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## Toward an Interactionist Sociology of Ethnic Relations<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* This text has three parts. In the first, I discuss the presence and absence of the concept of “social relations” in social sciences and focus on “ethnic relations.” Then, I analyse the ways in which the theoretical problems of ethnic relations are conceptualized in sociology. Finally, I offer my own suggestions. Why is it worth dealing with concepts of interactions and social relations at all, especially with respect to macrosocial phenomena (such as “ethnic issues”)? First, it seems to me that these are some of sociology’s most basic concepts. Second, the relational and interactionist current in contemporary sociology offers some important inspirations relating to the analysis of macrocultural phenomena. I suggest to follow Randall Collins’ ideas and seek the “microfoundations” of macrosocial phenomena in the chains of interaction rituals present at the foundation of society as such. I intend to avoid such a sociological approach to ethnicity which calls all ethnic phenomena “ethnic relations” but in fact deals mainly with individual groups, types of structured ethnic order or attitudes. Actually, ethnic order rests on the interactionist understanding of the social relations between ethnic actors. It is these relations which dynamize social order.

*Keywords:* basic concepts of sociology, interactions, social relations, ethnic relations, relationism, individualism.

This text has three parts. In the first part I discuss the presence and absence of the “social relations” concept in sociology and focus on “ethnic relations.” In the second part I demonstrate the ways in which the theoretical problems of ethnic relations are conceptualized in sociology. Finally, in the third part I offer several suggestions of my own.

Why is it worth dealing with concepts of interactions and social relations at all, especially with respect to macrosocial phenomena (such as “ethnic issues”)? First, it seems to me that these are some of sociology’s most basic concepts. Second, the relational and interactionist current in contemporary sociology offers some important inspirations relating to the analysis of macrocultural phenomena.

I would like to follow Randall Collins’ suggestions, generally and “formally,” and seek the “microfoundations” of macrosocial phenomena in the chains of interaction rituals which lie at the foundation of the organization of society as such (Collins 1981). I would also like to avoid such a sociological approach to ethnicity which calls all ethnic phenomena “ethnic relations” (or “racial relations”) but in fact deals mainly with distinct groups, types of structured ethnic order or attitudes. Actually,

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank two PSR reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I partly draw from reinterpreted material used in fragments of my Polish-language book, see Mucha 2006.

ethnic order rests on the interactionist understanding of the social relations between ethnic actors. It is these relations which dynamize social order.

### **Presence and Absence of the “Social Relations” Concept in the Social Sciences<sup>2</sup>**

This text is about “ethnic relations.” The first part is more concerned with “relations” than “ethnicity” (or “race”), however. “Social relations” are my basic concept. Although this concept is mainly used in analytic sociology to study selected (largely long-term, regular and normalized) interactions between individuals and between social roles, I am equally interested in the macrosocial approach, i.e. in social (mainly ethnic) relations between very large groups and their sociological conceptualizations. The term “social relation” is used in many areas of everyday life and is variously understood. This text is about sociology, however.

According to one popular definition sociology is the science of “social relations.” Prominent representatives of the discipline also use this definition. Social relations are often presented after Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1970), and also after Florian Znaniecki (1963, 1965, 1967, 1973, 1988) as a very important analytic category, a significant element of social bonds, the consequence of spatial and psychological contact, as well as mutual interactions. Jan Szczepański, a student of Znaniecki and author of a textbook which has been very influential in Central and Eastern Europe, views social relations as an important component of mutual interdependence systems, institutions, social control and social organization (see Szczepański 1972).<sup>3</sup>

Editors of encyclopaedias of the social sciences feel no need to define the “social relation” concept. The pre-war *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (1930) does not have entries for “relations” or “social relations” (or “relationships”), or for “interaction” or “social interaction.” The grand *International Encyclopedia* published nearly forty years later (in 1968) has no entries for “social relations” or even “relations,” nor does it have any cross-references to these terms. However, it does feature six entries on interaction. The recently released third edition of the encyclopaedia of the social sciences edited by British social anthropologists (*The Social Science Encyclopaedia* 2004), has entries for “industrial relations” and “international relations” but no entry for “interaction” (just like the previous editions). The two-volume international sociological

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<sup>2</sup> No matter how meticulously one researches, one cannot possibly read the entire literature on a specific subject. Many, many books and articles have the phrase “social relations” or “ethnic relations” in their title. The interactionist approach can be detected in hundreds of them. Hundreds more deal with “relations” yet actually only discuss crystallized ethnic structure. One of the unintended consequences of my selection of sources is of “regional” character. Although I mention the ideas proposed by European writers I pay much more attention to those of American scholars. It is also worth bearing in mind that in the socialist countries the term “social relations” often appeared in public debate inspired by “Marxist theory” without being defined.

<sup>3</sup> The approach to teaching the foundations of sociology adopted in academic introductory textbooks on sociology (see e.g. Giddens 1991; Goodman 1992; Turner 1994) is quite different from the approach which prevailed many decades ago. Most authors no longer move from the “social atoms” (such as social “action” or “interaction”) to larger structures and focus instead on various spheres of social life in the contemporary world.

encyclopaedia (*International Encyclopedia* 1995) has no entries for “relations,” “relationships” or “interaction” but pays a lot of attention to the practical aspects of “ethnic and racial relations” (without introducing the terms analytically). The five-volume encyclopaedia of sociology whose second edition was published in 2000 does not feature “relations,” “relationships” or “interaction” (*Encyclopedia of Sociology* 2000). The Polish encyclopaedia of sociology (*Encyklopedia socjologii*) published in 1998–2005 does not have an entry for “social relations.” It features “interaction” and “industrial relations” but not “ethnic” or “international” relations. The twenty-six volume encyclopaedia of the social and behavioural sciences published in 2001 has no entries for “relations” or “interaction” (*International Encyclopedia* 2001) but has an entry for “social relations in adulthood.” The international dictionary of racial relations published in 1987 makes no effort to define these relations (*International Handbook* 1987).

