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## Friends of Relational Sociology? The Relational Current as a Space of Hospitality

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### Abstract

The text considers the writings of François Dépelteau from the framework of hospitality, as an invitation for scholars to participate in specifying the key ideas and practices of the relational sociology movement. Thereby, instead of searching for cues where he would speak about hospitality, the text explores his thinking as hospitality. It examines how his writings performatively try out and expand the possibilities of creating hospitality within the relational sociology movement. The article suggests that the antinomy between what Jacques Derrida has called unconditional and conditional hospitality proves helpful when trying to explicate Dépelteau's views on keeping relational sociology alive as a project or intellectual movement. The difficulty of the community building, it will be maintained, comes down to finding a balance between embracing difference and protecting identity.

### Keywords

community, friendship, hospitality, invitation, mourning, relational sociology

## ¿Amigos de la sociología relacional? La corriente relacional como espacio de hospitalidad

### Resumen

El texto interpreta los escritos de François Dépelteau desde el punto de vista de la hospitalidad como una invitación para que los académicos participen concretando las ideas y prácticas clave del movimiento de la sociología relacional. De este modo, en lugar de buscar pistas sobre dónde hablaría sobre hospitalidad, el texto explora su pensamiento como hospitalidad. Estudia sus pensamientos sobre cómo la sociología relacional podría probarse y ampliar de manera performativa las posibilidades de crear hospitalidad dentro del movimiento de la sociología relacional. Además, el artículo sugiere que la antinomia entre lo que Jacques Derrida llama hospitalidad incondicional y condicional resulta útil cuando se trata de explicar las opiniones de Dépelteau sobre cómo mantener viva la sociología relacional como proyecto o movimiento intelectual. Así pues, se mantendrá la dificultad de la construcción de la comunidad, pero reducida a encontrar un equilibrio entre abrazar la diferencia y proteger la identidad.

### Palabras clave

comunidad, amistad, hospitalidad, invitación, duelo, sociología relacional

“Whatever it is called, this is an invitation for an exploration by fellow travellers”  
(Dépelteau, 2018c: 504)

### To François: assuming responsibility to respond

This is a work of mourning. I am mourning a dead friend whom I never met in person, but with whom I shared an obsession for thinking all things relational. In his last email to me, my friend François (whom I am calling by his first name here) wrote me: “Then, we might meet. Just a delay. Will see.” Besides expressing hope at the moment when all hope was gone, his words hint how the existential certainty of death is conjoined with temporal indeterminacy. While in every single moment of our lives we are beings that will die, we need to live with the uncertainty and terror of not knowing when exactly this will happen. To me, the hope expressed in François’s words extends (and quite possibly against his own intention) even beyond life, thereby forcing us to reconfigure what it is to “meet” each other. In that regard, his words present a challenge for the relation between friends to survive death. This text is a response to that challenge; not as one

responds in a duel, when two men meet each other at dawn for showdown, but in friendship, where the one who survives must assume it as one’s responsibility to respond. As one friend must die before the other, the law of friendship is always also the law of surviving and mourning. One simply “does not survive without mourning”, and for this reason “[s]urviving [...] is the other name of [...] mourning”, as Jacques Derrida (2005: 13) has proposed. The imminent mourning accompanies and structures any relation between friends from the beginning.

The one who survives is always called upon to respond. How does one respond to such an unthinkable, unspeakable event – the death of a friend? On such an occasion, “[s]peaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness” (Derrida 2001: 72). While in the first case, that of speaking, the impossibility refers more to a loss of words and thus to the difficulty of finding the right words or even uttering a single word, silence rather seems impossible due to the fact that saying nothing would simply be irresponsible and disrespectful, something completely out of the question. One cannot but do the impossible and speak. To recall the life of the friend and not let it pass into oblivion, one must break the silence and respond with words, uttered at the limit of life and death. And one may only hope that those words are fit for the friend in question and

bear witness to the unique relationship that one has had with the friend.<sup>1</sup>

