

God's Scrutiny, Divine Anonymity, and the Reception of Social Action

Lorenzo Sabetta* 

Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza-University of Rome (Italy)

Submitted: September 17, 2025 – Accepted: October 19, 2025 – Published: December 22, 2025


Abstract

Building on Thomas DeGloma's book *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities* (2023), to further explore the subject of anonymity, in this paper I elaborate on its connections with the themes of God and the divine. I open with a discussion of two "impossibilities": to act undercover in the sight of almighty entities and to identify such almighty entities. Therefore, I examine the fragility of anonymous performances to underscore how the anticipation of exposure can make them less free (in a way, less anonymous) as well as abundant, since the allure of investigation often drives engagement. I then shift to the node of "impossible identification", addressing how certain forms of ultimate authority remain deliberately faceless to absorb blame, deflect praise, and facilitate the public misattribution of both. I conclude by emphasizing the role of the audience in shaping social behavior, linking anonymity to the broader category of reaction.

Keywords: Anonymity; Omniscience; Anticipation of reception; Reaction; Alessandro Pizzorno.

Acknowledgements

Admittedly, this is a weird paper. At some point, however, I worried it might be *too* weird. So, I asked a few colleagues for feedback. I received generous and insightful comments, and I'm very grateful to Matteo Bortolini, Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Gerardo Ienna, Carmelo Lombardo, Giuseppe Sciortino, and Giovanni Zampieri. Special thanks to Ugo Corte.

*  lorenzo.sabetta@uniroma1.it

Thomas DeGloma's *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities* (2023) is a remarkable work, and you should read it. If you wish to forgo the richness that reading *Anonymous* affords and choose instead to just grasp its significance and scope, then you may turn to the reviews it already received (Tavory, 2024; Tian, 2024; Dromi, 2025; Muller, 2025; Morrison, 2025). After that, though, you might find yourself wanting to go back and, in fact, peruse the book. However, in no case should you read this essay to understand how *Anonymous* is structured, assess the many insights it offers, or even get a general sense of its sociological importance — I won't elaborate on any of that. Instead, I corroborate the main point of the book, attesting to how the question of anonymity does sit at the core of society and sociology. But I do so in accordance with the editor's instructions, namely, "write an essay for *Sociologica* critiquing Tom DeGloma's latest book". *Anonymous* accomplishes a great deal, but of course, it cannot do everything. My move, then, is a classic one: I isolate a theme that seems very consequential to the overall analysis of anonymity yet remains underdeveloped across the volume. This theme is nothing less than God and the divine (or, in Wittgenstein's parlance, *das Mystische*).

If anonymity is defined as acting under obscured personal identities (DeGloma, 2024, p. 4), then God and anonymity are doubly tied. It is impossible to perform anonymous acts when dealing with almighty entities: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place" (*Proverbs*, 15:3), "Allah is All-Seeing of what you do" (*Quran*, 49:18), *sarvajña* (Sanskrit for "all-knowing") is an attribute of both Buddha and Vishnu, and so on. Conversely, to uncover the identities of such almighty entities is hopeless, considering the basic theological pillar that God's essential nature transcends earthly understanding, making Him/Her/Them ultimately incomprehensible ("For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways", *Isaiah*, 55:8) as well as envisaging God's name as almost unutterable (e.g., the Jewish Tetragrammaton). This indicates the twin themes of *impossible anonymity* (for humans in front of God: never incognito) and *impossible identification* (of God in front of humans: always incognito). To focus on these themes *per se* would either be uninteresting or unexpected for the readers of this journal and, at any rate, far beyond my expertise.¹ In what follows, I explore some sociological implications of these radical hypotheses: the complete perspicuity and equally complete obscurity in terms of personalizing activities when God's involved. I take their doctrinaire absoluteness as sort of ideal-types, useful to discuss more mundane and less thorough actual instances, either religious or unreligious.

Adopting the Zerubavelian mode of inquiry of "concept-driven sociology" (see Zerubavel, 2021) as well as DeGloma's method of "theme driven social analysis", this paper insists on "bringing together an eclectic set of cases based on a shared characteristic despite their substantive differences, while also highlighting those differences and interpreting each case to reinforce the analysis of the general theme at hand" (DeGloma, 2024, p. 279). In particular, significant portions of the discussion engage with literary material.

Here's the road map of this quirky foray into quasi-theological territories: starting with the topic of "impossible anonymity", I analyze how the fragility of anonymous performances can influence both their degree of genuine freedom (people might prudently self-regulate in advance) and their frequency (the appeal of unmasking is an integral part of their success). Then, turning to the topic of "impossible identification", I discuss why certain sources of ultimate authority remain faceless in order to accept responsibility for negative actions, relinquish credit

1. The Western-centric, rather arbitrary, and very short list of books I preliminarily used to back up my sketchy theological education includes Goldmann, 2016[1964]; Benjamin, 1978; Calasso, 1993[1988]; Sontag, 1995; Sgalambro, 1987; Altizer, 2003. It is possible that parts of my argument only hold for the God of monotheistic religions (see Assmann, 2008).

for positive ones, and allow (or even enable) the public to misattribute both. I conclude by reinforcing the role of the audience in shaping social action and coupling the subject of anonymity with the category of *reaction* via Alessandro Pizzorno's idea of "the reception of social action".

