

## Chapter 5

### Temporality, action and interaction<sup>1</sup>

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At the end of *Time Matters* (hereafter, *TM*), Andrew Abbott reviews his research on the relations between temporal and causal analysis of social phenomena. His intention is to recapitulate all his arguments on the opposition between the two main types of approach that have emerged in the social sciences: the standard approach, which he calls the *General Linear Model* (GLM) or *population/analytic* or positivist approach, and the *case/narrative* approach. Abbott's aim is to transcend this opposition, and his main resource in doing so is the temporal treatment of social realities. The impact of his theoretical propositions can be tested on a case that is central in social science: the analysis of inequalities. Abbot recognizes that this is the most widely studied problem in conventional social science. This is moreover also one of the themes of his investigation of the fractal nature of theoretical positions in social science, which he demonstrates in *Chaos of Disciplines*. Reading Abbott's books and articles has led me to three conclusions.

First, the processual ontology that Abbott wishes to invent leads him to emphasize difference rather than inequality, so that his treatment of temporality fits the requirements of his relational and processual sociology.

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Morgan Jouvenet for his comments on the first version of this text.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, Abbott's inspiration is explicitly Bergsonian. See *TM*: 214-224.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am referring to the distinction of Windelband between nomothetic sciences (aimed at knowledge in

Second, the treatment of temporality is entirely organized around the present. From a Meadian perspective, the decisive power of conditions prior to any event is consequently seen from a perspective that is not causal-deterministic. This refusal is consistent with the principle which holds that change cannot be analysed if stability or reproduction are taken to be the primitive data of the system. On the contrary, stability and persistence can be analysed with a processual ontology that proceeds from change.

Third, Abbott's sociology breaks with the theoretical underpinnings of Meadian and Blumerian interactionist sociology on one crucial point: the treatment of the third dimension of time, the future. This dimension can assume importance only in a sociology of action and interaction that is based on the actor's point of view and the temporal complexities of actors' strategic interdependence. Yet Abbott wants to signify his distance from the most comprehensive treatment of future-oriented action, that of economic analysis (grounded primarily in game theory). The Abbottian critique of the pathologies of teleological reasoning, which he argues are inherent to taking the future of action into account – that is the conclusion of my analysis – converges with the critique of the normative and teleological nature of most social science work. The majority of this work is centred on issues of inequality, which is seen as a dependent variable, a reality to explain and to reduce, according to the "meliorist" arguments that Abbott detects in most sociological production.

Hence, the question that is still largely unanswered concerns the action model corresponding to Abbott's processual ontology. In the current state of this ontology, as I understand it, Abbott's primary temptation is twofold: first, to desubstantialize the actor, in an approach similar to that of Whitehead's philosophy, in order to make it an emergent totality rather than the basic element of the system of action; and second, constantly to emphasize the structural

nature of social reality, which leads to attributing extraordinary value to the explication of everything that is stable, inert and persistent in social reality, and to understanding novelty as an emergent structural property, without reference to a conception of action. My objection is that *action, interaction and change are unthinkable without an axiomatics that incorporates the teleological nature of action*. Without this dimension, the temporality of action remains an abstraction. And my objection can notably draw on Whiteheadian philosophy itself.

In this chapter I first draw on Whitstead's work for several short discussions on inter-individual inequalities in social science, in order then to show the trade-off between the standard approach and the narrative approach on this point. I examine an example dear to Abbott, to raise the following question: must the best vehicle for totally temporalized and interactionist analysis of action be an actor without any qualities? To conclude, I point out the relationship between the economic and the sociological analysis of action with regard to the treatment of the temporal dimension of social phenomena, based on my personal work before I read *TM*.

### **1. The two dominant models in the social sciences, according to Abbott**

To the seven basic postulates that he identifies in the standard approach, Abbott opposes, term for term, the seven hypotheses of the narrative model (*TM*: 38-59). I examine four pairs of arguments here, chosen for their particular importance in the understanding of temporality supported by Abbott.

1. In the standard model (GLM), as Abbott presents it, the social world consists of fixed entities with variable properties: rather than starting with complexity and reducing it, the authors who use the standard model to study the social

world start with simple realities and gradually add the characteristics needed to explicate the problem they are examining. By contrast, in the narrative or demographic model of reality (*TM*: 60), the entities (cases, individuals, events) tend to appear, disappear, move, merge and divide up.

One of the characteristics of a central-subject/event approach (*TM*: 61) is that it reduces the scale of analysis in two respects: the complex properties of entities are observed with a more fine-grained and subtly arranged temporal resolution; and social reality is defined by its interactional nature. The reduction of the scale of analysis demands a trade-off: as the complexity of elementary units of observation appears to be greater when the focus is narrowed down, it is necessary to limit the number of observations or cases covered by such analyses. This is not the work of a statistician who can process thousands or millions of cases; it is an exploration of a temporal process in which the actors and events become visible and significant because they are few in number, and for which available data are abundant and heterogeneous. This is the approach underpinning the comparative analysis of the histories of organizations, professions, revolutions, international policies, etc. (*TM*: 61, Note 46).

