# Ambiguous coexistence and social transaction: On a sociology of opacity and institutionalized discretion

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# Ambiguous coexistence and social transaction: On a sociology of opacity and institutionalized discretion[‡]

**Abstract**: Together with concepts such as pillarization and consociational democracy, the notion of social transaction has been forged to account for national contexts where different subcultures coexist and yet simultaneously maintain their own autonomy. But while pillarization became a widely agreed-upon diagnosis of Belgian society, limited in its descriptive reach to this and a few similar contexts, social transaction, by contrast, has become part and object of a scientific practice stretching out from France as far as Canada. The paper seeks to better understand the notion's emergence in Belgium and its relevance beyond this original context. We first examine what the concept reveals of its historical and intellectual context, and vice versa. Next, we show that its engagement with different and opposing sociological strands grants social transaction a typically ambivalent character that mirrors the experiences of its authors and their position within francophone sociology. The notion does not make unambiguous theoretical choices, but rather gives and takes between production (Touraine) and reproduction (Bourdieu), exchange (Mauss) and negotiation (Crozier). If despite its rootedness, the notion of social transaction has nevertheless gained relevance beyond Belgium, so we suggest, a plausible explanation might be found in its claim that the opacity of the social world stands as one of its most universal and productive traits.

**Keywords**: social transaction; Belgium; sociological ambivalence; sociology of science.

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[‡] Jean Rémy passed away on October 6, 2019. He was preceded by Émile Servais, who died a year earlier. This article was written between both events, but admittedly does not feature the hagiography commonly found in obituaries. It does, however, try to express a critical appraisal of a bold and creative style of thinking that even today remains unparalleled in Belgian sociology.

## I. *Une histoire à la belge*

When Paris catches a cold, runs a Belgian quip, Brussels sneezes. The somewhat bizarre idiom carries a twofold meaning. The first and principal one gives expression to a slightly irreverent admiration, admitting the long-standing attraction its towering neighbor exerts on life in Belgium. It sums up in a phrase how much of what happens in France echoes throughout Belgium. But the vaguely comical effect of the expression relies mainly on its second and more subtle meaning. With much knack for self-deprecation, it mocks how trends and fashions hailing from the French capital tend to be significantly rescaled in order to fit the Belgian context. As if Belgium, metaphorically speaking, could not accommodate full-blown colds, but only the occasional sneeze. The local witticism thus allows us to highlight how apparent causality and seemingly obvious similarities go hand in hand with significantly differing contexts, each with its own horizon of possibilities. The student revolts in May 1968, which in many ways were a catalyzing event for the Belgian sociology that we shall discuss in this article, offer an illustrative case in point.

Much as in Paris, in Belgium too protests emerged against the established authorities. But as proverbial wisdom indeed already knew, inevitably there were considerable differences. In fact, the differences are so strong that one could rightly ask if, ultimately, the two events are related at all. As historians eagerly point out, for example, some of the most significant student protests in Belgium began much earlier, with demonstrations happening as early as the end of 1966.[1] That already offers an indication of how the Belgian student dissent unmistakably participated in its own national context, where considerably different issues were at stake. While one might still characterize the Parisian upheavals as experiments with the micro-politics of desire – including its many happy misunderstandings – the Belgian context at the time offered little room for all too bold adventures. The student riots in Belgium, one could say, espoused by contrast a much more conventional, yet grimmer political philosophy, which crystallized the country's linguistic differences into a clear opposition: friend versus foe.

In the university town of Louvain above all, the student protest became tightly entangled in this old, but increasingly prominent linguistic divide of the country. Over the previous decade, a series of language laws (cf. McRae 1986, pp. 149-156) had gradually re-articulated Belgium as the ensemble of two coexisting, linguistically homogeneous regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. But although situated in northern Flanders, the Catholic University of Louvain had until then successfully maintained its francophone leadership. It also had a substantial French-speaking student body, in 1968 still accounting for up to almost half its total population. A Dutch-speaking section was introduced in 1963, doubling its internal structure into a federation on paper. But as even French-speaking observers had to concede, the University of Louvain was still essentially a francophone university, with its Flemish section amounting to little more than "a sort of annex" (CRISP 1966).

Against the backdrop of a strongly growing influx of new students, most of them Flemish, the university's uneven bilingual status increasingly stood out as an anomaly, which its Flemish section found hard to stomach. To them, the university's French-speaking establishment represented an unwelcome remnant of a not so distant epoch when Belgium's upper strata and much of its public life were exclusively francophone. As

[1] Next to the sources mentioned above, our summary account of this tumultuous period relies mainly on its historical reconstruction by Willy Jonckheere and Herman Todts (1979) and Christian Laporte (1999).

