

# THE ENIGMA OF SOCIAL RELATIONS IN AFTER-MODERN SOCIETY

**PIERPAOLO DONATI, *L'ENIGMA DELLA RELAZIONE***

Fabio Ferrucci  
University of Molise

The deep changes that globalization has produced have highlighted the shortcomings of the theoretical and epistemological paradigms of modern sociology. For a long time, people have hoped for a “new sociological imagination” Fuller 2006), capable of offering new categories for the analysis of contemporary society, characterized by an explosion of connectivity and interrelations. Manuel Castells (1996) has called this society “network society.”

## **/// The Social Relation: New Life for an Old Concept of Sociological Theory**

For an increasing number of researchers, social relations have become the central element of sociological analysis. Such an idea is not new. In fact, all classical and contemporary sociologists have used the concept of the “social relation.” Nevertheless, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Elias, Goffman, Parsons, Luhmann, Bourdieu, and Habermas, to mention just a few thinkers, have privileged only certain aspects of the social relation. Even Georg Simmel, who is considered by many to be the pioneer of relational sociology, only focused on the formal aspects of the social relation, and paid less attention to its content. As has been pointed out:

While relations have of course been paid some attention in the tradition of sociology, it is only with few exceptions that they have been considered in relational terms. On the contrary, relations are typically understood primarily on the basis of beings, for example as something possessed and/or caused by individuals or structures (Pyyhtinen 2016: 7).

Even today sociology dictionaries hardly define social relations, despite being full of references to them (Bruce & Yearly 2006; Scott & Marshall 2014; Turner et al. 2006).

Powell and Dépelteau (2013) and Dépelteau and Powell (2013) have produced a comprehensive and updated study of the relational approaches present in contemporary sociology. In one of their edited volumes, they claim that relational sociology became a more mature research paradigm in the 1990s after the publication of *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* by Emirbayer (Powell & Dépelteau 2013). However, a relational approach had already been elaborated at the beginning of the 1980s in Italy by Pierpaolo Donati (1982, 1983). Much earlier than Emirbayer, Donati published *Teoria relazionale della società* (1991), in which he proposed a systematic theory of relational sociology fully articulated at the ontological, epistemological, and methodological level. Even though Dépelteau and Powell's volume (2013) included a contribution by Donati, interestingly they do not antedate the birth of relational sociology to the works of the Italian sociologist, who was at the centre of the international debate long before the publication of *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (Donati 2011). Already in *Teoria relazionale della società*, Donati attributes the “relational turn,” and the notion of the social relation (*Wechselwirkung*) as a constitutive element of the social order, to Simmel. Donati (1991: 46) writes that: “For Simmel, the social phenomenon is neither an emanation of a subject, nor of a more abstract system, a priori posited. The social order is the relational as such. It is the mutual relation or interaction that is productive of, embodied in, and manifested by something that, although invisible, has a certain degree of ‘solidity’.”

What does it mean to observe the social world in relational terms? Powell and Dépelteau's work has highlighted that there is a “family” of different relational approaches. Terenzi (2013) individuates three major directions of research. The first direction is what Mische has defined as the “New York School,” chiefly represented by Whyte (1992) and Emirbayer (1997, 2009; Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer & Mische 1998).

A second direction was developed in francophone sociology, thanks to Ba-joit (1992, 2013, 2015) and Laflamme (1995). A third direction originated in Crossley (2011), who realized that neither individuals nor social structures are adequate units for the analysis of social life. According to Terenzi, these three tendencies remain within the dichotomy of individualism/holism. The “individualist” approaches conceive the relations as “interactions that do not exceed the social actors involved,” while the “holistic” approaches “believe that social relations are derived from the social structures and afterwards embodied in society” (Terenzi 2013: 9–10). This also means that those sociologists who see themselves as relational, by going back to the turn initiated by Simmel, have some trouble handling the nature of the social relation. Why are they incapable of freeing themselves from a conception of social relations understood as the product of something else?