2. In the standard model, entities are linked through causal relations which in all cases and at all times act uniformly, always significantly, and at a constant speed. By contrast, in the narrative model the time frame of processes is essential. Events have widely variable characteristics, can be dilated, and have a time horizon (*TM*: 290). This horizon is the minimum length of time that must be taken into account to observe a significant change (*TM*: 44), and this notion is introduced to challenge the monotonous and synchronous standard time of the GLM. Thus, from a Meadian perspective, the actors reinterpret their more or less distant past and draw lessons for future action: *"le présent remodèle continuellement le passé en fonction des préoccupations actuelles de l'acteur"* ,

wrote Abbot, and this confers "*une nouvelle efficacité historique aux événements passés lointains*" (TM: 180).

3. In the standard model, events have no temporal density. The distant past determines the immediate past, which in turn acts causally on the present, with an entirely stochastic simplicity. In the narrative analysis that Abbott advocates, the temporal flow in which events are identified is a complex multiplicity consisting of the interlinking, retention and dilation of temporal realities. Hence, complexity comes first, and is the starting point from which decomposition and analytical simplification must proceed<sup>2</sup>.

4. In the standard approach, the sequencing of time is either neglected or taken into account superficially. The temporal order of events has no causal action of its own in statistical analyses using cross-sectional data, which transform the causality in a process into a pseudo-narrative with pseudo-actors (such as the representative agent in rational choice theory). The order in which causal relations are shown between factors is often treated as insignificant. While Abbott emphasizes the multiplication and growing sophistication (in the late 1990s) of models that more directly take into account the temporal dependence of sequences (event history models, Markovian processes), he also points out their limits. The temporal decomposition of a process can then do with more precision, but the temporal elasticity of sequences and the complexity of interactions between the past, present and future of the entities whose behaviour is under study are largely beyond reach.

In narrative causality models, the order of sequences matters, and the specific location of events in a temporal sequence has its own causal influence. Seemingly insignificant events can have considerable effects due to their

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<sup>2</sup> On this point, Abbott's inspiration is explicitly Bergsonian. See TM: 214-224.

location in a particular sequence. Examples can be found throughout the book. One of the best tests for measuring the relevance of the analysis of the order of phenomena and sequences relates to innovation and, more generally, anything emergent (*TM*: 234).

Moreover, the modelling of sequential data has developed, with the introduction of typological classification models in sociology. Abbott himself has made a crucial contribution through his use of optimal matching analysis (see Abbott and Tsay, 2000, as well as the chapters of N. Robert and Ph. Blanchard in this book).

## **2. Adjudicating on theoretical models: how to conceive of inter-individual differences other than as inequalities?**

Does Abbott's argument simply aim to show the superiority of a "narrative discontinuist" sociology over standard analysis? Or is the intention not, as I would here like to show, to reveal the shortcomings of each model? In that case, the problem through which to show the limits of each of the two models has to be determined. My hypothesis is that to transcend the respective weaknesses of the standard analysis and the narrative analysis, Abbott has to depart from the over-riding conception of human society proposed by sociology, which emphasizes hierarchies and inequalities. His theoretical gamble is that only this distance can allow one to retrieve an authentically temporalizing and relational view of the social world. The question that is then raised is that of the conception of the actor and of action stemming from Abbott's desubstantialization of acting entities.

What has made the standard model successful? Coleman, cited by Abbott, argues that the standard survey analysis is particularly appropriate for objects

whose spatial and temporal location is of little analytical importance. And if the standard methods apply so well today, it is because we are in modern societies characterized by growing individualization. Abbott suggests that it is the analytical and methodological machinery of standard models that constructs case independence, not the other way around. His general diagnosis is that this approach is irremediably hampered by the social ontology underpinning its basic postulates.

What is the best object to reveal this ontology? I maintain that it is inequality, even though Abbott does not address it systematically. In the Epilogue of *TM*, a diagnosis is proposed: standard social science is in a sense a social engineering science (my term) at the service of the welfare state ("*the technical evaluator of the welfare state*"). The argument is epistemological and historical: sociology is predominantly normative and practical. But does this diagnosis, borrowed from Gouldner (1970), differ from that of Coleman, which Abbott refutes, if – as in the Tocquevillian paradigm – we relate the growth of individualism to the democratic organization of societies and to the correlative passion for inter-individual equality that the redistributive action of the welfare state aims for?

How does this epistemological position act on sociology's methodological and theoretical tools? In the same Epilogue (*TM*: 284), Abbott replies: the standard models distinguish independent variables from dependent ones. An alternative consists in considering, as in the narrative model, that this assignment of the quality of being a dependent or independent variable to a social indicator is meaningless: social reality is "*une immense toile, dans laquelle tout influence tout*" (*TM*: 284), and the only real problem up for analysis is that of "data reduction". Methodological decisions are thus linked both to the nature of the data and to that of the project under way. And Abbott ascribes the greater importance that social science grants to certain variables, to what he calls the

social sciences' partiality to "meliorism", that is, "the belief that the world can be improved by human effort". The conclusion of this point is crucial to my argument: "by far the most common dependent variables in sociology are those related to inequality" (TM: 284).

