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**The concept of relation in methodological
individualism and holism:
a reply to a functionalist critique**

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Abstract: In an article entitled ‘Agency, functionalism and all that. A Sraffian view’, published in this issue of the *Journal of Philosophical Economics*, Cesaratto (2024) has proposed a functionalist methodology to study the relation between agency and structure. In doing so, he made some criticisms of an article of ours that had previously appeared in the same journal in volume XV, entitled ‘Towards a unity of sense: a critical analysis of the concept of relation in methodological individualism and holism in economics’ (Ianulardo and Stella 2022). We take Cesaratto’s critique as an invitation to a dialogue on the methodology of the social sciences and we would like to clarify some aspects in response to his critique. In essence, we clarify that our article consisted of two parts, which we can call *pars destruens* and *pars construens*, respectively. In the first, we show that while the *determinate* identity of the individual postulated by methodological individualism cannot stand without reference to difference, the *relational* methodology postulated by methodological holism requires its terms (i.e., individuals) to stand as a relation. In the second part, we make it clear that the *sense of unity* to which we have referred is not represented by an actual community, but by the *drive towards unity* that is common to all individuals when they intend to form a social entity (group, class, nation, party, institution etc.). Every unification makes it possible to shed new light on the moments that led to it. In this sense, we have spoken of a *teleological perspective*, since the end point allows us to re-signify the intermediate moments that led to it.

Keywords: methodological individualism, methodological holism, teleology, relation, unity.

Introduction

In this issue of the journal, Professor Cesaratto revisited an article of ours that had previously appeared in the same journal in volume XV, entitled ‘Towards a unity of sense: a critical analysis of the concept of relation in methodological individualism and holism in economics’ (Ianulardo and Stella 2022).

In his article, Cesaratto argues that organicism or functionalism needs to be rescued from the criticism that has been levelled at them, in particular by the currents of methodological individualism, and defends a functionalist conception of society that safeguards the actions and aspirations of individuals, even though these are to be seen as historically conditioned (‘informed by historical conditioning circumstances’, p. 48). He summarises his position in an incisive manner by arguing that ‘agency must be historically contextualised’ (Cesaratto 2024, p. 48).

We will not discuss Cesaratto’s analyses of the classical labour theory of value and the production of economic surplus as developed by Sraffa and, earlier, by Marx. There is an endless literature on these themes, from the classical studies of Böhm-Bawerk (1896) to the more recent interpretations of the theory of value by Napoleoni (1976) and Ricossa (1981 and 1991) and others. We will not discuss this issue in this article, as we did not deal with the genesis of economic value or its determination in our previous article, although we believe that some clues can also be drawn from our philosophical discourse on this question. Instead, we will focus on the more strictly philosophical question that we raised in our previous article and that Cesaratto has carefully considered.

Our article is structured as follows: in the first part, we summarise the ‘functionalist’ thesis as presented by Cesaratto; in the following section, we present the criticisms that Cesaratto has raised against our position. In the subsequent sections, we present our refutations of Cesaratto’s functionalist position, distinguishing our argument into a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens*, and finally we conclude with some remarks that serve as an invitation to dialogue with all scholars interested in a philosophical approach to economics.

Cesaratto's proposal: functionalism as an explanatory methodology

We note, first, that, in presenting the Marxian functionalist thesis, Cesaratto, while rejecting Popperian criticisms, recognises, at least in part, the validity of the criticisms of analytical Marxists such as John Elster, who assert the role of individual choices in the constitution of social phenomena (*ibid.*, p. 51). From the outset, therefore, the author clarifies his thesis by stating that his 'idea is that agency is historically defined within material relations of production, and in this it finds its intimate connection with structure' (*ibid.*, p. 52).

It follows, as anticipated above, that he intends to defend 'a functionalist view of society, while giving space to individual intentional action and aspirations, albeit informed by historical conditioning circumstances that affect agency' (*ibid.*, p. 52). The conclusion, then, can only be the rejection of an explanatory method based on individual choices independent of the social context ('unrelated to the social context', *ibid.*, p. 52) and the consequent affirmation that 'agency must be historically defined and studied' (*ibid.*, p. 52). We agree with this last sentence because, although within a radically different conception from the one put forward here, we had argued in favour of precisely this aspect from a philosophical point of view when speaking of the theoretical limitations of the reductionist model, both in the section entitled 'The concept of relation in methodological individualism or why individualism needs reference to the other' and in the section entitled 'The theoretical limitations of the reductionist model' (Ianulardo and Stella 2022, pp. 212-218). However, our critique went further and also showed the circularity of the *relationalism* underlying holism (or systemism or functionalism, which, from the conceptual point of view we are interested in, are all united by the same systemic-relational conception).

