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SYMPOSIUM – REVIEW/3

MARIO DIANI'S *THE CEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY* Relational Reflections

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Mario Diani's *The Cement of Civil Society*, makes a major contribution to relational sociology, the study of civil society and social movement studies. As Diani himself observes, the idea that social relations are fundamental is widespread in sociology but the commitment to their importance tends to be restricted to the theoretical domain and is seldom translated into methodology or empirical research. Research on civil society illustrates this as well as any other domain. Whatever sociologists might say and believe in theory, studies of civil society tend to treat it as a collection of discrete (organisational) actors, each with individual level properties which, in aggregate, define it. A sociological profile of civil society is effectively a headcount of its organisational members and their attributes (the aggregate approach). Whilst he finds much to recommend in this approach and arrives at the view that it is largely complementary with the approach that he himself takes, Diani departs from it, using the tools of social network analysis (SNA) and blockmodelling in particular to achieve a more relational perspective. Focusing upon two UK cities, Bristol and Glasgow, he identifies a number of key civil society actors and tracks their various relations with one another. Doing this, he claims, allows us not only to think about but also to research civil society relationally, as an 'inter-organisational field'. It comprises not only actors but interactions and ties between those actors. His contention, well-founded theoretically and well-supported in his research, is that these relations both make and reflect differences. Local (city-level) civil societies which look

similar in aggregate terms may behave differently on account of differences in patterns of connection between their participating actors. Conversely, differences at the aggregate level may have a reduced effect if offset by relational similarities.

As the book progresses Diani is at pains to stress that the aggregate and relational approaches are not mutually exclusive options. They complement and can mutually inform one another. The challenge for the book, however, is to prove that the relational approach, as the 'new kid on the block', is able to tell us something important that we would not learn by way of the aggregate approach. The analyses which put this to the test are fairly detailed and not easily summarised. Suffice it to say, however, that Diani offers us good reason to believe that the relational approach does make an important difference, opening up civil society in new and interesting ways that are not accessible from a purely aggregational approach.

In the main body of the book, building upon his basic social network analysis and also upon a typology of 'modes of coordination' introduced and discussed early in it, Diani blockmodels each of his two networks, partitioning them into three (structurally equivalent) blocks, representing the aforementioned 'modes of coordination'. The typology offered here is again innovative on account of its relationality. Rather than classifying actors by reference to their individual properties and/or identity claims, as researchers ordinarily would, Diani classifies them by reference to their position within the network (their pattern of ties). This raises questions both about the extent to which the classes generated by this approach correspond to those that would have been generated by the more conventional approach and, where they differ, what advantages (and disadvantages) the relational approach affords. Again Diani's discussion of this is nuanced and defies easy summary but he finds much to recommend the relational approach.

As an advocate of relational sociology myself and one who uses SNA to implement this program methodologically and empirically (Crossley 2011, 2015a), it was never going to be difficult to convince me of the central arguments of *The Cement of Civil Society*. That said, however, Diani does make a strong and persuasive case, particularly in his use of SNA. Moreover, I see his book as a potentially important intervention in current debates regarding relational sociology; debates about what it is and whether all sociology isn't relational already, making calls for a new, specifically relational approach redundant. Isn't 'relational sociology' a tautology? One response to this latter question is that whilst sociology may be relational, to a degree, in theory, that commitment does not extend to methodology or empirical research. The prevalence of the aggregate approach in civil society research, identified in Diani's survey of literature, offers a very good concrete example of this. Of all areas of social life, one would expect researchers to focus

upon connection in a study of civil society, irrespective of any wider theoretical commitment to a relational view. The very fact that we speak of civil **society** suggests that we imagine it to be something more than a mere aggregate of individual actors (organisational or otherwise). And yet, as Diani shows, in the vast majority of cases relationality drops out of the picture when it comes to researching civil society. More importantly, his own analysis demonstrates both how this problem might be solved and what gains we can expect by doing so. He offers an excellent exemplar in relational sociology, showing how it might be done and what difference it might make.