I here wish to highlight a point in Abbott's argumentation that I will return to later on: the motif of inequality is a modality of the inter-individual differentiation that arises only in a hierarchical and competitive structuring of the social sphere. This point is fairly trivial, but its implications for Abbott's central theoretical argument – his departure from the standard and detemporalized models of sociology – are decisive. This is what is shown in the third passage concerning the question of inequality, taken from the article "Process and temporality in sociology. The idea of outcome in US sociology" (Abbott 2005).

In it, Abbott explores the various conceptions that can be elaborated to study the relationship between a social process and its outcome. He distinguishes three main types of outcome: "point outcomes" (results of a process that has been analysed, and the final state of which, the end point, is characterized); "trend outcomes" (trends of a process that evolve in a certain direction, without necessarily having a specified end goal), and "equilibrium outcomes" (minor local results which may however be part of a broader dynamic of long-term change). Abbott claims that sociologists are primarily interested in point outcomes and trend outcomes, and "typically" trend outcomes on the evolution of inequalities, due to the "meliorist" hue of contemporary sociology (Abbott, 2005: 405).

Of importance in this third occurrence of the meliorism motif is the contrast that Abbott shows between the different figures of temporality: on the one hand, the

deterministic action of factors causally leading to the concluding point of a process, and the explication of which is by nature retrodictive (point outcome); and, on the other, the undefined evolution of a process, considered outside of any balancing mechanism.

By picking out these different occurrences of the motif of inequality in Abbott's work, my intention is to determine what happens to the individual in Abbott's non-standard model; in other words, what inter-individual differences are, and what they produce in interaction.

Let us review what we have seen up to now. In causal-continuist analysis models, inter-individual differences are calibrated by distributions of characteristics allocated to given (fixed) entities, the temporal processes are generally those of a regular trend, and the mechanisms of reproduction determine a heterogeneity (inter-individual differentiation) which is quantifiable. This result (trend or point) says something about the structure of the social world, but with the help of standard analytical tools that largely strip the study of phenomena of their processual nature, their complex temporality, and the interactional nature of the situations in which individuals really move every minute of their life. Even though this outcome corresponds to most of the social sciences' production, and is inherently normative, it is not associated with a point of equilibrium – that is the perspectivist nature of reasoning in terms of trend outcome.

A fourth occurrence of the motif of inequality in Abbott's work, in the chapter headed "Fractal Heuristics" in *Methods of Discovery*, shifts the analysis to its epistemological side. In this chapter, for the sake of his demonstration, Abbott identifies apparently irreducible theoretical contrasts in the social sciences. The one of interest to me is the realists versus constructionists pair. It clearly raises

the question of inequalities since the debate focuses on exceptional sports performance and the success of champions (see also Menger, 2009, Chapter 6).

Presenting this debate, Abbott shows how, from a constructionist point of view, realist reasonings inevitably filter through (it could hardly be otherwise with the fractalization of the argument!). He draws on the article of Chambliss (1989, see Abbott 2004: 189-191), who explains how competitive swimmers accomplish exceptional performance, without any reference to original differences in aptitudes. Hence, rather than studying major decisions and differences of talent, it is better to examine all the small decisions that make up daily training and the multiple types of competition, and which together constitute a cumulative advantage, based on small differences in a very routine organization of things. Chambliss' sociological explanation is of course grounded in a realist argument, since he highlights a sum of deliberate acts that end up producing excellent performance.

We see that the example is of interest to Abbott, as a theoretician of the temporal-narrative model of social processes, for he bases a career path on a series of interdependent interactions. From my point of view, the lessons from this temporalized and realistic analysis of differences of performance concern the question of inequality – of which sports performance is a quintessential illustration.

### **3. Temporalization and differentiation**

I have to clarify the significance of this fourth occurrence of the motif of inequality, in order to identify the exact meaning of the substitution of the vocabulary of differences for that of inequalities in Abbott's theory. What is the temporal substance of a career or of a course of action whose complete curve is

observable, as in the case of a sports champion's career? In the causal-continuist model, career is simply the accomplishment of an underlying social process. And even if time is mathematically as finely divisible as necessary, the power of formal calculation is still at play. Although the model has few variables, its explanatory power increases when the observations are sufficiently numerous.

