Identity and Order in Aesthetic Markets

-Towards a Relational Ontology

Draft for the Berlin Symposium on Relational Sociology

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How order emerges and is maintained can be seen as the most profound sociological question. Order, if one follows Harrison White, should be addressed at the level of social formations, such as markets, which is to speak of order at a partial level. Others, like Parsons, have assumes value consensus as an ordering principle at a "global" level. This paper investigates order and its connection to ontology, departing from aesthetic markets. This means to look closer at aesthetics, markets, order, and ontology. In this paper, I take the issues of aesthetics and markets for granted, and focus on order and in particular on the ontological foundation of the relational sociology.

All markets are by definition ordered. The modern sociological idea of a market in which actors orient to each other, rather than acting like economic monads, was introduced by White (1981). Moreover, his work is the most important statement of a relational approach (Emirbayer 1997) within economic sociology. White presents an idea of how producer markets are ordered, which depends on the social structure, and more specifically, on the niches that actors (producers) occupy in relation to each other in these markets. In other markets, as those presented by the neoclassical economics, order is based on assumption of homogenous commodities in a market in which the price mechanism clears.

White's market approach assumes the emergence of a quality standard. What I call esthetic markets are characterized by lack of standards or fixed values.[1] Markets, more generally, can be ordered according to the principle of status or standard (Aspers 2008). In some markets, the items sold are so entrenched that one may speak of a quality-standard. This means that one can measure all goods against this scale. In what is called status markets, the social structure is a more entrenched social construction than the quality standard. Thus, in what way can one speak of order when there is no God, and no principle of order? Order in aesthetic markets (Aspers 2001; Aspers 2005:147-150), in which aesthetic goods are traded that lack an "inherit" quality, is a result of status ranks on the two side of the markets coming together. When "buyers" and "sellers" with high status come together, high status "goods" are produced. In other

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[1] It was with the development of the aesthetic sphere (Weber 1946), that the idea of a standards of evaluation begun to be questioned. The centrality of aesthetics as a "principle" of order is, above all, discussed by Friedrich Nietzsche (Aspers 2007); to him all propositions are "aesthetic" as there is no independent principle of order (or truth).

words, the order in aesthetic markets is determined by the relations among actors. The idea of status markets or aesthetic markets put the search light on the relational approach even stronger than the idea of producer market, as they are relational but they also lack any "quality"- standards. These assumptions are not always explicit, but they are always the background of how the researcher thinks about what is studied. I concentrate, in other words, on the issue of the foundation of these relations. Foundation refers to ontology, or the question what is (cf. Heidegger [1957] 1997; [1927] 2001). I will investigate, and this must be seen as a preliminary investigation, the ontology of Martin Heidegger, to find out to which extent his work can serve as an ontological foundation for the relational sociology.

Order, Identity and Essence of Man

I define order as the predictability of human activities and the stability of social components in relation to each other.[2] Also people's identities are "social components" that have to be ordered, as the same time as one of course only can talk of a *social* construction (Hacking 1999) given that many people have similar references. Man, one may say, holds a special role, as both part of the world but with capacity to reflect upon herself (cf. Heidegger [1927] 2001:25). It is the notion of identity, and more explicitly the human identity, which must be looked at with special attention, as the very idea of order only makes sense in relation to human activities. In other words, this paper does not assume an objectively existing world that is independent of human activities, and which could be described by scientific theories.

It follows that any investigation leads back to the question of what man is. It would of course be easy to follow the traditional ideas of how one defines the essence of man, as, for example, a "rational human who has a language." In this paper, I use the relational approach. White, as one of the most prominent relational thinkers, presents an

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[2] Hayek has provided a definition that to some extent is similar. He defines order as, "a state of affairs in which a multiplicity of elements of various kinds are so related to each other that we may learn from our acquaintance with some spatial or temporal part of the whole to form a correct expectations concerning the rest, or at least expectations which have a good chance of proving correct" (Hayek 1973:36).

idea of how identities are constituted in relation to each other.[3] The more profound question is to see this at the level of ontology, but I will start with the question order at the "ontic" level of social science theories (cf. Heidegger [1927] 2001). The ontic level refers to the "objects" that are presumed or "found" by individual sciences. The ontological question refers to the meaning of being. I will try to show that this ontological question opens up for an ontology that nails down what is "relational."

