

The Economy of Interactions. Comment on “The Functions of Social Interaction in the Knowledge-Creative Economy: Between Co-Presence and ICT-Mediated Social Relations,” by Marianna d’Ovidio and Alessandro Gandini

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Abstract

In economic sociology, networks of relationships are seen as playing a fundamental role with respect to economic transactions, while interactions support such networks. Consequently, interactions appear as subordinated to the aim of conducting transactions, and as having an instrumental character. This comment argues that, if transactions are to be made possible, interactions among participants have to be conducted and understood as non-instrumental and autonomous

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Early in Paolo Sorrentino's 2013 film, *The Great Beauty*, a party scene occurs, in which Rome's writers, actors, publishers — in short, the creative industries — gather together to celebrate the writer and journalist Jep Gambardella's birthday. Exclusive parties appear to be essential with respect to how, in d'Ovidio and Gandini's account, the knowledge-creative industry of Milan channels contracts and work essential for surviving (and perhaps even thriving) in the gig economy. Parties are occasions for face-to-face engagements, but professionals from these industries appear to put a lot of effort into online interactions and social media as well. So, what is more important with respect to channelling contracts: face-to-face interactions, or online ones?

For a long time, economic sociologists have privileged the study of networks of social relationships over interactions. Not that the latter do not have a well anchored tradition in sociology, or that their investigation wouldn't bring any new insights into the properties of economic transactions (see, for instance, Heath, 2013; Knorr-Cetina, & Bruegger, 2002). One can also note in passing that the study of market interactions is a well established subdiscipline in finance, under the name of market microstructure — one could say, market microstructure is ethnography with other means.

At the first sight, this privileging seems to make sense, especially when taking into account the rise of the gig economy and the transience of work relationships. When periodically seeking work and navigating from one short term contract to the next become the norm, at least for some professional categories, such as those discussed in this paper, one would expect social networks of professionals to become even more relevant with respect to how contracts are obtained. Networks are the pipes through which work opportunities are channelled. Hence, at least at the first sight, privileging networks over interactions seems justified conceptually.

Nevertheless, the rapport between networks of relationships and interactions deserves closer attention. When I say that economic sociologists have privileged the study of social networks over interactions, it does not mean that the latter are not acknowledged at all: they are, namely as having a specific, ancillary function, that of sustaining webs of social relationships which in turn support economic transactions. In this perspective, interactions are tools put to work with the ultimate aim of achieving some output: a contract, a transaction, an exchange. Such outputs can be produced (only) within networks, hence the necessity of grooming social networks by using interactions.

Of course, one could also argue that some transactions are not anchored in network relationships: online transactions of cryptocurrencies, for instance, do not seem to be conducted within networks. Traders do not know each other. They might not even reveal their offline identities to each other. But that doesn't mean that their interactions do not sustain a form of relationality, one that is not quite a relationship. Relationality implies "cognitive recognition without social recognition" (Goffman, 1971, p. 228), as an intermediate form between anonymous and anchored interactions. We send signals of relationality in face to face, as well as in online interactions, but such signals are different from engagement signals, which require an element of mutual social recognition (Goffman, 1963, p. 102).

An instance of (professional) relationality signals is provided by LinkedIn connections: we send signals about recognizing cognitively other relevant professionals, while lacking the social recognition necessary for building anchored professional interactions. Reflecting upon this, this author realized that he is not connected on LinkedIn with any of his close research collaborators: this is not necessary, as the combination of cognitive and social mutual recognition (expressed in almost daily exchanges) would make such a signal (a LinkedIn connection) completely superfluous.

It is thus helpful to distinguish not only between types of interactions anchored in different modes of co-presence — spatial or temporal — but also to distinguish relationality from relationships. Based on this, we can investigate the economy of (professional) interactions and its outcomes — that is, the dynamics of producing relationality in specific interaction formats, and the ways in which this relationality is transformed (or not) into something like an anchored relationship by systematically transitioning (and translating) across formats. Of course, such transformations require effort on the part of participants — they require an engagement acknowledged as such by the parties. At the same time, the said transformations are different from the participants' post hoc rationalizations of this effort, or from post hoc accounts of how such efforts went. This is not to say that accounts do not occur, or that they are unimportant; quite the contrary. But we must distinguish here between accounts intrinsic to the interaction (in Harold Garfinkel's term, glosses), and accounts of the interaction. The former are part

and parcel of producing relationality and transforming it into an anchored relationship. The latter are rationalizations of this production effort, for the benefit of third parties.

I will try now to illustrate this with the case of the close circuit parties, which appears to be crucial for the situations discussed by the authors: apparently gaining entrance to such a party is coveted and consequential. It can land one a contract, and this, in the gig economy, is no small thing. Invitees should be expected to account to each other why they are there, and what it is that they are at, as part of their party interactions. (To go back to Garfinkel's term, participants should be expected to gloss to each other.) Yet, such accounts might differ substantially from post hoc accounts made for the benefit of the researcher. While not having seen the transcript of such interactions, I would assume that invitees will not say to each other, I am here because I need a new job, or a new contract. I would expect them to say something along the lines, I am here because I wanted to see you, or I wanted to be with all these amazing people, or something similar.

If the former were the case, there would be little difference between an exclusive party and a job fair. Saying that the party enables cultivating networks is not enough — a job fair can do precisely the same. Not to mention here that this would completely undermine the said party's claims to exclusivity. Hence, for the party to be regarded as exclusive, and for the participants to preserve their reputation of having been invited to an exclusive party, they would have to format their interactions (including accounts thereof) as non-instrumental: they are at the party because it is such a marvellous party. According to this logic, for the party to be effective as the occasion where work opportunities are channelled among participants, the party would have to understand and present itself as purely interactional — as the site of pure sociability, “as the pure, abstract play of form” (Simmel, 1971, p. 129). It would have to be “such a marvellous party.” (This is the logic illustrated in the party sequences of Paolo Sorrentino's 2013 film, *The Great Beauty*.)

This stands in sharp contrast with the presumed functional character of interactions: in order for economic transactions to become possible, at least in this case, interactions have to have no function at all. Their function is not to have a function. Otherwise it would be more difficult, if not outright impossible, to transition from cognitive recognition to social recognition and from relationality to anchored relationships, with all the possibilities and opportunities that the latter imply.

There are several aspects worthy of further investigation here: first, how are online signals of cognitive recognition processed into pure sociability? In other words, how is something like a LinkedIn connection summoned (if at all) within the context of a closed circuit, exclusive party? Are the two kept apart or not?

Second, while sending online signals of cognitive recognition may be one strategy of achieving a professional identity, abstaining from sending too many signals may be an equally valid strategy. How does such an economy of signals connect into the economy of professional interactions? After all, the omnipresent professional is just one figure in a wider panoply; solitary cultists and intellectual introverts (Collins, 2004, p. 356) are additional figures, and they might be successful as well, especially in what the authors call the knowledge-creative industries. We would need to know more about the figures populating the party landscape in which these industries are situated.

Third, how are the objects of professional work shaped (or not) by these interactions? If this is the knowledge-creative industry, what is the understanding of creativity produced in such interactions? To what extent is the work of producing anchored relationships indistinguishable from that of producing “creativity,” and to what extent is this done within sites of pure sociability, such as a party?

Of course, these questions go well beyond the confines of d'Ovidio and Gandini's article. Nevertheless, they should be raised. They are open to further investigation. They also widen the possibility that interactions, and especially the type grounded in physical co-presence might be more than, and different from ancillaries of network relationships.

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