



**HAL**  
open science

## Taking seriously the web of life.

Laura Centemeri

► **To cite this version:**

Laura Centemeri. Taking seriously the web of life.. Sociologia urbana e rurale, 2019, 120, pp.22-46. <10.3280/SUR2019-120003>. <hal-02448452>

**HAL Id: hal-02448452**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02448452v1>**

Submitted on 27 Jan 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

## ***Taking seriously the web of life. On the need for a better articulation of experience and structure in the world-ecology approach***

Laura Centemeri<sup>1</sup>

Centre d'Etude des Mouvements Sociaux (CNRS-EHESS-INSERM)/ Ecole Française de Rome

In this commentary, I propose that ongoing dialogues within the world-ecology community, currently based on the *lingua franca* of Marxist systemic structuralism, are ripe for new directions. In particular, I argue that *pragmatic sociology* is an interesting direction to explore. From my perspective, this move is *necessary* to world-ecology's broader political project centered on emancipation *in* the webs of life, that is, as opposed to emancipation *from* the webs of life.

In its current form, the reference in world-ecology discussions to the webs of life sounds detached from any serious consideration of experience: social structures appear as forging experiences and how experiences can affect social structures in return is not clear.

Pragmatic approaches also are structuralist. In Luc Boltanski's terms (2017), they are inspired by a form of 'cognitive structuralism.' They are interested in how representations of the world generated by the historically situated capacity of social reflexivity become *lived ecologies* -- that is, forms of socio-material organization and shared cognitive frames.

For instance, in a groundbreaking paper, Laurent Thévenot (1984) outlines his notion of "investment in forms," which he gives to the manifold ways to inform and conform people, things, beings, environments so as to stabilize common frames of valuation, evaluation and valorization. It should be of little surprise, then, to learn that the objects pragmatic sociologists are typically interested in are, in a Foucauldian move, *dispositifs*, conventions of quantification and monetization, technical tools, evaluation procedures, statistical categories, processes of categorization, accounting tools and so on.

Luc Boltanski's (2017) recent work on the "structure of commodity" and the "forms of valorization" -- inspired by the French historian Braudel -- is instructive here. He synthetically encapsulates a pragmatic-inspired understanding of economic power in the contemporary world, as both "the power to develop a discourse on things and to valorize them in order to negotiate them at the highest possible price" and "the power to inscribe this discourse and the profits it generates in the web of reality (*la trame de la réalité*), a power distributed in a strongly asymmetrical way" (p.622).

If similarities with a world ecology approach are undeniable, still a major critical point emerges: the limits of an approach that considers value as an objective reality, "extracted" and governed by "a law of value"; such perspective perpetuates the "mysterious and mystical halo" of the notion of value (Ibid., p.612).

The pragmatic intuition is that of overcoming the dualism between '(economic) value' and '(social) values' (e.g. Stark 2009) by analyzing how actors concretely value, evaluate and valorize, taking *always* into account the contexts in which they are entangled, and their material and immaterial infrastructures. Contexts, with their infrastructures, can induce an inclination in actors towards some value practices; when enforced by institutions, the latter become the *normal way* to value things. From this perspective, actors are both always free of valuing in a variety of ways and always bound and conditioned in their valuing. Against Durkheim, pragmatic approaches acknowledge the (relative) autonomy of experience. The

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Andrew Hoffman for his very much valued comments on a previous version of the article.

relation between experience and structure is conceived as dynamic and is based on evaluative feedbacks, defined “reality tests” (or reality checks) (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006). This is why the vantage point of value practices enables an original perspective on both unnoticed forms of oppression and unsuspected resources for critique.

It is a fact that Marxist approaches cannot really explain the dynamics of collective action. As Alberto Melucci (1992, p.17-18) writes: “The explanation based on the common structural condition of the actors takes for granted their ability to perceive, evaluate and decide what they have in common. In other words, it ignores the very same processes that allow (or prevent) the actors to define the ‘situation’ as a field of common action. On the opposite side actors’ motivations and individual differences cannot explain how it happens that certain individuals recognize themselves as similar and become part of a ‘we’”.

The way out of this conundrum that pragmatic sociology suggests consists in considering experiences and structures as intertwined in the plane of existence where “troubles” in the experience can trigger “inquiries” (as John Dewey theorized). One should consider as structures (or structuring forms) all those “operators” that help actors engaged in inquiries to recognize relevant commonalities and differences to be taken into account to explain the problematic situation and act upon it. These operators can help actors to recognize what is needed to build an ordered (non-chaotic) and just (not-oppressive) world.

Systemic structuralism and its narratives -- in which I include world-ecology in the present argument -- produce these types of operators that are likely to help people identify the significant differences and commonalities needed to structure a justly ordered world. But we need to investigate the adequacy and the limits of the world-ecology operators. That is why world-ecologists need to take *situations and experience* seriously into account -- a central tenet of the pragmatic perspective. It is essential to go beyond the ritual appeal to the “web of life”, to recognize the need, in the world-ecology conversation, of approaches that can describe, as finely as possible, the value practices that make their textures and the variety and relative messiness of entanglements among and between human beings and non-human others.

Describing messiness is not a goal per se: it is an invitation to apply a method that Anna Tsing (2015) calls the “arts of noticing”. And we need to be able to notice in order to advance in the elaboration of new (or renewed) operators that are intelligible to actors wrapped in situations and that can help them recognize relevant differences and commonalities on which to build critique.

At stake is the elaboration of a new socio-technical imaginary combining freedom and ecological interdependencies. This is a very tricky and thorny question that implies, in my view, to take seriously into account the arguments for the emergence of the political project of modernity.

In the world-ecology perspective, however, modernity is depicted as the justificatory discourse of capitalist oppressions, dispossessions and exploitations. I consider more historically convincing Peter Wagner’s (2001) approach to modernity and capitalism as two distinct but intertwined social formations: the political project of modernity created the necessity to organize the response to human needs outside the feudal-domestic sphere and its servitude, and capitalism offered a solution. But this solution generated a field of systemic forces and conditions of oppression and domination that, in turn, shaped the modern project. My point is that there were reasons, in the modern project, to keep nature at distance, not only linked to an oppressive purpose but also to a genuine emancipatory will.

Today, emancipation must be entirely re-imagined, giving nature a space for action and "co-design" but avoiding the return of naturalisms and the risks of envisioning fluid naturecultures one can reshape at will (Pellizzoni 2015). The emancipation *in* the web of life has perhaps to do with the ability to turn borders that separate into ecotones that connect across diversity, a diversity that pragmatic sociology tries to make more intelligible.

### *References*

- Boltanski, L., and Thévenot, L. (2006). *On Justification*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Boltanski, L. (2017). Pragmatique de la valeur et structures de la marchandise. *Annales*, 72(3), 607–629.
- Melucci, A. (1992). *L'invenzione del presente. Movimenti sociali nelle società complesse*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Pellizzoni, L. (2015). *Ontological Politics in a Disposable World: The New Mastery of Nature*. Farnham, Ashgate.
- Stark,, D. (2009). *The Sense of Dissonance. Accounts of Worth in Economic Life*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Thévenot, L. (1984). Rules and implements: investment in forms. *Social Science Information*, 23 (1), 1–45.
- Wagner, P. (2001) *Modernity, capitalism and critique*. Thesis Eleven 66: 1-31.