

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie  
= Swiss journal of sociology

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

**Band:** 24 (1998)

**Heft:** 1

  

**Artikel:** Transaction : some pre-conditions : reactions to J. Remy's paper "The concept of transaction"

**Autor:** Guizzardi, Gustavo

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814255>

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**TRANSACTION: SOME PRE-CONDITIONS.  
REACTIONS TO J. REMY'S PAPER  
"THE CONCEPT OF TRANSACTION"**

*Gustavo Guizzardi*

Dipartimento di Sociologia, Università di Padova

Remy proposes an organized conceptual structure based, to my mind, on two major underlying components.

On the one hand, he presents such structural concepts as "situation", "context", "pattern of intelligibility", positioned within the major all-embracing reference framework provided by the concept of "social formation".

The second major component consists of systems of relationships. "Conflict", "contradiction", "integration", "cohesion", "coordination", "cooperation" and "negotiation" seem to be among the principal types of relationships in question. They are, for the most part, opposing pairs which, through their complex interrelationships, are synthesized in the concept of transaction, understood as a form of sociability in the Simmelian sense.

In this sense, "transaction" represents an analytical concept. However, transaction is also something else: it is also in fact a type of praxis. Remy himself notes that this "praxis of transaction" proves useful, even necessary, when it comes to "coordinating opposing demands that cannot be circumvented".

At the same time, it is not a praxis involving mere "common sense" but the product of a deep-seated necessity: the endeavour to imbue a complex notion of the "individual" with acceptable content. This notion is, on the one hand, a source of renewed solidarity, which as such represents a cornerstone of group relationships and may in effect prove to be an actor in the transaction. At the same time, however, the individual is attracted by solitude, by self-motivating individualism. Furthermore, the individual has to act and live in an ambivalent context which tends to negate the very concept of individuality. The Simmelian concept of "mass" is an important reference in this connection.

In this system of diverse sources of tension, what is primarily at stake is the search for a guarantee for the individual thus defined of a certain degree of freedom vis-à-vis institutional structures and also for the reassertion of the

individual's ability as an actor to change at least part of the system of existing relationships and structures through transactional activity.

In this sense, the concept of transaction is based on a premise that may be viewed as "political" inasmuch as it is a means of resolving fundamental conflicts – those concerning problems of legitimacy. The transaction then represents a means of addressing them through a "new approach involving an airing of conflicting views each of which claims to be legitimate".

Leaving aside the political-propositional approach, I shall remain on an analytical-descriptive level.

I fully agree with the proposition that legitimacy is the crux of the conflict. But I wish to raise the following question: if the transaction is a form of relationship, in which structural situations will it be encountered? What conditions are conducive to its presence? What conditions make its success possible or, alternatively, make its very existence impossible?

Implicit in my question is the assumption that the transaction is *not* a necessary or even useful form of social practice but constitutes *one* possible fundamental relationship, for which we may usefully determine the structural interconnections in which it is situated.

In particular, is it possible to create hypothetical scenarios in which "the will to cooperate" or "the search for a tolerable minimum" or "the invention of an acceptable interstice" are, at least in terms of probability, foreseeable? Is it possible to specify conditions that provide a firm basis for the transactional solution, the inclination to seek a dynamic, provisional, multifactorial solution? Even in the theory put forward by Remy and his research group, it seems clear that the existence of the transaction is not simply referable either to the will of the actors or to the possible usefulness of pursuing a transaction-based relationship. We are well aware that there are many conditions and many social actors which do not involve any kind of social transaction even though – from the point of view of a third party, for example a sociological analyst – it would be "reasonable" for them to do so.

In raising this question, I am, as it were, responding to Remy's request for a joint effort by drawing attention to two cases that I have studied. The existence of something similar to the concept of transaction can probably be recognized in these cases *ex post facto*.

The first case is situated in the field of sociological analysis of religion. I have suggested elsewhere (Pour une sociologie politique de la religion, *The Annual Review of the Sciences of Religion*, Vol. 3, 1979) that studies of religion

focus primarily on the system of producing symbolic interpretations and representations of reality. I wished to draw attention in this way to the fact that religion, as we perceive it in its empirical manifestations, actually represents the final stage in a process that I have termed “unequal exchange”.

