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## **Anselm L. Strauss. Action/Work as Process and Perspective**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The article will shed some light on the theoretical works of the American sociologist Anselm Strauss (1916-1996). Already well-known as one of the founding fathers of Grounded Theory his achievements in social theory and especially his firm re-grounding of the interactionist project in its pragmatist roots often remain underestimated. There are several reasons for this. The most obvious is the great success of the grounded theory research style established by Glaser and Strauss (1967), a success which sadly seems to have largely outshined Strauss' theoretical works. Another reason is that Strauss did not fit into the established division of labor in sociology between, on the one hand, empirical researchers and, on the other, social theorists and philosophers. He did both and built one on the grounds of the other. In addition, Strauss neither built his social theory from scratch nor did he center it on one key idea. His theorizing has been a lifelong step-by-step iteration of theoretical concepts derived from working on empirical problems and driven by a basic philosophical compass inherited from early American pragmatism. His later theoretical writings, thoroughly grounded in decades of empirical studies on illness and healthcare, are structured by two core categories, process and perspective, which are both approached with a focus on action and work. In shifting the Blumerian emphasis from *symbolic* interaction towards a more material view of sociality as situated activity, and thereby blurring the somewhat artificial separation of action from structure, Strauss both established a strictly anti-dualistic view of the social and showed the dynamic tension between doubt and belief to be the mover of human activity.

An interesting point regarding Strauss is that although his early academic education brought him in close contact with pragmatism, especially with Dewey's epistemology and philosophy of science, he entered American academic sociology at a point in history where interactionism in the then prevailing Blumerian variant of symbolic interactionism was close to losing contact with some key pragmatist elements. Although prominent in the works of its founder George Herbert Mead and other early figures in Chicago School sociology, only a faint afterglow of pragmatist thinking in Blumer's interpretation of Mead's works remained. In

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted both to Louise-Alice Dunn for making this paper readable to native speakers of English and to my dear colleague Adele Clarke for numerous invaluable comments on an earlier version of this text.

developing his own theoretical stance, Strauss not only regenerated pragmatism but also combined it with the ecological approach developed by Everett C. Hughes. Resulting from these theoretical influences, empirical experiences, and creative problem-solvings, the conceptual groundwork laid by Strauss allows for pragmatist interactionism to adequately deal with postmodern challenges such as the participation of nonhuman entities in social activity or the importance of discourse in shaping situated action and at the same time being shaped in these situations.

### **A Life for Curiosity**

Born on December 18, 1916 in New York, Anselm Leonard Strauss grew up in Mount Vernon, a typical middle class suburb in Westchester County. He was the eldest of three children, and his father Julius Strauss taught sports at a high school in New York while his mother, Minnie Rothschild Strauss, fulfilled her role as a housewife. Although his family origins lie in Germany and his grandparents migrated from there between 1860 and 1870, Strauss rather saw himself as the child of a typical American family than a migrant. Jewish by birth, according to him these cultural and religious roots had no deep impact on his life (Legewie and Schervier-Legewie 2004).

We cannot fully understand Strauss' biography without considering the grave health problems from which he started to suffer in his youth. Due to severe breathing problems, his doctors advised him to choose a dry and warm south-west state such as Arizona for his undergraduate studies. However, in 1935, he finally ended up studying at the University of Virginia in Richmond. He never shook off his fragile health status, which later escalated to a micro heart attack in 1972 and a severe heart attack eight years later. His chronic heart disease made it difficult for Strauss in his later years, to live the normal life of a social scientist including travelling, conferences and public debates.

His health problems even influenced the subject of his undergraduate studies: Strauss began by studying sciences because after all the medical treatments he endured during his youth he wanted to become a surgeon (Legewie/Schervier-Legewie 2004). However, bored after his first year of studies he added courses in humanities, sociology and psychology to his schedule (Baszanger 1998: 355). Whilst in Virginia he got involved with Chicago-style social science and philosophy through his first teacher Floyd House, a former student of Robert E. Park in Chicago. House introduced Parks' and Meads' perspectives as self-evident and Strauss "absorbed this general sociological orientation much as goldfish accept their environment"

(Strauss 1996: 6). It was also through Floyd House that the young Strauss came to read the classical pragmatists, namely Dewey and his philosophy of science. Despite his serious stake in the social sciences, Strauss graduated from University of Virginia with a BA in biology.

Due to his fragile health state, Strauss was spared the fate of many men of his generation. Instead of fighting WWII, he was able to continue his studies from 1939 until 1944 at the University of Chicago, where he studied sociology, social psychology and anthropology under the auspices of Herbert Blumer. Blumer convinced Strauss to devote his master's thesis to a critical review of the concept of "attitude" in social science research. However, because Blumer's never-ending critical comments compelled him to rewrite his thesis again and again, Strauss finished the manuscript of his dissertation on marital choice (Strauss 1945) under Ernest Burgess before his master thesis had been accepted (Strauss 1996: 5). This episode nicely characterizes how Strauss experienced his relation to Blumer, who taught him a lot, but with his strict criticisms also discouraged curiosity and creativity (ibid.).

