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Rein Raud, *Being in Flux: A Post-Anthropocentric Ontology of the Self*, Cambridge, Polity, 2021, 226 pp.

During his career, the Estonian intellectual Rein Raud published on a remarkable array of topics. Spanning from pre-modern Japanese philosophy to cultural semiotics, he also authored poetry, novels, and plays – and translated classical works such as Dante Alighieri’s *Vita Nova*. In recent years, he has moved his interdisciplinary gaze toward the social sciences. After focusing on the practices through which selfhood is made and understood in Western modernity, Raud has offered a fascinating theory of culture that elegantly fuses the semiotics of Juri Lotman and Umberto Eco with sociological theories (*Meaning in Action*, Polity, 2016). His latest book reads like the natural consequence of this convergence. In *Being in Flux*, Raud presents a social philosophy aimed at radically rethinking both our relationship with the world we inhabit and how we can study it. He does so by developing a processual ontology which he then employs to reconceptualize the mind, selfhood, and agency.

The author organized the book in four chapters. In the first, he uncovers the explanatory limits typical of object-oriented ontologies. These postulate the existence of self-sufficient ‘things’ separated from their environments and stable over time. Explaining his choice to embrace methodological perspectivism – according to which every ‘thing’ always appears as it is from a particular viewpoint – Raud clarifies how the rejection of essentialism does not entail any form of anti-realism: “the acknowledgment that logical structures are products of the mind-observing reality (...) credits this reality with more, not less, independence from the mind” (p. 17). The author then shows how the problem of the self-sameness of objects has been typically solved, that is, by postulating either substance or pattern continuity. These imply that the ‘things’ constituting objects – or the relations between the ‘things’ these are made of – are stable over time. Raud forcefully reveals the little explanatory power of these discourses when employed to account for the shifting nature of many phenomena and shows how objects appear as ‘things’ only because of the human tendency to take for granted their

perspective on reality, which the author proposes to relativize. To move beyond an anthropocentric point of view, Raud suggests recognizing the multiple speeds at which reality moves – many of which are simply unnoticed by the human eye – and the gradualness of the interwoven causal processes – against clear-cut representations of reality organized around binary oppositions. He does so by theorizing a third type of continuity, namely ‘processual continuity,’ defined as a “significant overlap between certain stages of the existential span of an entity” (p. 54), that escapes the problems presented by the first two types of continuity.

In the second chapter, Raud articulates his framework. The author’s core idea is that “every cross-section of every process of any kind at any given moment is best represented as a field,” a “configuration of constitutive tensions” between positions (p. 56). Fields are always momentary occurrences and bear within them the traces and marks of their past interactions while refracting them into a cone of possible futures. In a Bourdieusian fashion, Raud identifies fields as organizational patterns of relations between positions. Nonetheless, given that it illustrates only a cross-section of a process at a single moment, the field metaphor is employed only analytically, while the emphasis remains on the processual nature of entities. In his framework, Raud defines a process as “*a domain surrounded by any imaginary membranic boundary, which grants a degree of internality to the processes occurring within it, as well as a certain capacity to initiate or limit its relations with its outside and thereby to participate in causal chains*” (p. 84, emphasis in the original). In this vocabulary, ‘being’ is understood as the momentary outcome of emergent connections between processes separated by porous borders. Raud evokes a language of gradients, thresholds, and membranic relations between entities to describe what happens within and between fields, making the most of the field metaphor’s heuristic potentialities. By establishing a process’ internality, observers can identify the relations between its subprocesses and its internal time regime and distinguish between “reorganizations” and “transformations of the field” – reconfigurations of its internal linkages and rearrangements of its boundaries, respectively (p. 88). Spurred from the release of tensions rifting its field, these events redraw the boundaries of the process and are among the crucial factors to be considered when producing causal explanations. In this account, the latter do not invoke static variables identifiable as ‘causes’ and ‘effects,’ entailing

instead the synchronic connections a field has with its outside and the diachronic ties it has with its past and future.