### **/// “Man Rarely Learns What He Thinks He Already Knows”: Social Relations as an Enigma**

Social relations are enigmatic. This is the fundamental thought in Donati’s essay, which I will review in the following pages. Relations are enigmatic in two ways. On the one hand, the enigma is in the relation; on the other hand, the existence of the relation is itself an enigma. In both cases, relation is an obscure reality, which “speaks covertly” to us. Donati’s claim is a singular one, particularly if we consider that Donati is one of the chief theorists of relational sociology. Donati has in fact elaborated his approach for decades by studying different problems, from the sociology of the family to the sociology of health, from the transformations of the state to multiculturalism (Terenzi et al. 2016).

According to Donati, the enigma of human life is inextricably tied to the enigma of social relations.

Human life—Donati writes in the introduction—hangs by the thread of relations, those with themselves, with others, and with the world. Nevertheless, we take little care of them. We use them, but we do not stop and try to understand them, despite their being the source of so many of our daily dilemmas. (...) The enigma can be simply expressed with this question: why should we live with others? (2015: 14–15, transl. M. Stango).

The fact that we do not understand social relations is the result of a cognitive deficit on our part. It is no longer sufficient to recognize, as classical Western thought has done, that man is a social animal. The relation to others is ambivalent—necessary but at the same time dangerous, since “it compels us to act in a way that does not correspond to our desires” (Donati 2015: 16); “it is a reality that demands attention in itself and for itself” (ibid.: 17–18). For this purpose, Donati makes explicit why it is so hard to understand relations right from the outset: “thinking about the relations is a reflexive act which requires a return on one’s thought—our thought, which is always about something or somebody—always from a different point of view, that of the relation to the referent of one’s thought” (ibid.: 11).

In his earlier works, Donati introduced the reader to this “different point of view,” his relational approach, from the front door, so to speak, where the motto “in the beginning is the relation” (Donati 1991: 25) is engraved in clear letters. In this book, the reader is rather lead to the relational perspective from a back door. To use Goffman’s expression, Donati invites the reader into the “backstage” of his thought. From this vantage point, the reader has access to the emergence of relational thought in its relationship to the enigma of human life in its social dimensions. It is a melting pot of ideas and arguments that follow each other and reappear in different chapters, every time under a new light. Most of the titles of the sections are formulated as questions. This does not seem a mere rhetorical strategy. On the contrary, those questions are the enigmas with which the author engages throughout the book and through which he clarifies his epistemology, showing in this way how his approach is different from other relational sociologies.<sup>1</sup>

While remaining within the sociological perspective, Donati’s approach has broader implications. His paradigm enters into a fruitful dialogue with other human and social disciplines which “share the same ontological and epistemological ground according to which human life is constituted of relations” (Donati 2015: 67). The reader is thus challenged in this stimulating and at the same time demanding journey from sociology to philosophy (classical and contemporary) and theology. Nor does Donati miss the chance to quote a song by the long-standing band King Crimson. Aware of the many difficulties in the study of human relations, Donati leads us through unusual territories. He also shows, through references

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<sup>1</sup> For a more analytical comparison of Donati’s approach and other relational approaches, such as Fuhse, Crossley and Emirbayer, compare Martignani and Ruggieri (2014).

to art history—including the mosaic of the Trinity in Kourion, Canova, de Chirico, and Nan Goldin—what it means to understand the change of social relations, such as in the case of love relationships (ibid.: 75ff.), or in the way painters have spoken of the loss of the social ties through their portraits (ibid.: 202ff).

### **/// How to Think About the Enigma of Social Relations**

Even though the erosion of human relations that started with modernity is not over, Donati's relational perspective leads us to consider the "reappearance of new forms of sociality, where people can live with trust, cooperation, and reciprocity" (2015: 20). During the past four decades, Donati's relational theory has developed substantially. Donati realized that our society is morphogenetic, namely, a society constantly generating new relational forms. Instead of trying to fit this new, ever-changing scene into the old categories of modernity, he has accordingly attempted to elaborate a new epistemology that could face the challenges of contemporary society. Such an epistemology should be able to navigate the different morphogenetic forms of our society: those that regenerate human social bonds and those that make them perish. The structure of the book might appear enigmatic both to those who cherish a technical sociology for specialists and to those who are looking for ready-to-hand solutions. But those who are looking for a new sociological imagination will not be disappointed. Donati's goal, which is revealed only in the last page of the book, is that of "suggesting a way of thinking," of "indicating a path"—not necessarily a new path, but a renewed one.

