owners believed that slave labor was practical and profitable; slaves were human property; and slaves should be subordinate to their master.

2. **Sentiment**: Expressive feelings of two persons toward each other. Masters expressed paternalism and superiority toward their slaves, and slaves expressed victimization, resistance, and powerlessness.

3. **Goal**: An end or objective sought. The main goal of the slaveholder was profit through the use of slave labor.

4. **Norms**: Rules that govern, regulate, or control behavior. Slaves were not permitted to leave the plantation without approval of their master, and slaves were expected to be obedient to their master.

5. **Status**: The position(s) one holds in a social unit. Owner, manager, overseer, driver, house slave, and field slave were statuses/positions within slave plantations.

6. **Rank**: The arrangement of positions into a social hierarchy based on social evaluations. The positions of owner, manager, overseer, driver, house slave, and field slave, which comprised the social hierarchy, were based on inequality in the distribution of wealth, power, and prestige.

7. **Power**: The capacity to control or influence the behavior or attitudes of others. The two extremes of the power continuum were the owner and the slave.

8. **Sanctions**: Negative or positive allocations based on conformity or nonconformity to existing rules. Slaves were punished for disobedience (e.g., escape or attempted escape), and some slaves were rewarded with privileges (e.g., visitation passes) for good behavior.

9. **Facility**: The types of material technology, resources, or means used to attain ends within the system. This included the slaves' work tools and implements, land, labor, capital, and production strategies and techniques.

• We could ask if this structural definition is the best one or not, but this is not our problem here. If we want to determine if social structures have causal powers or not, it is better to start with the following, simple but crucial questions:

**What do we have here? What is this description?**

• We have a description produced by a sociologist who studied many slavery plantations, read a lot on the fundamental elements of social structures, and who came with this description based on these nine elements.

• For him, this was the typical social structures of slave plantations in this part of the world, at that time.

• Let’s suppose his description is right. (Again, the validity of his description does not matter for us).

• It leads us to our central question:

  *Could this thing – this social thing – had causal powers on the slaves (and the masters)?*
• The answer is yes, but only in vague ways:

Indeed, we can assume that after a while, all the slaves learned the nine elements of this social structure, and they had to deal with it in one way or another. In this sense, one can say that this social structure imposed itself to the slaves.

1) First problem:

- This fact is almost irrelevant for any sociological explanations of the slave’s behaviors (whatever their behaviors could be).

- First, this is a very general description produced by a sociologist who studied many slave plantations and produced something like an ideal-type of this institution.

- Slaves lived in one of very few plantations during their lives, and their were not sociologists. They had other things to do in their lives than studying and comparing these plantations.

- Durant recognized the importance of these differences before presenting his general and structural descriptions:

  (...) plantations were complex and multifaceted creations while at the same time serving to remind us of the limitations of one-sided, reductionistic explanations of how such a social organization worked. So, too, many of these chapters demonstrate that the social landscape of the plantation system was a quite varied and complex one involving important personal, social, and status differences among slaves, white owners and non-owners, and racial and ethnic groups, that is, Native Americans, blacks, and whites.

In other words, slaves had to deal with one or few specific, contextualized social fields, and not with a structural description of slave plantations. In this sense, they had to deal with specific masters, hierarchies, norms, expectations, reactions, and so on. They were all specific interactants who had to interact with other specific human and non-human interactants. And the differences between one plantation to another mattered a lot for these slaves. For example, having to deal with a conservative, cruel, sadistic master was much more difficult than to deal with a liberal one who saw his slaves as human beings.

Of course, we could argue that we need sub-categories of slave plantations and describe the structural characteristics of each of those sub-categories.

If would not change anything to the problems (for socio-structural explanations) that each slave plantation was distinct, and that distinct slaves were interacting with other specific interactants, and not general structures of all the plantations or sub-categories of plantations.

Conclusion:

- It is better to see social structures as descriptions made by sociologists which can help us, today, to define and understand what social fields are or look like generally speaking, and avoid to transform these sociological descriptions into social things with causal powers.

