THE ELEMENTAL FORMS OF SOCIAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT. The notion of elemental reality is parsed here as instrumental to a renewal of the understanding of social formations, orders, processes, events, and, more generally, social life. An attempt is made to revisit the element notion drawing insights from the classical imagination, so as to develop an 'elementalism' that does not imply a simple return to atomism, but rather retrieves some important insights from the Aristotelian tradition. Elementalism, it is suggested, enables us to see the limitations of both individualist and collectivist takes on social life, allowing for a more 'environmentalist' idea of what constitutes society. In an attempt to analyze how an elemental reality can be said to be at play, the category of 'the visible' is considered, so as to evince some of its constitutive dimensions, properties, and moments.

KEYWORDS: Social theory; Medium theory; Social environment; Elemental reality; The visible

INTRODUCTION: CLASSICAL ELEMENTS

In popular culture, the elements are perhaps most familiar to us moderns through the Greek philosophical theory of the sub-lunar elements. An attempt is made here to revisit the element notion, drawing insights from the classic imagination, so as to develop an 'elementalism' that can be suitable to contemporary social theory. The idea of 'elemental reality' is parsed here as instrumental to a renewal of the understanding of social formations, orders, processes, events, and, more generally, of what we call social life. In the first part of the text, some of the peculiarities of classical element theory are reviewed, specifically, as they are featured in the Aristotelian and atomistic traditions. The second part offers an attempt to elaborate on how a *sui generis* elemental reality might be deployed as a prism to theorize social life. In this context, the proper element of social life is conceptualized as a medium, or milieu, of visibility, which can be termed, 'the visible.' An attempt is made to unpack the constitutive dimensions of such

medium, so as to evince some of its properties, along with the nature of the emergent forms and formations that it engenders.

In ancient philosophy, Aristotle took the motif of the four elements (*stoicheîa*) from the Sicilian Empedocles, who spoke of the 'roots' of things, as well as from Ionian philosophers, in particular Anaxagoras, who spoke of 'seeds'.[1] In the treatise *On Generation and Corruption*, Aristotle reserves more praises to Leucippus and Democritus than Anaxagoras; nonetheless, the latter remains an important source of inspiration for the Stagirite. Anaxagoras heralded the conception of a number of invisible seeds (*moîras*) quantitatively mixed within concretely existing things. Anaxagoras' elements differ from Aristotle's in that they are undetermined in number (although Aristotle, somehow confusingly, attributes to Anaxagoras the thesis that there are infinite elements), with each seed manifesting a pure quality that cannot be mixed, but does feature in visible, composite entities. In addition, Anaxagoras called mind (*noûs*) the thinnest, most homogeneous and unmixable element, which has been interpreted as the non-molecular medium surrounding all molecules (Clive 1974). Leucippus and Democritus (who was the former's disciple), for their part, argued in favor of the existence of indestructible, 'impassive' atoms, infinite both in number and in kinds; what is peculiar of their approach is the role of the void (*kenós*), allowing for the dynamism of the universe through atomic collisions. The atomists heralded a physics of mechanicism and determinism (Barnes 1987). It is perhaps possible to summarize this rough excursus by saying that the elementalism of Empedocles and the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus appear as nearly polar positions, with Anaxagoras offering a kind of mid-way.[2]

The Aristotelian elements, also characterized as 'principles' (*archai*), are imagined as 'simple bodies' (*haplâ phainómena*). There is debate among the specialists as to whether or not Aristotle admitted, besides the elements, an underlying prime matter (De Haas and Mansfeld Eds. 2004; Dimas, Falcon and

[1] It is perhaps worthwhile to recall that the Greek term, *stoicheîon*, is used to indicate also the alphabet's letters, the Zodiac signs, etc.; in addition, the title of Euclid's treatise that lays the ground of mathematics through its basic objects and axioms, in fact features the same word. More generally, the verb *stoichéin* means 'to follow in line.'

