

BLACK NO MORE:  
TOWARDS A NEW THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDIES OF SOCIAL  
SPACE CONNECTED WITH THE 'INFORMAL ECONOMY'

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*Black no more* is the title of a satire on the colour-based 'caste' system in North America.<sup>1</sup> In the novel, the logic of the system in which a black skin colour is a signifier of a lower 'caste' has been reversed: through the invention of a technology making a Black person perfectly white, the Blacks become a shade whiter than the Whites, after which the colour white becomes the negative signifier. A similar system-reversing technology is needed to remove a bias in research on the social space connected to the 'informal economy', which in fact very much resembles the (in)famous 'swamp of the Negro'<sup>2</sup> problem: an endless debate involving value marked terms and moral judgments, self-powered by a rhetoric which went round in circles for years, with no way out.

Just as the terms 'Negro'<sup>3</sup> and 'Black' were not only fuzzy but also negatively value marked,<sup>4</sup> denoting a person of inferior status,<sup>5</sup> the terms used to describe 'informal' economic activities, such as the 'Black Economy', 'Shadow Economy', Subterranean Economy, 'Grey Zone', 'Shadow Sphere', 'Underground Activities', 'Semi-legal

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1 Schuyler 1989.

2 For more information on this debate, see Irek 1994. It was eventually cut short by the Myrdal study (Myrdal 1944). The now historical term 'Negro' (defended by W.E.B. DuBois, who claimed that changing the label would not change the situation) was considered less derogative than 'African' and was used by Black intellectuals in the New Negro intellectual movement. Eventually it was replaced by 'Black'.

3 Luschan 1927. Due to the large mixed population in the US it has not been possible to mark a clear line around who exactly falls within the category. There was the 'one drop of Negro blood' argument in which a person who had only one ancestor documented as Black was deemed to be Black, regardless of skin colour.

4 This is not redundancy: a term can be marked for value in either way; see below, p. 220.

5 Schwarz and Disch 1970: 6-7. The authors quote the connotations of the word 'black' when used for racist purposes: soiled, dirty, malignant, deadly, disastrous and sinister. Biblical imagery was blamed for the moral connotations of black in respect of 'sin, damnation, death, despair, ugliness and evil'.

Activities', 'Informal Sector' and 'Irregular Activities',<sup>6</sup> denote the inferiority of such activities, as well as of all the social actors participating in them. Apart from a lower place in the hierarchy of values, the terms also involve a negative moral judgment. Used as a part of this term, 'Black' is as bad as 'Underground' or 'Subterranean', which also contain connotations of hell. 'Grey' and 'Semi-legal' are better than 'Black' but still not exactly good, while 'Informal' and 'Irregular' are not quite good, although not as bad as 'Black'. Whatever the choice of words, the above terms signify the same problem, it being a matter of the personal preference of the researcher which one he decides to use.<sup>7</sup> The present article uses the word 'Informal', which is the most general and neutral of them all, and which has been accepted by international organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The category of 'informality' is in itself as problematic as that of 'race' (where the morphological variations within one category are greater than between two different categories),<sup>9</sup> and it is considered to be the main source of the conceptual crisis immanent in the studies of the 'informal economy'.<sup>10</sup> The exact semantic content of the very word 'informal' is hard to specify, its understanding relying on common sense: according to a brief entry in Fowler and Fowler's English dictionary, which has been regularly reprinted since the mid-1920s, 'informal' is 'something without formality, or not in due form', while a half page-long entry describes 'form' as a 'shape, an arrangement of parts', 'visible aspect, something visible or tangible', 'mode in which a thing exists or manifests itself' and 'a set order'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the adjective 'informal' denotes something shapeless, lacking arrangement, invisible or intangible, devoid of a mode in which it can manifest itself, and something without a set order. When used to describe a social category, the word 'informal' makes a negatively value-marked and hardly precise term useless in accounting for any regularities (set order), but it is still the most neutral and most appropriate of all the currently used alternatives mentioned above, such as black, shadow or grey. It also

6 Gutmann 1985. He lists informal economy, together with black, irregular, shadow, unofficial, moonlight, twilight, second, submerged, clandestine, unobserved, concealed and back door economy, as aliases of his preferred term 'subterranean economy'.

7 Carson 1993, Gutmann 1985.

8 Keith Hart introduced this term in the 1970s as the part of the phrase 'informal economy', which shortly afterwards became popular with the World Bank and ILO as the 'informal sector', used to describe activities that take place outside official institutions. See Hart 1985.

9 The concept of 'race' was developed long before human genetics and was based on the morphological differences between different persons and groups of people. Systematic research on these morphological differences, using anthropometric methods, was conducted by Rudolf Virchow and the scholars he influenced, especially Felix von Luschan and his friend Franz Boas, who concluded that 'race' does not exist. See Irek 1994, Luschan 1927.

