Social Actors and the Phenomenological Modelization[1]

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Abstract

The phenomenological approach has a quasi-monopoly in the actor and subjectivity analyses in social sciences. However, the conceptual apparatus associated with this approach is very restrictive. The human being must be understood as rational, conscious, intentional, interested, and autonomous. Because of this, a large dimension of human activity cannot be taken into consideration: all that does not fit into the analytical categories (non-rational, non-conscious, etc.). Moreover, this approach cannot really move toward a relational analysis unless it is between individuals predefined by its conceptual apparatus. This lack of complexity makes difficult the establishment of links between phenomenology and systemic analysis in which relation (and its derivatives such as recursiveness, dialectic, correlation) plays an essential role. This article intends to propose a way for systemic analysis to apprehend the individual with respect to its complexity.

Résumé

L'approche phénoménologique détient un quasi-monopole en sciences sociales pour ce qui est des analyses de l'acteur social et de sa subjectivité. Pourtant, l'appareil conceptuel qui lui est associé est très restrictif. L'être humain doit être compris comme rationnel, conscient, intentionnel, autonome, et, de surcroît, il est entendu que cet être n'agit qu'en fonction de son intérêt. Pour cette raison, une importante dimension de l'activité humaine ne peut pas être prise en considération : tout ce qui échappe à ces catégories analytiques (le non-rationnel, le non-conscient, etc.). Plus encore, cette approche ne peut pas vraiment s'ouvrir vers une analyse relationnelle à moins que la relation soit étudiée entre des individus prédéfinis par son appareil conceptuel. Ce défaut de complexité rend difficile la création de liens entre la phénoménologie et l'analyse systémique dans laquelle la relation (et ses dérivés comme la récursivité, la dialectique, la corrélation) joue un rôle essentiel. Cet article entend proposer une voie par laquelle les analyses systémiques pourraient se donner accès à l'individu sans transiter par la phénoménologie.

AFTER THE GOLDEN years of functionalism, sociology has largely emerged as a science of the individual. There are few approaches that are not focused on a social actor! Fewer still are approaches that have not modelized this actor outside of an intentional logic in which interdependent concepts are jostling around (rationality, strategy, consciousness, interest, intention). But sociologies focused on the

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individual are analytically poor: they are so close to concrete actors that abstraction is difficult[2]; they are too ideological to allow a scientific sociology to understand the individual[3]; they are too intentionalist, therefore causalist[4]; they are, by definition, monadist, which gives them limited access to complex social phenomena[5]. For this reason, many of these phenomenological sociologies have had to borrow a vocabulary from much richer theorizations than theirs; the relational and systemic analyses have indeed somewhat helped in overcoming the limits of their individualism. Thus appeared "symbolic interactionisms[6]" or "sociologies of organized actions" (Crozier 1963; Crozier and Friedberg 1977). However, success has been mixed because phenomenology infinitely hinders all development that could favour relationalism or systemism (Roggero 2006). Some relational or systemic approaches are aware of that limitation and have thus proposed sociologies that do not focus on the individual (Bagaoui 2007, 2009; Donati 2004; Emirbayer 1997; Laflamme 1995; Luhmann 1995; Vautier 2008). But these breakthroughs sometimes give the impression of a refusal of the actor, of a denial of the individuals, or of a rejection of the human. This, in our view, is not the case. Of course, on these paths, phenomenological sociology is criticized, but sociology of the subject is not rejected; is denounced the necessity for a sociology focused on the subject, not the possibility that one exists. In accordance with Pascal Roggero (2006), it seems to us that relational and systemic approaches can favour a sociology of the subject. But it also appears to us that it is not because they do so that they must advocate a sociology in which the focus is inevitably on the individual. It is not because sociology can study human subjectivity that it is obliged to build on this subjectivity.

Sociology is equipped with a theoretical apparatus to understand human action. But this apparatus is better equipped for asserting the freedom of social actors rather than understanding them: the actor is conscious, therefore free; he is intentional, therefore free; he is rational, therefore free; his rationality allows it to act according to its interests, therefore he is free; he is capable of strategy, therefore he is free. The premises of each assertion become categories that affect one another by complementing each other. They form, in fact, a system.

