

Disembodied Intersubjectivity.
Social networks, space and experience.

Giuliana Mandich

This paper is a preliminary account of my research on the connections between social networks and space. In the first place I will try to show how the introduction of space and time concepts can give some new ideas to network research enabling us, at the same time, to look at spatio-temporal modifications in a more concrete and operative way. On this purpose three important meanings of space, having different explanatory powers, are discussed: space as a *constraint*, space as a *frame* organising social relations, and space as a *form of experience*. Secondly I will suggest the concept of intersubjectivity as a possible interesting outcome of networks and space and time approach partnership. In particular I will briefly discuss how the link between networks and experience (in their relation with space) can be an interesting field of application of this challenging and controversial concept.

KEYWORDS: space; time; social networks; intersubjectivity.

1. Introduction*

In the last decade space and time approach has become an increasingly important field in sociology, producing a large amount of literature and generating new and interesting explanations of modernity and postmodernity¹.

Also in the field of network analysis, it is possible to notice an increasing interest in space and time². In a way the two dimensions have always been present in network approach. The very influential studies on urban networks in the 70s, for instance, implied a set of interesting hypothesis on the nature of spatial modifications in contemporary society (Fisher, 1982; Wellman, Carrington, Hall, 1988). The way in which Wellman describes the transformation of the traditional community (as a densely knitted network based on the embeddness of social relations in a closed local space) leading to the proliferation of personal communities (as sparsely knitted and spatially dispersed networks) anticipates the concept of disembedding which was subsequently developed within the space and time approach³. Later, in *Identity and control*, one of the most important theoretical contributions to network analysis, Harrison White expresses a very high degree of awareness of the complex and rich interplay between space, time and networks.

In the past few years, however, the attention to space and time seems to have taken a much more central role in the theoretical discussion within the approach. Thus recently, for instance, in Emirbayer's "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology" (A.J.S 1997)

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¹ The literature on space is by now quite extensive. Amongst the most representative and influential studies: Giddens (1990), Harvey (1990), Friedland and Boden (1994), Werlen (1993).

² Network tradition is a much more well-established approach within sociology. For general references: Wasserman and Faust (1994); Scott (1991); Wellman and Berkovitz (1988).

³ Disembedding can be defined as the coming out of relationships from the immediacy of presence. It is a product of social mechanisms (symbolic tokens, expert systems) and produce distantiation (the stretching of relations in space and time). Cfr. Giddens (1990)

“spatio-temporal terms” are put at the base of the relational challenge. The fundamental dilemma in sociology, according to Emirbayer, is to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances, static “things”, or in processes, unfolding relations developing in space and time.

Space and time enter the field of social networks, however, mainly as a way to point at the concrete (situated and dynamic) nature of networks. In particular, space and time are used as related to the idea of contextuality and processuality. The emphasis on social networks as structures of relations situated and changing over time can be much more easily found in the literature of the last few years.⁴ Doreian’s (1995) keynote speech in 1995 *European conference on social networks*, for instance, expressed impatience with the relative sterility of many studies, and pointed at the search for substance and at the consideration of the dynamic nature of networks as the most important issue in network approach.

Such a framework emphasises the similarities of network analysis with the situational and interactional sociology of the Chicago School. Network approach is said to recover a tradition regarding social facts as “ecologically embedded within specific contexts of time and space – that is to say, within particular interactional fields composed of concrete, historically specific ‘natural areas’ and ‘natural histories’ ” (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994).

It is possible to agree that the introduction of more contextual and dynamic elements can contribute to create a more sophisticated version of network analysis. As it is possible to agree that maybe the betrayal of the Chicago heritage (and above all of the network analysis origins in British social anthropology) has been one of the

⁴ The development of space and time approach is certainly connected to more processual and dynamic view of society (Giddens, 1984).

reasons for a certain disappointment with the development of this approach⁵.

In this paper however, my interest is not to discuss the limits of the mainstream approach in network analysis . I will instead try to discuss a more analytically specific use of the concepts of space and time referring to the abundant sociological literature developed recently on the subject. Space and time are in fact complex dimensions with varying characteristics and interesting explanatory powers which are worth trying to translate into network terms.

