

# social objects. from intentionality to documentality

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SOCIAL OBJECTS. AN OVERVIEW

IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

The idea for this issue of the *Rivista di Estetica* comes from a conference that was held at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, June 2011. The question that the speakers were asked to tackle was “What keeps society together?”. At least since John Searle’s 1995 book, *The Construction of Social Reality*, a popular answer to that question has been that collective intentionality lies at bottom of all manifestations of social reality – from interactions in informal groups to cooperation and competition in institutionalized situations. Several problems and criticisms have arisen in subsequent philosophical debates. On the one hand, there is no agreement on what collective intentionality is. Such a disagreement concerns not only philosophy, but also other areas of investigation in which the notion has received attention – such as psychology and economic theory. On the other hand, a social ontology based on intentionality faces severe difficulties in accounting for the resiliency and opacity of many social phenomena, and – more generally – it is at odds with our realist intuitions with respect to the social world. In this framework, Maurizio Ferraris, starting with his 2009 book *Documentality. Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces*, has suggested replacing the notion of “collective intentionality” with the notion of “documentality”: the basis of social reality is the inscription of acts and the social objects that follow. Instead of the rule *X counts as Y in C* (which Searle himself acknowledged as flawed in his 2010 book, *Making the Social Reality*) we should have the rule *Object = Inscribed Act*. Social objects are the result of a social act (one that involves at least two

persons or a person and a deputed machine), which is characterised by being recorded on a piece of paper, in a computer file or even simply in the minds of the people involved. From this more realist standpoint, the social sphere is filled up by social objects – such as marriages, promises, bets, parties, revolutions and economic crises – which are more important for us than stones, trees and coconuts, since a considerable part of our happiness or unhappiness depends on them. Yet we do not always take them into the proper account, and even more rarely we ask ourselves what they are made of – taking them seriously only when we lose our wallet or train ticket, our passport or credit card or when we set to searching, paying, phoning, writing e-mails and queuing in all sorts of offices.

### *1. The Advantages of the Documental Approach*

The essays and the critical notes in this issue target, from different perspectives, topics that are related to the shift of perspective on the analysis of social and institutional reality mentioned above. Among the essays included, three directly discuss the advantages of the documental approach for explaining social reality. In the opening article, *Documentality: A Theory of Social Reality*, Maurizio Ferraris and Giuliano Torrenco set forth the general principle of the theory of documentality as a theory of social reality. The various social objects that inhabit our everyday world – for instance, institutions, social roles, promises, marriages, corporations, and enterprises – are ontologically quite peculiar. On the one hand, we commonly speak and think of such entities as if they existed on a par with entities such as tables and persons. On the other hand, there is a clear link between what people think and how people behave and the social domain. Ferraris and Torrenco argue that the widespread “reductionist” approach in social ontology fails to account for both those aspects of social reality. While social ontologies are based on the idea that collective intentionality grounds social reality, the theory of documentality considers documents – and more generally records of social acts – as the basis of social reality. This change of perspective constitutes a crucial difference from the reductionist approach. In particular, the theory of documentality allows us to account for the ontological variety of complex social realities such as ours, while overcoming the problems raised by putting the content of collective intentions at the fundamental level of social reality. By analyzing the social world through the characteristic relations of ontological dependence between social objects in general and documents, and between documents and shared stances of acceptance of procedures that originate them, the authors argue – *vs.* Searle’s view – that the *content* of shared intentions does not have a constitutional role.

One interesting consequence of the change of perspective on social ontology entailed by the documental approach is that social objects require memory to exist. The centrality of memory in social reality is apparent in the gigantic explosion of the means for writing and recording that characterizes the contemporary world. Modern writing tools reveal to be not so much means for communicating

(for that, old cell phones were quite adequate), but rather means for ensuring the fundamental social good, namely recording.

In Andrea Lavazza's contribution, *Documentality, Emotions, and Motivations. Why We Need a Kind of Internal Memory* the relationship between memory as a criterion of personal identity, emotions, and social reality is tackled. Lavazza argues that documents – understood as inscriptions – make up our external memory in a peculiar way: they constitute both a stable anchor and a reference-point for our personal transformations over time. There is, however, also an internal memory, residing in our brain. This is partly based on external documentation; but, of course, it is not exclusively tied to it. Rather, it evolves dynamically over time, in part reflecting ethical debates that we carry on within ourselves and that are also influenced by emotional factors, for example as we try to erase memories that are unpleasant. If, for example, the internal memory of some offense against our person is erased, then the motivation to testify against those who offended against us no longer exists or is greatly reduced, and this is so even though the documents that record the offense remain. Our motivations here depend on the emotional factor in our memories; once this has been lost – even though the autobiographical, episodic memory still remains – the value-significance of the event fades from our view, and the impulse to act disappears with it. Emotions are in large part responsible for creating a bond with documents; they make it possible for our internal and external memories to have significance.

