



## Relations Along, not Between: Incorporating Becoming into Relational Sociology (via Life-Philosophy)

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Résumé de l'article

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*Abstract. The article advances a type of relational sociology that is sensitive to the continually ongoing formation of beings and relations over the course of time. While the dynamic and fluid character of relations has been stressed by other relational scholars as well, the article suggests by drawing from the work of Simmel and anthropologist Tim Ingold that to attend to the coming-into-being and change of beings and relations, we need to alter the very grammar of considering relations: instead of fathoming them as connections between entities, we had better examine them as lines of life along which things become, act, change, move, and grow. This is to interweave the concept of relations with the notion of life, which the article conceptualizes by turning to the life-philosophy of Simmel. Instead of regarding life as encapsulated inside living organisms, Simmel considers it as form-giving immanent in the world's incessant processes of becoming.*

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Over the past 20 years, “relational sociology” has gained increasing prominence as an intellectual movement. There is, for example, a large number of books and edited volumes (e.g. Crossley, 2011; Donati, 2011; Powell and Dépelteau, 2013; Dépelteau and Powell, 2013; Donati and Archer, 2015; Dépelteau, 2018; Papilloud, 2018a) as well as articles (e.g. Emirbayer, 1997; Somers, 1998; Tilly, 2001; Kivinen and Piironen, 2006; Dépelteau, 2008; 2015; Fuhse, 2009; Mische, 2011; Erikson, 2013; Selg, 2016a&b; Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016; Traue, 2018; Donati, 2019) conceptualizing and/or applying relational sociology. Even though relational ideas can be found already in the work of such classical authors as Karl Marx (see e.g. Burkitt, 2018), Georg Simmel (see e.g. Vandenberghe, 2002; Cantó-Milà, 2005; 2016; 2018; Ruggieri, 2016; 2017; 2020

Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2016; 2017; Kemple, 2018; Papilloud, 2018b); Gabriel Tarde (see e.g. Toews, 2003; Tonkonoff, 2018), Marcel Mauss (Papilloud, 2018c), and Georg Herbert Mead (see e.g. Côté, 2018), it was above all with the publication of Mustafa Emirbayer's article "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology" published in *The American Journal of Sociology* in 1997 that relational sociology began to take shape as an explicit, self-conscious programme in the Anglophone world.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, relational ideas are not confined within sociology alone, but they have spread across various fields, from physics and other natural sciences (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), science and technology studies (e.g. Latour, 1986; 1996; 1999; Law, 2002; Mol, 2002); anthropology (e.g. Strathern, 1996; 2005; 2020; Ingold, 2011; 2015), and philosophy (e.g. Gasché, 1999; Mesle, 2008) to political science (Jackson & Nexon, 1999; Selg & Ventsel, 2020; Klasche, 2021), archaeology (e.g. Fowler and Harris, 2015), feminist theory (e.g. Haraway, 2004; Barad, 2007), psychology (e.g. Wachtel, 2008; Gergen, 2009), and psychoanalysis (Barsness, 2018), for instance. At the moment, relational thinking is nevertheless far from amounting to an actual new paradigm for the social sciences, not least because the contrast between substantial reality and process continues to be a very contested issue. While strands of relational thinking, as Emirbayer (2013: 210) suggests, "have moved closer to the mainstream," so that at the moment they perhaps "occupy a less subordinate place in the space of sociological approaches" than before, at no point has relationalism gained an upper hand over substantialism. Therefore I think that the assessment "sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static 'things' or in dynamic, unfolding relations"

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<sup>1</sup> Though in Italy, Pierpaolo Donati had been systematically pursuing and developing relational sociology already from the early 1980s, and Donati has also created a network of scholars with an interest in relational sociology, under the name Relational Studies in Sociology.

Emirbayer (1997: 281) voices in his “Manifesto” depicts a situation that more or less prevails still today, after more than two decades.

The immediate difficulty we face with relational thought has to do with the fact that our everyday common-sense experience of reality – at least in the Western world – is substantialist rather than relational (see also e.g. Whitehead, [1934] 2011: 10–11; Emirbayer, 2013: 210; Selg, 2018: 539–40). Our ways of speaking and thinking are reifying in that we tend to perceive the world as consisting of relatively static and permanent self-consistent, clear-cut objects, not of dynamic relations and processes. For us, our world is furnished with bits of matter demarcated from each other by surfaces: wherever we look, we see trees, rocks, embodied individual persons, fruit, buildings, chairs, lakes, cars, animals, books, and computers, for example. As Norbert Elias ([1929] 1978: 111–112) notes, our languages are constructed in such a way that even movement and change seem to imply first an isolated object at rest, to which is added a verb that expresses the fact that the thing changes: we say “the river flows” and “the wind is blowing,” as if the river was somehow separate from its flowing and the wind from its blowing. According to philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, the entire history of philosophy attests to the fact that the mind “tends to ignore the fluency, and to analyse the world in terms of static categories” (Whitehead, [1929] 1978: 209). Ultimately, a relational perspective requires thus nothing less than redesigning, perhaps even revolutionizing, our accustomed modes of thinking and speaking.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that processual-relational thought would be entirely foreign to common sense, at least not in all cultures. Anthropologists have studied how the animistic world of some indigenous cultures is a world of movement and becoming. For instance, Tim Ingold suggests that for Koyukon people, indigenous hunters of Alaska, names are verbs instead of nouns. The names the Koyukon use for animals, for example, do not observe the animals as objects or entities that are then perceived to act and move, but their names are based on the behaviour of each animal. (Ingold 2011: 72, 143, 169–170). As anthropologist Richard Nelson notes, instead of a fox the Koyukon people see “streaking like a flash of fire through the undergrowth,” and instead of an owl they see “perching

