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PERSPECTIVES
OF DOCUMENTALITY

abstract

Social ontology has experienced significative growth in the last decades. In particular, a promising research agenda concerns social objects. The reference to social objects implies sharing a realistic conception of the world which allows a definitive departure from the post-modern vision of the social world as a fluid and elusive organism. A taxonomy that distinguishes between social, physical and ideal objects can, on the contrary, reinvigorate human sciences getting over the well-known methodological controversies of the last years. The theory of Documentality provides heuristic power and a solid basis for organisational resources: all potentially reliable sources for the web society. Documentality theory aims to represent a valid alternative to Searle ontology, and at the same time to offer both theoretical and practical developments.

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1.
Writing
Explosion

In *2001: A Space Odyssey,* filmed in 1968, normal type-writers are used to write in the spaceship and Hal, the computer, is a talking brain. The PC would be invented a few years later, yet no one had the slightest inkling of it because no one realized that using a talking machine that simulates thinking would be trivial compared to more powerful writing and archiving instruments, and that this—more so than spaceships and jets—would be the true propellant for delocalization and globalization. And so, in a science-fiction film from a little over forty years ago no one had foreseen what, in a short time, would emerge as a writing explosion. The prediction that writing would eventually be engulfed by a society of "hot" communication—that is, radio, cinema and television—today seems unrealistic. This point merits our reflection. It has been stated and restated throughout the course of the twentieth century that ours is a society of communication. This concept is mistaken for two reasons: the first is that it does not consider the fact that any society—human or animal—requires communication. The second, more crucial, error is that it fails to consider that *any instance of communication would be a sterile act if it were not accompanied by the act of recording,* to which we entrust the existence and permanence of highly important things such as promises, roles, debts and credit, as well as our identities. It is upon this very hypothesis that the social ontology of "Documentality" bases itself, whose principal theory is that documents are not an accessorial element of social reality, but rather (in the various forms that they can assume) its condition of possibility, insofar as they ensure the fixation of individual and collective memory.

2.
Amnesyne

Let us verify through three mental experiments.

1. A man sentenced to death is offered the choice between a cyanide capsule and a pill of amnesyne, a concoction that causes total amnesia. When all is said and done, there is no real difference between swallowing a cyanide capsule and an amnesia pill (a hypothetical chemical mixture that is able to provoke a state of total amnesia). Intuitively, we might admit that it would be less terrifying to swallow a capsule of amnesyne than it would be to swallow cyanide, but the question is: how rational is our elevated

fear of cyanide? Come what may, what we are would disappear, and what would remain is a mere oblivious body.

2.   Let us suppose that two people are responsible for the same crime—only one remembers the events while the other does not. Our dominant intuition is that the person who does not remember the events is in some way less guilty than the person who does remember them. This is fairly peculiar, considering that the events are the same and the one who has forgotten the events has (hypothetically) the same mental capacities as the one who remembers them. And yet, we feel as though we should offer the one who has forgotten the events a sort of mitigation, due to his limited mental capacities. We might say that his intellectual and moral standards were left unaltered, he just failed to remember certain acts—yet this simple fact makes a significant difference. The only punishment that appears to be appropriate for the one who has forgotten the events would be the administration of a pill of amnesyne which would make him forget everything else (producing a sort of civil death) or, alternatively, a capsule of mnemosyne that would allow him to remember everything and, as a consequence, force him to face his responsibilities.

3.   Let us envision a marriage that takes place in the complete absence of documents, or with documents written in invisible ink. Let us also imagine that, for some reason, all video cameras, photo cameras and cellular phones fail to record anything. Moreover, for the scenario to be complete, let us imagine that directly after the ceremony the bride and the groom, the officiant, the witnesses and all of the participants drink the amnesyne concoction that was mixed into the champagne. Can we truly claim that the two are married? We have good reason to exclude the possibility, since no one—not even those directly concerned—remembers anything about it. In fact, marriage, just as promises, bets, holidays, revolutions and economic crises, is a social object. As opposed to natural objects such as lakes and mountains, it exists only if we are aware of its existence, and in order to be aware of something it is, first and foremost, imperative that we remember it.

These three experiments demonstrate the relevance of writing, of memory and of the act of recording in social ontology.

