

DO SOCIAL RELATIONS “HAVE” TIME? A CRITICAL-REALIST RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL TIME*

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/// Introduction

This essay briefly explores how a critical-realist (CR) perspective might approach the concept of social time. Such an approach is inherently shaped by the core socio-ontological principles of CR and the epistemological frameworks for knowledge acquisition established within its meta-theoretical tradition. Given the extensive scholarship on these topics, including numerous excellent books and articles, I will not delve deeply into them here. Instead, I will concentrate on what I consider most crucial to my argument: the notion that social relations possess emergent properties distinct from those of their constituent parts. In other words, the reality of social relations is qualitatively different from the reality of the individual entities comprising them, such as persons or social roles. Elżbieta Halas and Pierpaolo Donati (2017) describe this emergent dimension of social relations as “relationality as such.”

A CR approach to social time must consider how time is experienced by individuals and how humans attribute meaning to their actions. For analytical purposes, this approach distinguishes between two dimensions

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of time: its meaningfulness (Halas 2013), which I term “the biographical temporality of the self,” and the temporality associated with relationality, which I refer to as “relationality’s social time.” This essay focuses exclusively on the latter dimension.

In other words, a CR approach to social time seeks to explore the proposition that “social time is an emergent property of relationality as such.” In the next sections I first examine the assertion that “social time is an emergent property” and then I draw on Margaret Archer’s concept of situational logics to analyse the notion of “relationality as such.” Finally, I illustrate these theoretical insights with examples of a CR approach to social time.

/// Social Time as an Emergent Property of Relationality

By saying that social time is an emergent property of something, critical realists mean that this “something” is social entities which are emergent. From a philosophical standpoint, emergence suggests that the world around us is populated of entities composed of parts whose configuration gives rise to specific properties. According to this perspective, the properties of an emergent entity are:

- relational: emergent properties result from prior relations among the parts;
- novel: these properties cannot be predicted based solely on the attributes of individual components, which often arise as unintended consequences;
- autonomous: emergent properties are irreducible to their component parts, as they possess a degree of independence;
- holistic: these properties are not merely an aggregate of the parts but form a cohesive whole beyond their sum (Mumford 1998: 31–40).

Another idea following from this view concerns the fact that emergent properties have the power to do things. The philosophical background of this idea is “dispositional realism” (Mumford 1998), according to which dispositions are the properties one ascribes to social objects (persons, institutions) to act in specific ways under specific conditions. By knowing properties, one knows what a social entity might do in a particular situation. According to Stephen Mumford (1998: 56), dispositions conceived of as ascribed properties are causally efficacious. Causally efficacious means, for example, that if teachers in a “democratic” school are happier than those who work in a “bureaucratic” school, then the outcome (happiness,

well-being) is owed to a specific property that the relations in a democratic school, as such, possess. This means that the relations in this school have the property of giving rise to this outcome.

/// The Emergent Properties of Situational Logics

Given that social relations do not exist in a social vacuum, relational properties such as strains/tensions/contradictions and compatibilities characterise the structural and cultural context in which people live and in which strains and compatibilities may be necessary and internal or contingent. If these two possibilities of the relational properties are cross-tabulated, then four situational logics can be created in which specific strategic actions can be deployed within the structural and cultural contexts.

Regarding the structural contexts, when necessary and internal complementary relations permeate the systemic structure of an institution, that is, when its vested interests are mutually reinforcing, then social integration prevails. Since everyone has something to lose from possible disruptions, this situation entails a logic of *protection*, meaning that social groups interact so as to protect these interests. When the vested interests within an institution or between them come into conflict because it cannot be otherwise (i.e., necessarily), then the most likely course of action for those who face these internal contradictions is *compromise*. Compared to the situational logic of protection, the situational logic of compromise is an inverted way of promoting the vested interests of those involved (Archer 1995).

However, in cases where institutional interests are insecure or liable to vanish because of the openness of society, that is, cases in which contradictions are contingent (as in cases of war), then the situational logic of *elimination* shapes strategic action. Finally, when vested interests are shaped in such a way that they are complementary and contingent, then people face the situational logic of *opportunism*. In this situational logic, innovation and creativity are defining features of the courses of action taken by social groups (Archer 1995).