10 Feige 1985. The conceptual crisis arises from the lack of any precise definition clearly indicating the scope of the field of research, which manifests itself in both the vagueness and the plurality of the terms used — aliases that are not differentiated from each other.

11 Fowler and Fowler 1976.

permits the category to be extended *ad infinitum*, for something shapeless and devoid of form has no limits.

In sociological thought, ‘form’ is defined tautologically as ‘the form of something which is its structure, its skeleton, its grammar’,<sup>12</sup> as opposed to its content. Forms ‘negate the continuity of matter by introducing distinctions that make things separate’.<sup>13</sup> According to this definition, as the only way to experience the world is through forms, it is assumed that the whole human world is formally constituted and therefore it has a discontinuous nature. Thus, something lacking in ‘form’ has to be continuous. Hart, who introduced the term ‘informal economy’, defines informal as ‘something failing to reproduce the pattern of some established form’,<sup>14</sup> form being ‘the rule’, ‘conformity’, ‘predictable and easily recognized’, ‘the invariant in the variable’ and ‘a prescriptive idea of what should be universal in social life’. And since, according to him, the dominant form of social life over the last century has been that of the nation state bureaucracy (where the nation state is the way in which the capitalist mode of production is organized), whatever is informal goes on outside the gaze of the national bureaucracy.<sup>15</sup>

This concept is coherent with the classic definition developed by American economists. It describes as the ‘informal’, alias ‘underground economy’ all economic activities not reported to a taxman,<sup>16</sup> thus grouping under one label activities as different as a wife cooking a dinner for her family and organized mafia crime,<sup>17</sup> and establishing a discursive space marked by two axes: that of the economy, and that of the nation state. The fact that the category of the ‘informal economy’ has been conceptualized in the context of the nation state is of crucial importance for research on the social space in which informal economic activities are carried out: by definition, this is the space hidden from the control of the state. In other words, under the present definition, the state is necessary for this space to exist.

Although the economy is at the core of the concept of unreported, ‘informal’ activities—as is shown by the terminology used across different disciplines in the social sciences, such as *black markets*, *undocumented labour*, *workforce migration*, *illegal employment* or the *informal sector*—the social space in which these activities are embedded extends far beyond the production and exchange of goods and services. It is not some separate area or sector, like a slice of brie cheese, nor is it the lower layer of a structure,

12 Definition in Rapport and Overing 2007: 153, after Simmel.

13 ‘Form and Content’ in Rapport and Overing 2007.

14 Hart 1985: 56.

15 Hart 2005. Quoted from version in the Memory Bank, pp. 1, 2 and 7 (accessed 29.12.09).

16 Feige 1985.

17 Pahl 1984, Carson 1993.

which might be conceptualized as a hidden basement under a house, nor an underground area where the creatures of the night go about their unsavoury business,<sup>18</sup> nor even the bottom of an iceberg, where the part hidden under water supports the one third that is visible on the top. It is more like the whole of an iceberg, since the social space of formal activities is contained within the space of the informal ones.

Even a person involved in the most formal structures, such as the state's jurisdiction or bureaucracy, can engage in both formal and informal economic activities at the same time.<sup>19</sup> When a president of a nation state has his tea made for him by his wife, he is engaged in an unrecorded economic activity, not to speak of situations in which the bureaucracy, including presidents, openly engage in informal economic activities that are definitely less benign than drinking tea, such as nepotism, corruption or participation in organized criminal networks. The point is that 'formality' and 'informality' are not two different social spaces, but attributes of the same social space. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive: the same person can have both formal and informal functions, and the same activity can be formal and informal at the same time. Technically, the only distinction is whether or not the activity in question is recorded, that is, written down in a form which is controllable by the state. When the activity is not recorded, it is up to commonsense judgment to work out the qualitative difference between the proverbial housewife cooking a family dinner and organized mafia crime.

The social space in which both formal and informal activities take place is best represented by the metaphor of the human body, in which the informal space would be pictured by connective tissue (*textus connectivus*), with institutions pictured as bones, cartilage and fat, and whatever is not institutionalized as the rest: the shapeless, dynamic, changeable and omnipresent vital fluids that flow across all structures to make the organism work as a whole.<sup>20</sup> This 'rest' is the space of the informal networks, understood after Boissevain and Kadushin as open ended sets of ego centred relationships 'created and negotiated by people in the process of trying to work and manage the system'.<sup>21</sup>

These relationships are non-prescribed, are not mandated by culture or institutions, and can be of very different natures: the links between the people engaged in the network (nodes) may be purely transactional, purely emotional or a mixture of both, they can be defined by kinship, friendship, love, sex, sympathy or common interest, they can

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18 Henry 1993.

19 As distinct from the concept of one person temporarily slipping in and out of the informal sector, or using informal activities in the initial stage of social mobility and then discarding them after obtaining some formal status. See Ferman et al. 1993.

