

# AN ONTOLOGY FOR THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL PROCESSES

Extending the Extended-Case Method

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**Abstract:** The central concern of this article is the relationship between ethnography and social theory. With the help of ‘consequent processualism’, a social ontology that centers on the co-constitution of people, cultural forms, social relations, and the built environment, this essay makes an argument for what should be at the core of social theorizing: the principles underpinning the dynamics of processes in the nexus between actions and reactions, igniting social formation in webbed flows of effects across time and space. The article shows how consequent processualism is able to implode time-honored, reifying conceptual dichotomies, such as micro-macro, event-structure, agency-social structure, to open new vistas on the social. Building on consequent processualism, the essay argues on the one hand for the significance of theory for the practice of ethnography in identifying and delimiting fruitful field sites. Conversely, it advocates ethnography as the method of choice for developing social theory.

**Keywords:** consequent processualism, ethnographic methods, field-site choice, social ontology, social theory

Imagine that we wanted to study a particular social process in contemporary social settings. How could we translate such an interest into an ethnographic project among a concrete set of people located in a particular space and time? What kind of a theoretical imagination of process would be useful in guiding this research? How could we use such engagements to systematically develop theory? How could we go about identifying field sites that are equally responsive to both our substantive and theoretical interests? Wherein lie the specific advantages and problems of ethnography for the study of process in contemporary societies? In this essay, I will develop the contours of an answer to these guiding



questions by proposing an ontology of social processes that is Weberian in its focus on action, Meadian in its constitutive constructivism, and network theoretic in its emphasis on the importance of relationship patterns, while imagining processes to be the very stuff of social life.

An article about process and ethnography must not fail to consider the work of Max Gluckman, who has contributed significantly to what might be called the ‘processual turn’ in the social sciences. Gluckman inspired the first wave of ethnographers who viewed processes rather than a bounded set of people as the proper object of their investigation. Seen from today’s perspective, his exhortations to focus on process (see, e.g., Gluckman 1967) have a visionary touch, positively unsettling the mainstream of their time. For Gluckman wrote in the heyday of both structure-functionalism and structuralism, each enchanted with systems metaphors borrowed from biology, engineering cybernetics, and linguistics. Of course, it is not the case that structuralists or structure-functionalists were completely disinterested in processes. However, their attention was focused on processes of proper systems functioning and beyond that on disequilibrium (often conceived as external shock) and subsequent re-equilibration. Neither structuralists nor structure-functionalists were looking to understand processes of genesis, slow change, and disintegration in historically contingent circumstances, and this is precisely what interested Gluckman. Given that structuralist and structure-functionalist thinking always proceeded from and ended in structure, it is perhaps not surprising that it all too quickly fell into a reification of structure and thus into a fallacy so aptly analyzed by Whitehead (1979: 7) as “misplaced concreteness.”

Moreover, structuralists and structure-functionalists operated explicitly or implicitly with a notion of totality (the ‘systems level’), a notion that was as alien to Gluckman as it was to Weber simply because neither believed that such knowledge was humanly attainable.<sup>1</sup> Gluckman, much like Elias, that other processualist out of synch with the zeitgeist, refused to conceive of processes as *systemic* (i.e., in the context of systems’ operations), even though he conceived of them as *systematic* (i.e., as the consequence of ordering action) in historically contingent circumstances.

Gluckman has probably become most recognized for his original conceptualization and advocacy of an ethnographic practice, which got branded in his name as the “extended-case method” (see Gluckman 1961, 1967; cf. Burawoy 1998, 2000). And it is of course precisely the question of how to uncover the systematicity of unsystemic, historically contingent processes that he urged himself and his associates to answer. Yet the processualism that transpires from Gluckman’s work is neither a worked-out body of theory nor a bounded methodology, but rather, to use a metaphor from the world of software engineering, an ‘open platform’ to which many people inspired by him have later contributed significant pieces.

Building on previous reflections about how to employ ethnography systematically to develop theory (see Glaeser 2000: esp. 12–24), I too hope to contribute to this by now venerable platform. I will begin quite abstractly by proposing an ontology<sup>2</sup> of social processes that undergirds a theoretical perspective that might

be called ‘consequent processualism’. I undertake this step for several reasons. First, the ontology of social processes allows me to transcend a number of dichotomized concepts that have for a long time now organized (and troubled) the division of labor in the social sciences. Chief among these are the distinctions between subject and object; agency-structure, event-structure, micro-macro and culture-social structure; and, last but not least, the traditional versus the modern. Ethnography as a research practice has overwhelmingly been associated with the respective first term in these pairings. Not only did this association have serious consequences for the politics of method in the social sciences, which turned ethnography into something of a low-status pursuit, but, more importantly, it impoverished the sociological imagination of the social sciences as a whole.<sup>3</sup> I will then show how consequent processualism has been able to transcend these organizing dichotomies while retaining what was analytically useful about them. In a next step I will use the ontology developed here to evaluate critically the assumptions underlying the ethnographic practices of classical Malinowskian and Chicago School work, and I will show how subsequent Gluckmanian (and more generally Mancunian) ethnographic innovations, as well as the emergence of historical ethnography and the reflexive ethnography of the last two decades, have systematically led in the direction proposed here. Finally, I will show how consequent processualism can be used to think systematically about theory development and field-site choice, which are closely associated issues for the analysis of social life for which significant portions of the relevant contexts are fragmented and spatially and temporally removed.

## **Ontology: Imagining Social Life as Process**

I would like to begin the development of an ontology of social processes at a level of social imagination that is not only very congenial to Gluckman’s own, but is today, after the convergence of several theoretical and methodological approaches on this point, perhaps already a commonplace, at least among social scientists working ethnographically and/or historically.<sup>4</sup> I propose to imagine social life as an incredibly dense thicket of partially independent and partially interacting social processes. What, then, are processes?

### *Action-Reaction-Effect Sequences*

A good starting point may lie in the observation that the big questions in the social sciences typically inquire about the why and how of developments. Thus, we ask, for example, “How did capitalism or the nation-state emerge?” “How do revolutions begin, succeed, or fail?” “What was the impact of colonialism on the subjectivities of the colonized?” “How do natural scientists construct knowledge?” The very formulation of these questions suggests that, conceptually, we tend to think of processes as changes to ‘something’ (a form of economic organization, of governance, etc.) in which the process manifests itself. I call these ‘somethings’ social formations, because they come into being

as *effects* of interconnected reactions to antecedent actions.<sup>5</sup> The spark of social creation is, as Weber clearly recognized with his very definition of sociology, active attunement to the actions of others.

At this point, it might be helpful to illustrate social formation through action-reaction-effect sequences with a handful of paradigmatic cases that are central to the history of social thought. The first is Durkheim's ([1893] 1997) analysis of the emergence of social bonds between people either in shared ritual attunement or in the interdependence of regular exchange. The second is George Herbert Mead's (1934) analysis of the constitution of the self in the "conversation of significant symbols" between two individuals. For Mead, the self as the fundamental capacity of human reflexivity is the effect of the internalization of communications with other human beings. The third case is Wittgenstein's (1984) argument that human beings cannot follow a rule individually, that rule-following is instead always the result of interactions within a larger interpretative community.<sup>6</sup> From Wittgenstein's understanding of speaking as a form of action among other actions grew, finally, the fourth case, which consists in what speech act theorists call performative utterances. In speech act theory, marriage, for example, comes into being as the effect of the exchange of mutual vows (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1992). Marriage, and social formations like it, originates in the perlocutionary force, that is, the effect of utterances understood as actions. The point of all of these examples is that something new comes into social life through action-reaction-effect chains. Whether this is an intentional or unintentional creation is secondary—both happen.