In the book's second half, Raud engages with his ontology to recast the notions of mind and self. In the third chapter, the author offers a countermelody to the neurocentric discourses that seek to locate the human mind and self within the brain by detecting patterns of neural circuits activated by external stimuli. Raud convincingly argues that the brain is not the "sole carrier of selfhood, mind, consciousness," but must be understood as an element that has "evolutionally developed in parallel with the ability to put self-other relationships into a higher gear" (pp. 131-2). Taking insights from the extended cognition approach, the author argues that minds and selves should be thought of not as outputs of the brain but as the result of continuous interactions between entities and their environments – just like meanings are produced in interpretation and are not immanent in texts. Recalling the field metaphor, Raud proposes to theorize selfhood as a cross-section of the emergent mental process "constituted by tensions between positions and elements both internal to its flow and external to it" (p. 113). Selfhood is an undecided field over which different positions compete for control: this means recognizing that there is neither a rational locus of power nor a 'true' inner self, but a space where different forces struggle for balance. In this fashion, an actor's decision is defined as the "recalibrating of the constitutive tensions of the field" that significantly alters the selfhood process, reshaping the array of possible futures by opening up new possibilities while making others unthinkable (p. 147). For this reason, the author proposes to speak of a perpetually moving 'decision-making focus' and to recognize that often verbal accounts are only *ex post facto* rationalizations produced to explain why a decision was made.

The self can have neither substance nor pattern continuity: one's cells, ideas, memories, and knowledge constantly change. Only the concept of processual continuity allows us to explain selfhood as something persistently on the move, a field "that has been caused and has causal powers itself precisely because of its unrepeatable pattern of interacting subprocesses" always seeking equilibrium (p. 155). Selfhood is relational – a node entangled in a larger web of relationships with human and nonhuman others. In the fourth chapter, Raud elaborates further on this idea by conceptualizing the self as an "extended decision-making net-

work” (p. 160). The self is not confined within the intracranial processes nor contained within the boundaries of the skin. Raud incorporates into his framework an alternative to the mind-body distinction, which he proposes to substitute with the concept of “bodythink,” a process that sees “the entire body, and all of its activity, as a conscious praxis, even if the majority of it takes place outside the shifting focal point that has taken on the role of the individual’s self-perspective for a given moment” (p. 166, 168). Even if some parts of the conscious field are granted a higher degree of autonomy, decision-making processes involve actors in their wholeness. These have at their disposal trajectories – “attractors towards which individual life courses might gravitate, or, conversely, which they would seek to avoid” (p. 176) – that they might follow or not considering the memories of successful or failed past strategies, the experiential traces left by these, and the futures scenarios conceivable at that particular moment. Particularly interesting for sociologists, Raud applies this view also to social groups: against methodological individualism and the perspectives assuming entirely rational, self-same actors, he argues that collectivities have emergent properties. Collaborative and competitive intra-group relationships and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that redraw the boundaries of groups change the selves-as-fields of the actors involved. Just as for the connection with nonhuman entities, the linkage between individual and social groups thus alters the processes on both levels – the properties of which can be reduced neither to the sum of the individual entities nor to the general properties of the group.

In *Being in Flux*, Raud brings a peculiar array of sociologists and social theorists around the same table. Speaking of fields, *praxis*, and trajectories, he incorporates insights from Bourdieusian sociology without turning entirely to field theory. The accent on the relational and processual character of reality is grounded in conversations with the ideas of sociologists Andrew Abbott, Mustafa Emirbayer, Ann Mische, Pierpaolo Donati, and Margaret Archer. When dealing with selves as emergent in social interactions, Raud gathers the crucial insights of Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Jeffrey Alexander, which he integrates into his discursive framework without losing his peculiar voice. This is one of the book’s greatest strengths: as an outsider of the discipline, Raud assembles sociological theories and concepts in a refreshing way that infuses them with new lymph. By

employing its vocabulary, it could be said that *Being in Flux* has a sufficient degree of internality so that the proposed framework remains consistent and recognizable while its membranes remain porous enough to permit the exchange with several sociological programs. Thanks to this, the book delivers a robust toolkit of theoretically-driven concepts that might be tested through empirical research. The field metaphor permits to study social groups (i.e., a political party) synchronically or diachronically. In the first case, a sociologist would emphasize the gradient of permeability of its boundaries (how much is it difficult to enter the party?), identifying the relationships between its subprocesses (are the sections of the party competing with each other, or do they collaborate?) and their different timescales (with which speed a decision taken at the center is ratified across different locales?). In the second case, she might highlight how past decisions left traces in the present (has the expulsion of a member of the parliament created more tension among the militants?), reconfiguring the cone of possible futures by turning some trajectories challenging to pursue or imagine (did this expulsion prevent future alliances with another party?). Even if limited in its empirical application, the concept of bodythink would prove fruitful in framing agentic decisions not just as the outcome of deliberate processes (why did this group choose to rally amidst a pandemic?). Social scientists could apply the idea of groups and selves as contested fields to study collective decision-making (whose perspective are the militants taking in this assembly?) and selfhood (how central is the group membership for this militant I am interviewing?). Exceptionally rich in heuristic potential, Raud presents a solid ontological framework and precious epistemological reflections that make *Being in Flux* a must-read.

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