[2] More precisely, the atomist were also – and perhaps, above all – engaged in a controversy against the Eleatic philosophers, who denied any reality to change (with Parmenides famously arguing that, once the void is named an entity, it is no longer void).

Kelsey Eds. 2022). In any case, Aristotle followed Empedocles in admitting four such sub-lunar elements (plus one supra-lunar one, the ether). In the Aristotelian scheme, these elements are obtained out of a 2x2 matrix of *differentiae*, whose opposite affections (*pathémata*) are, respectively, cold *vs* hot, and moist *vs* dry. This gives the four well-known combinations of water (cold X moist), earth (cold X dry), air (hot X moist), and fire (hot X dry). It mattered to Aristotle that the elements are generated through contrarieties, since these contrarieties enable a smooth transformation of the various elements into one another. Also, among the two basic contraries, hot and cold are understood as active properties (they can act upon other bodies), whereas moist and dry are thought of as passive properties (they can be acted upon by other bodies). On these bases, Aristotle presents a whole dynamics of generations and dissipations.

All perceptible bodies are, for Aristotle, compounds of all the elements, present in them *all at the same time*: for instance, a concrete fire (an 'everyday' fire, or what sometimes Aristotle also calls 'a flame', *phlóx*) manifests not only the fire element, but also the other three – its body is mixed. In *Metaphysics* (V 3), Aristotle calls the elements 'ultimate', in the sense that they cannot be further divided qualitatively, and they necessarily enter as components into compound bodies. However, as hinted above, the Aristotelian elements are not properly to be understood as atoms. Certainly, the Stagirite starts his discussion from what looks like a very atomistic assumption – asking, that is, how can a given speck of matter be further divided, and what are the limits of such division. In the end, though, the solution he offers is distinctively not atomistic, but qualitative: the simple bodies have qualities and tendencies that cannot be evinced individually, but must be considered via a structural graph presiding over their mutual transformations. The qualities expressed by each element are specified as follows: earth is what is found in its proper place; water is what binds, what holds together; fire is what manifests form, and grows;[3] and air is (although not explicitly stated this way) what circulates in the middle, what is mobile in between (*GC* II 3, *CG* II 8). As upper elements (elements of the above [*tò áno*]), fire and air are borne towards the boundary, yet fire, if unimpeded, is bound to rise higher. That is why Aristotle also attributes to fire a special affinity with nourishment: fire truly gets

[3] Let us quickly recall that, for Aristotle, growth is a formal, not material, process.

nourished, or nourishes itself,[4] as the extremal sublunar element.

THEORETICAL IMPORT OF ELEMENTALISM

What is interesting to us is that Aristotle sought to offer an inherently pluralist and dynamic theory. It is not necessary to subscribe to all the points of his construction to extract various interesting insights. Overall, as hinted above, this way of understanding the physical reality cannot be squared with the modern physical atomistic approach: the notion of *stoicheîon* somehow joins the smallest and the simplest to the most encompassing and most enveloping. There is, in other words, a peculiar relation between element and form: on the one hand, the element progresses through polymorphic stages, on the other, it defies each shape, and cannot be seen as a 'building block' of matter. In modern philosophy, Merleau-Ponty (1966) gestures towards elemental theory in his unachieved work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. In order to explain his notion of 'flesh of the world', Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term "element," in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. (Merleau-Ponty 1968[1962]: 139)

To the extent that they entertain a crucial connection to mobility and metamorphism, the elements correspond to the proper manifestation of a mode of being which is formless, inherently transformative, and grounded in 'style.' This mode can be designated as *presence*: the element thus designates a *mode of being* that is *a presence without being a form*.