The path traced in *L'enigma della relazione* is articulated in five chapters that deal with topics on which Donati has worked for many years: the birth of plural society and the destiny of the West (chapter 3); the distinction of human and non-human (chapter 4); and more recently the emergence of relational subjects (chapter 5). What seems to me new in this book is the framework within which these traditional topics are placed. Since the first pages, Donati admits that thinking in relational terms is not easy, because "the culture in which we live removes the enigma of relation" (2015: 33). Even "the relation to ourselves, before the relation to others, is something impenetrable, and nevertheless real, because it brings to us joy and pain. The enigma hides a reality that we cannot decipher. Most of the time we react to the enigma by trying to avoid it, to remove it, or in any case to

make it innocuous, indifferent” (ibid.: 13). Donati maintains that human relations, although constituted **by** individuals, are not made **of** individuals. He defines them as “the immaterial reality (immersed in the space-time) of the inter-human, namely, something that is among the actors and ‘constitutes’ their mutual positioning and behaviour while being irreducible to the singular actors, either individual or collective, who are the poles or terms of the relation” (ibid.: 70).

While sharing the concern for placing the social relation at the centre, Donati’s approach is different from those perspectives according to which “relational sociologies tend to dissolve both substantialized actors and substantialized structures into dynamic relations and fluid processes” (Pyyhtinen 2016: 16). The relational perspective put forth by Donati has nothing to do with those philosophical or sociological relationalisms that focus on the social relation while neglecting the problem of social ontology. Already in the first chapter Donati claims that “we should conceive of the social relation not as an accidental reality, secondary to or derivative of other entities (individuals or systems), but as a reality in its own right. Such reality has an autonomy consisting in the special way in which the affective, cognitive, normative, and symbolic elements are combined together” (2015: 42). But this does not amount to neglecting the reality of the actors or of the social structures. The principle that “in the beginning is the relation” does not imply that the relation has an ontological priority over the person, so that it is the relation to generate the person and to “determine it in its fullness” (ibid.: 39). In the chapter devoted to relational subjects, as we will see later, Donati puts forth an original approach to the link between actor and social relation. At the same time, Donati’s relational sociology cannot be assimilated to those approaches which, inspired by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari or the sociology of Latour, propose a “rhizomatic” conception of relation, in order to go against the anthropocentric character of relational sociologies (Pyyhtinen 2016). Donati shares the idea that the social does not coincide anymore with the human, since social reality is produced by practices and processes that are no longer caused only by human actors but by nonhuman factors or more-than-human artifacts. It is sufficient to think here about the pervasive role played by technology and by the “technological system” (Ellul 2004). While on the one hand Donati does not accept the verdict that the human being is “outdated” (Anders 1956), on the other hand, his perspective cannot be confused with those, such as Pyyhtinen, who promote a “more-than-human sociology” and the end

of a dualistic conception of social reality based on the outdated opposition between substance and discourse, due allegedly to the fact that they are “ontologically interrelated” and that “any divide between them is a product of boundary practices” (Pyyhtinen 2016: 7). In the relational sociology elaborated by Donati, substance does not evaporate; reality does not lose its consistency (as it does in certain paintings by Salvador Dalí) by being reduced to pure relations. For Donati,

the relation does not annihilate the substances (persons) but shapes them throughout the social time, so that the actors are ‘shaped’ by the relations, while maintaining their capacity to act freely (agency). We always have to keep in mind that substance and relation are co-original principles of reality, in the sense that there are no substances without relations and no relations without substances (...). To say that the human person is a ‘relationally constituted’ subject does not mean that the relation ‘generates’ the subject (substance), but only that it imparts onto him a certain ‘shape’, a way of being in time. But it remains true that the person has an original nature that can be actuated in different ways, even contrary to his own potentialities (2015: 57–58).

This critical realism prevents Donati from making the same mistakes of reduction that can be found for instance in the relational approach of Pyyhtinen (2016), which conflates different orders of reality by reducing them to a mere product of our social practices.