But the system is so closed and its categories so ideologically loaded that the analytical model it represents is not able to react to observations. Consciousness is so strongly asserted that unconsciousness is invisible; rationality is so fundamental that it cuts itself off from the irrational or emotional, etc. The categories and their convergence constitute a set of axioms. Thus, using an analytical model is unnecessary since there is no analysis; there is only construction of the object. There are no dialectics or trialectics (Laflamme 1992) of the model, the theory, and the object of the theory. The whole understanding of human action thus passes through the declaration of a subjectively free humanity.

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[2] Basing sociology on the individual can lead to problems, such as preventing sociologists from having theorized concepts.
[3] These are more of advocacy for human freedom rather than models.
[4] For Weber, the intentionalist concept elevated in strategic modeling ensures that the actor has a means-end logic, giving the impression that human action comes down to a process of cause and effect.
[5] The understanding of action from subjectivity produces the illusion of a mind that acts outside the field of human relations and structural constraints; it therefore makes a dialectical approach impossible.
[6] Read Herbert Blumer's students, who created the term, namely Howard Becker (1985) and Erving Goffman (1973, 1974)

The assertion of the freedom of social actors is not the only method of conducting a sociology of social action or of subjectivity. Many sociologies, in fact, have studied subjectivity without adhering to the imperious model. They have allowed, for example, access to complex dimensions of friendship (Bidart 1997), family (Kaufmann 2008), life goals (Bouchard 2006; Grossetti 2006), and conversations (Girard 2009; Jalbert 2006). These studies are often based on qualitative data, but quantitative analyses also achieve human subjectivity outside of intentional logic (Laflamme et Bagaoui 2006; Lafortune et Laflamme 2006). Sociology can therefore conduct the human hermeneutics without being confined to a logic of interest or without being alienated by a rhetoric of human freedom.

TWO APPROACHES TO A SOCIOLOGY OF THE SUBJECT

It appears, however, that these works, although they go far beyond the boundaries of phenomenological models, and although they adequately respond to their questions, do not yet constitute a sociology of the subject. To achieve this sociology, it is especially important to comply with the principles of scientific epistemology; it is therefore required to produce models based on a theoretical organization and to agree to trigger a reaction according to what the observation shows.

We will not be able to submit the model to empirical data as part of this reflection. This work will be done later. Above all, our objective is to develop such a model based on strong theorizations. There are two approaches available, both of which will reach similar conclusions.

A First Approach

A first approach involves complexifying the categories of the phenomenological system, which is already at work, inspired by philosophers such as Ricœur (1990) or Habermas (1987).