The example that Abbott provides concerns the respective explanatory power of initial training and accumulated professional experience in the study of an individual's career path. Abbott points out that on-the-job training (*TM*: 178) is embedded in a process of which the predominant independent variable (the level of initial training) indicates only the general curve of determination. The argument corresponds to the wish to be able to break down temporal processes into the smallest possible interlinking structures. That is necessary if the influence of variables such as on-the-job training is to be captured. From there, things become more complicated: the effect of education level on income, for example five years after exiting the training system, is made up of a macro-determination (the weight of the degree) and micro-processes (the occurrences and variable modalities of acquisition of on-the-job training) which follow on from one another according to more complex temporal and causal logics. Things become more complicated because, in reality, this is not simply a matter of the rate of sampling of observations along a temporal path. When the temporal pace of the analysis is reduced, a discontinuist and narrative conception emerges, which seems to be understood as a limit (in the mathematical sense of the term) of the stochastic model (*TM*: 178-179). By reducing the temporal pace, the discontinuity stands out against the smooth image of a continuous reality – the metaphor being that of a sea of waves or wavelets. The main variables that configure the arching causality and temporality of processes disappear in the "daily narratives of real interaction" (*TM*: 179). Everything happens as if the standard analysis of individual situations could not become more precise after a

certain point; beyond that point precision declines, because the dimensions of temporalization of the behaviour and individual action and the immersion of the individual action in the social web of interactions become completely visible and essential.

Here we find the classical problem of the distinction, and of the relationship, between macro- and micro-approaches. If we refuse the lazy respectable pluralism that recommends a different examination (on different scales) of various classes of phenomena, depending on the questions that we put to them, or if we wish to avoid playing out in sociology the role of historians from over a century ago<sup>3</sup>, the problem will be conceived of as that of the current limits of analytical models, to which this non-convergence of micro- and macro-approaches must be imputed. Abbott sees it as intrinsically temporal, since it is actually a problem of conception of the time horizon, and once this has been taken into account, the micro-macro distinction has no more object ("in terms of the eventful world, everything is macro", *TM*: 296).

The comparative analysis of the treatment of temporality in economics and in sociology (Menger 1997) shows that the future is a ubiquitous dimension, if you will, in economic analysis, and one which is entirely oriented towards understanding action as a driver of decision making. Abbott is particularly wary of the risk that the theory of action, oriented in this way, has of tilting over into the paralogisms of teleology. He thus calls into question the intentional substance of individual action, preferring instead an essentially topological and reticular conception. But the motif of divergence from economic analysis is actually more radical. While economic analysis is forward-looking, the future as it treats it is contracted into operations of probabilization and expectancy to such

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am referring to the distinction of Windelband between nomothetic sciences (aimed at knowledge in general) and idographic sciences (aimed at that of the particular), and Rickert's identification of history with the knowledge of the individual.

an extent only because the aim is to determine, by way of modelling, those equilibriums that make individual decisions and actions compatible. Clearly, modelling oriented towards the determination of results in the form of equilibrium provides only a very limited map of the actors' interdependence and actions, and of the temporalities shaping them. That is the subject of the next part of my analysis.

#### **4. The invention of processual ontology**

The key argument, well-known in the non-determinist pragmatic sociological tradition, is that if change is the primary reality, we need to explain inertia, stability and the reproduction of entities. Change is the independent variable, and reproduction the dependent one. This motif, a constant in *TM*, is found in Dewey, Mead, Hughes, Becker, and Blumer, to cite but a few authors who sought to link thinking on social temporality to an interactionist conception of society. This is a problem of asymmetry: inertia can be explained on the basis of change, but not vice-versa – unless we involve the mysterious phenomena that are at odds at once with causal-continuist ontology, emergent phenomena, and innovations that cause a break in the course of things. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that once the explanation of permanence and stability is set in motion, the risk becomes that of annihilating the transformative power of time, and of making it no more than a particular, marginal modality of things' tendency to persist, evidence of which abounds.

We see this in Abbott's treatment of the notion of trajectory. When a turn arises, how should it be understood? As an illusion, the name of an undecipherable complexity of continuous processes? Abbott devotes the eighth chapter of *TM* to this question. Of course, a turn only appears as such after a while, when it becomes clear that there has been a change of direction in the course of things.

But once this turn has been identified and causes different alignments and realignments in relation to the new slope of the path, the question is about the origin of the deviation, of the Lucretian *clinamen*.

In response, Abbott posits that all reality can be broken down into its structural and relational properties. The inertial stability of a social structure is equivalent to its ability to withstand local effects introduced by the variability of local interactions and behaviours (see Abbott's example of university in *TM:255*). The argument can refer to the critical quantities of events likely to change the course of a stable trajectory. The principle is apparent: temporalities are multiple, and entangled. Some of them characterize stable processes; others qualify slow and predictable evolutions; others yet correspond to abrupt changes and to reorientations of trajectories; and others express a visible agitation at micro level (like wavelets that constitute events in the interaction seen from close up, but that are indiscernible from an aeroplane flying over a sea or lake, to use the same metaphor as above.)

The action itself, another basic unit of the standard analysis, has to be requalified in the same way by a complex aggregate if we want it to have its relational and temporal substance. For "*aucune action n'accomplit qu'une seule chose*":

« En écrivant cet article, je poursuis ma carrière (supposément), je connecte mon département à certaines littératures, j'identifie mon université avec certaines instances intellectuelles, je crée des rivalités avec certains collègues, je fournis de l'emploi à des éditeurs. La liste est sans fin. Ce ne sont pas de simples mises en récit alternatives. C'est la vraie multiplicité de l'action. En faisant beaucoup de choses, chaque action reconnecte certaines structures existantes, en déconnecte d'autres, et crée certaines structures

non vues jusqu'alors. Ces structures ne doivent pas être réifiées comme des choses; ce sont simplement des *patterns* de relations (des réseaux de connections) qui ont des chances de réapparaître à la prochaine itération du processus social » (TM: 255-256).