The path opened by Donati is not that of a “more-than-human sociology” where everything is mixed together and confused, but that of a sociology capable of managing the distinction between human and non-human. The fundamental thesis of the book is that “the human preserves and transcends himself in the social bond, on the condition that the bond is configured as a vital and generative relation” (Donati 2015: 24).

In the second chapter, Donati analyses the cultural vicissitudes of Western society, which, after exalting the “I” to the detriment of its relations, is now witness to the end of its most foundational myth, the “claim that the individual is self-constituted and self-determined” (2015: 82). In Donati’s diagnosis, the crisis of the myth originates in the gap between the cultural and social systems, given that the former cannot explain what happens in the latter: “On the one hand, the culture of our society puts an emphasis on the equality of opportunities and strengths of individuals,

while on the other hand the structural outcomes reveal growing social discrepancies and weakness in the individuals” (ibid.: 84). For Donati, the incapacity to see concrete social relations is the disease of the century. We are not able to understand our social relations because we do not see them, and we do not see them not simply because they are intangible goods but also because our culture prevents us from seeing them as a potential support or resource—seeing them instead as “a tie and a constraint from which to break free as soon as possible” (ibid.: 85).

In order to facilitate the analysis of social relations, Donati suggests an analogy with air. Social relations are invisible and necessary to life just as air is. They are the environment in which our being lives. However, as happens when the air is polluted, we become aware of the existence of our social relations only when they become bothersome. Contrary to the air, which is a variable mix of gases, social relations have a special structure, given by the fact that they are an emerging phenomenon, while the air is a cluster. Finally, the structure of social relations has qualities and powers distinct from the subjects involved in them. Donati’s relational sociology, contrary to other forms of relational sociologies, presupposes a precise social ontology and epistemology, as it “assumes the approach of critical and analytic realism that sees being as act. ‘Rel-ation,’ in fact, indicates a mutual action”<sup>2</sup> (2015: 94). This is its originality compared to the positivist sociologies that, focusing on the “facts” (for instance, Durkheim’s), end up overlooking human conduct and its potentialities. However, to observe the social relation as an emerging phenomenon without objectifying it, a reflexivity of the first order is not sufficient. First-order reflexivity allows us to observe the interaction among visible elements, for instance, individuals. Only a second-order reflexivity allows us to observe relations among the individuals, namely, “a reality that is not reducible to the elements that have generated and regenerated it over time” (Donati 2015: 97), a reality “that can be good or bad for those who are affected by it” (ibid.: 102). This reality is not identical to what the individuals exchange, nor is it reducible to a functional interdependency. Rather, it is something that exceeds and transcends it. Friendship is a good example of this.

In this way, the fundamental tenet of Donati’s relational approach, “in the beginning is the relation,” becomes clearer. While certainly echoing Martin Buber’s claim (1923) that “in the beginning is the relation,” Donati has elaborated his view independently from Buber. He wants to indicate

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<sup>2</sup> Donati plays on the Italian word for “relation,” i.e., “relazione,” by showing how *rel-azione* conveys the idea of a mutual or reciprocal (*re-*) action (*-azione*) [translator’s note].

that “social reality—what makes us ‘social beings’—is the relation, that is, the generative continuous act that generates us as people with a certain character, a certain lifestyle, a certain way of dealing with other people (...)” (Donati 2015: 98). The relation, then, “gives social form” (ibid.) to our existence, without taking away the fact that “the person is a presocial and metasocial substance” (ibid.). Donati’s approach represents then a strong antidote against the relativistic tendencies in sociology. On this point, Donati’s account of his encounter with Achille Ardigò, one of the fathers of Italian sociology and also Donati’s teacher, is very instructive. In order to rescue individual subjectivity, Ardigò saw the social bond as grounded in intersubjective-objectivity, and distanced himself from an objective conception of the social relation understood as external and coercive. On the contrary, around the same time it was already clear to Donati that in order to avoid the stagnant conception of relation typical of modernity—exposed, on the one hand, to the risks of subjectivism and relativism and, on the other hand, to those of structuralist determinism—it was necessary to think of social relations as a *sui generis* order of reality, with precise qualities and properties—an order of reality that finds its place in a multilayered view of reality. Postulating the existence of a relational order of reality allows Donati to respond to the objection of those, like Ardigò, who think that speaking of relations jeopardizes the ontology of the person. Since the person is at once within and without the relation, there is no opposition, but rather integration, between ontology of the person and ontology of the relation: “the relation is constituted by the person as long as the person is generated by a relation and the relation from which the person is originated depends in turn on the person, on his agency, on the agency of a substance” (Donati 2015: 99).