1 Is There Such a Thing as a Permanently Anonymous Act?

Ira Cohen (2015) observes that even when actors are alone and exempt from the Parsonian "double contingency of interaction", forms of "delayed monitoring" could eventually assess the results of solitary behavior (p. 78). Acting solo, of course, does not mean acting secretly, still less anonymously. I wrote the last sentence alone, but I'm fully accountable for it, nonetheless. This is less banal if hyperbolically extended, considering the substantial resources that Omnipotence and Omniscience can offer. Abrahamic religions share the belief in the Last Judgment, when an undecivable audience will evaluate everything done in the history of humanity, so that "each and every act has to be seen to lie adjacent to the final moment of time", as though "unprotected" (Fisher, 2002, p. 105); a persistent religious motif, anticipated by the Egyptian "Weighing of the Heart" and the Greek *kerostasia*, differences notwithstanding. Other than the typical do-the-right-thing-even-when-no-one-is-watching attitude, this opens up several possibilities: from cynical wagers à la Pascal to heartfelt daily prayers, from Simony to the desperate search for signs of blessed predestination (but see Riesebrodt, 2010).² It can be weaponized against believers, as epitomized in the first republican Italian parliamentary election of 1948 by the humorist Giovannino Guareschi, who crafted for the Christian Democracy party this anti-communist slogan: "In the secrecy of the voting booth, God sees you, Stalin doesn't!" It can surreptitiously influence behavior in general: anonymous economic games are played in prosocial ways when concepts of God and the assumption of omnipresent supernatural agents are introduced (see Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). It can, in sum, make the idea itself of hidden identities a chimera: there's always an audience that nails (or will nail) us down.

Two additional elements to factor in: (1) Acknowledging the Durkheimian dictum that "Society is God" and anchoring the dynamics to societal expectations (Freud's superego, Mead's generalized other, etc.), the pressure intensifies — it concerns both believers and non-believers. For example, the sheer prospect of future exposure restrains even one's most private (viz., undiscoverable) acts, as perfectly rendered in fiction by Thomas Mann while portraying the relationship between Hans Castorp and Pribislav Hippe (Mann, 1972[1924], pp. 118–128) and studied at length by Erving Goffman (1959). By the same token, the success of censorship also lies in instilling preemptive self-censorship, regardless of how much thought expression is shielded by anonymity.³ (2) DeGloma specifies (2023, pp. 16 ff.) that anonymity cannot be reduced to mere secret, privacy or confidentiality. Anonymity always entails some partial publicity ("controlled exhibitionism"), since it's about acting openly while blocking audiences from linking actions to personal identities. So, what DeGloma (2023, pp. 16 ff.) calls "the risk of unwanted divulgence — of revealing too much in the process of acting the anonymous role" is ubiquitous. To echo Fine's (2003) perspective, "as we realize from the strings and trip-wires of social control, actors are embedded, and actions — even seemingly secluded, concealed ones — can be channeled and checked" (p. 654).

2. That these attempts are fundamentally clueless is evidenced by the fact that we don't even know if our very conception of/disposition toward God is relevant in that regard. As David Foster Wallace (1996, p. 205) quipped, "God might regard the issue of whether you believe there's a God or not as fairly low on his/her/its list of things s/he/it's interested in re you".

3. See for example the recent work of Wang (2024) on online fanfiction communities in today's China.

Take Alcoholics Anonymous, obviously a recurring example in *Anonymous*. Doing the 5th step (“Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”) and confessing to others what they have been ashamed to confess to themselves, AAs can face the necessity to produce half-confessions, weighing the details they provide and ultimately being reluctant to engage in sincere parrhesia (see Jensen 2000, pp. 105–107). Those with much to lose (e.g., VIPs like politicians) cannot trust the protective space offered by standard AA meetings.⁴ After all, confession par excellence, i.e., the Sacrament of Penance, has been historically used as an impression management tool too (Zampieri, 2024); the very first novella of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* tells the story of a wicked character (Cepparello, “the worst man ever born”) who, on his deathbed, tricks a holy friar with a false confession, ending up venerated as a saint (see Almansi, 1975, pp. 24 ff.). My point is that hidden identities, because of the more or less conscious feeling they won’t remain so, *can be performed as though they are not really anonymous in the first place*.⁵ Reading internal documents of the Red Brigades written during their militancy and clandestinity (see Re, 2020), the texts seem to anticipate their own eventual disclosure — one could argue that they were crafted with a view to possible future dissemination from the outset. Also, as DeGloma (2023, p. 189) notes regarding phone calls, anonymizing tools and techniques are obsolescent: what guarantees anonymity today may be ineffective tomorrow. Declassification of state records is just another illustrative case among many.