Social formations have a number of peculiar ontological characteristics. First, their ultimate material substrate consists of actions and reactions and thus human bodies. The existence of social formations is therefore always rooted in concrete spatio-temporal locations. Second, they transcend every concrete action-reaction pair, however, by pointing backwards and sideways to other action-reaction pairs with similar effects and forward to the future, creating the expectation that there will be additional such pairs with comparable effect. Third, chiefly because our memories systematically become faint in the course of time and because expectations need to be met eventually if they are to maintain their forward-pointing thrust, social formations achieve significant duration and stability exclusively through *continued* action-reaction sequences.<sup>7</sup>

Although ritual is an important source for the maintenance of social formations, it is by no means the only or even the most important one. The fourth characteristic of social formations is that they can be, and very often are, maintained as the effect of *diverse* sets of action-reaction sequences. An individual self, for example, is maintained in communicative interactions not only with the original care-givers but with pretty much everyone with whom this person converses, as well as in every act of performed reflexivity. In everyday life, marriage is reproduced through rather diverse sets of interactions not only within the couple but also between either partner, or both partners, and outsiders. This in turn points to the fact that individual selves and individual marriages depend on the rooting of social formations such as 'self' and 'marriage' in the interactions of a set of interconnected people with whom the self and the

couple in question might come to interact. Only then can strangers face each other with the expectation to 'have a self' and 'to be married'. The technical term for this distributed rooting of social formations in interaction is 'institutionalization', which is the fifth ontological characteristic of social formations. It is through institutionalization that social formations acquire their peculiar object-like character (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966). We rightly perceive that social formations are not dependent on our individual actions. They face all of us individually as independent, objective entities, even though we all together keep reproducing them through our reactions to other people's actions. At that point, we tend to forget that social formations are in fact made and remade in interaction by all of us together. If we want to stop reproducing them, we face the problem of collective action.

Analytically it is useful to distinguish four categories of social formations: *people* (including their agency, desires, hopes, and fantasies), their *relationships* with one another, the *cultural forms* they use to navigate the world (practices, symbolic and emotive forms, values, and styles), and the *material environment* they build.<sup>8</sup> Among these social formations, people are *primus inter pares*, insofar as human bodies are the key material substrate of all the other social formations.<sup>9</sup> In every other respect, all four categories mutually constitute each other through people's actions. Human bodies become people only in interactions within relationships (e.g., to parents, siblings, and friends), situated in a built environment (e.g., nourished and sheltered), and in use of cultural forms (e.g., ideas of what a good life is about). Relationships in turn are made by people in use of cultural forms (e.g., ideas and norms about friendship) and the built environment (e.g., spaces where people can meet), and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

As actors, people are not only the effects and thus objects of processes but also their *primus inter pares* subjects. Of course, relationships, cultural forms, and the built environment are co-stars in the (sometimes rather boring) drama of process. It is through us lending them life that they in a sense become co-actors. This, I believe, is why we have such an ambiguous relationship toward them. On the one hand, we seem to possess the 'other' social formations totally; they belong to us as our creatures, our tools. Yet even slight changes in use (e.g., an extra amount of reflexivity) reveal how 'other' they are, and we begin instead to feel possessed by them. This is the fascination, power, and horror of masks—the celebration of technology as a savior and its condemnation as a corruptor. It is the deep, ongoing resonance we feel for Frankenstein and 'his' (or should I say 'the') monster.<sup>11</sup> In his theory of commodity fetishism, Marx (1960, chap. 1) has, paradigmatically for the social sciences, worked out the process of objectification for that part of the built environment that he called commodities. However, objectification is something that affects all social formations through institutionalization. Persons can become objectified as exalted majesties, stars, or saints; cultural forms can become objectified as truth in positivistic science and in everyday life; social relations can become objectified as biological ones; the built environment can become objectified as nature *tout court*.

It may seem that the fact that persons, relations, cultural forms, and the built environment all play the roles of both objects and subjects constitutes a classical paradox because that which is made seems to make itself. However, this is no Münchhausenesque tale in which a rider is pulling himself out of the swamp by the tail of his wig. The reason is simply that the roles of subject and object are *distributed* over a large number of actors in all four categories, which means that we all are subjects and objects—not primarily of ourselves but of each other. No subject is completely his or her own object; otherwise, he or she would not be a participant in society. Object and subject are thus but names for accents of attention. They indicate directions in which we turn our gaze in the investigation of the temporality of process.<sup>12</sup> Looking forward, we see subjects acting; looking backward, we see objects being made.<sup>13</sup>

People are the *primus inter pares* subjects of processes in a dual sense. They bring actions into being, and they connect in these actions as *reactions* many actions of others that thus have a common effect. And they do so by utilizing other social formations. The point here is to see actions not only—and perhaps not even primarily—as origins, as expressions of sovereign decision making, but as nodes connecting an often diverse set of other people’s actions performed at various times and in different contexts, such that these obtain a common thrust in a particular action as reaction. Seen from this perspective, an actor is less a source than a collector and transformer producing actions out of confluences. The confluences from which actors can produce their actions are contingent on opportunity. Their situational trajectory puts them ‘in the reach’ of some actions to which they could or must react, while it provides them with particular relations, cultural forms, and built environments. How much these actions are the result of poiesis, of creative play with influences, rather than mere habit or other quasi-automatic forms of reaction, is, as we know from Simmel (1992) and like-minded theorists, a matter of the plurality and polysemy of relations. And as we know from advances in cultural theory in the last two decades, it is also a matter of the plurality and polysemy of cultural forms and the built environment.<sup>14</sup> Agency is neither just there (gracing a sovereign subject) nor just absent (leaving a mere object); instead, building on an innate potential, it is constructed, augmented, or diminished within the flow of process (see, e.g., Bieri 2001).

The following example may illustrate how the various elements of the ontology I have presented here hang together. It may also show how repeated action-reaction-effect sequences interweave both similar and different processes into a coordinated field. A price hike for a particular fashion item (the changing object) may occur because a vendor in Los Angeles who is facing a rise of orders from certain buyers (two large department store chains) over a given time period might feel tempted to increase the price of the item in question. What helps the vendor to make this (more or less conscious) decision are the lessons she had once learned in business school in Philadelphia, her shareholders’ expectations to maximize the value of their stock, her sense that her competitors in Tokyo and Milan are on the way to making similar moves for similar reasons, alongside her own desire to squeeze the last buck out of her business operations, now that she

has, for her mother's sake, forfeited a life in the arts for one in business. Here the vendor connects the actions of dispersed (but not necessarily independent) buyers, of shareholders, of teachers, of her mother, etc., into a unified reaction. Note how the actions she is reacting to have taken place not only in a variety of locations but at different times as well. Her reaction in a sense makes simultaneous the non-simultaneous and local the non-local. It presents the non-present and thus connects the at least seemingly non-connected. Other vendors may follow suit so that there is indeed a general pattern of price increases for the particular good under consideration here.

The department stores themselves may have reacted to the consumers' novel demand, which may again be seen as reactions to other people's actions, such as the flaunting of this particular fashion item by people who present themselves as fashion avant-gardists in public places. The latter's entrepreneurship may in turn be a reaction to their realization that other people's ability to create a following had eroded their peculiar fashion advantage, a marked difference they had acquired in the previous round of fashion differentiation. The ideas for how to differentiate themselves were perhaps coming from the latest Parisian prêt-à-porter shows in which they have of course not participated but the photographs of which they have seen in fashion magazines.<sup>15</sup> These shows in turn may have been keyed to some 'retro' theme (styles associated with a particular decennium and recognizable thanks to family photo albums, the movies, and television). And again, the end-buyers react and thereby connect actions in disparate times and places that have an effect through these purchases.

This example shows quite nicely how processes dovetail. On the one hand, the same action can be part and parcel of a variety of processes constituting different social formations. For example, the purchase of a particular fashion item is, reconfirmed by the admiring glances of others, an aspect of the identity-formation process of that person, the confirmation of a particular ideology of what it is to dress tastefully, as well as part of the price-hike process. Similarly, a manager's decision to raise the price of the same item may be a move in asserting a particular identity of the firm in the business world (the vendor as price leader), a reconfirmation of the cultural forms absorbed in business school, a signaling to the board that suspicions of indecisive management are indeed not warranted, and so forth. On the other hand, this example also shows how various strands of the same kind of process (distinction through fashion) can be interwoven to furnish another (price hike). In this way, social life comes together as that incredibly dense thicket of partially independent and partially interacting social processes that I have defined above.

### *Socialities and Processual Dynamics*

As soon as somebody reacts to the actions of another, a relationship is initiated. These relationships can take many different qualitative forms, or socialities, which deeply influence subsequent reactions to the other's actions. In fact, the very same action can call forth startlingly different reactions, depending on

the sociality invoked between actor and reactor at the point of reaction. Just imagine how differently people react to a particular critique depending on who utters it. For that very reason, actors have a key interest in trying to persuade potential reactors that their relationship is actually characterized by a particular quality that promises a more favorable reaction. Rhetoricians have long known that the particular quality of a relationship is formed socially.