Mélanie Girard (2007, 2009) suggested that action theories tend to present their fundamental concepts not only as interdependent, but also as non-hierarchical, as if they did not maintain any logical precedence link between them. They also tend to be presented as if they do not play distinguishable roles, especially in relation to the object. Thus, she drew the relationship between rationality, strategy, consciousness, interest and intention in a neutral, star-shaped form (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
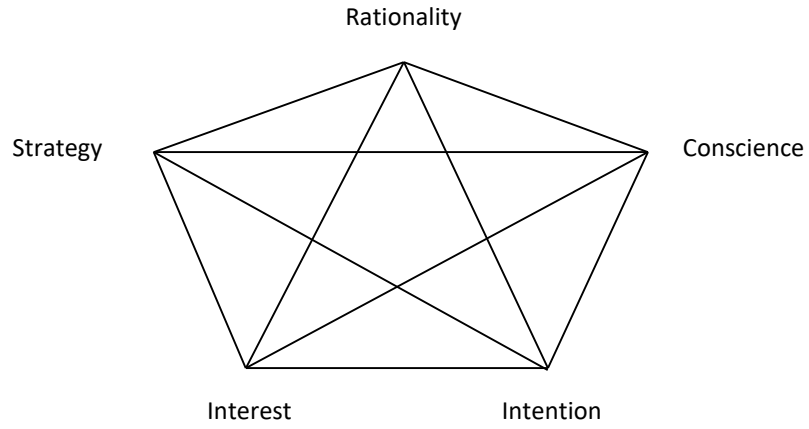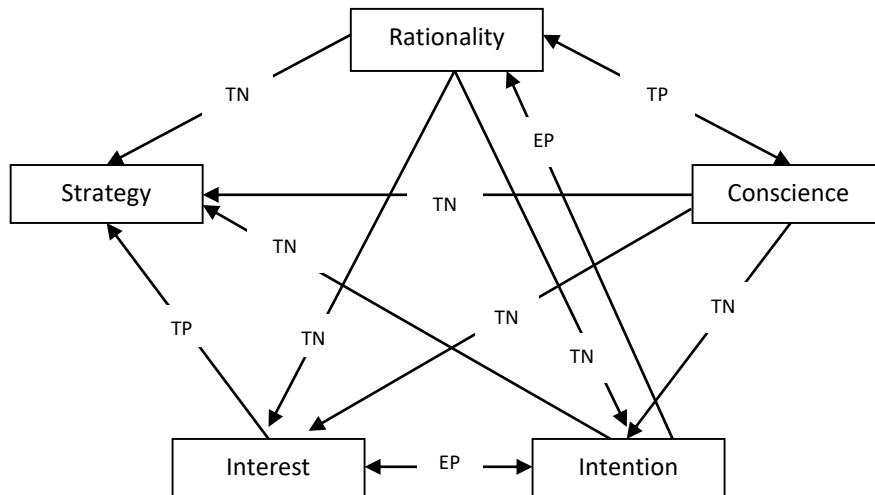The Actor as Understood by Action Theories

Rationality

Strategy

Conscience

Interest

Intention

Figure 2
Critical Modelization of the Actor
as Understood by Action Theories

Rationality

TN

TP

EP

Strategy

TN

Conscience

TN

TN

TN

TP

TN

TN

TN

Interest

EP

Intention

Legend
TN = theoretical necessity
EP = empirical possibility
TP = theoretical possibility

Initially according to Mélanie Girard

Girard also showed that this structure was improper, that between certain elements of the links were theoretical necessity whereas in other cases they were theoretical or empirical possibilities. Therefore, she proposed another schematization (Girard 2007:54, 2009:75) that we have somewhat adjusted (see Figure 2).

This figure shows, for example, that strategy assumes consciousness, although the opposite is not true, and that we are dealing with a link of theoretical necessity. It also indicates the fact that strategy is interested is an empirical possibility, not a theoretical necessity; the fact that rationality refers to intention is an empirical possibility and that this possibility must be distinguished from the link of necessity in action theories, which goes from rationality to intention. And so on.