This leads to the traces left behind while acting anonymously. For example, in my experience, the break of anonymity in the peer-review system is less about questions of hermeneutics (interpreting the expressions of strong opinions or the reference to published papers, as noted by DeGloma, 2023, p. 16) and more about the simple fact that authors’ names are too often unremoved from the document properties (be it PDF, Doc or other file formats). Generally speaking, to handle these traces is not necessary to imagine a totalitarian, Orwellian society of control. Centralized real-time control systems seem unmanageable and unrealistic, but a surveillant assemblage (multiple, scattered, and overlapping: Haggerty & Ericson, 2000) is enough to operate when needed.⁶ Consider the affair of Elena Ferrante, a story (ironically enough, more newsworthy in the US than in Italy) that DeGloma carefully examined. The investigative Italian journalist, based in the US, Claudio Gatti essentially followed the money. He pinned down

4. Tominey, C. (2022). MPs and staff attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at Westminster. *The Telegraph*, March 12. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/03/12/westminster-holds-weekly-alcoholics-anonymous-meeting-first/>.
5. Even when anonymous identities are preserved by means of law, exactly to avoid that others would otherwise hold back and restrain themselves in the future, the very fact that this had to be reaffirmed may ipso facto function as a deterrent — e.g., another judge might rule differently. See Barendt (2016, pp. 152–154) on a legal case regarding *Spickmich*, a German equivalent of *RateMyProfessors*.
6. After all, even in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the eponymous model of Orwellian surveillance, the full reach of Big Brother does not constitute a panoptic and all-encompassing vigilance, that is reserved instead only to the most important fraction of the party (to which the protagonist, Winston Smith, belongs). The proles, who made up almost 85% of the population in Oceania, live reasonably unrestrained, or at least not kept under constant observation: “Very little was known about the proles. It was not necessary to know much [...]. The great majority of proles did not even have telescreens [the device, functioning both as television and security camera, monitored by the Thought Police] in their homes. Even the civil police interfered with them very little” (Orwell, 1983[1949], p. 67). This is to say that many anonymous actions done before (let’s imagine) taking office at the national level, committing murder, or going viral on the Internet won’t remain anonymous after those watershed, attention-getting moments; what I argued earlier is that social actors are *somehow* aware of this, and their actions are informed accordingly. The category of “vigilance regimes” (Ivasiuc et al., 2022) comes apropos here (but see also Baehr, 2019, pp. 145–150).

(to me, beyond any reasonable doubt) the couple Anita Raja and Domenico Starnone because of bank payments and real estate transaction traces. Raja and Starnone bought multiple, astronomical properties in the early 2000, thanks to astronomical paychecks from the (fairly small, back then) Italian publishing house of Elena Ferrante; their work as translators did not justify such compensation.

The “delayed monitoring”, to have it with Cohen, took place some 15 years later — when a full-scale investigation about the whole case was sensational enough to be contemporaneously aired in four different nations.⁷ And the delayed monitoring can amount to a death sentence: it is true (as DeGloma observes en passant [2023, p. 35]) that *pentiti* and Mafia cooperating witnesses receive new pseudonymous identities via state protection programs, but it is also true that these measures often fall short against the thirst for revenge and the far-reaching networks of mafia organizations. Put differently, the traces connecting them to their previous identities are stronger than the state-issued alias.⁸ My point here is that *there's hardly any covered identity, only insufficient resources (or power) and interest (or willingness) to uncover it*. When the CIA is involved, for example, the delayed monitoring can occur surprisingly quickly, no matter how resourceful the anonymous performers may be (e.g., a highly politicized and motivated group of scientists: see Turchetti, 2024). In Murakami's *1Q84*, the protagonist defends herself against the supernatural beings of “Little People” (a riff off of 1984's Big Brother) by not letting her feelings and thoughts out of her heart (Murakami, 2011[2009], p. 319); Little People cannot go that deep. But anonymity is not secrecy, and to sustain anonymous performances things must go out of one's heart: the production of traces that associate actions to identities is ineluctable. This contributes to making sense of DeGloma's conclusions, according to which “anonymity and pseudonymity are increasingly precarious and even impossible to guarantee, yet simultaneously more common” (2023, p. 169). Arguably, the ongoing performance of pseudonymous authors and their enduring allure (to my knowledge, the last one is the bestselling Japanese novelist-and-performer Uketsu)⁹ is fueled in part by the irresistible, and likely profitable, game of trying to investigate and identify the person behind the cover. Literally irresistible: who is hiding their identity may well have something juicy to hide.

Now, I move on to the flip side of the ideal-type I started with: the case of transcendent agents operating always undercover.

