

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Special Section: “Special Issue guest-edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau”

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau’s relational sociology

Peeter Selg
Tallin University

Date of submission: February 2021

Accepted in: June 2021

Published in: July 2021

Recommended citation:

SELG, Peeter (2021). “A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau’s relational sociology”. In: “Special Issue guest edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of Francois Dépelteau”. [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26, pp. 1-13. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. [Retrieved in: dd/mm/yy]. <http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.383829>



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

In this paper I introduce the special section on the work of the late François Dépelteau (1963-2018), by analyzing an essential tension within the relational sociology which I call the division between “clumsy” and “elegant” relationalism. “Clumsy” relationalism as exemplified most uncompromisingly by François is in a way an extreme perspective on social research, prescribing a certain “obsession” with change and unfolding of reality, rather than its stability or firm foundation. As François has put it in one of his last published works: “Everything is changing all the time, including ourselves. This is hard to accept since we are looking for some sort of stability often to reassure ourselves.” I ask why should we accept this perspective rather than continue with reassuring ourselves. I also point out that both “elegant” and “clumsy” relationalisms are useful for social research, but that the latter is increasingly pertinent for contemporary world inhabited by “wicked” social problems that have no elegant solutions or even definitions. I also analyse in more detail François’s critique of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology that is the most eminent example of “elegant” relationalism, and the furthering of “clumsy” relational sociology in the contributions to the special section by Nick Crossley and Jean-Sebastien Guy.

Keywords

François Dépelteau, relational sociology, social processes, Pierre Bourdieu

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

Imaginación sociológica para un mundo torpe: la sociología relacional de François Dépelteau

Resumen

En este artículo presento la sección especial sobre la obra de François Dépelteau (1963-2018), donde analizo la tensión fundamental dentro de la sociología relacional, que yo llamo la división entre el relacionalismo «torpe» y el «elegante». El relacionalismo «torpe», tal como lo ejemplifica François implacablemente, es en cierto modo una perspectiva extrema de la investigación social, y prescribe una cierta «obsesión» con el cambio y el desarrollo de la realidad, en lugar de su estabilidad o de una base sólida. Como dijo François en uno de sus últimos trabajos publicados: «Todo está en constante cambio, incluso nosotros mismos. Es difícil de aceptar, ya que siempre buscamos algún tipo de estabilidad que nos brinde seguridad». Yo cuestiono por qué deberíamos aceptar esta perspectiva en lugar de seguir brindándonos seguridad. También me permito indicar que los relacionalismos «elegante» y «torpe» son útiles para la investigación social, pero esta última es más apropiada para el mundo contemporáneo habitado por problemas sociales «retorcidos» que no tienen soluciones elegantes, ni siquiera definición. También analizo con más detalle la crítica de François Dépelteau a la sociología de Pierre Bourdieu, que es el ejemplo más eminente del relacionalismo «elegante»; y el avance de la sociología relacional «torpe» en los artículos de Nick Crossley y Jean-Sébastien Guy para la sección especial.

Palabras clave

François Dépelteau, sociología relacional, procesos sociales, Pierre Bourdieu

Introduction

Already long time ago Charles Wright Mills introduced the idea of “sociological imagination” in a book with the same title (2000 [1959]). Although it is hard to see it as a rigorously defined concept, one can definitely perceive it as indicating to a certain attitude towards the world or an ethos of research rather than a set of clear-cut methodological principles. Sociological imagination does not take neither micro- or macro-observations at face value, but tries to uncover their relations. This imagination was meant to reinvigorate the research ethos of classical social analyses (Durkheim, Weber, Marx and others) in the face of the new positivist tendencies of Mills' time that he referred to as “abstracted empiricism” with their “bureaucratic techniques” (Ch. 5), and the pretentious play with concepts “drunk on syntax, blind to semantics” (p. 34), which he saw as the tendency in “grand theory” (à la Parsons). Sociological imagination for him is

“the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see *the relations between the two*.” (Mills 2000, p. 7, italics added)

Yet those relations seem to have gone lost. So much so, that roughly forty years later Mustafa Emirbayer deemed necessary to write a “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” (1997) with the now famous opening words: “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.” (p. 281). Taking the second route – the processes-dynamic-unfolding-relations oriented path – is the one he proposes for relational sociology against what he calls “substantialism” or seeing the world in terms of substances or static “things”.

Yet another decade later François Dépelteau published a landmarking paper “Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency” (2008). Both Emirbayer's Manifesto and his paper were provocative: not only did they try to articulate what relational thinking is, but also to dismiss as forms of substantialism various perspectives that more or less explicitly seem to be about studying social relations. As the title of François's paper indicates, not only does he propose a groundwork for relational thinking, but also a critique of what is sometimes referred to as co-determinism, variable-centered analysis or interactionalism in theoretical-methodological reflections over the “relational turn” in the social sciences (see also Dépelteau 2013a; 2015; 2018a; 2018b; Emirbayer 1997; Selg 2016a; 2016b; 2018; Selg and Ventsel 2020). In this paper the above-mentioned Mills is used as an example of co-determinism along with many other eminent social theorists including Pierre Bourdieu, Roy Bhaskar,

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and Margaret Archer. In the vocabulary of François, co-determinism means basically moving from reductive monism (in the form of voluntarism or structuralism) to the dualism of structure and agency: "*social universe is made by interactions between structures and agency*" (2013a, p. 177). Yet at the same time for François

"the main challenge posed by relational theories is to explain social phenomena without *any* total or partial causal relation from social structures to action. As a developing mode of perception, relational sociology is still a challenge in itself. It is also challenging an old, persistent habitus in social science: to see social actions as the effects of social things." (2008, p. 59)

In other words, co-determinism is not a relational approach at all. This points to certain creative or even agonistic tensions (see Selg 2013) within the "relational" movement, especially given that by the beginning of the third decade of this century, "relational" has become an increasingly positive catchword in the social sciences and no one wants to be dismissed from the "relational" camp very easily anymore. These tensions are alluded to in all of the contributions to the current special issue dedicated to François Dépelteau's work that all the contributors see as essential for the development of the movement into its current global reach over the last decade.