The Relational Approach to Order

How shall we understand this constitution of identities in relation to each other? Moreover, what is the relation between "things" and humans? The father of modern network theory, Harrison White, is in the US the most central thinker when it comes to what Emirbayer calls "relational sociology" (Azarian 2003). White's most important book is called *Identity and Control*. It is published in two editions, the first with the subtitle *A Structural Theory of Social Action* (White 1992), and the second with another subtitle *How Social Formations Emerge* (White 2008). These two editions will be the main sources in this paper for understanding and analyzing White. White is a structuralist who tries to theorize how to get action. Another central idea of White is that order emerges out of noise. He argues that identities seek control, and in the social process of gaining control, their identities emerge as effects of the control process.

White claims that his theory of social formations (disciplines), or social molecules, is a general theory, which operates at the so-called middle range level (White 1992:xii). White says that these disciplines, which are social formations, are the smallest units of analysis. They are, moreover, social constructions. He talks of three forms of social molecules: arena, interface and councils, but this is unlikely to be the final outline (cf. Azarian 2003:117-125, 185-187). Each of these disciplines evolve together with ordering (White 1992:28). Molecules are seen as "self reproducing" structural contexts, which sustain identities (Leifer/White 1987:85; White 1992:22). His analysis is centred on two concepts, identity and control. Identities are created as a result of interaction in the

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[3] Emirbayer (1997) has identified a number of other sociologists, e.g., Pierre Bourdieu and also the symbolic interactionists, who are relational sociologists.

social molecules. Or as the second editions begins, "Identities spring up out of efforts at control in turbulent context" (White 2008:1). The control is made in relation to other identities, and this can only be understood in relation to the "contingencies" that the identities imply. For an identity, other identities make up the social reality, which it more or less has to take for granted. An identity is defined as "any source of action not explicable from biophysical regularities, and to which observers can attribute meaning" (White 1992:6). One identity, and one identity's emergence, can only be understood in relation others.

Identity, rather than persons, which White (1992:24) sees as a myth, is the starting point of the analysis. Persons, including the associated components of preference and goals, are derived from social actions, rather than being the cause of these actions, which is the myth of rational choice theory (White 1992:8). White focuses on the "personal" identity, which is the result of actors switching between different netdomes (White 2008:7). He sees persons coming into "existence and are formed as the result of overlaps among identities from distinct network populations" (White 2008:129). One may see this as a form of passive identity formation, in which one identity can only be understood as a result of other identities (and their need to control). The identity evolves in social interaction; it is here that the most central idea of "relational sociology" appears in White's thinking. Ties emerge between identities, and make up networks. Ties and identities are inseparable, though ties can be direct or indirect (White 2008:20-36). Identities can, moreover, couple and decouple from a network. This means that one is taking part as coupled, and stop taking part (for the time being) by decoupling. Thus the tie remains after decoupling, which presupposes coupling (White 2008:36).

In his sociology of markets, to take one example, actors watch each other, and it is the relational structure, of a "dozen or so" actors that constitute each other's identities as a result of their interaction with the consumers. White defines markets as "self-reproducing social structures among specific cliques of firms and other actors who evolve roles from observing each other's behavior" (White 1981:518). Each firm focuses on holding a niche in its own market, which it does in relation to other firms, some of which become known as high-quality producers, whereas others tend to be low-quality producers, who sell their product for less money (White 1993:162). The relational

approach, in sum, says that man is a result of his relations. But what is the starting point in this process? Or put in different words, what is the foundation of this argument? To analyze this question takes us back to the issue of ontology and relational sociology.

A Relational Ontology?

Above I have outlined White's theory, and tried to focus on the central relation and process that constitute identities. This is the level of ontic science that presupposes the regional ontology of a science like sociology.[4] In this section, I will look at the ontological presuppositions of White's theory. More specifically, I will address the following question: To what extent has White a relational ontology? In pursuing this question, I begin with the notion of identity.