This structural complexity of the realities described has a strongly Leibnizian content<sup>4</sup>, the imprint of which is found with Whitehead, from whom Abbott borrows certain key elements of his processual and relational ontology. As Debaise writes in his *Vocabulaire de Whitehead* (2007: 27), with him "becoming and relationship are identical [...]: *any relationship is a process and any process is a relationship*. Current entities are 'acts of becoming' that are at the same time relational-beings". The vocabulary of this ontology is that of a de-substantialization of entities that seem simple and stable to us, and of a reduction of each one to its potential of ceaseless transformation and recombination. Hence the Whiteheadian watchword of creativity, which he substitutes for that of creation, the latter having become unusable due to its identification with a causal origin and with the shift from nothing to something, or to absolute novelty. The becoming is effected by what Whitehead calls prehension. This notion has a central place in Abbott's construction : "At any given time, there is an immensely complex structure of prehensions linking up all the occasions of the social world" (TM: 234). Abbott certainly seeks to give it a hierarchical characterization.

Once the frames of this ontology – of which I have mentioned only some crucial elements – have been set, what operations are conceivable? To enable us to really grasp the well-adjusted (narrative) complexity and the unnecessarily oversized (stochastic) complexity in the treatment of events and sequences of

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<sup>4</sup> On the differences and convergences between Leibniz and Whitehead, the author is referred to Deleuze's analysis of Whitehead in "Qu'est-ce qu'un événement", one of the chapters of *Pli* (Deleuze, 1988).

events, Abbott notes that if we wish to make an event a combination of elementary properties, and thus to produce the totality of possible events from the calculation of the set of combinations of particular values that the different variables generating these properties can take on, we see that most of the events theoretically obtained do not exist, and that most of the possible events do not occur. The result is that *"l'analyste narrative voit dans les événements le moyen naturel de simplifier le processus social"* (TM: 169)<sup>5</sup>.

How, asks Abbott, can we practice narrative analysis, or at least retain the drivers of an authentically processual conception of social reality, without giving in to the teleological pressure inherent in narrative causality? This is where the last argument that I wish to highlight in Abbott's conception comes in: the focus on the present, which leads to thinking about difference, of which the question of inequality is but a reduction.

## **5. Present without future**

As I have pointed out above, Abbott identifies the conception of temporality specific to Mead and Whitehead with a sequential and stochastic point of view. As he writes in *TM* (p. 180), events, sequences of events or careers are forms of sequential division of temporal flows carried out on more or less extensive temporal scales, but the homogeneity of which is based on the principle of discontinuity and implication: all the sequences have a beginning and an end, but all the sequences, identified by micro- or macro-temporal division, imply a complex architecture of the past. This is a causally profound past that acts on the recent past, on the present and on the future horizon of temporal development. The analysis is discontinuist while being sequential, but it has to endow each

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<sup>5</sup> Behind the argument of superior analytical efficacy, we find Leibnizian inspiration. The idea is that the event can be formed provided that a "screen" filters the chaotic proliferation of possibilities (see Deleuze 1988: 103).

sequence and each entity observed in each sequence with a memory. I have shown above, on the example of the opposition between an economic model of inter-temporal equilibrium and a sequential model, how temporal depth was activated in the same way. On the other hand, what tends to radically distinguish Abbott's analysis from the sequential modelling of time in economics, is the treatment of the future.

Abbott sees the future essentially as the product of an extrapolation based on a present reinterpretation of the past: we cannot wrench ourselves from the anchorage of the present in the past when we act, for time is not a homogeneous milieu in which the past and future of the actor and of their environment can be symmetrized around the point of the present moment. All the benefit that Abbott seeks in Whiteheadian inspiration lies in the combinatory conception of entities: they are constantly aggregated, disaggregated and re-aggregated, for all reality moves in a continuously reconfigured system of relations. How, in such a conception, can we think the future, that is, goal-oriented action, what Leibniz calls *appetition*? Along the lines of Meadian argumentation, we could imagine the future in terms of operations that are as well-thought-out and substantial as those of the past, which provides the material of present action, because it is constantly reinterpreted. The primary importance that Abbott grants to the present is inferred both from a first dead-end to which, according to him, we are led by a determinist conception that reduces the present and the future to being governed by the causal influence of the past (without considering the relational situation of each entity and each event), and a second dead-end to which we are led by a philosophy that places the present under the causal control of a future understood as a goal set initially, as in teleological and eschatological systems. The site of a topological conception of time or of a temporal conception of relations between entities is the present (*TM*, pp. 255 and following).