What can we learn from those encyclopaedias and dictionaries which do have entries on “social relations” or “interactions”? Marek Ziółkowski portrays interaction as a process occurring between human individuals and also a basic component of macrosocial phenomena (Ziółkowski 1998: 349). M. S. Clark presents a psychological approach and focuses on close relations between two people, when each person influences the other’s thoughts, feelings and/or behaviour. In this sense people are at least minimally interdependent. Relations may vary in frequency, diversity, impact on the partner, and time span. Clark presents various typologies of adult relations. Let us take a closer look at one of these typologies. Relations can be divided according to four dimensions: cooperative and friendly versus hostile; equal versus unequal; intense versus superficial; and socioemotional and informal versus task-oriented and formal (Clark 2001: 14423–14424). Witold Morawski discusses “industrial relations” and applies the term to the rules of play between the most important actors on the industrial arena. His focus is less on interactions between individual people and more on interactions between employers and employees (and their representatives) and also between these groups and the state organization (Morawski 2002: 123). This entry contains the important observation that not only individual actors but also collective actors, including institutional ones, can be actors in social relations.

Encyclopaedias and dictionaries notwithstanding, such significant areas of social studies as the sociology of ethnicity, economic sociology or political science are concerned respectively with “ethnic and racial relations,” “industrial relations” and “international relations,” or at least that is what we can infer from the titles of numerous books, chapters, journal articles and conferences. It seems to me that the vast body of work on these subjects attests to the great practical viability of the concept which interests me in this article, in the social sciences. What is missing, however, is an in-depth consideration of the nature of social relations and their concretization, that is ethnic, industrial or international relations.

In the last three examples the social actors may “come from” many different levels of social reality. They may include individuals (people, personalities, social roles), social communities varying in level of organization, or social institutions. Hence we have the problem of the collective social actor and the collective participant of social relations and the question of which theories adequately account for the many elements

and parts of the social world and the social relations *between* these parts rather than within them. In this article I am going to try to identify the actors of social relations, particularly ethnic or racial relations, and the number of actors. I am also going to try to determine the extent to which these relations are relations between “independent” actors or actors within one “social system;” the nature of conflict—is it a social relation or perhaps a social relation deficit or even its contradiction; and finally how we can develop typologies of social relations.

The “relations” problem area is of course presociological and mainly logical. Therefore it is worth referring to the “basic” concept, the concept of “relation” and its analyses in contemporary theories. According to Barbara Stanosz,

we call any connection or dependency between two or more subjects, e.g. a peer relation, blood relation or friendship between people, the property of having greater weight or higher temperature between physical objects, minority or divisibility between numbers, similarity between geometric figures etc., a relation (Stanosz 1988: 170, 199; see also e.g. Ziemiński 2002: 95–101).

As far as the sociology of social relations is concerned, I am interested of course only in some of the problems indicated by Stanosz. What concerns me is that (“any connection or dependency”), what is “going on” (I wish to stress the great importance of the dynamic and interactionist aspect which is not necessarily present in logical relations theory) “between people” but also between human collectivities and social groups. I am well aware, however, that when sociologists speak of what is “going on between people” they are often doing so in a different, non-dynamic and non-interactionist, sense. In the literature we find the term “relation” being used to signify the connection between the attributes of people or social groups. For example, one group may be larger than another group, similar or dissimilar in one way or another. We sometimes read about “relations between events” or relations between people and non-human objects.

Interesting terminologically but less interesting substantively are such issues as potential differences in meaning in the English language (and English language literature is particularly important here) between the words “relation” and “relationship.” It is my impression that those who write in English usually make no distinction whatever between these terms and “simply” use them interchangeably. However, Michael Banton (whose ideas I shall discuss shortly) did make the distinction in his book devoted to the study of social roles and “social relations.” In fact, despite the title of his book, he discussed the latter term, the one which concerns me more, only marginally. “A social relation exists between two or more individuals, but a relationship links two or more roles” (Banton 1965: 127). It is often the case that relations between two people are conducted in terms of several different alternative relationships, since various men’s roles may be relevant simultaneously. “The same two men may be colleagues in one situation, rivals in another, associated in a club, but adversaries in political discussion, and they may pass from one relationship to another, and back again, in a matter of moments” (ibidem: 127). Unfortunately in his many works on ethnic and racial issues Banton fails to pursue this interesting and important theme. He exposes his methodological individualism and (from the 1970s) emphasizes the utility of rational choice theory in the analysis of racial relations but in fact discusses collective

actors (communities, groups and their activities) rather than human individuals and social roles. He basically ignores relationships and concentrates on relations instead (see e.g. Banton 1994, 2000a, 2001, 2005a).<sup>4</sup>

