IMAGINARY SOCIAL RELATIONS

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For the twenty first century, new sociological theory is needed to account for changing social relations created by rapid advances in communications technology that transcends the old nationalist boundaries of the industrial world. Many new techno-social relations have developed since Tonnies and Simmel first theorized that primary relationships characterized pre-industrial society, and secondary relationships characterized industrial society. I theorize that imaginary social relations characterize post-industrial society, and will characterize societies wired in the twenty first century.

Imaginary social relationships have existed since kings and famous people were first made known to the unknown masses, but have numerically exploded with literate technology, i.e., talking machines (telegraph, telephones, radios, television, computers, walkmen, cell phones, Internet, VCRS, robots, fax, talking toys, etc.).

Imaginary social relations are defined as the emotional relationships an individual, once socialized, has in his/her mind with literate technology of human culture, its cultural objects and products; what Marx called the ideological superstructure. Imaginary social relationships can take many forms; they can be the general or specific love-hate relationship a socialized individual has with:
a) a communications medium itself, the software of art: film, books, art, poetry;

b) a communications technology itself, the hardware of: radio, television, film, telephones, PCs, laptop computers, Internet, or other literate machines e.g., walkmans, CD/DVD players, nintendo, play stations, video games, computer games, robots, talking toys, cell phones, phone menus, where the lone individual talks, screams, sings or dances to machines with language; c) a particular cultural object: a favorite film, book, newspaper, painting, sculpture; d) a fictional character in books, radio, film, TV, video, telephone, computer, Internet, cartoon, animation, virtual reality; e) famous real people one has never met and may never meet in face to face interaction, e.g., an author, writer, director, actor, movie star, politician, model who appears in books, radio, TV, video, film, computer/Internet cyberspace, f) ordinary real people one has never met and may never meet in face to face interaction, e.g., phone sex, Internet chat rooms, telephone; video conferencing; g) the memory of dead people—both famous and non-famous; dead loved ones and relatives e) supernatural beings one cannot see, i.e., God, Virgin Mary in prayer; capacity. g) non-human animals we talk to, but who cannot talk back in a human language, i.e., pets.

Imaginary relations differ from primary and secondary social relations in that:

1) other humans may be physically absent; 2) the cultural object of our desire may not desire us, or even know we exist; and 3) the object we are talking to cannot immediately talk back or hear us. Imaginary social relations stretch existing notions of what sociologists traditionally define as the social: face to face interaction between two or more physically present people. Simmel’s dyad was the model for the beginning of sociation. If Simmel’s dyad was a two-way street; then imaginary social relations are a
one way street. What used to be the actor on stage talking to a mass audience is now the audience yelling back to the star on stage and screen. Interestingly enough, we can return to Simmel’s work on isolation and Cooley’s work on hero worship to find new directions in sociology and define the social in technological society.

Simmel knew there was an “antecedent relationship that precedes the dyad that is the first social relationship, and that is the relationship of the isolated individual to society. Isolation and freedom precede the dyad.” Simmel wrote: “Isolation.... refers by no means only to the absence of society... on the contrary, the idea involves the somehow imagined but then rejected existence of society.” It is ... “society’s effect at a distance—whether as lingering on of past relations, as anticipation of future contacts, as nostalgia, or as an intentional turning away from society. The isolated man does not suggest a being that has been the only inhabitant of the globe from the beginning. Isolation is interaction between two parties one of which leaves, after exerting certain influence. The isolated individual is isolated only in reality, however, for ideally in the mind of the other party, he continues to live and act.” This is the theoretical ground we must look to for new directions in sociology.

**Simmel’s Theory**

In sociology, most of the work done on the isolated individual has been relegated to the subfields of deviance, criminology, mental health, juvenile delinquency, marginal sub-cultures, except for Simmel’s classic work on the Stranger. The stranger occupies that unique position of nearness and farness in social space at one and the same time, according to Simmel. Strangers play a functional role for society, establishing the in-group and town/neighborhood social boundaries.
Simmel’s fascination with numbers and sociation, the “numerical significance of social life,” his work on the individual (one), the dyad, the triad, small groups, large groups all show him as a social mathematician. Simmel would have liked to have been able to develop a social math, a mathematical formula for social interaction, it seems. Simmel is like a scientist trying to break the mathematical code for sociation, break down the molecule of human interaction down into the atom, in the same way that theoretical physicists are bombarding the nucleus to find what is the smallest unit of life. Simmel was looking for the smallest social unit, the cutting line between what is social and what is not, the beginning of society.