Figure 3
Dialogical Modelization of the Actor
As a Means of Going Beyond Action Theories
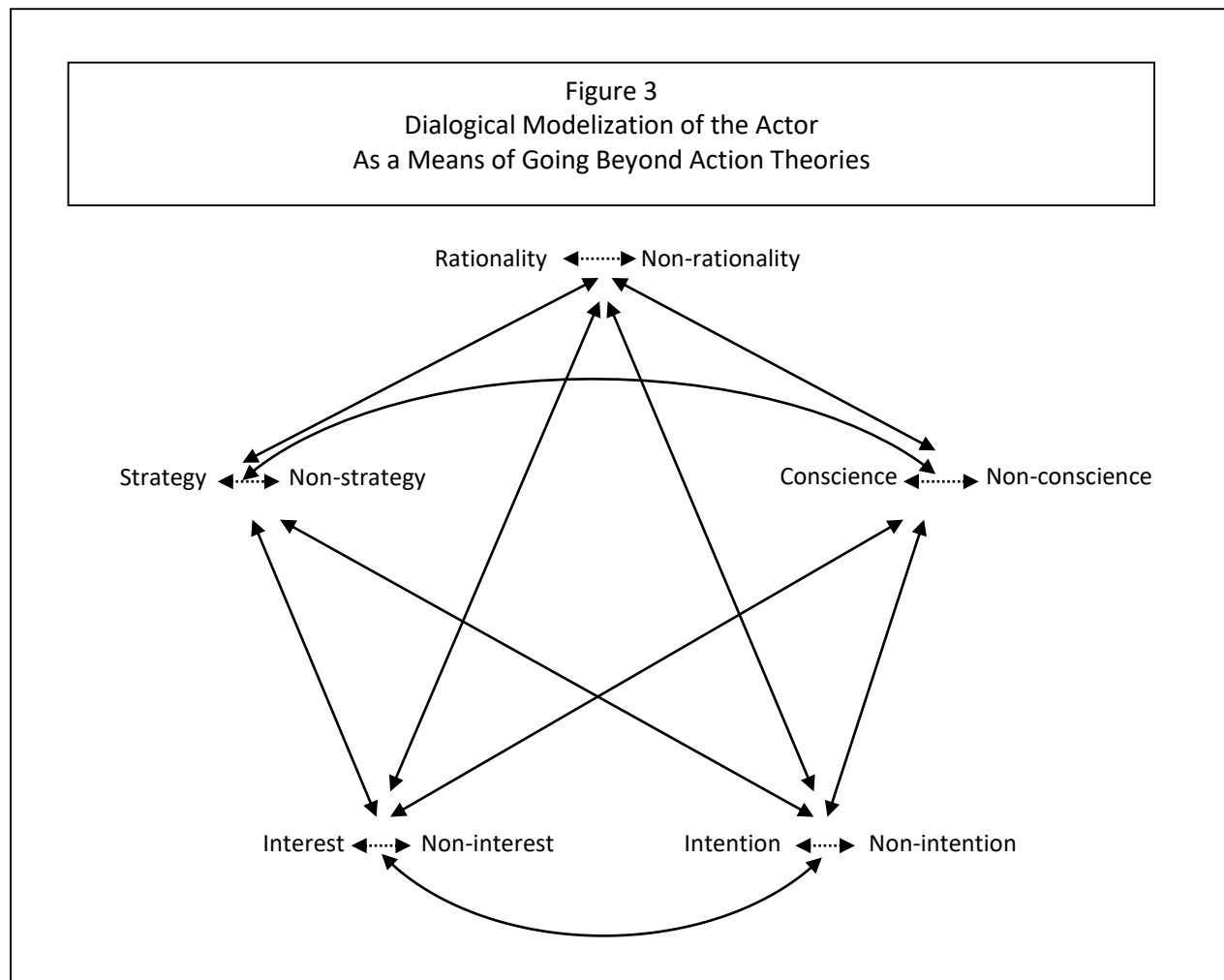
All human action, on the other hand, is not rational, strategic, conscious, interested or intentional. We address people who do not refuse to hear it; who have understood that, empirically, such a position is not tenable. A sociology of the subject that will want to consider this or that will want