But to whom are such words addressed, actually? Obviously, in this case, they are *for* François. The expression “*for* François” suggests not only that I write about him and his work, but also that the words and thoughts are dedicated to him, given as a gift. They are intended as a token of recognition, as a gesture of appreciation, and as a tribute. Nevertheless, I am of course painfully aware that these words cannot reach him, in the manner as they could have while he was still alive. They reach him too late; François himself is no longer here.<sup>2</sup> (And yet, François of course is still present among us and in us, as we still can have relations with him, even though he can know nothing of it anymore. It is we who are absent to him, since it is not him who has disappeared from the world but the world has disappeared from him. For this text, for example, François appears as a donor, because it is his life and work that give me the occasion to give. He gives me the gift of giving on this particular occasion.) So, let me repeat my question. For whom are these words? To whom and for whom does one write? I wrote to *you*. And who are you? I do not imagine you as a suspicious, hypercritical reader whom I assume to disagree with everything I have to say, and whose every possible objection I would therefore try to anticipate.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I intend you as my friend. This means that this text is surely not “for all and none”, as Nietzsche pompously pictured the readership of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1999), for those who are friends to all are no one’s friend in particular, Aristotle (2000: 1171a) reminds us.

By regarding you as a friend does not, however, mean that you and I should be like-minded. You do not have to conform and agree, but you may also disagree. “The best I can hope for is that [you] disagree in full disclosure and in constructive ways” (Dépelteau, 2018b: 28) – I treasure these words of wisdom by François and take them as my guiding light here. Yet, you may disagree already here. By what right do I call someone like François whom I never met a *friend*? Or you whom I do not even know? Can friendship just be declared, unilaterally? I am fully aware that calling François my friend even if we never got to meet each other in person may easily sound daring, unsuitable, wrong, and also less credible than when coming from someone who had known him well and for a good while. Aristotle stresses that a friend is not to be had without trial nor in a single day; it takes time to see if friendship endures the test of time (Aristotle, 2011: 1237b, 13, 17). What is more, considering the circumstances, calling François

*my* friend may appear possessive and presumptuous, a case of indecent posthumous appropriation. Am I using him here for my own purposes, to get another peer-reviewed publication and earn some points? Those who were his “true” friends in the sense of knowing him for a long time and being close to him might quite legitimately say that he was *their* friend and not mine. And they would be absolutely right. Our friendship was of a peculiar kind. As friends, François and I were – and *are*, in the eternal present of theory – above all, friends of processual-relational thinking.<sup>4</sup> That is what we share. That is our common denominator, the Third mediating our relation. And that is also how I would like you to approach this text: as a friend of relational sociology. A friendly piece of advice: if you are not interested in relational sociology, you’d better stop reading here and move on to something else that might fascinate you instead. Life is long unless you make it short by wasting it (Seneca, 2005).

Let me also emphasise that a friend is not a property, but relational. One cannot “get” friends in the sense of obtaining or acquiring them as one would collect objects (apart from Facebook “friends”, perhaps). Instead, friends are *made* in mutual co-constitutive relations: the other can be my friend only insofar as the other not only accepts my positioning of themselves as my friend, but also sees me as their friend, and I accept that position. (It is not possible that one has a friend to whom oneself is an enemy; one can only become – not be – friends with an enemy.)

The question of who and what is a friend (of relational sociology) lies at the heart of the present text. The article explores how François pictures the project of relational sociology as a collective undertaking by examining his thoughts and initiatives within the framework of hospitality, especially in conjunction with Derrida’s thoughts. In his opening piece to the monumental *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (2018) that he edited, François sketches the core ideas of relational sociology and invites fellow sociologists to join him in a discussion on what could and should be done to render relational sociology into a strong and vibrant intellectual movement. As François himself puts it:

This is an invitation to start a chain of discussion on the ideational and practical characteristics of this intellectual movement, which refers to the worldviews, principles, concepts, methods and scientific practices of this approach (Dépelteau, 2018b: 7–8).