Having finished his PhD, Strauss left Chicago for a two year teaching job at Lawrence College in Wisconsin before he became an assistant professor at the University of Indiana. There he met Alfred R. Lindesmith who had become known for his empirical research on opiate addiction in the research style of Znaniecki's analytic induction. Lindesmith and Strauss became life-long friends, and together published the classic interactionist textbook *Social Psychology* (1949). It was through the joint writing of this book that Strauss gained a critical distance from his former mentor Blumer. He found Blumer excellent in pointing out wishful social theoretical goals, but not equally gifted in developing these theories or suitable empirical paths in their direction (Strauss 1996: 7).

In his early years as a professional sociologist, Strauss did not have his own method either. That changed when in 1952 he went back to the University of Chicago as an assistant professor and began to work with Everett C. Hughes. During his graduate studies, he had avoided Hughes' readings which he deemed mere story-telling. Then when working with him, he found in Hughes' fieldwork practices a clue to his own methods problems (Baszanger 1998: 356). In Hughes, a descendent of Parks' famous research group, Strauss became connected to a very practical empirical strand of sociological research, which he blended with the theoretical depths of the Dewey-Mead-Blumer line of pragmatist-interactionism. Moreover, and no less important, in working with Hughes, Strauss became acquainted with Erving Goffman, Fred

Davis, Tomatsu Shibutani, Eliot Freidson and Howard S. Becker, who would become his lifelong close colleagues and friends.<sup>2</sup>

A second impact the collaboration with Hughes had on Strauss' development lies in a higher regard for organizational and processual aspects of the social (Corbin 1991: 24). Hughes' ecological approach, with its understanding of organizations as processes organized by their commitment to goals enacted in dealing with different environments (Hughes 1971/1957), would become a core inspiration for Strauss' later sociology of work and organization. The influence of this perspective can first be seen in Strauss' monograph *Mirrors and Masks* (Strauss 1959).

Together with Hughes, Becker and Blanche Geer, Strauss then took part in the fieldwork study *Boys in White* (Becker et al. 1961) on the professional socialization of medical students conducted at the University of Kansas in the late 1950s. Although Hughes and Strauss were mainly responsible for the conceptual and analytic work, Strauss did spend about three months of fieldwork at the medical school and started to develop his own style of comparative analytic work with empirical cases. Directly following this first fieldwork experience, Strauss initiated another team ethnographic research project at both Chicago State Hospital and Michael Reese Hospital, where from 1958 to 1960 he also served as research director. The study he conducted together with Leonard Schatzman, Rue Bucher, Danuta Ehrlich and Melvin Sabshin, resulted in the monograph *Psychiatric Ideologies and Institutions* (1964). Here, Strauss presented his first and most important empirically-derived theoretical concept, the "negotiated order approach". Strauss and his colleagues showed that decisions about psychiatric treatments, rather than being based on solid and unquestionable professional knowledge, were in fact more often than not the result of a constant stream of negotiations involving professionals, nurses and even patients. This understanding of social order as a "processual ordering", as he later phrased it more adequately (Strauss 1993), became the core of his theoretical work .

In 1960, Strauss was awarded a full professorship at University of California in San Francisco. Very fittingly, given the subject matter of his previous research in professional medical work, his new position was located in the U. C. San Francisco School of Nursing, a position he accepted with the understanding that he would later be able to found a PhD-program in Sociology. Though delayed, the program began in 1968.

It was in San Francisco that Strauss finally left his professional career in social psychology behind and became a full-fledged sociologist. Key to the research program Strauss

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<sup>2</sup> Young and enthusiastic as they were, they formed an informal group, the "Chicago School Irregulars", named after Sherlock Holmes' "Baker Street Irregulars" and dedicated to "studying natural settings, daily life, everyday worlds, social worlds and urban lifestyles..." (Lofland 1980 ; see also Strübing 2007a: 19).

established at UCSF was a large research grant offered to him by the US National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH). Strauss intended to follow in depth a trace that was already highlighted in *Boys in White*: While medical students at that time learned a lot about saving their patients' lives, they did not, however, learn to deal with dying patients and their relatives (Glaser and Strauss 1965: 4).

Together with Barney Glaser, a Columbia PhD in sociology who had studied with Robert K. Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, and Jeanne Quint Benoliel, a trained nurse and nursing scientist, Strauss investigated how the process of dying in the organizational and professional setting of hospitals is socially constructed and performed. It was through their studies that the idea of death and dying as socially constructed knowledge issues was established in both sociology and medical practice. With their key concepts of the "awareness context" and the "dying trajectory", Strauss and his collaborators were among the founders of the sociology of medicine. After years of fieldwork, the project resulted in three important monographs, two of them regarding the above mentioned key concepts, while the third became one of the most influential books on qualitative research methodology: the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

A series of empirical studies on varied topics of medical work and care ensued across the following decades. In *The Social Organization of Medical Work* (Strauss et al. 1985) Strauss broadened his view on hospitals by investigating in general how organized medical work is done. At this point, work became the centering perspective through which Strauss approached his fields of research. In pursuit of this perspective, he published a series of articles explicitly addressing the interactive organizing of work. Here he develops both the core of his social worlds theory (Strauss 1978) and a sound sociological theory of organization (Strauss 1985; 1988). Yet all these more general concepts remain embedded in his empirical research on medical topics.