Andrzej Grzegorzczuk tackles the problem of “interpersonal interactions” (that which transpires “between” individuals and between collectives) in his analytical “applied philosophy.” “We call the sequence of actions of several subjects of the kind that the next action of each of them can be viewed as a response (reaction) to the situation produced by the previous actions of all involved subjects—an interaction” (Grzegorzczuk 1995: 175). An interaction is often an intertwining of the longer action sequences of several subjects who pursue their goals in such a way that the way each of them pursues his/her goal depends on the actions of the remaining subjects. It may also be the case that what is involved is not only the effect of one subject on the ways another subject (subjects) acts but also on the other’s (others’) action goals. Interactions, Grzegorzczuk argues, have a structure of their own. Most important are the subject’s (subjects’) goals. Then come general methods of action. These are determined on the one hand by the “pressures and standards to which they submit” and on the other hand by “morality, approved habits, professed values, that is one’s accepted action ethos” (ibidem: 175). Grzegorzczuk gives the following examples of interactions: competing, playing, fighting, but also cooperating, helping one another, dialoguing, negotiating.

I find several of Grzegorzczuk’s ideas particularly interesting. First is his approach to interaction standards and the standards of behaviour of interaction parties. Community life is a source of ideal images of interaction as a sequence of actions which realize certain values. Even adversaries may have a goal which they share to some extent or they may share ideas concerning the rules of the game which they are both playing. Although many rules are shared, individuals may have internalized different standards. Some individuals may be practically unable to meet the standards accepted in a particular community or superimposed on them (or—let me add—sometimes ones which individuals have voluntarily accepted). In this case we have a conflict between different people’s standards or between a collectivity’s generally accepted standard and its implementations. What is more, interaction partners may or may not have their own rules of conduct in a situation in which their partner does not adhere to the commitments which a standard implies. Finally, even if a standard is initially accepted by all interaction partners, these partners may differ greatly as to how the standard is to be understood and they may react very differently to new contingencies (ibidem: 176–178). Second is Grzegorzczuk’s intuition concerning collective actions and interactions between collective partners. Collective action usually involves division of labour. There are several ways of doing this. Division of labour defines the obligations of specific partners and other partners control each of them. When cooperation is running smoothly, “we can distinguish in it elements and phases analogous to those which operate in the activity of the single actor, that is collective cognitive experiences

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<sup>4</sup> Banton stresses the importance of linguistic precision in the social sciences, the need to define concepts and to distinguish between colloquial and scientific language (see e.g. Banton 2000a: 537–538, 2001: 164–175, 2005: 470). Unfortunately even in his texts explicitly referring to “social relations” and their “definition” he fails to explain what he exactly means (see Banton 200a: 187–192, 2005a: 466–470).

and value experiences, collective decisions and collective (task-allocated) realization (ibidem: 179). Differences in the way values are experienced by different participants of the same collective action can lead to the team's disintegration, says Grzegorzczyk. Not everyone needs to be aware of the action program, however. Sometimes it is enough if the majority is only partly aware of the program draft and only a few are fully informed about the program. Besides, no program description can be completely exhaustive. It is always necessary to improvise and improvisation will be all the more fruitful, the more people are aware of the general idea and basic goal of the cooperation without having to go into the details (ibidem: 179–180). I find this way of thinking interesting. It draws upon the idea of collective consciousness and collective actor and has considerable potential for the analysis of ethnic relations.

Let us return to the hypothetical lack of an analytical interest of a considerable portion of mainstream sociology in "social relations." It is worth making a methodological distinction between "substantialism" (both individualism and holism) and "relationism" in the social sciences. George Ritzer and Pamela Gindoff analyze this issue in the context of the differences between holism and individualism. The first assumption of methodological relationism is, in their opinion, that explanations of the social world involve relationships among individuals, groups and society. Activities of people, groups and larger societies cannot be explained without taking the social relationships among and between them into account. Second, relationists do not deny the existence of individuals and wholes. However, concepts dealing with them must be defined in such a way that they include the relations between them. Third, individualistic and holistic concepts are useful for gaining an understanding of social life, but in order to explain it, we must employ relational concepts. Already in traditional philosophy we find the anticipation of methodological relativism. In social psychology, Ritzer and Gindoff see relationism in research on the micro, mezzo and macro spheres. Discussing American sociology in the 1980s and 1990s, the authors emphasize interest in relations between the micro and macro spheres, and in European sociology during the same decades they observe interest in agency-structure integration (Ritzer & Gindoff 1992: 132–135). However, these authors wrote their text mainly because they noticed that the relationist approach was being neglected in mainstream world sociology.

Mustafa Emirbayer voiced a similar opinion several years later. "Sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static 'things' or in dynamic, unfolding relations. Large segments of the social community continue implicitly or explicitly to prefer the former point of view. [...] But increasingly, researchers are searching for viable analytic alternatives, approaches that reverse these basic assumptions and depict social reality instead in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms" (Emirbayer 1997: 281, 287–289; see also Emirbayer 1996: 124).