In this article, I make a modest contribution to this endeavour by advancing a type of relational sociology that I call *processual-relational sociology*. It considers the world as consisting of relational processes instead of fixed entities with variable properties, as substantialism does.<sup>3</sup> Recently, versions of processual sociology stressing the fluid and dynamic character of relations and the social world have been cultivated by others as well (e.g. Emirbayer, 1997; Dépelteau, 2008; 2015; 2017; 2018; Kivinen & Piironen, 2006; 2013; Abbott, 2016). My own take shares some features with these, but it also manifests crucial differences. While for example Osmo Kivinen and Tero Piironen (2006; 2013) develop what they call a non-ontological “methodological relationalism,” refuting all ontological questions as irrelevant and futile, I make bold ontological statements. I hold that we cannot simply do away with metaphysical assumptions.<sup>4</sup> They are an unavoidable part of every research process and our very relationship to the world (Hämäläinen & Lehtonen, 2016). The question of the world should not therefore be transformed into a question of how and whether we can come to know the world. To me, processual-relational

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in the lower branches of spruce trees” (Nelson, 1983: 108, 158). The idea of a world in perpetual flux and variation is not entirely alien in western societies, either. We can relate, for example, to Heraclitus’ famous maxim that you can never step in the same river twice. Not only the river changes as we step into it, but so do we (Mesle, 2008: 8). Nevertheless, despite all the changes that things go through, we in the western world have a tendency to think that they have at least some minimalistic core that endures and persists. All in all, my purpose here is not so much to replace everyday knowledge and experience with an allegedly better “scientific” alternative as to *disrupt* the largely predominant substantialist modes of speaking and thinking. The experiences of people should not simply be explained away, since they matter in and for the constitution of our common world (see also Pyyhtinen, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The line of research that I propose partly builds on my previous work (see Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018), but here it is presented the first time in a more systematic, programmatic manner.

<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging that ontology and metaphysics do not always mean one and the same thing, I nevertheless use the two terms synonymously here.

sociology must avoid this reductive conversion and advance a “make-shift metaphysics” (ibid.). The interest in ontological questions is what my approach has in common with Emirbayer’s (1997) “Manifesto” and the “process-relational sociology” of François Dépelteau (2008; 2015; 2017; 2018). Whereas relational epistemology would hold that relational analysis presents the best tools to grasp the world (i.e., that we should study the world relationally, through relations), my own approach more or less shares with these authors the idea that this is so because what exists is constituted and characterized by relations. However, whereas Emirbayer and Dépelteau draw mostly from pragmatism, especially from the so-called “transactional” approach (Dewey and Bentley; 1949),<sup>5</sup> I turn to the life-philosophy of Simmel and the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold for inspiration and propose a concept of relation that is interwoven with the notion of *life*.

The article proposes a change in the grammar of conceptualizing relations. I argue that the prevailing understanding of relations in relational sociology and for example in social network analysis as connections or processes *between* actors can only make a fairly static picture of relations and thus comes short in conceptualizing how beings and relations are continually in-process and change over the course of time. To attend to their ongoing formation and coming-into-being, I suggest by drawing on Ingold (2007; 2011; 2015) that the bilateralness of the between needs to be converted to the longitudinal of *along*. Whenever a relation is conceived as a link, a connection, or interaction between elements, the occurrence and change of co-becoming beings in and through time remains insufficiently acknowledged and considered. Even when trying to incorporate process into analysis, the standard understanding of the evolution of networks across time in social network analysis, for

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<sup>5</sup> Emirbayer’s work has also been associated with the structuralist pole of relational sociology, emphasizing the structural properties of relations (Vandenberghe 2018: 38). And it is true that in some of his writings that have appeared after the “Manifesto” he does indeed draw substantially for example from Bourdieu (see Liang and Liu (2018) on this).