Thus, the element presents itself chiefly as *anti-object*: insofar as it constitutes a medium, or milieu, we cannot stand *in front of* it: at each time we start our analysis, we are always already *enveloped by* it. The notion of distance in the element is completely different from, and in fact, opposite to, the notion of distance in empty space. The idea that distance could be measured in abstract mode, surfaces slowly through the Middle Ages (in Oresme etc.), and consolidates in modernity (since Descartes etc.). For its part the element is, a priori, *out-of-measure*: there is no way to measure it *in general terms* that differ from its own. Humans devised

[4] The ambiguity is implicit in the use of the middle passive verb.

measures precisely to gain a grip on the elements. What measures seek to achieve is to turn the elements, from environments, into objects (Brighenti 2018). Correspondingly, objects can be said to be 'elements localized,' singularized, and made measurable through standardization. The elements equate with what linguists call 'uncount nouns': there are bodies of water, air, fire and earth, but the elements themselves *are not* such bodies. Water is an uncount or mass noun because there is something of it (its 'style') in all bodies of water. Again, the element is a *presence* that cannot be individuated and is not amenable to a mode of existence that is individual: effectively, there is no 'a water', only instances of it. This is how the elements test the limits of our language, or perhaps advance us towards clarifying its sources.

Objectivism is the epistemic attempt to entrap and master an elemental reality otherwise bound to remain elusive and resistant against localization – more akin, perhaps, to what in contemporary physics is described as *quantum non-locality*. The importance of the non-locality clause lies in illuminating the fundamental affinity between element and life: in and by itself, the element is non-organic and non-formed, and yet carries with it some force that is irrefutably alive and formative. In his 20th-century revisitation of elemental philosophy, Gaston Bachelard (1942: 195) contended that the elements needed not to wait for humans before they could start imagining on their own terms: the elements produce a 'material imagination' (Bachelard 1948b), which is not the imagination *of* materials (where the materials are the imagined objects), but a thorough elemental imagination. According to the vitalistic persuasion at work in Bachelard's work, imagination is the – only, *but* necessary – meeting ground between organism and element.

Against any pacified idea of elementality as irenic or harmonic infusion in the world ('New-Age' style), to recognise that *the elements are alive* entails taking seriously what has often been described as 'the fury of the elements.' In the midst of a storm or in the proximity of a blaze, for instance, when we are suddenly struck by the realization that *we do not know whether we are going to survive any further, or not*, we also gain the irrefutable certainty that an element is never anodyne in its manifestations. Humans could not but actively deal with the elements, and in this sense our cultural, societal and technological achievements are the outcome of a long entertainment with them. The elements may be *indifferent* to our

existence (a point Giacomo Leopardi could not stop ruminating) – but they explicate themselves through a deep *affectivity* with respect to our conditions of life. The elements affect us in terms of changing the ways we exist, feel and act. We cannot conceive them as space filled with some fluid, or occupied by a solid, rather, we feel them as active forces: in matters of life (and death), we are necessarily exposed to *the force of the elements*. That is why Bachelard (1942: 181) dubs the elements 'provocations:' by their very mobility, they elicit and stimulate our own activity. Whether luring or challenging, the elements stimulate, and augment in reaction, our own 'incisive forces': as they 'incise' us, we are also given a chance to incise them. The whole relation appears to Bachelard as a muscular one: whenever one wants to test oneself against the elements, the latter never fail to respond. Paradoxically, then, the elements *both* constitute *and* disrupt the situations of our life. In sum, the main difficulty with conceptualizing the elements adequately, lies in the fact that they embody *simultaneously* a deep continuity and *its thorough disruption*.

Because the elements are located *around us* as much as *inside us*, all material imagination testifies to some mode of *intimacy* and *complicity*. The elements nourish, support, fill, and animate us – still, as hinted above, their mode of life is non-organic and thus fundamentally different from our own. In order to live in the organic sense familiar to us, we need to compose and arrange the elements in specific ways: we are dust, since that earthly dust is what remains of our bones just a few years after we are dead (*in pulverem reverteris*); we are water, which our cells are specialized in maintaining within their membranes; we need to breathe, bathed as we are in the same air that surrounds us (a point hard to overlook in times of transmitted pulmonary diseases, air pollution alarms, and the never-dying specter of chemical warfare); and finally, for how much fire presents to us as the great destroyer, the bringer of *ekpyrosis*, we need to maintain bodily warmth, which we secure through the metabolic functions: we 'burn' calories. In short, our own life coincides with the laborious relations we exercise vis-à-vis the elements.