What about the future? There are several ways of qualifying the reticence with which the future is taken into account in Abbott's processual analysis. Epistemologically, he emphasizes the fact that the processual and differential nature of any socio-historical reality is denied in a schema that predetermines the "telos" of a process, as in causal-deterministic reasoning and modelling, and in the analyses which depict any result to be explained as the result of a "trend". This means neglecting the irreducible variability and contingency of social processes. The argument leads to an essential point governing all Abbott's sociology: "The substratum of social life is interaction, not biological individuals", and the individual who acts, deliberates, calculates and chooses between possibilities is a result to explain rather than an explanatory acting cause (Abbott 2007a: 7).

How can we explain the indifference to the actor's causal power? Abbott's topological vocabulary is close to the structuralist conception that makes positions and relations the primitive data, and the occupants of positions interchangeable. He has often written that, ultimately, the choice of a particular person (e.g. himself, Andrew Abbott), to occupy a position in a particular organization (e.g. to leave Rutgers to be recruited by the University of Chicago) and to carry out an activity there (e.g. heading the *American Journal of Sociology* for over a decade), is of little importance. The reason is simple: in each instance the individual is caught in the web of interactions, interdependencies and inertia that Abbott sees as the substance of social reality. The actor Abbott is a "relational self" and his action is "multiple" because it is his own as much as that of other individuals or entities (Abbott, 2007a: 9-10).

A second interpretation highlights the expressive and almost intimate nature of Abbott's reluctance to see the actor and the action projected towards the future and towards decision making. There is in Abbott's work an obsession with

breaking out of the stranglehold of rareness, as he explained in the closing address of the UVSQ conference (2011). As in sociologists' classical objection to economic theory, actors' preferences are not formed individually and are not independent of those of others. One of the obvious reasons for which Abbott wants to envisage the future in other terms lies in the mechanisms governing the analysis of action in terms of choice, that is, the combination of preference and interest. With this combination, the environment and the drivers of action are parameterized in the same terms, which is what explains its analytical performance. The pivotal argument of this axiom of the maximizing choice is that everyone knows how to discern what corresponds to their own interest, and must choose the optimal solution, within the limits of their personal resources and according to others' strategic choices. And the simple guide for discerning their interest is to refer to their preferences. Essentially, Abbott's critique is that these preferences are taken to be exogenous and fixed, and therefore situated outside the field of explanation (*TM*: 198): a processual and interactionist sociology claims to be able to endogenize the preferences, but without specifying which analytical protocol is available.

Furthermore, choices and decisions are made in a situation of considerable cognitive myopia, for future possibilities are numerous and impossible to explore or anticipate. Endowing action with intentionality and thus with a teleological aim therefore amounts, in Abbott's critique, to linearizing the formation of choices and to committing the sin of retrodiction.

## **6. Robustness**

Is this argumentation robust? A first test is to find out whether it contains graduable elements, or whether it can simply be applied on an ontological level, by recommending a topological and differential description, and by combining it

with a few evocative examples. After seeking to pin down the conception of inter-individual differences in Abbott's work, I identify two very different versions, although both are indexed on temporality: that of the present, and that of the future. According to the former, differences become singularities. According to the latter, differences are indexed on a hierarchy.

In his article "Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology", Abbott proposes, in both temporal analysis and epistemological critique, a plea for description in sociological work, and an examination – in a somewhat unexpected "lyrical" tone – of the pivotal situation of the present moment in the elaboration of his relational and processual ontology. The idea is to transcend the limits of narrative sociology which, in *TM*, contrasts with the faltering standard model of causal analysis. In concrete terms, the difference between the narrative-sequential perspective and that which Abbott qualifies as lyrical stems from this constant motif, in its full theoretical construction of a processual ontology: excluding any teleological orientation from the description. Abbott argues that envisaging the present differently, other than by its simple interstitial location on a continuum, means giving oneself the means to restore the full range of possible realities, of which the present is but one outcome among others. Cutting the present from its realizable future means differentiating without ordering it, in other words, situating it in a space of workable presents, and is thus the means to restore the value of uncertainty or unknowns that gives the present moment its quality of indeterminacy. In the oppositions constructed by Abbott, the thickness of this time corresponds to what he calls "tensed time", that is, the subjective and indexical time of the individual experience of the duration of events and situations. It is also what he opposes to ordered time that objectively arranges and marks out the sequences of occurrences, moments and events in the perception and consciousness of the narrator-actor.

When he examines the case of the choices that students and their families make between the different universities at which they could study, Abbott refuses the model of rational choice by optimization under the constraint of financial and informational resources. What prevails is rather, in the situation of the action, the "noise" and the profusion of information and motives for choices; and, for the choosing subject, the plasticity of behaviour in relation to the learning triggered by the interactions and variability of the environments. To give substance to the idea of a relational self, Abbott points out that rather than trying to determine how a student is able to choose one or another university, one has to understand that the choice of a university is not a process engaged in by an already fixed actor. Instead, it is a process of becoming somebody (Abbott 2007a: 15). In the words of Padgett and Ansell (1993), cited by Abbott, the relational self's acting corresponds to a "process of adaptive learning", rather than to a series of relational moves in a strategic game that is carefully explored and mastered according to "grand ubiquitous strategies" (Padgett and Ansell, 1993: 1301-1302).