example, only provides us with snapshots of T1, T2, T3, and so on, where the flows of processes have been arrested in time and entities seem to hold a never-ending posture without budging – until they may appear holding a different posture and position in another moment of time. In his proposal for what he calls “radical relationalism,” Christopher Powell (2013: 194) suggests that whereas one snapshot is not enough to grapple process, a series of snapshots would do the job. In contrast to this idea, the approach articulated in this paper holds that snapshots can never give us process, because process is a course of becoming that takes place *in-between* the discrete photographic moments.<sup>6</sup> In snapshots, process has already become the opposite of itself, something fixed and static. In contrast to the snapshot methodology, which is thus in conflict with the conviction of the primacy of process to be found at the heart of processual relationalism, the approach signalled by the preposition “along” in this paper temporalizes relations by considering them as lines of activity, growth, and movement along which beings come to be and change (the notion of “lines” comes from Gilles Deleuze, as will be explicated later in more detail in the article). The paper proposes a way of attending to the becoming and change of relations and entities by considering them on the basis of the fluid character of the *life-process* and that, in this endeavour, it is particularly useful to draw on the life-philosophy of Simmel. Simmel insists on the interconnectedness of life and time. In *The View of Life* (1999: 221; 2010: 8), he writes: “Time is real only for life alone. [...] Time is the – perhaps abstract – form in our consciousness of that

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<sup>6</sup> For this reason, I also take issue with the suggestion by Dépelteau (2008: 62), according to whom “Social phenomena are fluid and moving like movies instead of being fixed like pictures.” Perhaps even better than in cinematic terms, the fluidity of social phenomena can be thought in *musical* terms: whereas movies consist of individual static frames (which the human eye perceives as motion due to the fact that it cannot process a frame rate that high as individual frames), a melody is not a series or summation of isolated tones following each other, but an unfolding unity.

which is life itself, as experienced in inexpressible, immediate concreteness.<sup>77</sup>

I start by briefly laying out the controversy and tensions in how relations are typically understood within relational sociology and argue for a processual approach as against a more “structuralist” interpretation. After that, I elaborate on the processual understanding of relations, suggesting that relations are best understood not as connections between entities but as *lines along which beings come into being and change*. In the subsequent section, I argue that attending to how beings involve each other in their ongoing, unfinished processes of formation necessitates interweaving the concept of relation with that of life, and I explicate the concept of life by drawing on Simmel. I conclude the article by contrasting the fluid reality pictured by processual-relational sociology to the lifeless world of its alternative(s), where beings are ultimately cut off from life. I also deal with the risk of neglecting permanence and being that the emphasis on processes and becoming easily entails and suggest that it is possible to account for the endurance and stability of things in processual-relational terms, without resorting to the notion of substance.

### **Relational-structuralist vs. Processual-relational sociology**

While sociologists have studied relations perhaps as long as the discipline has existed, the novelty of relational sociology lies in transmuting relations from an “object of analysis into a general perspective” (Vandenberghe, 2018: 38). For relational sociology, “relation” is not just any concept among many, but it designates a

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<sup>77</sup> It is moreover important to note this presents a very different notion of time compared to that held by social network analysis, for example. While the latter amounts to a *spatialized* understanding of time, considering time in terms of quantitative homogeneity, Simmel’s life-philosophical conception of time has more in common with Bergson’s notion of “duration” (*durée*), “endowed with the power of qualitatively varying itself” (Deleuze, 1991: 31). It is a matter of qualitative transformation, change, and becoming rather than being measurable in quantitative terms.



novel approach to reality. What relational sociologists tend to have in common is the idea that relations constitute much of the central stuff of social life. Relational theories generally reject any substantialized entities such as actors or structures as starting points for sociological enquiry, and instead insist on relations as the final unit of sociological analysis. Whether it is for example power (Selg 2018), the family (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008; Jallinoja and Widmer, 2011; Donati, 2012; Rossi and Carrà, 2017), agency (Burkitt, 2018), leadership and education (Eacott, 2018), the gift (Godbout & Caillé, 1998; Pyyhtinen, 2014; Papilloud, 2018b; Hénaff, 2020), problems of governance (Selg & Ventsel, 2020; Klasche, 2021), or music (Crossley, 2018; 2020; Emms and Crossley, 2018) that they examine, relational sociologists consider their objects of study in relational terms, as constellations of relations and as the outcome or effect of interactions or trans-actions of interdependent actors.

Nevertheless, relational sociology presents no unified theory or doctrine, but rather a more or less diffuse set of theories and approaches. There are great internal differences within the movement even when it comes to the question of how to fathom relations (see Pyyhtinen, 2021). At one end of the spectrum we can find the *relational-structuralist* pole and at the other end the *processual-relationalist* pole.<sup>8</sup> This divide tends to follow another one, namely that between a *realist* and *constructivist* understanding of relations (and reality). Scholars who identify themselves as “relational realists” (e.g. Donati and Archer, 2015) tend to pay attention to the structural aspects of social relations and entertain a realist definition of relations. They conceive relations as emergent structures between elements with causal powers of their own (e.g. Donati, 2011; 2018; 2020). Thus, in the realist perspective, a relation is “something like a great stone bridge stretching between two cliffs”; it “connects two

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<sup>8</sup> The divide has also been mapped by Frédéric Vandenberg (2018), who terms the two poles “relational-structuralist” and “processual-pragmatist.” While I regard the first term as apt, I think that the latter unnecessarily narrows down the scope of procesual relationalisms to pragmatism alone.

particular things, but has some extra being of its own” (Kennedy, 2003: 99–100).