to become more complex must "dialogise", to use Edgar Morin's term (1977-1991)[7]. Each category will then become, upon departure, a dyad, in the sense that it will be attached to what it obscures. This model will have the following binary categories: rationality ↔ non-rationality, strategy ↔ non-strategy, consciousness ↔ non-consciousness, interest ↔ non-interest, intention ↔ non-intention; each of the dyads will be connected to the others not by its elements, but by its junction point (see Figure 3).
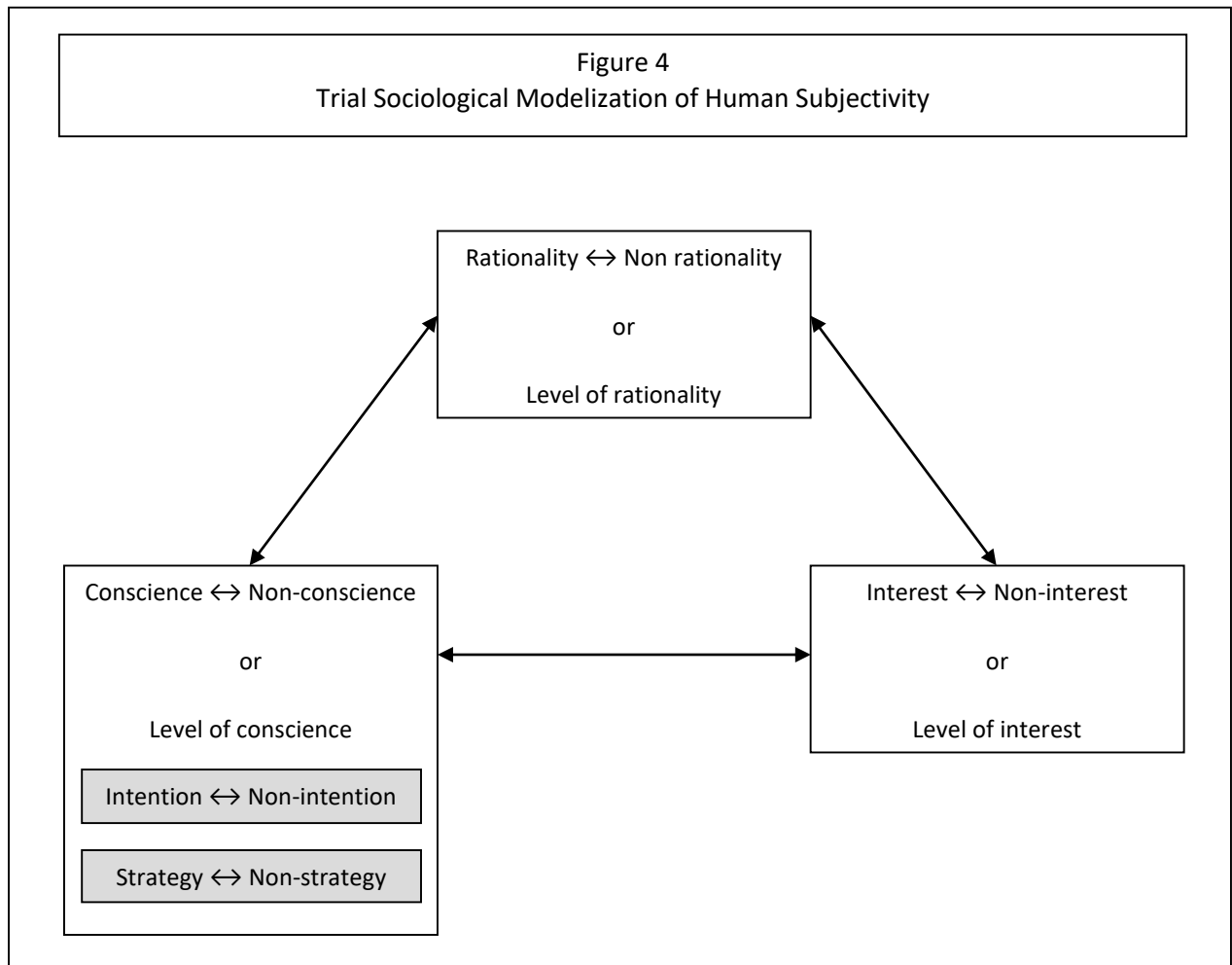
When creating a structure where each elementary category is dialogised, the problems of logical precedence or of level are reduced. The consciousness ↔ non-consciousness dialogic can very well be dialogised with the intention ↔ non-intention dialogic. Indeed, the intentionality modulation can also act on the consciousness modulation, and *vice versa*. But then, it is the whole sense of the action theory that disappears. It no longer becomes necessary to define action as intentional in its relation to consciousness; it becomes important to understand how an action is situated between consciousness and non-consciousness, on the one hand, and between intention and non-intention, on the other, and how this positioning proceeds from the interaction of these two dialogics. In other words, this new system promotes an alternative to the axiomatic framework and opens phenomenological concepts to observation; empirical reactions will eventually allow the model to adjust and the theory to develop.