In his contribution, Olli Pyyhtinen points to controversy between ontological realists and constructivists: "Relational realists, to put the matter crudely, conceive relations as connecting previously unconnected bounded entities and having an emergent being of their own, whereas thinkers of a more constructivist pole consider relations as constitutive of entities." (Pyyhtinen 2021, p. 7). Those, he calls realists (e. g. Donati and Archer 2015) are basically what Dépelteau calls co-determinists. What Pyyhtinen calls constructivists, are what Dépelteau would call relationalists: besides himself, Emirbayer and Latour would probably be the most eminent names in this camp (see also in this section Leoni Birriel and Grisotti 2021). There are other controversies like those between structuralist-relational and process-relational approaches that are closely tied to the first controversy; between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric approaches; between various understandings of relations (in terms of communication, translation, etc.). All in all, Pyyhtinen concludes: "these divisions and disagreements suggest that relational sociology presents no homogeneous space" (Pyyhtinen 2021, p. 7; see also in this section Eacott 2020, p. 10; Fuhse 2021a, p. 6; 2021b, pp. 3, 6). This point is reiterated by Jan Fuhse in his combination of a more general relational theory of social fields (2021a) and sketch of an analysis of the field of relational sociology (2021b). Scott Eacott (2020) takes up a relational analysis of François Dépelteau's role in embodying relational community by initiating creative controversies and not presuming one single understanding of "relational" approach.

All those brief references to François's work and to the contributions of this special section point to an essential division in the relational movement thus far which I would conceptualize as one between "clumsy" and "elegant" relational sociological imagination. The figures of "clumsiness" and "elegance" come from cultural theoretical approaches to governance and decision-making more generally. Important here are Mary Douglas's and Aaron Wildavsky's works (e. g. 1982) that see governance of societal problems in terms of different mixtures of hierarchical, egalitarian, individualist and fatalist tendencies in decision-making and communication (see Swedlow 2002; 2011). Among other things, this cultural theory has inspired various versions of addressing "wicked problems" through so-called "clumsy solutions" which would be a creative combination of different forms of decision-making cultures (individualist, egalitarian, hierarchical, fatalist) unlike "elegant solutions" in which there would be an overwhelming dominance of one form of decision-making (see Verveij and Thompson 2006). For "wicked problems" (see Rittel and Webber 1973; Peters 2017), of which the COVID-crisis is a new example, no "elegant solutions" exist and therefore their governing presumes providing "clumsy solutions" that do not reduce the problem to any permanent ground or singular form of decision-making. My insight is that there is an internal split within the relational movement between "elegant" relationalism and "clumsy" relationalism: the former (among the proponents of social network analysis [SNA], Bourdieusians, critical realists) is still presuming some elegant ground for analysis of the world. The latter (along the lines of Dewey and Bentley's trans-actionalism and Norbert Elias's process-relationalism that were the major sources for Dépelteau) are going to the end in denying that anything but dynamically and processually unfolding relations (trans-actions) are constituting the social world. Both forms of relationalism have legitimacy and relevance, since we cannot decide, in advance, on whether the world is either "elegant" or "clumsy." But when faced with contemporary "big issues" that are often wicked problems (e. g. climate change, global pandemics, migration) the relevance of clumsy relationalism is considerably growing. We have to start, however, with untangling the main sources of clumsy relationalism that inspired François through – the work of Emirbayer, who in turn based his argument on Dewey and Bentley.

On the difficulties with clumsy relationalism

It has proven to be very difficult to truly accept what is at stake in Dewey and Bentley's proposition that is often quoted as a source of relational thinking after Emirbayer used it in his Manifesto:

"systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements'." (Dewey & Bentley 1949, p. 108)

This point of view, which Emirbayer calls "the perspective of *trans-action*" (1997, p. 286), and explicitly also "label[s] 'relational'" (*Ibid.*, 287) is confusing in a double sense. First of all, it is distinguished from the perspectives of *self-action* and *inter-action* in both Dewey and Bentley, as well as Emirbayer. Why is this confusing? Well, if one looks carefully how the perspective of trans-action is presented in Dewey and Bentley, one cannot help but notice that it is an *epistemological* or even *methodological* perspective and *not an ontological* outlook: it is not about how the world *is*, but how we employ or should employ our conceptual schemes (theories, models, frameworks, even observations, etc.) or "systems of description and naming". It is an epistemological/methodological call of not presuming any final "essences" or "realities" to "elements" we encounter when we try to conceptually grasp "aspects and phases of action". We should presume our conceptual schemes to be provisional and subject to change as we go along with our investigation of the world (see also Morgner 2020, p. 16). But besides that – and even more importantly for relational thinking – it is also a call not to treat those "elements" or "entities" as isolated from their relations or even not to presume that "entities" and "relations" are detachable from each other. In view of this, Emirbayer's equation of the relational perspective with the perspective of trans-action makes a lot of sense, and one can only wonder why this obvious fact is often ignored by his critics who claim, for instance, that he "never defines what he means by 'relation' and 'relational sociology,' but instead talks of a 'transactional sociology'" (Donati 2020: 184).¹ But, be it as it may, it is important, again, to highlight that this is not an analytical or descriptive statement of how the world *is* (ontology), but how we should treat our knowledge or systems of descriptions of the world (epistemology, methodology²). And here is where the first confusion lies. Namely the two forms of substantialism – perspectives of self-action and inter-action – to which Emirbayer opposes this relational perspective based on trans-action are presented in *ontological*, *not epistemological/methodological* terms.