I read François’s piece and this sentence in particular as an invitation in the most literal sense, that is, as an act of *hospitality*.

1. François’s friends have already responded with beautiful eulogies (see Guy, 2018; Selg, 2018; Vandenberghe, 2018b).
2. Derrida examines this problem of *for whom* in his eulogy for Roland Barthes (Derrida, 2001: 35).
3. Howard Becker (2007: 8–9) suggests that, as writers, social scientists tend to make “innocuous but safe” rather than bold statements, “because we fear that others will catch us in obvious errors if we do anything else, and laugh at us”. And thus we walk on eggshells.
4. In his tribute to François, Jean-Sebastien Guy (2018) fittingly writes that, when launching the research cluster of relational sociology within the Canadian Sociological Association, François “was not searching for disciples, but for colleagues or even friends – not people to boss around, but people to cooperate with as equals.”

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Instead of searching for cues where he would speak about hospitality, I explore his thinking as hospitality (see Friese, 2004: 74; Höckert, 2015: 40). By inviting people to join in the discussion on what relational sociology is and what it could be, the invitation opens up a space not only to do things together, but also to do togetherness. And this is also how I approach François's own writings here: as efforts to build and gather together the relational sociology community in a performative manner. I explore how they try out and expand the possibilities of creating hospitality within the relational sociology movement/community. To be sure, such a reading strategy focuses on and proceeds from the margin, trying to tease out new ideas and perspectives. Hospitality cannot in any way be said to constitute a central theme in François's work. As far as I know, it is close to a non-existent subject matter in his publications. And yet, his writings evince and express hospitality. The quotation from François – "Whatever it is called, this is an invitation for an exploration by fellow travelers" – placed at the beginning of this article as an epigraph illustrates this beautifully.

I suggest that the antinomy between what Derrida (2000a&b) has called *unconditional hospitality*, on the one hand, and *conditional hospitality*, on the other, proves helpful when trying to explicate François's views on keeping relational sociology alive as a project or intellectual movement. While as a coordinator and organiser François wanted to create a space in which differences could flourish and to which he was also willing to welcome whomever, without distinguishing between friend and enemy, guest and parasite, as an author he introduced demarcations and divisions. In the text "Relational Thinking in Sociology: Relevance, Concurrence and Dissonance", he insists that, as relational sociologists, we need to "find a balance between controversy and discipline" (Dépelteau, 2018b: 27), if we want the movement to subsist and prosper. And I will argue that the tension between these two practices can be best conceptualised in terms of the contrast between the two notions of hospitality.

## Invitation as a hospitable act

What is an invitation? In the book *Of Hospitality* (2000b: 133, 135), Derrida remarks in passing that "[i]nviting... go[es] by way of language or the address to the other". This formulation captures two key aspects of an invitation. First of all, that an invitation is tied to language. It designates the spoken or written form in which a person is invited or assumes an inviting gesture through which our body speaks to the other (though the high prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual abuse bear witness

to how messages never intended as inviting in the first place are often deliberately misread as inviting, thus overriding, coercing, or manufacturing consent). An invitation is thus always declared and needs to be made explicit. There cannot be any implicit invitation. For something to count as an invitation, it can never remain secret, but it must always become manifest.