In contrast to this, the processual-relational approach that I advocate here lays emphasis on the processual nature of relations. It asserts that relations are not “things” (like “ties” or “bonds”) or “structures,” but *fluid and ongoing processes* to be grasped in their incessant becoming and formation. Moreover, it insists that relations do not just connect previously unconnected bounded entities, closed in on themselves, but relations are constitutive of those entities – whence the label “constructivist.” Let us think of the human body, for example.<sup>9</sup> My body is not a self-sufficient, permanent lump of matter, but a precarious and shifting assemblage pulsating with life, a confederation and coming together of various forces, relations, practices, and materials from DNA to food, oxygen, swarms of bacteria, habits, minerals, physical exercise, medical history, chemicals, and technology, for example. Instead of first being *somebody* and then setting myself in a relation with the world outside me, my body is constantly produced and enacted and *lives* in and by these various interminglings with its environment. It is precisely through the gatherings or to-getherings of these diverse flows and materials that I not only come to have a body but also *am* a body (something singular and bounded, yet at the same time topologically continuous with my environment). The becoming of my body unfolds in the foldings or gatherings of these and other diverse materials.

This is to say that beings, too, and not only relations, are in-process. Therefore, it is more apt to think of them as dynamic, ever-changing crossroads of crisscrossing *lines* (as I will argue more closely in the next section) than as self-contained pieces of matter or as points in a network connected to each other by ties. We are constantly bombarded by flows of energy, signs, opinions, viruses, images, beliefs, tropes, clichés, and desires, which situate us, name us, define us, put us into motion, and make us live, and we also

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<sup>9</sup> I use this example also in Pyyhtinen, 2015.

radiate and spread outwards – the coronavirus has made this all too clear – what we have received and taken in (Latour & Hermant, 2006: 42).

While the idea of substance may be useful for our purposes in practical life, “whenever we try to use it as a fundamental statement of the nature of things, it proves itself mistaken,” as Whitehead suggests in his magisterial *Process and Reality* ([1929] 1978: 78). In a world of connected self-contained entities there would simply be no *life*. The idea of “the self-contained particle of matter, self-sufficient within its local habitation, is an abstraction” (Whitehead, [1934] 2011: 32), cut off from its relations and from life-process. Nothing exists solely in and by itself, but the world flows into each entity just as each entity flows outwards into its environment. We inhabit a fluid reality and are traversed by multiple lines of activity, growth, and movement. The world and its things are continually in-process. Process not only has primacy over static things, but things are engendered and characterized by process. To paraphrase Whitehead’s ([1929] 1978: 23) principle of process (which has analytical affinities with Simmel’s notion of life as an emblem of movement and radical becoming): how things become makes what they are; their being is constituted by their becoming.

Premised on the principle of process, processual-relational sociology thus replaces an ontology of being with an ontology of becoming, that is, with an ontology that gives primacy to the ongoing, unfinished processes of formation as against their finished products (see also Ingold, 2010). Instead of having beings in network structures as its focus, it attends to how beings mutually bring each other into existence and shape each other.

### **Relations not between, but along**

If relations are constitutive of entities, as was suggested above, how should the relational constitution of being be conceptualized, then? The prevailing manner of modelling it comes from network

research. Network thinking has spread not only across a variety of fields, from network science (e.g. Barabási, 2003; Newman, Barabási & Watts 2006) to psychology (e.g. Dunbar 2009), epidemiology (e.g. Sikic, Lancic, Antulov-Fantulin, Nino & Stefancic, 2013), anthropology (e.g. Wolfe, 1978), and sociology (e.g. Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 1992; Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Scott, 2000, Castells, 2000; Crossley, 2011), but also beyond the scholarly world. Today, “network” is not only a conceptual tool, but it has even become a kind of conceptual framework preconditioning how we see the world and ourselves in it (Eriksson, 2005). Network thinking insists on humans being relational animals, linked with others in networks via social and emotional ties. And since we are all inextricably connected in networks, it is untenable to think of ourselves as isolated individuals.

Nevertheless, even with the emphasis that some forms of social network analysis lay on the dynamic, rather than static, character of networks (see e.g. Crossley, 2011; Erikson, 2018), network thinking is not fully capable of incorporating process and time into its view of relations. It is ill-equipped to attend to the mutual *becoming* and ongoing formation of entangled beings. This is because it conceptualizes relations as connections or ties *between* entities.<sup>10</sup> Taking my lead from Simmel and Ingold, I suggest that, to grasp how entangled beings *are* processes and mutually bring each other into existence, it is better to conceptualize relations as vectors of becoming *along* which beings come into being and change than as links between them.

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Crossley, who proposes that “[t]he most appropriate analytic unit for the scientific study of social life is the network of social relations and interactions *between* actors (both human and corporate)”. (Crossley, 2011: 1; italics added). Even processual relationalism, typically, understands “social processes as constant and dynamic effects of relations *between* multiple interactants” and relations as “constant effects of interactions *between* two interactants or more” (Dépelteau, 2018: 500, 508–9; italics added). This is also how I have conceptualized relations in some of my own previous work (see e.g. Pyyhtinen, 2010).