2 Weber between Dostoevskian Heroes and God's Real Name

In the short novel *Three Versions of Judas*, Borges presents a theological heresy (a “Christological fantasy”) through Nils Runeberg, a fictional Swedish modern-day gnostic scholar. Runeberg goes so far as to trace God's real, unfathomable name (thus unveiling His/Her/Their

7. Claudio Gatti's report was published on *La Domenica del Sole 24 Ore* in Italy, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany, *Mediapart* in France, and *The New York Review of Books* in the US on the very same day (October 2, 2016).

8. This, at least in Italy. See, for example: Omizzolo, M., & Lessio, R. (2015). La vita impossibile dei testimoni di giustizia. *Il Manifesto*, February 3. <https://ilmanifesto.it/la-vita-impossibile-dei-testimoni-di-giustizia/>; or De Chiara, P. (2014). “Siamo morti che camminano...” *19 luglio 1992*, January 7. <https://www.19luglio1992.com/siamo-morti-che-camminano-il-racconto-di-un-testimone-di-giustizia/>. Claudio Cupellini's film *A Quiet Life* (2010) vividly depicts both the brutality and, above all, the “investigative tenacity” of the Neapolitan *camorra*. For a sophisticated examination of *omertà* (and its infringement), see Santoro, 2022, pp. 110–120.

9. Creamer, E. (2025). Am I a Cyclopien Monster? *The Guardian*, January 27. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jan/27/uketsu-masked-writer-japan-surreal-videos>.

actual identity) back to the infamous apostle Judas Iscariot. Moved by “a hyperbolic, even limitless asceticism”, Judas “renounced honor, goodness, peace, the kingdom of heaven, as others, less heroically, renounce pleasure”. He “labored with titanic humility; he believed himself unworthy of being good” (Borges, 1999[1944], p. 165). If virtue “is a near impiety” (*ibidem*), this is because of the sins engendered by its public attribution to the virtuous — pride, vanity, longing for external validation, hypocrisy. The third of the versions mentioned by Borges in the title is the most shocking: Judas is the pseudonym of God (see also Walsh, 2016).

A quite interesting feature of *Anonymous* is how DeGloma is careful in stating that anonymous acts are not necessarily so for everyone.¹⁰ In this sense, part of the reward of doing good acts (such as charity) anonymously is that a small audience can doubly gratify the big-hearted donor. That is, these performances are not *completely* anonymous: “Many anonymous philanthropists are known to be the person behind the act by friends, family, associates, or others in their closest networks, which likely boosts their reputations among those in their close social circles, not only because of their generosity, but also specifically because they shirked public recognition” (DeGloma, 2023, pp. 45–46). But what about complete unrecognition (as Borges’ God hiding behind the most despicable of the pseudonyms) or, to use the expression I employed to refer to supernatural examples, “impossible identification?” This is a central theme in the famous Dostoevskian tale of the Grand Inquisitor, a story (perhaps too well-known to bear repeating) in which Jesus Christ returns to Earth, in 16th-century Seville, and confronts the elderly Cardinal who oversees the Spanish Inquisition. Here, I just focus on how the old Inquisitor accepts a hideous destiny to save the many, unbothered by the stigma that publicly marks his identity: “For only we, we who keep the mystery, only we shall be unhappy” (Dostoevsky, 2021[1880], p. 276). Indeed, the topos of agents who deliberately stay anonymous to take the blame and forgo recognition, even facilitating the public’s misassignment of both, is essentially Dostoevskian.

In June 1880, at the inauguration of a monument to Pushkin in Moscow, Turgenev and Dostoevsky (who was just finishing the *Karamazov*) were chosen to deliver the commemorative speeches. Turgenev offered a sober and respectful portrait of the author of *Boris Godunov* and *Eugene Onegin*. But for Dostoevsky, that was the greatest public success of his career — a moment in which he articulated the ideal of a peculiar form of heroism, which he saw as distinctly Russian and fully embodied by Pushkin, one that embraces suffering and misfortune not only without seeking recognition but accepting that everyone will be misjudged (see Ritter, 2004, pp. 52 ff.). To Dostoevsky, a “pure Russian soul”, as the ones portrayed by Pushkin, would not hesitate, acting this way “even if I alone am deprived of happiness [and] even if no one [...] ever learns of my sacrifice or appreciates it” (Dostoevsky, 1988[1880], p. 62). Forms of heroism that go totally unrecognized or, even worse, are misascribed and miscredited, reemerge time and again in Dostoevsky’s narrative, in his diary (see Dostoevsky, 1994[1877–1881], p. 823) and elsewhere. For example, Alessandro Pizzorno (on whom more later) pointed out how “Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* is the most compelling literary depiction of situations in which humiliation is embraced as a form of salvation from the refusal of recognition” (Pizzorno, 2023, p. 262).