Accordingly, in order to understand the dynamics of process, it is absolutely key to consider the socialities involved. Scholars of society have been keenly aware of this; thus, their models frequently center around assumptions concerning prevalent socialities. Hobbes, for example, understood the relationships between human beings as fundamentally competitive, entailing dangers of violence. These could only be mastered, he argued, through balancing relationships of submission and domination of each and every citizen with the Leviathan. For Smith, too, the basic relationships between humans were competitive. In contra-distinction to Hobbes, however, Smith argued that competition leads through the division of labor to cooperation.

During the nineteenth century, the argument shifted from universalistic assumptions about socialities to universalistic assumptions about the development of socialities that themselves came to be seen as temporally variant. The process of 'modernization' was widely understood as a movement from 'traditional', that is, authoritarian, and hierarchical (kinship, caste, estate, guild) relationships to 'modern', at least nominally voluntary, and egalitarian contractual relationships. More recently, Foucault (1978) has argued similarly for dominant forms of sociality in relation to changing regimes of power that correspond for him to changing forms of subjectification. What such totalizing claims about sociality miss is the fact that social life is characterized by the co-existence of a wide variety of socialities that can stand in interesting systematic relationships to each other.<sup>16</sup> It is also important to see that socialities are situationally articulated. They can change from one instant to the next, thus widely affecting how actions are answered. Finally, several ambiguous and possibly even contradictory socialities can be at play in one and the same action-reaction link.

### *Webs of Effect Flows and Social Networks*

I have already explained above how the interlinking of various action-reaction chains can lead to the bundling of their effects in such a way that the social formation thus constituted becomes objectified as an institution. It is important, therefore, to understand how such interrelationships come about. For these purposes, the literature on social networks appears to be a logical starting point; indeed, contemporary network theory has valuable insights to contribute to the present project. However, the consequent processualism argued here also reveals fundamental limitations of current network approaches.

What contemporary social scientists mean when they speak of networks is a stable, ordered set of relationships that structure particular kinds of interactions. A number of scholars pioneering the network concept—most notably,



perhaps, Clyde Mitchell, A. L. Epstein, and J. A. Barnes—were in close conversation with Gluckman and indeed seem to have owed their mutual acquaintance to what appears to be a Gluckman-centered network.<sup>17</sup> The network literature has thus received many inspirations from Gluckman. The form in which the network concept has taken shape in the perimeter of the Manchester School and in which it has also moved into the very core of American sociology pays acute attention to the formal patterning of social relationships and the effects that such patterning has on the processes that take place within networks. Two distinctions are particularly fruitful here because they focus on how relationship patterns support different kinds of processes.<sup>18</sup> The first is the differentiation according to the *strength* of linkages.<sup>19</sup> Research building on this distinction, a simple and for some contexts congenial criterion for different forms of sociality (cf. Granovetter 1983), has shown how, for example, a particular search process (e.g., finding a new job in industrial societies) can depend not so much on ‘strong’ ties, such as friendships and relations with close kin, but on a wider net of ‘weak’ ties, such as acquaintances. What is central to analyses based on this distinction is that the distribution of particular kinds of information in particular social contexts does not typically require the shelter of intimate relations.

The other key distinction brought to the foreground in formal network analysis (e.g., Burt 1992; Granovetter 1973, 1983) is the one between different types of *positions* within a network. What this literature distinguishes primarily are positions with ideosyncratic relationship patterns (my relations are unlike yours) from others within densely clustered (or clique-like) relationships in which participants share a large number of key relationships with each other (the people with whom I entertain relations are likely to maintain relations with each other as well).<sup>20</sup> The internal processes of clusters of strong ties have been linked systematically to group cohesion (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, and Back 1950; Homans 1992; Mitchell 1969; for an overview, see Moscovici 1985) and the production of agreement, while the more ‘individual’ positions outside of clusters have been systematically linked with innovation (e.g., Burt 1980), competitive dynamics (e.g., Burt 1992), and the rapid spread of information (e.g., Epstein 1969, in response to Gluckman 1963). Of course, these distinctions are only a beginning. With an eye on what I have just referred to as sociality of human beings, it seems to me we need much more research on how other kinds of qualitative differences in relationships support different kinds of processual dynamics as well as substantive network interaction. And yet the outcome of this research is very important: the patterning of the relationships has a significant impact on the process dynamics.

Ironically, the network literature, which grew out of an acute dissatisfaction with structure-functionalism (e.g., Mitchell 1973), has in the end remained firmly structuralist (and the more so as it has taken the path to quantification) by effectively treating networks as exogenously given. From the perspective of the consequent processualism I have begun to outline, the literature overlooks how networks themselves are social formations (i.e., associations of relations) that get constituted through the webbed flow of people’s action-reaction sequences,

in use of cultural forms and the built environment. One could also say that the current network literature does not pay attention to how processes within networks and network-constituting processes emerge from the same actions. It thus also ignores that there are a number of other processes involving people, cultural forms, the built environment, and relations outside of the network that are necessary to maintain it. The dominant approaches to networks have yet another shortcoming, however, in predominantly imagining relationships on a personal, extended face-to-face model, which disregards the importance of reaction to actions far removed in time and space, a key phenomenon of social life in contemporary societies.

### *The Projective Articulation of Actions across Time and Space*

Most actions we undertake are reactions not just in the sense that traditional micro-sociological research has conceived of them: as answers to questions or chess moves upon chess moves. Instead, actions and reactions can be far removed in space and time and must be understood in a framework that departs decisively from the face-to-face model we usually think of first when we hear the term ‘social relation’.<sup>21</sup> The implication is that the relevant context of a particular action is by no means evident. In fact, any particular action can be a reaction to any number of other people’s actions in a diverse set of far-away places and distant times. The fashion item price hike mentioned above contains some examples in this respect.

Since all actions are embodied, they are *necessarily* local in time and space. If actions produce an effect on people beyond the proximate time-space coordinates in which they are performed—Schütz’s “world in immediate reach” (Schütz and Luckmann 1984)—some effects of this action need to be taken from the here and now and projected and articulated in the there and then. This is accomplished by intermediary processes for which I propose the umbrella term ‘projective articulations’.<sup>22</sup> Thus, projective articulations enable action-reaction-effect sequences that could not take place at all in their absence, or at least not in this form. As processes, projective articulations involve persons, cultural forms, the built environment, and relationships that are different from those drawn upon for the original act. To stay with the fashion example above, the consumer admiring himself in a recently purchased fashion item reacts to the projected articulation of the myriad actions effectively embodied in the production, marketing, and distribution of that item. The fashion designer raising the prices for these items reacts to the projected articulation of demand, the changes of which become discernible in accounting procedures, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

In the course of projected articulations, the locally registered effect of the actions gets converted into a transportable form and may be articulated elsewhere in yet another form. A locally delivered political speech may first be taped and then transcribed to be printed and distributed in a newspaper. Sometimes the projected articulation of the local effect of an action preserves some iconicity with the original action. This is the case, for example, with ‘live’

transmission of voices and images.<sup>24</sup> While it may be rather obvious then that what gets projected originates in an action, the awareness of the projection itself as enabled by action vanishes into the background. The more the projective articulation loses an iconic relation with the original action, the more it can be forgotten that it is indeed someone's local action that one is reacting to. This is most clearly the case for social formations industrially produced and traded today.<sup>25</sup> How we react to them as projectively articulated actions is in part contingent on how, to which degree, and with what involvement of imagination we make clear to ourselves that social formations are indeed projective articulations of actions that are made available by yet another set of actions. People react differently to a product (think of beef after BSE or of Oriental rugs) depending on how aware they are of the kinds of actions bundled up in the product that reaches them. Creating this transparency is what consumer advocacy is in part about. Since a certain degree of non-awareness is key to the functioning of projective articulations, however, because we would otherwise experience acute informational overload, the question is not so much whether this does create (commodity) fetishism, but what its effect is under particular kinds of circumstances. This includes the question as to what kinds of processes particular kinds of fetishisms enable or undermine.<sup>26</sup>

Certain areas of research have crystallized around particular forms of projective articulations of action effects. There is a well-established body of literature about the mass media, for example, and a fast-growing literature on social-memory practices (cf. Olick and Robbins 1998), as well as an increasing interest in the ways that the center of organizations, states included, render their periphery legible (e.g., Porter 1995). Unfortunately, the focus of these literatures has been on these techniques per se, not on how they enable other processes. Only more recently have scholars begun systematically to leverage an understanding of specific forms of projective articulations into the analysis of a diverse set of social processes that are enabled by them. What begins to take shape here is the insight that the use of new forms of projective articulations of action also produces novel forms of particular socialities precisely because they enable new action-reaction-effect linkages—that is, new forms of social processes. The agenda-setting book in this respect is Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), which argues that print capitalism, in conjunction with rising literacy rates, has enabled the emergence of new ways to live and imagine the social.<sup>27</sup>

The very notion of projective articulation suggests, then, that we need to rethink what it is that constitutes a social relation or, more precisely, a whole web of such relations. We have relationships with all people, alive or dead, known to us or unknown, whose actions we somehow react to with our own actions. Projective articulations vastly increase the number of relations in which an individual stands. In social contexts that are permeated with numerous forms of projective articulations, the sheer number and complexity of relations through which people are processually connected to each other become literally unfathomable. For a social scientist attempting to study processes, this is a dizzying, if not utterly nauseating, vista.