20 I.e. blood, lymph and menzenchyma.

21 Boissevain 1968, Kadushin 2004. This is an open ended network concept, different from the network defined as 'a specific set of linkages among a definite set of persons'. See also Mitchell 1969: 3.

be one-sided or reciprocal (mutual), they can be democratic (horizontal) or based on patronage (vertical),<sup>22</sup> and they can also vary in scope, intensity and complexity. Some nodes in an individual's network can be connected by many links (e.g. kinship, love, common interest, a family business), while others have single characteristics. The type of relationship in every single link of a network is variable in time, so that it is impossible to find some repeatable pattern: networks flow like a Heraclitean river.

An individual person's active network can be limited to a certain number of people, whereby biological factors and geographical distance are considered to be limiting factors in the 'activeness' of a network.<sup>23</sup> But on the other hand, an individual person's network of less than 150 people can easily stretch in geographical space from Beijing through Moscow and Warsaw to Berlin and further to Chicago<sup>24</sup> and cut across different formal and informal structures, such as ethnicity, nation, class, race, religion or interest group. And even if it is assumed that the majority of people have limited personal networks (which in the era of computer communication and cheap transport may be disputable), this would be of no consequence to the network as a whole: the scope of an individual person's (ego's) network is not a limitation on the size of the whole set. Since each single individual in a network is a centre of his or her own network, with each new link, the number of individuals in a set grows at a geometrical tempo, and although egocentric networks obviously do overlap, it is enough that there exist only two non-overlapping nodes to maintain this geometrical growth. This implies an infinite number of sets of interconnected and overlapping networks, an endless network of networks.<sup>25</sup> Due to their lack of definite shape, unlimited scope and ever-changing, 'liquid' nature, informal networks seem to be chaotic developments that are difficult to conceptualize in an orderly and precise way. Although it has long been implied that within this 'irregular' social space there are some patterns, even naming these patterns is problematic. Boissevain called the wider networks 'non-groups' because they lack the stability and permanence of corporate groups, with a subclass of more 'tightly knit coalitions of persons with a degree of patterned interaction and organization', which he called quasi-groups.<sup>26</sup> Departing from this concept, one looks for quasi-structures or 'foggy' structures as regular elements of society, thus producing a logical contradiction by claiming that 'not regular' is regular.

Discovering these 'irregular regularities' through empirical research is extremely difficult. The basic problem is a methodological one: the researched activities are by

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22 Lomnitz 2002.

23 Dunbar 1993, Kadushin 2004.

24 Irek 1998.

25 Castells 2000.

26 Boissevain 1968: 543, 550.

their nature informal, and since informality defies formality they cannot be researched by formal methods, for in the very moment of recording them their informal nature is destroyed,<sup>27</sup> as if one were to research the habits of a jellyfish by taking it out of the water. Also, the hidden nature of informal activities makes it difficult to obtain comprehensive data from the actors involved, who often refuse to talk about their informal activities or give false information on purpose.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore impossible to achieve accuracy in quantitative research, which is the main method in economics, sociology and human geography: whatever quantitative data are obtained, they are mere approximates.<sup>29</sup>

Of all disciplines in the social sciences, anthropology, with its qualitative methods such as participant observation and informal interviews, seems most suitable for researching informal social networks. However, it is in anthropology where the swamp grows seriously deep, due to anthropologists' habits of contextualization and defiance of clear-cut categories as such. There is no theoretical perspective in anthropology that can embrace this social space as a whole without simultaneously destroying its essence, which rests in both its infinite dimension and its dialectical opposition to the nation state. Although anthropology, as the name clearly indicates, was developed as a 'holistic science of man', it has long lost its holistic dimension and has been split into numerous subfields and anthropologies of different disciplines and of geographical regions,<sup>30</sup> offering no general framework for describing continuity of any sort. Despite the recent trend to try and glue it back together again and to reclaim what has been appropriated by other disciplines such as human biology or psychology,<sup>31</sup> research within so-called 'holistic anthropology' still presents a highly segmented picture, if any, of 'the whole'. This approach makes it possible to use a single object or an action as an excuse for a long, Proustian journey through possible associations and aspects, these, however, being limited to the immediate geographical area in which the object is found or the action takes place, like a settlement in Australia or Amazonia. In fact, through the re-inclusion of the scientific disciplines, the image of 'the whole' has been significantly blurred by splitting every single aspect of an action or an object into even more layers of description, like passing light through a prism. The technique of re-creating the 'holism'

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27 Henry 1993.

28 The validity of surveys has been questioned on the ground that the responses are not true. People lie about their hidden activities out of a fear of being punished for tax evasion (Gutmann 1985). Also, the very assumption of the honesty of research participants who take part in illegal activities is highly questionable (Williams and Windebank 1998). Where economic success depends on activities being hidden, people do not reveal anything to strangers (Elwert 1994, Irek 1998) and often lie in expectation of winning the researcher's sympathy or when they consider that it could profit them (Girtler 1990).