The defining feature of human relationality is a special form of reflexivity that can be called “internal conversation.” Donati uses this concept, which was introduced by British sociologist Margaret Archer (2003), to explain how the “I” constantly redefines its personal and social identity over time, by engaging with the identities that others assign to it (“Me,” “We”), and those that it chooses (“You”), in such a way that “our I is always the same from the point of view of the ontology of the person, because the person is unique. But his personal identity and his social Self change with the relations, because the I is put to the test by the Me, the We, and the You” (Donati 2015: 109). Through the internal conversation we can differentiate us from what we are. The process of identity differentiation presupposes a new semantics that, compared to the semantics of the past,

redefines the difference as a relation. In effect, the principle of identity ( $A=A$ ) has not been of great help in modern social sciences, which have developed a semantics of identity based on the idea of identity as the result of a double negation, so that the identity of A is the negation of all that is not A. According to Donati, this semantics is destructive and nihilist: “If I am simply the negation of all that is not me, I do not have a real identity because I am the result of the infinite play among negations” (2015: 114). The semantics of relational identity opens a new scenario. “Relation goes to the very heart of identity, identity can be generated only through difference and only those who can manage the difference can also ‘generate,’ namely, can become something different from themselves while remaining the same” (ibid.). I would like to mention here a movie that in my view exemplifies this dynamics very well. The movie *Gran Torino* (2008), directed and interpreted by Clint Eastwood, describes through the power of gestures the transition from a nihilistic to a relational semantics of identity. Walt Kowalski—a Korean war veteran of Polish origins, retired worker at Ford, and a widower—goes from an initial hostility toward his Hmong neighbours to a relation of friendship that redefines his social and personal identity. The personal relations of the protagonist trigger an internal conversation that, in the final scenes of the movie, generates in him an unexpected transformation of identity, turning him into an altruistic person. Such a change is not only a change in the protagonist of the movie but also of the stereotypical identity of the director/actor. The alternative to this generativity brought about by difference is the narcissistic relation that parents often have toward their children: a relation aimed at the realization of a double, namely, of “an other who has to realize the same I” of the narcissist (Donati 2015: 115).

### **/// The Enigma of Multiculturalism, the Post-Human Time, and the Perspectives of Relational Sociology**

In the following chapters Donati addresses the problem of how relational sociology can deal with some more urgent phenomena of contemporary society, which reveal, although with different manifestations, a deficit of relationality. This sounds paradoxical in a society where the defining feature is the explosion of relationality.

The third chapter advances an interpretation of the destiny of Western society after acknowledging the crisis of multiculturalism. According to some of its critics, multiculturalism has spared governments from the

effort of declaring their fundamental principles by putting forth a conception of tolerance that comes very close to abstention from any judgment. The crisis of multiculturalism has also been acknowledged lately by the political leaders of those European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, that had previously embraced multiculturalism wholeheartedly. After the end of the politics of “all different, all equal,” there is now a great uncertainty about the future of Western civilization. The enigma that Donati wants to solve is whether there is “a solution to the civil coexistence among different cultures capable of avoiding the negative effects of ethical and cultural relativism and of the secular politics that has accompanied multiculturalism” (2015: 134).