Let us think about a therapeutic relationship, for example. Carl Jung (1985) stresses that psychotherapy is “a kind of dialectical process”, where a person as a psychic system affects another and becomes itself affected by that other. This, Jung insists, also means that: “If I wish to treat another individual psychologically at all, I must for better or worse give up all pretensions to superior knowledge, all authority and desire to influence. I must perforce adopt a dialectical procedure consisting in a comparison of our mutual findings.” While Jung against his own advantage conceptualizes psychotherapy as a discussion “between” two persons, the fact that the therapeutic relation is a dialectical *process* nevertheless means that the therapist cannot but *change* and grow along with patient. This hints at a highly crucial point that any relation is a process through and along which both parties are transformed and from which they thus come out in a different state from the one in which they entered it. We grow and change with others and with the relationship. We change and shape each other mutually: when the Other replies to my gesture, s/he has already become different by what s/he has received from me, just as I become different through his/her reply (see also Hénaff, 2020: 75). And these ways of influencing each other may of course also be stabilized into more or less established patterns which themselves continually influence the parties.

The contrast between the prepositions “between” and “along” is one which Ingold takes up frequently in his writings to underline the difference between networks and what he calls “meshworks,” a notion he picks up from Henri Lefebvre. By meshwork, Ingold means a “texture of interwoven threads” (Ingold, 2011: xii), a bundle of “entangled lines of life, growth and movement” (ibid.: 63). A meshwork is a dynamic, fluid field of entangled lines, not of interconnected points (Ingold, 2007: 80–1; 2011: 70). The difference between *along* and *between* may sound like a minor semantic distinction. However, the shift from “between” to “along” is not simply about using a different word, but it implies a major

shift in perspective, with significant conceptual implications. The two terms articulate two very different ways of considering relations and have different ontological consequences. The notion of relation implied by the preposition “between” can be pictured as a bridge, a connection, or “double-headed arrow” between two terminals, here and there. It “articulates a divided world that is already carved at the joints”. (Ingold, 2015: 147) The “between” thus assumes *a distance, an empty space in-between the connected terminals, and logically entails that the connected entities are apart not only from each other but also from their relations* (Ingold, 2011: 70; Larson, Petch & Zeitlyn, 2007: 216–217). To use the vocabulary of Dewey and Bentley (1949), it represents an “interactionalist” rather than a “trans-actionalist” approach.

The preposition “along,” by contrast, “convert[s] the bilateral to the longitudinal” (Ingold, 2015: 153 n.): instead of articulating movement to and from, along is “*midstream*.” Whereas between has two terminals, along has none. It has no final destination. When we examine the processes along which persons and things mutually grow and change, there no longer are points or positions. Instead, the preposition “along” articulates “a movement of generation and dissolution in a world of becoming where things are not yet given [...] but on the way to being given” (ibid.: 147). Points and positions are dissolved into *lines*.

The concept of lines was famously coined by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. With lines, Deleuze refers to relational or vector-like practices, actions, and processes which constitute any entity. Ultimately, we all are “bundles of lines” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 202). Lines compose us and rearrange us. They may follow one another, cross over, transform themselves, and intersect momentarily, only to disperse and join other lines. Lines do not so much lead from one spot to another, but traverse things and are situated in the middle of things, *in medias res*.<sup>11</sup> As Deleuze writes in

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<sup>11</sup> With the concept of lines Deleuze and Guattari also address the heterogeneity of relations. All lines are not of the same type, but the authors distinguish between three kinds of lines: first, there are what they call “molar lines,” which produce

*A Thousand Plateaus* together with Félix Guattari: “A line of becoming is not defined by the points it connects, or by the points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs [...] transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 293).

For example, a meal is temporary encounter, arrangement, and congealment of different lines. It combines the physiology of eating with sociality and the habit of being gathered together (Simmel, 2001), along with table manners, ornamentation, nutritional values, care for one’s health, loved ones, and the environment, as well as gendered body norms and beauty standards, for example. Further, what we eat, the food itself, is a congealment of flows of materials extracted from lines of growth of plants and animals yet coming together in our bodies. The materials have travelled along their paths on ships and lorries from the living environments of the plants and animals, through food industries, wholesalers, and retailers to our homes, fridges, stoves, and plates only to disintegrate again when we chew and swallow them. They enter our blood circulation, erode in the stomach, mutate into flesh, make their journeys through the intestines, transform into energy and movement, and, finally, come out as excrement, which will be flushed down the drain and start its own journey in the waste management infrastructure, advance along pipelines to be processed at a wastewater treatment plant. All in all, a meal is a messy and complex meshwork of extracted plant and animal life, health and well-being, sociality, affective ethico-political practices of

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unity and uniformity and refer, for example, to established and stabilized social structures, classes, and divisions; second, “molecular lines,” which produce microscopic actions and practices, which are not reducible to molar structures, but may occur and operate beside them and in between them, by either conforming to or providing resistance to the structures; and, third and finally, “lines of flight,” which designate change and plasticity, as they dissolve molecular lines and the formations that they build up (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

care, ideals and values, norms, food and waste infrastructures, and ultimately even the climate.