29 Salt 2005, Williams and Windebank 1998.

30 Fardon 1990.

31 Parkin 2007.

by mechanically assembling different articles into one book does not work, nor does putting several departments together in one building: we are still left with a selection of several segments of the social, unless, of course, holism remains an ‘odd-job word’<sup>32</sup> that has nothing to do with ‘the whole’.

A common denominator is needed, some perspective through which it is possible to ‘synthesize’ at all: until then, ‘holistic anthropology’ remains just another sub-discipline of anthropology in which the analysis of human activities is still contained within certain borders. Thus, the question should be not how to glue anthropology back, but rather how to create meaningful links across these borders and ‘moving frontiers’. Ingold’s concept of ‘linear development’<sup>33</sup> seems to be a step in the right direction, but again it is based on an organic image: that of a fungal mycelium, which usually is not directly ‘open-ended’ but forms a perfect circle and eventually a ring, leading us back to the good old German concept of the *Kulturkreis*.

This geographical limitation of the researched space is also reflected in the very analytical tools of anthropology, which were developed for supposedly isolated, pre-industrial societies in which the state was not a shaping factor, hence one cannot use them to describe something that relies on the existence of the state. One other reason making these tools unsuitable for the description of informal networks is the ‘Bongo Bongo’<sup>34</sup> logical loop: whatever social phenomenon in Western society is being discussed, it is placed in the context of certain distant ‘isolated’ societies and of different possible theories regarding similar situations until it becomes meaningless, for in the process of contextualization the essence of something that is not clearly defined to start with leaks out through the fuzzy fringes of categories. Such tools do not even account for the very difference between the formal and the informal.

Structuralism, with its ‘synchronic’ perspective, its ability to generalize and to depart from philosophical humanism, with its moral questions,<sup>35</sup> would have been an appropriate framework were it not for the fact that the ‘structure’ is a pure concept not related to the empirical world<sup>36</sup> and failing to account for agency, like the concept of structure in Marxism. And informal networks are all about agency, about individuals

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32 Ibid.

33 Ingold 2007. It bears similarities to the Deleuzian rhizome. The fault in Ingold’s linear concept, if applied to informal networks, is that it excludes the possibility of the simultaneous presence of one person in two places, which in the era of virtual communications is no longer sustainable.

34 Vertovec 2007. I am referring to his jocular remark on the impossibility of finding truly new perspectives in anthropology. ‘Bongo Bongo’ is the synonym of an exotic fancy land that does not exist. Interestingly enough, the tendency of anthropologists to refer to societies ‘untouched by civilization’ had already been criticized a hundred years ago. See Luschan 1927.

35 Kuper and Kuper 2004.

36 Allen 1990.



constantly moulding and remoulding their social reality. Researching this reality cannot be done within a theory that does not account for the empirical space or that neglects the role of agency.

In line with the tendency to segmentation (and the Marxist typology of economic systems), anthropological research on the informal economy was split into three types of society: capitalist, socialist and ‘third world’<sup>37</sup>—one speaks of informal economies, rather than one economy. While in capitalist society the informal economy was viewed as the invisible hand of the market’s reaction to overregulation by the state, a relic of pre-industrial times, a safety valve for social tension, a means of capital accumulation or a survival strategy in times of shortage,<sup>38</sup> in the socialist economic area it was presented more like an institutionalized pathology resulting from the ‘stretched limits of decency’<sup>39</sup> characteristic of the ‘highly bureaucratized’ communist system. Only since the end of the Cold War has the political bias been removed and the ‘pathology’ approach softened.<sup>40</sup> In developing countries, for which the term ‘informal economy’ was introduced in the context of the poverty of the third world’s big cities, it has been seen as a specific mode of economic existence, necessary for survival in the face of a weak or non-existent state economy.<sup>41</sup>

More recent research on the ‘informal economy’ in Western societies has centred mostly on the themes of ethnicity and social networks, again with the unintended connotation of ethnic networks being causally linked to informal activities. Since it is through the themes of migration and ethnic networks that most of the interdisciplinary research on the subject of the ‘informal economy’ has been carried out, the connotation has been extended across all the disciplines involved. Consequently, the vast majority of studies are caught up in the swamp logic, having to prove over and over again that ‘informal’ activities are not clandestine crimes ‘perpetuated by ‘creatures of the night’<sup>42</sup> and spread by migrants into the otherwise healthy host society like some infectious illness, but the survival strategies of so-called ‘ordinary people’.<sup>43</sup> Such works typically start with a disclaimer saying, for example, that there are no causal links between illegal work and

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37 It would go beyond the scope of this article to discuss the current situation in informal economy research. Everything that current perspectives have to offer has been thoroughly exploited by the collective work of leading specialists in the field, edited in 1993 by Ferman, Berndt and Henry, where the bibliography alone has sixty pages. Some updating was added five years later by Williams and Windebank (1998). Nothing new had been said since then, only new ethnographic cases added to the great bulk of research.

