

# ProtoSociology

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Volume 26, 2009

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Modernization in Times of Globalization I

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# ProtoSociology

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Modernization in Times of Globalization I

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# IS THE WHOLE MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS?

*Matthias Thiemann*

Network analysis is a relatively recent meso-level approach to social reality that is interested in the effect of specific configurations of social relations (power elite connections, social structures of communication and of exchange) on the dynamics of social processes (information flow, contagion, processes of exchange). Inspired and propelled by a specific relational structuralism (s. e.g. White et al. 1976) mostly American researchers have developed a sound methodological and mathematical-analytical apparatus over the course of the last 40 years to provide possibilities of measurement for their structural analytical claims. As has often been remarked, many original theoretical inspirations stem from European, and more specifically German scholars (e.g. Elias' 'figurational sociology', Marx's class in itself vs. class for itself, Simmel's forms of sociation). However, despite this heritage, network analysis has only recently become a burgeoning field of empirical work in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Up until now, network analysis and network theory did not establish themselves firmly in the mainstream German social sciences (s. Haas and Muetzel, this volume). Some authors (s. Liepelt and Krempel, this volume) blame the dominance of survey research as the main empirical method in Germany, and the higher costs of network research. The costs for gathering network information have been reduced dramatically due to the internet, while the epistemic limitations of survey research to capture social processes continue unabated. Accordingly, the field of network research has become more dynamic in recent years, a sign of which is this rather large (600 pages) volume. The volume intends to portray this new paradigm and make visible the many different authors and theoretical strands using network analysis, emphasizing the specific theoretical contributions (*Netzwerkforschung*) can make to the international debate. The main claim of the book is that network analysis is a complementary paradigm that can be connected to many other theoretical frameworks, elucidating the relational context of social processes. In this respect, the articles in the book explore these areas of potential overlap and present empirical work validating the fruitfulness of the network approach.

1 The book reviewed: *Netzwerkanalyse und Netzwerktheorie – Ein neues Paradigma in den Sozialwissenschaften*, VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2008

21 years ago a similar volume (although smaller) appeared in America (Wellman and Berkowitz 1988) claiming the ascendance of a new paradigm of *structural analysis* using network theoretical tools. It was energized by the claim that “The presently existing, largely categorical descriptions of social structure have no solid theoretical grounding; furthermore network concepts may provide the only way to construct a theory of social structures” (White, Boorman and Breiger 1976, p.732). It demanded that a categorization of social structures should emerge from direct observation of these structures, stating that network analysis is not merely a metaphor or a bag of methods but a “fundamental intellectual tool for the analysis of social structure” (Wellman and Berkowitz 1988, p.4) with social ties becoming the unit of analysis and their patterning the variation of interest. Theoretically it argued that the analysis required “to draw inferences about the behavior of elements from aspects of the overall structure of systems (wholes)” (Berkowitz 1988, p. 483), with structures being the morphology of patterns of social relationships. The paradigm thus attempted to ground observed behavior of the elements in the overall structure of the system observed.

The current intellectual debate has moved on, and although both volumes operate under the heading of a paradigm, the 2008 volume presents a more multifaceted, pragmatic approach to the question how network analytical tools can potentially be combined with other paradigms, notwithstanding the number of contributions remaining true to methodological relationalism. Since the 90’s network analysis has begun to consider more seriously the formation, reproduction and transformation of networks focusing on the interplay of agency, culture and network structures (s. Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, p. 1411). The study of the relational and its specific theory has thus focused on dynamics, attempting to generate an idiosyncratic connection between theories of communication and action, between micro- and macroperspectives, while maintaining its own paradigmatic status. The current volume is an expression of these tension-filled attempts of synthesis.

The editor of this volume has amassed almost 50 articles in the short span of one year which allows a contemporary view of current approaches to and projects working with network analysis in Germany. This alone deserves appraisal, although some minor editorial features could have been improved. Rather than the short introduction to single chapters at the beginning of the volume, separate introductions into each single section would have made the access to the single chapters easier. This editorial weakness aside, the volume presents a fascinating variety of interesting empirical projects and theoretical approaches.

