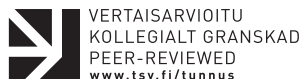


Toward a Processual-Relational Adaptation of “Substantialist” Sociology: Starting with Durkheim

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Abstract

The main thesis of the article is that “substantialist” concepts and explanations in sociology can and should be rendered processual and relational. By doing so, we can avoid problems related to reification, dualisms, and hard or soft forms of social determinism; and we can therefore focus on the empirical and pragmatic relevance of the revised explanations. In the article, Émile Durkheim’s idea of “social things” is used as an orthodox substantialist representation of social phenomena. I show how Durkheim’s substantialist explanations can and should be revised into processual-relational ones by adapting three famous explanations on the potential roles of corporations in modernity, the transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity, and the social causes of egotistical suicide. In fact, if we look at the Durkheim’s explanations in detail, we realize that he was talking about fluid social processes made by relations between interactants, which imply that the idea of “social things” and its related problems are superfluous.

KEYWORDS: Durkheim, substantialism, relational sociology, processual, determinism, co-determinism

Introduction

The main goal of this article is to highlight the need to revise substantialist approaches of social phenomena – in their deterministic and co-deterministic versions – in favor of a relational-processual approach. To this end it will select particular ideas from Émile Durkheim and use them as exemplifications of deterministic and(or) co-deterministic substantialist approaches and rework them in processual-relational terms.

In his “relational manifesto” Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) identified a “fundamental dilemma” for sociologists: choosing between a sociology of “social substances” or a sociology of “social processes.” As we will see in the first part of the article, the substantialist option can be exemplified by the classical idea of “social things” proposed by Durkheim in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (2013). It is well known that this idea comes with significant issues, such as the reification of

social phenomena, the dualistic separation of the society and the individuals, and hard or soft deterministic explanations of action. Durkheim himself recognized the controversial nature of his “formulas.” He even added that some of his “propositions” were “destined to be revised in the future” (Durkheim 2013, 6).

The need to revise reifying and deterministic sociological approaches has been raised before. In this respect, many sociologists have insisted on the importance of the “agency” of individuals and groups. We can think about the important work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, critical realists, and Anthony Giddens for example. In brief, they have proposed various co-deterministic frameworks where we are invited to make sense of our social universe by studying inter-actions between “social structures” and “agency.” In what follows, we will see that it is also possible to read Durkheim in a co-deterministic way. Unfortunately, however, co-determinism does not resolve the main problems. By holding on to the idea of external “social structures” having causal powers over individuals, as well as to the “analytical” separation of the individual and society, co-determinists have simply replaced hard social determinism with softer versions of social determinism. The latter still perceive social patterns as solid “structures” – endowed with causal powers – which are “analytically” external to the individuals. Other problems can also be identified by looking at each co-deterministic approach in detail (see Dépelteau 2013, 2008; King 2004).

Yet there are also sociologists who think we can do better and develop a third option aiming at fully moving beyond those persistent issues through placing emphasis on relations and processes. This approach is not entirely new but it is getting more traction these days, as recent publications show (for example, see Abbott 2016; Dépelteau

2018; Henlin et al. 2014; Pyyhtinen 2015; Selg 2016; Tonkonoff 2017). In the third part of the article, I will outline and present this perspective in an impressionistic manner by quickly identifying key ideas coming from process philosophers and processual-relational sociologists.

The identification of the aforementioned three sociological modes of perception – social determinism, co-determinism, and processual-relational sociology – is necessary in order to understand the main thesis defended in this text. Indeed, the idea is to start from meta-theoretical issues to improve analyses of concrete social phenomena. The main thesis of the article is that substantialist notions are unnecessary in sociology, since ultimately and *in reality* the entities that they refer to are fluid social processes emerging, changing, or disappearing through contextualized relations between various interactants. Substantialist concepts and statements thus give a distorted image of the nature of social life.

In the last part of the article, I will support this thesis by adapting three famous explanations provided by Durkheim on the potential functions “new corporations” could fulfill in modernity, the passage from mechanical to organic solidarity, and the social causes of egotistical suicide. Thanks to this type of makeover, we can focus on the pragmatic relevance of these ideas without being disturbed by unnecessary meta-theoretical issues. Similar work of adaptation could and should be done with other important classical and contemporary sociological explanations.

Let me emphasize that the article does not aim at finding what Durkheim really said or wanted to say. I am fully aware of the complexities and tensions of Durkheim’s work as well as of the multiple interpretations of his work. However, this type of discussion is irrelevant in relation to the issues

raised here. For the purposes of this article it suffices to select some of Durkheim's ideas for the sake of an intellectual experimentation to show how we can get rid of substantialist concepts and explanations in sociology. I could also have used statements from other sociologists like Talcott Parsons or Louis Althusser to conduct this type of experimentation. The reason why I started from the Durkheimian idea of "social things" is simply because it has gained such prominence and is therefore a great tool to use to reach the core of the substantialist logic in sociology.

The Audacious Substantialist Idea of Durkheim and Its Main Problems

Durkheim obviously knew that the relevance of sociology depends on its capacity to produce rigorous empirical research from which diagnoses and prognoses designed to fix important social problems in modernity can be derived. However, he was also fully aware of the importance of ontological, theoretical, and conceptual issues. His empirical research on the social causes of suicide (2006), for example, was not possible without *The Rules of Sociological Method* (2013; hereafter *The Rules*). We need to define what we observe before we can develop research methods and conduct empirical observations: "Before beginning the search for the method appropriate to the study of social facts it is important to know what are the facts termed 'social'" (2013, 20). To select and analyze any social phenomenon we need to know *what* that phenomenon is and *how* it works. Besides, Durkheim was also aware that for sociology to be relevant we need to clearly identify the distinctiveness of its "objects" and its comprehension in comparison to what other disciplines can offer. Sociologists have

(...) to indicate how, by outward signs, it is possible to identify the facts that the science must deal

with, so that the social scientist may learn how to pick up their location and not confuse them with other facts (Durkheim 2013, 13).