### *Further Notes on Time-Honored Dichotomies*

Viewing social life as a dense thicket of processes in the way that I have outlined it here transcends some of the major dichotomies that have galvanized some of the theoretical debates in the social sciences since World War II as either-or choices that have profoundly influenced the division of labor in the social sciences. Individually, the points I will make about these dichotomies have all been made before, yet I want to point out again that these dichotomies all disappear *together* within a consequent processualism of the kind I have outlined, because they are all the consequence of particular reifications that the kind of processualism I have introduced in this article avoids. The subject-object dichotomy is *au fond* the consequence of reifying extra-socially (by God or nature) constituted actors capable of sovereign choice. Entities capable of such choices are seen as subjects, those that lack this capability as objects. In the classical formulation, subject and object characteristics are distributed over different classes of social formations. From what I have said so far, it should be clear that the dichotomy cannot be overcome by reduction to either end. By contrast, consequent processualism sees object and subject not as things but as accents of perspectives within processes.

The structure-event dichotomy owes its existence to the Platonic reification of structures as the 'really real' of which events are only instantiations. The dichotomy effectively makes a distinction between a temporal and an extra-temporal domain. There is an overreaction to the claim of morphological primacy in the affirmation of super-fluidity in processes of infinite semiosis, endless difference, and so on. What gets lost in this view is that the difference in the rate of change in various processes is significant. This, however, is precisely the point emphasized by consequent processualism. It acknowledges that there are action-reaction sequences that lead to the maintenance of social formations, while others lead to their change. With different speeds in change, interrelated complexes of maintained formations look like structures in comparison to changing ones.

Finally, there is the micro-macro dichotomy and its more recent cognates, lifeworld-system and local-global. The well-known problem with macro theorization is that it reifies collective actors and collective states that need to be conceived as constituted processually through the interaction of real persons in real locations at real times. There is the possibility, of course, that these processes are, first, so unifying as to make persons as members of collectivities interchangeable and, second, so stable that talk of them as entities could in fact be legitimate as a form of shorthand. Such macro entities could indeed be the effects of coordinated, reproduced action-reaction sequences. Yet this needs to be demonstrated rather than presupposed.

With this goal in mind, various authors have suggested programs to 'translate' the macro into the micro.<sup>28</sup> Yet such efforts are doomed to fail as long as the micro continues to be imagined on the face-to-face model without keen attention to the face-to-other-via-object or face-to-other-via-symbol relationships, that is, without a systematic consideration of projective articulations.

The problem with traditional micro theory is that it reifies the immediately adjacent context of interaction, which needless to say can in the absence of projective articulations never produce the kinds of phenomena that macro theorists are interested in. The issue, then, is one of specifying processes with due regard for projective articulations. Some actions produce only local effects; others, thanks to projective articulations, produce transtemporal and translocal ones. This does not mean that more encompassing social processes stretching across a wider swath of locations might not require action-projecting techniques that are different from those used in smaller-scale processes. Nor does it mean that such widely distributed processes could not have peculiar dynamics of their own.<sup>29</sup>

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<b>Conceptual Dichotomies</b>	<b>Consequent Processualism</b>
traditional-modern	Which kind of socialities are at play in what kind of network patterns? How are various socialities dependent on each other? How do socialities and network patterns shape the dynamics of process?
event-structure	Which processes maintain a social formation as selfsame? What is the relative clock speed of various processes in relationship to each other?
culture-structure	How do cultural forms (and other social formations) play into the instigation, maintenance, or change of social relations? How do patterns of relationship (and other social formations) influence the reproduction of cultural forms?
agency-structure	How does the situation of an actor within the reach of various confluences create possibilities for poetic play? How does the distribution of the maintenance of social formation over wider networks of actors lead to their objectification?
subject-object	How does a social process appear looking forward into the future? How has a particular social formation come to be what it is?
micro-macro	What is the role of projective articulations in any particular social process?

Consequent processualism replaces traditional conceptual dichotomies that have structured the division of labor in the social sciences with analytical questions.

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## **Analysis: Studying Social Processes Empirically**

The idea of social life as a set of partially independent and partially interacting social processes, imagined as a web of effect flows in which actions are the nodes and various socialities the ‘docking points’ at which particular relations

get formed by reactions mediated by social formations, is utterly daunting. The pervasiveness of projective articulations seems to make that picture outright nauseating because they increase exponentially the possibilities for producing effects. As a result, the prospects of analysis seem to sink into the morass of endless possibilities of tracing action-reaction-effect linkages. In facing this web of social effects, from the dynamics of which emerge all social formations, every analysis may seem arbitrary. Thinly legitimized by shallow notions of emergence, macro theory has been the classical defense against this nauseating complexity. Macro theory insisted that it was possible to understand the seemingly chaotic to and fro of the beehive as the orderly interaction of collective entities (queens, workers, drones), which produce the collective states of the society. I have already argued why this move is highly problematic. How, then, has ethnography, macro theory's classic antipode, historically dealt with this nausea?

### *From the Ethnography of Clusters to Reflexive Ethnography*

There are in effect five background assumptions underpinning classical, 'first wave' ethnographic studies based on systematic participant observation in anthropology and sociology. Not all studies hold these assumptions to the same degree, of course, and some ethnographers (perhaps not by accident, in particular Znaniecki and Malinowski) maintain a fascination today precisely for having violated them in one way or the other. Nevertheless, I think these assumptions can be used to characterize conventions on method. The first is that the object of ethnography is to investigate the life of a group of people, its customs, and its traditions. Second, such groups as objects of study were typically conceived as self-constitutive in at least those aspects relevant to the ethnographic investigation. This means that all relevant interaction that could be observed was supposed to happen within that group. Third, the group was imagined in network terms as a cluster, that is, as a dense network of cross-cutting, redundant links, which could be projected onto a relatively clearly bounded location. Fourth, the group was conceived as a more or less selfsame structure, as a self-sustaining system. In the ecological jargon of the early Chicago School ethnographers, these groups occupied an 'ecological niche' (e.g., Park and Burgess 1984).

In other words, ethnographers laboring under classical assumptions considered it more or less possible to analyze their object by spending limited amounts of time in a rather clearly circumscribed area, even if this involved some adventurous travel over hundreds of miles of open sea, including encounters with similarly autonomous people, and even if it took a number of volumes to accomplish this task. Finally, since the group was thought of as self-constitutive, the ethnographer could treat him- or herself as a kind of alien, a member of another world who had no real influence on what was going on locally. Researchers and the people they studied could not possibly be conceived as entangled in the same action-reaction network. Structure-functionalism, as the predominant theoretical approach, and the methodology of an ethnography of the present in a clearly circumscribed locale were mutually reinforcing.<sup>30</sup> Structure-functionalist ethnography has avoided the nausea of thinking in terms of

cascading effect flows by limiting the breadth of the web to a more manageable number of actors and by temporally folding the web onto itself.