- In terms of causes of (inter)actions, we add two principles:
  
  - Social structures as defined by sociologists can have effects on interactants and interactions (theory effect or double hermeneutic of Giddens)
  
  - Interactants produce their own general representations (structural representations) of various social fields, and these representations can also influence their (inter)actions (through their Self, Me, I, perceptions of Others and fields).

For example, in Bahia in the 1830’s, owners of slaves were involved in a conflict with the governor of the State. They noticed that many slave revolts started during moments were slaves were allowed to dance, have religious ceremonies, etc. on the plantations. Social structure or social mechanism) They wanted to ban these free moments. The Governor believed that these moments maintained the ethnic divisions among the slaves, and therefore made it more difficult for them to get united and revolt. (Reis ???)
2) Second problem:

- The nine structural elements identified by Durant can all be reformulated into a relational logic, with the concepts I proposed with DRS.

- In other words, structural explanations and the reification of social phenomena (seeing them as social things) is unnecessary in sociology; it brings anything but problems:
  
  ✓ Problem of reification (social processes wrongly perceived and defined as social substances)

  ✓ Problem of undetermined and unpredictable actions (with social determinism)

  - Slavery plantations were full of so-called abnormal behaviors not being determined by habits, pro-reproductive self-control, and the control of others (full of escapes, suicides, murders, riots, robberies, and so on). Whenever there was slavery, there was resistance in one form or another.

  ✓ Problems related to the notion of agency and classical dualisms (for examples: where does agency come from if we are initially pre-determined by pre-existing social structures?; problems of inconsistently moving from one egocentric perspective to a relational one; problems related to analytical or ontological dualism...).
• We can explain the same phenomena with relational concepts and without any structural causal powers. We can always translate structural definitions and explanations into deep relational ones, get the same results (decent sociological explanations), and get rid of the unnecessary problems.

• Nine elements of Durant and the concepts of DRS:
1. Knowledge: Beliefs about what is thought to be true. Owners believed that slave labor was practical and profitable; slaves were human property; and slaves should be subordinate to their master.

- This structural element refers the dimension of action of perception of Other(s) (the slaves as perceived by the masters) and perception of social field(s) (the subordination of slaves to their masters). It should also be coupled with the dimension of values.

- We know that all the masters did not perceived slaves in the same ways. For some masters, slaves were simply commodities like any other tools or cows; for others, black people formed an inferior race which had to be dominated; for other masters, slaves were human beings which were necessary free labour power for their plantations, but who also deserved to be treated decently.

- The identification of generalities (structures in terms of knowledge here) should not prevent the sociologists from being aware that human interactants have a Self (reflexivity) and an I (creativity in terms of perception and action).

- Once again, the so-called structural element is just a generalization made by the observers in order to help us to picture a typical plantations and the knowledge of the masters. It is more an ideal-type than a description of a reality in all its complexity and diversity.
Sentiment: Expressive feelings of two persons toward each other. Masters expressed paternalism and superiority toward their slaves, and slaves expressed victimization, resistance, and powerlessness.

- The dimensions of emotion and values can be used to express this structural element.
- Once more, we have to take into account the creativity and the complexity of the emotions and values of the masters and slaves.
- The notion of being powerless has to be handled carefully. There were hierarchies among slaves, and some of them felt more powerful and prestigious than others. Besides, this sentiment was certainly evolving depending on the modes of interactions which prevailed in specific social fields, and also depending on the creativity of action of the slaves. Various forms of resistance could certainly affect this sentiment in positive ways for the slaves.
- Like the rest, sentiments should be seen and analyzed in processual ways rather than in terms of static, generalized social structures. They are part of evolving, dynamic interactions rather than being structural elements.
**Goal**: An end or objective sought. The main goal of the slaveholder was profit through the use of slave labor.

**Norms**: Rules that govern, regulate, or control behavior. Slaves were not permitted to leave the plantation without approval of their master, and slaves were expected to be obedient to their master.