Use of the vocabulary of the "becoming" reveals the two motifs of Abbott's anti-teleological mood: epistemological, since he seeks a principle of analysis that is respectful of the indeterminacy of the future (but without masking the largely stable and persistent nature of the course of things); and ontological because he seeks to transform the element of temporality that is most difficult to transform, the future, into a pool of possibilities which, simply imagined or envisioned (imperfect, distant, but real) suffice to restore the potential of temporality to change and vary. Rooted in an epistemological debate on the conceptions of history, and equally in praise of the poetic treatment of the sense of time, the argument that the "lyrical sociology" essay carves out aims to describe the moment as incarnating both the plenitude of the present and its fugacity, its transitory, undetermined nature or, if you will, as an essential indexical, that of a

here and now that classical philosophy has always seen as the height of the subject's self-presence (Derrida, 1967).

It is with this same motif that Abbott wants to show how the individual can experience his or her particularity. When he examines the pathologies of the experience of time, Abbott mentions two emotional levels that, according to him, haunt sociology: nostalgia and indignation. With regard to a well-adjusted conception of the temporal substance of the present moment, these two emotional perspectives make the mistake of emptying the present of its substance by relating it to points of reference: idealized past, in the case of nostalgia, and idealizable future, in the case of indignation. In the latter, Abbott adds that the ideal put forward is an egalitarian ideal. And it is here that his treatment of the motif of equality or reduction of inter-individual inequalities, in the sociological literature, becomes directly interpretable. Interlaced with that of temporality, the indexing of inter-individual differences on a system of unequally distributed characteristics amounts to a causal or narrative reduction of the treatment of these differences. The result is what Abbott calls a trend outcome, mentioned above. By contrast, in a lyrical sociology, a common experience is afforded by the unreduced deployment of inter-individual differences; in other words, by a horizontal differentiation based on juxtaposition and inter-relations. With explicitly Kantian undertones, which identify lyrical emotion with the philosopher's "sublime", Abbott makes differentiation – between individuals, between moments, between the "here and now" of each present experience – a principle of universality and inter-comprehension (Abbott 2007b: 96-97).

The French reader accustomed to the sociological equation of social inequalities of schooling and careers, will be surprised that, to illustrate the emergence of the young adult's personality through the formative experience of differentiated

exploration, Abbott chooses the summit of the academic hierarchy, where the student chooses between Harvard, Chicago and a few other prestigious universities, without mentioning any causal mechanism distributing the likelihood of choice. The reasoning is *ceteris paribus* and neutralizes everything that is usually bundled into the sociology of social trajectories and inequalities. This is the price to pay for the universality of the fulfilled feeling of individualization by difference. But what goes for the plenitude of the here and now, in the lyrical argument mentioned above, goes also for the possible actions that make up each person's life.

In his lecture "Scarcity, abundance, excess: Towards a sociology of too much", Abbott points out that being rich means being able to disregard the constraints of optimization of choices that the scarcity of means imposes. When one is rich there is no point comparing the prices of goods, airline rates, banks' financing plans, tax optimization techniques: the trade-off is superfluous or perhaps delegated to someone else. A rich individual has far more leeway to act and spends far less time examining the alternatives that each of these numerous possibilities can imply (Abbott, 2011). Situated in a framework of strategic interaction, the argument can be requalified in terms of power to act: how can I preserve a power to act that is not constrained by others' anticipations and by the manoeuvring stemming from it? In their study on the Cosimo de' Medici sphinx, Padgett and Ansell answer that power lies in handling indeterminacy, through the multiplicity of significations attributable to the behaviour of a powerful individual (Padgett and Ansell, 1993: 1263).

There is an argument of graduation here: the capacity to act, in a strategic context of interactions, increases with the quantity of options that can be maintained available and that can be articulated, in relation to future events. The rich and powerful sacrifice the fewest alternatives possible, to retain their grip

on the future. Abbott reaches the same conclusion in his reading of Padgett and Ansell, and of Leifer (*TM*: 247, Note 15). Is this graduation not equivalent to a discontinuist conception of the distribution of capabilities to act? It is only at the top of the social hierarchy that the constraint of scarcity can be overcome. Hence, a member of the social or political super-elite has the resource that is the least accessible to the others: taking advantage of his or her multiplicity to be undecipherable and unpredictable. The others, whom he or she dominates, have only their singularity, their difference, and the emotions they derive from the plenitude of successive present moments.

In Abbott's anti-teleological argument and in his wish to focus topological analysis on the action rather than the actor, there is something contradictory. The individual member of the super-elite mentioned in the previous paragraph neither controls the future nor resembles a rational decider who calculates costs and benefits, since he or she is faced with the uncertainty of the future, just like everyone else. But he or she is able to outsmart the others' calculations, by being unpredictable, and thus has a meta-competence: knowing how to remain multiple.