Meanwhile, examples of a contemporary relationist and interactionist approach to macro-sociology can be found. Within the last twenty years culture studies have become increasingly relational, dynamic and interactionist. Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman suggest that the old paradigm which views culture as a set of beliefs and values residing in human consciousness and which people never have to externalize

(although they can of course do so) is becoming obsolete. They argue that culture “is a set of publicly shared codes or repertoires, building blocks that structure people’s ability to think and to share ideas,” to act (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003: 735). The basic task of sociological culture studies is to analyze how people use collective representations to make meaning together in their everyday lives. People make meanings in various specific social settings, large or small, face-to-face or virtual, in relation to each other, as they perceive each other. And those perceptions are the shared grounds for interactions in these settings (ibidem: 735–736). Stratification studies are undergoing similar transformation. According to Wendy Bottero and Kenneth Prandy, the cultural and interactionist turn is evident in the class analysis of contemporary societies. These researchers are investigating the utility of relational or social distance approaches to mapping hierarchy and inequality, theorizing stratification as a social space. Space is identified by mapping social interactions. “Exploring the nature of social space involves mapping the network of social interaction—patterns of friendship, partnership and cultural similarity—which gives rise to relations of social closeness and distance” (Bottero & Prandy 2003: 177). Not only are these interactions and relations symptoms of social structure, they argue, they are its elements.

What I want to do here is draw attention to the fact that society’s “ethnic structure” and “ethnic orders” consist of dynamic and interactionistically conceived social relations.

When we study social (“interpersonal”) relations it is very important to deal with the problem of how these or merely similar social phenomena are sociologically conceptualized. I have already drawn attention to the fact that this text’s subject matter is often conceived in “interactionist” terms. Analytic “applied philosophy” or even social psychology notwithstanding, we must pay attention to at least two traditions in contemporary sociology. One tradition is exchange theory in the broad sense, particularly the one represented by George C. Homans (e.g. 1974) and the macrostructural version proposed by Peter M. Blau (1977a, 1977b; Blau & Schwartz 1984). The second tradition is symbolic interactionism, especially the one inspired by Herbert Blumer. This one often assumes that interactions are relatively brief. Meanwhile, I am interested in relatively stable social relations and ones which cannot just be reduced to “social exchange.”

Most importantly, I am interested in the aforementioned macrosocial theories (the sociology of ethnicity, industrial relations and international relations) which conceptualize their problem areas in terms of “social relations” rather than “interactions.” However, I do not intend to neglect the applicability of Herbert Blumer’s symbolic interactionism to the analysis of ethnic relations or the consequences of exchange theory (in its macrostructural version proposed by Peter M. Blau or rational choice theory) for ethnic studies.

To begin with I would like to say how I understand ethnicity and ethnic group. According to Michael Banton, the “concept of ethnic group was introduced by Sir Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon to clear up confusions between the ideas of race, culture and nation. They wrote [in 1935—JM] that ‘it is very desirable that the term race as applied to human groups should be dropped from the vocabulary of science

[...] in what follows the word race will be deliberately avoided and the term (ethnic) group or people employed” (Banton 2000a: 536–537). Of course Banton is referring to the English-language literature because Max Weber (see e.g. 1947, 1978) was already analyzing ethnic relations and groups over a dozen years earlier.

I feel that it is important to recall Milton M. Gordon’s ideas. Gordon thought that in “classic” modern immigrant societies an ethnic group is a group whose members share an elementary cultural identity, a *sense of peoplehood*. Ethnicity is a hybrid feature and may be rooted in a variety of foundations. In immigrant societies there are three basic criteria for the distinction of groups which are called ethnic: features which a given society identifies as race, religion and national origin (Gordon 1964: 23–29). In his well-known compendium of “racial and ethnic relations,” Martin N. Marger, like Gordon, argues that ethnic groups are groups within a larger society that display a unique set of nontrivial, fundamental features transmitted in the process of socialization from generation to generation, such as language and religion. Also like Gordon, Marger highlights the importance of social identity, a sense of community (Marger 2009: 8–18). I am not going to discuss such admittedly very important issues as ethnicity as an ascribed feature versus ethnicity as a group construction; the objectivity vs. subjectivity of group features and boundaries; the territoriality of ethnic groups; or ethnicity as a constant vs. variable in social analyses. I would, however, like to point out that in many cases religious diversity may lie at the roots of so-called ethnic phenomena if it is a matter of fundamental importance or group identity. Another potentially important problem is the problem of relations between the concepts of ethnicity and race. I think that the opinion that “racial groups” ought to be analyzed from the point of view of differences in significant cultural patterns which are socially inherited and socially recognized, i.e. “simply” as ethnic groups, has been the dominant opinion ever since World War II.<sup>5</sup>

I would like to stress that this article cannot possibly exhaust the topic of the nature of social relations (including ethnic ones). In addition to the traditions on which I am going to focus here I also think that the work of Karl Marx is important (ownership of means of production and related problems). Neither am I going to discuss the admittedly very important problem of relations between ethnic diversity (ethnic relations) and class diversity (class relations). After all, my focus is on the content of the concept “social relation” (and particularly “ethnic relation”), not links, however close, between various empirical types of social relations.<sup>6</sup> For example, Edna Bonacic studied relations between the class of American capitalists and the ethnically divided working class (see e.g. Bonacic 1972). The distinguished British scholar John Rex made references to Max Weber’s class theory in his analyses of relations between

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<sup>5</sup> Among the distinguished students of culture who think otherwise it is worth mentioning M. G. Smith who wrote: “I recognize as races those varieties of mankind characterized by distinctive sets of gross hereditary phenotypical features. I therefore distinguish sharply between ‘race relations’ and ‘ethnic relations’, reserving the first term for relations between people of different racial stock and the second for relations between people of the same racial stock who feel themselves, and are felt by others, to differ ethnically by virtue of their differing descent and culture” (Smith 1988: 190).