My belief is that the introduction of space and time concepts can give some new idea to network research and, at the same time, can contribute to a space and time approach enabling us to look at spatio-temporal modifications in a more concrete and operative way.

Finally (and on this, more ambitious, point my paper is very much a work in progress) I believe that the partnership of networks and space and time approach can offer a very interesting theoretical starting point. Particularly the link between space, networks and experience leads to the challenging and controversial concept of intersubjectivity as a possible way of looking at the world "in between" individual and society. Social networks can be an important field of empirical application of this concepts.

2. Social network analysis and space and time approach

2.1. Relational views of society

The similarities between social network approach and space and time approach are quite strong. Even though these approaches were developed in different periods, refer to different theoretical

⁵ Some interesting critiques have been developed on this point within european sociology: see for instance: Gribaudo (1998), Gribaudo (1996), Eve (1996), Mutti (1996), Piselli (1995).

traditions and apparently analyse different social processes, they seem to share a common understanding of the social world⁶.

Both describe a "spatiality" (the abstract space of relations in one case, and the "physical" space on the other). Moreover the descriptions of these spaces have quite a good number of similar characteristics.

In the first place both approaches explain the changing configuration of this space as a process of disembedding. Whereas network approach tends to characterise modernity as the intricate intersection of social circles resulting from the "coming out" of relations from the concentricity of closed social spaces, space and time approach concentrates on socio-spatial processes related to the disentangling of relationships from the closed context of co-presence.

Social network analysis, in fact, is originated in British anthropology from the difficulty in applying normative analysis to social systems in which ties cut across "the framework of bounded institutionalised groups or categories"(Barnes, 1969: 72).

In a similar way space and time approach was developed when the traditional organisation of space based on "boundary-specific institutional rules of citizenry, defined cities" (Castells, 1996: 112) disappeared under the space of mobility, the technological space of railroads first, of plane and electronic communication subsequently.

Specifically the borders of both spaces cannot be defined through unambiguous and stable principles. The organisation of space and time does not correspond to spatio-temporal objects (nation, community), and likewise the organisation of social space does not correspond to well defined institutions.

More importantly both approaches share a relational view of society. The position of social agents cannot be defined through

⁶ It is not by chance that both approaches can claim Simmel's sociology as an important starting point within the classics.

fixed categories related to individual attributes (age, gender, occupation). This position varies with the localisation of individuals in the abstract structural space (for network analysis) and in the concrete spatio-temporality (for space and time approach). Both approaches thus emphasise the need to situate individual behaviour in a relational context, even if differently conceived: as an abstract space of relations and as the concrete space of interactions.

The similarities between network approach and spatio-temporal approach, however, are not simply rooted in the sharing of the same view of society. They are more substantially due to the fact that space and relations are very intimately linked. Relations, in fact are spatial constructs and space is definitely a relational construct .

2.2. "Social" and "physical space": analogies and superimpositions.

The analogies between the concrete, "physical" space and and the "abstract" space of society have always been very strong. In sociological vocabulary, for instance, the word «social space» is used to point at the abstract field of the relationships between individuals and social groups, making it difficult to find the right expression to distinguish this space from a bodily, territorial one. Society is quite often described in spatial terms, presenting itself as a social topology. Expressions like *field*, *borders*, *action space*, *centre*, and of positional terms, like *location*, *position*, are quite common in sociological language. These spatial metaphors are strongly insidious and almost invisible, also because they are much more abstract than other metaphors used in Sociology (like organism, text, play) and can be usually blurred with the ones normally present in every day language. In fact spatial metaphors remain a rather implicit and underconceptualised feature of sociological thinking (Silber, 1995).

Simmel's sociology is probably the most fascinating example of the intricate interlacing of concrete and metaphorical space. The spatial forms "crystallising" social relations refer to the physical space and, at the same time, are widely used as metaphors of society. The spatial *centre* is, for instance, only one of the manifestations of centrality, conceived as a characteristic implied in every society of organising itself around a fulcrum which can be merely symbolic (Cfr. also Shils, 1975). Viewed in Simmel's *Sociology of space as a frame*, the *border* too is a general principle of organisation of experience a way to cut out reality to construct the meaning of events⁷. The difficulties in reading Simmel's essays on space (probably even more than for other part of his *Soziologie*) are due the continuous alternation and mixture of concrete and metaphorical uses of space⁸.