Secondly, Derrida's remark rightly underlines how an invitation is dependent on *the other*. It is a relation between self and other, positioning the self as a host and the other as a guest. Host and guest are relational concepts. A person cannot be a host without a guest whom one welcomes and hosts. The host and the guest are thus co-constituted; we cannot have one without the other. This does not mean that their relation would be symmetrical. On the contrary, the host-guest relation is very much an asymmetrical one. The gesture of welcoming gives the host power to define the "guest situation" (Berking, 1999: 82), and the two have unequal rights and duties. The co-constitution of the host and the guest means above all else that the two terms are conceivable only in relation to each other. I can be a guest only in relation to the host, who interpellates me. The alterity of the guest can be understood only in reference to the host, who precedes it, both logically and semantically. And yet the host, too, always implies a guest, whom one invites or welcomes. It is only in relation to a guest – and by addressing the guest – that one may present and declare oneself as a host. There would never occur any generosity, and no hospitality would ever take place, if the gesture of giving hospitality was not accepted by the other. The actualisation of hospitality relies thus not only on giving but on receiving as well.<sup>5</sup>

How does one become a host? By what right? In the general sense of the term, hospitality seems to assume a certain amount of sovereignty: "No hospitality, in the classical sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's house" (Derrida, 2000a: 55). Being a host thus necessitates dwelling, a home, a particular relation to space. One's hospitality is made possible by one's own home (ibid.: 53). Hospitality, the opening up of space, would thus paradoxically be dependent on and conditioned by its opposite, a prior appropriation of space. It is as if I could make a space accessible to others only insofar as I first enclosed that space and excluded the others by saying "this is mine".<sup>6</sup>

What qualifies François as a host, then? While he might have agreed that relational sociology is his home, it would be less appropriate to say that it belongs originally to him, that he, as a host, is its designated owner. He is not one of the "founding fathers" of the subfield, and so in this sense he is not the head of house but himself a guest. His invitation itself amounts to a response to preceding initiatives and already existing discussions and debates. François does not claim ownership over relational

5. I have emphasised the significance of receiving also in relation to the gift (see Pyyhtinen, 2014a).

6. For more on the appropriation of space, see Serres (2011).



sociology. He does not say “this is mine”. On the contrary, he openly acknowledges that “the field of relational sociology started many years ago thanks to the works of founders such as P. Donati and M. Emirbayer in the 1980s and 1990s” (Dépelteau, 2018a: ix). Indeed, in Italy, sociologist Pierpaolo Donati had been systematically pursuing and developing relational sociology from the early 1980s, and Donati has also created a network of scholars with an interest in relational sociology, under the name Relational Studies in Sociology. Yet it was above all with the publication of Mustafa Emirbayer’s “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology”, published in *The American Journal of Sociology* in 1997 that relational sociology began to take shape as an explicit, self-conscious international programme and movement. Today, Donati’s realist relational sociology and the so-called New York School represented by Emirbayer and the works of Harrison White, Charles Tilly, Ann Mische, and Margaret Somers, for example, form two largely independent and separate sub-groups of the relational sociology current.

But even if François did not found relational sociology, neither did Donati and Emirbayer themselves create it *ex nihilo*. Not even they can claim ownership over it. Even though the name “relational sociology” is of more recent origin, relational ideas can be found already in the work of several classical authors, including Karl Marx (see e.g. Burkitt, 2018), Georg Simmel (see e.g. Cantó-Milà, 2005; 2016; 2018; Donati, 2011; Crossley, 2011; Ruggieri, 2016; 2017; Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2016; 2017; Kemple, 2018; Papilloud, 2018); Gabriel Tarde (see e.g. Toews, 2003; Tonkonoff, 2018), George Herbert Mead (see e.g. Côté, 2018), and even Émile Durkheim (see e.g. Dépelteau, 2017), whose work is usually seen to exemplify fairly orthodox substantialist thought. In addition, the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias already was relational through and through (see e.g. Elias, 1978; Dépelteau & Landini, 2013). And of course, the thoughts of these authors did not emerge out of nothing, but they, too, have their predecessors and sources of inspiration.