<sup>6</sup> For example, John Solomos discussed the various Marxist conceptions of “race” in the mid-1980s (Solomos 1988). I do not think that any significant new approaches have been published since.



ethnic structure and class structure. A more serious problem perhaps is that I am also not going to dwell on the substantively important question of ethnic dominance, discrimination and racism. I believe, however, that these problems are usually of more practical than theoretical significance in “theories of ethnic relations.” Nevertheless it is good to remember that they exist.

### **Interactionist Conceptualizations of “Ethnic Relations”**

General interaction sociology and the sociology of social relations (and related phenomena) emerged at the turn of the 20th century. Max Weber and Florian Znaniecki were particularly involved in their development. Ethnic issues are present albeit rather scantily in their analytic works. Herbert Blumer’s “interactionist macrosociology,” and especially his vision of the dynamics of “racial relations” in the US are quite a different story. I am also going to present Peter M. Blau’s and Hubert M. Blalock’s “individualistic macrosociology.” These two researchers studied social interactions and relations mainly basing on ethnic examples. Their conclusions are consequential for both ethnic studies and the general sociology of social relations. The methodologically significant problems of relations between the microsocial and macrosocial spheres are present in the theories of both these scholars. A third group of examples illustrates the analysis of collective actors and ethnic relations. I am going to discuss the interactionist aspects of theories of two British sociologists, John Rex and Michael Banton.

Blumer’s macrosociological, dynamic and structural theory of racial relations is seldom discussed in the literature but there are several interpretations which recognize and develop these approaches (see e.g. Killian 1970; Lyman & Vidich 1988; Esposito & Murphy 1999). Blumer’s analysis of racial relations is of course based on the interpretative approach. This approach puts special emphasis on the way structured social collectivities (and their members) define constantly and in complex way their own situation and the situation of other groups belonging to the larger society. Blumer was aware that although there is much mention of social relations in sociology, their theoretical analysis is highly insufficient. Unfortunately he himself offered no suggestion as to what the nature of these relations is, how they differ from interactions, to what extent we can apply identical theoretical instruments to study relations between individuals and between collectivities or institutions (see e.g. Blumer 1939, 1953, 1955, 1969; Blumer & Duster 1980). As far as the core idea of this text is concerned, Herbert Blumer’s contribution is worth considering because he has clearly demonstrated that ethnic (racial) order is fluid, dynamic, anchored in interactions and relations between individuals belonging to various ethnic groups, interactions which are normatively and politically regulated.

As far as the proposals of Peter M. Blau (1977a, 1977b, 1994), Blau & Schwartz (1984) and Hubert M. Blalock (Blalock 1960, 1982, 1989), Blalock & Wilken (1979) are concerned, I find them interesting because they show how ethnic relations can be analyzed in “individualistic macrosociology.” It is worth noting how these writers

defined the distinction between the micro and macro spheres. According to Blau, the microsociological approach involves socio-psychological studies and emphasis on human interactions in small social groups. The macrosociological perspective is a “broader” perspective and involves looking at a whole society and the relations between different groups within that society. However, between-group relations are in fact interactions between individuals differing in social position, that is, belonging to different social collectivities. For Blalock, the micro sphere applies to individual motives, behaviours and interactions whereas the macro sphere applies to mutual connections between large social entities such as complex organizations, corporate groups, states, but also social categories such as social classes or ethnic communities. Macrosocial studies must take “subjective variables” into account.

Peter Blau writes about “social relations” in all his works. These are “real relations” between people from various social groups or strata, but mainly dyadic relations, and not just attitudes or verbal preferences. He also often mentions interactions. Blau’s writing on interactions is not analytically organized, however, by which I mean that it does not tell us when an interaction becomes a social relation. The concept of relation always applies to interacting systems. The nature of social relations may vary. For example, they may be “negative” (conflicting). Or we can analyze them from the “potential” point of view and pay attention to the social situation which may lack organized interactions where we would expect to find them or where they used to exist. Hence we analyze such issues as “avoidance” or segregation. Blalock in fact wrote almost exclusively about interactions between individual actors. But it seems to me that it is possible to detect some implicit terminological organization here. I think that Blalock reserves the term interaction to mean “what is going on” (with the accent on the dynamic, kinetic aspect of the issue in question). Where the accent is on “what is going on” between social collectives, viewed as collective actors, the “what” usually means “social relations.” We could probably say that social, i.e. between-group, relations consist of interactions between individual group members. A different interpretation would be that within the entire set of interactions it is possible to distinguish a type which could meet the demand we place on social relations in the strong sense in such classic theories as Weber’s or Znaniecki’s. As we see, there can be various kinds of interactions and we need to consider “the relation of avoidance” when analyzing them.

In my opinion, analyses such as these have the following advantages. First, these conceptions include a whole lot of propositions concerning social relations or interactions, some of which have been carefully tested in the US. These propositions can be viewed as research hypotheses whose validity and generality could be tested in other settings: with respect to ethnic issues but surely not only. Second, assuming that these propositions are valid, we can use them to interpret the results of specific empirical studies. Third, these conceptions are clearly no longer conceptualizing “relations” as relations between attributes of individual people or social groups (one group may be larger than another group, similar or dissimilar under certain aspects) or “relations between social events.” They also no longer understand the sociology of ethnicity as mainly concerned with the opinions of the members of one group about the members

of another group. These conceptualizations encourage us to practice an individualistic, interactionist, relationist dynamic sociology rather than a sociology focused on distinct social entities (social individuals or collectivities) and the opinions of individual men and women; they encourage us to practice a sociology which studies what is really “going on” between individuals belonging to various ethnic groups.