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Louis Vos (2008) has noted, the student riots in Louvain were the fruit of a (long-lasting, historical) bond between Flemish students and a broader Flemish movement, which had been advocating for more autonomy – against the French-speaking ruling class – since the very establishment of the Belgian state.[2]

Two years after the 1966 demonstrations, the Flemish students hence protested again – chanting near-tribal slogans such as "Walloons out" – but now saw their protests ramify, gathering effect up and to the fall of the then acting government. The ensuing elections centered on this so-called Louvain question and submitted the students' demands – "Leuven Flemish!" – to the popular vote.[3] The resulting electoral loss of the Flemish Christian Democrats, who participated for the first time beside and not together with their French-speaking colleagues, made abundantly clear how Belgium's hitherto determinant ideological cleavage had begun to falter in favor of another, crystallizing cleavage between the two opposing language groups. In fact, the mere given that governmental interference was necessary to put the whole dispute to an end displayed acutely the ineffectiveness of the clerical authorities in maintaining the bilingual unity of the university under the common banner of its Catholic vocation. Precisely for this reason, this peculiar string of unexpected events and its unpredicted outcome are often considered a turning point for the Belgian context. It ushered in the decreasing hold of ideological differences over social life in Belgium, while linguistic difference gained primacy as the country's organizing principle, as its later federal state structure would reflect.

The new government's way out of the entire impasse, thus far repeatedly rejected by both the French-speaking section and the religious establishment heading the Catholic university, consisted in splitting the institution into two autonomous and entirely distinct entities: the University of Louvain, now Leuven, became exclusively Dutch-speaking, while in Wallonia a vacant site, baptized *Louvain-la-Neuve,* was developed from scratch to make place for the new francophone university. With this strongly symbolic split and the subsequent transfer to the new town, reaching its almost farcical peak with the infamous divide of the university's library holdings, begins the genesis of the sociological concept central to this article.[4] If we have taken some time sketching its genealogical context, it is first and foremost because these peculiar events illustrate in an almost paradigmatic way much of what will follow, besides composing its historical substrate.

This notion, labeled social transaction, was coined by two francophone sociologists exiled from Leuven at the time, Jean Rémy and Liliane Voyé, later joined by Émile Servais (1978a; 1978b). The concept is closely knit together with their suddenly changed life courses and emerged from the blurry borderland between their research and

[2] Only later would the student protests emancipate themselves from this so-called Flemish cause and individuate into an autonomous movement in which the anti-authoritarianism against the French-speaking establishment turned into a broader concern for the democratization of higher education (cf. Vos 2006).

[3] To what extent these demands genuinely expressed the students' wishes – or instead merely voiced the concerns of others – is even half a century later still a topic for debate. There are certainly elements indicating that the students' demands at least coincided with the interests of other parties. Apart from the already mentioned close link with the Flemish movement, the protesting students enjoyed the vocal support of their Dutch-speaking professors, for example, who joined them and even incited them to skip school, as Jef Verhoeven (1982) mentions.

[4] The tragicomic split of the library collection, amounting to over a million volumes, took almost an entire decade. In the absence of any agreement on substantive criteria, the library's possessions were halved according to their shelf mark, attributing odd and even numbers to each new library respectively. This arbitrary principle, as related by Chris Coppens et al. (2005), was considered the fairest and, contrary to popular myth, avoided multi-volume publications being up divided between the two libraries.

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the practice to which the needs of the rising new town compelled them. From city sociologists they suddenly had to become urban planners – boots in the mud – whose input was requested for the development of the novel university site (cf. Rémy 2015, pp. 129-155).[5] In many ways, the concept's characterizing traits reflect the turmoil drastically disrupting the then current state of affairs and most probably would never have been written without it.

Next to the shifting national context that characterized Belgium at the time, the notion of social transaction also owes much of its character to the intellectual field and disciplinary context in which it was elaborated. Two elements are of particular importance.

(1) First, there is the given that at the time, the social sciences – and sociology, in particular – were still largely organized according to linguistic delimitations. While some French-speaking sociologists used to read the writings of their anglophone colleagues, their intellectual universe remained primarily limited by linguistic boundaries. A simple examination of their bibliographies reveals that even the most prominent French-speaking sociologists of that time mainly read and published in French. Together they constituted a rather closed, albeit international field of intellectual discussion, with France and Paris at its center. French-speaking Belgian sociologists found themselves occupying a paradoxical position in this field. Although involved in its evolution, they held a place on the margins, hence appearing subaltern *and* privileged in comparison to their Parisian colleagues. Despite, or perhaps due to its geographical and linguistic limits, the field of French-speaking sociology was markedly conflictual, distinguished by polarizing debate and strong theoretical oppositions. From their provincial setting, however, Belgian sociologists were not forced to engage directly with the dominant French divisions – Pierre Bourdieu against Raymond Boudon, Alain Touraine versus Pierre Bourdieu again, rinse and repeat. They could instead exploit their distanced position to create room for themselves, without having to take sides. As we shall elaborate later on, the work of Rémy and Voyé is highly illustrative in this regard. Absorbed by the turbulent university politics we have previously alluded to, they experimented a way to legitimate their own position-taking in the margins by exploiting their immediate context as a resource to think and work with.