38 Feige 1985, Gutmann 1985, Pahl 1984.

39 Sampson 1986, Bru and Laski 1985.

40 Ferman et al. 1993, Giordano 1994.

41 Geertz 1979; Elwert and Fett 1982; Elwert, Evers and Wilkens 1983; Hart 1985, 2005.

42 Henry 1993.

43 Vasta 2004; Jordan and Duvell 2002; Duvell 2004.



migration, after which they proceed to study the illegal employment of migrants from country X. Another tactic is to try and bypass the swamp by inventing new euphemisms intended to depart from the negative value marking of the terms involved. This, however, gets us no further, for euphemisms such as ‘foggy structures’ still remain mired in the logic of the swamp: the terms ‘foggy’ or ‘shadowy’ still denote something that is inferior to ‘clear’ and ‘bright’.

Some general framework for interdisciplinary studies of informality is needed to bypass the swamp, but although it has already been noted that the shapeless and continuous nature of the social networks that fill the informal space invites a horizontal perspective,<sup>44</sup> an appropriate theoretical approach has not yet been found. Such an approach should be applicable on a global scale like that used in migration research into transnationalism, but freed from the limitations of the transnational perspective, which, while bypassing state borders in its efforts to overcome ‘methodological nationalism’<sup>45</sup>—understood, after Martins, as a default theoretical perspective which assumes the presence of a nation state as the basic unit in the study of the social space<sup>46</sup>—creates borders between different ethnicities within the same state. Also, despite its ‘trans’ claim in the title, transnationalism is still bound by the lingering perspective of a ‘nation’,<sup>47</sup> as is reflected in the presence of ‘nationalism’ in the very name. At present it produces ethnic group-centred research into particular minorities, communities and networks in a given state and their links with another state, known as the ‘home’ country,<sup>48</sup> but leaves a dramatic cleavage between different ethnic groups in the same nation state. What is left out might be described as ‘trans-ethnicity’, which would account for cross-ethnic links.<sup>49</sup> Thus, in its present form the transnational perspective still does not account for the continuity of the social space, but simply represents a different arrangement of vertical axes while chopping the horizontal axis up into manageable bits.

If one could remove the vertical axis of the state structure from the discursive space and forget about hierarchy of any sort, one could observe a smooth flow of information, goods, services and emotions along the links between the ‘nodes’. Using such a horizontal perspective, one could concentrate on how the links are actually created, as advocated by ‘actor network theory’ or ANT, which at the moment is the only horizontal theory in the social sciences applicable for research into informal networks, although only within

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44 Hinds 2003.

45 Glick Schiller 2009.

46 Martins 1974; Nowicka 2007: 36.

47 Bommes 2005.

48 Cohen and Vertovec 1999; Vertovec 1999.

49 Wimmer 2007, Vertovec 2007.

a limited scope.<sup>50</sup> But then again, removing the perspective of the state would mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater: as indicated earlier, the very definition of informality on which this concept in social research is currently based depends on the state. Moreover, to create a truly horizontal perspective, one would have to attempt the clinical removal of hierarchy, which is a vertical concept per se. Even if such an operation were possible it would only be so in a closed environment such as a laboratory, and only to some degree, for at present, even under the strictest rules of ANT, making the social landscape flat in absolute terms is not possible technically.

In ANT verticality returns by the back door in the form of hierarchy: it has to be included in the ‘thick’ description, in which ‘thick’ is understood in the commonsense meaning of the world, as detailed and meticulous,<sup>51</sup> which in ANT replaces contextualization. The very requirement of the ‘thick description’, which involves slow, ant-like work in the meticulous construction of numerous sets of different records, practically excludes the possibility of accounting for the infinite dimension of the horizontal line and makes it methodologically impossible to move across large distances: the space has to be cut into bite-size units.<sup>52</sup> Whether the critics of the so-called ‘linguistic trend’ in the social sciences like it or not, to make any sort of description, be it thick or thin, one needs two things: perception (understood as a mental process including both reception and conception) to observe, and language to express. And although one cannot deny the existence of pre-and extra-linguistic forms of communication, these have no pragmatic validity for the actual process of scholarly description: scholars communicate their findings through verbal expression, as distinct from any form of empathy, body

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50 Latour 2005. In ANT, horizontality is achieved, among other things, by eliminating the subject/object distinction, which is considered vertical (Lechte 1994). Putting people into one epistemological category with objects involves another swamp-like debate (Collins and Yearley 1992) for, unlike non-humans, human actors are capable of creative thinking, their acts are influenced by emotions, and they have linguistic competence. For the purposes of the present article, it is enough to state that such a logical manoeuvre has a limited application to informal networks defined as egocentric links between people. It works only in an environment such as a scientific laboratory or production site, where the non-human elements (such as bacteria cultures or machines) can be said to ‘act’ and therefore can be included in the network together with the human actors, including the observer him- or herself. However, these are very specific circumstances: the space is limited, and the ‘acts’ of the non-humans are performed in a repeatable series—they are not creative. Under such circumstances, the observer has unlimited time to describe every single element, including his or her own reaction. But while the fundamental requirement of a scientific experiment (or machine production cycle) is its repeatability—so that if an ANT researcher misses some action, s/he can come back to the same moment in the next cycle—in the open space the same situation cannot be recreated, the observer must remain the subjective ‘other’, and the non-human objects do not ‘act’ by themselves (unless in a natural disaster) and do not have their own egocentric networks.