What does the sociologically produced identity presuppose ontologically? The following quotation suggests an answer: "[W]ithout footing, identities would jump around in a social space without meaning thus without communication" (White 2008:1). It is claimed by White that the footing is the result of control projects by the identities. Though I actually believe that White, if pushed, would say that these "identities" are not identities, or not "real identities," the quotation nonetheless reveals what I see as a non-relational ontology. In other words, the assumption is that somehow the "non-social identities", though this is a contradiction in terms, start to interact, and out of this some order is generated that create social contingencies, relations and thereby stabilized identities.

It is, according to White, the "chaos and accident" that are the "sources and bases of identity" (White 1992:4). One must, however, ask if it at make sense to start with this original situation of noise or chaos, out of which identities, social structure, meaning and so on emerge. What does it presuppose? White analyzes, though "for simplicity," "identities as tagged to individual human beings" (White 2008:10). So apparently, something is tied to the pre-existing and, I assume, atomistic units called humans. My

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[4] It is moreover, not possible to reduce ontology to epistemology, as too many do (Reed 2008).

interpretation of White's approach is that some pre-existing units are endowed with meaning.

My point, to conclude this section, is that the abovementioned approaches, including White's, are based on ontological assumptions, which none of them discussed. Harrison White has, without doubt, a relational sociology, but it is less clear if there is a relational ontology. In my view, the relational approach lacks an ontological foundation. This may partly be because sociologists have never fully understood the character of the question, as our tools block us from posing it, and fundamentally makes us unable to address it. This leaves us with at least two questions. The first is to understand the ontological question, and the second is to ask if the relational sociology could be based on Heidegger's work on ontology. It is in this ontology Heidegger sees that positive sciences, such as psychology, biology and sociology, are founded (Heidegger [1927] 2001:49).

Heidegger and the Question of Ontology

Though Emirbayer has discussed the relational approach, it is clear that he does not acknowledge Heidegger.[5] In this section, I will briefly draw on Heidegger and try to show how his discussion of ontology could be useful as its point at ontology for the relational sociology.

Ontology is the central question in Heidegger's most important work *Sein und Zeit* (Time and Being) (Heidegger [1927] 2001). He says that this question is forgotten and that it has been covered up, essentially by the "theories," in the broadest sense, we have developed. Sociology ought to be seen as one force that has contributed, though essentially unintentional, to cover up the ontological question. Heidegger's discussion of the way the ontological question is covered up is an apt description of the situation in sociology. I fear that one reason why sociologists have said so little on ontology, or simply reduced it into epistemology, is because the question has been misunderstood.

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[5] The most likely reason is that Heidegger is barely known by sociologists. Heidegger has sometimes been compared with pragmatist thinkers, though this is not correct (Frede 2006:65-66), as they address, at the most, ontology through epistemology.

Many sociologists talk of ontology (Reed 2008), but the issue is seldom defined or analyzed.

The most general definition is the study of being, i.e., what there is. Heidegger's analysis can shed further light on the question. He begins the discussion in *Time and Being* by analyzing and commenting on the question itself. To analyze ontology one cannot build on the existing theories, as they are part of the problem (Heidegger 1994:109-114). Heidegger suggests that phenomenology is the tool that is apt for understanding this basic question.

Heidegger's method is phenomenological-hermeneutical and can be divided into three steps, reduction, construction and deconstruction. Reduction means to go back to the question of being, construction refers to the study of being, and deconstruction as it refers to the starting point of the analysis (Heidegger 1975:28-31). Destruction does not mean to destroy, but to take apart (Abbau). We must start with our conception (preconception) of what we are interested in, to get to the phenomenon. Heidegger does not want to deconstruct ontology, but the historically produced doctrines of being ([1927] 2001:22-23); deconstruction is a concrete way of doing this (Heidegger 1994:118).[6] According to this method, man or what he calls Dasein, is the centre of the analysis. To analyze "the world" without starting with man is nonsense.

