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Towards a Relational Sociology of Inequality

The presentation aims at developing arguments for a relational sociology of inequality. It draws on the general theory of the **interplay of network structure and cultural patterns**, as advocated by Harrison White an others, but also on recent work in the sociology of inequality following Pierre Bourdieu. The concepts of 'social milieu', 'life-style', and 'subculture' are reformulated in a network terminology. It is argued that all cultural patterns (values, practices) are rooted in network structure. 'Social milieus', then, should be conceived as networks interwoven with particular values and practices – a life-style. Social milieus and life-styles make for a tendential ordering of networks and meaning, they feature in a fluid and interrelational topology of social structure. Subcultures, in contrast, build on a sharp boundary between inside and outside which orders networks and cultural patterns to a larger degree.

Relational Sociology starts from the assumption that social networks are interwoven with patterns of meaning. These comprise expectations between the participants, but also symbols, linguistic argots, attitudes, values, cultural practices, categories, and even the construction of the identities of the participants. Harrison White has termed this 'culture of a network' the 'domain'. Networks and domains are connected in 'net-doms'. If we define 'social structure' as the pattern of relations between individuals (in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown and Nagel) this interplay of networks and cultural forms should be at the heart of social structure. Social inequality should be rooted in the networks interwoven with categories and practices.

In contrast, **cultural materialism** in the tradition of **Karl Marx** and Pierre Bourdieu argues that cultural forms (the habitus) are mainly determined by the socio-economic situation, by the distribution of economic and cultural capital. According to Marx, class-consciousness and practices derive from the position of individuals in economic life. But he famously conceded that the allotment farmers in 19th century France lack ties between them and were thus unable to form a class with a common consciousness and the potential for collective action. Classes seem to build on networks, not only on the economic situation. In this vein, Roger Gould has shown that the protest in the Paris Commune did not conform to a Marxist interpretation: It was more driven by the heterogeneous networks in the Paris suburbs than by the homogeneous networks of inner-city craftsmen.

Pierre Bourdieu has led research on social inequality to acknowledge the importance of meaning and cultural practices – the habitus. Inequality is symbolically constructed by groups competing for resources and for the power to define the prestige ladder. Bourdieu also pointed to the importance of personal ties with his concept of 'social capital'. However, he views the habitus as primarily depending on 'objective circumstances' – the distribution of economic capital (income and wealth) and cultural capital (education). Bourdieu thus stands in the

tradition of cultural materialism. He does not view cultural forms as rooted in networks, and his vision of social structure firmly rests on cultural and economic capital determining the groups (networks) in a society and the relations between them.

The **new cultural sociology** in Germany, in contrast, argues that life-styles do not have to spring from the economic situation. Authors like Gerhard Schulze, Reinhard Kreckel, Hans-Peter Müller, and Stefan Hradil view social structure as composed of milieus that may or may not correlate to demographic and economic characteristics. Instead, Schulze argues, milieus rely on internal communication from which a common life-style emerges. This is consistent with the Symbolic Interactionism of Herbert Blumer and George Herbert Mead. Patterns of internal communication or interaction could be measured with the methods of network analysis – but have never been. Recently, Jörg Rössel has argued for an incorporation of the network concept into the sociology of life-styles. However, according to Rössel, milieus are not clear-cut social entities, but they overlap and form a plural and interrelated social universe.

Milieus can thus be conceived of as networks with increased internal connectivity. Based on this connectivity, they develop a specific **life-style** that in turn makes internal ties more likely than ties to other milieus. Friendships form more easily between people with similar values, or around the foci of activity (bars, sports clubs etc.) in such life-style milieus. However, modern social structure is too plural and multi-faceted to be partitioned into milieus as clear-cut entities. People not only associate with those with similar leisurely activities, but also with work colleagues or neighbors. Thus, the milieu concept is able to capture a tendential ordering of ties around common values and activities – but it does not lead to a neatly ordered topology of society. A milieu is foremost the social environment of cultural patterns and people around us – it is not a bounded group.

The **bases for such milieus** can be manifold. A milieu can be characterized by age, gender, level of education, wealth, or by common activities (such as sports, politics, protest, or religion), but it can also be based on categories like ethnic descent or race, or on locality. All of these attributes of people can under certain circumstances lead to increased homophily – either by acting as opportunities to meet and mate (foci of activity), or by ordering personal ties through categories. Whenever such attributes lead to a tendential ordering of personal contacts we expect the emergence of a specific life-style or habitus.

Categories like ethnic descent structure personal networks through the relational mechanisms identified by Charles Tilly. Outsiders are confronted with stigmatization and they are barred from precious resources. In return they often try to define a counter-identity – but can only do so if they form social networks among them. Examples for such a categorical ordering of networks have been analyzed by Norbert Elias, Franz Urban Pappi, Andreas Wimmer, and others. In the extreme case, such a separation makes for the formation of a **subculture** with an oppositional stance to the prevalent societal values, and with a sharp symbolic boundary.

But categories do not always separate groups with increased internal connectivity. Some categories order networks into **structurally equivalent positions** that are not necessarily connected among themselves. For example, the allotment farmers analyzed by Marx lack ties

with each other – but they form specific ties to specific alters (here: the patrons). Women, too, are not separated from men on the structural level. Rather they are connected to them on the most intimate level – in the household. But men and women are related to each other in culturally specified ways: There are still few friendships between men and women. And the intimate love relationship has traditionally been asymmetric, with the man typically older, more powerful, and more financially potent – and the woman occupying her place in the household like the farmer his allotment. This traditional ordering of ties is weakening currently, pointing again to a tendential structuring of networks by categories. And gender, of course, overlaps with other dimensions of social inequality, like race, ethnic descent, education etc.

The most prominent networks concept in research on inequality is the **social capital** concept, as introduced by Pierre Bourdieu and advanced by James Coleman, Ronald Burt, and Nan Lin. According to these theories, networks act primarily as resources for individual action, giving actors valuable information, allowing them access to jobs, or facilitating the acquisition of human capital. However, the social capital concept remains multifaceted with very different aspects of network structure emphasized by different authors (weak ties, closure, resources in networks). In addition, the notion of social capital presupposes an action theoretical framework which takes individual actors as its starting point. Relational sociology, in contrast, does not view social networks as resources for individual action. Instead, actors are firmly embedded in social networks – their motivations, their values, their practices, even their identities derive from the inter-personal processes in networks. Consequently, we should first look for what social networks propels actors to do, rather than actors manipulating their networks.

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