Cesaratto's critique

Before considering our proposal, Cesaratto dwells on Popper's critique of historicism and rejects it by drawing on the considerations of the Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, pointing out that for the latter, the understanding of historical phenomena requires an understanding of the past as a 'unitary sum of

human behaviour' (Cesaratto 2024, p. 54), since only if the object of historical understanding remains 'unitary', is an understanding of past events possible. A historical event – Cesaratto argues in agreement with Thompson – must be understood in its entirety rather than broken down into a 'piecemeal' research.

Cesaratto then presents the 'functionalist' conception. This method of explaining social phenomena 'explains individual behaviour as part of social or institutional behaviours functional to the working of the whole system' (*ibid.*, p. 55). Therefore, the author concludes, 'any system's component, in other words, is explained by the logic of the whole' (*ibid.*, p. 55). However, this 'whole', in polemic with the structuralist Marxist analysis of Althusser, should not be understood as a structural force that suppresses agency, but should leave room for the dialectic between social being and social consciousness, otherwise – echoing Thompson – history would become a 'process without a subject' (*ibid.*, p. 59). Thompson, on the other hand, points out that history is the result of 'vectors' representing individual agency, which in turn are conditioned by class membership, which, he argues, would legitimise an explanation based on class agency. Here, however, one can note that either the 'vector components' represented by individual agency are determined by class membership, the latter being understood as independent of the former, but this would hardly be compatible with the above criticism of the theses of structuralist Marxism à la Althusser, nor would it avoid the 'economic determinism' that Cesaratto believes was Sraffa's gain (p. 60), or else we are faced with a circular explanation from a genetic point of view, since the formation of social class would itself be the product of the actions of individuals. Cesaratto seems here to distance himself from Thompson, for whom class does not precede class struggle, and the latter is the product of subjectivity recognised in class membership.

Thus, Cesaratto seems to criticise both Thompson's subjectivist approach, which holds that the existence of a class is dependent on class consciousness, and Althusser's structuralist (objectivist) approach. However, the solution proposed by Anderson (1980), which Cesaratto seems to support, only shifts the problem, not the logical substance of the discourse, since Anderson argues that 'classes are constituted by modes of production and not vice versa' (Anderson 1980, p. 55). Indeed, one might ask whether these modes of production are to be regarded as 'autonomous, supra-historical entities' independent of individuals, or whether

they in turn depend on individual agency and consciousness, but we will not dwell on this point, except to point out that Anderson argues that it is precisely the dominant mode of production that ‘confers fundamental unity on a social formation’ (*ibid.*, p. 55).

We think, therefore, that Cesaratto is right to point out that Elster’s criticism of functionalism does not concern the conceptual nature of this methodology, but its analytical incompleteness, i.e., the difficulty of finding the necessary evidence and the unintended mechanism of explanation. In fact, our criticism of systemism and functionalism concerned their *ontological* status, not their practical-operational aspects.

After analysing the internal debates within contemporary Marxism between structuralist, historicist and functionalist approaches, Cesaratto considers our critique of the unilateralism of both explanatory methodologies, individualism and methodological holism, and how, in our view, each of them gives rise to a ‘vicious circle of presuppositions’, i.e., a circular type of justification, because they rely on a concept of relation understood as a mono-dyadic construct (for further discussion of this issue, see Stella 2016). We will return to this point and reiterate it in the next section; here, however, we would like to stress that Cesaratto, having correctly referred to our criticism, does not raise any objection to it, even though, if well-founded, as we believe it is, it would also rule out functionalism, since *a function is nothing but a relation*. On the other hand, all the difficulties that Cesaratto discusses in the functionalist approach are an indication of precisely this latent circularity, which has a deeper philosophical root and is not limited to the historical-genetic aspect.