The pivotal point of Donati’s project is the concept of “relational reason” and that of the “theological matrix of society.” The starting point of the analysis is understanding the characteristics of “plural society,” which has “institutionalized variety as the constitutive principle of its social order” (Donati 2015: 126). “Variety” here stands for “the coexistence of multiple and in principle incompatible principles of organization” (*ibid.*). However, contrary to what used to happen in modern society, in which diversity was perceived as a resource and an opportunity, in the present conditions diversity produces problematic situations in different areas of society, including the family, the processes of education, and the possibility of coexistence of different ethnicities, cultures, and religions in a globalized world. Here Donati stresses a difference that he also suggested elsewhere (Donati 2008) between multiculturalism as “social fact,” amplified by migratory processes, and multiculturalism as ideology. For ideological culturalism, cultural and religious differences are a good only on the surface, but in reality this form of multiculturalism neutralizes them because “their valorization is only private, while indifference reigns in the public sphere” (Donati 2015: 131). The cause—this is Donati’s diagnosis—has to be found in the fact that multiculturalism “brings with it a secularization that takes away the sense of relation, because it abandons and eliminates the ambivalence of the human relation, which consists in entering the identity of the Other in order to differentiate one’s self, and exiting with one’s own identity” (*ibid.*).

Donati’s claim is that in order to give grounds for people to coexist a new paradigm of relationality is necessary. This paradigm should be able to “expand reason from the human person to social relations, in such a way that reason can play the role of mediation among cultures” (Donati 2015: 134). In order to solve the problem of managing the borders between different faiths/religions and the public sphere—which has proved lethal for

multiculturalist ideology—religions need to develop an internal reflexivity capable of showing the difference between the internal reasons of any faith and the rational argument which should be developed in the public sphere. “Relational rationality” could represent a new comprehension of varying cultural identities, whose differences would be understood as the “different ‘way’ of interpreting and living the relation to the values that are common to every man. Or better, to the values that inhere in the relations among human beings” (ibid.). The elaboration of the concept of relational rationality requires a deep revision of the Weberian paradigm of rationality, especially with respect to the following four components: instrumentality, directedness to a goal, relationality, and relation to values. From here it follows that deliberative and procedural rationality are partial forms insofar as they combine only some of these components. The importance of relational rationality resides in the fact that it allows us to provide an answer to the enigmas left unresolved by the other forms of rationality. Above all, it can be applied to relations (and not to singular actions), “distinguishing them on the basis of the values from which they stem and the consequences they produce” (ibid.: 151).

The paradox of multiculturalism, in other words, the “indifference to the differences,” is another product of its incapacity to observe and manage social relations, without which the gap between the differences is immunized and deprived of its meaning. Donati reads this phenomenon by retrieving the semantics of identity and difference (as dialogical border, as binary opposition, and as relation) and by appealing to the “theological matrix of society,” which means for him “the matrix of the ‘ultimate values’ of any culture and society informed by a culture” (Donati 2015: 173). This also includes the ideologies and the systems of value “insofar as they reflect upon their most fundamental assumptions about what there is (social ontology) and what ought to be (social ethics)” (ibid.: 173). The pages devoted to this concept are full of references to philosophy, theology, Holy Scripture, and documents of the magisterium of the Catholic Church. In close dialogue with these disciplines, Donati’s sociological arguments go even deeper in unveiling the nature of human relations. Donati’s mastery in moving among different disciplines can disorient the reader at times. But the effort is always rewarded with a depth of analysis that is often absent from ordinary sociological analyses. Donati’s work is extremely rich. Contrary to those who take the religious phenomenon to be an outdated legacy of the past, Donati puts at the centre of his analysis the modalities in which religions manage the differences, and concludes that Christianity is

revolutionary because its theological matrix has no functional equivalents. According to Donati, Christianity, “contrary to all other religions, admits the case that one person can have two natures (Christ, true God and true human, *perfectus Deus* and *perfectus Homo*) and draws from this relational matrix analogous consequences for human beings and society” (ibid.: 175).

Over the last decade it has become clear that the multiculturalist project has not maintained its promises, and that it has proved incapable of promoting mutual acknowledgement among cultures. At most, it has worked for their coexistence. But this coexistence has been intrinsically precarious because it has been grounded on two premises: a certain relativism of values that theorizes the impossibility of a mutual exchange among cultures, and the irrelevance of the differences for the public sphere, which claims to be neutral with respect to them. What is then the destiny of the West after the failure of the multiculturalist project? The solution—and this is the task of Donati’s theoretical and practical proposal—can be found in a theological understanding of social relations, which could allow us to “go beyond the mere negative tolerance of the other and the recognition of the other as mere negotiation of the borders that leave us foreign to each other; it becomes necessary to acknowledge (namely, to know again) what can allow us to combine identities and differences without resulting in indifference for the differences, which exists and are constantly growing” (Donati 2015: 178). This theological framework is provided by Christianity, which is, according to Donati, the only theological framework capable of giving value to the differences instead of merely tolerating them.