The panorama provided by the volume powerfully demonstrates the capability of network analysis to generate meaningful results in many different fields. The subtitle alluding to a new (coherent) paradigm is slightly misleading as it conceals the often critical discussions of certain shortcomings of the network analytical paradigm, to which different answers are proposed. The most important criticisms regard the static nature inherent in network representations of configurations of social relations, which do not live up to their dynamic nature and, on the other hand, the lack of conceptualization of the actor.

Contributions in this volume then attempt to answer the question how to capture actor-orientations and their impact on these networks as well as the credibility of important measures derived from static network representations once dynamics are assumed. What the reader thus can observe is a testing of different methods and theories (Bourdieuian field theory, methodic individualism, systems theory, or communication theory) how to incorporate the network concept, alongside with proponents of network theory itself (relational methodology). This state of the field does not represent a weakness of the network analytical approach, as it is a sign of its internal maturity (established methods and facts) that it can open itself up to other approaches. Especially the dynamics of networks are difficult to be observed in the network paradigm, as the network theory has a very limited view of motivation of actors and has commonly focused on rather stable configurations (emblematic is the use of network analysis for kinship configurations). “The interaction of Bourdieu’s field theory and network analysis seems to be a strong theoretical synthesis, as the former provides a theory of strategies of actors emerging from their embeddedness in the field, which then can be tested for with network analytic tools.

On the other hand, the theoretical work by Hollstein that incorporates Simmel’s concern with the forms of sociation as the structure within which individual efforts play out is also a very powerful proposal, which makes Simmel’s framework fertile for empirical network analysis. Developing a relational framework linking micro- and macroperspective and network analytical and conventional empirical methods, while insisting on a meso-level relational analysis of social processes seems especially promising (s. Haeussling, this volume). The multidimensional analyses of network dynamics (communication networks and social networks) as well as qualitative network analysis are two important streams developing in Germany and of interest for the international debate.

The panorama of approaches comes with the formal necessity of short contributions. This forces the contributors to balance the presentation of the current

state of the art, their own method and their results. Some authors manage this balance very well, especially if their own work is focused on a specific aspect of network theory (such as social capital or centrality measures used in network analysis). These are often undergirded with own empirical work. Purely theoretical work sometimes does not establish a connection to further empirical work and thus the reader remains puzzled as to their relevance for research. The space limitations lead to some articles defining their problem, presenting the literature as well as their method but then lacking a thorough discussion of the results or sometimes results themselves. For example, Mehler et al. provide a great discussion of the work on semantic networks developing in the interplay with social networks and outline a very interesting approach to model this development. However no results of their work are provided. The contribution of Windhager et al. shares a similar fate. While their method offers a possibility of relating the dynamics of social networks to individual, organizational and global contexts with the help of visualization and data processing devices, the lack of empirical work makes it impossible to judge its potential. A positive effect of these presentations in the age of Internet is the possibility to visit the indicated websites and to find out more about the results generated by the research. The reader looking for potentially transferable research designs thus will get many useful inspirations from this volume, but sometimes might have to consult further sources to gain a better understanding of their actual potential.

In the following I will provide a summary of the different parts of the book as well as highlighting its most felicitous contributions, in order to generate easier access to this voluminous book for the interested reader. It consists of 46 contributions, sorted into 7 sections. The three articles from the "Introduction" are followed by the section "Theoretical reference points", which represents the largest section of the book. A section on methods joins, after which "Approaches to the study of dynamics in network research" are presented. The subsequent 2 sections cover the application of network research in different fields, with an emphasis on organizational studies. The last section ("Actor-network theory") aims at more theoretical goals and represents a dialogue between ANT and network analysis proper on the topic of actor-orientation and actor constitution through the process of translation.

The introduction outlines the main concerns of the book which are the presentation of the different attempts to use network analytical tools in Germany, thereby linking a non-connected community of scholars as well as illustrating the capacity of the network concept to tie in with different theoretical approaches and methods. This attempt of integration from a relational perspec-



tive proves fruitful (s. Haeussling, Stegbauer, Hollstein this volume), but is only one of the avenues taken in this book. The attempts of incorporation of network analytical concepts and findings into other theoretical edifices, on the other hand, presents a struggle of paradigms rather than a unification into a single new one.