(2) Sociological praxis was at the time less thematically fragmented than today's hyperspecialized subdisciplines impose, which in turn allowed for a much broader scope in publication themes. As their scientific output suggests, sociologists like Rémy and Voyé could still identify first as sociologists, even though they were acknowledged city sociologists and hence had expertise in a very specific research domain. Such generalized self-identification enabled them to publish on multiple themes, hopping from sociology of education to sociology of religion and from medical sociology back to urban planning. They could still legitimately put in a word in any of those empirical terrains and even pull back to the general debate about the nature of social processes and society as a whole.

[5] One of the concept's clearest precursors is to be found in Rémy and Voyé's (1974) self-devised method of participative scenario building, conceived *in situ* by trial and error. The scenarios served both analytical and prescriptive purposes, as they were meant to formulate to architects and the political establishment to what extent the city's facilities matched, or should match, the needs and wants of the population. In a wording that still bears the echoes of previous events, the scenarios' central ambition was to imagine how "to translate into space the diversity of aspirations of different socio-cultural groups," whilst allowing everybody to make explicit their specific needs.

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The notion hence sprang from its authors' involvement in a variety of research topics, but openly held on to the ambition to clarify the fundamental sociological problems appearing in that epoch. At the same time, if one looks at its genealogy from a Bourdieusian perspective, the concept of social transaction can indeed be understood this way: it emerged at the margins of francophone sociology and its development can be traced back to the characteristics of that field and the particularly ambivalent position of included outsiders that was assigned to French-speaking Belgian sociologists. As we shall outline in the following section (II), however, social transaction meant to express a very different perspective, much opposed to Bourdieu's line of thought. Rémy and Voyé advance a point of view that leaves more room for unexpected twists and turns, stressing the contingent nature of the social as a general rule. The notion of social transaction thus obtained its characteristically ambiguous shape, resulting from its obstinate refusal to take sides between the conflicting positions of French sociology. Instead the concept attempts to convert those contrapositions from mutually exclusive alternatives (either..., or...) into ambivalent counterpoints (both ... and ...). Next (Section III), we shall briefly survey the notion's reception in Belgium and abroad, in order to raise some questions about the relationship between the concept and its context. In the concluding section (IV), we elaborate the notion's relation to ambivalence, this time not understood as its own characterizing trait, but as one of sociology's most fundamental themes, in order to seek out how a sociology of social transactions contributes to the question.

## II. The sociological ambivalence of social transaction

Interestingly, extracting a clear definition of a social transaction from the rather abundant literature used to develop it proves itself a difficult task. Nowhere is the concept presented to the reader in a simple, unequivocal, clear-cut form. Or on the few occasions where a definition is provided, its summary formulation hides much of all its meandering meanings. One of the earlier publications, for instance, claims social transaction as "the confrontational process taking place among actors, who all have a differing capacity to assert and impose their perspectives" (Voyé and Rémy 1978, p. 28). In its most general sense, the term is indeed used to indicate how a confrontation unfolds into an agreement between parties, how a compromise is thus reached and how different opposing and even openly conflicting views could thus accommodate one another.

In an iterative movement, each step adding new layers of meaning, Rémy and Voyé progressively developed their concept of social transaction by simultaneously adopting and rejecting established references to similar but different notions. Rémy (1996) could thus underline, for example, the many qualities he admired in Michel Crozier's concept of negotiation – its open-ended character leaving room for innovation, its recognition of the opacity of most situations; its emphasis on conflictual cooperation – and then stress immediately afterwards the strengths of Marcel Mauss' economy of gifts – its emphasis on invisible and implicit exchanges, trust and reciprocal obligations between unequal parties – only to underline how the notion of social transaction is at once similar to but different from these established concepts (cf. Rémy and Fusulier 2005). In a dialectical play with neighboring concepts, the notion is hence usually defined by what it is not: a transaction is not mere calculation, nor is it a decision. It is not just a negotiation or a common compromise, because, in contrast to such notions, social transaction is much more diffuse and can include an implicit, not necessarily conscious dimension (cf. Rémy, Voyé, and Servais 1978a, pp. 93-94). Nor is it the result of pre-existing forces or reducible to the ambitions of only one of the involved parties, as domination theories would have

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it. On the contrary, a social transaction is not predictable or predetermined, but creates its own "causality of the probable" (Rémy 2015) in the course of events.[6] In sum, the concept of social transaction serves to disclose and overcome the discrepancy between what these more familiar concepts are able to reveal and the unrealized possibilities that escape them.