The attack on the assumptions of classical ethnography in this sense came in several waves. The first big step was Max Gluckman's turn away from the ethnographic conventions of his own teachers (already adumbrated in Gluckman [1940] 1958). Gluckman and his school are associated with a number of innovations. The object of ethnography is no longer taken to be a clustered group but a process that gets instantiated by a particular set of people with relations stretching well beyond the confines of clusters. Rather than editing the colonial context out of the picture, it is clearly understood as part and parcel of what is going on (*ibid.*). To describe how a process ought to be studied, Gluckman (1961) adopts the term "extended-case method." In comparison to the more conventional use of cases to illustrate structural features of society, Gluckman (1967: xv) proposes to take "a series of specific incidents affecting the same persons or groups through a period of time, and showing how these incidents, these 'cases', are related to the development and changes of social relations among these persons and groups, acting within the framework of their social system and culture."

What distinguishes Gluckman and his collaborators as well is a clear understanding that adequate representations of 'total ways of life' are simply impossible. With the move to process comes the question of how the 'field' could be meaningfully delimited, since not even the restriction to particular substantively characterized processes offers clear-cut boundaries. This means that analysis would have to be carried out on a limited 'chunk' of a principally open web of effects that had to be justified somehow (Gluckman and Devons 1964).<sup>31</sup> It remained for Gluckman's friends and collaborators to devise more concrete frameworks within which to study and delimit process. Victor Turner (1974), for example, focuses on crises and their resolution. He sets "structure" and "anti-structure" into a dynamic relationship and follows the unfolding and resolution of conflict along the lines of guiding "root metaphors" and rituals. Process is for Turner not an even flow of happenings but rather an unfolding of events with a dramatic profile in which analytic focus is most suitably placed on culminating points. Instead of concentrating on the temporal *development* of process, Sally Falk Moore (1978) proposes to look at what she considers to be fairly universal: dialectically related *kinds* of processes.<sup>32</sup> She also argues that it is particularly fruitful to look at the constitution of relatively autonomous fields of social interaction and their mutual contextualization and delimitation. With the notion of "diagnostic events" (1987; this volume), she has also developed a concept that is, if you like, the *commedia dell'arte* counterpart to Turner's somewhat formalistic sequencing of drama. For Moore, diagnostic events elucidate *in nuce* the larger process under investigation because they reveal the tension and dynamic of what I have referred to above as action-reaction-effect patterns.<sup>33</sup>

The next big step was the appropriation of history into ethnography. This was very much in Gluckman's spirit, and several people on whom he has had a lasting impact have become driving forces in this move, criticizing the ethnography of the ethnographer's present, which in spite of its attention to process still had no means to take into account a longer if not a *longue durée*

(e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Moore 1986). Of course, historical anthropology was not only a Mancunian affair. Post-structuralist neo-Marxism was an equally vital force in this transition (e.g., Sahlins 1981; Wolf 1982). If the historical conditions for the emergence of a structure-functionalist, other-allochronizing (Fabian 1983) ethnography were at least in part due to colonialist nostalgia (Clifford 1988), then decolonization (a process, after all) is the historical canvas in front of which the turn toward processes and history takes place. Now colonialism had epochal bookmarks, and the imaginary past of a timeless tradition was at least one whole epoch removed. Moreover, colonial administrations had, needless to say, produced precisely the kinds of records that 'proper' historical methodology required to be exercised upon. In this context, it became all of a sudden also much clearer that the connections between colonizers and colonized were in an important sense not so unique after all, that it had always been important to study the relationships between various groups of people, no matter how isolated they might have appeared to the naive European eye, casting itself as 'discoverer' of countries and people.

With the advent of history in ethnography arrived also a new interest in issues of political economy that necessitated a view in which Third World locales were integrated into translocal political and economic processes. With this explicit recognition of the reality of pervasive projective articulations also came the awareness that cases needed to be extended not only in time, a movement that led into the archive, but also across space, which slowly triggered what would eventually be termed 'multi-sited ethnography' (e.g., Burawoy et al. 2000; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1998). The consequence was that ethnographic practices had to become both temporally and spatially extended. What had once given ethnography its very identity as a research practice was now drawn into doubt as a possible impediment for good research results.<sup>34</sup>

The increasing awareness of pervasive projective articulations also furthered a reflexive mode that had to reconsider radically the role of the observer, including the power relations in which observers and the observed were entangled (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986). In other words, reflexive ethnography acknowledged the fact that ethnographers and their objects were part and parcel of a wider encompassing network that enabled ethnography as a practice. Consequently, it was also finally recognized that ethnography itself is indeed one particular way of producing projective articulations sustaining new sets of relationships, interlinking people in uncontrollable ways. This insight resulted in a virtual conundrum of new ethical problems in ethnographic practice (e.g., Shryock 2004) that have in turn produced a strategy for foreshortening the web of processual flows—dealing with the ethnographer-local partner interaction as the critical site of ethnographic knowledge production and an instance of globalization at work.

If you like, then, the history of ethnography can be written as slowly moving toward something like the social ontology I have presented in this essay.<sup>35</sup> The changes I have just described are the effect of an increasing understanding of the principal open-endedness of social life in every respect as well as a reflection on the conditions under which ethnographic knowledge is produced. Changes



in these directions have also been facilitated by dramatically changing social circumstances that have rendered classical assumptions about boundedness, with increasing palpability, implausible. Thus, we have lost our 'defenses' against the nausea I have spoken about above. The crisis of ethnography over the last two decades is the crisis produced by an awareness of seemingly unfathomable interdependencies.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Role of Theory*

This nausea is productive, however. It reminds us with visceral force that (maybe contrary to our desires) we cannot tell it all. Thus, we need to think carefully which story we would want to parse out. A stringent limitation of perspective, together with a reflection on the rationale for it, is necessary. The reason to tell a tale is interest. That interest can attach itself to three different aspects of process. There is first its concrete embodiment in particular people, their actions in concrete time-space in all its singular curiosity.<sup>37</sup> The second is the social formation as the effect of process, its becoming, maintenance, or disintegration understood as a case standing for a class of phenomena. Finally, interest can attach itself to the patterns, principles, or regularities underlying the very dynamics of process. This is the realm of theory proper. In good social science research, all three levels of interest should be closely intertwined, simply because they are dependent on each other: principles of process dynamics and classes of objects can be studied only in concrete embodiment; a particular embodiment is studied and theories of process dynamics are developed in the hope that this project yields relevant insights for wider classes of phenomena; and without the development of an explicit understanding of process dynamics, all narrations of process ultimately remain unreflexive. The tension between the peculiarity of embodiment and the generality of theory is only apparent; in fact, they delimit each other. Yet this delimitation can come about only in comparison in which several parallel strands of action-reaction-effect sequences are compared with each other. And it is precisely through such comparisons that theoretization becomes a productive response to the nausea created by the infinity process. The search for principles itself can provide the tracing direction because there is little reason to trace processes along the beaten path of the well established or the haphazard.

Theory provides us with a notion of what kind of systematic action-reaction-effect linkages to expect. And we can see whether they hold up under particular circumstances. Thus, theory gives us clues for tracing processes; it moves our gaze in certain directions. The search can move either forward from action-reaction chains to formations or backward from formations to the action chains that constitute them. In the first case, the question is which formations (persons, relationships, cultural forms, the built environment) these action-reaction chains constitute to a significant degree and which ones of those are interesting. The debates about globalization reveal in an instant how this movement from apparent actions (e.g., movements of people, goods, ideas, capital) to their effect on a formation is anything but trivial. Under which circumstances (cross-links

with other processes) do these movements strengthen or weaken the nation-state? In the second case, the trick is to define an object well enough to get a clear sense of what kind of action chains are critical to constitute it. Again, this is in many interesting cases anything but trivial. What kind of action-reaction sequences and their interlinkages have been historically decisive in sustaining the papacy in any given period? In reality, we have to alternate between both of these tracing directions to juxtapose any particular logic of linking to the question of whether it alone can be credited with doing the trick. We have to experiment with various depths and breadths of action-reaction chains to see where systematic links begin to diffuse. We have to investigate which socialities in conjunction with which other formations produce these regularities and what it is that maintains them. In the end, we will have used existing theories to mine data, and we will use these data to alternate or replace theories until our data and our theory as emplotment schema combine into a satisfying story (cf. Abbott 2001; White 1973).<sup>38</sup>