51 Latour’s concept is distinct from Geertz’s thick description, understood as the attention given to the contextual meaning of action. See Geertz 1973.

52 The ‘cutting of the network’ is thus done by the researcher. This is a different situation from that described by Strathern, where the networks are cut by the actors/actants themselves. See Strathern 1996.

language or 'affectation'.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of whether it is inborn or learned, *de facto* human perception is at least to some extent vertically constructed,<sup>54</sup> and so is language.<sup>55</sup> There is no proof to the contrary, and even the discovery of neurons in the human mind, which are responsible for registering a sequence of events which constitutes our sense of time, does not undermine the verticality of perception, for a 'sequence' can be conceptualized as much horizontally as vertically. Once we introduce the concept of horizontality, we are moving within a space ordered by the Cartesian coordinates, and whichever way we decide to twist them, we will always end up within a space with both horizontal and vertical attributes.

Since it is not possible to obtain an ideally isometric social landscape, the pragmatic question is not how to get rid of verticality, but how to control it. This cannot be done under present conditions, where the two axes of reference are being persistently confused by scholars of different disciplines and trends, arbitrarily attributing verticality and horizontality to different notions. As it happens, the major contribution to this situation came from within structuralist thought, where the idea of 'horizontal' research germinated. The early structuralists of the Kazan School of linguistics proclaimed horizontality even before it became an avant-garde philosophical idea of Nietzsche, a rival to the popular dialectical thought of Hegel.

Jan Nieciślaw Boduin de Courtenay and his student Mikołaj Kruszewski applied the tools of mathematical logic to language research. They rigorously divided the research space using two axes: whatever was historical was called diachronic and put on the vertical axis, while on the horizontal axis they placed whatever was contemporary, calling it synchronic. But they were aware that this distinction was not identical with that of 'static' versus 'dynamic', for as Boduin de Courtenay noticed, 'static' is just a form of 'dynamic'.<sup>56</sup> It was de Saussure who, about two decades later, mixed these two pairs of categories after taking over the foundations of structural linguistics from the Kazan school.<sup>57</sup> While the former demanded equal attention to synchronic and diachronic research, de Saussure rejected diachronic (vertical) research as represented by the omnipresent *Junggramatiker*, who were preoccupied with the evolution of Indo-European languages, in favour of synchronic (horizontal) research, which concentrated on the description (rather than prescription) of contemporary human language as such. In doing so, he failed to recognize that the opposition of static versus dynamic was not the same

53 For a very recent description of affectation, see Navaro-Yashin 2009.

54 To perceive one entity as different from another, at least one binary opposition is necessary to exist. Such an opposition is by nature vertical (hierarchical). See Dumont 1980.

55 Chomsky 1957, Lyons 1969.

56 Fisiak 1975.

57 Godel 1957.

as synchronic versus diachronic,<sup>58</sup> and he used the horizontal perspective to describe vertical phenomena (structure). Since at that stage there was an immediate feedback between the mainstream of linguistics and anthropology, with anthropologists such as Boas and Malinowski also researching linguistic issues,<sup>59</sup> the problem was transferred to anthropology.

By the time Lévi-Strauss, the main proponent of de Saussure's teaching in anthropology, published his *Tristes Tropiques*, structuralist research in linguistics already had its own eighty year-long history, therefore technically it could no longer claim 'synchrony' and be considered 'horizontal' in the de Saussurean sense.<sup>60</sup> And it was only two years after Lévi-Strauss's work appeared<sup>61</sup> that the linguists managed to order their axes of reference. Chomsky's transformational grammar brought back the rigour of the Kazan school's concept of horizontality and verticality:<sup>62</sup> this was synchronic in the sense that it did not account for historical development, and vertical because it described vertical transformations developing through different levels of language, from deep structure to surface. But unlike in the first half of the previous century, the mainstreams of the two disciplines were already too far removed from each other for direct feedback to be possible. Social scientists were no longer mainstream linguists, and an anthropologist capable of drawing Chomsky's derivative tree or of explaining the various systems of mathematical logic, would have been an exception rather than the rule. Thus, useful tools developed by linguists have been waiting to be used by social scientists ever since. The recent reaction against the 'linguistic trend' dominating the social sciences<sup>63</sup> is thus like staging a mutiny against a captain who has already long since left the ship. Linguistics does not explain the world or society but language itself, so on that basis alone it cannot be criticized for not being abstract enough to interface with all aspects of the social field.<sup>64</sup> Such criticism proves that knowledge of linguistics (understood as the theory of language) is no longer present in the social sciences. In fact, many problems, especially those connected with interdisciplinary research, arise precisely from the lack of linguistic rigour.