In the many definitions and redefinitions of the notion, the following traits often return and so obtain a certain centrality. (1) Involved actors are observed to have differing, even incompatible views or interests regarding the given that brings them temporarily together. Incompatibility, rather than uniformity or consensus, is claimed as the most common, possibly universal, characteristic of social life. (2) An open-ended time sequence develops and unavoidably unfolds into a new, unpredictable situation, differing from the initial state. (3) A so-called third party often mediates in the course of the transaction sequence (Rémy 1992; cf. 1996). Such a mediating go-between can take on extremely varying shapes: objects, space, time, or actors can all operate as a third party facilitating the transaction. In an explicit association with Georg Simmel, who is said to have acknowledged the "intrinsically triadic character of the social", Rémy (1992, p. 94) adopts the latter's intuition that the typically modern addition of a third party – something or somebody foreign to the conflict, acting as a non-partisan mediator – creates additional options for all involved parties.

A fourth and final trait warrants a more extensive elaboration. One of the single most important dimensions of the transaction concept relates to its rejection of Bourdieu's notion of domination. In Bourdieu's work, social and symbolic relations between groups are conceived as agonistic relations of domination. Social relations are conceived almost exclusively as relations of domination and exploitation, structured by a dichotomous relation between the dominated and the dominant. Symbolic relations confine the problem of legitimacy to that of the commanding legitimacy of the dominant class, internalized as self-evident by the dominated (Liénard and Mangez 2015). The apparent transformations of social and symbolic relations that arise from struggles among groups and classes are then often understood as nothing more than the ultimate cunning of the dominant reason – to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1999).

While it might appear as technical hairsplitting, the distinction between the notions of social relation ("*rapport social*" in French) and social bond ("*relation sociale*" or "*formes de sociabilité*") contains an essential element about the sociological ambitions behind the concept of a transaction. A social relation between Alter and Ego points to the fact that the two occupy different positions in a hierarchical structure (say, Alter is richer or more educated, or better known than Ego is). The concept of social bond, on the other hand, designates situations of co-presence: moments of everyday life where Alter and Ego share the same context. Bourdieu's sociology is understood and rejected by Rémy and his colleagues as the obsessive attempt to reveal the social relation at work in any social bond, such that their bond is reduced to a meaningless disguise for what really matters. Whatever might happen in the course of this or that specific circumstantial social bond, the determining force that gives any particular situation its true sociological meaning is this objective, pre-existing, social relation. The notion of social transaction established itself in opposition to such a view. "We acted against such a conception of social life, where the individual appeared in everyday life as a simple expression of the

[6] Significantly, Rémy tacitly borrows this very expression from Bourdieu (1974). But where Bourdieu used it to reflect on the determining causes of what statistics revealed as probable, indicating for example the self-fulfilling prophecies that feed the reproduction of social inequality, Rémy explicitly inverts its meaning to underline the contingency of everyday life, stressing how the social world only obtains coherence as it unfolds.

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social structure, on which he in return had little effect," as Rémy (1992, p. 84) acknowledged. The concept rejected such determination. Instead it asserted that most situations are indeterminate, unpredictable, and open to various possible outcomes (Rémy 1996, p. 12).

Rémy and his colleagues thus had a sense that the notions of domination, exploitation and (symbolic) violence, *en vogue* in the then dominating sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, were only an extreme, and in fact rather infrequent, case of how social situations are structured and evolve through time. While the situation in which the symbolic order specific to a given group acquires a commanding legitimacy is central for Bourdieu, it is precisely this situation which Rémy (1992, pp. 85-86; 1996, p. 11), again echoing Simmel (2009a, p. 298), considers an exceptional, if not merely hypothetical borderline case. The analysis of most situations instead requires crediting even the dominated actors with a capacity for autonomous symbolic work, i.e. they are not subject to the arbitrary symbolic imposition of the dominant classes but capable of producing an alternative symbolic order, a counter-system that serves their interests (cf. Rémy, Voyé, and Servais 1978a, pp. 90-92). In most cases, what then emerges is more complex than the dynamics of pure domination and symbolic violence would imply.