In *Che cosa esiste fuori dal testo?*, Enrico Terrone discusses the relations between the notion of documentality and the traditional notions of causality, intentionality, and normativity. His aim is to point out a problem for the theory as advanced by Ferraris 2009, and to propose a solution. Terrone points out that the concept of trace – which is at the core of the documental approach – rests upon an account of causality according to which traces are constituted by causal chains. Given that documents are a specific kind of traces, a criterion is needed to differentiate documental chains from others kinds of causal chains. However, Ferraris traces intentionality back to documentality, thereby preventing his theory from using intentionality as a criterion of this sort (on pain of circularity). The problem is that without such a criterion, the theory of documentality risks going back to Derrida's claim according to which nothing exists outside the text. The author suggests two strategies that can allow documentality to avoid this risk.

## 2. *The Remains of Collective Intentionality*

A second group of contributions deals with the notion of intentionality and, more particularly, with collective intentionality: namely, the capability to «assign a new status to some phenomenon [creating] a new fact, an institutional fact, a new fact created by human agreement»<sup>1</sup>. The Searlian version of this notion,

<sup>1</sup> Reinach 1995: 55.

according to Ferraris<sup>2</sup>, suffers from three severe defects as an overall explanation of social reality: «The first is that there are highly codified practices, such as military or sporting or dance training that are explicitly aimed at promoting collective intentionality, which must therefore be anything but a natural *prius*»; the second is that collective intentionality is unable to explain change; and third that it does not explain choice or decision. «If there were only collective intentionality – writes Ferraris – we could replace elections and opinion polls with the simple interrogation of a single individual, perhaps just by examining our own consciences.» Is the notion of collective individuality irremediably flawed? Could it be somehow conciliated with the notion of documentality? A critique to the intentionality-based approach to social reality is discussed in Stephan Zimmermann's *Is Society Built on Collective Intentions? A Response to Searle*. Zimmermann starts with arguing against Searle's understanding of the difference between social and natural reality as supporting a wrong ontological hierarchy. According to the author, social ontology is mistakenly designed by Searle as a domain-specific ontology subjected to the ontology of nature. In particular, Searle's notion of collective intentionality, which lies at the very heart of his doctrine of social and institutional facts, stands for a wrong objectification of the social, for it is highly questionable whether the social is really exhausted by being the content of our action plans and truth-apt thoughts.

In *Collective Intentionality, Rationality, and Institutions*, Ivan Mladenovic critically re-examines the notion of collective intentionality as a core notion of social ontology. After a reconstruction and a criticism of Searle's understanding of social ontology and his construal of the key notions of imposition of function, collective intentionality, and constitutional rule, the author contrasts Searle's understanding of institutional reality with the one based on evolutionary game theory. Taking into account that Searle describes his position as naturalistic, Mladenovic examines to what extent the alternative approach based on rational game theory, also naturalistic in its character, can address certain problems, which remain insolvable in the framework of Searle's theory. Enlarging the field of investigation to various philosophical account of intentionality, in *Dissenso e Oggetto*, Markus Gabriel considers the role of disagreement. The author argues that facts and things can only exist in what can be called a "field of sense". Given that there necessarily is a plurality of fields of sense, all facts and things can be manifested in different modalities of sense. Objectivity is thus conceptually tied to the existence of a plurality of fields of sense. Accordingly, disagreement is not a contingent feature of our discursive practices, but a reflection of the objective and public structure of facts. In other terms, dissent is an ontological category.

Finally, in *Reciprocal Illumination: Epistemological Necessity or Ontological Destiny? Some Preliminary Remarks*, Jovan Babić highlights the epistemic advantages of the documental approach, which – unlike any approach based on the centrality

<sup>2</sup>Ferraris 2009: 4.1.2.

of the notion of intentionality for social reality – can easily explain how it is possible that social and institutional objects exist independently from anyone's knowledge of them. However, the author also argues for a conciliatory point of view, in which the role of intentionality in social ontology is not diminished by the relevance of documental practices.