First, self-action, in which "things... are viewed as acting under their own powers" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108). Next, the perspective of inter-action presumes a world where "thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection" (*Ibid.*). These

are presumptions about how to view the world, not how to view our knowledge, or to put it in Dewey and Bentley's terms: these are views about "entities", not about "systems of description" of "entities". And this is related to the second confusion with the trans-actional view: namely Emirbayer claims that his "Manifesto," where he outlines the specificity of a relational sociology, "focuses throughout upon ontology, largely—but certainly not exclusively—bracketing associated questions regarding epistemology" (1997, p. 282). So, it seems that his essay is about how the "real is relational" (to borrow a slogan from Bourdieu [1998, p. 3]) – or on how reality really is. Here lies the reason why, again, he and his followers (e. g. the "trans-actional sociologists" like Dépelteau) are depicted as offering a "reductive vision of social reality" through reducing "relationships to pure flows, considering structures as purely contingent" (Donati 2020, p. 179). Emirbayer offers traps for such reading – by claiming that his essay is mostly about ontology and by presenting self- and inter-action in ontological terms.³ But, in fact, even in Emirbayer the exposition of the perspective of trans-action (that is, "relational perspective") is epistemological or methodological. He unpacks it in the following way:

"the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. The latter, *seen as a dynamic, unfolding process*, becomes the *primary unit of analysis* rather than the constituent elements themselves." (1997, p. 287, italics added)

A researcher adopting processual-relational perspective "sees relations between terms or units [of analysis] as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances" (*Ibid.*, 289, italics added). Thus, the "unit" of social analysis should also be seen as a "complex joint activity, in which it *makes no sense to envision* constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa)" (*Ibid.*, italics added). So, it is about "seeing" and "envisioning" of the proper "unit of analysis," not the "object" of analysis itself. And this seeing and envisioning is presumed to be in terms of unfolding processes that are primary to "constituent elements" (agents, structures, individuals, identities, families, wars, marriages, etc.). Those elements are seen as processes too. So, this perspective prescribes, epistemologically and methodologically, avoiding as much as possible what Elias (1978) calls "process-reduction" that is characteristic of our languages (pp. 111-112; see

1. Just to add a basic-level erratum here to this quote: Emirbayer never even mentions "transactional sociology" in his "Manifesto".
2. In the context of (social) science the distinction between "epistemology" or "methodology" is a matter of degree: one could say that epistemological research is on the conditions of possibility of knowledge on what there is (ontologically), whereas methodological research is on the practices and techniques that are suitable for gaining this possible knowledge. Both are, of course, based on ontological commitments (presumptions about the being of the world) and all three tend, from time to time, be left tacit in actual social research (see Hay 2006; Bevir 2008 and Selg 2016a; 2016b on these distinctions).
3. I leave aside the issue here that the ontology/epistemology inconsistency is also present in Dewey and Bentley.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

also Emirbayer 1997, p. 283). Social processes should be treated as unfolding and changing and it is this unfolding and changing that a researcher should investigate rather than presuming their givenness (which would be process-reduction). I will come to the details of process-reduction also below.

Now, in a way this is an extreme perspective on social research, prescribing a certain "obsession" with change and unfolding of reality, rather than its stability or firm foundation. As François has put it in one of his last published works: "Everything is changing all the time, including ourselves. This is hard to accept since we are looking for some sort of stability often to reassure ourselves." (2018b, p. 503). But why should we accept this perspective? Why not continue with reassuring ourselves? Why should we do away with obvious facts that we can see every day: that there are stable phenomena around us like people with proper names and identities, laws that structure our action, wars that have permanent, not only constantly changing consequences for many, etc.? First of all, a few specifications about social change and stability are in order regarding the consequences of this relational sociology we have been outlining based on the notion of trans-action. I will call it "trans-actional sociology" from now on.⁴ Trans-actional sociology does not in any way preclude studying stable social phenomena (most often termed "social structures"). All it prescribes is that we should not lose sight of the presumption that those stable phenomena are trans-actions as well. As Dépelteau explains: the "social universe is full of more or less continuous and similar trans-actions (or social structures) that we call market, wedding, war, genocide, racism, exploitation, domination, love, and so on" (Dépelteau 2008, p. 62). This is a crucial point to be reiterated again: trans-actional sociology does not preclude analysis of social objects like social structures. Trans-actional sociology only inverts the classical perspective of sociology regarding social change: not change, but the stability of social phenomena (structures, selves, identities, groups, etc.) is often the puzzle that needs to be explained, and these social phenomena "should be studied as chains of trans-action" (*Ibid.*). This means de-reifying those phenomena (*Ibid.*, p. 63) or bringing to the fore that it is the dynamic relations – not some sort of essences of entities – that constitute social phenomena as "things". Analyzing the very constitution of such "things" within trans-actions is the task of trans-actional sociology. In other words what needs to be explained are the changing being of "things" like the following: "An individual is a soldier full of hate, a knife is a weapon, and a mountain is a defensive wall or an obstacle, etc. when there is a war. In another trans-action, the same individual

is a 'loving machine,' the mountain a romantic view, and the knife might become a gift" (*Ibid.*). This, of course, does not mean that mountains or knives do not exist "on their own", but rather "*sociologically speaking*, the 'properties' of mountains are deeply shaped by some contextualized trans-actions between social actors" (*Ibid.*, p. 66). Thus, in a war figuration mountains function as a defensive wall; in a market figuration they might function as some sort of tourist attraction, but in the figuration of chess game they do not have any relevance at all and consequently "action and its environment are interconnected. They 'trans-act'" (*Ibid.*; see also Dépelteau 2013a, pp. 177-178; 2018b). This way, both change and stability of social phenomena can be explained. What is altered compared to a traditional sociological perspective is that stability is viewed as a special case of change. The twist of perspective is analogous to that performed by complexity theory for which "simple behavior is a special case of complex behavior" (Richardson 2007, p. 194). There is no denial of the existence of structures in trans-actional sociology (although they are seen as certain forms of trans-actions), like there is no denial of simple behavior in complexity theory (although it is seen as a certain form of complex behavior). So, we do not lose the traditional concerns of sociology related to social structures and their role in social analysis and explanation. We might as well assure ourselves with the stability of structures if we want to, and in most cases of social research there are good reasons to want exactly this assurance. What are the reasons? And are there also good reasons not to want this assurance? Both questions – especially the latter one – could be responded through a deeper engagement with François Dépelteau's contribution to trans-actional sociology. In doing so I treat trans-actional sociology and the positions that it is distinguished from (like co-determinism) as certain "ontological commitments" to avoid the, in my view fruitless, ontological debate on how reality really is, and engage, rather on the issue on what kind of problems and research questions can we meaningfully raise with one or another theory.