58 Fisiak 1975.

59 Boas, for example, discovered that the basic unit of human language is not the word but the sentence. This became an axiom for the later TG (transformational grammar) linguistic model developed by Chomsky. See Fisiak 1975.

60 Language is dynamic, so whatever system was being described eighty years earlier was no longer valid and had to be modified.

61 *Tristes Tropiques* was published in 1955, Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* in 1957.

62 American linguists were influenced by the Kazan school via the Prague school, as represented by Roman Jakobson. Fisiak 1975.

63 Navaro-Yashin 2009.

64 Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

While de Saussure confused the Cartesian coordinates in linguistics, Nietzsche—who is considered the father of today’s horizontal thought,<sup>65</sup> and who also rejected history and verticality of any sort by trying to leave the Cartesian space altogether to ‘venture into the open sea’<sup>66</sup>—brought this confusion to a higher level by encouraging an arbitrary interpretation of space. His classification was not based on synchrony versus diachrony, but on the distinction between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ elements. Unlike the linguists he considered history ‘static’, since whatever was in the past was a *fait accompli* which could not be changed. His concept deemed history to be vertical,<sup>67</sup> together with all other notions, categories and phenomena, which Nietzsche himself considered static, such as the concepts of actor, cause, the very distinction of subject versus object, the notions of identity, objective truth, idealism, dialectical thought and the thought of everyday bureaucratic hierarchies, as well as the equality of democracy. For Nietzsche there was no horizontal axis in Cartesian understanding, yet his idea of dynamic events—of the creative thought which is itself subjective, of life or rather of the will to live and of instable differences and values—is understood as horizontal.<sup>68</sup>

Although Nietzschean horizontality, which is also called a philosophy of difference, consists in the instability of differences and the permeability of all barriers and boundaries and therefore may seem like a promising perspective for research into informality, it is far too abstract for this purpose. It creates chaos by allowing for an arbitrary prescription of verticality to such linear categories as equality and democracy. Also, it assumes a closed system, whereas the informal space is open. Moreover, the essence of Nietzschean horizontality, the idea that the world is a game of dice repeated an infinite number of times so that eventually the outcomes are repeated,<sup>69</sup> is mechanical and does not account for agency any more than structuralist or Marxist dialectical thought. In the world thus constructed there is no place for emotions, nor for the commonsense judgments that constantly shape human society: they do not influence the Nietzschean game of dice, nor Lévi-Straussian structure, nor the Marxist class war. And it is through such commonsense judgments that the social is negotiated: they are the interface between structure and agency.

But as Nietzsche did not distinguish between subject and object, he did not need any interface: agency and structure were not relevant for his horizontal thought. This, however, was consistent within his own system: by the law of his own philosophy, Nietzsche was entitled to do whatever he wanted with space. Poetic license was written into his

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65 Deleuze 1962.

66 Safranski 2003.

67 Lechte 1994.

68 Deleuze 1994.

69 Lechte 1994.

horizontality and, through this license, every creative thought of a philosopher meant entering a desert and creating a new world. Nietzsche's ideas enjoyed wide reception, and it goes beyond the scope of the present article to describe all worlds, theoretical works in which the horizontal and vertical aspects have been creatively confused ever since, culminating in the Deleuzian concept of the transcendental, like the Emersonian God, the rhizome<sup>70</sup>—the epitome of the philosophy of difference.

Following Nietzsche's call for an independent, horizontal thought that dissolves identities rather than making them concrete, and abandoning Cartesian coordinates altogether in search of some completely new system that has been invented from scratch, is not related to any previous thought and is unbiased by a priori categories, would be like reformatting a computer and losing all its data. Besides, unless something is done about linguistic expression, this will always remain a futile exercise: as discussed above, since any new system still has to be expressed in language, it will have to use categories which are inscribed within it. In other words, however horizontal or open the system might claim to be, it will always to some degree be vertical and biased by the linguistic categorical a priorism. It is then more pragmatic to take advantage of the achievements of social thought to date. However, to do this one needs to clean out the Augustan stable and to disentangle the horizontal aspects from the vertical ones in order to obtain a clearly marked discursive space, thus allowing us to escape from the overpowering perspectives of state, class and economy. Apart from a clearly marked space, the new theoretical framework also needs a set of logically ordered terms and categories with a simple system, permitting the prescription of a definite semantic content for each separate term.