### 3. *Foundation Matters*

In a third group of papers, the very bases of any theory of social reality are discussed. In *Charter and Institution*, Petar Bojanić addresses the nature of the Charter as the most fundamental document in the institutional sphere. Starting with Hobbes's distinction between law and charter in the *Leviathan* («Charters are donations of the sovereign; and not laws, but exemptions from law»), the author examines and defends the connection between institution and charter, constructing the origin of the institution from privilege as a gift of the sovereign, and showing that the institution ensures freedom. Sebastian Ostritsch's contribution is also devoted to free will vs. social normativity. In *Hegel and Searle on the Necessity of Social Reality*, the author compares Searle's and Hegel's answers to the question of how humans – conceived as free beings – live in an essentially normative social world of institutions. The result of the comparison is that the Hegelian *Philosophy of Right* offers a better explanation of the necessity of an essentially normative social reality than Searle's account. Also, according to Hegel's view, social reality cannot be understood as something merely constructed or illusionary.

The two remaining contributions of this section, by Ivo Kara-Pešić and Marius Bartmann respectively, are more focused on the bases of documentality. In *Liberi dal presente. Le basi cognitive del mondo sociale*, Ivo Kara-Pešić defends an approach departing from the assumption that social objects are strongly dependent on subjects, but are not subjective – as claimed by most social ontologists (among which Searle and Ferraris alike). Taking into account some recent researches on the human cognitive architecture that point at metacognition as the foundation of social world, the author sets forth a dynamic picture, starting from the complex and circular relationship between human mind and natural/social environment. Both Searle's and Ferraris's accounts would remain anchored to a static distinction such as subject/object, science/experience; natural/social and, in doing so, they would miss the essential dynamic complexity of our being in the world. In a quite similar vein, Marius Bartmann in *On the Very Idea of Imposition. Some Remarks on Searle's Social Ontology*, criticizes as simplistic the subject/object opposition, arguing against the idea that social objects can be constructed as nothing more than physical objects on which we impose functions that are merely subjective and therefore external to them. The author defends a Wittgensteinian point of view that allows us to describe our relation to social objects while overcoming the static boundaries of the opposition between subjects and external world,

claiming that «we are *always already* engaged with persons, things and states of affairs, the access to which is permeated with sense».

#### 4. Case Studies

The last group of contributions apply social ontology to particular objects, investigating their nature in the light of the theories which this issue revolves around. In *La création d'un nouvel espace social: Internet et la documentalité / Internet comme documentalité*, Isabelle Pariente-Butterlin focuses on the Internet and the “virtual world” as a central case study. The opposition between «*in real life*» and «*in virtual life*» is often used, in order to distinguish between two parts of the word. We are supposed to live a virtual life on the Internet, behind the lightened screen of our computer, while we are supposed to live a real life in the real world. However, the author maintains that the Internet is not a virtual world, and that it is a part of the actual world. What supports this claim is that there are causal links between the Internet and the so-called real world. If we follow David Lewis in assuming that worlds that are causally linked to each other cannot be different worlds, it follows that the “virtual world” and the “real world” are not distinct. This thesis has interesting consequences for social ontology, and, if true, it could be easily justified within the documental approach. It is an essential part of the theory of documentality that what one writes has a causal power. Hence, if the Internet is fundamentally an instrument of writing and recording, it follows that the “virtual world” can't fail to be a part of the actual world.

A second case study is that of biological species: Are they natural objects or what? Although species could seem *prima facie* paradigmatic natural objects, several doubts have been raised on their ontological status, starting with the popular claim made by Darwin, in the second chapter of the *Origin of Species*, according to which the term “species” is «arbitrarily given, for the sake of convenience, to a set of individuals closely resembling each other». Elena Casetta, in «Are Species Social Objects? Some Notes», confronts Searle's and Ferraris' social ontologies on the ground of the issue whether species are natural or social objects. She concludes that the folkbiological notion of species can plausibly be given a social construal.

Finally, Sanja Milutinović, in *Documenting Sex and / or Gender. Montrer patte blanche as Ambiguous Expression of Proving One's Credentials* takes as a departure point La Fontaine's allegory of «*montrer patte blanche*», namely to provide evidence of identity, to face the problem of what it means to document sex and / or gender. The author highlights the problems that raise in the binary system of presenting sex or gender on official identification documents, and confronts it with the introduction of a third possibility – that of gender indeterminacy – that has been implemented in the last few years in certain democracies.

The variety of approaches and perspectives adopted in the present volume, as well as the multifariousness of topics here addressed, witnesses the great vitality

of social ontology. Our guess is that such vitality is destined to increase in parallel to, and partly because of, the progressive complexification of contemporary societies. A complexification that includes, on the one hand, an increasing presence of recordings – mainly in electronic form – which have to be understood, managed, and regulated, and on the other hand, persons and collectivities whose lives depend on those very recordings. If our guess is right, in the next future, social ontologists will have, if possible, even more work to do.

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