The intellectual influence of Dostoevsky on Weber has often been brought up (see, for

10. This echoes, and prevents, Coleman (1990) critique to Merton’s distinction between latent and manifest functions: the ambiguity of specifying *for whom* a function is manifest or latent — “an ambiguity that Merton was aware of and lectured about, but unforgivably in my eyes never eliminated” (p. 27) that DeGloma addresses and puts into use.

example, Honigsheim, 2000[1946]; Turner, 1999; Suzuki, 2003; Westerman, 2019; Kemple, 2020). We know that Dostoevsky was always debated during the regular meetings of Weber's circle in prewar Heidelberg: "I don't remember a single Sunday conversation in which the name of Dostoevsky did not occur" (Honigsheim, 2000[1946], p. 207). We also know that precisely the Grand Inquisitor is cited in *Politik als Beruf*. After presenting the polarity between *Gesinnungsethik* v. *Verantwortungsethik*, Weber remarks: "Those of you who know Dostoevsky will remember the scene of the 'Grand Inquisitor', where the problem is poignantly unfolded" (Weber, 1946[1919], p. 122). Orthogonal to the famous dichotomy conviction v. responsibility, there is another opposition that runs through Weber's essay. The inadequate politician (a pitiful "parvenu-like braggart") performs for the public eye, "concerned merely with the 'impression' he makes" and tempted to "strive for the glamorous semblance of power", ultimately hostage to "the vain self-reflection in the feeling of power" (*ivi*, p. 116). In stark contrast, the genuine politician who has the "calling for politics" must be a "hero", and "in a very sober sense of the word": by avoiding "sterile excitation", making sure that the responsibility for the consequences falls on him/her and not the others whom s/he serves, and having fully realized what s/he is taking upon her/himself (*ivi*, pp. 127–128). In a way, with some interpretive license, the true political figure is the one who accepts a sort of malevolent pseudonymous identity if that's what it takes to bring about politically far-sighted outcomes. Weberian responsibility is also the responsibility of eschewing credit, even if this means getting (so to speak) "unfairly pseudonymized".

Needless to say, this is not intended as a conclusive account of *Politik als Beruf*, though it is significant how Weber, in that context, also alludes to the view of the "deus absconditus", the hidden God (*ivi*, p. 123). Rather, the point is that to the indecipherability of the first link of chains of power, of the authorship of rector's rector (I'm adopting the terminology of Reed, 2020), one should add the possibility that such indecipherability is deliberately preserved. And this, not in the sense of the ruthless "boss" who "works in the dark" to seek "power alone, power as a source of money, power for power's sake" (Weber, 1946[1919], pp. 109ff.), but to keep at bay "vanity", the enabler of the "deadly sins in the field of politics" (*ivi*, p. 116). In other words, "constantly in danger of becoming an actor" (*ibidem*), the figures with the calling for politics should not let their perceived identity jeopardize their real objectives (substantive purpose, forward-looking consideration of consequences, etc.). A performance that should not be seen as such — hence the unrecognition, hence the heroism.

3 How Will They React?, or: How Will I Be Recognized? In Lieu of a Conclusion

I assumed two ideal-typical, extreme scenarios: impossible anonymity (i.e., the eventual, technically inevitable possibility of being identified) and impossible identification (i.e., personalizing the source of certain forms of ultimate authorities). These themes are theological in character — the former intertwined with the question of salvation, the latter with the question of theodicy.¹¹ However, I leveraged them sociologically; that is, in terms of their earthly ramifications and implications for social behavior (whether inspired by faith or not). This was framed to highlight how these cases, although radical, are not disruptive, and basically support DeGloma's emphasis on the import of the relationship identity-actions. If this relationship remains crucial, it is because the role of the audience, what Taylor (2022) calls "audience agency",

11. In Christian theology, both questions are synthesized in the time of *parousia*.

remains crucial. (Even more so, when the attempt is to efface the concept of audience itself, as with Dostoevskian/Weberian heroes). I would argue that anonymity is woven into the category of reaction, how social action is shaped by someone else's previous or envisioned response to that action (see Brighenti & Sabetta, 2024 & 2025). The process of taking into account the behavior of others and being thereby oriented is continuous. To Weber, this is what makes social action *social*.¹² In this sense, if reactions are inherently open to nonlinearity, escalation, and fall-out (basically, they create unpredictability), the performance of anonymous actions serves to channel others' replies; it is a reaction-shaper. Without eliminating unintended consequences, anonymity represents, however, an attempt to stay one step ahead of one's public.