Therefore, Durkheim begins *The Rules* with two well-known and general definitions of "social facts". According to the first: "A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint"; and, second, any social fact is "general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations." (2013, 27.)

The notions and expressions "way of acting," "external," "constraint," "over the individual," "existence of its own," and "independent of its individual manifestations" have become part of an orthodoxy for many sociologists who have accepted "*to consider social facts as things*" (2013, 29). Multiple sociological theories, concepts, methods, and courses have been based on this type of substantialist mode of perception of social phenomena.

Nevertheless, these ideas have triggered persistent critique ever since their publication (see Gane 1989, 67-102). As Durkheim notices in the second preface of *The Rules*:

When this book first appeared, it aroused some fairly lively controversy. Current ideas, as if put out of joint, at first offered such vigorous resistance that it was for a while almost impossible for us to gain a hearing. (Durkheim 2013, 6.)

Some of the forms of criticism lead to minor adjustments, for instance by adding that "social things" can also be *enabling* forces. Other (well-known) critiques – such as that coming from Gabriel Tarde – are calling into question the substantialist assumptions in sociology. Once more, these criticisms typically turn around the strati-

fied nature of the social universe (dualism), the reification of social phenomena, and hard or soft social determinism. Those critiques can be summarized with the following questions: How can we claim that society is external to individuals, and has causal powers over them, when it is empirically and logically evident that society cannot exist without them? How can we explain social change, if individuals are determined by pre-existing, external, and independent “social things”? How can we conceptualize and treat relations as “things”? Why would people (co)produce “social things” only in some moments – of “collective effervescence” or “agency” as many say today – and not all the time? Why should we believe society to be an external, powerful, and metaphysical entity which, just like previously God was assumed, would watch and punish individuals when they deviate from its values and rules?¹ If these statements are “analogies,” why should we think they are useful in spite of the undeniable complications that they create?

Durkheim provided several answers to these critiques. These answers have been repeated, adjusted, or rediscovered by deterministic and co-deterministic sociologists. In brief, he said that we should define the objects of sociology as “things” to make it clear that we are not dealing with philosophical issues which can be “known from the inside” or “by the simple process of intellectual analysis” (Durkheim 2014, 7). Talking about “social things,” Durkheim explains, “is to observe toward them a certain attitude of mind” (ibid, 7) – a “scientific” attitude according to which knowledge comes from “observation and experimentation” (ibid, 7). In other words, Durkheim talked about “social things” partly because he followed the “positive” path opened by others like Auguste Comte and his “social physics.” In this logic, legitimate sociologists would have to imitate natural

scientists and discover (social) “laws” through empirical observations:²

What it [the positive method or the “sociological method” based on the idea that social phenomena should be seen as social things] demands is that the sociologist should assume the state of mind of physicists, chemists and physiologists when they venture into an as yet unexplored area of their scientific field. As the sociologist penetrates into the social world he should be conscious that he is penetrating into the unknown. He must feel himself in the presence of facts governed by laws as unsuspected as those of life before the science of biology was born. He must hold himself ready to make discoveries which will surprise and disconcert him. Yet sociology is far from having arrived at this degree of intellectual maturity. (Durkheim 2014, 8–9.)

This guiding principle appeared to be at that time a reasonable guess, considering the success of natural sciences. It was also based on preliminary analyses Durkheim made about specific research topics, such as the deductions and the statistical correlations he published in French in *The Division of Social Labor* and *On Suicide* at the end of the 19th century. Nevertheless, for critics like Tarde (1897, Kindle Edition, location 7308), seeing

2 It is somehow surprising how ideas like these have been so strong for so long in sociology considering that, for instance, a natural science like biology has been characterized by its relative difficulty to find biological laws. As we can read in one textbook: “Another key aspect of biological culture is its obsession with the particular. Many other kinds of science focus on finding very general rules or laws that describe the behavior of a large part of the universe. Through hard experience, biologists have discovered that there are very few universals in biology. Even some of the most widespread phenomena in life (such as the use of DNA to encode information) turn out not to be quite universal; a few organisms always seem to manage to do things differently. For that reason, biologists are wary of generalizations.” (Hunter 2009, Kindle Locations 132–135.)

1 See the critique presented by Bauman (1976).

social phenomena as “social things” is an illusion. Durkheim himself was aware of this, as he suggested that we could have to reject this idea later:

Social phenomena must therefore be considered in themselves, detached from the conscious beings who form their own mental representations of them. They must be studied from the outside, as external things, because it is in this guise that they present themselves to us. If this quality of externality proves to be only apparent, the illusion will be dissipated as the science progresses and we will see, so to speak, the external merge with the internal. But the outcome cannot be anticipated, and even if in the end social phenomena may not have all the features intrinsic to things, they must at first be dealt with as if they had. (Durkheim 2014, 37.)