If we now turn to particle physics, the element there features as *atom* – the latter being, conceptually at least, the smallest conceivable bit of matter, 'that which cannot be further cut apart,' as *per* Leucippus and Democritus. The grain of sand first offered to the atomistic conception its foundational image. The very

fact that what counts as not-further-divisible has been shifted multiple times,[5] confirms the predicament with *localizing the element*: sub-atomic particles only make sense within physical systems where individuality falters. As hinted above, phenomena of quantum non-locality can be placed under the same heading: indeed, subatomic particles have a mode of existence that is *not* analogous to that of a grain of sand. Not only, in scalar terms, are we humans closer to a grain of sand than the grain of sand to a subatomic particle, but especially, the attempt to objectify only works within given limits: the smaller one becomes, the less localized one concurrently becomes, so that the smallest conceivable particle simply cannot be located anywhere. Space and time change meaning and constitution as we change scale.

The atomistic scenario offers us a situation made of myriads of elements that come in crowds, bringing with them a 'turbulence' (*turba* meaning both vortex and mob) that defines the very problem of early physics (Serres 1977). In the 20th century, the supporters of a particle-less physics, in the Schrödinger tradition, have pointed out precisely the uselessness of the postulate of ultimate particles that cannot be localized, and renounced to them altogether, in favour of a physics made only of waves (Bitbol 1996).[6] This ultimately allows us to observe how the two facets of elementality coexist: the most enveloping reality and the smallest conceivable bit of it form two poles, as it were, two 'circuits,' two circulations, two types of flow which, while not necessarily contradicting one another – and, in fact, always coexisting at each moment – seem to indicate the two extreme possibilities, two 'end-states' of elemental association.

DEVELOPING ELEMENTALISM IN SOCIAL THEORY

We may now take note of how elementality can prove useful to social theory. To begin with, an elemental perspective enables us to see the limitations of both individualist and collectivist takes on social life, the two main classic contenders in the task of singling out the building block of the social. In the liberal ontology, the human individual is posited as the social atom, the social 'grain,' so to speak.

[5] Since the late 19th century, and throughout the 20th century, new subatomic particles have been discovered by physicists at astonishing rate, and continue to be discovered to date.

[6] In turn, a wave is nothing without a field and medium, so that further entities, and modes of existence, are already implied.

This is an idea that thrives thanks to its intuitiveness, and despite its many shortcomings. The deceivingly self-evident nature of the individual is linked to its visibility as localized body. Paradoxically, however, the very unity of the body is more apparent than real: the more one investigates it, the more it dissolves into a number of material and social flows (Mol 2002). The individual is never a cause of anything, rather, it should be more realistically considered as the outcome of a technological, political, social and psychological scaffolding of life: the individual is a habit, a repetition or an arrest of flows. This way, it is not the individual who is individualist (*homo œconomicus*), but moral, political and economic individualism that individualizes: the more time one spends living, operating and thinking individualistically, the more one turns ontologically into an individual (ontology is not pure and a priori, but empirical and political).

In parallel to the shortcomings of the individualist social ontology, similar inadequacies can be revealed in the collectivist or holistic approach. The idea that the group is more than the sum of its parts – or, with Durkheim (1894), that the collective differs by nature from the general – leads to an undue reification of social reality as a manifold. The phenomena of circulation and variation constantly affecting the manifold are then elided. The variable geometry of social life gets lost if one focuses exclusively on the static and repetitive aspects of the social experience, to the detriment of its transformational vagaries. A process-oriented view, as opposed to an object-oriented one, is at work in the theory of Durkheim's rival, Gabriel Tarde; but while Tarde proves more apt at capturing phenomena of circulation and variation, he also tends to fall back into an individual-based perspective that, as considered above, obliterates the conditions that scaffold the emergence of individualities.