I was also particularly impressed by his concept, ‘modes of coordination’, and the way in which he implemented it, methodologically, by way of blockmodelling. These innovations mark a considerable advance in the relational approach by encouraging us to define and identify civil society (and other) actors by reference to their patterns of connection; a bold move and one which evidently pays dividends.

The fact that Diani tests this and concludes that relational and aggregate approaches are complementary and best used in parallel is important too. It is easy to embrace a fully relational approach in theory, rejecting individually or aggregate focused approaches (I’ve done it!), and perhaps over time further methodological innovation will afford us the empirical support to justify such a move. Currently, however, individual level properties, which we can’t reduce to social relations and interactions, seem to matter and we are forced to concede that a mixed approach is more defensible. We can believe what we like in theory but empirical analysis imposes constraints, which is a good thing, and that is why methodological innovation of the kind Diani offers is so important. It allows us to put our ideas to the test and explore their limits.

The debate is perhaps not so clear as ‘relational vs aggregate’ might suggest, however, as the focus of Diani’s relationalism is inevitably (given temporal and financial constraints) selective. He only focuses upon some ties and channels of communication. He mostly only focuses upon one temporal snapshot; a limitation which he acknowledges and discusses, defending his position, at some length. And his structural focus detracts to some extent from what appear to be relevant issues of process, culture, history and agency – all issues identified as important by ‘qualitative’ critics within the relational/network analytic camp (e.g. Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, Mische 2003). However, it is clear from his account that Bristol and Glasgow are quite different contexts and that the effects of both the individual properties of their civil society actors and the ties between those actors are mediated by this context. Factors which appear to explain outcomes in one city do not do so in the other. I suspect that this is because differences in the political cultures of the two cities, which have been generated historically through

interactions between participants within their respective civil and political domains, mediate the effect of the aforementioned factors. Different cultures dispose actors to act differently in very similar situations. Diani does briefly discuss 'political culture' but what he seems to mean by this is 'political opportunity structure'; a rather narrow definition. I would have liked to know more about the meanings which political actors attach to their activities and ties; about their identities and conventions of engagement; about the content and dynamics of their interactions. That is to say, I would have liked an exploration of (historically emergent) political culture in a much broader sense. Perhaps this would have required a different study and one which failed to capture much of what Diani captured with his approach. All the same, however, the significant differences that Diani notes between Bristol and Glasgow, and the way in which these differences appear to mediate the effects of both the individual and relational properties that he measures, suggest the need for greater attention to culture qua identity, convention and meaning – all concepts which belong to the relational view of the world as they refer to properties of the social world generated by way of social interaction (Crossley 2011, 2015b).

I noted Diani's discussion of both time and the justification for his 'static' approach above. This justification is entirely reasonable. However, time does enter into his analysis at one point in a manner that could perhaps be further explored: in Chapter Six, where he constructs a (two-mode) network of actors and events. This two mode (actor-event) network is more dynamic than his actor-actor network because it focuses upon participation in actions. Furthermore, it is inherently temporal because the events surveyed occur at particular times, over a period and in sequence. Some network analysts are beginning to look at the possibilities for more time-sensitive and dynamic analysis than this type of approach might afford¹ and it would have been interesting to see Diani attend more closely to time in his discussion of these data. I wasn't sure whether Diani was suggesting that civil society comprises not only of actors and their ties but also events in which they co-participate over time. If he was then this would be a further, very interesting and persuasive onto-methodological challenge to the existing body of literature on civil society. If he wasn't then this might be something which he and those who follow after him should consider, as it affords both a more comprehensive and encompassing definition of civil society, recognising, to a greater extent, its dynamic and processual nature, and, as noted, potentially allowing us to capture and analyse that process.

Diani's book is a huge step in the right direction, not only for political sociology and social movement studies, but for sociology more generally. Let us hope that it taps into

¹ My colleagues at Manchester University, Chiara Brocatelli, Martin Everett and Johan Koskinen, specifically.

the current relational momentum in sociology, infusing it with the methodological and empirical dimension which, sadly, it often lacks, and thus perhaps helping to make a genuine difference to the discipline.

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