Durkheim proposed an approach for a new discipline in search for scientific foundations, distinctiveness, and legitimacy. He asked us to think as *if* the “social things” are “external” and “constraining,” and to try out what could come out of this substantialist approach. We will see if it works or not, he said on few occasions. However, Durkheim’s stance is to some extent confusing, as he also presents this hypothesis as a reflection of reality. This inconsistency creates a situation where the reader does not know if a “social fact” is really a “thing,” if it is really “*capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint*” as Durkheim writes at the end of the first chapter of *The Rules*; or if we are just invited “to *consider* social facts as things,” as he writes at the beginning of the second chapter of the same book (ibid, 27). Is it about “social things” for real, or are we dealing with an “analytical” strategy we are invited to test? As is usually the case with stratified sociologists, his explanations could be complicated on some fundamental issues. Like others after him, he may move from one position to another within one text or from one text to another (Dépelteau 2008). As for another example where the “analytical” strat-

egy becomes a perception of social phenomena as “things” for real: Durkheim understood statistical regularities on rates of suicide as signs that there are real social forces imposing themselves on individuals. In his book *On Suicide*, he replies to Tarde that we cannot explain social regularities by saying that individuals imitate each other or pass some behaviors from one generation to another. We would need an external force to explain why the individuals feel obliged to imitate others. For instance, he writes: “The truth is that, here, as in the case of suicide, the statistics do not express the average intensity of individual inclinations, but that of the collective force that drives people to marriage” (Durkheim 2006, 340).

One of the problems is that social regularities can be also explained without the principle of “social things” and their so-called causal powers. As is well known, Tarde proposed micro-sociological explanations largely based on the notions of imitation and innovation, and it is hard to see why “external” forces would *have to* be involved in processes of imitation. It can even be harder to explain innovation when powerful, “constraining,” and “external” forces are involved. Many other competing social explanations can be proposed for social regularities, such as symbolic interactionist explanations, ethnomethodological ones, and the study of configurations based on more or less enduring balances of power, for example.

Like many others have done after him, Durkheim used the principle of social emergence to explain how social phenomena can be seen as external to the individuals even if they exist only through their relations. More precisely, he explained how “social things” emerge from interactions, “crystallize” and, then, constrain the individuals.³

3 Mustafa Emirbayer (1996) and Keith Sawyer (2002) already showed the importance of this important principle in Durkheim’s sociology.

He basically saw social phenomena working like natural ones. Societies and individuals are compared to cells and atoms. Such type of analogy is often used to deal with problematic statements in social sciences. For example, in his book *On Suicide* Durkheim explains to skeptical colleagues:

In the first place, it [the idea that "social forces" determine individuals] implies that collective tendencies like collective thoughts are different from individual tendencies and thoughts, with characteristics not to be found in the latter. So, you may ask, how is this possible since they are only individuals in society? But in that case, we should have to say that there is nothing more in living nature than an inanimate matter, since the cell is made up exclusively of atoms that are not alive. Similarly, it is quite true that society does not contain other active forces except those of individuals, but individuals when they unite form a psychic being of a new kind, which consequently has its own way of thinking and feeling. Of course, the germs of the elementary properties have been transformed by association, since it is only at that moment that it appears. Association is also an active factor that produces special effects: it is in itself something new. When consciousness, instead of remaining isolated from other consciousnesses, combines with them in a group, something in the world has changed. As a result, it is natural that this change should produce others, that this new thing creates other new things and phenomena appear with characteristic properties not to be found in the elements of which they are composed. (Durkheim 2006, 344-345.)

This article is not the place to discuss all the reasons why this kind of analogy that Durkheim uses is problematic. The main point is that like many other sociologists after him, Durkheim believed that we can and should reify interactions to understand social phenomena. We should see social phenomena as being "crystallized" into "social things" which, once they are "formed," can self-

act on or inter-act with individuals. This is why and how we end up with statements where "society," for example, is presented as some sort of metaphysical, powerful entity self-acting on the individuals (watching them, punishing them...). It is claimed that we should think in this way if we want to avoid the simplistic idea that individuals act outside of any social context. In such a perspective, the "substantialization" of social phenomena thus appears to be an analytical necessity in spite of its inherent problems.