Most importantly, the notion of lines is a way of reversing the submission of becoming to being. It is to give primacy to the process of formation over the finished product. To think of an entity as consisting of lines is to consider it as a bundle of varying trajectories of becoming and as belonging to a more or less open and variable relational force-field. Instead of being self-contained substances connected to each other by external relations, entities are rather processes that evolve and “happen” together through time and across space.<sup>12</sup> Even their seemingly finished and enduring properties are traces of unfinished becoming.

### **Restoring relations and beings to life**

Examining things in the process of their continual coming-into-being and formation is to restore them to *life* (Ingold, 2011: 68). Importantly, life is not understood here as some mysterious animating force or spirit infused into lifeless matter, nor is it reduced to genes, DNA, or organism. Eugene Thacker (2010: xv) has suggested that, today, life is increasingly caught between (quasi)religious mysticism and scientific reductionism. It is both fervently defended by religious groups (such as evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics objecting to abortion and stem cell research)<sup>13</sup> and increasingly seized and tamed by technoscience (with scientists exploring the human genome as well as trying to synthesize and design life, for instance). When interweaving the concept of relation with that of life, I associate with neither one of these camps. Instead, I find it most helpful to turn to the life-

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<sup>12</sup> In this context, it is interesting to remind how Deleuze pictured his collaboration with Guattari as a collective arrangement of two intersecting lines/lives: “We didn’t collaborate like two different people. We were more like two streams coming together to make a third stream, which I suppose was us” (Deleuze, 1995: 136).

<sup>13</sup> Bennett (2010).



philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*) of Simmel (1999; 2003), whom Ingold does not reference in his work on alongness. Simmel not only refutes scientific reductionism – as he insists that life is irreducible to specific forms of life – but his work also suggests that it is equally important to abjure the mysticism and irrationalism that considers life in terms of a soul or a personalized life-force.

While Simmel’s thinking has significantly influenced what Emily Erikson (2013; 2018) calls the “formalist” tradition of social network analysis that focuses on network structures, it also has a lot to offer for processual-relational thinking. And I would go even further and say that it is especially here that his true legacy for us lies. The importance of Simmel’s sociology for relational thought has already been stressed by various scholars (see e.g. Vandenberghe, 2002; Cantó-Milà, 2005; 2016; 2018; Ruggieri, 2016; Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2016; 2017; Kemple, 2018; Papilloud 2018b), but so far the relevance of his life-philosophy for relational sociology has largely remained somewhat undermined (for exceptions, see Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2017; Ruggieri, 2017; 2020). Therefore, I focus here on Simmel’s life-philosophy and for the most part lay aside his sociological work, no matter how fascinating and relevant it is in itself. While some scholars (e.g. Pietilä, 2011) have insisted on keeping Simmel’s sociology and life-philosophy apart, I side here with Gregor Fitzi (2002; 2016) who argues that there is no radical break between Simmel’s sociological programme and his life-philosophy. On the contrary, Fitzi suggests that Simmel’s mature life-philosophy is an extension of the sociological ideas developed in early and mid-career; in his post-1908 writings, Simmel seeks to extend the sociological a priorities from the societal domain to the domain of culture, art, politics, law, and religion. Fitzi (2016) addresses this link by employing the notion of “life-sociology,” and he identifies the dynamics of social life and social forms as its primary concern.

The culmination and crowning achievement of Simmel’s life-philosophy, as is well-known, is the book *Lebensanschauung* (1999;

trans. *The View of Life*, 2010), which was published posthumously in 1918, a couple of weeks after his death. Simmel regarded the book as his philosophical testament. Its title, which literally translates as “lifeview,” needs to be understood in the most literal sense. Instead of voicing his personal view of life, for instance of a good or happy life, or investigating particular contents of life, the book makes the bold attempt to view life in the bare: not only the life of the individual organism, but life itself, as an incessant, continuous flux of becoming.

In Simmel’s life-philosophy, the essential duality is no longer that between content and form, as it was in his sociology, but that between *life* and *form*. With it, Simmel tries to capture the dynamics of becoming and being and also bridge the gap between them – a gap that, beginning from Parmenides and Heraclitus, runs throughout Western thought. For him, form is actuality, being, stagnation, and timelessness, whereas life is potentiality, becoming, movement, and temporality. As Simmel states about life in the book *Rembrandt*: “It never is; it is always becoming” (Simmel, 2003: 321; 2005: 11). This is to say that process is life’s essence and peculiar way of being (cf. the aforementioned Whitehead’s principle of process). With the notion of life, Simmel gets at conceptualizing becoming in positive terms; life is not movement from non-being to being but a course of becoming that makes things what they are.