Individualism and holism both persist as general worldviews despite the criticism they have undergone. In 20th-century social theory, the terminology of *relationality* and *interactionism* seems to have offered a 'Solomonic' (= equitable) solution to the problem: the individual and the group can now be viewed, not as the primitive constituents of the social, but rather as formations that emerge out of the way in which relations spontaneously manifest themselves, or are deliberately managed. A deep relationalism is at work in current connectionist theories, such as Actor Network Theory, where a rich and seductive account of hybrid associations and assemblages is offered (Latour 2007). The problem, in this case, is that ANT and similar approaches never managed to explain what is

specifically *social* about the associations they consider. While significant, the fact that two things operate upon one another does not suffice to specify what contradistinguishes such connection as of social type, as opposed to other types of non-social connections, such as for instance merely mechanical or electro-magnetic ones. What purely relational approaches forfeit, is a more sustained theorization of the medium that is proper to social life. By correctly discarding substantialism and object-oriented-ness, relational and interactionist ontologies accidentally also discard medium analysis. It is on this point that there may be scope for a re-description of social relational dynamics through the unfolding of an elemental reality subtending them. Notions of medium, ambient, atmosphere, all imperfectly evoke such a subtended reality, which fundamentally requires us to go beyond the dualism of substance and object.

Once the theoretical gaze is more firmly installed in the midst of the 'social ambient,' its inner movement can be evinced. Since the element proceeds through specific 'seeds' or 'germs' that are apt to summon and condense its mode of being, a whole 'trajectology' of such elemental seeds – i.e., a study of movements and trajectories – can be developed (Brighenti 2017). To the extent that the social manifold can be said to exhibit 'order,' Harold Garfinkel (2002) is correct in qualifying it as 'endogenous.' Still, it is just not warranted that everything in social life is order: to properly investigate social life, it is at least as necessary to take into account disorderliness ('Brownian motion') as a positive datum. Again, such an inquiry could be placed under the rubric of *trajectology*, as opposed to the static *architectonics* of order. What happens, is that through stochastic motion, 'stuff' constantly arrives into what Garfinkel calls the *plenum*, and stuff constantly departs from it. Only half of society is 'endogenously' given, whereas the other half is not – not yet, no longer, or only virtually so: only half of social life (or, only one of its *faces*) is *here-and-now* (presence), while the other half, the other face, is *elsewhere-at-other-times* (latency, virtuality). *The* plenum is only *one* plenum. Whenever something new arrives onto the scene of the here-and-now, into the phenomenological present, it may not come as a determining cause, yet it still adds a novel dimension, which – by resonance and adaptation – is bound to become part of the endogenous equation. Such arrival is akin to the actualization of a virtuality: these are phenomena of 'birth' – and, correspondingly, each departure, each virtualization, are phenomena of

disappearance, of 'death.' It is in this way that social life effectively constitutes *a life.*

On the one hand, the element evokes an eternal reality: it has no internal history, but only an external one, determined by the forms, the events and the encounters that unfold within it (as well as, so to speak, and between it and itself). On the other hand, though, there is indeed something irreversible that concerns social elementality. Insofar as social trajectology is not simply logistical displacement, and is not simply 'traffic', but rather manifests of a type of life, it is marked by irreversibility. The social element can be imagined through analogic resemblance with a psychological 'engram' (Semon 1909): it entails a memory of its own. Sequentiality and irreversibility proceed hand in hand: what has been done, can never be simply undone, there is no 'erase' function – although there are of course many subterfuges and options to manipulate the visibility of various events and participants, so as to make things recede into oblivion, or conversely be rescued from it. 'The gift,' as anthropologically studied by Marcel Mauss (1950[1922]), offers an apposite instantiation of such reality, insofar as the gift creates tensional 'term' of latency, which Mauss called the 'expectation' of a counter-gift. Notably, the repository for such a memory is not only psychological, rather, it belongs to an anonymous, impersonal, 'eternal' element which functions as engrammable 'receptacle.' As an illustration, some contemporary archaeologists have excavated an ill-famed street corner in a British city, to find that in the 18th century the same spot was already an ill-famed one: no single psychological memory has covered the whole process, nor any official formal document exists about it, rather, a direct inscription into the 'element' of the city is what has prolonged the stigma, which successive generations of inhabitants have had to learn directly from the reality surrounding them.