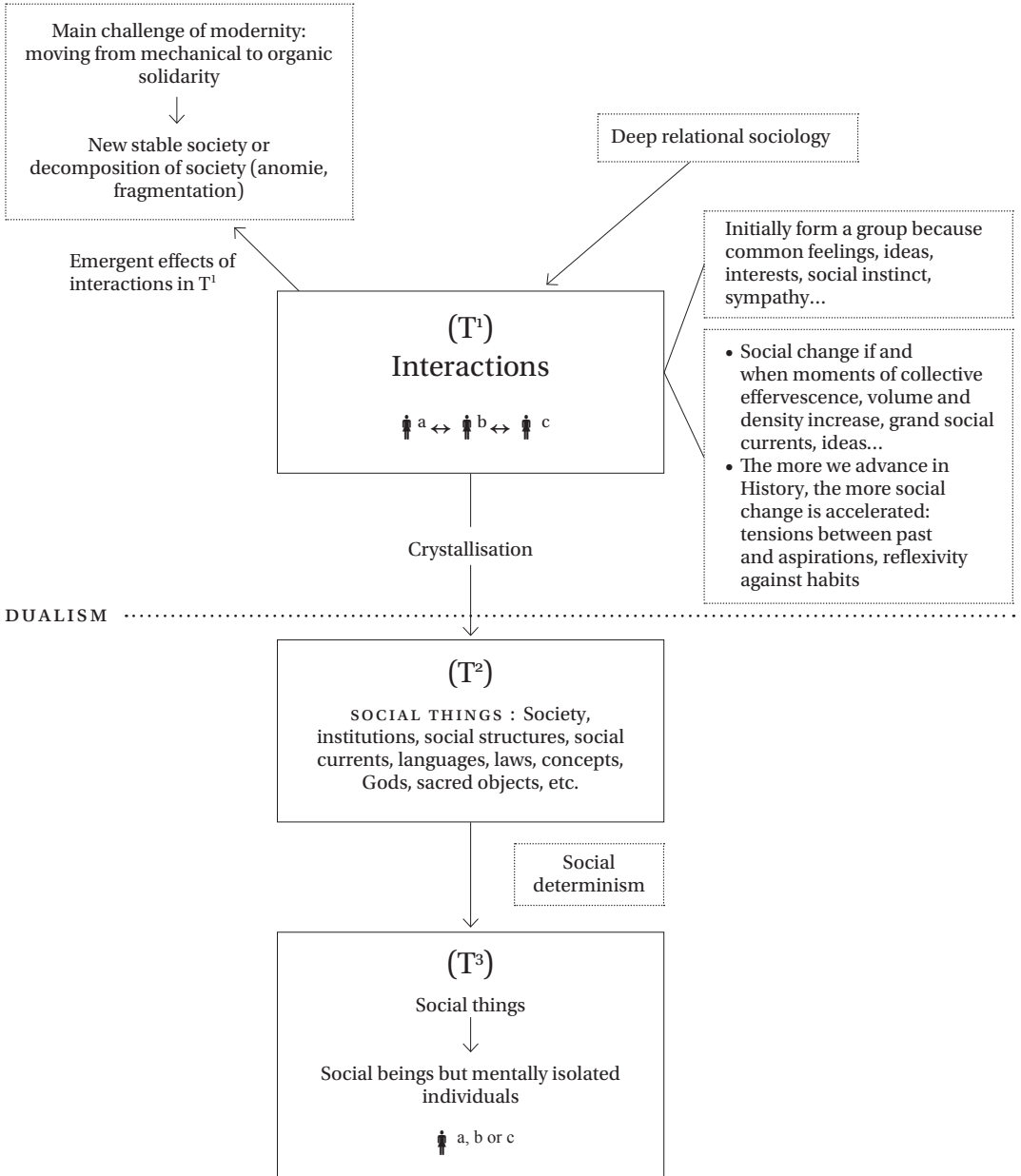
The Co-Determinism Version of Substantialism

The dualistic, reifying and deterministic approach just discussed obviously created problems which had to be fixed. In reaction, many sociologists have adopted a time sequence based on the interactions between the causal powers of "crystallized" social phenomena and some moments of "agency." In other words, they reject hard social determinism for co-determinism (Dépelteau 2013; 2008). Like Durkheim, co-deterministic sociologists typically add that their dualisms and alleged "crystallized" collective phenomena are necessary "analytical" postures. In other words, we know it does not really work in this way but we will pretend as if it would.

Overall, the principle of social emergence and crystallization with the addition of agency have become central ideas in contemporary sociology.⁴ Somehow, it allows co-deterministic sociologists to explain social change in spite of the causal powers they still give to societies, social structures, or institutions. Durkheim can (also) be read in this co-deterministic way, and his work obviously influenced co-deterministic thinkers like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. But all of this is still quite problematic and confusing. We end up with differ-

4 See Elder-Vass (2010; 2008; 2007) and Sawyer (2002).

GRAPHIC 1. Summary of Durkheim general theory and main concepts



ent readings of the same work, or with “tensions,” contradictions, or sudden transformations, as others say. For example, we can read Durkheim as if he offered two types of explanations of social change: a structural one and a so-called “micro-sociological” (or relational) one. The structural explanation

can be found in *The Division of Labor in Society* where the transformation of one form of “solidarity” to another is explained through changes in the “volume” and the “density” of the population. The second type of explanation of social change can be found in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

(2008) where some moments of “collective effervescence” lead to the invention and adoption of new symbols, norms, et cetera. Accordingly, as the graphic below shows, we have two contradictory processes: relational processes where the individuals create, reproduce, or transform social phenomena; and deterministic processes where the individuals are determined by crystallized social phenomena. Depending on what process we focus on and how we connect them (or not), we end up with three possible Durkheims: a deterministic, a co-deterministic, and a processual-relational one. Overall, we end up in some state of confusion in relation to fundamental principles and issues. I cannot give more details about these complications in this short text. However, interested readers will find connected and relevant explanations in the literature on Durkheim. To give just two examples: first, Jeffrey Alexander (1982) has talked about some fundamental “tensions” in the work of Durkheim, and, second, the analyses of Anne Warfield Rawls (2012, 2004) show how the “structuralist” readings of Durkheim (where substantialist ideas are predominant) can be challenged or replaced by “micro” or relational readings.

Once more, these complications, problems, and “tensions” appear to be superfluous if we get rid of substantialist ideas.

Processual-Relational Thinking

Even when they pay attention to relations, the substantialist approaches in sociology focus mostly or only on “structured” relations. Alfred Schutz underlined the importance of “interpretative schemes” as “patterns of syntheses of past experiences,” as “a stock of knowledge of physical things and fellow creatures, of social collectives and of artifacts, including cultural objects” which help us to comprehend the world in which we live and build our expectations (Schutz 1967, 81). Pragmatically speaking, rigorous knowledge of social patterns is

very useful. However, there is no obligation to see these patterns in any substantialist way. There is no need to distort the social reality by thinking as if “social things” self-act on or inter-act with individuals. We can understand the dynamics of these patterns as processes, by analyzing interactions between specific human and non-human interactants. It makes a big difference because social processes are always in movement. They are not solid “structures,” and they are co-produced by interactants rather than being external to them.