The notion of social transaction can hence be understood as a reaction to Bourdieu's emphasis on domination. The Belgian context, with its multiple divisions, and the ensuing rather creative, sometimes incongruous, solutions to conflict, made all the more apparent the limits of his sociology. Bourdieu's reduction of social life to the rigged combat between haves and have-nots, was therefore replaced with another guiding imaginary, deemed more capable of exemplifying and explaining the organization of the social world: life as a bustling marketplace (Rémy, Voyé, and Servais 1978a, pp. 89-90; 1978b, pp. 132-134). Not the market of the all-rational *homo economicus*, but a metaphorical place where what is for sale gives inevitably rise to opposing interests – between who buys, who sells, who pays more and who seeks to pay less, etc. – *which the transaction then dissolves*. Each transaction concluding the sale ends as well the opposition between involved parties and thereby becomes paradigmatic for settling matters between opposed interests, other than through overt conflict: as (indeed again) Simmel (2009a, p. 300) already knew, "every exchange for a thing is a compromise," not a victory or a loss.[7]

If the concept thus established itself by capitalizing on Bourdieu's blindness to the limitations of power, it also strongly emphasized what Rémy called the indeterminacy of the social (1992 p. 96) or its semi-aleatory character (1996, p. 12). The notion of social transaction supposes that no-one is in control of the future: neither those in power (as implied by Bourdieu's sociology) nor those opposing them (as maintained by Touraine): "no single actor holds the monopoly" (Rémy 2004, p. 19). Observing social transactions, then, is a way not to reduce such social indeterminacy, but an attempt to describe its collective (though not common or concerted) management in all its complexity. "If one adopts its perspective, the transaction, and its resulting compromise, is a way to account for the constitutive complexity of everyday life. So that the attention for complexity would oppose in a fundamental manner its simplifying reduction" (Rémy and Turcotte 1997, p. 634).

As we have said, social transaction is indeed a concept that engages with different and opposing sociological strands, which lends it a characteristically 'double' character.

[7] Max Weber (1979, p. 72), too, of course claims: "Every case of a rationally oriented exchange is the resolution of a previously open or latent conflict of interests by means of a compromise."

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The notion does not make univocal choices, but rather gives and takes between theoretical oppositions. As its creators write, "such ambiguity is not a flaw" (Rémy, Voyé, and Servais 1978a, p. 259), but on the contrary deliberately mimics what they consider an essential trait of the social world. Social practice is not univocal, carrying a unique meaning valid for all, but always produces simultaneously opposite effects. This time siding with Raymond Boudon (1977), they underline how what might appear at first palatable, since innocuous in the short term, might hide still opaque, but strongly destabilizing effects in the long term. Conversely, what announces itself as a disruption might turn out to be no more than a loud repetition of the status quo.[8] This ambiguity between stability and change, emerging from social life's unintended and unexpected but nevertheless interdependent consequences, constitutes, they claim, "the fundamentally dialectical character of reality" (1978a, p. 259). If sociology is prepared to recognize such ambiguity, it cannot but accept a constant readiness to readjust itself to unannounced changes: "ambiguity, dialectics, and self-criticism are inseparably linked" (Rémy, Voyé, and Servais 1978a, p. 260). As a result, Rémy and Voyé's writings on social transaction have an open-ended character, where in principle many theoretical frameworks can be mobilized next to and against each other (cf. Rémy 1989).[9]

## III. Beyond Belgium

Having introduced in the previous sections how social transaction has been elaborated by its authors, and what it owes to the context of its elaboration, we move on to survey the broader, national and international reception of the concept in order to sketch its career in and beyond its initial context. If we mention below some of its modest triumphs of scientific dissemination, it is not so much out of misplaced provincial pride but rather because they raise some pertinent questions about the relationship between sociology and its social context. If sociology is nothing but a map of the societal segment it observes, can the map then still guide us through other territories than those it was set out to represent? Do sociological concepts still work when they travel into other geographical or historical contexts? And if they do, how do they then attract attention and acquire meaning beyond their immediate context of origin? Can concepts at all emancipate themselves from that context or is such a universalist ambition nothing but a (useful) fiction that global science understands and presents itself with? Or should we simply follow Gregory Bateson (1972, pp. 448-465), who already knew that the territory never enters anyway and that all we ever deal with are maps of maps, ad infinitum?

Observing the reception of social transaction, domestically and abroad, a number of remarks can be made in this regard. First, the striking lack of even the slightest resonance of the concept in the northern half of the country illustrates clearly how francophone Belgian sociology faces insurmountable difficulty in reaching the Dutch-speaking part of the very context it observes. To the best of our knowledge, the concept *never* managed to cross Belgium's internal language border. Much as Raf Vanderstraeten and Kaat Loeckx (2018) write, the politico-religious differences framing Belgian

[8] As Boudon frankly admitted, such a position is of course not at all dissimilar to Robert Merton's (1936) original formulation (cf. Crothers 2004).

[9] Besides the notion of social transaction, there is a multitude of related concepts to be found in scientific disciplines other than sociology, such as linguistics, legal studies, psychology and of course economics. However, since the writings of Rémy and Voyé bear little (explicit) witness to such 'extra-disciplinary' elaborations, we have deliberately limited our discussion to how social transaction participates in the sociological debate.

