What is a Social Relation?
Reflections on the Limits of Vergesellschaftung
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1 A Preamble

In this contribution, the twin phenomena of Migration and Integration are being approached through the prism of what is perhaps the most important concept for the discipline of Sociology: Relations. Migration refers to the movement of a dwelling. The term “transnational” already indicates that this movement is understood in terms of the crossing of borders between nation states. Dwelling is about place and place is by its very essence relational (Malpas 1999). Dwelling also points towards Integration: a person who dwells can only do so, when there are particular attachments with which a place can be stabilized, for example as a “home”. It is only by virtue of extension in the sense of abstraction, that we are able to refer to Integration in relation to domains that are not concrete places, such as “nationhood” or “culture”. In this contribution, I refer to this process of abstraction as Vergesellschaftung which is a German word for “becoming a society”. It is because of Vergesellschaftung, that we have started to accept – usually without further questioning – that people are members of aggregates that extend well beyond the concrete interactions of everyday life.

2 Concerning Relations

Sociology is the science par excellence that concerns itself with connections or associations (which shall henceforth be referred to as “relations”). In our ordinary everyday understanding of the term, a relation always implies that there are at least two entities that are different from each other. In this sense, a relation is always in between. However, we also use the term “relation” to refer to another person
(usually a human being): for example someone we do business with. We also use relation in the sense of members of a family, i.e. relatives, and use the phrase “to be related” in a very specific sense. The difference between a business-relation and a family-relation is as such very interesting from the point of view of “what comes in between”. With a business-relation it might refer to a contract, a handshake, or an exchange of products, services and money. A family-relation refers to either common-ancestry (so called blood-relations) or very specific kinds of legal constructions, such as marriage and adoption. Seen in this sense, the matter of what comes in between, i.e. the interest that is being shared, is important in terms of identifying what kind of relation we are talking about.

*There is no relation without possession.* A relation is always carried by something concrete, something material, a piece of paper, a handshake, money, chromosomes, etc. Even a more elaborated ritual such as marriage involves a range of material entities: a ring, an official document with signatures and stamps, particular words that have to be spoken (such as the “yes”). What comes in-between is thus itself an entity. One might therefore conclude with the postulate, that a relation requires a minimum of three – and not two – entities.

The fact that we use relation not just in the sense of “what is in between” but also in terms of the entity we are related to seems to point to exactly the opposite. One has relations (business relations, friendship-relations, blood relations, sexual relations etc.). Here the relations between entities become that of possession itself: entities in a relation are no longer separated but bound: they are no longer the same as they were before they were in a relation; they have changed as a result of the relation; by having a relation, they have entered into a relation and are no longer indifferent to that relation; they have been affected. On the basis of this, one might say that relations neither imply three nor two but instead only one entity: the relation is the binding of different entities into something new that is irreducible to the entities that are being involved.

When we say “I am in a relation(-ship)”, we are referring to an entity “I” (ourselves) in terms of a location or place “in a relationship”. This “being in” is a kind of having in the double sense of both possessing and being possessed. It is never a case of either possessing or being possessed but always both. Perhaps one might be able to possess more and be possessed less; the possible asymmetries could be referred to in terms of “power” (hence the term “power-relations”). Saying “I am a relation (of X)” is thus the same as saying “I have a relation (with X)”, but with the second phrase, one is much easier attuned to the reciprocities involved as well as to the fact that relations may not last; relations evolve as processes, because that which lies in-between has been made explicit.