All this makes it anything but easy to determine who are the guests and who the hosts in the history and world of ideas. It is not always clear, whether or to what extent one gives or takes. The host and the guest appear as circulating epithets, tokens given and passed from one author to another. The verb “to give” needs to be understood in the most literal sense here: scientific contributions are *gifts*. In *The Scientific Community* (1965: 52), Warren Hagstrom analyses science as a “system wherein gifts of information are exchanged for recognition from scientific colleagues”. Indeed, while scientific research is an extremely competitive field, it is precisely by *what they give* that scholars compete for recognition. One becomes an acknowledged member of the community only as a donor; one cannot gain before and without having given first. One may receive recognition for instance by having one’s outputs accepted for publication in academic journals or by book publishers. Later, that one’s texts

are cited by other authors, invitations to give talks and lectures, positions gained, and awards are further means of paying and receiving recognition. Provided that the gift is a crucial vehicle of scientific community and research, the increasing marketisation of scientific publishing and teaching in terms of paywalls, high subscription fees, and tuition fees, for example, pose a serious threat to the scientific community and jeopardise the very practices of doing research.

So, if everyone owes something to others, what is it that qualifies François as a host within the space of relational sociology? First of all, François played a decisive role in advancing relational sociology as an international current. He made a significant impact not only discursively, as an author and as an editor of the volumes *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology* (Powell & Dépelteau, 2013), *Applying Relational Sociology* (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013), and *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (2018), but also socially or institutionally, by doing and hosting togetherness: he organised conferences, launched the Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology book series, and coordinated the research cluster of relational sociology, which operates under the Canadian Sociological Association (CSA), but is actually an international and transdisciplinary network of relational scholars, with over 120 members from 25 countries.

Secondly, it is important to rethink the very notion of hospitality. Is it really necessary to start from a prior appropriation and enclosure of space to offer hospitality? Could we begin from the giving of place to those without a home or shelter instead? In that case, the place of hospitality would belong neither to the host nor to the guest, but to the gesture of welcoming (Dufourmantelle, 2000: 62). It would be the act of hospitality, the giving of place, that created the hospitable place, not the prior appropriation of space. The host, too, would, in a sense, enter the place of hospitality by the grace of the visitor, or, to be more exact, thanks to their interrelation. The relation of hospitality would be primary, not any one of the subjects.

This is where relational sociology comes in. As I see it, relational thinking reminds us in an important manner that any agent is in fact always a guest, and any action is a response to an invitation. Along similar lines, Spanish philosopher Daniel Innerarity suggests in his book *Ethics of Hospitality* (2017: 3) that “human life is less a set of sovereign initiatives than a set of replies to the invitations that the world gives us”. No agent is the sole origin of the things accomplished or even of one’s own action, but any action is to some extent *received*, a response, as it is conditioned and constituted by others. Action or agency, for that matter, is never “possessed” by an agent, but the agent is rather itself possessed by action (Ingold, 2013), as any agent is always immersed in ongoing activity (Whitehead, 1938: 217). This makes action always *dislocated*: “borrowed, distributed, suggested, influence, dominated, betrayed, translated” (Latour, 2005: 46). Take thinking, for example. The one who thinks is not

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the sole origin of one's thought. The voice of the tradition and that of the sources of influence and inspiration always already precede one's own, and relations are a condition of possibility of the very exercise of thought itself. Even in the most solitary act of thinking one is always already populated by a multitude of voices (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006: 5). To apply Nietzsche's (2003: 26) thoughts on action: the thinker is a "mere appendage" to the act of thinking. With this regard, it is revealing that the words "thinking" and "thanking" have the same etymological root. The one who thinks is a guest, who to a large part has received one's thoughts and ideas.<sup>7</sup>

## Unconditional and conditional hospitality

To whom does one offer hospitality? To whom is François's invitation addressed? To the friends of relational sociology? And, if so, how can we tell who they are? How can they be identified? Or is the invitation an open call, extended to whomever? Would the parasites and enemies be welcomed as well? And what would actually happen if anyone came and joined in the party?