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sociology have regularly come at the expense of a remarkable disregard for Belgium's linguistic cleavage. To which we might add: which Belgian sociologists thus silently helped to reproduce. Although Rémy and Voyé regularly met and published with Flemish scholars sharing their interest in sociology of religion, notably via the international conferences they co-organized (cf. Voyé and Billiet 1999; Voyé et al. 1985), such a gateway did not produce any visible cross-contamination. In Belgium, the Dutch notion of pillarization, made popular by Arend Lijphart (1968), monopolized sociological research addressing the Belgian context. In the meantime, Rémy and Voyé carefully avoided citing the well-known work of that same Dutch political scientist (or any other Dutch-speaking social scientist of note, it seems) when elaborating on their idea of social transaction. The map does not only depict the territory; it is part of that territory – woven into its fault lines, as it were – and how could it be any different?

The concept fared better in the international field of francophone sociology, where it became a significant topic of discussion and part of a wide-ranging scientific practice. There the notion of social transaction has been taken up to study a plurality of themes, thereby expanding its range, even far beyond the privileged study objects of its authors. The concept found applications beyond city life, in areas as various as education (Rémy 1986), religion (Rémy et al. 1985) or tourism (Rémy 1994), but also sexuality (Van Campenhoudt et al. 1994), professional ethos (Fusulier 2011), sustainable development (Hamman 2008) or social work (Causer and Hamman 2011; Freynet et al. 1998). A rather rare privilege for Belgian sociologists, Rémy and Voyé's concept thus developed and is still developing a scientific career beyond Belgium. It became the core topic of a still active research network within the international association of French-speaking sociologists (AILSF), whose output has resulted in an extensive number of edited volumes and special issues of both Belgian and international journals.[10] While this international diffusion remained limited almost exclusively to sociological Francophonie, the success of the concept should still be considered significant, all the more so when taking into account the looming dominance of Parisian sociology. The concept made some cracks in the metaphorical one-way mirror (Heilbron 1988) from behind which Belgian sociology usually observes what happens abroad, thus offering the outside world a glimpse of what otherwise remains a very domestic affair. Rather surprisingly indeed, it is probably the best-known sociological concept attributable to Belgian sociologists.

Its minor success can also be told from the scientific polemic it stirred up. One topic of controversy – the relevance of its initial Belgian context, suitably enough – merits specific mention. The sociological quarreling gave rise to diametrically opposing positions. A considerably large group, gathered around the French sociologist Maurice Blanc, adopted the notion quite enthusiastically, stressing how its attention to ambiguity made it a fertile approach to describe their own local context.[11] Other sociologists showed much more skepticism. Rémy and Voyé's attempt to give and take from distinct and even strongly opposing paradigms was considered a sterile exercise without any clear theoretical gains. The concept's "sociological ecumenism," as Claude Dubar (1998) ridiculed it, found little grace. More importantly, it was argued that the notion still carried

[10] Besides the above cited monographs edited by Maurice Blanc (Blanc et al. 1994), devoted to the work of Rémy and Voyé, there are the recently published volumes presenting third-generation research, now devoted to Blanc himself (Causer and Hamman 2011; Hamman and Causer 2011). During the last decade, special issues have appeared almost yearly in the Belgian journal *Pensée plurielle*, while the journal of the international association of francophone sociology, *SociologieS*, devoted a special issue to the notion in 2016.

[11] "The clearest thing is the importance of ambiguity," writes Blanc, together with David M. Smith (1997).

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the stamp of its context of origin and could hardly be made meaningful beyond the Belgian context without considerably adapting it. It should be noted that such critiques did not necessarily result in a rejection of the concept altogether, but instead led to the conclusion that redefinitions were indeed necessary. The notion should evolve, even Blanc (2001) agreed, and unsurprisingly its initial origin was soon enough often minimized or omitted – or, much like other Belgian 'exports', simply assumed to be French.