The notion of "ontological commitment" comes from Quine (1951; 1953, pp. 1-19). Its canonical summary (given the outlet) reads as follows: "The ontological commitments of a theory are, roughly, what the theory says exists; a theory is ontologically committed to electrons, for example, if the truth of the theory requires that there be electrons" (Bricker, 2016). My use of this notion is in essence pragmatist: the question for me is basically what we can do with certain ontological commitments (e.g. trans-actional sociology) that we cannot do (at least not equally well) with others (e.g., co-determinism) rather than the question of

4. Note, again, that this was not the term used by Emirbayer, but was introduced later by Dépelteau (2013; 2015; 2018b). He, like Emirbayer, usually uses the non-hyphenated form "transactional". The inconsistency in this usage leads back to Dewey and Bentley (1949) who use both forms. In various writings (Selg 2016a; 2016b; 2018; Selg and Ventsel 2020) I have insisted on using the hyphenated form only in order to highlight the telling prefixes of the neologisms (self-, inter- and trans-action), especially given that transaction is widely used in economic literature where it actually refers to what can be conceptualized as self-action in Dewey and Bentley's sense.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

which one of those commitments represents reality as it truly is. The adjudication between different frameworks is not based on their correspondence to reality, but their usefulness for certain purposes. This is pragmatism along the lines of Richard Rorty, according to whom “there is no such thing as ‘the best explanation’ of anything; there is just the explanation which best suits the purpose of some given explainer.” (2006, p. 60). He, in turn, sees justification of ontological commitments in Deweyan sense, that is, by their “functional or instrumental use in effecting the transition from a relatively conflicting experience to a relatively integrated one.” (Dewey, 2012, p. 75). The upside of pragmatism is pluralism: while I argue that certain ontological commitments are more useful for dealing with certain research problems, I am not arguing that other perspectives might not be more useful for other problems. Thus, for instance, I argue that while trans-actional sociology of François Dépelteau is of more use for conceptualizing what I refer to as “clumsy world” where social problems are seen as “wicked”, the co-determinism ranging from Marx and Bourdieu to Archer and Donati is, again a form of relational sociology that is more useful for “elegant world” inhabited with problems that are usually referred to as “complex” or “simple”, rather than “wicked” (see Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 3). Trans-actional sociology gives us relatively integrated experience (in Dewey’s sense) for a clumsy world. Here treating our “systems of description” as preliminary and subject to change, and without presuming any essences of phenomena that those descriptions refer to, and without presuming the phenomena to be detachable from the relations they are embedded in – here all this messy stuff makes a lot of sense. However, were we to access the elegant world in a similar manner, we would almost certainly mess it up unnecessarily.

But how exactly does elegant relational sociology differ from the clumsy relational sociology we have been articulating here through the notion of trans-action. We can clarify it by focusing on an important part of François’s work: his critical examination of the work of one of the biggest names associated with the relational movement, Pierre Bourdieu.

A critique of elegant relational sociology: Dépelteau on Bourdieu’s co-determinism

Jan Fuhse in his contribution to this special section has pointed out that

“Bourdieu is not really interested in social relationships of interaction between actors... Bourdieu’s relations run between positions in fields, and these have two sides: actors are positioned ‘objectively’ in a field by the field-relevant resources (economic, cultural, social capital and others) they possess, and by their symbolic practices (‘posi-tion-taking’). Generally, practices are supposed to follow the habitus of actors, and

these are determined by the objective positions in terms of the relative distribution of resources.” (Fuhse 2021a, p. 7)

François would second him on this. He points out that although in the last phase of his career (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), he presented his works as a relational theory compatible with the works of Ernst Cassirer and Norbert Elias, there is little doubt overall that Bourdieu is more co-deterministic than a relational. Why think that Bourdieu was a relational thinker in the first place, then? One way to approach it is to take his own words (or those of his disciples) as a starting point: “Against all forms of methodological monism that purport to assert the ontological priority of structure or agent, system or actor, the collective or the individual, Bourdieu affirms the *primacy of relations*.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 15). According to François “this is taken to mean that in his work, social phenomena are perceived in a processual, fluid logic as ‘dynamic, unfolding relations’ rather than static “substances” (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 276, quoting Emirbayer 1997). There are sceptics however, most notably Jeffrey Alexander (1995, 2003) who see him as more or less structuralist, arguing that in the end social structures with their various positions determine the faiths of the actors and that notions like *habitus* Bourdieu introduces are meant to explain why the actors occupying those positions more or less automatically reproduce the underlying structures (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 276).

A comparison with Norbert Elias makes it clearer. There are some not so thorough, but still relatively obvious similarities between these two thinkers. They both reject classical dualisms in social research – those of objectivism vs. subjectivism and determinism vs. voluntarism. As François explains “both of them present relational perceptions of society or social structures. At first sight, their concepts of *field* (Bourdieu) and *figuration* (Elias) seem to be similar and relational (or processual) rather than being based on substantialism” (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 277). Yet there are certain limits to this processualism and dynamism in Bourdieu’s thinking. He proposes the notion of habitus for conceptualizing the connection between the field and the individual defining it as “mental structures” (Bourdieu 1989, p. 18) that is “both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices” (*Ibid.*, p. 19). Usual indicators of habitus could be found “in tastes, preferences, perceptions, and other properties of ‘agents’” François explains, adding: “The habitus is a mode of perception and orientation through which agents comprehend and manage the social universe. It is also manifested in body postures, the choices of words, and so on” (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 278). Similar notion can be found in Elias: “In *The Civilizing Process*, the notion of habitus is related to the perceptions, feelings, and evaluations of various people regarding public practices such as nose-blowing, table manners, farting, and spitting” (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 278).

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

Another seeming resemblance between Elias and Bourdieu could be found in their notions that describe the general makeup of the social world, "figuration" and "field". Elias figurations are "webs of interdependence" (1978, p. 15). Bourdieu's "relational mode of thinking" (1989, p. 16) presumes the notion of fields as "systems of relations" (1989, p. 16). Analytically a field is "a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 97); therefore, "to think in terms of field is to *think relationally*" (*Ibid.*, p. 96). François points out that "both Bourdieu and Elias use the game analogy to explain what are fields or figurations" and "both insist on the importance of social classes: in fields or figurations, social classes are involved in processes of imitation and distinction that shape the habitus of individuals throughout the evolution of society" (Dépelteau 2013b, pp. 278-279).