The fourth chapter is another example of how the relational approach works. In this chapter Donati deals with the transformative influence that technology has on human identity, which is redefined in its biological and psychological dimension as well as social and cultural dimension. Donati delineates the main features of what many have characterized as an unprecedented “anthropological mutation.” In the transition from the modern to the postmodern epoch we witness a “change of pace.” If modernity has pursued the immunization of social relations by producing the legacy of a weak and limited human subject, with the beginning of the postmodern epoch the imperative for the subject becomes overcoming his own limits. Moved by the dream of radical changes, contemporary societies see in the future the time of the post-human, of the trans-human, and of the hybridization of the organic and inorganic (cyborg) (Monceri 2009).

For Donati, the best way to interpret these changes is to understand that postmodernism wants to modify human nature by changing the na-

ture of social bonds. Phenomena such as genetic manipulation, fluid gender identities, virtual identities, the reduction of work to mere functional performance, could take place because people have lost those social bonds that were considered “natural” in the past. For him, then, “the battle over the human and nonhuman, human and post-human, human and trans-human, is fought today not on the field of a traditional understanding of human nature (...), but rather on that of human relationality, because it is in the social bond that human nature exists and realizes itself” (Donati 2015: 188). Human identity becomes in this way subjectable to any possible change and open to any contingency. This does not mean that the human subject is fully freed from the social bond. What happens is rather the replacement of ascriptive bonds with other kinds of bond. Habermas seems to express the same belief when he writes that “with genetic programming, however, a relationship emerges that is asymmetrical in more than one respect—a specific type of paternalism”(2003: 63), “a social relationship in which the usual reciprocity between persons of equal birth is revoked” (2003: 64). The German philosopher and sociologist, however, does not go beyond this simple remark, which on the other hand should be sufficient by itself to limit the genetic liberalism so pervasive today, by inducing it to accept the moral, ethical, and legal juridical imperatives typical of a certain idea of human life.

How can this be realized, however, if so many think that human society is close to an end? For Donati, the imminent end is not an unavoidable outcome. Just like some human relations are lethal for the human being, other relations can be regenerative. Donati’s tenet on this point is that the destiny of human society is in the “qualified morphogenesis of the social bond”: “regenerated man is the fruit of a new conception of his social relations” (2015: 210). For this reason, the “relationality of the social bond, together with its causal properties,” is “a fundamental criterion to distinguish what is humanly acceptable from what is not” (ibid.: 194). Not all kinds of morphogenesis satisfy this criterion. “Bound morphogenesis,” which is the most widespread at the moment, treats the social bond as a residuum, as a “subproduct of individual actions” or as “what emerges from the individual liberties guaranteed by a Hobbesian social order” (ibid.: 200). “Unbound morphogenesis,” developed by authors such as Pyyhtinen (2016), inspired by Latour’s actor-network theory, empties the social bond of its historical-temporal dimension. According to this view, the structure of the social bond is “denormativized with respect to absolute values, so that the rights and duties inherent to the bond are dictated by the interactions of

the moment” (Donati 2015: 201). Human society always realizes a special kind of sociality, where the social bond emerges through the mediation of a relational rationality and reflexivity. The emergence of time banks, the personalization of educational and welfare systems, the forms of co-production, the phenomenon of social streets, some of the new forms of housing characterized by the intentional construction of a social bond among the residents: these are all human social forms, understood as social relations “produced by subjects who cooperate on the basis of a shared horizon of meaning” (ibid.: 218). Contrarily, those forms of sociality in which people do not cooperate on the basis of a shared meaning, or in which people are merely functional actors, do not qualify as properly human.

Donati’s relational approach acknowledges that human society is no longer an immediate given but that it has to be produced through reflexivity. Accordingly, Donati sketches a plan for the work of the social sciences which takes into account the transcendence of the human being, understood as a process of overcoming his limits. The social sciences can succeed in their goal on the condition that (a) they work with a generalized theory of social relations capable of showing how the social relations create (or destroy) the specificity of the human being, (b) they acknowledge the “generativity of the social bond as latent potentiality in people and social relations, a potentiality that only the bond can expand further” (Donati 2015: 222).