This can be achieved by applying the tools used by structural linguistics in order to sharpen those used in social sciences. This should be done on a very basic level to make the whole process accessible to non-linguists, so that any scholar can make the terms he or she uses more precise. These tools can be found within the semantic theory which was developed as a part of Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar,<sup>71</sup> where each word (lexical entry) can be represented as a semantic matrix built of so-called semantic markers.<sup>72</sup> These are 'atoms' out of which the meanings are composed: different combinations of a small number of these 'atoms' create a large number of meanings. The markers have binary characteristics: each marker is either positive (+) or negative (-). Where the marker can be both present and absent, the entry is neutral for that marker, and when it does not apply at all, the entry is unmarked for that particular marker.<sup>73</sup>

70 Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

71 Chomsky 1957.

72 Katz and Postal 1964.

73 The system proposed in the present article is different from the original, which had to be significantly modified in making it simple.

So, for example, a semantic matrix for the word 'boy' consists of the following semantic markers: <+noun ^ +countable ^ +animate ^ +human ^ +masculine ^ -mature>.74 In biological sciences the marker [mature] entails additional distinctive features, these being: < biological and physical maturity >; in theology and philosophy the additional distinctive features are <value and innocence and purity>; in psychology <emotional and intellectual maturity> will be relevant; and in the social sciences the additional distinctive features of the term [boy] are [status] and [power], which are vertical markers: one can have high or low status, great or little power. Another vertical marker is value: it can be low or high. Thus, [boy] has a lower position in the biological sciences than a mature person, and also a lower status and less power than a [man]. Being marked (negatively) for <maturity and status and power> [boy] is clearly a vertical category, so an additional marker [+vertical] can be added to make its verticality visible. This will make it clear that the word must be used with caution: the innocent [boy] can become a derogatory category. A man placed in the category [boy] will be reduced to the lower status. And indeed, during slavery in North America, black men regardless of age were called [boy]. On the other hand, the notorious [race] is per se a non-vertical category, a fact which cannot be stressed enough, since this undermines the very foundations of racism.

Using this method, it is possible to develop a set of semantic markers for the terms and categories used in the social sciences. This will allow us to use a term such as 'perception' in its original meaning developed by the science of psychology and then, if necessary, to use discipline-specific distinctive features as additional distinguishers in order to make it workable in other disciplines like anthropology or sociology. Such a system will make it possible to mitigate hermeneutics, so that the semantic content of each term will no longer be left open to creative misinterpretations by scholars in other disciplines. The proposed system will also allow us to mitigate a priorism by controlling the categories themselves. Once verticality is used as a semantic marker, it becomes visible that the major categories used in the social sciences are vertical by definition, through being marked for status, value and power. So, for example: level, hierarchy, class, nation, society, clan, family, state and kinship are vertical; relatively few categories such as, race, ethnicity or neighbourhood are not marked for verticality; while structure, group or network can be defined in both ways, as either vertical or non-vertical categories.

Using such tools, it is possible to construct a theoretical framework based on the Restricted Verticality Principle, in which informal social space is no longer defined as the part of social space that escapes the control of the state, but as the total social space minus what is controlled by the state. This definition instantly orders the discursive space by reversing the current assumption: the primacy of the formal over the informal is wiped

74 Fisiak 1975. For practical reasons, I used slightly different graphical symbols from those used by Fisiak.



off, the state is removed without destroying the informal social space, and moreover the negative value marking included in the currently used term 'informal' is transferred to the 'state' through the negative connotations of the word 'control': now it is the state that 'corrupts' the free space of informality.

In such a perspective, verticality can be significantly limited. Even if the vertical axis is still kept in the background, it is prevented from disrupting the continuity of horizontal flow by reappearing and 'cutting' it every time a vertically marked category or term is used. This will enable a 'vertically unbiased' observation and analysis of dynamic, shapeless and continuous phenomena, such as informal networks, to be made. The Restricted Verticality framework is based on the following axioms:

1. formal and informal are attributes of the same social space; and
2. formal events are the subset of informal ones, not the other way round; and
3. categorical a priorism is mitigated by analytical terms being controlled for vertical marking; and
4. negotiations based on commonsense judgments are viewed as an interface between structure and agency; and
5. the researcher himself is not excluded from the common sense principle; and
6. there is no obligation to quote intellectual genealogies; and
7. cartographic 'mapping' replaces metaphorical mapping.

To remove itself even further from the existing perspectives and their limitations, this framework should have a distinct umbrella label, such as Informality Studies. This would make it possible to accommodate interdisciplinary research in which there is actually some understanding between the practitioners of the different disciplines, achieved through the same perspective of Restricted Verticality and the linguistic obligation to use translatable terms and categories across the disciplines involved, as well as across different languages. This may lead to research that will allow us to bypass more than one swamp and to concentrate on the qualitatively new social phenomena that are emerging right in front of our eyes as a result of the IT revolution and the current freedom of movement, unprecedented in the history of mankind.

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