In a similar way, the culture's emergent properties give rise to various situational logics. When complementarity characterises two cultural items, then social groups are trying to protect and *systematise* them because everyone receives an ideational gain from this situation. Contrarily, when two cultural items are incompatible, then constraining contradictions come to the fore. The members of two different political factions of a party will promote ideational items for the sake of *unifying* its political ideology (Archer 1988).

The question arises as to what social groups do when they face these situations. For Archer, whether social agents will act in an orderly or conflictual manner depends on whether the social distribution of power and interests aligns with the situational logic of the cultural system. Archer describes various possibilities of social action in relation to protection (necessary compatibilities) and correction (constraining contradiction).

In regard to correction, when the strategy of preserving unification fails, then competitive contradiction starts to take shape. In such cases, social agents are trying to eliminate contradictions, and *cleavage* is likely to emerge. Finally, in situations where compatibility is contingent, social groups (e.g., newcomers in a scientific field) have the opportunity to elaborate new and creative cultural items, and a new *specialisation* is possible (Archer 1988).

Following this brief outline of Archer's explanatory framework, my focus will now be on whether distinct forms of social time correspond to each of the situational logics. The task remaining is to articulate the specific variations of social time that arise uniquely from these different situational logics.

/// The Varieties of Social Time in Connection with Situational Logics

Having clarified Archer's theory on situational logics, I would now like to present how these four logics give rise to particular varieties of social time, and I will provide examples to illustrate my point. Let's start with the situational logic of *protection* and imagine how the social roles of school inspectors and school principals are interconnected in an educational system. These two groups are concerned about protecting the school hierarchy, because it is the hierarchy as such that promotes the vested interests of both groups. The beliefs of the school principals about education complement those of the school inspectors and in that sense the ideational position of both groups systematises educational policy. In regard to *compromise*, new social coalitions are created in political parties that support alternative political ideologies and whose interests contradict each other. However, they have to compromise on their varying interests because undermining the political party as such would be disastrous.

In the situational logics of protection and compromise, social time tends to manifest in cyclical forms, where past, present, and future merge into a perceived continuity. Additionally, time in these contexts may be

experienced as delayed, indicating a temporality that awaits activation, or as enduring, reflecting a slowed, extended duration. In the relationship between principals and inspectors, social time often seems to be held back – to experience delays in progression. This slowing of time is primarily due to the complementary ideational alignment of maintaining the school hierarchy, which is deeply embedded in the structural and cultural frameworks governing interactions. These three varieties of social time might be seen as the emergent properties of the morphostatic situations that characterise the structural and cultural contexts of protection and correction.

As far as *elimination* is concerned, if the eligibility criteria for entering the teaching profession change – for example, to allow those who have had two years of training in special education to become primary school teachers – then both groups (primary school teachers as insiders / those with two-year training as outsiders) have an interest in eliminating each other. Finally, in regard to *opportunism*, newcomers to a scientific field have vested interests in innovating and being creative because otherwise their scientific trajectory is in danger.

In contrast to morphostatic situations, morphogenetic situations like elimination and opportunism are related to contingent complementarity and competitive contradiction. The varieties of social time related to these situations concern what Georges Gurvitch calls deceptive time, erratic time, or explosive time, which are all shaped by contingency and uncertainty (Gurvitch 1964: 45–52). Deceptive time means that behind the appearance of a long-duration phenomenon, unexpected crises may evolve and discontinuities between the past and present may emerge, while erratic time (time of irregular pulsations between the appearance and disappearance of rhythms) is “the time of uncertainty par excellence” where contingency prevails. In this way, what matters is only the present and not the past or the future. Finally, when discontinuity and contingency are maximised due to acts of collective creation that intervene in social reality, then time is explosive. For example, in the competitive dynamic between current primary school teachers and prospective special-education instructors, time may exhibit the characteristics of deceptive or erratic temporality, reflecting the uncertainty and instability inherent in such a competitive relationship.

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