

## Introduction. Our Interactionism

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## *Introduction. Our Interactionism*

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### **Introduction**

More than eighty years after the first definition, formulated by Herbert Blumer (1937), *Symbolic Interactionism* relies on the simple premise ‘that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that things have for them’, and, naturally, ‘meanings arise out of social interactions ... in an interpretative process’ (Blumer, 1969: 2). He continues to repeat and reinforce the simple novel theory that, while not new, remains current and dynamic. And in the end, the fascinating reality of interactionism is that its effects may go unnoticed or unreported; yet many sociologists engage it without labeling or belonging to its privileging (qualitative) methods, relational (micro) dimensions, sensitivity (emotions) and without creating organizational conflicts. The strength of Symbolic Interactionism lies in its ability to compel the researcher to take the point of view of the social actor in order to try to understand how words and concepts become social facts and social facts become words and concepts. Symbolic interaction offers the researcher the opportunity to enter into the complex mechanism of social construction, even if he comes from a holistic perspective, with respect to practices, individual actions and interpersonal relationships, the fundamental building blocks that

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link social reality to the dialogic substratum embodied in the bodies and minds of flesh and blood subjects. At the same time, Symbolic Interactionism offers the researcher who moves from an individualistic and constructivist perspective, to focus on the structural and institutional dimensions of society which make interaction between subjects possible within a frame of shared meaning, even if these meanings are subject to change. Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes the relationship between micro and macro levels of society, allowing us to grasp the mechanisms of societal change and regeneration from one generation to another, without losing the central focus of identity.

The objective from the outset of work by Berger and Luckmann in one of the fundamental texts of the western sociological tradition that: ‘the understanding of a reality that forms the subject matter of the empirical science of sociology is, the world of everyday life’ (Berger, Luckmann, 1966: 33), a reality that had its origins in that face-to-face relationship, which Erving Goffman considered similarly essential (Goffman, 1955; 1959).

After almost a century of practice and theory, it is obvious that while maintaining and expanding its theoretical roots, Symbolic Interactionism not only experiences alternating protagonists in a historical journey in which substantial transformations are as theoretical as social; but its strength and charm remains in the ineliminable reproducibility and persistence of its roots. This is what Robert Dingwall, recent director of *Symbolic Interaction*, has not prevented in the academic context, as through many natural conflicts and contradictions, we have tried to reconcile internal conflicts with the difficulty of remaining consistent with academic tradition (Dingwall, 2001; Dingwall, DeGroma, Newmahr, 2012). All agree that a great data-mine of ‘cultural openness’ underlies interactionism, linking between its members, explicit or implicit, a relational character that unites the members of a society with the order that derives from it. The cultural opening that becomes central in this historical moment, is characterized by extensive processes of de-institutionalization, accompanied by equally large but often silent processes of ‘re-organization’ in relation to social reality, reverberating to us an image of a ‘free’ citizen, but one who is ‘submissive’ to uncontrollable dynamics.

With these references, a very brief introduction of a highly articulated and complex tradition was made on June 18, 2018 by the Department of Medicine, Surgery and Dentistry and the Department of Political Science, Social and Communication, organized under the patronage of *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction* and *dell’Associazione Italiana di Sociologia* with the *AIS Sezione Teorie Sociologiche e Trasformazioni Sociali*. It was a seminar titled *Interactionist Talks 3*, in continuity with the similar and previous initiatives, held at the same venue, from December 2012 to November 2015. The seminar received an

endorsement by Thomas DeGloma, President of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, and numerous contributions were made by Italian scholars investigating various topics related to history, theoretical development, and investigations through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism.

It was the aim of the management of the *Italian Sociological Review* to gather in a monographic issue, the materials of the third edition of Interactionist Colloquies, an initiative to which all participants are grateful. It is consistent with the purpose of the magazine to deepen the sociological debate, and contribute to an expansion of the discussion and research within interactionism and the disciplines coherent with it. Further, it proposes an approach aimed at advancing the processes of diffusion, criticism and reflection.

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