John Rex (e.g. 1973, 1981, 1987, 1988) and Michael Banton (e.g. 1965, 1967, 1994, 20001, 2000b, 2001, 2005a, 2005b) do actually deal with collective actions and collective actors in their theories but they do not say precisely how and how well these groups of actors are organized. On the one hand, both in original Parkian and post-Parkian “succession theories” and “theories of assimilation,” ethnic collectivities are understood in very distributive terms. Collective actions take place *via* the activities of individual members who are somehow connected. These individual members undertake similar actions and (mostly due to migration) enter into similar social interactions and relations with members of another collectivity. In this case it makes sense to speak about social relations understood as a normative order (usually weak) involving the aforementioned individual interactions between members of the two collectives. These interactions are also normative in that they lead to the collapse of old types of social order and development of new types. Elsewhere we read in these authors’ works about “intergroup relations” in which inhabitants of borderlands come into real contact with one another but with no consequences for the integration of social wholes or for intergroup dynamics. Still other situations of ethnic relations are ones where “rank-and-file” group members interact, inspired by elites (group leaders, “mobilizing entrepreneurs”) who use the former to realize their own interests. Elites also negotiate on behalf of their own groups, in which case these negotiations are genuine “social relations.”

These conceptions also include other interesting ideas. First, we have the (weakly) sketched idea of “lack of relations” when two ethnic collectives live in isolation from each other. Isolation does not necessary mean that there is no intergroup contact whatsoever. Two collectives may barter goods or services but otherwise refrain from relating. Second, we find the interesting idea that ethnic relations develop differently depending on which collectivity has become the dominating collectivity as a result of migration—the indigenous one or the immigrant one. Third, the two parties to the relation are not identical in terms of their perception of agency, i.e. of who is to initiate contact and activity. According to succession theories and “assimilation theories,” immigrants are the active party. It is they who consciously adjust to the dominant host society to which they aspire and which either accepts them or does not. Immigrants are also the active party in cases such as invasion or colonialism except that it is the indigenous population which must adjust to them. Fourth, ethnic relations are nearly always conceptualized in terms of conflict and dominance. Conflict may be latent, meaning that there is contradiction of interest which does not produce behavioural consequences for a while or may be legitimized coercion. More often than not, conflict means overt violence albeit based on some sort of rules (usually weak ones) accepted by all. Fifth, we may speak of a “negative intergroup relation” when one group discriminates another group.

### **Toward a New Interactionist Sociology of Ethnic Relations**

First and foremost I would like to explain what kind of sociology of ethnic relations I believe to be most intellectually adequate on the basis of the various visions outlined above.

What do we mean by a “social relation” in a not completely colloquial sense? How can we tell the difference between a social relation and any other “issue” in which people are involved, especially interactions, social processes, social contact, social encounter etc.? I think we should first make a distinction between interactions between human individuals on the one hand, which occur only in the micro sphere (understood operationally as everything that happens in small social groups) and interactions between human individuals who belong to various large collectivities (and whom scholars and other external observers treat as “representatives” of these collectives) on the other hand, also between these two forms of interaction and a third form, i.e. interactions between large groups or other “not so well organized” larger collectivities, treated nevertheless as “social wholes” or “collective actors.” This distinction also has its flaws, however, because as Georg Simmel (2000) argued, certain forms of social phenomena are similar in small groups (of more than three) and larger collectivities. One way or another, I do not see the distinction between the macro sphere and the micro sphere as dichotomous, I see it as a continuum.

The first of the situations mentioned in the previous paragraph (interactions between individuals in small groups) was, of necessity, an object of my concern here but for mainly instrumental reasons: to lead me on to the analysis of the conceptualization of social relations at the other end of the continuum, i.e. in the macro sphere, the one where ethnic relations essentially reside. I shall not discuss this first sphere any further. Suffice it to say that I prefer somehow modified approach represented by Florian Znaniecki, but also drawing inspiration from the works of Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Anthony Giddens. I shall understand social relations in the microsocial field as the “densification” of interactions between two or more people (for example, the triad, where the “third party” has various social roles, or the coalition) where these people’s social actions are mutually connected in such a way that one causes another. Social relations are normatively regulated. However, the regulations which steer these relations need not be formulated discursively; they can be accepted and observed implicitly, without being conceptualized. Parties’ rights and obligations within this normative regulation need not be identical (equal). Relations are relatively stable (parallel to the stability of the particular social group), based on some common plane which defines the area of cooperation or conflict (in the latter case it also defines the methods of conducting and regulating conflict and possible ways of conflict termination). This common foundation may change in the group’s lifetime. Social relations within so small a group may be variously typified but basically these typologies flow from the fact that the characteristic attributes of the social relation are dynamic rather than static. Some of the characteristics of relations in small groups can also be clearly seen when we study ethnic relations.