In the last chapter, devoted to relational subjects, Donati spells out how the relation “generates” the subject, as also recently developed in a collaboration with Archer (Donati & Archer 2015). Social relational subjects are those who are able to identify and solve the enigma of relation, which is so intensified in our pluralist, webbed, virtual society (Donati 2015: 213). A necessary condition for the existence of a relational subject is that social actors reflexively endorse social and cultural structures in such a way as to produce a “We-relation” (ibid.: 233). This is not a holistic entity, because “the ‘We’ of the relational subject is a relation” (ibid.: 234). For Donati, a “relational subject is the one capable of seeing the ‘third’—namely, the relations among the individuals, the network structure among them—and the one who takes care of this ‘third’ in his conduct” (ibid.). Taking care of relationality as a good in itself is critical for the good of the individuals involved in the social bond. The relational subject is begotten through the exercise of a specific form of reflexivity. The hypothesis suggested by Donati is that, in the case of the relational subject, “the object (the goal) of his deliberation and effort is not to act on the relation in function of the I and

his interests (...), but to act on the relation in order to maintain and change it in function of what it represents and what the relation can generate for me and for the others involved in it” (ibid.: 236). In these pages, Donati clarifies what he means when he says that relation is a “*sui generis* reality,” or “relational order of reality,” or when he claims that relation has “specific causal powers,” all expressions that are frequent in the book. The relationality of which Donati speaks is “activity-dependent, namely, dependent on the actions of the subjects, and its structure is manifested in the power it has to retroact on the members (ego and alter) of the relation” (ibid.: 241). In this way, the social is not seen any more as the product of the entities—individuals or structures—but as an order of reality in its own right.

The relational subjects can be observed at all levels of social interaction. For example, a couple is a good example of the micro level. A couple is a social relational subject if the partnership relation emerges as a reality irreducible to the two individual subjects (the “third”) and if it has an influence on each one of them. This can happen only under certain conditions: the individuals have to treat the relation as a reality irreducible to their Self; the relation should neither be considered a projection, nor an expectation of the individuals; the relation has to be defined as a “We”; this “We” has to be symbolized; the “We” that is born out of the two individuals has to make a difference in the personal and social identity of the two individuals. Associations are a good example of relational subjects at the middle level of interaction. In this case as well, two conditions are crucial: first, the symbol of the “We” has to be common, namely, it has to involve all the individuals in order to be effective, and second, the “We” has to be put into practice in a common endeavour. Donati even speaks of relational subjects at the macro level (although as a limit case), such as public institutions and transnational organizations. This requires a synergy of systemic and social integration.

The possibility of a relational subject at any level requires that the actors involved in it find the social relation attractive; that the relation is seen as an emerging good and not as a mere sum of parts; that the actors see in the bond something good for them; and finally, that they are aware that the relational subject will continue to exist only as long as these conditions will not cease to be satisfied (Donati 2015: 258).

In conclusion, *Lenigma della relazione* provides the reader with the opportunity to explore an original and groundbreaking version of relational sociology, one capable of facing the challenges of our time and stimulating the sociological imagination of the reader. The book can be difficult

and challenging, but the theoretical explorations contained in it are always connected to empirical facts. As is often the case, the most arduous and unexplored paths are also those that open new perspectives. Donati's book is one of these paths, one which allows us to look into the enigma of social relations.

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/// **Fabio Ferrucci**—full professor of sociology of culture at the University of Molise. He is delegate of the rector for student condition and disabilities, and member of the Scientific Board of the Center of Research on Inner Areas and Appennini. In the same University he was coordinator of PhD programme on “Intercultural Relations and Processes” (2009–2014) and chairman of the School of Communication Science (2003–2012). He served as secretary of the Social Policy section of Italian Sociological Association (2006–2009). Ferrucci’s main research topics are sociology of disability, sociology of family and childhood, sociology of health, social policies and third sector.

E-mail: ferrucci@unimol.it