Instead, Cesaratto considers our proposed solution in the last paragraph of our article entitled ‘Beyond methodological individualism and holism: a critique of reductionism and of the systemic model’ (Ianulardo and Stella 2022, pp. 218-222). He finds our solution unsatisfactory, recognising in it a kind of ‘communitarian teleologism’ (Cesaratto 2024, p. 70), since we argue that social processes should not be interpreted in the light of the starting point, but in the light of the end point (‘telos’). Cesaratto therefore writes: ‘The presence of a (sort of) communitarian teleologism or aspiration in their solution is openly admitted by Ianulardo and Stella who interpret “the social process not so much in the light of the starting point [...] but in the light of the *end* point”’ (*ibid.*, p. 70). In fact,

we were talking about a teleological perspective', but not about 'teleological communitarianism', if the latter term is to be given a very precise political connotation, which was rather alien to the philosophy of social science discourse that we were conducting. In fact, we were not aiming to propose a model of society, but how a social scientist, informed by a philosophical consideration of the concept of relation, should investigate social entities and social phenomena.

Hence Cesaratto's most serious accusation of falling into a form of organicism, which we had previously criticised, also with reference to Marx, insofar as it would suggest a prior assumption of 'imaginary collective entities hovering above individuals, like social memories, national spirits, or communitarian spiritualities' (*ibid.*, p. 71). Now, apart from the fact that we have not referred to such entities as hovering above individuals, it is, on the contrary, those who claim that a 'class' or a 'national spirit' hover above individuals who would fall prey to this accusation. But above all, Cesaratto, who had understood how we spoke of a 'sense of unity *immanent* in the relation', i.e., how every relation is a *unification* and therefore a striving for an *ideal unity*, could have noticed that we could certainly not speak of *hypostatized* 'communitarian spiritualities', 'classes' or 'national spirits' hovering above individuals and *independent* of them.

Cesaratto then wonders what this sense of unity that comes from the self-transcendence of the individual has to do with historical and social research, and how it seems to be a 'step back towards idealism' (p. 71). However, he appreciates both the sense of unity that we seek between the two terms of the question and the dialectical approach, which we would have the disadvantage of having understood not materialistically à la Marx, but idealistically. But even the reference to Marx in the VI thesis on Feuerbach, when he argues that 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of *social relations*' (*ibid.*, p. 71, italics added), could have made him aware of the centrality of the concept of *relation* even in Marx's materialist dialectics. But also, how the failure to address the *contradictory nature of the relation*, when understood as a mono-dyadic construct, leads to *circular* results. Indeed, one might ask Marx (and Cesaratto) whether such 'social relations', later specified as 'the material reproduction of life and their dialectical interaction' (*ibid.*, p. 71), are 'entities hovering above the agents' (something we believe he

groundlessly accused us of) or are themselves entities to be explained by recourse to the dialectical interaction between agents.

Moreover, in the passage quoted from the *German Ideology*, Marx himself notes that, although conditioned by their physical organisation, human beings are distinguished from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence and ‘definite individuals, who are *productively active* in a definite way, *enter into these definite social and political relations*’ (Marx and Engels 1845, p. 41, italics added). Thus, even Marx cannot fail to see that *social relations are constituted by active individuals* seeking the solution to *one* of their problems, that of subsistence. The ‘sense of unity’, represented here by the search for a specific social and economic organisation for the production of goods, is therefore also for Marx the *drive*, the *impulse*, that leads individuals to enter into ‘definite social and political relations’. The ‘physical’ or ‘material’ conditions are certainly the precondition for action, a ‘fact’, but Marx admits that these conditions which unite man and animal have not prevented the latter from relating to them in a very different way and from differing radically from animals.

Cesaratto then adds, summarising his functionalist position, that ‘it is somewhat paradoxical to note that functionalism in a sense presupposes and explains human agency and ingenuity, both as a passive instrument of reproduction and as an active instrument of change’ (*ibid.*, p. 71). In support of this thesis, he refers to Anderson, who argues that the term ‘agent’ means both ‘active initiator and passive instrument’ (*ibid.*, p. 76). It seems to us that to consider the same factor, i.e., an individual actor (or agent), at the same time and under the same respect, as both *explanans and explanandum*, is not a paradox but a blatant contradiction.

Cesaratto therefore concludes by arguing that ‘it is in the fabric of social relations, ultimately related to the economic texture, that individuals as a social being, and their motivations and opportunities, are defined’ (*ibid.*, p. 73). And, he adds, the central aspect of the functionalist conception remains valid insofar as it consists in ‘the idea that the forms of exploitation, i.e. the extraction and distribution of surplus, are at the core of the socio-historical analysis *co-determined* with the institutions that regulate these forms’ (*ibid.*, p. 73). Thus, he concludes, ‘*there is not such a thing as the individual agency, there is only*

socially defined agency' (*ibid.*, p. 73), and thus 'free agency seems once again to paying toll to objective forces' (*ibid.*, p. 74).