The key to Simmel’s life-philosophy is the concept of “boundary” (*Grenze*) (see also Fitz, 2002). For him, life’s continuous reaching beyond its bounds, which he calls “more-life,” stems from what ultimately restricts life. While forms (amounting to “more-than-life”) encompass life and provide it with shape, stability, and actuality, they “do not share the restless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications” (Simmel, 1999: 183; 1971: 375). Thereby, life cannot be fully accommodated in form, since forms funnel and dam its ever-flowing stream. This is why life ceaselessly reaches out beyond its actual, present forms and creates new ones.

The duality of life and form, importantly, suggests that life is not an attribute of beings. Instead of lurking in the interstices of living individual organisms, life, as Ingold aptly puts it, is “immanent in the very process of [the] world’s continual generation or coming-into-being” (Ingold, 2011: 67).<sup>14</sup> Life is form-giving. It is “the architect [*Bildner*] of our traits” (Simmel, 2003: 319; 2005: 10). Life generates something living, beings that are alive (*Lebendiges*), without being encapsulated within them. Life cannot be contained, but it breaks through boundaries and bursts open any fixed forms. “[I]t is in the opposite of capture and containment, namely discharge and leakage, that we discover the life of things” (Ingold, 2010: 8).

So, how does all this connect with relations and relational sociology? To attend to the endless formation of things necessitates a relational perspective. The life of beings is a gathering of several lines along which they act, move, and grow. Any being is an intersection of several undergoing world-processes. A statement by Whitehead puts this nicely: “There is no possibility of a detached, self-contained local existence. The environment enters into the nature of each thing.” (Whitehead, [1934] 2011: 31).<sup>15</sup> An isolated, self-contained existence would be cut off from its relations and from life. It would ultimately be lifeless, reduced to the status of an inert and passive object. An entity is, rather, a playground or field for various lines of life coming together from multiple sources.

The effort to examine the processual dynamic relations along which entities act, grow, and move thus restores things to life. Instead of re-animating inert beings that are closed in on themselves

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<sup>14</sup> Here I explicitly part ways with Whitehead, who writes that: “Life lurks in the interstices of each living cell, and in the interstices of the brain” (Whitehead, [1929] 1978: 105–106).

<sup>15</sup> This statement also makes it clear how Whitehead pictures his process metaphysics as “the inversion of Kant’s philosophy”: whereas for Kant, the world is a creation of the subject, for Whitehead the subject is a creation of the world. (Whitehead, [1929] 1978: 88). Processual-relational sociology conceives the subject along very similar lines.

by adding links between them, it is to start from the concept of life as incessant movement and becoming. Here, life equals the entangled lines of activity, movement, and growth of beings. The entwined lines not only bring about life, nor are they animated by life; they already *are* life. The notion of life is a way of addressing the dynamic processuality of how entities involve each other in their formation and reciprocally bring each other into existence. Life is always already social, and living entanglements must be the starting point for the study of all social configurations. As Simmel notes in the piece “Soziologie der Sinne” (“Sociology of the Senses”) of the threads of life that bind us together: “On every day, at every hour, such threads are spun, dropped, picked up again, replaced by others or woven together with them” (Simmel, 1993: 277; 1997: 110). They are continually in-process, and so are the beings which come into being, change, and perish along them. We therefore need concepts that are sensitive to process and becoming instead of those that describe entities as finished products in a stable and ready-made world.

### **Conclusion: how things come to life and endure**

The processual-relational sociology sketched in this article is suggestive of a shift from the sociology of the social as substance or thing to the sociology of the social as *life*: it gives primacy not to substances and their properties, but to processes, dynamic relations, fluctuation, and variation. Moreover, the article argued for a way of conceptualizing relations that differs from how they are typically understood in approaches emphasizing relations and relationality. Instead of conceiving relations as connections, ties, or links *between* things, by drawing on Simmel and Ingold the article proposed that they should be understood as lines or vectors *along* which entities come into being and change. All entities are composed of lines, and it is along those lines that also we as human beings live. Thus the insistence that the concept of relation should be interwoven with the notion of life: attending to how beings involve each other in their ongoing processes of formation is to restore them to life. The

implied notion of life, inspired by the life-philosophy of Simmel, does not amount to an esoteric idea of some animistic life-force, but it was suggested as a way of paying attention to the incessant becoming of the world. We inhabit a fluid reality and, with our life and actions, we participate in the world's ongoing formation. We are constituted in the processes that constitute the world.

Besides, just think about what the alternative to this would be: a lifeless world of substances and objects, a world to which life is added only afterwards, as an appendix. In such a world, beings would be cut off from the flows that bring them to life. Whenever entities are pictured as more or less fixed or static points or nodes connected to each other by network-ties spun between them, as in social network analysis, they are rendered dead, as it were. Even when trying to incorporate process into the analysis, the standard visualizations of the evolution of networks across time used in social network analysis only provide us with snapshots, where the flows of processes have been arrested (in T1, T2, T3...) and entities seem to hold a never-ending posture without moving.