Those processual ideas have been present since the beginning of sociology, and even before (see Abbott 2016; Dépelteau 2018; Helin et al. 2014; Pyyhtinen 2015; Tonkonoff 2017). Overall, we are talking about an empirical sociology of fluid experiences and open “becomings” rather than about the study of “beings” and(or) predictable relations of causality between entities being external to each other. Everything “in the social world is continuously in the process of making, remaking, and unmaking itself (and other things), instant by instant” (Abbott 2016, Kindle location 50). “Every belonging to a situation is a participation in a field of potential” and each event “is the release of this potential into a becoming.” (Helin et al. 2014, 4). This is a sociology of interdependence where dualisms are rejected and social creativity recognized. There does exist ordering, though only as a project and as constant efforts made by interactants (also challenged by other interactants) (Helin et al. 2014, 7). Reifying concepts and explanations are defied by analyses of “webs of interconnections” (Pyyhtinen 2015). Social processes are co-produced by entities, but these “entities are best examined as assemblages through the connections of their components and their connections to other assemblages and their components” (Pyyhtinen 2015, 9). Everything is an emerging, metamorphosing, or vanishing process. Processual ideas will probably continue to meet resistance in sociology. As noticed, many colleagues believe we should think as if there would be social

substances to avoid intellectual fallacies like voluntarism and subjectivism. Analytically speaking at least, certain forms of dualism and soft levels of social determinism would thus be necessary for them. Without “social structures” or a “macro level,” for example, so the reasoning goes, we would picture the social universe as if individuals would act freely, as if they would exist in a social vacuum. But this is not true. By paraphrasing Karl Marx (1963) in a processual-relational way, we can say that:

Human beings co-produce specific social (or interactional) fields (processes) called couples, families, schools, nation, et cetera. At the moment we appear in this world we are embedded in multiple social processes – social processes that we co-produce by interacting with other human and non-human interactants. Therefore, individuals do not make these fields as they please because they do not make them as isolated individuals.

It is impossible to present a detailed processual-relational approach here. However, we can present key ideas in few sentences. Sociology is the study of various social or interactional fields usually related to (hyper)modern life and where human beings play a central role. Those social fields are dynamic processes of interactions between human and non-human interactants. They emerge from, are transformed or stopped by those interactions. Even if the social universe is constantly evolving, we can identify social patterns. These patterns exist for real but they can be known only by focusing on social similarities and by ignoring all the inevitable differences. Social fields should not be reduced to “structured” (stable and solid) relations even when patterns can be found for a while with typical roles, functions, statuses, norms, rules, habits, and so on. The so-called “creativity of action” and other forms of unpredictable (inter)actions are always present. Their importance is an empirical question. A processual-relational sociology allows us to observe and analyze the interactants and their interactions rather than pre-defining

what they do and why they do it. It is misleading to say that social patterns (or “social structures”) have “causal power” over individuals. Once more, patterns somehow “exist,” but they cannot simply self-act on or inter-act with individuals. A social pattern has influence (so to speak) only through interactants. I cannot be under the influence of a social pattern – waiting in line at the bus station – unless I am aware of its existence and I decide to respect it by habits, for strategic reasons or whatever the reason can be. And even so, if I do not respect it, the social pattern will not resist to me like a wall or a policewoman can do. Only other human interactants can try to force me to respect a social pattern. If I push people around me to be the first one in the bus, the so-called “social structure” will not react because it is not an actor or a force. Only other people can react and try to force me to respect the pattern, if they know about the pattern, depending on the way they perceive it, if they care, if they have the courage to react...

Besides, the processual-relational framework allows us to see all the important features of the human conditions (co)deterministic sociologists want to see, such as:

- Human beings are reflexive and social animals;
- We appear in an ongoing social universe composed by multiple social processes (we do not choose our social universe);
- Our partial and imperfect knowledge of social processes, in part informed by our past experiences, is one dimension of action (but not the only one since there are also emotions, goals, interests, values, mobilized resources, et cetera);
- None of us is entirely free, since we constantly interact with other human and non-human interactants;
- Good sociology helps us to improve our stock of social knowledge and, hopefully, interact in better ways.

The point is that we can and should avoid reifying social phenomena, any form of determinism, and all the complications coming with dualism. By thinking in this way, we realistically recognize the fluidity of our social lives, the fragility of social fields, our past experiences and memories, our ongoing experiences and expectations, and our inevitable and constant state of interdependency.

Revising Durkheim

It is out of the question to revise Durkheim's entire work in this article. I will rather present three illustrations.

From Anomie to New Corporations

In the second preface of *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim diagnosed modernity as being in a "state of anomie":

(...) the boundary between the permissible and the prohibited, between what is just and what is unjust, is no longer fixed in any way, but seems capable of being shifted by individuals in an almost arbitrary fashion. So vague a morality, one so inconsistent, cannot constitute any kind of discipline. The upshot is that this entire sphere of collective life is for the most part removed from the moderating action of any rules. (2014, 9.)

In other words, since nothing in modern society "restrains the forces present from reacting together, or prescribes limits for them that they are obliged to respect" (ibid., 9). The result is "the continually recurring conflicts and disorders of every kind of which the economic world affords such a sorry spectacle" (ibid., 9).