In what follows, we will not dwell on the whole of Cesaratto's position and functionalism, but only on the criticisms that he makes of our position, hoping in this way to contribute to the fruitful dialogue to which he has invited us with his article.

First theoretical clarification: the circularity of holism and methodological individualism

As we have seen, according to Cesaratto our position is based on a *teleological* conception. He derives this conviction from the fact that we interpret the social process not in the light of the *starting point*, but in the light of the *end point* (*telos*). The first point that we would like to emphasise in order to clarify the discourse is that we cannot fail to distinguish between two levels: the *explanatory level* and the *factual-historical level*. Our article was clearly concerned with the level of *explanation* of social phenomena and the fundamental role that the *concept of relation* plays in this field. It consisted of two parts, asymmetrical in terms of development and independent in terms of execution. In the first part, which we might call the *pars destruens* and which takes up most of the article (pp. 196-218), it is shown that neither of the two models can stand without the other. In the second, much shorter part (pp. 218-222), which we might call *pars construens*, a way out of the methodological impasse was sketched out and, by asserting a different interpretation of the concept of relation, implications for the interpretation of social phenomena were drawn. Any criticism of this second part would not exempt the critic from showing the groundlessness of our criticism of the unilaterality and insufficiency of each explanatory model, should he wish to propose them again *sic et simpliciter*.

The first part of our discourse is at the level of the explanations of the social process. In our *pars destruens*, we stressed that, on the one hand, methodological individualism considers the individual as the explanatory basis (i.e., it affirms the primacy of the notion of the individual over the relation or, in other words of

the agent over the structure), but that, on the other hand, since the individual (agent) can only be thought insofar as it is *determined*, it *necessarily requires the relation* (structure), i.e., the reference to another individual, to the difference. This means that methodological individualism is forced to require the very relation that it pretends to deny. On the other hand, methodological holism (but also systemism, functionalism, complexity theories, etc.), by giving primacy to the relation, if it wants to be consistent with its own assumptions, requires individuals as terms of the relation itself, so that an explanation that wants to be based on this approach cannot but also have recourse to *individuals* who, as terms of the relation, are *essential for the constitution of the relation itself*.

The conclusion of our discourse was, therefore, that the two explanatory models claim to give value only to the moment of difference of the terms (of the relation), or, alternatively, only the moment of their mutual connection, without taking into account that difference is itself a relation, and that the connection postulates the connected concepts, and postulates them as endowed with an identity, somehow autonomous, because it is only by virtue of this autonomy that one term is not confused with the other. Our criticism, then, is not based on a teleological prejudice, but on a *logical-philosophical argument*: the impossibility of making absolute (i.e., independent) both the differentiating and the relating moment. In fact, the two moments imply each other, and this is precisely why we have spoken of a '*circle of presuppositions*' [1]. The explanatory aspect then finds expression in the descriptive aspect of the social process itself, in which the teleological theme acquires its own relevance. In what sense can we be regarded as advocates of a teleological view?

After having discussed the theoretic-philosophical aspects, which lead both methodologies to the circle of presupposition, we can now look at the function of models in social sciences, i.e., the role of theories in science. With regard to the interpretation of the social process, no longer considered in terms of the dialectic that exists between the individual (agent) and the structure, but as a process, that is, as a sequence of states that move from a starting point to an end point, we have pointed out that the starting point, understood in the light of the starting point itself, takes on a different meaning from the *starting point, understood in the light of the end point*. The latter, in fact, makes it possible to re-signify the starting point, and it is no coincidence that Marx himself, whom Cesaratto held in high esteem, was fond of repeating that it is only on the basis

of a knowledge of the anatomy of man that it is possible to understand the anatomy of the ape (‘the anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape’, *Grundrisse*, p. 102). In terms of the social aspect, this means that *only an understanding of more mature societies allows a full understanding of the structure of earlier societies*. This passage from Marx’s *Grundrisse* should at least make Marxists aware that a teleological method is also present in Marx:

Bourgeois society is the most advanced and complex historical organization of production. The categories which express its relations, and an understanding of its structure, therefore, provide an insight into the structure and the relations of production of all formerly existing social formations the ruins and component elements of which were used in the creation of bourgeois society. (...) *The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape*. (Marx 1858, p. 102, italics added)