In 1987, aged 71, Strauss formally retired. Yet despite his fragile health after a severe heart attack in 1980, with his retirement he began another very productive phase of his work. He not only published his first methods textbook on grounded theory (Strauss 1987), but more importantly, he started to complete his theoretical works. Apart from some theoretical and reflexive papers, e.g. on Meads' conception of time and evolution (Strauss 1991), it is largely in his last monograph *Continual Permutations of Action* (1993) that Strauss draws together the different lines of his theoretical thinking based on the vast amount of empirical work he had done.

No longer able to do much travelling, Strauss and his wife Fran made their home an open house for his students, friends and colleagues from abroad. The kitchen table became an

informal office and the place for vivid debates as well as of scholarly guidance.<sup>3</sup> Still engaged not only in writing but also in some empirical fieldwork, Anselm Strauss died of another heart attack on September 5, 1996.

### **Identity: From Social Psychology to Sociology**

In his first important monograph *Mirrors and Masks* (1959) Strauss highlights an issue that is core to the interactionist project and that was addressed by a considerable number of scholars at that time (namely Goffman and Shibutani, or, for that matter, Erickson): the issue of identity. However, he gives focussing on identity a different twist: Instead of defining identity and identity formation in ways used by contemporary psychologists, Strauss turns the notion of identity into an instrument to investigate those *social* processes in which identity is—at least in parts—formed (<1959>1997: 15). That is, he digs deeper into the symbolic and cultural foundations out of which identity results. Leaving topics of personal identity aside, Strauss concentrates on the social dimensions of identity, in other words, “how persons become implicated with other persons and are affected and affect each other through these implications” (ibid.).

Initially, *Mirrors and Masks* was meant to be short essay on identification. However, it ended up integrating organizational and institutional elements to generate a full-fledged social theory of identity formation (Baszanger 1998: 356). The impact of this book cannot be overestimated. Maines and Charlton (1985), for instance, identified *Mirrors and Masks* as a general “turning point” for symbolic interactionism in overcoming the self-limitations of social psychology to become fully sociological.

Retrospectively, *Mirrors and Masks* appears to be the agenda setting paper for Strauss’ lifelong research program. It addresses topics such as the role of social worlds in establishing and maintaining social order, the fluidity of both social formations and identities, and the importance of perspectives in the constitution of social reality. Alas, none of these topics appeared in a saturated form. The notion of social worlds, for example, is adopted from Shibutani, while it took Strauss another twenty years until he developed his own theoretical stance on this subject matter. He then criticized Shibutani for both limiting his understanding of social worlds to symbolic exchange and neglecting the material dimension of social activity and its constitutive role in maintaining social order. Still, with *Mirrors and Masks* Strauss managed to integrate topics of identity and identity formation as core issues into an

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<sup>3</sup> Among them were a considerable number of German scholars. Most of them made contact with Strauss on the occasion of two conferences near Konstanz, Germany in 1974. The network established through these meetings and some follow-ups might account for the extraordinary resonance Strauss’ works had and still have in German sociology (Schütze 2008 ; Strübing 2007a).

interactionist sociology and at the same time adding an organizational and structural view to it. Through this, he steered interactionism into the position of a full-fledged sociology encompassing micro, meso, and macro level issues.

### **Action/Work as Creator of Reality**

As Isabelle Baszanger (1998: 1) put it, “(t)he concept of action can be seen as Ariadne’s thread that weaves the work of Anselm Strauss together”. However, in order to understand the specifics of the Straussian perspective on social processes it is important to have a closer look at the specific phrasings Strauss gave his notion of action. Although the word ‘action’ may evoke images of an isolated, atomized act as it is typical for Weberian approaches or rational choice theories, this is not at all what Strauss had in mind. For him action “though expressed in English language as a noun is actually a verb – ‘to act’” (Strauss 1993: 22). He wrote this in the initial section of the first chapter of *Continual Permutations of Action*, indicating right from the start that his theoretical exposition centers on a *processual perspective* on the social. A second phrasing is action as *interaction*. Actions are embedded in interactions. That is, rather than recognizing actions as existing on their own, as single entities, they are only analytically definable units within a larger stream of action. “Yet the rare theorists who write about action, per se (such as Weber, Schuetz, and Parsons) tend to begin with the *act*, with a separate island of action; not with the assumption that interaction is the prior central concept, nor the assumption that to separate action from interaction is an analytic artifact” (Strauss 1993: 25). Thirdly, Strauss not only treats acting as synonymous with working but his complete analytic perspective focusses on the social process of working together. More than his choice of research fields (most often larger organizations such as hospitals), it is his special curiosity about work related issues that signifies Strauss’ approach to action-as-work. He used to ask questions such as ‘How do they accomplish it?’, a more specific variant of Geertz’ ‘What the hell is going on?’ (Geertz as quoted by Olson 1991: 248).