Prof. Liepelt leads a staunch attack on the epistemological short-comings of representative interviews regarding its unit of analysis (rational persons), its mode of analysis (regressions assuming stochastic processes) as well as its neglect of communication among members of a society. Instead he emphasizes recent insights from complexity theory which insist on the relative nature of attributes of objects, determined in their interactions with others. In what follows he uses the theory of Harrison White to make a shift of the unit of analysis to components of social relations of different size and density plausible, which can be identified with inductive methods such as blockmodelling. His emphatic argument for a paradigmatic shift is a successful introduction into a research area that is still in the making.

The goal of the following article by Haas and Muetzel is to represent the historical development of the network analytical approach in Germany as well as its current main fields of application. The analysis focuses on articles using network analytical metaphors and concepts which appeared in the six most prominent German social science journals over the course of the last 26 years. Their findings are quite bleak. Only 49% of the articles captured are primarily employing quantitative or qualitative network analysis, while the remaining 51% use concepts or metaphors of network analysis. The numbers demonstrates that network analysis has not yet established itself in the German main stream as less than 0.5 analytic network articles have appeared annually per journal.

The next section of the book is entitled “Theoretische Anknüpfungspunkte” (theoretical points of reference). In it, proponents of Bourdieu’s field theory, rational choice, systems and communication theory, but also genuinely relational sociologists (Hollstein, Stegbauer, Haeusserling) present their theoretical thoughts on the term network and its potential connection with other theoretical approaches as well as its potential contribution to topics of sociological investigation (see for example Fuhse regarding the questions of stratification). Conspicuous here as throughout the book, it is that empirically informed works are theoretically tighter and are proving their capacity of explanation through the empirics. Thematically, a large part of the discussion is devoted to the problem of network analysis in its treatment of dynamic processes and,

connected to it a theoretically grounded understanding of actor orientation. Especially Bourdieu's field theory and rational choice-theory are exerted to propose such a theory of actor orientation.

In both articles using Bourdieu (Bernhard and Bluemel) it is argued that field theory is not simply translatable into network analysis as the former analyzes latent power relations, while the latter analyzes manifest practices (an exception here is the block-model analysis as Bluemel rightly adds). Bourdieu's theory of action, characterized as methodological collectivism posits that what is initiated individually bears the traces of social rationality, thereby integrating the actor in larger scale structures of dominance. Observed patterns can then be interpreted as an expression of structural effects of objective power relations, which can be analyzed independently. These studies are remarkable scientific works, strengthening theoretical claims with empirical findings. The question however remains, if social capital, which is one of the foundations of "the objective power relations" as posited by Bourdieu, can be measured with network analytical tools, therefore granting network analysis a more intimate relation with field theory.

The rational choice approach (Kropp) emphasizes the strategic action of human actors in complex environments, acting according to resources and endowments. A strongly socialized version of the homo-oeconomicus indeed bears resemblance to Granovetter's model of action (1985). However the crucial question of how the exigencies of information processing by a maximizing agent are solved remains unclear. Holzer's proposal to understand networks as social formations of reflexive addresses defines the term network in a systems theoretical framework. However, the additional insights gained by such a construction do not become evident. Communication oriented modeling (Albrecht) is in this respect far more promising, as it combines the recording of the temporal development of communication networks in a multidimensional approach with the temporal development of social networks using the tools of conventional network analysis.

The contributions directly committed to methodological relationalism emphasize the structuring of action through positions, while at the same time paying attention to the negotiation of these positions in interaction (s. esp. Stegbauer). One strong finding is the problem of abandoning these positions by individuals, due to their continuous narrative and interactive reinforcement, as Haessling concisely demonstrates. He investigates differential learning opportunities in the first grade from a relational perspective. His framework for observing interactional networks, which is open to different empirical methods

and semantic theories, shows how theoretical openness can be combined with a genuinely relational analysis.