If this is true, then the *hermeneutic priority of the end point over the starting point is undeniable*. However, if one wants to have a far-sighted vision, one cannot but try to anticipate future developments in society, and this is the meaning of ‘foreseeing’. It is not by chance that science is nomothetic, i.e., it seeks laws because they have not only explanatory but also predictive value. Moreover, the use of counterfactuals is very common in science, precisely in order to predict future scenarios and their consequences, starting from a state of affairs that contradicts what is actually the case. This means that trying to project into the future in order to understand the present, in the sense of being able to grasp in the present the prodromes of future developments, can be of great importance. This, in fact, not only helps to better understand the present, because it allows one to see what it is moving towards, but also and above all allows one to direct processes towards that future that is desired as well as to put a brake on those processes whose evolution is judged undesirable. It is in this sense that we speak of *teleologism*, i.e., the ability to conceive of an end capable of transcending partial visions of the present. We believe, in fact, that it is precisely in the light of a prospective vision, calibrated on the end that one intends to achieve, that such partial readings can be overcome, because they are included not only in the process of their development, but also in the destination that that development portends and that should find its fulfilment in it, precisely because it is seen as

an ideal end. Without a prospective vision, in short, one is condemned to blind pragmatism.

Therefore, if current conceptions of the social process tend to absolutize either the differentiating moment (e.g., methodological individualism) or the relational moment (e.g., methodological holism), with the risk of having important repercussions on the organisation of society and on the process of its development, the recognition of the *co-essentiality of the two moments* cannot but configure a conception aimed at privileging the moment of *unity*. Such a conception, we believe, could itself have important repercussions on the organisation of society itself and on the direction to be given to the process of its development. All this to emphasise strongly that only a glance into the future avoids a flattening on the present and is able to open up new horizons.

We believe that Cesaratto has correctly presented our critique of both models, even though he does not take position on it directly; however, his theoretical proposal, functionalism, which is based on the dependence of the social agent on ‘material relations of production’, seems to suggest that he does not agree with our critique of the primacy of the relation over the individual in the explanation of social phenomena. We leave it to our critic to judge whether this position is compatible with our critique of ‘*relationalism*’ or whether, on the contrary, our critique deserves to be refuted first in order to then adopt a *relationalist* (or functionalist) social methodology.

Second theoretical clarification: the value of the sense of unity

We now come to the *pars construens*, which constitutes the final part of our article. In the concluding part of the article, we first pointed out that, as a consequence of what was maintained in the first part, and following an argument of a philosophical nature, *relation* must be conceived as *intrinsic to the terms* – and not placed between the terms – whereby *each is co-essential to the other*, and then we pointed out that from this co-essentiality, which unites all the individuals as terms of the relation, there arises a *sense of unity* which represents the essence and value of the relation. It is precisely because of this *co-essentiality* that the terms considered in isolation (i.e., the individuals)

become abstract and lose the sense that they have within the *unity* (Ianulardo and Stella 2022, p. 220).

From this way of understanding relation as the *intrinsic transformation of the given* (i.e., term, determination), we have attempted on the last page to outline a ‘translation’ into economic-social terms (‘translated into economic-social terms’, *ibid.*, p. 221), without any claim to completeness or exhaustiveness, but with the understanding that, precisely because of the theoretical gain mentioned above, the ‘translation’ should maintain the drive towards unity *intrinsic* to the terms.

To try to clarify this point, i.e., the meaning of the ‘translation’ indicated above, we can say that when the relation is understood as intrinsic and constitutive of everyone, the latter is no longer understood in a *static* sense, but its *dynamism* is grasped. In fact, the individual is grasped in his being by referring to every other individual, in such a way that a society/group/association/party etc. is no longer understood as an ‘aggregate’ of elements which are connected to each other as something external, but as that unity which comes from the *intrinsic* reference of each individual to all the others and to society itself. In other words, it is the intrinsic nature of each individual that does not allow him to be as a closed identity, separated from that of other individuals, but which inexorably urges him to *go out of himself* to meet others, because only in this way can he realise himself as an *authentic person*.

In short, in our opinion, in order to understand social *dynamics* adequately, it is necessary to abandon the *static* nature of methodological individualism and holism and to move towards a method of investigation that values a society/group/association/party, etc., starting from the *intention of unity* that drove its members to form it, that is, to study the person in its transcendence, going beyond itself. This is the *teleological* nature of our methodological proposal.