Hospitality is a process, where the other undergoes a transformation from a stranger to a guest. It is only when we know each other's names that we stop being strangers to each other. Hospitality thus usually starts with identifying the other, by asking the other person's name (Derrida, 2000a: 27). However, the invitation presented by François breaks with this. It presents a gesture of hospitality that welcomes basically whomever, offering hospitality before identifying and interrogating the other. It does not ask who the other is and demand to see whether the papers of the person crossing the threshold are in order.

Thereby, in many respects François's invitation corresponds to what Derrida has termed *unconditional hospitality*. Unconditional hospitality is absolute and unlimited. It means readiness to give without recognition, to welcome "the absolute, unknown, anonymous other" (ibid.: 25). One does not select to whom one gives place. Instead, unconditional hospitality requires that I "say yes" to whomever turns up, "before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*" (Derrida, 2000b: 77). Unconditional hospitality preserves the ambivalence inscribed in the Latin term *hostis*, which means both guest and enemy. It abstains from distinguishing between invited and uninvited visitor, guest and parasite, friend and enemy. François pictures the community of relational sociologists as an "open 'society'"

(Dépelteau, 2018b: 7). This means, among other things, that discussions on relationality and relational sociology should not be kept solely among like-minded people. Whoever wants to join in is welcomed. It is fairly common in academia, François laments, that scholars "avoid any real discussion with colleagues who disagree with them, except for episodic moments when it becomes inevitable – in congresses, for example". In such a case, "comparisons and critiques happen but they typically are designed to promote [and/or] protect the 'theory'". (ibid.: 23.) To have "[r]eal and [p]roductive [d]iscussions", François asserts, we should not try to repress and exclude disagreement and controversies (ibid.: 24), but embrace difference and make room for controversy.

Yet François is no naïve idealist. On the contrary, he is very well aware that "full openness would destroy the existence of any approach" (ibid.: 7). Against much cherished Western political utopias, no community can be absolutely inclusive. An entirely open, inclusive community without any exclusion would not have any shape and would collapse in a minute.<sup>8</sup> The constitution of community therefore relies on drawing a boundary between the inside and the outside. A border needs to be set up to establish order within and close it off from the disorder of the outside. Order is possible only on the condition that chaos is excluded, while chaos, of course, exists only in relation to order. Indeed, if relational sociology embraced difference to the full and included approaches, thoughts, and ideas of all sorts, "[w]e would end up with an empty and meaningless label", as François maintains (ibid.: 7). He suggests that "we need some form of self-discipline, and maybe even some form of decentralised and soft social control where 'libertarians' or 'anarchists' would be gently reminded by others that this movement is also a 'collective' or a little 'society'" (ibid.: 7).

There is thus a tension between welcoming otherness and protecting identity in how François pictures relational sociology as a collective and movement. Frédéric Vandenberghe (2018a: 53 n. 6) has captured this nicely by observing that:

As a coordinator of the network of relational sociologists, François Dépelteau is inclusive and ecumenical. Whoever identifies with the relational project and wants to contribute to its expansion is in. But as an author (Dépelteau 2015, 2008), he is rather more divisive and develops his transactional sociology as a radical pragmatist-processual sociology without any concession to the more structuralist pole of relational sociology.

The tension between being "inclusive and ecumenical," on the one hand, and "divisive," on the other, can also be conceptualised

7. The work of Tarde (1903) is of crucial importance with regard to this theme, as it emphasises the entanglement of invention and imitation and gives primacy to relations over the psyche or the mind. Tardean sociology amounts to a kind of interpsychology, which explores the affective processes and relations between minds. Instead of being endowed first with some primordial interiority closed off from the outside world, we gain a psychological interiority only through relations with the extrapsyches (Tarde, 1903; see also Latour, 2005: 216).