Betina Hollstein pursues the question, how exactly patterns of relations impact the dynamics of relations. She carefully reconstructs Simmel's idea of sociation forms, to develop a two level mode of analysis. According to her, the forms of sociation determine the capability limits of the concrete realization of these relations. Within these limits, actor orientations and actions determine their actual molding. Her empirical work on changes of social networks after the event of widowhood proves the fit and fertility of her approach. Especially noteworthy is that she allocates a place for individual orientations in her framework while retaining the supremacy of social forms over actors' individual intentions, thus remaining linked to the structural paradigm.

In his overview of the impact of social capital on processes of stratification, Fuhse develops a model of interplay of life styles and socio-economic status with social networks. It states that the structuration of social networks of acquaintances, through social categories and socio-economic status, feeds back into socio-economic achievements through the opportunity structures provided by and aspiration horizons structured in social networks. While the specific impact of social networks on these factors might weaken, given the decline of milieus, Fuhse's work illustrates how a relational approach can contribute to the study of perpetuating patterns of stratification.

The part on methods begins with a positive view on the future for network analysis by Krempel due to improved methods and cheaper relational data. The presentation of his own projects is too short to be explicatory, but shows the manifold areas in which network analysis can be applied and its results are available via the internet. The following works on the visualization of social networks (Pfeffer) and the problem of missing data (Erlhofer) represent the current state of the art, and are of special interest to those already working with network analytical tools.

The outstanding article of this section is the one of Mutschke, who problematizes whole network data as technical artifacts, with only loose meaning for individuals after two tie-steps away from them. To generate a more realistic understanding of observability, he develops a new centrality index, which takes the formation of communities into account, embedding these in metacommunities. His new measure is able to resolve some paradoxes in empirical work stemming from unrealistic assumptions inherent in measures of in-between centrality. Most of the following articles are solid and work on important problems of social network analysis (the measurement of the diffusion of in-

novation, problems of network generators and the study of the co-evolution of network structures and communication) forming a useful practitioners guide.

The first article in the section “Approaches to the Study of Network Dynamics” (Trier and Bobrik) successfully casts doubt on static measurements of network centrality of actors, proving with its dynamic analysis that this measure continuously fluctuate. Instead the authors propose an event driven dynamic centrality analysis, which allows the user to observe the development of network centrality in self-chosen time windows. The article shows that with their dynamic centrality index, actors with the same final centrality can be differentiated according to the historical development of their centrality, allowing the separation of more influential from less influential actors. The next article documents fascinating technical developments which allow the tracing of social dynamics in time and space. However, the ethically problematic activity of generating a vitreous corporate citizen in the process of investigating network dynamics is not problematized in the article. Additionally, there is a lack of discussion of the potentially opposite direction of imputed causality in the observed correlations, which leaves a mark of ambiguity on these results that deserve further research.

The third article (Marbach), which investigates the changes in two forms of social capital over time through panel data is not only a thorough empirical investigation, it is also a presentation of what already can be done with more conventional techniques of statistical analysis. His analysis of the data provide a good starting point for further qualitative research to verify his interpretation of the forces underlying changes of network structures.

Heidler’s contribution, discussing the “stochastic actor-driven model for network change” and its computer program SIENA, presents a very different approach to network panel data. It represents the most remarkable shift away from the structural premises of network analysis, claiming that production, reproduction and development of networks can be grasped much better from an actor based method. SIENA borrows heavily from methodological individualism, assuming optimizing agents and utility functions, which however include structurally motivated variables, as the tendency towards clique formation. A reiterative method finds the parameters of this utility function by fitting them to the patterns of change observed in the actual networks, which is a very nice feature of this method. This might lead to a detection of regularities of behavior of individuals as Heidler claims, but only if the right mechanisms are put into the function by the researcher. What guides this choice and how to model positionally specific effects on the capacity of actors to make relational choices (s.

Haeussling, this volume) will remain important questions for the future. The following article on dynamics of negative relationships in classrooms applies SIENA and generates interesting results, especially the outstanding impact of alter's lack of popularity to the formation of a negative relationship with that person. However, explaining this fact with a pay-off for actors seems odd, as this explanation is only backed by the model, not by empirical evidence itself.