This otherwise banal controversy gives an indication of how sociological praxis is not only an expression of its own situatedness. While all sociological concepts inevitably owe some of their characteristics to the socio-historical specificities of the context they were forged in, the international life of the concept of social transaction allows one to highlight, inversely, how sociology also participates in the global, context-transcending practice of science. For that to happen, sociology continuously requires practices that, much like any other cognitive activity, allow its assertions and observation schemes to condense into generalizations – society, actor, structure, or indeed many other existing sociological concepts – ready for others to pick up and endow with new meaning. For example, in the work of Philippe Hamman (2013), a junior colleague of Blanc belonging to the concept's third generation of scholars, social transaction is generalized into the process of "socialization and mutual adaptation in a universe structured by couples of oppositions." Conceptual dilutions, like this one, can easily appear as too broad and problematic generalizations, liable to result in an empty "catch-all concept," as Bernard Fusulier and Nicolas Marquis (2009) have retorted in yet another polemic with Blanc. The notion's resultant "excessive generosity," as Mathieu Berger (2013) ironizes, can indeed quite easily lead it to mean too much while saying too little. At the same time, there is something to be said for considering such *decontextualizing* practices to be as necessary as the context they (too) occur in – for it is certainly true that sociology can never escape the context it observes. But as social transaction's longevity beyond Belgium makes visible, sociology always relies on such generalizations, withdrawing context and initial nuance, in order to exist as a global social practice. [12] Sociology always balances between the inevitability of a *situated* diagnosis of its present and the requirements of participation in a *globally* operating discipline, which prevent the diagnosis from becoming a private language of sorts, meaningless in other contexts.

Not all concepts, however, seem equally equipped to become the object of such decontextualizing practices. As the limited descriptive reach of notions like pillarization and consociational democracy shows, there are of course variations. Even when the latter notions became globally known expressions, indeed much more so than social transaction, they remained descriptors of a very specific phenomenon, which limited their pertinence to the portrayal of a handful of national contexts.[13] In the final section we suggest that the concept of social transaction owes its own decontextualization to its

[12] In a similar vein, Jean-Claude Passeron (1991) speaks of sociological concepts as semi-proper nouns, which unlike more rigid designators require a certain elasticity in order to work.

[13] Staf Hellemans' work may therefore be called rather exceptional, in the sense that he was the only one attempting to strip the notion of its provincial character and transform pillarization into a general theory, where both the (sub)differentiation into societal blocs and the ensuing de-pillarization are considered to result from the interaction between social movements and modernity. Quite significantly, Hellemans too concludes with the ambiguity of its outcome. Contemporary society, Hellemans (1990) writes, "is more than ever covered by a veil of 'unsurveyability'." For an account of the challenges he faced in translating the pillarization concept to other geographical contexts, we refer to his contribution in this special issue.

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ability to theorize ambiguity as a fundamental, if not universal, aspect of social life. In its abstract ambiguity, we argue, the notion of social transaction sought to incarnate and acknowledge the opacity of the social world as one of its most basic and productive traits. And in doing so, quite unexpectedly, it unearths a rather distinctive position on the sociological landscape.

## IV. A sociology of opacity

As we have illustrated above, in the writings of Rémy, Voyé, and Servais ambiguity itself is exploited as a valuable resource, allowing them to endlessly oscillate between theoretically opposing strands. Social transaction can either lead to an admiring Maussian appraisal or rather critically engage with the bargaining *homo economicus* and his negotiations, only in order to ultimately decline either of such propositions and claim the self-created third position emerging between the two. There is never any space for dialectical relief, however. Their writing never synthesizes oppositions into newfound clarity but stubbornly maintains an ambivalent back-and-forth between positions. Rather like the overly rigorous cartographers in Jorge Luis Borges' one-paragraph satire on the exactitude of science – who fabricated a tragically useless map, coinciding point for point with its territory – Rémy and Voyé's writing style thus mimics and merges with the social world they describe.[14] They do not write in a self-excluding movement, as if they were outside and unaffected by reality's ambiguity, but allow their writing to be governed by the principle their notion seeks to express. Social transaction thus turns ambivalence into a conceptual strategy, probing the fruitfulness of keeping its own distinctions in continuous suspense. The concept constructs itself via bipolar registers that never get to determine its final meaning (cf. Rémy 1995). If such ambivalent theorization often comes at the very steep price of dry verbosity and a frustrating lack of uniform answers, it nonetheless has the merit of an experimental attitude towards social theory, today almost unthinkable.

Sociology over its history has tended, sometimes almost compulsively, to shun ambiguity (Levine 1988). The notion of social transaction seeks, by contrast, very explicitly to make apparent how opacity is *productive* for social life. It expresses how for coexistence to be possible, differences cannot be resolved with linear solutions – valid for all – but need to be maintained in a thus ensuing social opaqueness. It is important to understand that in their endless refining of the notion, its authors never posited such ambivalence as the characterizing peculiarity of a specific geographical context. Instead, ambivalence is theorized as the corollary of modernity, an inevitable part of life in contemporary society. While its writing style certainly strikes one as over-sinuous or dated – and even more ample concerns have been voiced about its resistance to time (Blanc 2009; Fusulier and Marquis 2011) – the notion does thus highlight a too often unheard characteristic of the social world. For Rémy and Voyé, the ambiguity of the

[14] ". . . In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers' Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. *Suarez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro N, Cap. XLV, Urida, 1658*" (Borges 1998, p. 325)

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social world constitutes not only the endless source fueling the Sisyphean ordering ambitions of modernity – a position central to much, if not all sociology – but denotes a trait of sociality that, when tolerated as such, becomes the enabling element for even highly improbable forms of coexistence.