Social life unravels neither simply in mechanical imitation (as Tarde postulated),[7] nor just in purely consciously-intended action (as Weber had it): a curious mix of the two dynamics must be envisaged – or, perhaps, an altogether different dynamics. Elementalism finds its place in this gap. Retracing and expanding the tradition of elemental thinking, a chance is given to develop a new

[7] See, for instance, his use of image of the photographic cliché, alter also used by Bergson to describe the matter of the universe.

type of analysis that takes into account the reality of a sensitive, receptive, *eternal yet engrammable* medium of social life.

THE VISIBLE AND ITS PROPERTIES

A lot of work is still needed to dispel the Cartesian metaphysics, within which we unconsciously tend to frame elemental realities. Suffice to consider the issue of dimensionality: we are easily drawn to the idea that the elements are amenable to insertion into a three-dimensional space: a body of water, for instance, can be measured in extension or capacity. This, however, only proves the extent to which our common sense is imbued with Cartesianism. For the element is precisely what *exceeds* the abstract space and exhibits a dimensionality *of its own*: one needs to be *in the element* of water to see its proper dimensions unfold, its forms come to fruition. It is not the element that is 'in dimensions,' but the dimensions that are in the element. These intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, dimensions are the ways in which the element, as a veritable manifold, reveals its faces and explicates its inherent dynamism, its proper logic. Attempts to clarify social logic may need to advance this way.

Drawing analogically from the Aristotelian elements discussed above, we may call the social element, 'the visible.' The visible can be conceptualized as a milieu-manifold where sensitivities can be inscribed, which correspond to the social 'connection' – or, if one prefers, the social bond, the social intercourse, etc. The word 'sensitivities' reminds us that, most often, a connection-made-social does not come with additional certainty, but contrarily with more uncertainty than a non-social connection. Social life does not afford extended predictability, and rather tends to generate, as the hallmark of lack of stabilization, *awkwardness*. Of course, many different feelings are experienced through the social connection that transcend awkwardness – still, at bottom, we can say that the inception of the visible corresponds to the underdetermined, uncertain range of all possibly clumsy outcomes. At the polar opposite of purposive rational action, we find, not irrational drives, but clumsiness as the signpost of warped conditions where means and ends get embroiled beyond repair. Awkwardness thus attests that social life comes with its specific *style*, which is not neutral vis-à-vis its own explications and substantiations. The visible is one single element, one 'mode of being,' but, as an element, it always implicates many dimensions, through which it explicates itself: far from being anodyne and uniform, it includes the wildest

hues, the most adventurous glides, the most raging storms.

The element of social life differs from a substance, exceeds a sum of formal relations, all while not being reducible to purely psychological mechanisms. Zooming in onto the visible, we notice how such a medium appears as an excitable, fine-grained, especially 'soft' element. As it defines zones of incipient reactivity, the visible acts – as Bachelard said of the elements – as 'a provocation'. By attending the visible in terms of its epistemology, it becomes clear that the matter lies not in deciding whether social life resembles more an object, an organ, a body, or an inter-spiritual contact. Indeed, social life *includes and encompasses* all these options: the most tedious mechanical transmission, the vegetative stubbornness of growth and expansion, the endless moments of sudden and unpredictable animation, as well as a number of ongoing inter-individual conversations – regardless of whether these 'conversations' occur between humans, other animals, or other non-animal entities.