In this structure, however, concepts become redundant: intention and strategy, or even intention and consciousness. If it is certain that there can be no strategy without intention, or intention without consciousness, as in the first model, one can wonder what the purpose of this strategy category is. If the intention category is active, the strategy is only a manifestation of the intentional action. Certainly, one could ask such a question in a phenomenological structuring in which the terms were not dialogised. But as soon as they are, what is the purpose of the concept of strategy? What does the strategy ↔ non-strategy dialogic bring that the intention ↔ non-intention dialogic does not? If it is possible to situate subjectivity between intention and non-intention, it is because its content is known, and therefore it can be determined whether or not it is strategy. In other words, dialogisation of basic concepts reveals the redundancy of the initial model. The same is somewhat true of the relationship between consciousness and intention. Is situating the subjective event between intention and non-intention not the same as situating it between consciousness and non-consciousness? If this is the case, the dialogic between the consciousness and non-consciousness dialogic and that of intention and non-intention adds little to the interpretation that can be made of actor subjectivity.

The dialogics of the elementary concepts of action theory enrich the phenomenological approach by making it more complex, allowing it to become more connected with empiricity. But the fact that a subjective event is situated somewhere between, for example, consciousness and non-consciousness, or comes from the consciousness ↔ non-consciousness dialogic, is the result of an observation modulated by a theory and by its concepts. This suggests that these dialogics—that the theory makes them into levels, or something more layered—may appear in dialogical concepts or be absorbed by concepts, which would simplify the work of theorization. This suggests that the increased

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[7] In an argument, Morin (1997) presented as follow the concept he calls dialogic: "I will signal [...] a notion that I call dialogic, notion that can be considered as the equivalent or the successor of dialectic. I use 'dialectic' not in the reductive way in which the Hegelian dialectic is commonly understood, namely, as a mere overcoming of contradictions by a synthesis, but as the necessary and complementary presence of antagonistic processes or instances. /It is the complementary association of antagonisms that allows the connection of ideas that reject each other, such as the idea of life and death" (our translation).

complexity that allows for dialogisation favours simplifying the conceptual structure (see Figure 4) and thereby possibly the work of operationalization.

Figure 4
Trial Sociological Modelization of Human Subjectivity

Rationality ↔ Non rationality

or

Level of rationality

Conscience ↔ Non-conscience

or

Level of conscience

Intention ↔ Non-intention

Strategy ↔ Non-strategy

Interest ↔ Non-interest

or

Level of interest

Here, the systemic focuses on the links between categories to understand subjectivity. It does not focus on the relationships between individuals nor on the relationship between individuals and social structures. The role of these relationships will be understood in what subjectivity reveals itself and theorized in accordance with recurrences.

A Second Approach

A second approach consists less of complexifying the dominant model and more of recognizing the major achievements of the social sciences. These sciences have established that:

i. the human is a social being,
ii. the human is a communicative being,

iii. the human is a historical being,

iv. human thought has resulted in language, although it is not reducible to it,

v. human languages are historical,

vi. the human is a rational being,

vii. the human is an emotional being.

The problem of the social sciences is not accepting these findings one by one; each of them could easily be accepted as truth. The problem is integrating them.

An integrated model of these findings could take the form found in Figure 5 (Laflamme 1995: 82).