Without going deep into Heidegger's work, it is clear that the starting point of the analysis of the ontology is man in-the-world. Man is in the world, and cannot be thought of as living "outside" this world. It is, consequently, not the case that one first opens up a window to the world, reaches out, and builds a relation with the "atoms," "monads," or "egos" that are also reaching out from their "houses" (Heidegger [1927] 2001:81).[7] In fact, the idea of "ready-made" units that, somehow, are there, and become social as the same time as they create a social world, is an idea that many Western social scientists have taken over from Descartes, Leibniz and Husserl. In sociology, this idea is common,

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[6] The historically created understanding, that is what we call tradition and "knowledge" has its root in Greek thinking, on which later developments were built. Thus, our contemporary understanding is built on old ideas as well as taken for granted logical principles (Heidegger 1994:16-17). Also theology is built on historical ideas of being, and, for example, stressed "substance" (Frede 2006:45).

[7] Heidegger's approach is different from Husserl's. Husserl stresses the role of mental acts and the constitution of meanings as the foundation for what we see as the world (Srubar 2001:178-179).

and we recognize it in the works of other phenomenologists, such as Alfred Schütz ([1932] 1976), and in the works of the two most well-known social constructivists, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann ([1966] 1991). Rational choice is yet another approach that starts with this "egological" assumption, which essentially means that the entire question of being is taken for granted, and the task of science is only to elaborate on how social relations are constructed. Some people who use network "theory" more as a method, assume, in a similar fashion, that the only thing that matter is the form of contact, or the content of the form of relation that is of interest. The nodes, the actors, constitution, do not change. Realism, finally, has been the assumption of many social scientists, because this is what their methods "demand".

Heidegger sees things in a radically different way. He starts with the fundamental ontology of man, which is the baseline of other ontologies. He argues that there is no naked subject that is "already there" (Heidegger [1927] 2001:116). Heidegger starts, in contrast, from the idea of what he calls Being, or in German, Dasein ("Dasein"=being there). Dasein is no strange creature, but what we are; it is mine (Heidegger [1927] 2001:114). That man, according to Heidegger, is already in the world (Heidegger [1927] 2001:53-60) is what, ontologically, makes man what he is. Man is from the very "beginning" part of a larger whole, the world (Heidegger [1927] 2001). This is a constitute relation. Heidegger presents a holism in which the constitution of man must, on the one hand, be understood in relation to "tools" (Zeuge) that we use. These are ready-to-hand (Zuhanden) and make up categories, which refers to the question "what". The form, on the other hand, that is special of humans is called existential (not to be mixed up with existence) (Heidegger [1927] 2001:44-45), and this refers to the question "who". Humans have a form of being that is, as indicated above, more profound than "objects;" they have a special role.

Let us begin with "objects." They are only "discovered" by Dasein as a result of what Dasein does. This, hence, is not a Kantian idea that we discover the "things" as existing independently of people; in fact, the idea of "thing" does, strictly speaking, not apply in Heidegger's work. Objects are not there before Dasein is there, but are constituted by the relation to man and to other things that also are in the world. Furthermore, we have to do with a whole: each tool refers to another: the hammer to the nail, to the panting

that hangs on the nail on the wall, which refers to the person who views it. Moreover, what is present-at-hand (Vorhanden), and what typically stand in the search light of any science, like stones, trees and so on, is only discovered indirectly. The trees in the forest that are used to make fire in the stove, as timber for the construction of the barn in the field, for pulp to be sold for money, and by walking in the forest one begins to see the difference between kinds of trees as they "have" meaning to us. The field belongs to persons of a farm, and the farmer cultivates the land and so on. This "Zeugsummenhang" or wholeness of our surrounding world (Umwelt) of tools in a wide sense, suggests that one shall not see "things" atomistically, or as existing prior to Dasein. What we have around us refers to other humans' activities, though we may not know them as individuals. One may say that the world is essentially a social world, in which what we have around us refers to our Mitseins (being-with (other people)).[8]

Out of this ready-to-hand relationships follows, to take another example, that space is not to be understood as an objective world, but as something that is grounded in this "practical" encounter with the world. Projects of "knowledge," "science," "sociology" and so on depends on us, and to forget this throws us back into scientism that already presupposes being, knowledge and an ontology; to follow this track is to be in the Gestell ("stand") of science.