- The same concept of goals.
- For norms and rules, we have to be careful here. They should be seen as social things since they are interpreted and used by human interactants through specific interactions. Maybe they should be seen as tools (a form of non-human interactants), and like tools their contribution to the emergence, so-called reproduction, transformation or destruction of a social field is interdependent with the human interactants who interpret and use them. (H. Becker gave good examples of these processes with the role of legal rules in the production of deviancy: the rules do not simply themselves to the individuals; their application is part of larger and more complex interactions involving policemen, lawyers, witnesses, judges, etc.).
- But clearly, rules and norms do not simply self-act on individuals, or they do not even interact with them, since they are always used in one way or another by human interactants.
Status: The position(s) one holds in a social unit. Owner, manager, overseer, driver, house slave, and field slave were statuses/positions within slave plantations.

Rank: The arrangement of positions into a social hierarchy based on social evaluations. The positions of owner, manager, overseer, driver, house slave, and field slave, which comprised the social hierarchy, were based on inequality in the distribution of wealth, power, and prestige.

- This a simplification of the complex stratification of the slaves on plantations (constant risk with structural descriptions). Slaves were also profoundly divided by ethnic separations (coming from Africa) and religious beliefs. Better to start from stratifications coming from detailed descriptions of specific social fields made to explain these specific interactions. Otherwise, risk of being blind to important social processes.

- It refers to the modes of interactions, the Self, the Me and the I, and the perceptions of Other(s) and social field(s).

- Social hierarchies should not be objectified, and they cannot self-act on, or interact with, interactants.

- Social hierarchies are constant effects of interactions.

- Changing hierarchies means changing modes of interactions, the Self, the Me, the perceptions of Other(s) and social field(s).

- The so-called reproduction of hierarchies, statuses and ranks is not a structural effect. As M. Weber, N. Elias, C. Tilly, M. Foucault and many others showed, it is an effect of actions and interactions; it is a socio-historical effect based on modes of interactions like social closure, for example. In sum, it should be analyzed in a relational way rather than a structural way, even if observers can identify some similarities, make generalizations and find some more or less recurrent patterns.
Power: The capacity to control or influence the behavior or attitudes of others. The two extremes of the power continuum were the owner and the slave.

- Power is not a substance, or something we get by occupying a structural position in a social hierarchy.
- Power is relational (Foucault and many others). It is a mode of interaction, which involve various levels of intensity, duration and space of interactions.
- Power relations also involve various level of creativity of action, as so many slaves showed in the history of slavery plantations by resisting, stealing, killing their masters or themselves, escaping, developing little black markets of tools, food, weapons, etc.
- Power relations are balances of power (Elias), shifting relations of power; even if, once again, observers can find patterns, similarities, and so on.
Sanctions: Negative or positive allocations based on conformity or nonconformity to existing rules. Slaves were punished for disobedience (e.g., escape or attempted escape), and some slaves were rewarded with privileges (e.g., visitation passes) for good behavior.

- The same is true about sanctions. There were patterns like these ones to observe by comparing slavery plantations.

- But again, sanctions were fluctuating modes of interaction which depended on the other dimensions of action and characteristics of interactions in various and specific plantations.
From (Co)Determinism to (Deep) Relational Sociology

Facility: The types of material technology, resources, or means used to attain ends within the system. This included the slaves’ work tools and implements, land, labor, capital, and production strategies and techniques.

• The dimension of action of mobilization of resources is the one to use here.

• Resources are human or non interactant in a social field.

• They somehow impose themselves to other interactants with their intrinsic properties, possibilities, forms, limits, and so on. (It is more difficult to fly with a boat than with a plane; or to kill a master with a fork than with a rifle; or it was often more difficult to hide yourself in the American colony than in the Brazilian one after escaping).

• But the use and the effects of resources also depend on the interactants and the ongoing interactions. (For example, the same mountain, with exactly the same characteristics, can be a source of entertainment for tourists or a strategic tool to use for escaping slaves who are trying to hide themselves from Portuguese soldiers running after them).

• In conclusion, like the rest of our social life and universe, resources are more relational than structural.
From (Co)Determinism to (Deep) Relational Sociology