Figure 5
Structure of Analytical Categories
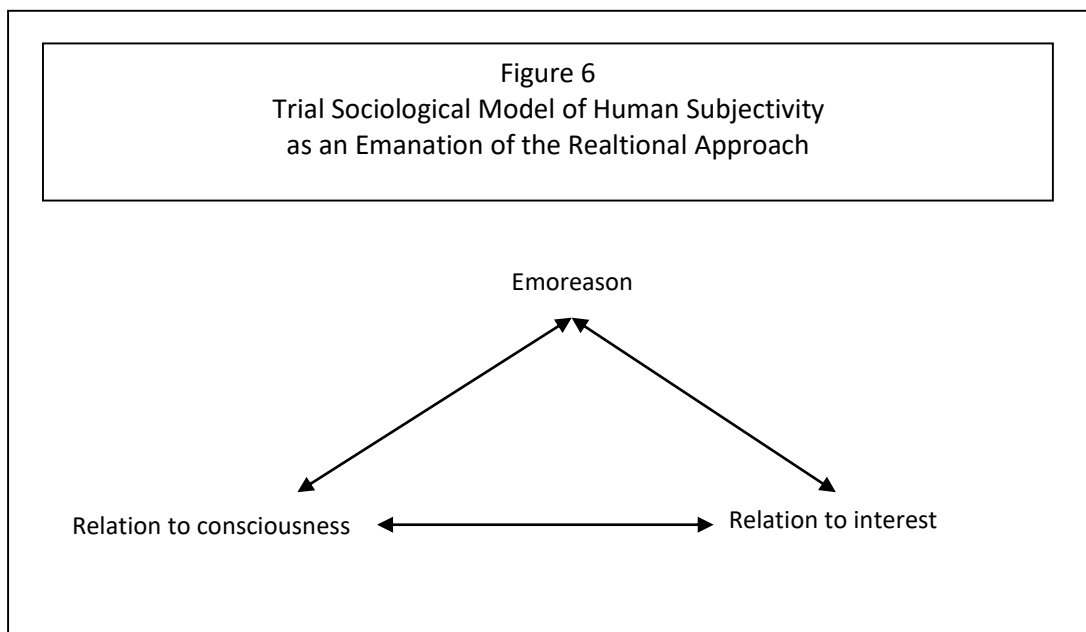for a Relational Approach of the Human
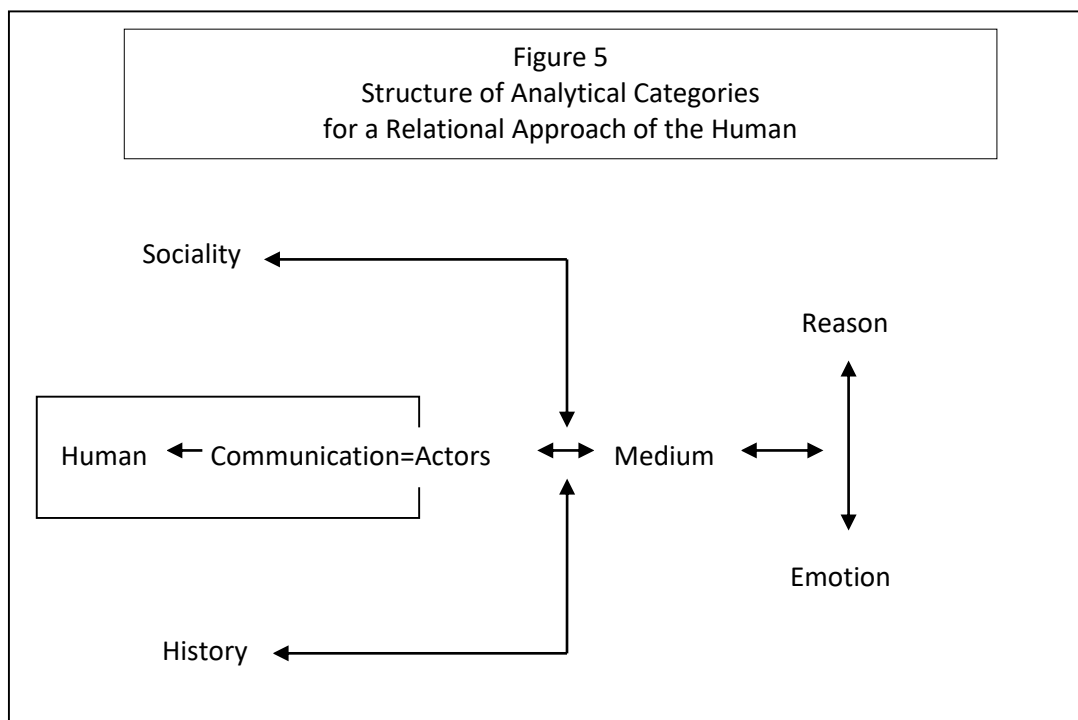
In such a grouping, the human is inconceivable outside of communication. It is a communicative reality; a combination of multiple relationships where communicating actors occur socially and historically, undergoing and fabricating their sociality and historicity. Human communication involves mediums, or in a broad sense, languages, that enable interaction and collective actions. They shape sociality and historicity, but they are also shaped by them. This dialectic of communicating actors and their mediums determines the human psyche and its rational and emotional dimensions, which in turn affect the mediums. It is because humanity is, in terms of its existence, inseparable from reason and emotion that the human does not occur socially and historically in purely logical or illogical schemas.