If we forget about the idea of "social things" as I suggest, Durkheim's explanations are interesting in at least three ways. First, the existence of the "society" as a constraining force can be seen as an empirical and a social/moral issue, rather than as an ontologi-

cal postulate or as an "object" required to establish a new science. Second, modern "society" is judged to be too weak or precarious. Note that Durkheim did not consider sociologists were losing their "objects" with modernization, which should be the case if we simply stick to the idea that sociology is "the science of society" as a "social thing." On the contrary, the pragmatic relevance of his sociological diagnosis derives from the warning that we are moving toward an empirical lack of "society." Therefore, sociology can be much more than a deterministic science of "social things." Sociology appears as the "science" of the capacity to live together; the "science" of a challenge called "society." Third, Durkheim was also pragmatic in other ways even if he criticized pragmatism. The value of his sociological explanations was also related to his capacity to provide solutions to modern social problems. Hence, his sociology was much more than the cold revelation of relations of causality between variables, and it was clearly not just a "conservative" sociology even if some of his statements appear to be of this nature. It was also a praxis connected to crucial social issues such as "anomie," the social causes of suicide, or the fear of "anarchy."

One of the solutions offered by Durkheim was that some social relations happening in specific social fields (new "corporations" or "professional groups") could support the emergence of a new needed "society." In order to do, we need new "groups" – new relations – from which a "new system of rules" could emerge: "To put an end to anomie a group must thus exist or be formed within which can be drawn up the system of rules that is now lacking" (2014, 11).

Durkheim's proposed social reform was based on the idea that in a new society where the market has become national and international, new professional corporations should not be "restricted exclusively to the artisans of the town" (Durkheim 2014, 24). They must become national networks including "all the members of one profession" which

are otherwise “scattered over the whole country” (ibid, 24.). Durkheim was talking about reassembling disconnected people – “reassembling the social”, as Latour (2005) would say. It is about putting more or less isolated people into interactions through the transformation of one type of social field called “corporations”: “For in whatever region they may be, whether they live in town or countryside, they are all linked to one another and share a collective life.” (ibid, 24.). Rather than being egotistic or isolated, dominated by a central political power, individuals would find some “functions of mutual assistance,” “feelings of solidarity,” “a certain homogeneity of intellect and morals,” “many educational activities,” and even “artistic activity” in the new corporations they would co-produce (Durkheim 2014, 26). At the same time, these corporations could fuel a larger social field called the modern “society.” In modernity, social life could be invigorated and constantly energized. As a result,

(s)ociety, instead of remaining what it is today – a conglomerate of territorial districts juxtaposed together – would become a vast system of national corporations. The demand is raised in various quarters for electoral colleges to be constituted by professions and not by territorial constituencies. Certainly in this way political assemblies would more accurately reflect the diversity of social interests and their interconnections. They would more exactly epitomize social life as a whole. (Durkheim 2014, 26–27.)

If we come back to our previous graphic, we are at the upper part of it ($T_1 \rightarrow T_2$), where the “social things” in T_2 are revised into some conditional, precarious, and emerging social phenomena such as “groups,” “interconnections,” or, more generally, “social life.” According to this logic, “society” is perceived as a field of precarious sub-fields (“secondary groups” for Durkheim) which “must be close enough to the individuals to attract him strongly to their sphere of influence and, in doing so, to absorb him into the torrent of social life”

(Durkheim 2014, 27). Otherwise, without this closeness or without being co-producers, the individuals detach “themselves from one another, and thus society disintegrates to a corresponding extent” (Durkheim 2014, 27). In total, it is all about being assembled in ways that interactants co-produce a needed society. And this society becomes a precarious effect, an empirical issue, and a modern challenge rather than a solid, determining “social thing.”

Beyond the relevance of this specific prognosis which could be discussed elsewhere, the main point here is that we have a deep processual-relational and pragmatic sociology instead of a (co)deterministic one. In effect, the sociologist is not simply the neutral observer of relations between variables since he identifies one possible “reform” and “its general principles as they appear to emerge from the facts” (Durkheim 2014, 24). What is more, the “objects” that s/he studies are now perceived as social processes, or fields of interactions, from which could emerge a larger social field called modern “society”; a new society which cannot be founded on the power of the Leviathan (political liberalism) or on the market fueled by egotistical economic interests (economic liberalism); and which is constantly fueled (or not) by specific interactions between people.

This reading of Durkheim becomes possible only if we neglect some positivistic principles such as the ones on social laws and “social things.” By doing so, the problems of voluntarism and social determinism simply vanish, and we do not have to separate individuals from society. No dualism, no reification, and no hard or soft social determinism appear here: social fields emerge, are transformed, or disappear through interactions between people. In this logic, the needed “professional groups” Durkheim was talking about are not pre-existing social forces imposing themselves on individuals. A group of this kind is

(still) seen as a “*sui generis*” phenomenon which cannot be reduced to the sum of isolated individuals because, once again, it comes from their interactions, and not *simply from* the qualities, the choices, or the will of independent individuals. It is not about the study of individuals as analytically or empirically isolated people, but rather about relations and processes made up by interactants or interdependent people.