What interests me much more is the concept of social relations as it is applied in macrosociology. In my opinion, things are much more complex here. The entire sphere of "relations" may include not only relations in the strict sense (a specific type of intergroup interactions) but also "potential relations" which are "just" a set of attitudes albeit ones which, by definition, contain the possibility of one party undertaking actions directed toward the other party in the future, or relations which are a set of interactions which are strictly objectified at that particular moment, for example, commercial or service interactions, but may spread to other spheres in the future. These may include relations between human individuals belonging to various collectivities (their ordinary members) but also relations (variously realized in practice) between people and non-human objects (as far as ethnic issues are concerned, most important in my opinion are group symbols) etc. As far as I am concerned, the most important relations are dynamic ones in the interactionist sense because they are real systems of connected actions.

Such relations are important "as such" for two reasons. The first one, and a very important one as far as I am concerned, is that at least at the declarative conceptualization level a whole range of areas of social life are studied in social sciences from the perspective of social relations on a particular problem area. Even more important is the second reason for relational and interactionist research. Social relations, understood in the interactionist vein, are—I think—a dynamic substrate of social life and also a background of more stable and permanent social forms. This leads directly to my third argument. Let me quote Randall Collins once again although he was actually interested in a slightly different issue, i.e. recognition of the microprocesses underlying macrostructures. I think that analysis of these stable, permanent, or even petrified forms of social life, stratification or institutional orders, should (at least partly) involve the indication of their underlying mechanisms and the types of social relations which form them. It is these relations which affect macrostructural dynamics. Finally I would like to recall Peter M. Blau who argued that integration of an entire society is based on strong intergroup bonds, on social relations between its component parts. To study integration (state and process) is to analyze interactionistically understood intergroup relations. To facilitate the practical integration of society is to facilitate the streamlining of these processes. Naturally, all this also applies directly to ethnic issues. Ethnic structure (stratification) is based on ethnic social relations. Ethnic order is the good organization of relations among ethnic groups. Ethnic integration is the fluid flow of relations among ethnic groups, not the blocking of interaction channels by reinforcing internal integration within each group.

In my opinion, the interactionist sociology of ethnic relations should draw inspiration from the work of scholars presented in this text (not only them, of course). The majority of these researchers are advocates of methodological individualism. They believe that, "ultimately," ethnic actions and ethnic relations are actions and relations between individuals. However, I think that pride of place should be given to the macrosociology of Peter M. Blau, the only researcher not directly cognitively interested in collective ethnic actors. In Blau's sociology, which makes powerful references to Simmel, ethnic (and other) groups are connected by means of direct behavioural

relations between their individual members. Blau recommends that we study real interpersonal relations such as dyads based on exclusive and stable relations (married couples, close friendships), where partners spend a lot of time together (this is a variable rather than a constant, however), not just unilateral choices, verbal preferences or attitudes per se (understood narrowly as cognition and emotion) of the members of one group vis-à-vis members of another group. Relations within these dyads may or may not be cooperative.

I think that such research is very necessary and can easily be conducted not only in America (to which Blau limited his empirical studies). We must remember, that Blau conducted his investigations in specific social conditions and that his theoretical approach applies largely to these conditions. In my opinion these conditions featured very scattered minority groups (e.g. immigrants) in the host (dominant) society or spatial mobility of various ethnic groups as well as quite unrestricted social mobility, both horizontal (the aforementioned migrations) and vertical (upward and downward). Blau tested his theories in big American cities where these conditions were largely fulfilled. These conditions are not universal, however and therefore I think that it would be very restricting to focus on just this specific sociology of ethnic relations. On the other hand, the patterns found in "Blau's world" can also be found in many other contexts. Blau's work also largely deals with systems containing just two ethnic groups (hence dyads). This too may be a serious setback but such situations are frequent and deserve to be analyzed.

An individualistic and interactionist sociology of ethnic relations can also be very sensibly practised with respect to borderland contacts between even very cohesive, large, but also small, ethnic areas (particularly in the initial stages of such contacts); with respect to unorganized immigration and at least some aspects of immigrant assimilation in consecutive generations. Here we may find problems of lack of contact and mutual or unilateral avoidance in places where, for "ecological" reasons, we would expect social relations to be present, i.e. places where they could exist "potentially" and where they could appear in the future, and problems of individualized attitudes of members of one group toward members of another group. As I said before, these attitudes can be viewed as "potential social relations" due to the disposition to act which is an inherent element of attitudes. It is also possible to conduct individualized studies of the extent to which social relations between members of two or more ethnic groups can (should?) be viewed as "ethnic relations;" or perhaps purely instrumental, objectified relations (e.g. commercial or service) between such individuals are not "ethnic relations" but simply a potential, preceding stage. In addition to the idea that restriction to purely instrumental "contacts" (interactions, relations) can be identified with "avoidance" from an ethnic point of view, with the lack of strictly cultural relations (i.e. the idea endorsed by Florian Znaniecki or John Rex), we may suggest the rival idea that lack of acceptance of such avoidance, i.e. that specific type of purely instrumental contacts, between members of two ethnic communities, may lead to ethnic conflict triggered by the group which would like to have closer, more "positive" relations because avoidance violates its various interests (i.e. the idea endorsed, for example, by Herbert Blumer). Another important issue is the question of the dynamics of

social relations in hierarchic systems (e.g. the shift from bilateral or unilateral “ethnic avoidance” to mutual recognition of each as equal partners) which may be interpreted as a sign of social emancipation.

Various interactions between individual people belonging to various ethnic groups need not be independent. Individual actions and reactions to other people’s actions usually follow certain patterns whose origins may be internal (e.g. the culture of the group of origin, the group’s “ecological situation”) or external (e.g. legislation or the culture of the host society or the dominant society). Internal or external contingencies may promote shared definitions of the situation in an ethnic group and individuals may mutually adjust their actions accordingly.