But this model is valid as a principle of a relational sociology. If it can inspire an attempt at a sociology of the subject itself, it is not this sociology. It posits that all subjectivity acts in relation to each

other in social and historical conditions, therefore in structures and as a process. If it moves towards a sociology of the subject, if it discovers a systemic of subjectivity, it easily crosses the dialogics that arise in a critique of the phenomenological approach.

In this relational sociology, it is reaffirmed that pure rationality is not a part of the human experience. The human is capable of desubjectivized reasoning; the proof is in the results of scientific research. However, the human cannot be social in pure rationality. Human subjectivity is about the rational and the non-rational. In our view, this non-rational is emotional. For this reason, we have already created the concept of emoreason (Laflamme 1995). Emoreason could be applied as a metaconcept of the rationality and non-rationality dialogic, as we have described it in the critique of phenomenological analysis. It must be understood that this emoreason, however, cannot be understood in a monadic framework since the actor is always in relation with the others. But if emoreason can be considered a component of subjectivity, it cannot represent sociology by itself. If it is certain that subjectivity arises between the rational and the emotional, it is no less evident that the whole subjectivity, in the sociologist's view, is not only emotion and reason combined. A sociology of the subject will have to understand that subjectivity can also precede the action or manifest at the same time—it can even be outlined after the action. The intentionalist principle is thus abandoned to the extent that it expects all action to be the consequence of an intention. A second time, reliance on the relational approach produces results that cross those that highlight the complexification of the phenomenological analysis. Sociology continually raises the question of interest. Asking this question does not mean postulating that all action is motivated by interest, but preparing to empirically verify what it is. This means that sociology accepts that the action may or may not be interest-based. Thus, a sociology of the subject raises the question of relation to consciousness and to interest. For a third time, a sociology of the subject based on the achievements of the social sciences, as does the relational approach, supports the conclusions of the critique of the phenomenological analysis that can be reached by way of the complex systemic (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Trial Sociological Model of Human Subjectivity
as an Emanation of the Realtional Approach

Emoreason

Relation to consciousness ⟷ Relation to interest

The modelization thus resembles the one that has been previously established: emoreason, relation to consciousness and relation to interest interact, as did the dialogics built around reason, consciousness and interest. Between these three categories, one can imagine the beginnings of a sociology of subjectivity as it is based on the important findings of the social sciences, but especially as an unfinished work. This work will take a more accomplished form after it is transformed due to the dialectics of theorization, of modelization and of empirical verification.

CONCLUSION

In this reflection, we recalled the importance of sociology studying human subjectivity. But we also reaffirmed that not all sociologies have to be built on this subjectivity. In fact, it is not because relational and systemic approaches are increasingly tending to distance themselves from sociologies based on subjectivity that they reject a sociology of the subject. Both the relationalism or the systemic are analytical approaches; they can enable the analysis of various objects. Of course, they both unfold on a critique of sociology and they convey principles, but they do not disapprove of the choice of objects in themselves. They disapprove of the ideology that rejects all sociologies that are not built on subjectivity, and especially that which claims that this subjectivity can only be understood in terms of a philosophy of freedom.

The complex systemic and relationalism can contribute to a sociology of the subject. We have shown this by writing a critique of the conceptual apparatus around which the theories of action are reproduced, and by introducing some major relational sociology terms. Using these two approaches, we reached consistent conclusions and we developed comparable systems. However, these systems cannot be used for anything other than as a starting point. In no instance should they be solidified by repetition, as has been the case in sociology since Weber, at least. In sociology, as in any science that deals with the world, the only way to avoid drivel is to accept that theories become models, that these models are empirically tested, and that this is necessary to modify models and, if required, theories.

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