So far, I have discussed man's relation to things, but only indirectly discussed the relation to other men.[9] Man is not always concrete. Other humans are also there, and this is a existential relation of being with (Mitsein) and the world is a essentially world with others (Mitwelt) (Heidegger [1927] 2001:118). Individuation and individual perceptions, ideas and so on, if I am correct, are only derivatives of the "social world" that constitute our being (Heidegger 2001:334). Thus, though the idea of relations between man and the world is essential, one must see how it connects to what sociologists usually find even more interesting, the idea of das Man (They). Heidegger argues that man is not an island. In fact, man, or as I will say, Dasein, is only possible as a relation with others (Heidegger 2001:333; [1927] 2001:125). Dasein, as I have said, is not a subject, and Heidegger, in trying to make his point clear, sees it as "between"

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[8] One may here discuss the relation to the Actor-Network-Theory (e.g., Latour 1996).
[9] Heidegger says that man, in his everyday-life, understand himself as what he does (Heidegger [1927] 2001:239).

subject and object (Heidegger [1927] 2001:132). But he, of course, means something more than simply saying that Dasein is "in between" two existing things. The theories of "subject-object-relations," that have framed so much of the sociological discussion, is in Heidegger's view a result of Dasein, it is a possibility among many, but this relation is not basic, and cannot account for the ontological question. It is, as it were, an ontic question. The "in-between" is the constitutive relation, not the "objects".

Consequently, to be in-the-world is essentially to be in the world with others. Though also a car is in-the-world, it has a different relation to Dasein has to it Mitseins. Dasein, to further separate it from the more common idea of "subject" is dispersed (zerstreut) and must find itself (Heidegger 2001:333). Not only is Dasein ontologically dispersed, it is also dispersed and fragmented in its own activities: caring about something, doing something, questioning and other kinds of activities (Heidegger [1927] 2001:56-57). This idea of fragmentation corresponds with what White says about how persons are constituted due to multiple identities in several domains. What Heidegger says is not that Dasein first is a unit that then falls apart, it is rather the other way around: the dispersion is the condition of the unity of man. Heidegger says, moreover, that one is given to one self (Heidegger [1927] 2001:129). The "subjective" feelings, empathy and much more are only derivatives of the more basic Mitsein relation. Heidegger says that the "I-You" as well as the sex-relation presupposes the we-relation of Mitsein (being with) (Heidegger 2001:145-146).

The others are what make up the less concrete das Man (they). To be with others does not call for direct presence of people. Heidegger is, in contrast, stressing how we are affected by what "one does." The normative priming is for Heidegger not something that enters the "inner sphere" of the subject; it is an essential relation. Thus, we cannot, "even make sense of a nonsocial Dasein" (Dreyfus 1991:148). Each of us is part of they, but they is always there; one behaves as "one does," read newspaper as one does, enjoy oneself as one does and so on. This constitutes the public and Heidegger even uses the notion of dictatorship to account for the relation between the one and the many. It is vital to see that Heidegger does not only focus on the direct relations, but argues that we are caught up in a socially determined way. Our thinking and practice, or for short, being, is constituted in relation to socially praxis and conventions (Heidegger

[1927] 2001:126-130). Das Man is part of the constitution of Dasein, and Dasein is dispersed "in" das Man.

Conclusion (preliminary)

I have argued that the question of order is central in sociology. In aesthetic markets, this problem is made clear, as they lack stable values or standards. Order is maintained by the social structure, or put in other words, by the set of social relations in which actors are positioned. White's approach is seen as the most developed relational sociology. Still, it is not entirely clear to which extent its foundation is relational. Heidegger's ontological work is not directed at the specific problems of the individual sciences (Srubar 2001:184; Heidegger [1927] 2001:312-313). This should not stop us from finding ideas in Heidegger's work that can help to improve sociology. In this paper, I have tried to draw on Heidegger's ontology, which includes many possible ontic positions, to develop one such ontic statement, namely relational sociology.

I would say that the idea of das Man and being together with others, the importance of "in between," the deconstruction of the subject-object relation, the rejection of mentalism, and much more, could be used for developing the relational sociology. Heidegger discusses the "relation" and the "constitution" of Dasein and "tools" and how this is the foundation for the world, and this could be further developed. The relation to others, not the least in forms of ties, could also be discussed much more in the light of Heidegger. I have here not been able to talk of how Heidegger sees the world as passively coming to Dasein. Dasein is born into the world with culture and so on, and not actively a creator.

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