Nevertheless, crucial differences remain between Elias and Bourdieu:

"Elias studies how relations between interdependent actors produce social processes. Social phenomena are seen as fluid and more or less precarious social processes produced by interdependent individuals and groups. In contrast, by essentially thinking in a (co)deterministic way, Bourdieu explained in many important texts that structural positions influence our actions via the habitus, by adding that sometimes actors can have some agency." (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 279)

Thus, essentially Elias is attempting to grasp the *clumsy* world of "precarious social processes", while Bourdieu is opting for an *elegant* world of "structural positions". This is very close to structuralism – a position that is almost as elegant as it gets in social explanation. A key idea here is that

"structures are interiorized through the habitus. Put briefly, there are some structures that reproduce themselves through time and space with an amazing stability, and this phenomenon is not due to respect for some conscious or unconscious rules. These reproductive tendencies instead involve the use of 'strategies,' a 'practical sense of things,' and 'a feel for the game'". (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 280, quoting Lemaison and Bourdieu 1986, p. 111)

The "social *game*" here is an elegant site indeed, referring to "a field of forces" or "objective power relations" (Bourdieu 1985, p. 724), which are none other than "relations between objective positions that are not chosen by any actor" (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 280). François conclusion from here is clear: "There is little doubt that this type of mode of perception seriously limits the historical, processual, and fluid nature of the social to some extraordinary moments. ... For Bourdieu, the social universe is structured at first, and then actors start to move in predetermined ways (via their habitus)" (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 280). This is as elegant as it gets when it comes to perspectives that can in any sensible sense be

called "relational". Bourdieu's structuralist leaning is clear, since for him the "objective relations" are not empirically observable relations, "the relations between positions occupied within the distributions of the resources which are or may become active, effective, like aces in a game of cards, in the competition for the impropriation of scarce goods of which this social universe is the site" (Bourdieu 1989, p. 17). The contrast with Elias's clumsy relationalism is telling for François:

"Bourdieu's explanations are usually not about relations between specific, empirical actors like in Elias's reconstitution of the (Western European) *civilizing process*. Bourdieu's theory is more attuned to variable analysis, probability logic, and causal thinking based on how structural factors determine individual and collective behaviors. In *The Distinction*, for instance, the observation of empirical relations in real social processes is replaced by statistical analysis showing how some external factors (as independent variables) cause social actions. The same is true about a more recent text like *The State of Nobility*, in which, for instance, the class positions of the students affect the evaluation of their works made by their teachers. (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 281)

The problem for François is that Bourdieu-like analyses amount to structural analysis of positions rather than empirical analysis of relations. Often the notion of habitus in Bourdieu is seen as offering a missing link in his relationalism. But, again, it not unjustified – though not completely benevolent – reading of Bourdieu to see habitus as designating just another variable in his generally variable-centered approach:

"Adding the notion of habitus as an intermediate variable cannot transform a deterministic or co-deterministic theory into a relational one. According to Bourdieu, the habitus simply connects the external cause to its effect 'because the dispositions of agents, their habitus, that is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world'." (Dépelteau 2013b, pp. 281-82, quoting Bourdieu 1989, p. 18).

In my recent work (e.g. Selg 2020; Selg and Ventsel 2020) I have argued that one of the cornerstones of relationalism of at least Emirbayer and Dépelteau who among others take Dewey and Bentley's notion of trans-action as their starting point is seeing social research in terms of constitutive explanation rather than variable-centered causal explanation, which is more in tune with inter-actionalism and in its very crude forms, also with self-actionalism. In these terms, Bourdieu's theory and methodology is inter-actionalist with a strong leaning towards self-actionalism, "a causal thinking where structures predetermined people, and where specific relations between people disappear and statistical calculations are emphasized instead." (Dépelteau 2013b, pp. 282).

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

Dépelteau quotes Bourdieu's own words (in Wacquant 1993, p. 21) about his research program:

"The proper object of analysis is the objective relations that obtain between these various subspaces, and the mechanisms which tend to reproduce these relations by continually redistributing the agents who will occupy their positions, in such a way as to perpetuate the structures, and especially by inculcating the properties and dispositions appropriate to that end. In other words, by granting some not only the *right* of entry but also the *desire* to do so."

Finally, when it comes to the central notion of power, one cannot but agree with François (Dépelteau 2013b, p. 290) that Bourdieu's notion is inter-actionalist, seeing power essentially in terms of differences in amount of various capitals, differences that define the positions in "the field of power":

"I may mention that when I began this research in the 1960s, we knew very little about the field of power, i.e. about the system of positions occupied by the holders of the diverse forms of capital which circulate in the relatively autonomous fields which make up an advanced society." (Bourdieu quoted in Wacquant 1993, p. 20)

Therefore, in my view, François is not unjust in his overall diagnosis when it comes to Bourdieu: "In spite of subtitles such as 'The real is relational' ... this is soft determinism or co-determinism" (2013b, p. 281). Although relations are important for Bourdieusian analyses, they are safely contained in the elegant structure of the system of positions. Although Bourdieu is the most famous example of such elegant relationalism, various other perspectives can be analyzed in these terms. Instead of taking up these analyses here that François has done in his work, I point to a more general issue that is at stake in the division between elegant and clumsy relationalism: the issue of conceptualizing social processes (for a more elaborate account see also Selg and Ventsel 2020, chapter 2).

Clumsy and elegant relationalism on social processes

When it comes to social processes, the core of clumsy relationalism is the view that social reality is processual and should be treated as such. This amounts to the call for avoiding "process-reduction" (Elias 1978; Emirbayer 1997) as much as possible in their research. Process-reduction occurs in our natural languages constantly, making it difficult to adopt a truly processual perspective: we say things like "the wind blows" as if the wind were an instigator of the process of blowing and as if there could be a wind that did not blow (see Elias 1978, p. 111-112). Process-reduction is not problematic in itself – it is often quite useful for analysing simple and teleological social processes (see Guy 2021 in this special

section, and below). Process-reduction amounts to reducing a continuous process into discrete, tangible pieces of a puzzle with concrete parameters, measures, etc. But what does the opposite of process-reduction mean? What does it mean to treat processes as processes? This has been put forth in an early attempt to bring the insights of relational sociology to bear outside sociology, by Jackson and Nexon (1999) who draw on Dewey and Bentley's notion of trans-action via Emirbayer's Manifesto, as well as various approaches to process-philosophy (see Rescher 1996). Jackson and Nexon distinguish between two types of process, that they refer to as "owned" and "un-owned" (1999, p. 302): "Owned processes are 'doings' attributable to a particular 'doer'. Un-owned processes are 'doings' which are not attributable to a particular 'doer'. Processes in *substantialist* accounts are owned — *entities instigate processes, or processes are reified as entities.*" (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 302, italics added). What does it mean to view processes in a *substantialist* manner as *instigated* by entities or as being *reified* as entities?