Of course, while giving precedence to process, we cannot simply just embrace or celebrate becoming, fluency, and variation at the expense of being, stability, and permanence. Without doubt, one of the risks involved in relational thinking is that, as it emphasizes flux and fluidity, it may lead us to disregard how things come to endure (Olsen, 2010: 158–9; Fowler & Harris, 2015: 128). The risk of ignoring stability has made sociologist Christian Smith (2010), for example, to reject the stark opposition between relationalism and substantialism. Smith insists that “pure relationality cannot and does not create objects. Relations need substances and substances need relations. All that exists and every way it works requires relations and substances.” (Smith, 2010: 232) Donati, too, who is one of the most vocal figures of contemporary relational sociology, positions himself much along the same lines, rejecting the opposition between substance and relation as a fundamental ontological dilemma. Instead, he tries to accommodate them both in his relational

thinking as mutually constitutive principles. Donati describes his version of relational sociology by stating that it “is based upon a social ontology for which *substance and relation are co-principles of reality*: they work together” (Donati, 2018: 436).

To me, the solution provided by Smith and Donati is unsatisfactory, as it is too wishy-washy. Firstly, it remains unclear what is left from relational sociology if the fundamental dilemma between relations and substances is dissipated. How can it still be premised on relations being constitutive of phenomena? Secondly, and more importantly, to me it seems entirely possible to account for the endurance and stability of things *in relational terms*, without resorting to the notion of substance. How can we achieve this? Here Simmel’s manner of approaching society proves very helpful and informative. In an insightful passage of *Philosophie des Geldes* (trans. *The Philosophy of Money*), he writes:

Society is not an absolute entity which must first exist so that all the individual relations of its members [...] can develop within its framework or be represented by it: it is only the synthesis or the general term for the totality of these specific interactions. Any one of the interactions may, of course, be eliminated and “society” still exist, but only if a sufficiently large number of others remain intact. If all interaction ceases there is no longer any society. (Simmel, 1989: 209–s10, 2004: 175; see also 1992: 23–24)

What is forceful about Simmel’s take on society as constituted by relations is that it needs not be limited to society alone but can be generalized to basically any entity.

The idea is simple but groundbreaking: while some of the features of an entity may endure even though many of its relations drop off, this is so only insofar as there are enough others that remain in place and intact.<sup>16</sup> This relational approach to the

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<sup>16</sup> Fowler and Harris (2015: 132) make a somewhat similar point, but they do not draw it from Simmel.

constitution of entities allows us to consider them as bundles of dynamic and changing relations without disregarding their possible endurance. While an entity can of course be independent of particular relations, no entity can be devoid of *all* relations and remain in existence. We do not get at what an entity is – its assumed “substance” – by stripping it of its relations and detaching it out of its environment.<sup>17</sup> In such a situation we would be left with nothing but what Whitehead ([1929] 1978: 29) calls a “vacuous actuality.” No thing exists in and by itself, as if in a vacuum, cut off from other things. We never encounter anything out of its specific circumstances. Things are never devoid of relations, but to be is to be related; entities become what they are along the lines they live and that traverse them. While there is indeed something in things that cannot be subtracted from them without them ceasing to exist, this “something” is no essence or substance, but their relations, their lines of life. Or, alternatively, one could say that there is no substance to things other than their relations, their ongoing, unfinished formation along lines of activity, growth, and movement. Deleuze’s (1988: 32) idea of the “event” as “one with the essence of the substance of a thing” would thus also be an apt formulation of how processual-relational sociology conceives entities.

So, whilst laying emphasis on becoming, processual-relational sociology is also capable of accounting for how something enduring may be born in fluid reality, from the instant of the event. Thereby it turns upside down the prevalent point of departure in the social

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<sup>17</sup> The processual-relational sociology that I am suggesting here is thus diametrically opposed to the so-called object-oriented ontology (OOO) developed by Graham Harman and Levi R. Bryant, among others, insofar as OOO starts from the assumption that “the way to establish a realist philosophy of things is not to shift from individuals toward process, flux, genesis, dynamism, or pulsion, but to establish a new model of individual entities as free of all relation, and hence as cut off from each other and from their own histories” (Harman, 2008: 374).

sciences: it is not the change between status quos that is the cause of wonder and in need of explanation, but what needs to be explained is, rather, how fleeting and precarious bundles of lines come to endure and how something lasting is built out of them. The dissolution of substance into dynamic, unfolding relations also displays a crucial advantage of processual relationalism over the relational-structuralist sociology mentioned above, namely ontological simplicity: instead of presenting a two-tier reality that combines substance, on the one hand, with process, on the other, it argues for a one-tier ontology of process.<sup>18</sup> For it, things or substances are generated, sustained, and characterized by processes. Processual-relational sociology presents thus a way of undermining the bifurcation of reality into relation and substance, and in that way significantly simplifies matters compared to approaches which position entities as pre-existing and apart from their relations.

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<sup>18</sup> The division into “two-tier” and “one-tier” ontologies comes from Rescher (1996: 49).



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