The following section on network analysis in several research areas presents different applications of network analysis. Two articles deserve special attention, the chapters on "social capital and trust among migrating polish peasants" (Von Bock und Polach) and the work on the changes of networks of people becoming unemployed (Marquardsen and Roebenack). They represent successful applications of the qualitative network approach which mostly works with semi-structured interviews and network cards. The first investigation looks into the patterns of labor migration of Polish workers to German agricultural firms, while the second looks at the changes of network configurations after becoming unemployed. Both studies reveal the strength of qualitative network analysis as developed by Hollstein.

In the next section on organizational research, Nicole Scheidegger tests several hypotheses on the impact of cohesive and diversified social relations in organizations. Her work proves the necessity to differentiate dimensions of the informal organizational networks in order to gain meaningful results for different forms of social capital.

The book closes with three articles on Actor Network Theory (ANT). Most impressive is the work by Birgit Peuker, whose actual use of network methods to identify central actors in the political discourse on genetically modified food and her use of network visualization to show the main concepts of the debate and their linkages for the pro and contra side is very impressive. This article not only uses ANT to motivate its research steps, but also uses network methods to gain results.

Overall, this volume presents many interesting developments of method, computer programs and theoretical proposals. Multi-dimensional and fine grained temporal analysis of networks are the most important methodological innovations, however their explanatory value still needs to be proven. The mixture of qualitative interviews and network data, known as qualitative network analysis is more internally mature and already produces valuable results. The field is evidently in motion, and several contenders for the integration of network analytical tools into broader theoretical frameworks can be identified. Do these approaches add up to more than the sum of its parts? Not yet, but one

might hope that in the end, after taking into account dynamics, culture and actor orientations, the fundamental structural insight of the constraining impact of the structure of the whole on each elements' behavior will remain intact, in whichever larger framework it will reside. This book is a vivid picture of this process and a great guide for all interested in the current state of the debate.

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# IMPRESSUM

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## ON PROTOSOCIOLOGY

*Protosociology plays an important role among philosophy journals with connected contributions on important and breaking topics – such the nature and special features of collective cognitive states – that do not receive such generous attention in other journals. It is worth serious consideration for inclusion in a library's philosophy collection.*

Margaret Gilbert, Storrs (USA)

*The relatively young journal Protosociology has become an important forum for discussion in the philosophy of social science and of sociality and, more broadly, for theoretical discussion in social science. It is especially interesting and important that such new fields as social metaphysics and social epistemology as well as research related to collective intentionality and its applications have acquired a prominent place in the agenda of Protosociology.*

Raimo Tuomela

*Protosociology occupies an important position in the European intellectual scene, bridging philosophy, economics, sociology and related disciplines. Its volumes on rationality bring together concerns in all these topics, and present an important challenge to the cognitive sciences.*

Donald Davidson, Berkeley (USA)

*Protosociology publishes original papers of great interest that deal with fundamental issues in the human and social science. No academic library is complete without it.*

Nicholas Rescher, Pittsburgh (USA)

*Protosociology has been remarkably successful in publishing interesting work from different tradition and different disciplines and, as the title signals, in giving that work a new, eye-catching slant.*

Philipp Pettit, Canberra, Australia

*Protosociology is a truly premier interdisciplinary journal that publishes articles and reviews on timely topics written by and for a wide range of international scholars. The recent volumes on rationality are remarkable for their breadth and depth. Protosociology would be a great addition to any library.*

Roger Gibson, St. Louis (USA)

PUBLISHED VOLUMES

# ProtoSociology

An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research

## Double Volume 25, 2008

Philosophy of Mathematics –  
Set Theory, Measuring Theories, and Nominalism

Preface

*Gerhard Preyer, Georg Peter*

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# ProtoSociology

An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research

## Volume 24, 2007

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt: Multiple Modernities —  
A Paradigma of Cultural and Social Evolution

Introduction (*Gerhard Preyer*)

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Dr. Gerhard Preyer lehrt an der Universität  
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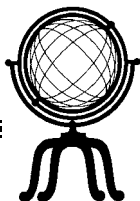
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