From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity

The type of adaptation suggested above can be extended to other notions formulated by Durkheim. Many of his famous so-called “social laws” can be seen as relational explanations of specific social processes. When Durkheim proclaimed that “it is a law of history that mechanical solidarity, which at first is the only one, or almost so, should progressively lose ground, and organic solidarity gradually become preponderant” he was talking primarily about another emergent phenomenon where the new “kind of solidarity,” as the new “structure of the society,” comes from a modification of “the way in which men are interdependent” (Durkheim 2014, 138). In other words, beyond the idea of “social things,” “social structures” derive from interactions or, even better, they *are* fundamentally interactions. In Durkheim’s words, “the division of labor progresses the more individuals there are who are sufficiently in contact with one another to be able mutually to act and react upon another” (2014, 202). The new “form of solidarity” requires more people (increase of volume), but this is not enough. Individuals need to be interactants rather than disconnected individuals (increase of density). We can easily see relations from which one form of division of labor constantly emerge from, as long as these interactions are repeated from day to day, and with no guarantee similar interactions will still happen tomorrow. Strikes, revolutions, wars, et cetera happen and are hardly predictable.

Above and beyond all the difficulties of the modern society, his explanations of the emergence of

this precarious modern social order were basically processual-relational ones. Or they can be read as such. For example, Durkheim (2014, 202–203) provided an explanation of this type about the increase of social density. Thanks to the decline of “the activity of nomadic tribes” and agriculture, and the rise of industrialization, “from their origins European societies have seen their density increase continuously in spite of few cases of temporary regression.” In other words, the European industrialization was characterized by “tighter” “social ties” (relations). We can call this process a “structural” change if we wish. The fact is that the European industrialization was a highly complex social process. It was made by uncountable social relations happening day after day. Moreover, it was quite messy, noisy, and fluid even if we can paint these wide and complex social processes as simple and rigid “social structures” with defined and fixed roles, functions, norms, et cetera. In addition, according to Durkheim, the emergence of towns is also another key characteristic of this “assemblage” since “towns always result from the need that drives individuals to keep constantly in the closest possible contact with one another” (Durkheim 2014, 202). Once again, we are talking about relations and processes. “Finally, there is the number and speed of the means of communication and transmission. By abolishing or lessening the empty spaces separating social segments, these means increase the density of society.” Once again, this is fundamentally about connections and relations between people. The emerging society is, in fact, all about new and more dynamic relations involving more people in larger territories.

The Example of Egoistic Suicide

Mostly due to its methodology based on statistical comparisons and variable analysis, and its related attempt to discover social laws such as “suicide rates vary inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups to which the individual belongs” (2006, 224), *On Suicide* became

a classical example of positive, substantialist, and deterministic sociology. Re-reading it within a processual-relational framework helps to see why and how Durkheim's statistical comparisons and correlations between variables should be revised to really understand what he was referring to, sociologically speaking. This is probably true for any relation of causality between variables where the independent ones are "social facts."

Ultimately, the so-called "power of society" as a "social thing" can be criticized as a (problematic) metaphor which, somehow, detaches his sociology from the empirical social life of the people. We can see this when looking at statements like this one:

When society is strongly integrated, it keeps individuals in a state of dependency, holding them to be in its service and consequently not permitting them to dispose of themselves as they wish. Society is thus opposed to their escaping from their obligations towards it through death. (Durkheim 2006, 225.)

This is even worse in statements where "society" appears as if as God and the individual as its "material":

In a word, since society to a large extent makes the individual, it makes him to the same degree in its own image. So the material that it needs will not fail, because it has, so to speak, prepared it with own hands. (Durkheim 2006, 359.)

Realistically, the notion of "society" Durkheim had in mind when he wrote these sentences can only mean that specific individuals (parents, neighbors, friends, employers, policemen, soldiers...) keep other specific individuals "in a state of dependency" and do not permit "them to dispose of themselves as they wish" (Durkheim 2006, 225). These interactions happen (or not) in spe-

cific social fields such as conversations, families, workplaces, tribunals or religious communities. This is something Durkheim himself recognized at the beginning of his career. In 1885, the young Durkheim wrote:

Sans doute une société est un être, une personne. Mais cet être n'a rien de métaphysique. Ce n'est pas une substance plus ou moins transcendante; c'est un tout composé de parties. Mais alors le premier problème qui s'impose au sociologue n'est-il pas de décomposer ce tout, de dénombrer ces parties, de les décrire et de les classer, de chercher comment elles sont groupées et réparties? (...) Puisqu'il n'y a dans la société que des individus, ce sont eux et eux seuls qui sont les facteurs de la vie sociale. (Durkheim 1885, 5)⁵

Once again, these unnecessary problems can be easily resolved through a processual-relational revision. We can use Durkheim's own explanations on the four types of suicide to show how this work can be done. In the next paragraphs, and again due to a lack of space, I will focus only on the egoistic suicide.

Durkheim defined the egoistic suicide as "the particular type (...) that results from excessive individualism." (Durkheim 2006, 225). In his words, only the existence of a solid and external "society" can prevent this "excessive individualism." Interestingly, many illustrations used by Durkheim show that "society" is all about inter-

5 Without any doubt, a society is a being, a person. However, this being is not metaphysical. This is not a substance more or less transcendent; it is a whole composed by its parts. Then, isn't the first problem confronting the sociologist to decompose this whole, to enumerate its parts, to describe and classify them, to find out how they are grouped and allocated? (...) Since there are only individuals in a society, they are the only factors of social life. (Translation by the author FD)

actions. In spite of the concept of “structure,” if suicide rates are lower in protestant groups, this is so basically because individuals exert less pressure and control on each other, which is mainly due to the relaxed relations of control and influence between specific individuals such as priests and believers:

The protestant is more the author of his own belief. The Bible is put into his hands and no interpretation imposed on him. The very structure of the reformed faith gives expression to this religious individualism. Nowhere except in England is the Protestant clergy organized in a hierarchy. The priest, like the ordinary believer, depends only on himself and on his conscience. He is a more learned guide than most believers, but he has no particular authority to impose dogma. But what most clearly demonstrates that this freedom of inquiry proclaimed by the founders of the Reformation has not remained at the level of some Platonic assertion is the growing number of sects of every kind, in such vigorous contrast with the indivisible unity of the Catholic Church. (Durkheim 2006, 163–164.)