A fourth dimension that enriches and specifies Strauss’ notion of action is the *body*: “No action is possible without the body” (Strauss 1993: 23). It sounds trivial at first but in the light of the strong emphasis that interactionists such as Blumer and Shibutani placed on the dimension of symbolic communication as the *mover* of interaction, Strauss’ statement and the fact that he positioned it as the first of his 19 basic assumptions in *Continual Permutations of Action* indicates that this is a pivotal issue for him. Long before the “turn to the body” appeared on the social science stage, Strauss took on the task of detailing what the body as a necessary condition for action means and what consequences a developed concept of body has for sociological analysis. Rather than being a mere tool for performing mentally pre-designed

actions, the acting self is conceptualized as a bodily self: “the dualism of distinguishing between mind and body is rejected” (Strauss 1993: 23). By the same token, body is not thought of as a limited physical entity, but rather as “multifaceted” (23), including multiple body processes that represent layers of relations between the acting self and its environments. While Goffman defines interaction as bound to the physically present selves and others, Strauss points out the preconditions and the consequences of this boundedness of symbolic interaction to physical/material processes.

### **Process and perspective instead of structure and action**

One of the core issues of social theory is the relation between structure and action. Often treated in chicken and egg fashion, social theorists try to decide which comes first: action or structure. Strauss, however, with his pragmatist background, did not bother much with unfruitful dichotomies. Instead, he follows Hughes’ stance: “... not change but the dynamics of remaining the same is the miracle which social science must explain” (Hughes 1955: 6). The way Strauss tackled the issue can best be seen in his concept of “processual ordering” (Strauss 1993: 245 et passim). Social order, instead of being either the stable Parsonian frame within which action takes place, or the result of accumulated individual acts, in Strauss’ conception appears as a continuous process evoked by ongoing interactions. These, in turn, both rely on and are shaped by what actors from their respective points of view perceive as given resources and constraints. Interaction is always situated. It takes place in the view of and dedicated towards the specific conditions experienced in the processes of interacting. Strauss maintains that these conditions are far more than just other humans and their activities in face-to-face contact. Rather they consist literally of any issue occurring in the perspectives of actors as relevant: established divisions of labor, the material resistance of the built environment, the actual perception of time constraints or a growing feeling of uneasiness and despair in light of an upcoming risky surgery, for example. (Inter)action responds – consciously or not – to the whole range of these conditions. Moreover, it does so in various ways, thereby re-establishing or modifying them in acts of practical confirmation, denial, manipulation, and so on.

By referring to Dewey, Strauss states that the permanence of seemingly stable structures is nothing but a function of these entities in respect to other elements of the lived environment that are experienced as relatively quick, rapidly changing, or irregular (Strauss 1993: 246). Not surprisingly, both Dewey and Strauss (along with most interactionists) reject the concept of structural determination. Instead, they insist that even the most difficult constraints, although they must be taken into account, are still conditions to which actors may respond in different ways. This is, at the same time the source of creativity.



“Processual ordering” or, in its earlier variant, the “negotiated order approach”, represents a more advanced version of Thomas and Thomas’ (1928) “definition of the situation” in spelling out the basic dialectics of human activity. As Dewey put it: “Whatever influences the changes of other things is itself changed” (1929: 73). This perspective fosters the idea of human actors literally being constituted in relation to other entities, be they human, other biological entities, or material substance, rather than reifying the Cartesian divide between the individual and its environment.

### **Social worlds, arenas, and organizations**

By the same token, Strauss conceptualized arenas and social worlds, the other key concepts of his theory, as open and fluid processes, risky and unpredictable. Based on a pragmatist understanding, in his theory of social worlds and arenas (Strauss 1978 ; 1993: 209pp) he combines various theoretical and empirical influences, namely Meads notion of “universes of discourse” (Mead 1934: 89), Shibutanis reference group theory (Shibutani 1955), Hughes’ ecological approach and his own empirical experiences in the field of medical and care work.<sup>4</sup> Instead of regarding it as given, Strauss sees social order as an issue that has to continuously be solved and solved again. Moreover, conflict is more likely than consensus in such processes. For him, “(t)he generic social process is assumed to be intergroup conflict unless and until the data prove otherwise” (Clarke 1991: 129).

That is, *social worlds* as the basic formations of social order and temporary results of social processes have to be explained in empirical analysis. For Strauss, social worlds are, as Clarke wrote “groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business” (Clarke 1991: 131). The key point in Strauss’ analytic concept of social worlds is the notion of ‘activities’. While Mead and especially Shibutani regard social worlds as based on communication and discourse, Strauss brings the argument down to earth: Social order results from doing things together, which in turn involves “palpable matter” (Strauss 1978: 121) and not just communication.

“There are sites where activities occur: hence space and a shaped landscape are relevant. *Technology* (inherited or innovative modes of carrying out the social world’s activities) is always involved. (...) In social worlds at the outset, there may be only temporary divisions of labor, but once under way, *organizations* inevitably evolve to further one aspect or another of the world’s activities” (Strauss 1978: 122).