It could be objected that the enlargement of social life beyond the human species, as well as beyond all other animal species, leads to an excessively generalist notion, one plagued by a lack of differentiating potential, with the risk of loosing sight of what is unique about the social experience. It is precisely on this point, though, that a decisive epistemological step forward is called for. Durkheim is famous for being a 'discontinuist' theorist, who introduced a radical break between psychology and sociology: it is not because, as individuals, we participate psychologically in social life, he argued, that we know anything about the real nature of society – to the contrary, Durkheim contended, we must break with the false impression of familiarity, and recognize that social facts belong to a different order of reality vis-à-vis psychological processes. Today, the question is no longer to accept Durkheimian discontinuism, but to apply a similar epistemic break to the false identity of social life and human life. The argument can be put as follows: it is not because humans, as a species, participate in social life that they and better placed to know its nature, or that social life unfolds at species-level; quite to the contrary, it is necessary to break with the false sense of familiarity, and admit that social life belongs to an altogether different order of reality vis-à-vis humanity (or other animalities). Social life cannot be entirely reconciled with species-level phenomena.

If this reads opaque, let us briefly reconsider the question of *who* takes part in

the unfolding of social life, and under what respect or capacity it does so. Once we dig deep enough into the question of admission and exclusion, of who and what qualifies to become part of a social unfolding, it becomes evident that it is hopeless to determine such minimal requirements in the absolute and in abstraction. Interactionism has among its presuppositions the idea that actors can be said to be engaged in a social unfolding whenever there is some meaningful reciprocal action ongoing between them. In fact, however, the social unfolding is never symmetrical, never simply mutual (more than out of an alternance of action and reaction, it is made of pace-changing reactions). Instead of seeking to tick a list of requirements, social life begins by uplifting its participants into a kind of whirlwind, where even those who are technically unequipped, and who would seem to have little chance to fly, can effectively be seen moving in it 'spontaneously' (…*als ob*). Of course, not all the parties remain in motion for the same amount of time, nor do they all dance in the same way; still, we should not be misled into deciding about the occurrence of social life on the basis of duration or other external factors. The composition of a manifold may be quite ephemeral and fleeting, and still perfectly real (effectively, *a society*) for its own purposes. What matters are neither external chronological measures, nor previously existing scaffolding structures; it is, rather, facts of intensity, rhythm, and *style*.

The whirlwind is, admittedly, only an image to approximate social elementalism – it is, we might say, the expression of a 'material imagination'. Bachelard, as seen above, insisted on the fact that the materials themselves imagine, that an imaginational production unfolds at their core. The elements are imagining materials, materials capable of imagination. We cannot think of social life without such elemental imagination coming into play in one way or another: social life can be as solid and hard to change as a rock (the Durkheimian point), but it can also be as flowing and variegated as a river flow (the Tardean view); in addition, it can be as light and inspirational as air, as well as, at other times, as heated and dangerous as fire. The 'flying whirlwind' in which a strange dance unfolds, is the visible element itself: it amounts to something that cannot be reduced to any clearly diagrammable operation, but which still supports inscriptions of states, along with designs of ways forward.

Perhaps the word 'plane' could be employed. The Bachelardian element, in this sense, can be found metamorphosed by Deleuze and Guattari (1991), who

render it in terms of a 'plane of immanence.' The plane is the horizon wherein the concepts to be built by a philosopher can appear: it is the 'ground' [*sol*] apt to confer independent existence to the concepts it hosts, without melting in them. Something similar Deleuze (1987) says in his lecture on the 'act of creation,' where he suggests that having ideas is never a general activity and that, instead, one always has ideas *in specific domains* and determined fields – for instance, one has an idea 'in cinema', 'in painting', 'in literature', 'in music' etc. Understandably, an idea requires a sustained engagement with a set of materials, and with technologies, aesthetics, history, politics, etc. which are always specific. Such domains are not necessarily to be considered as fields or systems, but can be seen as an elemental plane – the plateau, the 'mode' – out of which new ideas can emerge, and inside which they can make sense. The plane is a horizon, a presence, which does not dictate form, but without which no form would be possible.