A notion like social transaction then indicates how such tolerance requires the institutionalization of a certain discretion, as to shield the world from too much clarity and the ensuing risk of conflict. Social life, Rémy (2020, p. 62) warns, cannot tolerate 'perfect' transparency. Precisely here lies its difference from the much more established position that Zygmunt Bauman (1991) elaborated in his famous trilogy on postmodernity. Both can be said to share the conviction that ambiguity is the essential quality fostering all social life, as well as the inevitable outcome of modernity.[15] The oeuvre of Rémy and Voyé, however, seeks to bring out how a common sociality does not necessarily come at the cost of curtailing individual moral discretion, as Bauman (1993, p. 46) feared. On the contrary, they show a community without consensus, more precisely a sociality based on institutionalized discretion – or, phrased pejoratively – organized hypocrisy.[16] Social transactions, in yet other words, always involve "playing with a specific operative fiction: 'acting as if'. The transaction unfolds in a subtle balance between transparency and opacity, closure and openness" (Rémy 2020, p. 93).

The coexistence described by the notion of social transaction is hence not based on shared beliefs or assumptions, integrating atomic individuals into collective order, but on social mechanisms by which the supposed need for collective agreement can simply be circumvented in the first place.[17] Social transaction is therefore a strangely apt way to summarize the notion's sociological position-taking, for, just as monetary transactions are able to keep the participants' person out of the equation – and thus liberate them from the necessity of interpersonal agreement beyond a set price (Simmel 2009b) – social transactions come with similar individual liberties. There is no need for agreement, if that was ever a real possibility to begin with, only for mechanisms that keep its impression intact.[18] As Voyé summarizes, "consensus is never anything but a supposition and dissent is hence always latently present, not only in the rifts of consensus but also in all those situations where the latter is not explicitly pursued" (Voyé 1992, p. 212).

This often requires discretion, as the mere wish to verify the shared character of those assumptions might too easily unveil its absence and so break up peaceful coexistence. As such, Rémy and Voyé describe a sociality where difference is recognized but not necessarily considered a dangerous threat, nor is it inevitably assimilated into uniformity. On the contrary, Alter's difference constitutes the best guarantee for Ego to maintain his or her own idiosyncrasies and quirks. Discretion implies above all a certain disregard for such traits. It generalizes the position of the stranger to a condition common to all, by designating *deliberate indifference* as that which enables the impression of

[15] A similarly contrarious argumentation that sees ambiguity not as a nefarious problem for social life to solve but as its outcome, can be found in Robert Merton and Elinor Barber's (1963) seminal text on role ambivalence, where they argue how the highly ordered relationship between professionals and clients is itself a structural source of ambivalence, affecting the role behavior of both.

[16] We borrow this expression from Nils Brunsson (1989), well aware that in his writings it carries a more specific meaning and not the pejorative undertone of what is here alluded to.

[17] A related position, although from a very different angle, has been theorized in unequivocal terms by Jean De Munck and Marie Verhoeven (1997), who observed how procedures are negotiated in order to overcome situations where normative certainty lacks or cannot be reached.

[18] Here Niklas Luhmann's (1972) early writings on the fictious character of consensus were a clear (and acknowledged) inspiration.

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communality in the first place.[19] The coexistence emerging from such social transactions hence resembles more the tacit conventions of good neighborliness than a commonly agreed-upon social contract: nosey interference is little appreciated, some matters are not to be discussed, some questions cannot be asked – and so some research cannot be funded (cf. Mangez and Mangez 2011). If society thus rests on the cautiously maintained operative fiction of shared beliefs, instead of actually shared beliefs or situation definitions (Park and Burgess 1921), the resulting ambiguity is inevitable and hence turns into ambivalence. Where the former designates the mere lack of uniformity, the second indicates that lack as impossible to bridge and thus as the incompatibility between two or more opposing poles, driving society to find coping mechanisms. Ambiguity and ambivalence, Mathias Junge (2000) concluded elsewhere, therefore stands as one of sociology's most fundamental themes. They denote the both constitutive and always dynamic element defining all societal processes. More than anything else, then, social transaction is the attempt to grasp this infinite movement of modernity within a single concept.

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[19] In the sense that Simmel (2009a, p. 602) attributes to strangers as 'objective persons' – not as figures of "mere aloofness or disengagement," but of "indifference and engagement." He considers them a constitutive part of the social context wherein they participate, albeit with an increased degree of freedom and without any strong commitments.

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