What we called self-actionalism above is the first form of substantialism referred to by Jackson and Nexon: it views whichever processes in the world to be "owned" in the sense of being "instigated by entities" (individuals or structures). When it comes to social processes, it presumes them to be analyzable and solvable by dividing them into discrete, manageable units that can be addressed separately. Analyzing processes would mean asking for the instigators of them, more concretely, the persons, institutions, states and other entities responsible for them.

When it comes to inter-action then it is the "variable-based" approach (Emirbayer 1997, p. 286) that methodologically "detaches elements (substances with variable attributes) from their spatiotemporal contexts, analyzing them apart from their relations with other elements within fields of mutual determination and flux" (Emirbayer 1997, p. 288). Inter-actionalism involves the second form of substantialism in Jackson and Nexon's sense, the "reification of processes as entities": it amounts to seeing processes as "things" between or among other things (1999).

We could say that although self-actional and inter-actional approaches to research might be process-oriented, they are not *processual*, since their orientation is to either finding an *instigator* of the process or to *reifying* it. It is only the trans-actional approach that does not perform this kind of "process-reduction". This is because for Jackson and Nexon, trans-actionalism treats social phenomena as un-owned processes as "doings" which are not attributable to a particular "doer." *Trans-action*, as the prefix "trans-" indicates, refers to action that *transcends* the entities, which are seen as *constituted within* this action. This already implies that the constitutive social processes involved in such action cannot be treated as "owned" by the entities. To adopt for a moment an essentialist common-sense vocabulary: the actions that the entities are or have been involved in are defining parts of their very nature; they are what they are in virtue of being

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

involved in various trans-actions. But to abandon this essentialist vocabulary now, we can say that those "essences" of entities are in constant change and motion and cannot be presumed to be fully constituted in any given moment. Thus, trans-actionalism presumes thoroughly non-essentialist perspective.

Based on my earlier reflections on power we can point to three features of trans-actional perspective, first two of which are "necessary but not sufficient elements of trans-actionalism" that the perspective shares with inter-actionalism (Selg 2016b, p. 188). A trans-actional approach to a social phenomenon (power, governance, democracy, equality etc.) presumes that the phenomenon is (1) "a *relation* that exists (2) in *practice* ... (3) whose elements can be considered *separately*, but *not as being separate*" (*Ibid.*). The third condition radicalizes the first two and it is the *differentia specifica* of trans-actional approaches. The figure of "separately, but not as being separate" itself comes from Elias (1978, p. 85), and entails that even if in some analytical steps we could talk about entities and their actions/relations separately we should view them all as parts of "unfolding, ongoing processes ... in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa)" (Emirbayer 1997, p. 89).

This is the core of the trans-actional view of social reality: it views social processes as un-owned processes. Table 1 summarizes three approaches to social processes.

Table 1. Three approaches to problems as social processes

Name of the approach	Process as...	Approach to social processes
Self-actionalism	Owned	Processes reduced to their instigators (structures of actors)
Inter-actionalism	Owned	Processes reified as separate entities
Trans-actionalism	Un-owned	Processes treated as constitutive processes

Source: adapted from Selg and Ventsel 2020, p. 34.

Trans-actionalism is, of course, none other than a clumsy sociological imagination when it comes to social processes. In François's vocabulary this point is explicitly high-lighted in his principles of relational thinking, especially in principle of "primacy of process" and that of "dereification" (Dépelteau 2008, pp. 62-63). "The primacy of process" rejects the view of seeing individuals as "separated from the society as if they would be outside, beside, or prior to social relations. Social phenomena are fluid and moving like movies instead of being fixed like pictures." (Dépelteau 2008, p. 62). It is important to note here, again that

"it does not mean that there is no continuity in the social universe. The social universe is full of more or less continuous and similar trans-actions (or social structures) that we call market, wedding, war, genocide, racism, exploitation, domination, love, and so on. Their discovery and explanation

is one of the most important tasks in sociology. But these structures should be studied as chains of trans-action." (*Ibid.*)

When it comes to structures "relationists are not looking for the 'girders of the building', but for 'webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds', that 'people make up', and that are 'characterized by power balances of many sorts, such as families, schools, towns, social strata, or states'." (Dépelteau 2008, p. 62, quoting Elias 1978, p. 15). And this is, of course, what "dereification" means:

"states, social classes, social movements, political parties, pressure groups, nations, firms, cultures, societies, gender, patriarchy, capitalism, etc. do not act, think, enable, nor constrain since they are neither people nor social things. They are evolutionary social processes made up by interdependent actors through their trans-actions (actor actor nation, social class, social movement, capitalism, etc.). In the same logic, and once again, the notion of agency cannot be seen as an individual 'property'." (Dépelteau 2008, p. 63)

This, in other words, is the relational sociological imagination for the clumsy world. In the current special section, the same imagination is more or less explicitly shared by all of the contributors. As a way of concluding my paper I highlight two contributions – those of Nick Crossley and Jean-Sebastien Guy – whose commitment to this imagination is most explicit.

A tribute to François's clumsy relational sociology in the special section

Both Nick Crossley and Jean-Sebastien Guy take on the important task of furthering our understanding of two points that were crucial for François throughout his writings on relational sociology: 1) why relations are essentially processual and dynamic; 2) and why relations as processes are not teleological but rather self-referential.