This does not mean, however, that forms cannot be established within the visible: to the contrary, the visible offers the space wherein, and the materials with which, forms can be sculpted. If we consider social-theoretical notions such as those of differentiation (Simmel 1890), distinction (Bourdieu 1979) and boundary (Luhmann 1990), to name a few, we notice that they designate operations entirely supported in the visible. Such operations are neither simple discontinuities, nor just demarcations of a given effectuation; they can be better described as 'sensible enactments.' The category of the visible, in other words, affords an elemental reality that is simultaneously of the *percepibilis* and the *percipiendum*: the visible is offered to one, but also forced upon one (it is perhaps in this sense that, for his part, Goffman [1971] spoke of 'unwarranted initiatings').[8] Acts of inscription into the visible conjure up forms that, far from being geometrical occurrences, are imparted with the anonymous vigor of an elemental life. All elemental forms of social life are thus to be approached through morphogenetic reconstruction.

Deleuze (1980) objected against formal analysis on Spinozist grounds: what matters to understand the encounters between bodies, Deleuze claimed with

[8] There may be reasons to argue that what Goffman called 'interaction order,' is in fact more akin to an elemental reality, than a spatial-geometrical one.

reference to the framework of Spinoza's *Ethics*, are compositions of speeds and capacities to receive and impart affects, rather than forms and substances. However, we believe that the consideration of morphogenesis offers a way to connect form to affect, through a dynamic appreciation of forms on the basis of their proper energetic regimes. Morphogenesis, in other words, enables us to understand that form is not merely visual or geometrical in its deployment, but heralds a number of capacities that are (or) to be played out. Suffice to recall here the importance of disguise, camouflages and metamorphosis in myth: in mythical tales of all sorts (from Ulysses to children's books), the very fact of changing shape *does* affect one's speeds and capacities. It is a somewhat mysterious effect, one that does not proceed in any linear causal way, but comes about in the mode of the evocative and the propitiatory. Between form and affect, there will always be a gap, but the two effectively never stop relating to one another. It is precisely around the nature of such 'conversation' that social theory can practice.

CONCLUSION

As we interrogate social life, we are forced through swathes of metaphors. Clearly, the visible cannot be explained in terms of a sheer physical reality – as such, it is not to be added to the list of other physicalist metaphors, from organism to field. Still, if it is true that the properties of the visible recall as many physical occurrences, then we can learn analogically (for what analogy is valid) from Aristotelian elements about a number of aspects which the visible exhibits in its explications, on its own account. Observed this way, the classical elements become as many 'moments,' or modes, of the visible: earth, 'what is found in its proper place', conveys the inertial, repetitive, 'empty' (or invisible, infra-ordinary) mode of social life; water, 'what binds', instantiates the relational, connectionist, distributive as well as 'distinctive' and 'boundary-making' mode; fire, 'what manifests form and grows,' embodies the formative, tensional, 'teleological' mode; and finally, air, 'what is mobile in between', specifies the interstitial, contagious, 'atmospheric,' fusional mode. Most importantly, we will not forget Aristotle's core idea of dynamic elemental transformation through changing ratios of *differentiae*: the many moments of the visible are not separate entities, nor separate spaces, but generative combinations.

There may be advantages to practice such a modal social theorizing, without conflating the registers of the classical elements with those of the social manifold

as such: the analogy is not substantial, but operational. It is in the deployment of the visible as a plane of existence *sui generis* that these stylistic inflexions occur (spontaneously, tactically, strategically, etc.).

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