Let us return one more time to the price-hike example. The social formation in question is indeed the movement of an index; the actions constituting it are price settings determined by individual actors. I hypothetically traced one vendor's price increase to a number of antecedent actions (parental demands, previous competitor actions, presentations of managerial and/or corporate identity, demand) that seem to be at play. To get a full understanding of the breadth of relevant actions to which an individual price increase is a reaction, to get a full understanding of the socialities, the cultural forms, the relations, and the built environment, is to define a case revealing the directions in which a theoretization might develop. Just imagine a psychodynamic theory of inflation or, somewhat less revolutionary, one that traces continuous price pressures to corporate governance arrangements or to managerial ideologies! Even if in this one instance the vendor's reaction to her mother's demands and the pressures of the board were as important as sustained changes in demand (the old Econ 101 story), it does not mean that next time they will be or that a competitor will follow similar action-reaction-effect paths. But if they do, through a number of comparative cases, we are onto something. Let us imagine for a moment that we had told an Econ 101 story as far as the object, the price hike, is concerned. Let us assume that what we would like to explain is persistent inflation, for which our example was just a case. Does the Econ 101 story make sense? Demand fluctuates, but prices seem to be more generally on the rise. So the story needs a bit more complexity. At this point we might want to follow some of the other leads we had and construct perhaps a Lacanian theory of inflation. But could we substantiate it?<sup>39</sup>

Here is another example. In my first book (Glaeser 2000) I tackled the following problem. Soon after the reunification of Germany in October 1990, which proceeded under the assumption of an essential unity of the German people, many signs emerged suggesting that if there were not already two German identities, an eastern one and a western one, then they would emerge fairly soon. People began to talk about "walls in the minds of people" that had effectively replaced the Berlin Wall to describe misunderstandings and

hostilities between easterners and westerners. The first challenge in terms of an analysis of process was to grasp 'identity' in such a way that it could be linked to actions performed by real people in real time and space. I chose a phenomenological understanding of identity as a momentary interpretation of self that proceeds through contextualization. But how do people *do* identity? What I saw in the field was that people continuously identified each other as easterners or westerners performatively in speech, gesture, habitus, and reference to objects, and I learned to take such identifications as building blocks of identity formation processes.

The next question concerned what it is that people are reacting to when they identify themselves or others in such ways. Contrary to expectations, life in East and West had produced significant cultural differences ranging from architectural styles and lexical variations to ways of managing work and the uses of time. People reacted with oppositional identifications to the perception of these differences. These identifications, which were in no way accommodating or even neutral, were heavily morally laden.

In this context it is important to understand that the very way in which the unification process was organized produced countless circumstances in which the state, with its bureaucratic techniques of projective articulations, identified easterners as deficient variants of westerners to which they were asked to assimilate themselves. And why was this policy pursued with such a vengeance? On the one hand, it became clear to me that the Cold War was yet being acted out in this way; on the other hand, it also became evident that this was still a reaction to Germany's Nazi past. A sociality was thus stipulated by a conundrum of historical memory and current policy in which easterners were related to westerners as students to teachers, as recipients of democracy to givers of democracy, as receivers of wealth to givers of wealth, producing oppositional identifications on a massive scale. If not torn apart by competition for ever scarcer jobs, easterners reacted to this by forming a community of sufferers that could reconfirm oppositional identifications. Likewise, westerners working in the East returned 'home' as often as they could, and they too huddled with each other, complaining about easterners' ungratefulness. Thus, friendship networks remained origin specific. The theoretical gain of this study was an analytic theory of identity construction processes that remains open to what identity is about by centering on the performance of acts of identification, their context sensitivity, and the specific modes in which they can be cast.

### *Choosing Field Sites*

Neither anthropological nor sociological ethnography developed with a systematic approach toward field-site choices. The disciplinary project was one of cataloguing human diversity that in comparison promised to shed light on the *condito humana* more generally. Moreover, assumptions about the systematicity and homogeneity of cultures made site strategies beyond the expediency of access irrelevant. The point was to get in *somewhere*; spatial and temporal homogeneity assumptions took care of the rest. The acknowledgment of the

pervasive existence of projective articulation changes the situation dramatically. First, different locations may have different positions in networks of relations, and these need to be considered because they offer different perspectives on effect flows and interactions with other processes. Influenced by world systems theory, parts of such differences in network positions have been considered for a long time in the guise of center-periphery exchanges. Yet the center-periphery model is only one among many to consider here. The relatively smooth operation of (international) *lex mercatoria*, for example, can probably not be understood in this way.

Second, projective articulations regularly create a number of parallel action-reaction-effect strands. These will inevitably have distinct local flavors, and yet at first glance they might provide equivalent possibilities to study the kinds of processes we are interested in. However, even if they are subjected to comparable influences, these sites may differ vastly in what they can offer us in terms of the very observability of process. What we want to understand is why people act/react the way they do and what the effects of their reactions are on the formation. This means that contexts are particularly helpful in which people comment locally on each other's actions as reactions and where a diverse set of such commentaries is available. In the case of German unification, for example, I wanted a site where a number of identical easterners and westerners encountered each other on a daily basis, not only across hierarchical levels but also at the same level of hierarchy. This way I hoped to get more open conflict. Berlin, as the once divided and now unified city, seemed to offer more in this regard than any other place in the country. It was, after all, the only reunified city on German territory. I considered a number of organized environments—banks, cultural institutions, public administrations—and settled on the Berlin police for a number of reasons. The department had created a situation in which about half of the remaining former eastern People's Police officers were sent to the western part of the city and a similar number of western officers were sent east. Here was a quasi-experimental set-up, virtually unique in the entire country. These officers had to encounter each other's spaces, work with each other's equipment, and accomplish tasks together that involved many other people and social problems.

The Berlin police department was typical neither of post-unification police organizations nor of East-West encounters in state bureaucracies more generally. A good field site is not necessarily typical for contexts in which processes of particular kinds proceed. Instead, it needs to be productive in revealing action-reaction-effect linkages that may be going on elsewhere as well, if often less visibly so. Much like a play, a good field site is a theater of process that communicates through its particulars something more general. Artists may create the *besondere Allgemeine* (the particular general); we ethnographers need to go find it.

### *Formal Organizations as Sites*

Formal organizations offer a number of advantages as field sites. They are interesting for the ethnography of processes because they funnel—that is, gather and concentrate—a wide variety of actions toward a limited, interconnected

set of people. Formal organizations projectively articulate action effects along a number of different dimensions. Typically, they bring people together from different families, diverse neighborhoods, and different socio-economic backgrounds, submitting them to related sets of disciplines, professional standards, and so on. If the organizations are large, they connect people across countries and continents and, through their very endurance, across time. Moreover, they enforce government policies among employees and mobilize their employees in response to the actions of other organizations. More importantly yet, projectively articulating action effects is typically what formal organizations are all about, no matter whether they are businesses, government agencies, parties, or movement headquarters. They collect and transmit information about what people do, think, or feel; they bring goods produced by some people to others who use them; they make available the money earned by some for investment by others; they force the orders issued by some on designated others, etc. In the name of efficiency, formal organizations are usually busily attempting to shape the identities of their employees as practitioners of particular crafts and as citizens or members of the collectivity. Accordingly, organizational life is saturated with memory practices small and large, ranging from learning from past experiences to improve operations to the establishment and dissemination of the history of the organization in the interests of positive emotive bonding. Formal organizations are in this sense enormous linking operations that incubate a diverse set of processes by connecting actions to reactions.

This role of formal organizations has proved to be essential for my first project. Easterners and westerners brought their home, neighborhood, and family lives into the organization in the form of countless stories in which vacations, illnesses, renovation projects, and large-scale acquisitions, as well as reminiscences of all sorts, played a significant part. At the same time, the police subjected them to the state's vision of what unification should look like. Westerners were encouraged to serve as models, furnishing easterners with knowledge about how things ought to be done. Easterners, in turn, were assimilated into new practices: they were scrutinized for deeds and affiliations deemed morally problematic, their qualifications were reassessed, and they were given a new rank and a new place. Thus, the police as a formal organization allowed me to show how the political process of unification was enacted on the ground, how the 'macro' that emerged from being a set of ideas developed by a limited number of people in some location was projected into the realm of everyday life. The local designation of policies became a mass ('macro') phenomenon through the projection of formal organizations such as the police, which in turn fueled the growing alienation between easterners and westerners.