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account on how the social world concepts of Mead, Shibutani and Strauss relate see Cefai (2016).

Thus, social worlds are formed by a practical, situated commitment to similar activities. People do not belong to social worlds by formal or explicit memberships. Instead, it is the amount of commitment to the core activities of the social world that makes them more or less a member of this world. Strauss notes: “Perhaps it would be better to discard the concept here of boundaries and substitute something like peripheries, and thus avoid arousing irrelevant imagery” (Strauss 1993: 214). In fact, he did not go as far as that. However, in his concept of membership of social worlds, he demonstrates this idea practically: While an individual’s level of belonging to a social world might vary between peripheral or central, at the same time “we all have multiple memberships” (Strauss 1993: 213). A member of the profession of engineers might simultaneously be a mother, an amateur golf player, and a devoted supporter of a local basketball team. Thus, different commitments might every now and again enter into conflict with each other.

Strauss’ role models for social worlds are professions, at least they were at the outset of Strauss’ work on these concepts. The empirical findings of the collaborative psychiatric ideologies study clearly indicated that social worlds such as professions (e.g. psychiatry) might consist of social subworlds like psychoanalysts and behavioral therapists. Another suitable example for this argument is scientific communities. At the same time, organizations might host particular representatives of a large number of different social worlds, e.g. nurses, medical practitioners, administrators, and physiotherapists. The structure of social worlds, their shape and their relations to other social worlds are, for Strauss, an ongoing and continual process. There are segmentation processes (Strauss 1984), within which new social subworlds might splinter off into autonomous movers while others might vanish completely (if people cease to show practical commitments to its activities).

The second core concept of Strauss’ social worlds theory is that of *arenas*. Here he refers to “interaction by social worlds around issues—where actions concerning these are being debated, fought out, negotiated, manipulated, and even coerced within and among the social worlds” (Strauss 1993: 226). Arenas are where social worlds meet. That is, if social order has to be explained and if interaction is seen as the obligatory a point of passage through which every change of social order has to be processed, then the arena stands for those analytically reconstructed units in which a certain issue or sets of issues are fought out. “As whirlpools of argumentative action, they lie at the very heart of permanence and change of each social world” (Strauss 1993: 227). Arena is a concept for cooperation without agreement, disagreement that cannot be solved instantaneously and thus results at least for some time in a more or less stable social form (ibid).

We tend to think of arenas as large-scale political fields of debate that exist around topics such as ‘the’ refugee problem, or TTIP. However, a striking and analytically most useful feature of Strauss’ theoretical concepts is what I call ‘scalability’: Social worlds can be fairly small and more local (e.g., a community initiative for a sustainable energy project) or large and stretched out over societies (e.g., the World Health Organization). The same is true for arenas, they “exist at every level of organizational action, from the most microscopic to the most macroscopic” (Strauss 1993: 227). There are arenas regarding how societies should organize care for the elderly, with state health agencies, stakeholders in social policy, health insurance companies, representatives of employers and unions, as well as those of older citizens who negotiate in various sites (e.g., in talk shows, parliaments, on the street, and in newspapers). At the same time, arenas might be as small as the ongoing debate in a progressive housing project over how to behave in shared bathrooms.

There are two key points that signify arenas, regardless of how far-reaching or limited they might be: “First, arenas (...) involve questions of policy about directions of action. Second, the source of issues and debate can be both internal and external to the participating social worlds-subworlds” (Strauss 1993: 227). Thus, arenas do not merely manage the relations between social worlds or subworlds. Instead, arenas constitute their general mode of noting and engaging issues of joint concern to the different social worlds. At the same time, Strauss does *not* conceive of arenas as formal sites of negotiations such as committees, parliaments or group meetings that convene on a regular basis (although such organizational forms are often a part of arenas). As an analytic tool, the concept of arena helps to identify all sorts of interactive contributions to solve an issue between an open number of affected social worlds/subworlds. When viewed in this way, it is often a surprise how large the number of social worlds involved is and how intricately interwoven the various sites, modes and organizational forms of a particular arena are.

Just as formally constituted elements might become part of an arena, *organizations* more generally speaking exist in a delicate interplay with social worlds and arenas. Based on Hughes’ notion of organizations as “going concerns” (Hughes <1957>1971), for Strauss an organization is built around an organizational goal, to which its members are committed in various ways. However similar this sounds to Strauss’ definition of social worlds, both concepts differ in important properties: While for social worlds the notion of boundaries proves to be largely meaningless, organizations are generally used to having formal, legally (and often physically) secured boundaries, materialized in membership cards, labor contracts, fences, and lawyers. Alas, in terms of social processes of ordering, these formal boundaries are just another resource and my in fact be quite permeable. The commitments of formal members varies largely within

organizations. For Strauss, this is because organizations are usually populated by representatives of different social worlds or subworlds. These representatives' commitments to organizational going concerns is thus deeply impregnated by their professions, status groups, factions or religious movements they belong or adhere to. For example, both, car designers and assembly-line workers are committed to building cars for their employing company. "So, whom does this complex, multi-world organization represent?" (Strauss 1993: 228). That is, negotiations about representation and authenticity are core both to organizational processes and to ongoing arenas.