Besides, a number of the concepts used in network analysis involve spatial metaphors. The social space brought out by social networks is described and analysed in spatial terms. The concepts of centre and of border, analysed by Simmel, for instance, are at the same time important categories for network analysis⁹.

This double level of meaning in spatial vocabulary, the constant shifting between a "concrete" significance of space, referring to its "physical" reality and the "metaphorical" use of this dimension, is certainly one important source of confusion in dealing with the connections between space and networks¹⁰. As has been pointed out (White, 1992), analogues to physical space confound

⁷ In this meaning is very similar to Goffman's (1986) definition of frame.

⁸ Simmel gives us a clue to understand why it is so as I will try to show in par. 4.

⁹ The methodology itself of network approach (and above all the use of graph theory to analyse social networks) is in fact based on topological representations.

¹⁰ The definitions of space in sociology appears constantly to oscillate between two different, and apparently opposed conceptions. On the one side, space tend to be considered as an objective characteristic of things, as a dimension which is external and independent from social facts; on the other side, space is viewed as metaphorical dimension, as a variable and heterogeneous way of representing society. (Cfr. Mandich, 1998).

the proper differentiation of levels within social spaces (and vice versa).

2.3. Space is a relational construct.

The profound reason for the confusion between social and physical space is that in fact these dimensions cannot be parted: relations are intrinsically spatial and space as such is a relational construct. Space cannot be conceived independently from relations and relations are forms of coupling always implying, in different ways, space.

The recognition of this very strong connection between space and relations has been the base for a much more central position of space in social theory.

For a long time a morphological definition of space, considering space as a container of social facts has been dominant in sociology (Cfr. Giddens, 1990). In this meaning space has been related to the materiality of social life, to the empirical, "concrete", substratum of society. Durkheim's description of space as the *material substratum of society* (*Social morphology*, as the "territorial distribution of social facts") describe a dimension which is *external* to society, exerting a constraint over the individual. Products of past practices, allow for some activities and obstruct others.

In classical sociology, however, we also find very interesting relational definitions of space. According to Simmel, for instance, it is impossible to define space without referring to social relations. The fundamental property of space is located, by Simmel, in the relational capability as the possibility of co-presence. Forms of interaction, emotions, types of association, fill space in different ways. Space is in fact, one of the "structural principles" at the base of Simmel's sociology. It is a formal presupposition for social interaction. As the sphere of coexistence, space is the founding place of society, embodying social relations. Simmel's basic aspect

of spatial dimension (exclusivity, mobility/immobility, nearness/distance, borders) are different modes of relations taking form in specific spatial configurations (state, nomadism...).

Symbolic interactionism and phenomenology have strongly emphasised the connection between space and interaction (Crossley, 1997). Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1968), in particular, has shown how space comes out from the "pre-linguistic" communicative relation between individuals, which he defines as *intercorporeality*. Space must be thought of not as something the objects of reality are in, but as something which creates actions and relationships.

In the last decade, sociology has strongly emphasised the relational nature of space. Notably Giddens (1990) has distinguished space as a "created environment" from space as a relational construct. Definitions of space as *tissu des possibles* (Ledrut, Javeau), *systeme d'operations* (Ledrut), or concepts like *presence availability* and *packing capacity* (Giddens, *time-geography*) express the idea of a space which is defined by its capability to "put together" as the "precondition of relations", in Simmel's words.

Space and time modifications in the electronic age, have certainly contributed to the call for a relational definition of space. In a way, the clearest evidence of the inseparable link between space and relations can be found in the fact that while new technologies have "annihilated" "annihilated" space, it has been, simultaneously and immediately rebuild in a virtual dimension. The sphere of relations mediated by the computer is identified by the term virtual space and is described by spatial metaphors (electronic highway, square....). In virtual space, without the friction of materiality, the relational quality of space is particularly evident. Virtual space is social space par excellence (Soja, 1989).