Individualistic sociology of ethnic relations usually adopts a distributive approach to the social group, including the ethnic group. However, this is still macrosociology. It can analyze an ethnic group (category) in terms of its place in the whole social structure. It can also study this structure’s historical dynamics or even variants and extrapolations of their developmental trends. In other words, dynamic analysis of the ethnic relations system must also include the search, in specific circumstances, for hypothetical outcomes of these relations in their more structured forms.

It is not easy to view ethnic groups (except perhaps traditional societies) as a very cohesive agent of group actions but such terms introduced by Blumer as circular reaction, circular interaction, or even collective behaviour, may successfully be applied in interactionist analysis. So if we feel that it is difficult to view any ethnic collectivity in modern society as very cohesive groups in the strictly sociological sense (especially from all socially significant points of view), we must consider whether there is really no way in which we can treat them as collective social actors and hence collective partners in social relations. Social relations sociologists, from Max Weber to contemporary rational choice theorists, are much less negative about this question. Social collectivities, including ethnic groups, can be groups to various extents. As Znaniecki argued, groups can realize collective actions by means of the same or very similar individual actions performed by all their members, within a shared project, but also by means of division of labour among their members or by means of actions performed by their representatives. Max Weber, Herbert Blumer or Michael Banton (to name just a few) mentioned group elites, group leadership, “mobilising group entrepreneurs,” all of whom act on behalf of the group. It is the group leaders who negotiate (engage in social relations) with representatives of other groups. Therefore, ethnic relation studies may consist in analyzing actions undertaken by the group’s elite on the group’s behalf and addressed to other groups and actions which are reactions to the actions of other groups, also for example in the form of actions undertaken by their elites. Once again we may be confronted with the problem of attitudes expressed by group representatives, or the mass media, or the education system (as emphasized for example by Herbert Blumer). Attitudes may become institutionalized and lead to group behaviour and to relations between groups, now understood as social wholes.

Analysis of relations between ethnic groups should also include the investigation of various types of (internal and external) resources at these groups’ disposal or ones which these groups are capable of generating or mobilizing under certain conditions.

Very important for the dynamics of stable ethnic structures are the resources available to minority groups.

Social relations between ethnic groups may be regulated by the cultural norms of a larger collectivity to which they belong but we must remember in particular to study the way in which state institutions, especially legal ones, affect these relations. These institutions may simply or exclusively represent the dominant group but they may also, for a variety of reasons, operate in a universalistic way to limit traditional forms of dominance. Classical ethnic relations studies also pay attention to the fact that middleman minorities, but also institutions, such as religious organizations, associations, the media, NGOs, or various levels of schools, may play an intermediary role between ethnic groups.

This leads me to the next question. I do not think that ethnic relations studies have to be limited to a dualistic approach (individual or collective dyads). We often deal with multiple ethnic collectivities on a given territory and therefore it is worth investigating the effects of relations between various minority groups on their joint or individual relations with the dominant group. It is also worth studying the way intergroup coalitions develop and operate.

Ethnic relations are usually connected with other types of interactions including petrified forms of social life. Until now, the most frequently analyzed ones have been connections between ethnic relations and class relations (or perhaps more broadly, economic relations) within a society. I also think it would be advisable to pay attention in our research to the fact that ethnic relations dynamics are affected by social processes in other spheres of life. Herbert Blumer used to draw attention to the technological processes of industrialization (which of course are closely linked with the economy). Today we may wish to consider the role of post-communist democratization processes, European integration and globalization, taking Central and Eastern Europe as our example.

I think that spheres of life other than ethnic ones are important here, if only because ethnic groups may draw upon their resources and use these resources in ethnic relations in the strict sense. We could also hypothesize that ethnic relations in a country or region can affect other social processes, both the ones mentioned above and other ones.

The sociology of ethnicity stresses explicitly or implicitly the frequent presence of one of the aforementioned types of ethnic relations, i.e. ethnic conflict. Although I have not discussed ethnic conflict as a specific phenomenon I believe it is important. Whether or not conflict can be generally viewed as a social relation is disputable. Similarly controversial is the question of the close links between the problems of conflict and the problems of dominance and subordination. "Ethnic problems" in the contemporary world, warfare between ethnic groups, ethnic cleansing, racism, ethnic discrimination, nationalism and resulting collective actions all contribute to our natural tendency to focus on the analysis of ethnic conflict. It is worth bearing in mind, however, as Peter M. Blum reminds us, that it is just as important to analyze ethnic relations as the foundations of social integration and order.



It was not my intention in this article to construct a multidimensional model of analysis of ethnic relations. Such multidimensional models are often constructed and we can hardly dispute their contribution to the systematization of the problem we are discussing. As far as I am concerned, however, I simply wanted to highlight the aspects of ethnic studies which are worth closer inspection and attention rather than to systematize this problem area.

To conclude this short article I would like to accentuate its three main theses. In ethnic studies it is worth analyzing not only various phenomena which take place within various ethnic groups. It is also worth making what is going on between these groups the main focus of our analysis—between individual people who are members of various ethnic groups, and between these groups, conceptualized as hypothetical entities. It is worth viewing the ethnic structure of any society as a transitional state (which does not mean short-lived) resulting from the nature of ethnic relations and constantly changing in response to these relations.

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