The combined package of these three concepts of social worlds, arenas and organizations allows not only for powerful analytical reconstructions of existing social worlds, but, moreover, for resolving them into their generic processes. Society, understood in terms of social worlds and arenas is, as Strauss put it,

"A universe marked by tremendous fluidity; it won't and can't stand still. It is the universe that fragmentation, splintering, and disappearance are the mirror images of appearance, emergence and coalescence. This is a universe when nothing is strictly determined" (Strauss 1978: 123).

When Strauss wrote these lines in the late 1970s, the dominant sociological discourse was still driven by structural functionalists and neo-Marxist scholars who were attacking symbolic interactionism in the 1960-1980s, claiming the pre-eminence of structural categories like race, class and gender for social processes. Later, however, still referring to these struggles Strauss underscored the special achievement of social worlds/arenas theory by stating: "I shall argue that if the concept of social worlds is made central to the conceptualization of society, then a radically different view of society emerges" (Strauss 1993: 211).

### **Arcs of work and trajectories**

When core activities, issues, and going concerns are at the heart of what constitutes a social world, an arena, or an organization, a detailed analysis of work is of pivotal interest to any social world analysis. Following the empirical study *The Social Organization of Medical Work* (Strauss et al. 1985), Strauss published two theoretical articles where he outlined his analytic perspective on work processes (Strauss 1985; 1988). Here, his central concepts were the interplay between *lines of work* and *arcs of work*. Instead of regarding the analysis of work as a specialized task of a certain fraction of sociology, Strauss and his colleagues were convinced that a work-and-occupation perspective would be far too limiting. As his longtime collaborator

in San Francisco Elihu Gerson illustrated: “rather, we should be thinking of work as all the activities in which people engage in order to accomplish their ends” (Gerson 1983).

Thus, analytic attention is drawn to the practical organizing of processes in which things are produced, achieved, brought forth, or accomplished. An important advantage of this perspective is that it regards all kinds of activities as work regardless whether it is part of formal work organizations, unpaid household work, or any other practical activity of achieving something. Here again, Strauss emphasis is on processes and how they are continuously organized. He maintains that organizing work, instead of being a separate task of work organizations, rather happens ‘on the fly’, within the performative work process. “Articulation work”, as he terms it (Strauss 1985: 2), is a mode of working that distributes tasks among actors, articulates the different practical contributions, and makes them mutually accountable. Where formal work organization results in plans about how work should be performed, leaving what Garfinkel called a “hiatus” between rule and practice, Strauss maintains that in an interactionist perspective, the factual organizing is done practically in work-as-interaction. Plans and rules are resources, then, employed in interactions in various interpretations by participating actors.

Consequently, work processes do not exist *per se* but offer a *Gestalt* only in analytic retrospect. Empirical reconstructions are a suitable means to uncover to which “end” or “going concern” a certain activity is what kind of contribution. Strauss shows that in ‘working’ at least three things happen at the same time: people follow their sequence of tasks, thereby contributing to one or another going concern, and, in doing so, they articulate their various activities by way of “interactional alignment” (Strauss 1988: 168). Two analytic perspectives can be employed. One would be to reconstruct “lines of work”, that is, in Gerson’s phrasing “all the activities which go into carrying out a particular kind of work, without reference to a particular work situation” (Gerson 1983: 4). We can think of this as of what a carpenter, an architect or a bank clerk for example, does in pursuing his or her professional activities. In contrast, an “arc of work (...) consists of the totality of tasks arrayed both sequentially and simultaneously along the course of the trajectory or project” (Strauss 1985: 4). Different from analyzing pre-designed divisions of labor, reconstructing arcs of work also accounts for how the actors involved jointly go about the contingencies and obstacles that lurk along their path to their respective going concern. In reconstructing arcs of work, the analyst looks back from the results to all the contributions that made it happen. That way, a certain result, situation, a state of being, or a product becomes visible as the outcome of numerous contributions of actors involved, be it active or passive, consciously or not, purposefully or accidentally. Each contribution is regarded in light of how it changed the development of the outcome under scrutiny.

While the concept “arc of work” is dedicated to the analysis of work processes, its structure can be generalized into a basic sociological concept. Strauss did that in his notion of “trajectory”. He uses this term nearly synonymously with the term project in the above quoted definition of arcs of work. In fact, the concept of trajectory is much older and stems from a different generative question. Strauss and Glaser had already coined the term “dying trajectory” in the 1960s in the course of their investigation of death and dying in hospitals and it became the core concept of their monograph *Time for Dying* (1968). They wrote: “The major dimensions of a dying trajectory ... are ... (f)irst, dying is almost always *unscheduled*; second, the sequence of steps is *not institutionally prescribed*; and third, the actions of the various participants are only *partly regulated*” (Glaser and Strauss 1968: 247). Twenty-five years later, Strauss noted in retrospect that the more and more “elaborated conceptualization of trajectory was the central concept in my sociological, interactionist theory of action” (Strauss 1993: 53). Its centrality for Strauss is due to the fact that, in his opinion, trajectory links up nicely with the “Pragmatist theoretical action scheme [that is; J.S.] work is entailed in the process of unblocking the blocked action, and moving along into the future” (Strauss 1993: 52). Trajectory is a specific concept used to generally analyze all types of work in the wider sense of problem-solving activities that Dewey (1938) had in mind when he conceptualized how actors deal practically with those “inhibitions of action” that Mead (<1932>1959: 172) made central in his theory of action. In this respect, trajectory is not only most central to Strauss’ theory but at the same time it is an excellent example of how he translated the kernel of a pragmatist philosophy of the social into his interactionist sociological theory.