The processual-relational nature of Durkheim’s explanations is even more apparent in the reasons that he gave for the relatively low suicide rates in Jewish communities. It starts with the account that hostile interactions between Christians and the Jewish minorities reinforced internal relations within those communities. The so-called “solidity” of the “constraining” Jewish “little” societies come from these intense and interdependent external and internal interactions:

The long-standing hostility of Christianity towards the Jews has created unusually strong feelings of solidarity among them. The need to struggle against general animosity, and even the impossibility of communicating freely with the rest of the population, obliged them to clasp one another tightly. As

a result, each Jewish community became a little society in itself, compact and cohesive, which had a very strong feeling of its own identity and unity. Everyone within it thought and lived in the same way; individual divergences were made more or less impossible because of the community of existence and the unceasing, tight surveillance exercised by all over other. (Durkheim 2006, 165–166.)

If we forget about its exaggerations and simplifications (“Everyone within it thought and lived in the same way”), this type of explanation is deeply processual-relational. It brings us back to historical processes where social life is made by interactive people with feelings, identities, values, problems, conflicts, habits, and everything else that really make human social life. In sum, in one way or another, it is always about dynamic relations between specific interactants in various, specific social fields.

Conclusion

Processual-relational thinking clearly detaches sociology from positivism and its unrealistic promises (such as discovering social laws and predicting social phenomena), and the problems coming with deterministic, dualistic, and reifying views. However, we need good reasons to believe that we truly receive significant gains by adopting the processual-relational framework. The limited and sketchy adaptation of some of Durkheim’s ideas presented in this article hopefully gives a better idea of those gains cognitively speaking, but also in terms of social actions and reforms.

By seeing ourselves as co-producers of multiple social fields we avoid hard and soft social determinism without falling into the trap of voluntarism. Besides, the Durkheimian critique of the modern cult of individualism can be reinforced by means of an approach which stresses our inescapable state of interdependency. We are “social” at the core,

meaning that we are interactants and, as such, we are what we are, and do what we do, because we constantly interact with other interactants in multiple social fields. No one of us is entirely “free” to simply make anything of any social field as they please, even if power relations are typically unequal in this world. Furthermore, when some of us are killed, tortured, used as tools or resources, and/or denied of their humanity, they are victims of human interactants and not of “social things.” Everywhere we are dealing with are fluid and dynamic relations between interactants.

Besides rejecting all assumptions regarding their reification and isolation, the processual-relational take on social phenomena also refuses the idea that reified social phenomena would self-act on us as substances. Social patterns are effects of our relations, not their causes. In addition, the perspective suggests that when trying to achieve social change, we are not forced to interact with such external and powerful “social things”. Our social life is not seen as being made by common phases of social determination and rare moments of agency. Social change is constant and it happens through relations with other specific human interactants like us (and with non-human interactants). As individuals we recognize our collective power through our capacity to co-produce various forms of assemblages. In sum, we think in terms of the collective creativity without feeling all-powerful or powerless, without dissolving ourselves into the social or seeing ourselves as isolated individuals.

When we adopt the processual-relational perspective, we also stop treating “society” as a powerful force acting like God or a “thing.” We do not see it as the source of the social order or as a system, which acts upon us by socializing us, by placing us in pre-existing hierarchies, or by inserting norms and values in our heads. We are able to abandon these problematic views and can focus

on the real issues raised by Durkheim and others, such as in the state of crisis that “society” faces in (hyper)modernity, and the threatening possibility of disintegration. Society’s existence should be seen as a significant challenge rather than an analytical necessity for sociology. Its future depends on our interactions. Society is an ongoing accomplishment related to interactions happening in smaller-scale social fields such as families, churches, workplaces, corporations, schools, political parties, and social movements.

This way we can address concrete problems such as anomie or high suicide rates in some communities more efficiently, by working on contextualized interactions between people and related problems (for example, the lack of clear norms and rules or whatever it can be). Therefore, the relevance of sociology becomes more easily related to real, empirical experimentations rather than to the search for statistical correlations basically made to meet the requirements of “scientific” publications. Sociology becomes more pragmatic than positivistic.

If properly adapted, Durkheim’s texts can also help us to move beyond enduring modern ideologies. As he repeated many times, a decent “society” cannot be adequately assured by the market, by egoism, and/or by the domination of the State. In other words, sociology reveals the limits of economic and political liberalisms, fascism, communism, and individualism as desirable foundations for social life in modernity. However, it is harder to focus on these crucial issues if we are obstructed by unnecessary ontological and epistemological problems.

Last but not least, a processual-relational sociology could be a great antidote against the dangerous side-effects of the cult of individualism and multiple quests for independence. More precisely, by encouraging us to think in terms of interdependency, it could prevent us from falling

for destructive versions of nationalism, communitarianism, populism, and various forms of identity politics. Beyond the fallacies of egocentrism, the “free market,” the will of the “people,” or the affirmation of X and Y, we are fundamentally interdependent.

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