Thus, the more a society shows itself to be united around certain values that it considers authentic, the more it is *possible to study the unifying impulses that have led it towards the desired goal*, because in it the individual is willing to renounce individual gain for the sake of the common value, for the sake of the common good, and it is by virtue of this value, or by virtue of this good, that unity between persons, rather than fragmentation, is achieved. Without the

transcendence of individuality, in short, any organism would be reduced to a mere aggregate, lacking *one* 'soul' to give it a sense of unity.

To sum up, in order for a social scientist, informed by a philosophical understanding of the concept of relation, to recognise the *sense of unity* in the multiplicity of values and ideals that characterise each society, he must be able to grasp that *intention of unity* which is the authentic essence of every person and which urges him to seek unifications that are increasingly suited to the new problems to be faced. In some cases, this intention is translated into the constitution of a 'public space' in which different opinions and values can confront each other in a dialogue regulated by legal codes and moral norms, which themselves are animated by the same intention. After all, how can we fail to remember that Plato's teaching consists precisely in pointing out to human beings that the construction of the Polis is only possible through dialogue, which in turn is based on the intention of truth, that is, the intention of unity, which unites the participants in the dialogue?

In the search for true unity, there is undeniably a unity between the terms (the individuals), a unity that can be described as a quest for that *ideal unity* that is *never actually achieved*, but which, nevertheless, allows for increasingly cogent and meaningful syntheses. Translated into socio-economic terms, this means that class, community, nation, group and other aggregations are *unifications*, but *none of them represents an authentic unity*, that is, the unity in which all differences are neutralised by what is common to each. Each *unification*, however, makes it possible *to shed new light on the moments that led to it* (i.e., to re-signify them), that is to say, it gives a unity of sense to the intermediate stages of the process. And these moments, which constitute what is unified, represent the very genesis of the unification, precisely because they are permeated by those drives towards unity which then materialise in specific socio-historical determinations.

In short, it is this drive towards unity that gives rise to concepts and categories which, in so far as they express the unity found in multiplicity (the common element in the diverse), form the basis of any theory, and therefore of any model, even of society. Without them, one could not work, as social reformers do, to bring the society that actually exists into line with the society that one hopes for.

Nor, to repeat the concept, could one design the institutions themselves and the principles or values on which they should be based.

What needs to be clarified is this: for us, the *intention* is the ‘intention of unity’, and therefore it should not be understood in a generic sense, as if one were to make intentions that remain unfulfilled and are therefore called ‘pious intentions’. The *intention of unity* is that undeniable tension which urges the multiplicity towards its foundation and which, *translated into social terms*, urges the multiplicity of individuals towards an ever more unified and cohesive society, to the point of achieving that unity which neutralises the very difference that exists between individuals. This difference can be neutralised in terms of certain values or parameters: for example, when we speak of equality between men, we do not mean an abstract equality – because each man is different from every other man – but we mean that they are equal before the law and that their difference has therefore disappeared. The intention is precisely not the wanting to possess (‘pretence’) the final state (i.e., to determine it *a priori*), but to tend towards it (‘intention’). It is not by chance that the Latin ‘*in-tendere*’ means a tending towards, that is, the abandonment of one’s own individuality in order to go beyond it. In short, we are *not* claiming that a tension towards unity is a *sufficient* condition for designing good institutions, but rather that it is a *necessary condition*, because every institution arises from a tension inspired by a unifying aspect/mission/vision.

This is why we argue that this same drive, on the one hand, is the empirical engine of transformation, and, on the other hand, is itself evoked by the very unity that constitutes its goal and end (*ibid.*, p. 222). Therefore, the ‘communion’ of which we speak, as we said on p. 221, is based on the *intentional unity* that animates the search, in such a way that the historical unifications that are actually realised are the expression or empirical translation of this drive, and for this reason the value of these unifications is measured by the degree of unity that they can express, on the understanding that *authentic unity is never actually realisable*, precisely because it constitutes the *ideal end* of the search. If the ideal were actually realised, the quest would be over forever. Our intention, then, is not to point to specific historical configurations, nor to a political or social community, nor, even less, to an ‘organism’ that would rise above individuals, who, as far as they are concerned, would still retain their individuality. Rather,

we want to highlight that *intention of unity*, which we could also call the *communitarian intention*, which constitutes the drive present in every individual to surpass himself (i.e., to transcend himself) in a further dimension that encompasses him, as Aristotle himself makes clear when he speaks of man as ‘*zōon politikón*’.