There are two modes in which Strauss employs his trajectory concept: “(1) the course of any experienced phenomenon as it evolves over time (...) And (2) the actions and interactions to its evolution” (Strauss 1993: 53-54). It is similar to a figure-ground Gestalt switch that allows us to see a phenomenon on its way and, in the next moment, the contributions that made it happen that way. For Strauss, the centrality of the trajectory concept lies in its account of both phenomena as processes and the delicate relation between purposeful acting on something and unforeseen events. Social phenomena regarded as unfolding trajectories consist of activities directed towards them intentionally or inadvertently, consciously or not knowingly. Yet, at the same time, these events shape the course of a phenomenon that—from the perspective of participants—is just happening and cannot fully be taken into account in advance.

The dying trajectory is a good example of a type of trajectories of suffering. It has been studied not only by Strauss and Glaser but also in Germany by Schütze and Riemann (Riemann and Schütze 1991). An uncountable number of events affect the course of individual

biographies and although these do not strictly determine the life course of a person, they are not under control of this person either. He/she has to react to these events (say: the death of a parent, an upcoming war) and even ignoring them would exert some kind of impact on the individual's biography. Thus, trajectories prove to be "not entirely manageable" (Strauss 1993: 53) and at the same time are still the unique product of serious of actions and interactions.

Interestingly, although Strauss died too soon to realize that link, the concept of trajectory has a lot in common with the concept of "practices" as vividly discussed in recent praxeological debates (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001 ; Reckwitz 2002). Trajectories like practices have an existence independent of single actors, who, in the end, are just participants in the course of events.

### **A Theory-Methods Package**

While this is not an essay about the methodological achievements of Strauss, it would nonetheless remain somewhat incomplete without relating his methodological position to his theoretical development. More recently, Clarke and Star (2007), two of his former doctoral students, proposed the notion of "theory-methods-packages" as a concept to overcome the common framing of empirical methods as mere (neutral and innocent) tools, utilized for limited purposes of dealing with 'the empirical'. The case of Strauss is a striking example for how delicately theoretical and methodological development depend on each other. In his early career, Strauss, disillusioned by his mentor Blumer, had been searching for systematic, yet creative ways to derive his theoretical ideas from empirical findings.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, inspired by Hughes, Strauss started to dig deeper into comparative heuristics. This path came to fruition when he started to work empirically with this colleague Barney Glaser, who as a Columbia School alumni, had a markedly different methodological training. In their research practice, they developed a set of systematically articulated heuristics, altogether a research style that allowed scientists to turn their empirical results theoretical by elaborating their meaning vis-à-vis respective practical or theoretical problems. Grounded Theory as they termed it (Glaser and Strauss 1967) turned out to become one of the most influential research styles within the interpretive paradigm of empirical social research. More importantly for our argument here, it proved to be the core of Strauss' modus operandi for bringing forth new theoretical insights. At the same time his empirical research was firmly based not only on the ontological beliefs he gained from a pragmatist philosophy of science (Strübing 2007b) but as his career progressed,

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<sup>5</sup> In a retrospective interview, Strauss noted: "Blumer didn't have a method at all. He just said: Do with your data whatever you want" (Legewie and Schervier-Legewie 2004).

more and more on those empirically grounded concepts derived in his previous empirical studies. Social Worlds and arenas, negotiated order, trajectories, articulation work: All these theory figures are as much an outcome of Strauss' empirical research as they are theoretical sensitivities for his later studies. On a second level, the strong ties between Strauss' pragmatist predisposition and his methodological perspective show up in the operational mode of Grounded Theory as a research style: The iterative-cyclical process mode he proposes (Strauss and Corbin 1994) mirrors Dewey's model of problem-solving—as does his notion of theory as a “never-ending process” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 40). Also, in the idea of theoretical sensitivity resonates Mead's concept of perspective.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Anselm Strauss was undoubtedly a child of his time, living at the edge of late modernity, struggling with the predominance of both structuralist and functionalist approaches in social theory, and deductive, positivist methodologies in empirical research. His emphasis on process and perspective can be read as his response not only to unbalanced structure/action constructions (structuralism, subjectivism), but at the same time to more recent approaches that tried to ‘compromise towards the middle’ (such as Bourdieu and Giddens). His solution is radical, in that it resolves the dualism of structure/action, subject/object, individual/society, and mind/body into a continuum of perspectival processing differences with interactive problem-solving as its *modus operandi*. He clearly formulated his conception from American pragmatism, namely from Dewey and Mead. It is striking, though, how late in his career, despite his early contact with pragmatist thinking, he explicitly addressed this perspective. In Strauss's early methodological writings, we find only cursory references to pragmatism. The same is true for most of those papers in which he introduced new theoretical concepts drawn from his empirical research. Although in these papers he did not neglect his pragmatist roots, neither did he argue with them systematically. This changed only from the late 1980s on, when he started to refer in depth especially to Dewey and Mead. Only in 1993 with his last monograph *Continual Permutations of Action* did he outline in more detail an encompassing pragmatist social theory. Only in this book, he brought together all his important theoretical concepts. Moreover, he did so not in the conventional way of reprinting a collection of older articles in one edited volume. Instead, in *Continual Permutations* he organized all these concepts in ways that showed them to be part of a larger, overarching theoretical perspective, that is, pragmatism.

