

**Who do ideas belong to?
Methodological implications of
relational ontology in knowledge
production**

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Relational ontology

- “Plural relations are original and therefore that both **singularity** and **relations between singularities** are **always secondary**”
- “The **founding singularity**, given that it emerges as a putative possibility, will **only have occurred after the event**...henceforth called a constituting ‘plural event’”

(Andrew Benjamin, *Relational Ontology: Philosophy's Other Possibility*, SUNY Press, 2015).

Ontology of intellectuals?

- Intellectuals as ‘producers’ of knowledge
- Ownership over ideas
- “Translation” of intellectual competence into political/social engagement
- The generative significance of context (social, political, historical, economic)
- Networks of knowledge production and dissemination (social network analysis, translation/reception studies)
- Actor-network theory – materiality of *concepts* (viruses, quarks, etc.)

Relational sociology

- Emirbayer (“Manifesto for a Relational Sociology”, 1997), Pier-Paolo Donati (“Birth and development of a relational theory of society”, 2005), Donati and Archer (“Relational Subjectivity”, 2015)
- Postulates: (1) society as fundamentally relational (ontological); (2) emphasis on *the constitution of relations* (epistemological)

“The central point is that social relation cannot be explained neither basing on individuals’ action, nor basing on structures’ conditioning: it places itself in ***another reality*** compared to that of agency and of operations (mechanisms) of social systems. It is the point to conceive ***relation neither as a bridge between individual and system, nor as a mix of individual and systemic elements***, as intended by the majority of the sociologists [but] to understand that social relation is the emerging effect of interplays between individual actions and social system, where actions, systems and relations are provided with inner characteristics and powers which are peculiar to them.” (Donati, 2005)

“(iii) Relational sociology suggests another theorem being the base of the whole sociological theory, the one of relational identity: $A = r(A, -A)$, according to which A’s identity is a relation between A and what is not A. Such relation is a **mediation**, exactly the mediation acted by actors when they define (build over time) their identity in every situation. Such identity grows “by relationing”, or rather it is not immediate (as in $A = A$), but it is not even built on a principle of dialectical denial.”

(Donati, 2005)

Intellectual positioning as relational

- Baert (2012): **context-cum-relational view of intellectual products; intellectual interventions** acquire meaning in a particular setting, dependent on the status, position and trajectory of the author(s) and other intellectual products available at the time
→ **relational epistemology**
- But: positioning not only in relation to other intellectuals/products, but also **events** (e.g. WWII in the case of Sartre)
→ **relational ontology?**

What happens if we view intellectuals and ideas as co-produced?

- Event **not as ontological rupture** (*contra* Badiou); acquires meaning through acts of positioning (performative)
- Intellectual production in part always also production of the context