**3.
Social Objects**

Social ontology is a discipline that has undergone an important growth over the past decades. A field of research that is within it and that is particularly promising concerns social objects. The reference to social objects appears to correspond to a vision of reality in compliance with a realistic structure that is able to surpass the post-modern vision of the social world as a fluid and unseizable Tower of Babel. On the contrary (Ferraris 2012), to speak of social objects, which are distinct from natural objects and ideal objects, might confer a new analytical power upon the social sciences and overcome the traditional identitarian and methodological problems (Ferraris 1988). From an ontological point of view the underlying question is the following: are people and behaviors the only constituents of social reality, as argued by the Reductionists (Tuomela 1995), or, in accordance with the Realist intuition (Reinach 1911, Mulligan 1987, Thomasson 2003, Gilbert 1989), should we admit that a third ingredient—social objects—exists? The Realist intuition appears to be justified, first and foremost, by theoretical considerations. Although their existence depends on subjects, social objects (promises, bets, money, and institutions) possess an autonomy that makes them different from mere psychological constructs, such as imagination or will. But there is a second motive that redounds in favor of the ontological reality of social objects: this is the importance of archives (and their proliferation in the information revolution). Why are recordings so important if not for the fact that they fix and make permanent social objects and liberate them from their strict dependence upon individual will and intentions? Two theories exist with regard to the construction of social objects. The first, and main, one is what we can synthetically call "Intentionality"; the other, which is being proposed here, is called "Documentality".

 "Intentionality" is the theory proposed by John Searle (Searle 1995, Searle 2010), which explains the construction of social reality through the rule "X counts as Y in C", that is, the physical object X counts as the social object Y in the context C. For example, a piece of paper (X) counts as a bank note (Y) in the spring of 2012 (C). This approach has been named "Intentionality". Let us call this theory "Intentionality" in order to emphasize how the imposition of function—considering the physical X as the social Y—depends on the action of a faculty that Searle defines "collective intentionality", which is comprised of the ability to collectively share the belief that a piece of paper is a bank note, that a pad of paper is a book, or that a living human body is a professor.

 "Documentality" is the alternative theory (Ferraris 2005, Ferraris 2009, Ferraris 2011), which states that the constitutive rule of social objects is, rather, "Object = Inscribed Act", that is to say: social objects are the product of social acts (those which involve at least two people) which are characterized

by the fact that they are inscribed, upon a piece of paper, on a computer file, or even, simply, within the mind of a person.

This theory allows the construction of social reality to depend on documents (hence the name "Documentality). There are two arguments—one stronger than the other—concerning collective intentionality. The first is that collective intentionality is nothing but the sum of individual intentionalities that comes to fruition in documents and in their predecessors in societies without writing (in rites, for instance). The second is that the same individual intentionality depends, broadly speaking, on writing (which we shall define "arche-writing", in accordance with Derrida 1967).

**4.
Intentionality**

Let us begin, then, with the problems of intentionality. Searle's theory presents more than one difficulty (Smith 2003a 2003b, Koepsell and Moss 2003, Ferraris 2005, Ferraris 2009), both from the point of view of the object (that is, the physical X that is subject to the social Y) and from the point of view of the act (that is, the collective intentionality called upon to exercise the transformation of X into Y).

With regard to the object, it is easy to observe that the theory is applied only in certain cases (for example, in the case of a human body that counts as a professor, or of an ordinary object that counts as a work of art, within the theory of ready-mades), yet it does not account for entities that are vast and vague (nations, corporations), entities that are present in the online world, which do not have a precise physical equivalent, or of negative entities, such as debt. The attempt to take into account these "independent Y objects" (that is to say, objects that lack an evident physical X), undertaken by Smith (Smith 2003), who spoke of them as "quasi-representations", lessens the distinction between social objects and mental objects and, therefore, does not resolve the problem. Nonetheless, Smith's proposal was acknowledged by Searle (Searle 2010). In the updated version, the constitutive rule becomes: "We make it the case by Declaration, that the Y Status Function exists in context C". This rule—which is the reproposition of the theory of the speech acts (Austin 1962)—has the advantage of no longer appealing to Xs, which are oftentimes difficult to find. Rather, it makes the entire social reality depend on collective intentionality (or, more precisely, on mental states), just as when Searle 2010, 201) states that economic reality is a product of the imagination ("massive fantasy").

There are two problems concerning collective intentionality (that is the function designated to transform the physical object X into the social object Y, through an assignment of function).

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1. First, it is not clear what is meant by "collective intentionality", which appears to be an *ad hoc* function. From the observation of collective actions (Gilbert 1989, Gilbert 2006, Bratman 1992) we cannot infer the existence of a primitive biological datum that would ensure the passage from the physical to the social realm. Similarly, the fact that there are mirror neurons to which the genesis of empathy and imitation are attributed (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006) is simply proof of the role of imitation in the social world, which has been widely recognized (Tarde 1962), though not yet a decisive argument in favor of the existence of a collective intentionality.