2.4 Spatial modifications: a view from social networks

Space and time modifications have been one of the most analysed feature of contemporary societies. The new technologies of transportation and communication and the way space (and time) have been transformed by it, seems to be the leading factor in contemporary changes. This field, intersecting the post-modernity debate (see particularly Jameson, Harvey, Lash), has produced a large amount of interpretations, emphasising the negative effects of spatio-temporal changes. The attention has been mainly put on the technological, objective level, and on its effects on subjective experience. Let's take two important elements emphasised within the approach.

The first one has been called "separation of Space from Place". Space is perceived and identified for its abstract and quantitative properties and not for its unique and specific qualities (place)¹¹. Simmel had already shown that, as for other aspects of modern societies, spatial experience is less related to the immediacy of perception and to the concreteness of places. This objective and abstract nature of space transforms the character of place. Urban spaces become abstract, generic and modular.

Another important transformation is what has been called "the separation of Social Place from Physical Place" produced by the means of electronic communication (Meyrowitz, 1985). This means that where we are physically no longer determines where and who we are socially. The definition of situations and of behaviour is no longer determined by physical location. For instance to be physically alone with someone is no longer necessarily to be socially alone with them. There are always other people there, on the telephone, radio or television. Face to face interaction is no longer the only

¹¹ One of the preconditions of the processes of disembedding (coming out of the relations from the context of co-presence) and of distantiation (stretching of social systems in space) is the prevalence of an objective definition of space. The separation of time from space is the first step in this process (see Giddens, 1990).

determinant of personal and intimate interaction. The difference between stranger and friend, between people who are here and people who are somewhere else is no longer so unambiguous.

Isolation and disorientation are, according to most of the theories, the consequence of these transformations. On the one hand, the new places, characterising contemporary society, constructed for functional purposes (airports, supermarkets, waiting rooms) are unable to generate sociality (Augé, 1992), the new streets, made for the cars, separate individuals instead of relating them (Berman, 1982).

On the other hand, both because of the abstract and distant nature of space (which is always the same wherever) and because of the uncertain nature of its borders, the consequence, for the individuals is a feeling of disorientation, a sense of “getting lost”, the loss of control over space. (Jameson, 1990, Harvey, 1993).

This picture (based on isolation and disorientation) is definitely biased. We have many signals leading to different conclusions. The existence, for instance, of spaces which cannot be defined through their functional, objective nature, but are related to the specificity of relations¹². Moreover the fact that the process of globalisation led by time-space compression goes with a process of localisation, the intensification of local relations, on the base of the processes of reembedding¹³.

A view from networks can help to reconstruct the concrete relational structures developing from different settings. The simple observation, for instance, that people living mostly within functional spaces (for instance managers) have certainly larger networks (and larger educational resources) than people living in “traditional”

¹² What Soja (1996) calls *third spaces*, the spaces of difference, for instance gender spaces.

¹³ On this point see further par. 3.2.

locations, mainly based on co-presence (old people, housewives), throws a different light on the disorientation thesis¹⁴.

3. Space and Networks.

3.1. Dimensions of space.

One more reason for the difficult interlacing between space and networks is due to the fact that space is a complex dimension.

We usually think of it as a single-sided and unambiguous dimension. The fact that we live on the comparatively stable surface of the earth almost creates the impression that space is there to be seen and grasped (Barbour, 1982). If we look at the sociological acquisitions concerning space, however, we are immediately faced with a large variety of dimensions. Not only does space have different social meanings according to the culture we consider, but it has different contents and can be differently defined according to the discipline we use, the point of observation we choose. More importantly it enters social theory referring to different explanatory powers, which are not always very easily traceable to a common source.

Amongst this variety of dimensions, it is important to point out at least three important meanings of space.

Space can be analysed as a *constraint*. The concept of distance indicates the influence of geographical space on human activities. In this meaning space is a dimension which is external to individuals and homogenous (given a certain set of technological means).

Space can be seen as a *frame* organising social relations. In this sense space is a context whose character influences interaction and communication;

Space is also a *form of experience*. As such space is not something external to individuals, something "to be experienced" but a

¹⁴ Abstract thinking is able to bridge space and time creating a level of experience less related to the immediacy of the situation.

modality of experience, a dimension mediating our relationship with society.