Speaking of the public, audience, and other receivers of our actions, it is worth adding a specification in line with Gary Alan Fine's call for a "tribal sociology". His proposal is that "we care about our audience, but not in the amorphous and astructural way suggested by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), a caring, apparently, for everyone and no one" (Fine, 2003, p. 655). Fine contends (*ivi*, p. 664) that the interaction order "depends in ample measure on the modest reality that people share their lives", since the level on which interaction happens is miniaturist and small-scale: dyads, families, inner circles, or niche groups ("tribes"). Mostly, "people matter to their partners" (*ibidem*). Hence, to mobilize once again an example from the world of letters, consider the case of the two major recluses of postwar U.S. literature — J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon. Their general reception owes much to their withdrawn lives.¹³ However, arguably the individuals most influenced by that performance of (quasi-)anonymity have been those closest to them. That is, those who actually came to know their true identity, either due to circumstances (e.g., living under the same roof) or by choice (e.g., a privilege granted by the normally invisible author). A list of scattered examples: (a) Pynchon's wife, Melanie Jackson, is his agent and is responsible for handling business negotiations, made especially difficult by her husband's obscure identity; (b) Pynchon's exceedingly rare public appearances have often been motivated by the desire to please his son, Jackson: Pynchon voiced himself twice on *The Simpsons* (his face hidden by a paper bag with a question mark on it) because Jackson was such a fan of the show; also, in 1999 he wrote a short piece, "Hallowe'en? Over Already?", for Jackson's school's newsletter; (c) Salinger's son, Matt, was assigned by his father the duty of transcribing all his unpublished materials (which is now a full-time job for him); (d) Salinger had several affairs with young female fans, initially drawn in by an "absolutely captivating letter, composed in a voice they recognized as that of Holden Caulfield".¹⁴

12. One could argue whether we are ever really alone. Corte (2022, p. 168), unpacking certain forms of inner speech practiced by big waves surfers, writes that "by talking to ourselves we construct and partake in mental simulations that help us gauge the consequences of different courses of action. We retrieve data from our consciousness, integrate them into story lines, and then edit them in different cuts. Basically, we construct narratives with alternate endings".

13. Which were, anyway, quite different, just as their style and vision. This did not prevent the journalist John Calvin Batchelor from writing a long article, published in the SoHo Weekly News in 1977, arguing that Pynchon did not exist, and that Salinger had written all his novels. Batchelor soon received a note from Pynchon, in which he confirmed that he, in fact, existed. Pynchon also added: "Not bad. Keep trying" (see Tanner, 1982, p. 18).

14. See Cohen, J. (2013). First Family, Second Life. *Harper's Magazine*. <https://harpers.org/archive/2013/10/first-family-second-life/>; Cohen, J. (2019). Matt Salinger Wants to Put the Record Straight. *Penguin*. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/matt-salinger-on-jd-salinger>; Traub, J. (1997). Thomas Pynchon Finally Loses the Game of Hide-and-Seek. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/07/14/ink-james-traub>; Haas, L. (2019). Matt Salinger: "My Father Was Writing for 50 Years Without Publishing. That's a Lot of Material". *The Guardian*, February 1. <https://www.theguardian.com/>

Against this backdrop, it is appropriate to conclude by recalling Alessandro Pizzorno's lesson on the parallel concepts of "recognition and reception" (see Sassatelli, 2019). His work on the mask, "a metaphor of recognition received or as declination of an identity that is being constructed" (Sassatelli & Pizzorno, 2019, p. 47), "a moment in the function of appearing and of revealing" (Pizzorno, 2010, p. 17), stresses "the essence of the mask in its relation to others" (*ivi*, p. 24). This resonates with the position of DeGloma and Gary Marx (1999, p. 100): "fundamentally social", anonymity "requires an audience of at least one person". Following Pizzorno, the step forward is concentrating on what the audience made of the performance: since "the meaning of an expression or an action is not simply determined by what the speaker has in mind, but rather by the responses it receives from the community within which it is manifested", sociologists should "give priority to reception in reconstructing to social meaning of acting" (Pizzorno, 2007, pp. 114–115). In this paper, I tried to reflect on how the *anticipation* of such reception (either immediate or posthumous, certain or hypothetical, favorable or hostile, delusional or strategic, small- or large-scale) informs social action from its very inception. But I'm not sure I pulled it off — perhaps I should have published this paper anonymously.

References

- Almansi, G. (1975). *The Writer as Liar: Narrative Technique in the Decameron*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Altizer, T.J.J. (2003). *Godhead and the Nothing*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Assmann, J. (2008). *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Baehr, P. (2019). *The Unmasking Style in Social Theory*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Barendt, E. (2016). *Anonymous Speech. Literature, Law, and Politics*. Oxford: Hart.
- Benjamin, W. (1978). *Reflections. Essays, Aphorism, Autobiographical Writings* (E. Jephcott, Trans.). New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Borges, J.L. (1999). Three Versions of Judas. In *Collected Fictions* (A. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin. (Original work published 1944).
- Brighenti, A.M., & Sabetta, L. (2024). Reciprocity, Reaction, and the Transduction of Social Encounters. *MAUSS International*, 4(1), 210–221. <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-mauss-international-2024-1-page-210>.
- Brighenti, A.M., & Sabetta, L. (2025). Activated. Towards a Sociology of Reaction. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 28(1), 85–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241230167>
- Calasso, R. (1993). *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. New York, NY: Knopf. (Original work published 1988).

books/2019/feb/01/matt-salinger-jd-the-catcher-in-the-rye; Flood, A. (2018). JD Salinger's Teenage Lover Challenges Her "predator" reputation". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/06/jd-salinger-teenage-lover-challenges-her-predator-reputation-joyce-maynard>. See also Dalsgaard, 2024.