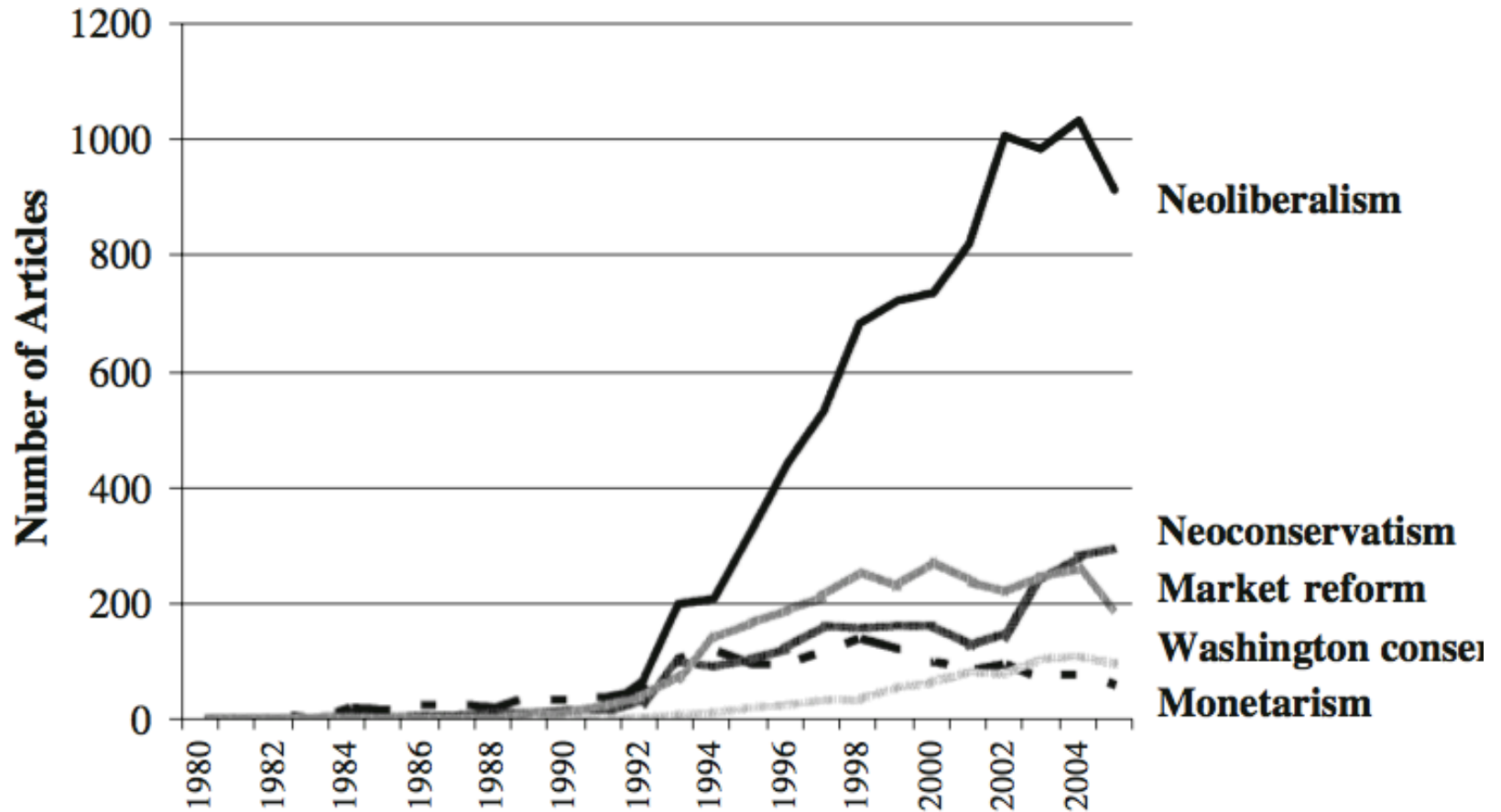
⇒ Engagement as something that happens “on top of” (intellectual ownership of ideas) vs. engagement as something that is intrinsic part of intellectual production

- Political economy: producers/owners of labour
- Reception/audience: markets (fields, etc.)
- “Intellectuals” as generated through the event; “intellectual positioning” a pleonasm?

Illustration: the academic life of 'neoliberalism'

- Since end-1990s: rapid rise of the number of (academic) articles that use/mention 'neoliberalism'
- Boas and Gans-Morse (2009); Peck (2010), Venugopal (2015): too broad, value-laden, under-defined
- How to explain the rise and expansion of 'neoliberalism' as a diagnostic?
- Boas and Gans-Morse: framework for analyzing 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie 1956)

Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009



Positioning effects of ‘neoliberalism’

- “While a fifth of the articles on neoliberalism in our sample referred prominently to **other people** as neoliberals, all of our research, **we did not uncover a single contemporary instance in which an author used the term self-descriptively**, and only one in which it was applied to the author’s own policy recommendations (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009)
- Bourdieu’s “Contre-feux”: (1) Establish “neoliberalism” as an acceptable diagnostic term; (2) Equalize France and (earlier) developments in UK and US → ‘general’ positioning and ‘defense’ of French “republican” model => **chicken/egg?**

Methodological implications of relational ontology

- Context and intervention are co-occurring; descriptions/interpretations of 'context' are always intellectual interventions (Bourdieu's "Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger"; Le Goff's "Mai 1968, l'héritage impossible")

⇒ **Fundamental relationality of intellectual production (intellectual field is not autonomous)**

- Political ontology of 'neoliberalism'; would there be 'neoliberalism' without neoliberalism?
- 'Neoliberalism' is representational; intellectual production is reproductive

⇒ **Fundamental materiality of intellectual production (follow the money)**

- **Towards a political economy of intellectual interventions**