3.2. Space as a constraint: the influence of geography.

Geographical space, the space which is there to be seen, and measured is definitely the less complex dimension of space and also the one which has been in fact more frequently considered in network analysis.

The debate in the 70s about the "decline of community" thesis, on the basis of network ideas, has been mainly interpreted in terms of the ever decreasing importance of space as a constraint. The idea is that with improvements in communication and transportation, social relations have been "liberated" from geography.

The automobile and telephone make it easier for people with common interests to find one another and spend time together, substituting the traditional forms of solidarity, (densely knitted, based on the embeddness of social relations in the closed space of the local community) with a community of interests which are not necessarily segmental and transitory. The disintegration of the monolithic community has thus led to the proliferation of many personal communities, each more compatible and more supportive to the individual than ascribed corporate groups. These relationships tend to form sparsely-knit and spatially dispersed clusters of relationships.

Considering "activity space" (the spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and locations, within which a particular agent operates see. D. Massey, P. Jess, 1995) of social networks, we can note that it is increasing in its spatial reach and complexity. Though this does not mean that space is no more important for social relations.

In the first place, if new means of communication has facilitated the existence of spatially dispersed networks and has

increased their "activity space", if we look at the "active" ties (the one's we see regularly) they are usually more local (Wellman, 1996, 1994). Proximity's influence is still important, even if it has been stretched by the telephone, the automobile, the aeroplane and the internet. Workplace and neighbourhood continue to have strong effects on contact in personal communities networks. We cannot underestimate what has been called "compulsion to proximity"(Boden e Molotch, 1994), that is to say the fact that in our societies the need to meet face-to-face remains a very important aspect. As Giddens (1990) has pointed out of great importance in our societies are the processes of *re-embedding*, i.e., the social mechanisms through which trust relationships based on abstract (disembedded) systems can be reinforced and transformed by *facework*. Some data on telephone communication in social network show that the possibility to "annihilate" space given by this mean does not simply lead to the construction of dispersed, unbounded communities. Telephone contact is more a complement to face-to-face contact than a substitute for it. They help keep kin connected even more than friends and neighbours. The telephone has allowed kin- and friends- to be strongly connected even when living apart. It has allowed them to select the kin with whom they will maintain ties (1993).

A second reason supporting the idea that geographical space is still important, can be found in the existence of social and economic restraints on the access to the means of transportation and communication which have diminished the influence of space as a time-cost. The process of space-time compression induced by technology does have ambiguous consequences and not everyone is in the same position within it. It has been emphasised, for instance, that the new means of electronic communication may overcome some kind of discrimination (based on race or gender for instance) and may constitute a new kind of public sphere, ensuring new

spaces of communication. This is certain considering the peculiar modalities of interaction. At the same time it is more than possible that the access to these technologies creates new forms of inequalities or deepen the existing ones (educational inequalities for instance).

Networks distantiation (the “stretching” of networks in space) can be an interesting field of analysis of inequalities related to the process of space-time compression. It would be interesting to see, for instance, if different degrees and forms of distantiation influence other relational resources¹⁵.

3.3. Space as a frame: the spatial roots of social networks.

Considering the transformations of traditional communities we must take into account not only the technological factors increasing distantiation but also the social mechanisms at its base. As Simmel first and Giddens (1990) more recently have shown the capability of distantiation of a society depends not only on its means of transportation and communication (automobile rather than carriage, telephone rather than mail) but needs to find its basis in the social structure of society. The processes of abstraction and objectification (what Giddens calls symbolic tokens and expert systems) have been important mechanisms making possible the process of disembedding.

These factors influence the forms and logic of organisation of space in each society. Traditional societies are grounded on the logic of *embeddness* (circumscribed to the sphere of co-presence). The organisation of space is much more transparent and spatial forms are easy to recognise. The village community, based on co-presence, is a spatially bounded cluster of relationships and a socially bounded space.

¹⁵ Network distantation (or network’s space of activity) could even be seen as a form of social capital.