Relationships with the concept of transaction are conceivable if we are dealing with a field that is not quite as structure-oriented and whose characteristics are not quite as expropriating as those indicated by Bourdieu, and with a “hierarchical culture” as indicated by M. Douglas. In such cases, the production of religious benefits is the product of a process of exchange (or should we say transaction?) between diverse social actors endowed with a different ability to impose solutions that suit them within a framework which – for purposes of mutual utility and not from the standpoint of a prejudicial form of voluntarism – may be defined as objectively producing an unstable equilibrium based on compromise (the latter notion comes from Poulantzas).

In empirical cases that I have studied (for example the “ideology of rural civilization” formulated by Pius XII between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s or that concerning the status of women in politics, also formulated by Pius XII just after the Second World War), I have suggested that the exchange-transaction involves a kind of “measurement” criterion, albeit of a different type from that indicated by Remy. This “measurement” consists in the consent exchanged among the social actors. It is a multifaceted consent inasmuch as, in one respect, it is a consent to the prevailing institution in the domain but it is also, in another respect, the consent of the institution vis-à-vis the social groups who are the beneficiaries of the religious product. These groups are free to use it to their own ends and in accordance with their interpretations provided that they respect certain conditions: (a) recognition of the legitimate right of the religious domain, in this case that of Catholicism, to formulate general interpretations regarding the subject; (b) refraining from making public use of the specific religious product in a way that openly would distort the “orthodox” use established by the institution. The exchange refers to the fact that the institution encompasses, in the religious product, the non-religious objectives of the social actors involved (for example, interest in the development of landed property by the rural petite bourgeoisie or support for the emerging public role of women).

The second case is very different but involves a similar basic relationship. From the time when, in the early 1980s, people began to talk about the social phenomenon generally referred to as AIDS, a set of images, symbols and indications of behaviour having an impact on daily life began to be generated. They are unambiguous, compact and linear only in a superficial sense. In

reality, they constitute a large-scale collective phenomenon, which initially seems to be concerned with defining the situation but almost immediately thereafter proceeds to an elaboration of specific and detailed indications of behaviour.

In reality, the major transaction consists primarily in producing a definition of which particular social actors are entitled to speak – and even more importantly to be present in the public arena – and secondly in establishing the minimum indications of changes in private behaviour in daily life which still have a certain degree of acceptability. Here the important aspect is that mass communication assumes a decisive role, not because – as many authors keep saying – only through information, some kind of result can achieve but because the mass media are the public arena in which the transaction is being conducted.

There are different factors at stake. On the one hand, it is a matter of establishing which collective actor is entitled to speak, to offer interpretations and to provide useful indications (whether the religious domain, or specialists in medical theory and practice, producers of knowledge through scientific research, information specialists themselves, etc.). But on the other hand, it is also a matter of determining who is socially involved in this group of illnesses labelled as Aids. This may be done in negative terms because of the substantial collective costs that ensue, for example in terms of marginalization and assignment of guilt (homosexuals, drug addicts, unfaithful couples, etc.), or it may be done in positive terms inasmuch as there are benefits to be reaped. These benefits may be financial, for example changes in public expenditure on research, investments in health care structures, information and public awareness, or there may be benefits in terms of acquisition of legitimacy, for example recognizing homosexuals as a social group with interlocutor status.

All of this may be situated in a framework of latent conflict stemming from underlying resistance to change (carefully noted but prevented, as far as possible, from appearing in the public sphere), the actual behaviour of individuals in their daily lives being virtually unchangeable and, more importantly, virtually unchanged.

In conclusion, my contribution might consist in proposing a path of inquiry: focusing on consent as a criterion of valid “measurement” for the interpretation of certain phenomena that may be incorporated in the process of transaction.

Moreover, the empirical cases briefly addressed above could probably assist in providing an answer to the questions I have asked, that is to say in indicating the conditions that provide a firm basis for the phenomenon of transaction. It

might be resolved through an expansion of the theory, propoused by Remy himself when he speaks of a “semi-structured context”.

*Author's address:*

Prof. Gustavo Guizzardi  
Università  
Dipartimento di Sociologia  
I-35122 Padova PD

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