He found that isolation and freedom precede the dyad. Isolation is always preceded by sociation. In traditional sociology, only face to face interaction between two or more physically present people was considered a social relationship. However, some of the work of Simmel, Cooley and Mead lead us to consider the isolated individual still carrying on a conversation in his or her mind as social. In fact, for some people, this lingering on of past relations is more real than their face to face interactions. Nostalgia, both individual and mass is real to the persons experiencing it e.g., Mass nostalgia for the fifties “rock and role.”

Who hasn’t experienced this lingering on of past relations? After a relationship breaks up, and one never sees the person again physically, the relationship can still live on in the mind for a long time through photographs, memory. Proust wrote about it, the persistence of memory. It doesn’t have to be love; it can be terror as well replaying in the mind. Look at Holocaust survivors and soldiers, post-traumatic stress syndrome, replaying major events of one’s life over and over again, like a tape recorder, a stuck
Simmel, Cooley and Mead would all call this the society of the mind, the prototype of all relationships and conversations are based on. Talking to one’s self. The human ability to talk to oneself as we talk to others makes the self reflexive for Mead.

Simmel thinks this remembering, this talking to oneself about previous relationships is a social act. This is what he meant by the relationship that an isolated but previously socialized individual has with his or her society is the social relationship that precedes the dyad.

Another type of isolated individual that Simmel referred to who intentionally turns away from society: the Vietnam draft dodger who went to Canada. Can we actually say that this man doesn’t have a relationship to U.S. Society? What about other political exiles?

Sherwood Anderson’s play, “I Never Sang for My Father,” speaks to this Simmelian point. The scenario is: The actor Gene Hackman plays Gene, the son who perusing through a family photo album and thumbs across a page with a photograph of himself with his father with their arms around each other. His father is already dead at the onset of the play/movie. The play is a sensitive study of the painful relationship between father and son. The son is a prominent writer, but has spent 30 years trying to get the approval of a prominent Rotarian, Lions club, former Mayor of his hometown. A man who tells everyone relentlessly how he pulled himself up from his own bootstraps and had a bum for a father. The father’s favorite exchange with his son at cocktail time is to offer the son a lady’s drink a Dubonnet, while he boasts he’ll have a martini. Although the father is dead at the beginning of the play/movie, by the end
the audience knows all too well that the son can never get his father to die in his mind.  
Father lives in the mind of his children for a long time after his death. Even bad fathers live on in the child’s mind.

Anderson begins the play this way: “Death is not the end of a relationship, for the relationship struggles on in the mind of the survivor toward some kind of reconciliation whether it ever realizes it or not...” Can we say the act of remembering our dead fathers is not a social act? Simmel, Cooley and Mead think it is, but the rest of sociology never went with them, instead choosing to define the social as based on two physically present people, Simmel’s dyad.

NEW THEORY

I will argue that the socialized isolated individual tied by imaginary social relations via mass media machines (TV, VCR, computers, Internet email/Instant messaging); multi-national corporate advertising; and global or continental mega-organizations (e.g., European Union) will characterize 21st century post-industrial society. These transnational imaginary social relations transcend the old nationalist boundaries. Sociology needs new theory to describe these new social relations. (See Chart 1 next page.)

Of course, people in post-industrial societies will still continue to have primary and secondary relations within the old nationalist boundaries, but they already have many more imaginary social relations than they do primary and secondary relations. This will only increase as more literate machines are used by more and more people. People in pre-industrial societies had a few imaginary relations, but many more primary relations.
Air and Internet travel characterizes post-industrial society, which makes unplugged global communications feel to the lone individual like magic carpet time travel through the air; unlike the more geographical land and water travel in preindustrial and industrial society.

Chart 1. Transnational Social Relations and Technology.