Beside Dewey and Mead, Everett C. Hughes was clearly the other important source of inspiration for Strauss. Not just in terms of the practicalities of conducting empirical research,



but also theoretically, Strauss benefited greatly from Hughes and his ecological approach. Although the Park-Hughes line of human ecology is itself deeply rooted in pragmatist philosophy, the notion of conflict and the insight that on a regular base it works to result in more stable states of being, is a feature of Strauss' theory that is clearly a legacy of Hughes. For Strauss, this idea is missing in pragmatism so far: "curiously the pragmatists did not build those insights and positions into their theory of action, thereby leaving it incomplete..." (Strauss 1993: 225). In his social theory, Strauss succeeded in integrating these two important influences into a coherent theoretical perspective.

He did not, however, embrace postmodern poststructural theoretical thinking all too enthusiastically. His understanding has been that already with *Mirrors and Masks*, he had set a pragmatist interactionist tone that, as he puts it in a forward to the Transaction Edition of that book, "runs as a ground bass in virtually all of my writings" (Strauss <1959>1997: 2). He hoped this to be a "less ideological voice to that (postmodern; J.S.) current din" (ibid.). Although not alien to his approach, discourse theory and analysis did not become part of his approach. The same holds true for the notion of nonhuman actants—ironically despite the fact that in the 1980s Bruno Latour during a sabbatical spent some time in San Francisco and worked with some of Strauss' close colleagues.<sup>6</sup> Also, Strauss's notion of action, while critical to the Weberian and Schuetzian tradition, does not fully elaborate praxeological ideas of social processes being organized largely by practices, rendering 'acting' as an always already shared endeavor between participating entities of all sorts. In addition, while Strauss and his wife and lifelong companion Fran were politically engaged citizens, not much of this engagement appeared in explicit form in his theoretical works—in stark contrast to how some of his successors linked their research agenda to political issues.<sup>7</sup> While in all these aspects Strauss remained a classic late modern liberal academic, with his theory, though, he prepared the ground for further developments at the junction of pragmatism and practice theories (Strübing erscheint 2016).

Thus, what does Anselm Strauss' life and work mean for the interactionist project in sociology? Where, apart from his methodological heritage, are the marks he left in current social sciences? A number of his PhD students and late colleagues (like Adele Clarke, who followed him on his position at UCSF, Susan Leigh Star, or Joan Fujimura) picked up not only his research style, but also stepped into his theoretical shoes. Beginning in the early 1980s, they started to broaden Strauss' research agenda on health and medicine and shifted it more to the

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<sup>6</sup> Leigh Star even revised parts of *Science in Action* for Latour (personal communication with Leigh Star 1998)(Latour 1987).

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed account on how Strauss handled the tension between reform and science see Baszanger (1998: 373) and Clarke (2008).

then prospering new fields of STS and gender studies. This move went hand-in-hand with further developments of both his methodology (Charmaz 2014 ; Clarke 2005), and the theoretical and ontological perspective of the pragmatist-interactionist project. In empirical studies on fields such as reproduction sciences (Clarke 1998), the organizing of cancer research (Fujimura 1987), or forms of cooperation in brain research (Star 1983), these scholars developed important new theoretical concepts. Most influential among those were, e.g. the notion of “boundary objects” to account for the issue of heterogeneous cooperation in science (Star and Griesemer 1989 ; Bowker et al. 2016) or a new definition of the concept of “situation” to better account for discourse, practices, and positionalities (Clarke 2005).

This paper addressed the theoretical contributions of Anselm Strauss and deliberately left out his methodological works. However, it is exactly this kind of false dichotomies that were at the heart of Strauss’ criticism in both theory and methods. Clarke and Star (2007) turned this critical stance into a conceptual frame and proposed in an ontological argument that social research needs to be done in “theory-methods packages” to overcome problems of both deductive and inductive research. Not surprisingly, they suggested the package of grounded theory and Strauss’ social worlds/arenas theory as specifically well suited for the study of organized social activities.

As a pragmatist, Strauss himself would not take his theory as complete or final but as “just a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 40)—a very humble statement for a remarkable contribution to interactionist theory.

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