The contradiction is striking if the graduation is discontinuous: only the powerful individual can act on the future, both his or her own and that of others; only the powerful individual is an actor, one who is total because multiple. The argument cannot be understood unless we see this individual as more than an actor, that is, as an entity who produces history because he or she leaves the others' anticipations to act, like an operator of strategic interactions, or alone sums up the other actors' contradictory plays of interests, as Padgett and Ansell posited (*op.cit.*: 1307).

If we wish to have a less discontinuous graduation of the chances to explore the future and act on it (and a less discontinuous one of social power), we have to embrace a characterization of the individual subject that is more classical, along with a ranking of their capabilities to analytically process future possibilities, based on less unrealistic models than those of rational decision making with an uncertain horizon. Psychology teaches us that one of the most distinctive characteristics of the human being, in the living world, is to be able to think about the future and to think the future (Gilbert, 2005: 5). But the same psychological studies emphasize that the imagining of the future is often poor, because it is based largely on simple extrapolation of the present to build future scenarios, and thereby under-estimates the novelty of the future (Gilbert, *ibid.*: 124 onwards). How can the tension be resolved between, on the one hand, a massive psychological and anthropological orientation of the individual towards the future and towards different imaginable futures, and on the other, an Abbottian view that relativizes the argument of the control sought by the individual over his or her action and environment?

All actors constantly transcend the "here and now", where Abbott situates the plenitude of the experience of horizontal inter-individual difference. How do they do this? Behavioural science proposes an interesting conceptualization of individuals' reaction to events situated in a more or less distant past or future. Liberman and Trope (2008: 1205) point out that when distance with the here and now increases, mentally moving through time and space requires superior resources of abstraction. This enables one to exclude peripheral, local elements from one's mental or perceptive field, and to focus on central elements and more global information, which act as guides to support anticipation, evaluation and risk-taking in the course of action. The desirability of the action taken at a significant distance from its final outcome contrasts with the calculation of its feasibility, which involves a local inventory of the means to employ. The more

distant the result targeted, the more desirability prevails over feasibility, as Liberman and Trope show. These distinctions will suffice here to suggest the value of a highly differentiated approach to the treatment of temporality, which may moreover echo the Whiteheadian ontology so dear to Abbott, but in a way that, to my knowledge, does not feature in Abbott's thesis.

In Whitehead's ontology, the experience of the plenitude of the immediate present, to which Abbott's "lyrical sociology" grants so much value, is indeed highlighted (see for example Whitehead, 1933: xv). But Whitehead constantly emphasizes not only how (i) any individual object making up reality, in a processual conception – "entities and occasions" –, is a complex combination of elements from its spatial and temporal environment, on which this entity has a "prehension"; but also, (ii) how the entity has to integrate this constituent multiplicity to be able to be individualized. Without this process of integration, the entity will not be able to happen, to become (notably by incorporating selectively only the objects afforded to its grasp) and to perish, to use Whitehead's words. Hence, the frequent reference to the "cellular" organization of "occasions" and "entities", which supports an at once genetic and morphological conception of the organic integration of elements into a whole, into a "concretization". These elements substantiate the ontological argument present in Mead's or Whitehead's work, that the teleological orientation of action is a requisite for the relational conception of time and of the actor's environment – an argument that Abbott singularly disregards.

## **7. Conclusion**

The analyses that Abbott devotes to the question of inter-individual differences and inequalities have served me to examine the gap that he constantly highlights between his sociology and the usual forms of causal-linear analysis of the social

world. There is an obvious tension between the high level of ambition and theoretical generality of Abbott's argument, and the potential specificity of the questions and domains to which his propositions might apply. The simplest and most ambitious answer, but also the most normative one, would be to consider that the most successful sociology, or the one that is the most authentically different from any other social science, especially economics, is that which studies fields and issues where it maximizes its comparative advantage, through the adoption of an original ontology of social reality. This answer appears in two ways: negatively and radically, when Abbott equates all sociology of social inequalities to a normative social engineering science regulated according to a welfarist teleology ("meliorism"); and positively, when he draws up the inventory of empirical domains of exploration of what he sees as the hard core of sociology, or its founding base: the temporal and spatial analysis of social relations and social processes, or "interactional fields". At the forefront of this empirical research he situates the sociological literature on Goffmanian interactions, on urbanism and patterns in the city, and on work and professions, as well as certain currents of historical sociology and studies on criminality (*TMI*: 124).

On the other hand, Abbott's sociology deliberately plays down the role of the actor, and in so doing is loyal to a particular version of interactionism that is more openly structuralist than pragmatic. The actor is then merely a particular type of entity, which itself is but the aggregation ("congeries", Abbott calls them) of multiple adjacent and underlying realities. The whole theoretical construction proposed by Abbott aims to treat the diverse types of entity, individual, organization, profession, scientific discipline, etc., with the same conceptual repertoire and in line with an ontology of Whiteheadian inspiration, except when the treatment of the time horizon – the future – of the action is concerned. And it is in this respect that Abbott's argument leads to a processual

conception of the actor and of social totality based on differentiation without ranking.

Translation by Liz Libbrecht

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