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<tr>
<th>Socio-Social Relations</th>
<th>Preindustrial</th>
<th>Industrial</th>
<th>Post-Industrial</th>
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<tr>
<td>Social Relations</td>
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<td>Commun-ications Technology</td>
<td>Handmade</td>
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<td>Books &amp; Art</td>
<td>Books, Telegraph</td>
<td>Radio, Television,</td>
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<td>wires &amp; cables</td>
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<td>Transport Technology</td>
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<td>Sailboats</td>
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<td>Domesticated Animals</td>
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In *The Social Life of Information* (2000), John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid argue that the Information Age or the “third wave” has brought about “endism”, the end of social institutions and organizations, e.g. press, television, mass media, brokers and other intermediaries, firms, bureaucracies, universities, government, cities and regions and the end of the nation-state (Brown, p. 16). In *Diversity and Its Discontents* (2000), Neil Smelser notes the end of community and neighborhoods in the United States, and the rise of “porous institutions.” An individual can easily fall through “porous institutions,” like step-families compared to the old extended and even nuclear families.

Brown and Duguid predict that information technology will unleash the forces of “despacialization, denationalization, decentralization, disintermediation, demassification and disaggregation” that will break society down into its fundamental constituents: individuals and information. (Brown, p. 22) Simmel’s theory comes true. Long before the Internet was invented, Teodor Adorno foresaw the cultural phenomenon that Brown and Duguid refer to as “despacialization,” but Adorno called it “spacelessness.” (*Adorno Reader*, p. 5-6)

Many theorists and commentators have tried to put their finger on individual “spacelessness” wrought about by rapid communications advances as they try to map the Internet. Brown and Duguid think the individual experiences this rapid Internet ride as “tunnel vision.”

I theorize that instead of the individual traveling geographically through space on old transportation technology, the new communications technology is time travel. Internet is time travel which brings the world in a audio-visual dream to the
individual who never leaves home. Like in a dream, the sedentary body is almost paralyzed, all the action is in rapid eye movement, auditory hallucination and the imagination. Imaginary social relations will increase as primary and secondary relations decrease in post-industrial society. Philip Slater predicted in *The Pursuit of Loneliness* that we would invent machines and use technology so we never have to ask another human being for anything. Only problem is: we’re lonely.

Kris Kristofferson’s song is prophetic for the individual of the 21st century, “loneliness was more than a state of mind.” It is no wonder that we have started talking more and more to machines as Clyde Haberman noted in his article “Let’s Nip Gizmophilia in the Ear Bud,” in the *New York Times* (p. B1, June 27, 2000). Haberman raised the question: Who are they all talking to walking down the street? I call these people walky talkies.

Peter H. Lewis describes how cell phones disrupt primary face-to-face relationships in “Wireless Valhalla: Hints of the Cellular Future,” (*New York Times*, July 13, 2000, Circuits Section, G1). We begin to ignore the real people in the old regional or geographical world around us, thinking it more important to be electronically tethered to the mother ship Internet. Individuals float in Adorno’s “spacelessness.

Another song speaks to our post-industrial condition brought about by NASA’s outer space travel and satellite communications advances. David Bowie sang, “Major Tom to ground control...I’m floating in a tin can...can you hear me Major Tom? can you hear me major Tom? ” Outer space technological advances have led us deeper into inner space generating more imaginary social relations.
Sociology needs to catch up to the music and science fiction of the now in literature and film, which has beautifully described our need to talk to machines in the post-industrial world because we are lonely. We have moved from *Frankenstein* to “*Stepford Wives*” to Hal, the renegade computer in *2001* to “Johnny 5,” the robot who has feelings in “*Batteries Not Included*”. The dream-fear of it all was that the machines would take over. Instead of Bad Boys, we would have Bad Bots. The new book, *Evolution of a New Species: Robo Sapiens* points the way toward a new imaginary social relationship I did not foresee in my 1973 Rutgers University Masters Thesis on “Imaginary Social Relationships...”: a social relationship with robots. The artificial intelligence machines have begun to talk back to lonely people, starved for conversation. The only question is: are the machines lonely too?

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**Works Cited**


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