2. Collective intentionality is not able to explain social reality in its entirety, but only certain cooperative activities, that are the product of training and, therefore, appear as a result rather than a premise (Ferraris 2009). Moreover, collective intentionality does not explain central elements of the social world: that is to say, dissent, conflict and the fact that a change in collective intentionality—in a mass movement, for example—does not necessarily involve a change at the institutional level.

5. Documentality

The problems with the theory of intentionality can be resolved by the theory of documentality, defined as such because it maintains that the construction of social objects is to be searched for in an act of recording which finds its eminent manifestation in documents. The theory of Documentality is rooted in two principle theories: the theory of performatives (inspired by Reinach 1911 and Austin 1962) and the theory of inscription (inspired by Derrida 1967 and De Soto 2000).

The theory of performatives derives from the theory of speech acts, whose roots can be traced back, even before Austin (Austin 1962), to Reinach (Reinach 1911). Linguistic acts introduce into the world new objects that bring into existence demands, obligations, rights, relations of authority, debts, permits, names, and an array of other types of entities that, together, constitute the ontology of the social world.

The theory of inscription, developed by Derrida (Derrida 1967) and based on phenomenological reflections on writing and institution (See Bojanic 1995) and Reinach's theory share the same origin. Seeing as though speech acts are evanescent, the physical basis for the existence of the entities of the social world—in small societies, and for simple interactions—can be identified by the traces in ones memory and other characteristics of the psychology of the people involved. In more vast societies, and for more complex social interactions, people's memories are not sufficient; documents create and maintain those deontic, lasting and reusable powers, which expand human memory and create and maintain in existence the new and more

complex forms of social order that are characteristic of modern civilization. This proves to be especially evident in the economy (De Soto 2000). By performing documental acts (acts of compiling, recording, communicating and validating) we change the world and bring into existence relations of property, legal accounting, the organization of events and other activities that are typical of modern societies. Just as the combination of stocks and its division between shareholders creates capital, statuses create companies. The theory of documentality (Ferraris 2005, Ferraris 2009) entails, first and foremost, an explanation of the ontological conditions of the theory of inscription. Linguistic acts are, after all, inscribed acts: without some form of registration, performatives would not produce social objects such as conferences, marriages, graduation ceremonies or constitutions. The point is quite simple: if, in accordance with the amnesyne mental experiment, we envision a graduation ceremony or a marriage or a coronation where there are no scribes or witnesses, then it is difficult to claim that a graduate, a husband and a wife, or a king were produced: social objects are closely linked to the forms of their inscriptions and recordings. In this sense, documents do not achieve social reality, but rather they constitute it.

At the same time, the theory of documentality weakens the theory of inscription, which in Derrida's version was applied to reality as a whole, resulting in a problematic statement such as, "nothing exists outside of the text". In the theory of documentality, on the other hand, the role of inscription seems to be decisive only within the sphere of social objects, whereby it can be argued that, "nothing *social* exists outside of the text". This proposal appears to be especially innovative as it confers a practical importance upon a theory that is otherwise simply metaphorical, and factually false.

It is necessary, first and foremost, to distinguish between three different families of objects (Ferraris 2005, Ferraris 2009): 1. Natural objects, which exist in space and time independently of subjects; 2. Ideal objects, which exist beyond space and time independently of subjects; 3. Social objects, which exist in space and time dependently on subjects. Only social objects require inscriptions, and this is the very reason for which the theory of inscription is weakened in the theory of documentality, according to which "nothing *social* exists outside of the text".

It is within this framework that the constitutive law of social objects is formed in accordance with the theory of documentality—that is, as previously mentioned, Object = Inscribed Act. According to this law, a social object is the product of a social act (which involves at least two people, or one person and a machine, such as a computer), characterized by the fact that it is recorded on

a piece of paper, a computer file or some other digital support, or even simply in people's minds.

The theory of documentality resolves the problems of the theory of intentionality.

> 1. It explains the construction of social objects without turning to physical objects that have been translated into social objects, as occurs in Searle (Searle 1995), and avoids the troubles caused by vague, complex or negative entities.

> 2. Contrary to what is stated in Searle (Searle 1995), and especially Searle (Searle 2010), it does not require a recourse to collective intentionality. Individual intentionalities, directed by previous documents (norms, laws) are recorded in other documents. There is no need to recall an *ad hoc* faculty; that which is called "collective intentionality" is simply a name for the common experience of a contract that includes the signatures of the contractors and the potential authentication of a notary.

Due to its extreme simplicity, the theory of documentality confers a great heuristic power and great organizational resources, especially in a society like that of the web. The theory strives to constitute an alternative to Searle's ontology, while at the same time offers both theoretical and practical developments.

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