When discussing social network analysis [SNA] that is often presumed to be more or less structuralist or variable-centered approach (see Selg 2016a; 2016b; 2018) Crossley claims that "Networks are ever-evolving structures-in-process" and that "their key structural properties and configuration typically evolves slowly, such that a snapshot [of SNA] captures relatively enduring constraints and opportunities (for actors) whose significance extends beyond the immediate moment of the snapshot." (Crossley 2021, p. 4). Although in essence a snapshot methodology, nevertheless "SNA allows us to model those changes and their mechanisms. 'Structure' and 'process' are not opposing terms but rather two sides of a coin (structure-in-process)" (*Ibid.*)

This is organically related to Crossley's conceptualization of relations. Based on Kennedy he distinguishes between 1)

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

"realist definition, in which a relation is 'something like a great stone bridge stretching between two cliffs ... [it] connects two particular things, but has some extra being of its own.'"; and 2) "juxtaposition definition, which centres upon comparative differences between 'objects'." (Crossley 2021, p. 5, quoting Kennedy 2003, pp. 99-100).⁵ The reified notion of relations found in realism is obviously not a candidate for relational view, but the juxtaposition view has shortcomings too, since it "does nothing to challenge the atomism of the individualist" (Ibid.). So, Crossley puts forth his definition of relations, showing, among other things, how "relations are perpetually in-process and whilst they may remain stable are always susceptible to evolution and change" (2021, p. 7):

"Human being entails 'doing', activity, which unfolds through time, and social relations form at the intersection of such 'doings', in interactions, which are similarly temporal. Relations are not 'things', extending across space like bridges, but rather processes extending through time. A relation is a 'state of play' within an ongoing interaction history. Our relation now is the cumulative effect of all that we have been through together, how it has affected us and what we anticipate in our shared future, all of which might be affected by what we do, in interaction, right now." (Ibid.)

While Crossley demonstrate how it is reasonable to view relations in processual terms, Jean-Sebastien Guy takes up equally important task of analyzing the nature of processes. I have already touched this issue here in terms of the distinction between "owned" and "un-owned" processes, but he takes even more specific steps with his recourse to Niklas Luhmann's work. Guy's starting point is the fact that although many sociologists (including relationalists) talk about the importance of grasping reality as process "the concept of process is in turn burdened with certain ambiguities that have not been properly addressed as of yet. Namely, a distinction must be made between *teleological* processes and *self-referential* processes." (2021, p. 1). His argument is that "the processes that best embody the ideals of relational sociology as François conceived it are self-referential processes" (Guy 2021, p. 1). What is a teleological process? Something that is similar to the process of boiling:

"most commentators would admit that boiling is a valid illustration of what a 'process' is supposed to be in principle. What causes confusion is that boiling water clearly implies a beginning and an end. It is that after moment that defines the process retrospectively for what it is (as opposed to any other processes, like freezing). This is potentially misleading because the processual thinking that François and other relational

sociologists advocate *needs not* imply such teleological projections." (Guy 2021, p. 2)

Turning to Luhmann's notion of social systems as self-referential systems, Guy points out that "social systems are not posed between an initial state and a final state [as in case of teleological processes]. This is to say that social systems are not moving toward a definite outcome located in the future and yet known ahead of time... In time, social systems just continue to react to themselves in a recursive fashion." (Guy 2021, p. 2). Consequently, he demonstrates convincingly that "that François' deep relationalism is strongly reminiscent of Luhmann's radical constructivism" (Ibid., p. 13) since both align with the understanding that social processes are essentially non-teleological or, to use Luhmann's notion: "self-referential". Although François used different vocabulary, he would probably have agreed with such a parallel and this is an important advancement of his argument.

Acknowledgements

Writing this paper was supported by the Estonian Research Council with a personal research grant "PUT1485 A Relational Approach to Governing Wicked Problems".

References

- ALEXANDER, Jeffrey (1995). *Fin de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason*. New York: Verso.
- ALEXANDER, Jeffrey (2003). *Social Life. A Cultural Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BEVIR, M. (2008). "Meta-methodology: clearing the underbrush". In: BOX-STEFFENSMEIER, J.; BRADY, H.; COLLIER, D. (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political methodology*, pp. 48-70. Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199286546.003.0003>
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1985). "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups". *Theory and Society*, 14 (6), pp. 723-44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00174048>
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1989). "Social Space and Symbolic Power". *Sociological Theory*, 7 (1), pp. 14-25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/202060>
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1998). *Practical Reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre; WACQUANT, Loic (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

5. Bourdieu and Rorty are for him examples of juxtaposition definition. I agree with the diagnosis about Bourdieu (given his notion of capital), but have doubts about Rorty, given his use of "number analogy" (see Rorty 1999, pp. 52-53).