- Cohen, I.J. (2015). *Solitary Action: Acting on Our Own in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, J. (2013). First Family, Second Life. *Harper's Magazine*, October. <https://harpers.org/archive/2013/10/first-family-second-life/>.
- Cohen, J. (2019). Matt Salinger Wants to Put the Record Straight. *Penguin*, June 10. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/matt-salinger-on-jd-salinger>.
- Coleman, J.S. (1990). Robert K. Merton as Teacher. In J. Clark, C. Modgil, & S. Modgil (Eds.), *Robert K. Merton: Consensus and Controversy* (pp. 25–32). London & New York, NY: Falmer Press.
- Corte, U. (2022). *Dangerous Fun: The Social Lives of Big Wave Surfers*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Creamer, E. (2025). “Am I a Cyclopien Monster?” How Masked Writer Uketsu Went from Asparagus Videos to Literary Sensation. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jan/27/uketsu-masked-writer-japan-surreal-videos>.
- Dalsgaard, I.H. (2024). Keeping Thomas Pynchon Private: The Limits to Studying an “Anonymous” Celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*, 15(1), 107–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2054143>
- De Chiara, P. (2014). “Siamo Morti che Camminano...” Il racconto di un Testimone di Giustizia. *19luglio1992*, January 7. <https://www.19luglio1992.com/siamo-morti-che-camminano-il-racconto-di-un-testimone-di-giustizia/>.
- DeGloma, T. (2023). *Anonymous. The Performance of Hidden Identities*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- DeGloma, T. (2024). Theme-Driven Social Analysis: Three Approaches. *Symbolic Interaction*, 47(2), 278–297. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.692>
- Dostoevsky, F. (1988). Pushkin. In S.S. Hoisington (Ed.), *Russian Views of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin* (W. Arndt, Trans.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1880).
- Dostoevsky, F. (1994). *A Writer's Diary. Volume Two 1877–1881* (K. Lantz, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. (Original work 1877–1881).
- Dostoevsky, F. (2021). *The Brothers Karamazov* (R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky, Trans.). New York, NY: Picador. (Original work published 1880).
- Dromi, S.M. (2025). Review of “Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities”. *Contemporary Sociology*, 54(1), 33–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00943061241299304dd>
- Fine, G.A. (2003). On the Trail of Tribal Sociology. *Sociological Forum*, 18(4), 653–665. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SOFO.0000003008.77517.fo>
- Fisher, P. (2002). *The Vehement Passions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Flood, A. (2018). JD Salinger's Teenage Lover Challenges Her “Predator” Reputation. *The Guardian*, September 6. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/06/jd-salinger-teenage-lover-challenges-her-predator-reputation-joyce-maynard>.

- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goldmann, L. (2016). *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*. London, UK: Verso. (Original work published 1964).
- Haas, A. (2019). Matt Salinger. "My Father Was Writing for 50 Years Without Publishing. That's a Lot of Material". *The Guardian*, February 1. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/01/matt-salinger-jd-the-catcher-in-the-rye>.
- Haggerty, K.D., & Ericson, R.V. (2000). The Surveillant Assemblage. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(4), 605–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310020015280>
- Honigsheim, P. (2000). *The Unknown Max Weber*. New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1946).
- Ivasiuc, A., Dürr, E., & Whittaker, C. (2022). The Power and Productivity of Vigilance Regimes. *Conflict and Society*, 8(1), 57–72. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2022.080104>
- Jensen, G.H. (2000). *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Kemple, T. (2020). The Rationalizations of Culture and Their Directions. In L. Scaff & S. Whimster (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Max Weber* (pp. 445–464). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190679545.013.32>
- Mann, T. (1972). *The Magic Mountain* (H.T. Lowe-Porter, Trans.). New York, NY: Knopf. (Original work published 1924).
- Marx, G.T. (1999). What's in a Name? Some Reflections on the Sociology of Anonymity. *The Information Society*, 15(2), 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/019722499128565>
- Morrison, D.R. (2025). Anonymity, Deception, and Power. *Symbolic Interaction*, 48(2), 278–281. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.1204>
- Muller, T. (2025). Review of "Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities". *American Journal of Sociology*, 130(4), 1037–1040. <https://doi.org/10.1086/731545>
- Murakami, H. (2011). *1Q84* (J. Rubin, Trans.). New York, NY: Knopf. (Original work published 2009).
- Omizzolo, M., & Lessio, R. (2015). La Vita Impossibile dei Testimoni di Giustizia. *Il Manifesto*, February 3. <https://ilmanifesto.it/la-vita-impossibile-dei-testimoni-di-giustizia>.
- Orwell, G. (1984). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (Original work published 1949).
- Pizzorno, A. (2007). *Il Velo della Diversità. Studi su Razionalità e Riconoscimento*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Pizzorno, A. (2010). The Mask: An Essay. *International Political Anthropology*, 3(1), 5–28.
- Pizzorno, A. (2023). *La Maschera dei Classici. Leggere i Maestri della Teoria Sociale*. Bari: Laterza.