But through its self-historicization, the police organization also made it easy to trace the perceived impact of the past, especially the overwhelming shadow of the Nazi past and, in its umbra, the peculiarly German interpretation of the Cold War as a continuing battle against totalitarianism. The hyper-self-consciously performed reaction of the state's political leadership to that Nazi past was in turn projected into the everyday minutiae of habitus, police station design, and typeface, yielding together an intricate semiotics of overcoming,

which in turn formed a convenient benchmark to measure relative moral worth between easterners and westerners.

Locating fieldwork in formal organizations often also gives rise to an opportunity to follow the second strategy, that is, an investigation of the full circle from action over projective articulation to reception and reaction, to the reverse projective articulation of reaction effects, back to the original actor. Such feedback loops are very important because they can lead to process dampening or amplification. These loops are relatively easy to study as long as they are internal to the organization, for this often involves little more than fieldwork on hierarchically distinct layers. In the unification study, I researched how the police bureaucracy in Berlin was developing its policy to integrate eastern officers in response to the general unification treaty negotiated by both governments. I then studied how these were enforced, what effect this had on the officers so treated, and how they, through their performance, affected the Berlin police and its perception by a wider public. Studying feedback loops that transcend the perimeter of a formal organization is more difficult because one typically has to switch field sites.

## Conclusions

In settings where social life produces relatively few traces that would allow later generations to construct a rich understanding of what this life was about, ethnography understood as a documentary practice may make sense (even if there is no such thing as simple documentation), because this is a way of producing at least some signs that later generations may wish to interpret for their own gratification. After all, we are glad that Thucydides was around to tell us about the Peloponnesian Wars, notwithstanding his peculiar angle on things and his errors of fact. However, in settings in which more traces are produced than any later interpreter can possibly take in view anyway (and a large number of contemporary settings are of this kind), ethnography as documentary practice lessens dramatically in value because it produces just another set of signs in a sea of signs. In such contexts, ethnography has to choose between two alternative paths. It can develop into a systematic form of reporting that for the sake of efficient communication forfeits explicit reflection on its own employment. Alternatively, ethnography can become one of the ways in which social theory is produced, that is, one of the ways in which we develop languages of the social that help us to make sense of the world in which we live.

The partial social ontology that I have presented here suggests a number of broad areas for theory development. The first is sociality. More knowledge about the systematic connection between different kinds of socialities, their contextual invocation, their change through different network contexts, and their historical transformation would make significant contributions to a better understanding of the unfolding of social processes. The critical contribution would be a network analysis in which relations are seen not as an unqualified component of a structure but as a dynamic, qualitatively highly differentiated path through which action-reaction connections are not only enabled but shaped. The second

major area of development is the link between social formations and their constituting actions. Better ideas about what kinds of often diverse action-reaction links sustain what kinds of formations in particular times and places would lead to a much improved analysis of institutional/cultural change. The third area—the ways in which cultural forms, relationships, and the material environment interact to produce reactions to actions—has, with the advent of practice theory, already experienced a significant boost. What would be desirable here is a better integration between approaches focusing on conscious reflection and those focusing on practices and emotions. In any event, we also need to study the temporal and spatial projective articulation of action effects, not just for their own sake but as component pieces of the processes they enable. The face-to-face needs a face-to-object and face-to-symbol extension through which these projective articulations interface with other processes. Thus we will learn how the past is in the present, how the translocal is in the local. For this to happen, the study of formal organizations—as the predominant purveyor of all kinds of projective articulations—needs to be seen less as a special field and more as an integral component of studying processes more generally.

For all this, ethnography should be the method of choice. No matter whether we trace our ethnographic ancestry to Gluckman, through Goffman to Mead, or through contemporary instantiations of practice theory to Marx, we are all processualists now. Ethnography must not lose depth; if anything, it may want to gain depth, for example, by retooling itself psychoanalytically. In this sense, we will want to continue to do cases—albeit ones that for the sake of achieving this depth need to be carefully delimited—theoretically. Starting with Gluckman and his collaborators and followers in anthropology and sociology, we have already gained considerable breadth, and we need to gain much more to capture fully the work of projective articulations. For some time we may help ourselves by carefully choosing our field sites, both in a single site and in two- to three-site mode, by strategically placing them within nodes that continue to mediate between the locally and temporally present and absent. In this context, we may also exploit more vigorously the potential of formal organizations as critical sites. In the medium run, however, we will have to learn to cooperate with each other. None of us will want to give up completely our cherished artisanal mode of production. Alas, we might have to shift to working in cooperatives.

## **Acknowledgments**

In one sense I owe this essay to the kind invitation of Terry Evens to participate in this volume. Yet in another, I owe it to my undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Chicago with whom I have wrestled over the question of how to define a productive ethnographic project. It is in conversations with them that some of the ideas expounded here have originated. The other part stems, needless to say, from the ontological and epistemological qualms about my own research. Many thanks go to Terry Evens, Sally Falk Moore, Michael Biggs, Daniel Cefai, Jeffrey Olick, and Gary Fine for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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## Notes

1. Of course, there were, interestingly, structure-functionalists who were also highly skeptical about the possibilities to create totalizing views of societies. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental difference between Parsons and Merton, the former never tiring in producing ever more comprehensive models of the totality 'society', thus setting forth what some have come to call 'grand social theory', the latter exhorting us equally tirelessly to stick with what he called 'theories of the middle range' (with all of the logical problems this entails for a functionalist).
2. By 'ontology', I do not mean the venerable philosophical quest for the ultimate constituents of the universe. Instead, I take it to be the art of making productive assumptions about such constituents and their linkages in a particular domain of life that will prove useful in guiding our research practices.
3. I will discuss how farther below, but here are two examples. For ethnographers, the danger of this division of labor has always been to focus on the temporally and spatially proximate context of field sites and, in a desire to go beyond it, to do in effect little more than speculatively overlay concrete observations with the 'larger picture' fashion speak of the moment. For macro theorists, the danger, in turn, has always been to wield a vocabulary of collective actors, which, deprived of an interactional imagination, quickly produced a shadow theater of abstract heroes.
4. Besides Gluckman's influence in ethnography, the turn to processes was energized by renewed interest in Meadian interactionism and Wittgensteinian pragmatism, as well as Peircean (as opposed to Saussurean) semiotics, and it was most forcefully propelled forward by ethno-methodology; the post-structuralisms of Derrida, Foucault, and Bourdieu; the historical turn in anthropology (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Moore 1986; Sahlins 1981; Wolf 1982); and historical sociology (e.g., Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1976; or more recently, Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005).
5. I think of actions here in the widest possible sense of 'doing', which includes habitual, non-reflexive behavior, unconsciously motivated actions such as parapraxes, and so forth. I speak here of action-reaction sequences rather than of interaction because the latter term insinuates immediate feedback loops between both actors. However, as I will show farther below, this is by no means necessary.
6. In short, the reason is that without the input of other people, *believing* to follow a rule would be exactly the same as *following* a rule. Left to their own devices, individuals have no hard criterion by which to determine whether or not they follow a rule.
7. Our forgetfulness is therefore the fundamental source of something like social entropy.
8. I shall employ the term 'built environment' henceforth. I take it to encompass all human-converted nature, that is, the entirety of the material conditions of our lives, which includes the architectural spaces we live in as much as the food we consume and the