8. See also Pyyhtinen (2014b: 61–62).

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in terms of the contrast between unconditional and conditional hospitality. Unlike unconditional hospitality, conditional hospitality is selective and limited in character. It endows both the guest and the host with certain (asymmetrical) rights and duties and asks the guest to enter into a pact and somehow repay the hospitality received. While François seems to welcome whomever, before any identification, he nevertheless stresses the importance of having a common language. The stranger needs to speak our language and share what is shared with a language. To quote his own words: "Relational sociology cannot become a 'Tower of Babel' with no common language or some sort of anomic (pseudo) group of people which would all use the label 'relational' in their own way, according to their own desire" (Dépelteau, 2018b: 7). So, he insists that in order to survive the relational sociology community needs to have some boundaries to protect its identity.

And, at present, relational sociology does indeed lack a clear or coherent identity. It presents a somewhat unorganised and diffuse cluster of theories and approaches. There also exist several partly overlapping divisions between them:

- 1) While some relational approaches are based on a realist ontology (e.g. Donati & Archer, 2015; Donati, 2011; 2018), there are others, which base themselves on a constructivist ontology (e.g. Latour, 2003), and still others which see the question of ontology irrelevant and thereby wish to do away with it entirely (e.g. Kivinen & Piironen, 2006). 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.
- 2) There is also a divide between "relational-structuralist" and relational-processualist perspectives, that is, between approaches that emphasise the structural properties of relations and approaches that lay more emphasis on processes, becoming, and dynamics of relations (Vandenberghe, 2018a).<sup>9</sup> While relational-structuralist perspectives focus typically on network-structures and the structures of relational formations, process-oriented perspectives lay emphasis on the processual and dynamic nature of relations. For processual-relational sociology, relations are not "things" (like "ties" or "bonds") or "structures," but fluid and ongoing processes to be grasped in their incessant becoming and formation (Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2015; 2016; 2017).
- 3) While some varieties of relational thought are more or less anthropocentric (e.g. Vandenberghe, 2002; Donati, 2011; Fuhse, 2013) by focusing solely on relations between

human actors (and conglomerates of humans), others adopt a non-anthropocentric perspective (e.g. Mol, 2002; Latour, 2005; Pyyhtinen, 2015; Dépelteau, 2018b&c), emphasising that to get a full sense of the relations that constitute us and of our entanglement with the world it is important that we acknowledge the powers of non-human, more-than-human or not-quite-human materials, objects, and flows in shaping us and society.

- 4) Relational thinkers also disagree on whether social structures, such as networks and social systems, have causal powers once they have emerged or whether they are sheer relational effects (see Dépelteau, 2018b). Some relational sociologists, like Donati (2018; 2020) and Nick Crossley (2011), assign networks of relations some causal powers. There are, however, other relational scholars who oppose the idea that network-structures could interact with human agents not to speak of being able to self-act, that is, act in their own right. Structures are rather considered 'as empty abstractions apart from the elements of which they are produced' (Emirbayer, 1997: 288). As François puts it, structures are "not 'external' from their interactants since they constantly 'emerge', are transformed or dissolved through their interactions" (Dépelteau, 2018c: 509; see also Dépelteau, 2008).
- 5) There is also no agreement even on the matter of how we should conceptualise relations (e.g. should we consider them in dyadic terms or otherwise? Should we understand relations as structures or as unfolding processes? Are relations primary or secondary vis-à-vis what is connected by them? Can we reduce all relations to one basic model, such as communication (Luhmann); exchange or reciprocity (Simmel; Mauss); translation (Serres), and trials of strength (Latour)? In addition, how do terms such as "social ties", "bonds", "connections", "links", "associations", "relationships", and "interactions" relate to each other?).

All these divisions and disagreements suggest that relational sociology presents no homogeneous space – even when we consider it as a space of hospitality. And the dissonances are the main reason why François sees it as important to introduce coherence and identify "the strong ideational core" of relational sociology, which for him is found in the idea that sociology should study relations, and that social phenomena are co-produced by interdependent interactants (Dépelteau, 2018b: 23).