With the processes of disembedding and distantiation the intersection between social and physical space becomes blurred, space is better defined in terms of flows, relations seem to have a very uncertain and variable connection with space. The spatio-temporal contexts of everyday life in modern societies are thus organised in social forms which are much more permeable and dynamic. For this reason the analyses of how social networks develop from space and time context can be very important. Networks in fact develop from spatial contexts. Some of the structural constraint usually considered in network approach can probably be better expressed in terms of different spatio-temporal resources¹⁶. The analysis of space and time contexts is important not only in order to understand the concrete rooting of networks in society, but also to understand the new forms of social production of space and time.

Hopefully sociology has already put at our disposal quite an interesting number of concepts we can use.

A first set of concepts is related to the analysis of the different forms of *presence availability* i.e. the condition making possible and favouring interaction. Goffman's idea of *complete conditions of co-presence* investigate how presence is not only "being in the same place" He is more interested in the contextual and egocentric dimensions of human territoriality than in the character of physical settings in itself.

Giddens's draws on Goffman to construct his notion of *locale* as "a physical region involved as part of the setting of interaction, having definite boundaries which help to concentrate interaction in one way or another".

¹⁶ The question of gender differences in networks, for instance, as it is well known, is based on two lines of explanation. The first one considers the different attitudes towards sociability, the second one takes into account the different presence of men and women in the "institutional", "public spaces". If we characterise this dimension through attributional variable like status, we are not able to get to the concrete relational resources of individuals.

A second set of concepts refer to the character of space in relation to human activities. Spatial context can be categorised according to their function. Particularly interesting from a relational point of view is White's idea of *discipline*. Discipline is a spatio-temporal context of interaction which can be described as a self-reproducing formation which sustains identity and is characterised by the different ways of *embodying* identities.

A cafeteria meal is an *interface*, effectively delivering food to people. A sit-down urban dinner party among professional couples is an *arena* discipline. It is concerned with establishing some sort of identity of the evening. A church supper, by contrast, is a *council*, ordered by prestige valuation in an unending concern with balancing and disciplining conflicts as such.

3.4 Space as a form of experience.

The most complex and problematic dimension of space is that of space as a *form of experience*, following Simmel's account. He constructs his conception of space going back to Kant. According to Simmel space is a category of knowledge, but differently from Durkheim he sustains a relativist theory (based on the fact that there is no knowledge without *a priori*) which is not "based on common consent" (that is to say these *a priori* are somehow based on reality and are not the result of the agreement between knowing subjects). The spatial dimension can be termed *logical and perceptive a priori*. Unlike Kant, Simmel's *a priori* are not universal and a-temporal but variable in time and space (v. Boudon, 1989). While Simmel shows how space is in some way socially formed, he does not treat space as simply a social construct. Space retains a reality of its own. Simmel's position then, lies somewhere between spatial determinism and social constructionism. (Lechner, 1991, 1986).

Space is not, therefore, something external to the individual, something which can be experienced, but is a form of experience. From this point of view space has to be analysed for the way it mediates our relationship with social reality. *Distance* (as opposed to proximity) for instance, is not only a restriction to human activity but also a form influencing the properties of social relations. As Simmel has shown us, two links which are very similar on all the other characters, are different insofar as the subjects are close (prevalence of sensoriality and emotions) or distant (prevalence of neutrality and abstractness). In the same way *mobility* and *velocity* modify the nature of relations and the connection to the everyday world, affecting the way people travel, meet and work, but also the way they dance, walk and think (V. Matoré, 1976, Virilio, 1984).

As a form of experience space is definitely more important (and more challenging) for the analysis of social networks, because it is much more intimately related to the nature of relations. Different characteristics of space can change the nature of relationship, both network formation and network structure can be affected by the spatial character of their roots.

Schutz and Luckmann , for instance, distinguish between a primary and secondary zone of influence. The primary zone is the area of the physical world on which the agent can have a direct physical effect, the zone of direct manipulation. This area is the origin of all experience of objects in the "natural attitude" and the immediate area of experience of the world as it is spatially represented. In fact face-to-face contacts are usually said to be 'authentic'. If there is no distance between people, the reasoning goes, then their communication can be immediate and direct-unmediated. In other words, it is argued, the very lack of spatial distance can give a community-in-one-place an authenticity which would otherwise not be possible (Young,I.M., 1990). On the other hand, the secondary zone of influence is defined as the part of the

physical world which the agent can only affect through the use of technological aids.