- raw materials we convert into energy. I have taken the term from Bill Sewell (2005) precisely because it emphasizes nature that has been humanly acted upon (in contrast, for example, to 'material environment', which does not).
9. Even nature typically becomes a resource only through work, and it needs continued work to remain a resource. Fields need to be tended, machines repaired, clothes mended, and so on.
  10. And to complete the circuit, cultural forms are reconstructed by people in relationships (e.g., through use in conversations) and within a built environment (e.g., with spatial features as a repository of social memories). A portion of the total physical environment is transformed by people in relationships (e.g., the division of labor in production) in use of cultural forms (ideas of the product or about humans' relationship to nature).
  11. Fittingly for my argument, the scientist and the monster are more popularly known under the same name: Frankenstein. Shelly's name for the monster, Victor, is more or less forgotten.
  12. This formulation does not solve the mind-body dualism in the way Terry Evens addresses it (e.g., 1995 and in this volume), but it makes it less of an issue in a Wittgensteinian sense.
  13. This is in fact a generalization of what is indeed one of the great collective insights of the social sciences in the past century: the simultaneous made and making character of what I have called here social formations. In reconstructing a genealogy of this insight through its perhaps most prominent embodiments, the key inspirations of Marx's (1960, chap. 1) analysis of commodity fetishism and Hegel's (1986) master-slave dialectic need to be mentioned. Not least through the influence of Lukács (1969), we find early formulations of it in Mannheim ([1936] 1984), and then, revising Mannheim, in Berger and Luckmann (1966), through their emphasis on the dialectic of 'internalization and externalization'. We find it also in Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus' and Giddens's (1984) concept of 'structuration' wherein he also describes this peculiar aspect of social structures very aptly as 'duality', which is finally very fruitfully discussed by Bhaskar (1989). Related formulations can be found in Latour's (1987) poignant analysis of the Janus-headed nature of scientific theories which in development are written as hypothesis and in agreed settlement as facts. I am sure other examples could be added.
  14. This means that our role as *primus inter pares* subjects of processes is contingent on being the object of processes. There is no action without anything to 'act on' and to 'act with'; we need to acquire language, knowledge, etc. Unfortunately, it is not true that we are always made the objects of processes because we are subjects capable of poiesis. In other words, there is the danger of objectification in which we are as (grammatical) objects only ever addressed as objects expected to produce nothing but necessary, predictable confluences.
  15. It is conceivable, of course, that the price hike could be the outcome of a random walk. However, more likely than not, the unfolding of the process is far from random. If it were, social scientific inquiry would be pointless.
  16. In some basic form, this dialectic between forms of sociality was obvious to Hobbes and Smith. However, what is needed is a much more thorough consideration of a wider multiplicity of socialities and their relationships within a particular historical context. For example, the contractual market relationship between a male laborer and his employer is to this day often contingent on a non-contractual relationship between the laborer and his wife. During the Industrial Revolution, the contractual relationship between this couple's children and their employers was likewise contingent on the non-contractual relationship between these children and their parents. Žižek (1997) has analyzed a number of such interdependencies with great verve.
  17. Thus, Clyde Mitchell (1969) and his collaborators dedicate their collection, *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analysis of Personal Relationships*, "To Max Gluckman—point-source of our network."
  18. Actually, some network analysts (e.g., Burt 1980, 1992; Granovetter 1973, 1983) conflate the two, assuming implicitly that strong ties are always clustered and that weak ties are not. This, of course, is by no means the case.

19. In American sociology, this distinction was most widely disseminated by Granovetter (1973). Earlier contributions speak about the same characteristic as “intensity” (Mitchell 1969: 27f.) or “strength” (Reader 1964: 22).
20. There are a number of other terms in use to denote the same phenomenon. Bott (1957) speaks of “close-knit” and “loose-knit” networks. Barnes (1954) speaks of “small and large mesh” and has contributed to a formalization of this notion by developing it further into “density” (1969: 63). If cluster ties are strong, they are also often called “cliques” (Burt 1980: 79).
21. Schütz and Luckmann (1984) make some very interesting turns to break out of the face-to-face mode as the ur-model of interaction. Alas, in keeping with the character of the work as an outline of the structures of consciousness, their effort remains somewhat typological, designating whole classes of people according to the ways in which they are present to an actor. Yet it remains a real contribution that they have alerted us to the fact that people’s knowledge of whom they could possibly affect under what kinds of circumstances may have a profound influence on how they experience the world and what they do.
22. I do not want call them ‘mediations’ for the simple reason that this term is also used to describe the shaping of actions by cultural forms, relations, and the built environment. All actions are mediated in this sense. However, not all actions are projectively articulated.
23. To name a few more, the mass media produce such projective articulations, as do technologies of state or corporate legibility. Military and law enforcement capabilities projectively articulate power over long durations and across wide swaths of space. Telecommunication and transportation, social-memory practices, payment methods and other financing tools—all produce projective articulations.
24. Yet highly iconic, live projective articulations should not be confused with the local action, even where the latter was produced expressly to become projectively articulated. Anybody who has participated in videoconferences, to say nothing about such crude means as telephone conversations, can attest to the difference.
25. This is, of course, not the case for all produced objects. Those considered ‘art’ or at least ‘traditional handicraft’ continue to be expressly read as the effect of action, even if the conditions of the production of such action are often shrouded in myths of what ‘artwork’ or ‘handicraft production’ is like.
26. Someone who has regularly done interesting if not necessarily very systematic work along these lines is Slavoj Žižek (e.g., 1989, 1997).
27. Other, more recent exemplars are Dominic Boyer’s (2005) analysis of journalism in the making of the German polity; Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger’s (2002) investigation of international currency dealer cultures emerging through interactions on networked trading screens; Sally Falk Moore’s (2001) study of the imposition of conditionalities by donor countries on developments in sub-Saharan Africa by way of international organizations and agreements; Arvind Rajagopal’s (2001) investigation of the role of television in the emergence of Hindu nationalism in India; and, finally, James Scott’s (1998) splendid analysis of techniques of legibility in nation-state formation processes.
28. The misplaced concreteness inherent in most macro categories is well recognized and has led to various attempts in the social sciences to develop the macro from the micro (e.g., Coleman 1990; Collins 1981; Hechter 1983; Schelling 1978).
29. The “small world” phenomenon discussed, for example, by Watts (2003) is an excellent case in point. The small world problem wonders how it is possible that, for example, information (but also diseases) can spread rapidly throughout a social network even though the majority of relations people have tend to be cluster-like—or this is at least what network analysis like to assume. Projective articulations are assumed here (e.g., through the Internet) but not really thematized.
30. The blinders one has to use to legitimate ethnography under classical assumptions are then very similar to those one has to use to legitimate micro-sociological approaches. Both overlook the co-constitution of what goes on locally by what goes on in connected locations.

31. This problem is, of course, closely related to the issues of delimitation that historians have been arguing back and forth. It is the question of legitimate beginnings and endings (and, for example, the use of epochal markers in this respect), as well as of the legitimacy of 'special' histories (of gender relations, economic affairs, etc.).
32. Rooted in the study of "law," she makes an argument to trace ways in which people try to impose order ("regularization") in the face of others who try to take advantage of these orders through their necessary gaps, contradictions, and ambiguities to follow their own interests (situational "adjustment"). This approach becomes particularly useful if it is understood that the dialectic envisioned here is itself contingent on the mediation of particular cultural forms and the activation of particular socialities. From within studies of (organized) contestation, it is easily overlooked that contestation is in itself an achievement.
33. Turner's and Moore's emphasis on crisis as revelatory of process due to its foregrounding of expectations and local theories of 'how things happen' deeply resonates with the phenomenological emphasis on breach and repair (e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1967), which makes a similar kind of argument for a still smaller scale (cf. Austin 1956–1957).
34. For a nice dramatization between Evans-Pritchard's advice on how to proceed and musings about his own recent multi-sited work, see Hannerz (2003).
35. That Gluckman's vision of moving to a study of processes has been born out is visible in a marked shift in emphasis of ethnographic titles from particular groups of people ("The Nuer," "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America"), localities ("Middletown"), or institutions ("The Hobo," "The Taxi-Dance Hall," "Nuer Religion") to the result or course of processes ("Distinction," "Facts and Fabrications," "The Poetics of Manhood"). Linguistically, this is reflected by the new prominence of a verb somewhere in the title, most notably verbs of production used in continuous form ("Manufacturing Consent," "Crafting Selves").
36. This awareness is the source of the injunction against 'violent' theoretization and is the font of strong moralization of ethnographic practices, which offers some guidance for navigating an endless web of processual flows with regard to the effect of one's own position in it and with the hope for betterment of the world.
37. Except for cases of 'celebrity embodiment', few people other than the researcher might share this interest. One way of producing celebrity status is the exoticization of that concrete embodiment as 'other'. In this case, it is often hard to decide when an interest in the variation of what it means to be human—a program associated most clearly with Ruth Benedict (1934) or Margaret Mead (1963)—gives way to sensationalism. Any exercise of ethnography as 'mirror' or 'cultural critique' is bound to overstate difference at the expense of similarity.
38. In this respect, our performed judgments are themselves reactions—to genre conventions enforced by journals and publishers, to past or ongoing differences with colleagues, to our admiration for others past and present.
39. The theory could be presented along the following lines: the burning desire stemming from inevitable misrecognition becomes symptomatic in wanting to have ever more, which is reflected in profit maximization behavior. Žižek (e.g., 1989) seems to have a jolly good time offering Lacan as an answer to the puzzles of humankind. Unfortunately he never follows through with an empirical analysis of process.

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