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

- CROSSLEY, Nick (2021). "Relations-In-Process: In Honour of François Dépelteau". In: SELG, Peeter. "Special Issue guest edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau". [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374139>
- DÉPELTEAU, F. (2008). "Relational thinking: A critique of co-deterministic theories of structure and agency". *Sociological Theory*, 26(1), pp. 51-73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00318.x>
- DÉPELTEAU, F. (2013a). "What Is the Direction of the Relational Turn?" In: POWELL, C.; DÉPELTEAU, F. (Eds.), *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology*, pp. 163-185. Basing-stoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137342652_10
- DÉPELTEAU, F. (2013b). "Comparing Elias and Bourdieu as relational thinkers". In: *Norbert Elias and social theory*, pp. 275-295. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137312112_17
- DÉPELTEAU, F. (2015). "Relational sociology, pragmatism, transactions and social fields". *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1), pp. 45-64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2014.997966>
- DÉPELTEAU, F. (2018a). "Relational thinking in sociology: relevance, concurrence and dissonance". In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, pp. 3-33. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66005-9_1
- DÉPELTEAU, F. (2018b). "From the Concept of 'Trans-Action' to a Process-Relational Sociology". In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, pp. 499-519. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66005-9_25
- DEWEY, J. (2012). *Studies in Logical Theory. Project Gutenberg*. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/40665/40665-h/40665-h.htm>
- DEWEY, J. & BENTLEY, A. (1949). *Knowing and the known*. Beacon Press.
- DONATI, Pierpaolo (2020). "Fluxes and Structures: Which Relational Gaze? A Comparison between Relational Sociologies". *Polish Sociological Review*, 2(210), pp. 179-197.
- DONATI, Pierpaolo; ARCHER, Margaret (2015). *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316226780>
- DOUGLAS, Mary; WILDAVSKY, Aaron (1982). *Risk and culture: An essay on the selection of technological and environmental dangers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520907393>
- EACOTT, Scott (2020). "François Dépelteau and the generation of a relational intellectual community". *Digithum*, [online], no. 26. [View: 4-06-2021]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374154>
- ELIAS, N. (1978). *What Is Sociology?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- EMIRBAYER, M. (1997). "Manifesto for a relational sociology". *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2), pp. 281-317. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/231209>
- FUHSE, Jan (2020). "Relational Sociology of the Scientific Field: Communication, Identities, and Field Relations". In: SELG, Peeter. "Special Issue guest-edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau". [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374144>
- FUHSE, Jan (2020). "The Field of Relational Sociology". In: SELG, Peeter. "Special Issue guest-edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau". [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374145>
- GUY, Jean-Sebastien (2021). "Are relational processes teleological or self-referential? What relational sociology can learn from systems theory". In: SELG, Peeter. "Special Issue guest-edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau". [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374159>
- HAY, C. (2006). "Political ontology". In: GOODIN, R.; TILLY, C. (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of contextual political analysis*, pp. 78-96. Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270439.003.0004>
- JACKSON, P. T.; NEXON, D. H. (1999). "Relations before states: Substance, process and the study of world politics". *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(3), pp. 291-332. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005003002>
- KENNEDY, J.B. (2003). *Space, Time and Einstein*. Chesham: Acumen. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/UPO9781844653447>
- LEONI BIRRIEL, Mariana; GRISOTTI, Marcia (2021). "Reflexiones sobre la sociología relacional-procesual de François Dépelteau". (Reflections on F. Dépelteau's relational-processual sociology). In: SELG, Peeter. "Special Issue guest edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau". [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26, pp. 1-10. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.383702>
- LEMAISON, Pierre; BOURDIEU, Pierre (1986). "From Rules to Strategies: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu." *Cultural Anthropology*, 1 (1), pp. 110-120. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1986.1.1.02a00060>
- MILLS, Charles Wright 2000 [1959]. *Sociological Imagination*. Fortieth Anniversary Edition. Oxford University Press.
- MORGNER, Christian (2020). "Reinventing Social Relations and Processes: John Dewey and Trans-Actions". In: MORGNER, C. (Eds.), *John Dewey and the Notion of Trans-action*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26380-5>
- Peters, GB. (2017). "What is so Wicked about Wicked Problems? A Conceptual Analysis and a Research Program". *Policy and Society*, 36(3), pp. 385-396. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1361633>

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

- PYYHTINEN, Olli (2020). "Friends of Relational Sociology? The Relational Current as a Space of Hospitality". In: SELG, Peeter. "Special Issue guest edited by Prof. Peeter Selg around the work of François Dépelteau". [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 26 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.3199>
- QUINE, W. (1951). "Ontology and ideology". *Philosophical Studies* 2, pp. 11-15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02198233>
- QUINE, W. (1953). *From a logical point of view*. Harper.
- RESCHER, Nicholas. (1996). *Process metaphysics: An introduction to process philosophy*. SUNY Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/process1996252>
- RICHARDSON, Kurt (2007). "Complex Systems Thinking and Its Implications for Policy Analysis". In: MORCÖL, Gögtug (Ed.), *Handbook of Decision Making*. CRC Press, pp. 189-221. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781420016918.ch11>
- RITTEL, H. W. J.; WEBBER, M. M. (1973). "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning". *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), pp. 155-169. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>
- RORTY, Richard (1999). *Philosophy and social hope*. UK: Penguin.
- RORTY, R. (2006). "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?" In: RORTY, R., *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 46-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SELG, P. (2013). "The politics of theory and the constitution of meaning". *Sociological Theory*, 31(1), pp. 1-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275113479933>
- SELG, P. (2016a). "Two faces of the 'Relational Turn'". *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 49(1), pp. 7-31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096515001195>
- SELG, P. (2016b). "'The Fable of the Bs': between substantialism and deep relational thinking about power". *Journal of Political Power*, 9(2), pp. 183-205. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2016.1191163>
- SELG, P. (2018). "Power and relational sociology". In: DÉPELTEAU, F. (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of relational sociology*, pp. 539-557. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66005-9_27
- SELG, P. (2020). "Causation is not everything: On constitution and trans-actional view of social science methodology". In: MORGNER, C. (Ed.), *John Dewey and the notion of trans-action. A sociological reply on rethinking relations and social processes*, pp. 31-53. Palgrave. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26380-5_2
- SELG, P. & VENTSEL, A. (2020). *Introducing relational political analysis: Political semiotics as a theory and method*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48780-5>
- SWEDLOW, B. (2002). "Toward cultural analysis in policy analysis: Picking up where Aaron Wildavsky left off". *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 4(3), pp. 267-285. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876980208412683>
- SWEDLOW, B. (2011). "A Cultural Theory of Politics: Editor's Introduction: *Cultural Theory's Contributions to Political Science*". *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), pp. 703-710. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001314>
- VERWEIJ, M., & THOMPSON, M. (Eds.) (2006). *Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World: Governance, Politics and Plural Perceptions*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230624887>
- WACQUANT, Loic (1993). "From Ruling Class to Field of Power: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu on La Noblesse d'Etat." *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 10: pp. 19-44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327693010003002>

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

A sociological imagination for a clumsy world: François Dépelteau's relational sociology

Peeter Selg

(peeter.selg@tlu.ee)

Professor of Political Theory

School of Governance, Law and Society

University of Tallinn, Estonia

Jean-Sébastien Guy is a sociologist interested in sociological theory in general, whether classical (Durkheim, Marx, Simmel, Peeter Selg is professor of political theory at Tallinn University, Estonia. His main research interests include theories of power, social science methodology, and relational social sciences. His work has appeared in journals such as *Sociological Theory*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and *Journal of Political Power*. His book (with Andreas Ventsel) *Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method* (Palgrave Macmillan) is forthcoming in August 2020.

More information: <https://www.tlu.ee/en/node/106508>


**UNIVERSIDAD
DE ANTIOQUIA**