The expansion of spatial movement and time-space distancing of social relations has definitely changed this view based on the dichotomy presence/absence, unmediated/mediated. Distance as a general form of spatial experience has to be thought in terms of technological distance. In the same way as the primary zone of influence is divided according to the agent's sensory modalities (touch, hearing and sight), the secondary zone can likewise be divided according to the technological means of mediation.

4. The crossing of networks and space: the concept of intersubjectivity.

Social networks approach emphasise the relational nature of society and is based on the assumption that human behaviour cannot be reduced to individual properties. The relational structure identified by social networks is supposed to mediate between individuals and society. The way this relationality is conceived, however, can lead to different theoretical interpretations.

The concept of intersubjectivity defines a relational configuration involving space and time. Intersubjectivity, in the "classical terms", refers to an existent milieu of man related to fellow man in multiform temporal, spatial, corporeal as well as cognitive and emotive terms. Human group life reflect a shared linguistic or symbolic reality that takes its shape as people interact with one another. The sphere of intersubjectivity is not, in fact, an abstract set of relation, but is based on the individuals sharing of time and space. Space and time are not simply a frame for the relations, they are constitutive of the "shared reality" which is at the base of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity refers to the relational character of *human lived experience*. The relational sphere of individuals is the starting point from which they experience society.

An intersubjective point of view is fundamental in the understanding of individuals "being in society", especially because contemporary societies seem to be, on the contrary, flattened between the opposing tendencies to objectivisation and subjectivisation (Fornäs, 1995).

At the same time, intersubjectivity is a difficult and controversial subject, which has been mainly conceived in philosophical and theoretical terms, and certainly needs to find a definition more suited to the nature of contemporary societies and above all an empirical field of investigation.

Some aspects of the concept (at least in their traditional definition) are more problematic and controversial. Two points in particular seem to be difficult to apply to contemporary societies.

In the first place, the idea that intersubjectivity is a pre-given, "taken for granted" reality which is related to the immediacy of experience. Our first relation to the world is not reflexive thought or knowledge, but practical, purposive engagement in-the-world. The definition of intersubjectivity in these terms seems unsuitable to contemporary societies that have been characterised by the idea of reflexivity (Giddens and Beck, 19??).

Secondly the definition of the "we"relationship, as related to the world of *coexistence*. In Schutz's definition the shared reality which is at the base of intersubjectivity is founded on presence. The face-to-face relationship is the systemic root of a shared world, and the base of familiarity. As we have outlined in the previous paragraph, distantiation and disembedding modify the character of spatial experience. Proximity can lead to strangeness and distance to familiarity.

Networks (and particularly what Wellman calls personal communities) can be a very interesting empirical field where to make testable hypotheses about intersubjectivity. They can describe the specific forms taken by the relational sphere of individuals. They

can show how “being in space and time” affect the nature of relations. They can reveal the mechanisms making intersubjectivity “live” as the “in between” linking the exterior world of objects with the interior world of subjectivity.

For instance, reconstructing the way social networks are rooted in space and time can allow us to highlight the intersubjective dimension of space and time.

Social activities are usually based on social time (and localised in social space)¹⁷ social time (and social space) is in fact defined by activities (work, leisure...) Everyday routine based on activities follow closely the social organisation of space and time. If we analyse everyday life through relations, however, we get a very different view. Of course social time and space are always important because of their role of synchronisation. They are an important relational resources. At the same time relationality does not follow closely social time, it has very often its own rhythms giving a different character to everyday life. Social times are experienced and transformed through the relationships linking individuals¹⁸. Intersubjective time is a very important point of relation to understand the connections between individual and social time.

¹⁷ The definition itself of social time depends on activities Cfr. Prenovost (1989). The structure of everyday life is based on activities (routine).

¹⁸ A research made on university students' social networks, has shown very different relational rhythms developing from a similar presence in institutional times. Cfr. Mandich (1996)

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