However, what makes the tension between embracing difference and protecting identity difficult is that one cannot just choose either one. While the contrast between unconditional and

9. Quite often (though not always), this divide tends to overlap with the first one: scholars who identify themselves as "relational realists" tend to pay attention to the structural aspects of relational compounds, while those subscribing to a constructivist ontology adopt a processualist perspective on social reality.

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conditional hospitality seems absolute, as the two notions negate one another, they are in fact indissociable. They simultaneously presuppose and exclude each other. As Derrida writes: "They incorporate one another at the moment of excluding one another, they are dissociated at the moment of enveloping one another" (Derrida, 2000b: 81). They presuppose and oppose one another in one and the same gesture, and therefore, to understand hospitality, both of these notions need to be included as its components. On the one hand, to some extent hospitality always seems to require some sovereignty, certain conditional rights and duties. No hospitality is possible without at least some right to choose one's guests. Otherwise, as Derrida remarks, the notion of hospitality "would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory". On the other hand, conditional hospitality would be corrupted or perverted were it not "guided", inspired, and "given aspiration" by the idea(l) of unconditional, absolute hospitality (Ibid.: 79). If most of the energy was focused on establishing boundaries and guarding them, conditional hospitality would cease to be hospitality at all and instead turn into something inhospitable. It would enclose space rather than keep it open for others.

## Concluding thoughts

This article is a response to the invitation, expressed by François Dépelteau in several of his writings, to join in the discussion on the core ideas and key practices of relational sociology. To continue in existence, relational sociology, just like any movement and community, needs the convergent and interdependent efforts of many people. And, precisely because it is fundamentally a collective undertaking, co-produced by a multitude of scholars, no single author can claim ownership over it. No one can be relational sociology or have it all to him/herself; one can only be its *friend*, as was also suggested by the title of this text.

However, I have not responded to the invitation as the host may have expected, amounting thus to a disobedient, "untidy guest", who gives an "unexpected twist to the social situation" and the host-guest relation (Veijola et al., 2014: 2). Instead of participating, as was solicited in the invitation, in the collective effort to specify the ideational and practical characteristics of the relational sociology movement, I have examined François's invitation itself as an act of hospitality and community building, trying to accomplish togetherness. When examined as hospitality, François's thinking appears as being structured in the tension between unconditional and conditional hospitality. On the one hand, he stresses the importance of embracing difference. Rather than crossing out alterity and forming a collective only among those with whom we seem to have something in common, François is willing to welcome whoever wants to join in. Yet on the other hand, he emphasises

that relational sociology needs to have some core and identity. Full openness would destroy it.

The antinomy between unconditional and conditional hospitality is therefore not a matter of theoretical hair-splitting, but it has concrete consequences. Just think for instance of the justification (and erosion) of the welfare society, which has been under much debate and criticism during the last few decades, or the current governmental actions against *personae non gratae*, such as turning away refugees, closing borders, and exiling asylum seekers. All these issues bear a relationship to the problem of hospitality. What is at stake in them, just like in the efforts to keep relational sociology alive as an intellectual movement, is the problem of inclusion and exclusion, and how the law of hospitality and the right to choose one's guests may at some point turn hospitality into hostility and xenophobia. With regard to the relational sociology community, here lies the threat of a kind of intellectual protectionism, of the movement closing in upon itself, which easily leads to a suffocating dogmatism. What is needed, rather, is openness to alterity and readiness to welcome the other, even though this otherness may not match our desires and think alike, but may contradict how we see the world and what we know and believe in. Thinking in openness and heterogeneity exposes us to new, unexpected ideas and alternative perspectives. I also see here something like a germ of an ideal of good academic life, concentrated more on leaving open the possibility of disruption, noise, messiness, and disorder than protecting the community with rigid boundaries. It would be a life where "learning the productive commerce with alterity" (Innerarity, 2017: 4), not closing the borders, is seen as the source of renewal and vitality.

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