What we have indicated, then, is not a type of social aggregation, but a *criterion* for assessing its value: and this criterion is represented by the degree of unity that each social aggregation expresses, in the sense that the more integrated a society is, the more it is possible to study it by detecting the moments that led to it. However, even in a society or association or company with a low degree of unity, the social scientists can grasp the sense of unity that led its members to form it. We have therefore only indicated the meaning of the ‘translation’ of the ideal into the real, which consists in the striving for unity on the part of those unifying moments that are societies. In our article, therefore, we wanted to begin to outline the path indicated, knowing that the discourse needs to be developed on both the socio-economic and philosophical sides, and we wanted to specify the repercussions in the socio-economic sphere of our way of understanding the concept of relation, not as a construct, but as an *act of act of self-referring* of terms.

Conclusion

With regard to Cesaratto’s characterisation of our discourse as ‘idealist’, as opposed to his self-representation as ‘materialist’, we believe it to be correct, although such terms have taken on an enormous variety of semantic connotations over the centuries [2], which have made many misunderstandings possible. Precisely because we agree with this presentation, we believe that the assimilation of our position (in footnote 24, Cesaratto 2024, p. 77) to sociobiological studies of ‘ultra-social’ insect species, in which the individual disappears into the community that would represent a perfect unity, is far from our approach, because it proposes an immediate translation into reality of what is and remains only an *ideal*. Indeed, to pretend to translate the *ideal unity* into a factual unity would be to fuse together (i.e., con-fuse) the differences that are essential to the empirical-factual dimension. However, this assimilation also

misses the point of our article and our proposal, which was not to provide a model of an ideal society, let alone saying that only a very compact society can be studied, but to provide a criterion for studying any association, including but not limited to a society (thus also a company, a team, a union, a party etc.), in which, despite the differences that abound in it, a social scientist can grasp the emergence of a sense of unity that has led to it. We believe that in the dialogue with Cesaratto, it could be a point of contact that he considers the ‘sense of unity’ that we are discussing as valuable, although he then understands it as a ‘fact’, i.e., the ‘material reproduction of life’ (following Marx and Karl Polanyi), whereas in our discourse it is an ‘act’, the ‘fact’ being instead only the *starting point* of the hermeneutics that always goes beyond itself, i.e., that always refers to something else. A brute fact, i.e., matter, or however one wants to define it, would – paradoxically for functionalists – return the explanation to the reductionist atomism that we have criticised with reference to methodological individualism.

We can therefore conclude by noting that no objections have been raised to the *pars destruens* of our article, in which we showed that each explanatory model requires the other in a *vicious circle*. As far as the *pars costruens* is concerned, i.e., how the process of explaining social phenomena should be carried out, we believe that we have clarified what we meant by an ‘emerging *sense of unity*’ which, far from leading to a ‘dissolvement of the individual in the community’ (Cesaratto 2024, p. 72), invites an understanding of individuality in its self-overcoming (self-transcending) in the community itself. Not a dissolution that is an empirical elimination, but a full realisation that is a *transcendental* overcoming.

We hope that this dialogue, to which Professor Cesaratto’s intervention has invited us, has led to a clarification of our positions and may serve as a stimulus to those who wish to approach the analysis of social phenomena by means of a *theoretical reflection* that, starting from a rethinking of the concept of relation, no longer understood as a construct, makes it possible to redefine the salient moments of social processes, without getting stuck in methodologies of investigation that have proved inadequate.

Endnotes

[1] Cesaratto acknowledges that here we are in the presence of a ‘chicken and egg dilemma’ (Cesaratto 2024, p. 52), but earlier Martin Hollis, who was certainly not opposed to holism, had used the same expression in *The Philosophy of Social Science*, claiming that ‘it is teasingly insoluble in this chicken-and-egg form’ at p. 111, but he had stopped there without further exploring the philosophical root of the problem.

[2] Indeed, our ‘idealism’ differs both from Hegelian idealism and from the characterisation given by the author on p. 59, where, following Thompson, idealism is understood as an idea of history as driven by ‘exogenous metaphysical forces’ independent of human action, which would guide the latter.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that this research has no conflict of interest.

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