- Re, M. (2020). The Red Brigades' Communiqués: An Analysis of the Terrorist Group's Propaganda. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(2), 275–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1364639>
- Reed, I.A. (2020). *Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Riesebrodt, M. (2010). *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ritter, H. (2004). *Nahes und fernes Unglück. Versuch über das Mitleid*. München: Beck.
- Santoro, M. (2022). Mafia Politics. London, UK: Polity.
- Sassatelli, R. (2019). Recognition and Reception. On Pizzorno, Identity and the Mask. *Sociologica*, 13(2), 39–43. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/9754>
- Sassatelli, R., & Pizzorno, A. (2019). The Mask and Identity. A Conversation with Alessandro Pizzorno. *Sociologica*, 13(2), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/9755>
- Sgalambro, M. (1987). *Trattato dell'Empietà*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Shariff, A.F., & Norenzayan, A. (2007). God is Watching You: Priming God Concepts Increases Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game. *Psychological Science*, 18(9), 803–809. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01983.x>
- Sontag, F. (1995). *Wittgenstein and the Mystical. Philosophy as an Ascetic Practice*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- Suzuki, M. (2003). Antinomies of Conviction and Responsibility in Max Weber's Life and Thought. *Max Weber Studies*, 3(2), 199–220. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24579643>.
- Tanner, T. (1982). *Thomas Pynchon*. London & New York, NY: Methuen.
- Tavory, I. (2024). Review of “Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities”. *Social Forces*, 102(4), e1–e2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soae020>
- Taylor, A. (2022). Audience Agency in Social Performance. *Cultural Sociology*, 16(1), 68–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755211029604>
- Tian, J. (2024). Review of “Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities”. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 11(4), 650–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2024.2336761>
- Tominey, C. (2022). MPs and Staff Attending Alcoholics Anonymous Meetings at Westminster. *The Telegraph*, March 12. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/03/12/westminster-holds-weekly-alcoholics-anonymous-meeting-first/>.
- Traub, J. (1997). Thomas Pynchon Finally Loses the Game of Hide-and-Seek. *The New Yorker*, July 7. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/07/14/ink-james-traub>.
- Turchetti, S. (2024). Contesting American Hegemony: Attacks to US Scientific Initiatives in Cold War Europe (and Means to Secretly Defy These Challenges). *History and Technology*, 40(1–2), 109–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2024.2360715>

- Turner, C. (1999). Weber and Dostoyevsky on Church, Sect and Democracy. In S. Whimster (Ed.), *Max Weber and the Culture of Anarchy* (pp. 162–175). London, UK: Palgrave.
- Wallace, D.F. (1996). *Infinite Jest*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company.
- Walsh, R.G. (2016). *Three Versions of Judas*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wang, R. (2024). Censorship and Creative Communities: Fragility and Change of Fanfiction Writing in China. *Qualitative Sociology*, 47(4), 667–689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-024-09567-9>
- Weber, M. (1946). Politics as a Vocation. In H.H. Gerth & C.W. Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (pp. 77–128). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1919).
- Westerman, R. (2019). From Myshkin to Marxism: The Role of Dostoevsky Reception in Lukács's Revolutionary Ethics. *Modern Intellectual History*, 16(3), 927–960. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244317000373>
- Zampieri, G. (2024). Saving One's Face while Saving One's Soul? The Refraction of Tactical Approaches to Penance as a Disciplinary Device in Counter-Reformation Italy. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 75(5), 700–714. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13123>
- Zerubavel, E. (2021). *Generally Speaking: An Invitation to Concept-Driven Sociology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lorenzo Sabetta – Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza-University of Rome (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1116-6968> | ✉ lorenzo.sabetta@uniroma1.it

🌐 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lorenzo-Sabetta>

Lorenzo Sabetta is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Sapienza-University of Rome (Italy). His work investigates the intersections of cognitive sociology, field theory, and the interaction order. He held research and teaching positions in Sweden, Poland, the UK, and the US. His contributions have appeared in journals including *European Journal of Social Theory*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, and *MAUSS International*, among others. With Andrea M. Brighenti, he is now working on a book on the concept of “reaction.”