

The Promise: A Breakthrough for Social Science

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Abstract

This article orbits the promise of Sociology and presents the sociology of promises — or, more precisely, the science of promises, aimed at addressing all sociological curiosities and encompassing all that is sociological. In introducing the *General Social Theory of Compromises* (G-STOC), a framework designed to overcome the fragmentation of traditional social theories and address their limitations in explaining social behavior, a breakthrough is presented in eight main takeaways that are simultaneously ontological, epistemological and theoretical: (1) social coercive powers derive from actual or *virtual* agency; (2) virtual agency derives from promises; (3) all anger and disappointment derive from broken promises; (4) promises are always in dynamic reciprocal sets called compromises; (5) compromises are heuristic devices underlying all social relationships; (6) all social phenomena involve compromises; (7) to explain is to describe relationships and (8) sociological explanation, therefore, derives from the description of compromises and their history. The above tenets begin to outline a powerful and coherent framework and their proper appreciation is bound to have a profound impact in Social Science. Avoiding convoluted syntheses of competing theories and emphasizing the social importance of the future as well as theoretical novelty and superior heuristic power, the author advocates for clear conceptual and theoretical grounds to enable a complete and integrated explanation of social phenomena. With this innovative approach, the paper invites scholars to engage critically with G-STOC and explore its potential to unify and enhance the study of the social world, offering new insights about its complexities.

Keywords: General Social Theory of Compromises (G-STOC); Social Ontology and Epistemology; Relational Sociology; Social Exchange Theory; Social Norms; Virtual Agency; Social Structures; Promises; Paradigm Shifts; Curiosity; Theoretical Controversy; Futurology.

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Science, curiosity and controversy

Consider this modest claim:

The original promise of Social Science is to quench curiosity about social phenomena and the social universe.

Curiosity usually manifests in the form of questions and is a human psychological, intellectual need that is satisfied by acquiring knowledge. *Scientific* knowledge is produced through descriptions and explanations obtained with the important guidance of scientific theory (plus empirical data). *Sociological* theory, in turn, has been in very bad shape since forever: fragmented, incoherent, incomplete, inconclusive or overly specialized (Bottomore, 1991; Campbell, 2019; Turner, 2007; Horowitz, 1993; Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2016; Vandenberghe, 2010; Kasper, 2013). Redundant theories coexist, failing to overcome one another. That is because none is sufficient (or satisfactory) on its own (Kuhn, 1962; Lakatos, 1978). To date, large chunks of elementary curiosity about society and social phenomena remain unaddressed or faced with undecided, unsatisfactory answers from a plethora of conflicting theoretical perspectives: *What is society? What is social or sociological theory? What is Sociology supposed to study? How to explain a social phenomenon?* The naïve presumption that there must be a straight answer often underlies such basic, demanding questions. Apart from avoiding them altogether (or unabashedly pretending there is a consensus), the cynical and sadly usual answer begins with ‘well, that depends...’². Why should we ever be sure? How *could* we be sure if we do not agree? How *can* we agree if we are never sure? If other sciences share these conceptual, ontological and epistemic dilemmas to some degree³, Social Science arguably struggles with them far more acutely and fundamentally.

A newcomer to Sociology might believe their ignorance is due to lack of erudition, to be corrected over time. The reality, however, is that the deeper one delves into Sociology, the more competing perspectives emerge and the less certain one becomes about the social world and the sociological. If that sounds counterproductive it is because it is. I mean counterproductive with regard to satisfying general sociological curiosity, one’s own and the public’s. That has a direct impact on the (social) relevance of the work done (thus suggesting it is counterproductive that more dedication should lead to less results in terms of satisfying curiosity and, therefore, less relevance). Kasper’s “*Beyond the Knowledge Crisis*” (2021, pp.1-58) as well as Turner & Turner’s “*The Impossible Science*” (1990), Cole’s “*What’s Wrong with Sociology?*” (2001) and others (Berger, 2002; Keith, 2000, 2006; Keith & Ender, 2004;

² The more sincere and straightforward contributors to dictionaries in Sociology offer striking examples corroborating the fragmentation in the theoretical and ontological domains. The entry on ‘social structure’ in *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology* (Bruce & Yearley, 2006) borders on the comical by bluntly stating that the term is used “so loosely” that one is better off checking each author in order to discern what it means to them! The entry on ‘society’ is similar, saying the discipline has “trouble succinctly defining its core term” due to a “very wide variety of meanings”. In contrast, other authors of dictionary entries often devote many pages attempting to hide or make sense of that fragmentation and disarray.

³ Questions such as ‘what is life?’, ‘what is gravity?’, ‘what is inflation?’ and others analogous to the ones mentioned above also apply to other sciences, driving some controversy. While those questions might be deemed irrelevant to much research, I argue that they are not irrelevant as legitimate curiosities.

Lopreato & Crippin, 2002; Turner, 2015) all provide compelling summaries and insights on the perceived decline in the public relevance of Sociology, evident in terms of student enrollments, budget cuts, membership in associations, academic fragmentation, explanatory deficits, disciplinary poaching, etc.⁴ Although they do not always make this connection explicitly, I readily lift the hypothesis that associates the unfavorable trends with Sociology's theoretical inconsistencies and inadequacies. Like me, Zald (1991) also dared relate the discipline's "low level of consensus" (and its problematic heuristic and scientific consequences) with its *funding*: "If sociology could claim to be a science, [...] surely society would recognize its value and provide the material resources", he said, adding that sociologists' "claims of expertise [...] are often challenged" and that Sociology looks "expendable" when "hard times come to universities" (pp.169-172). A science that lacks basic consensus even on its object of study could hardly be successful or relevant in the eyes of the general public – except, perhaps, in the unique form of political activism, which is no more than its very corruption.

Without a proper general social theory to agree upon and make sense of *everything* in one common language and method, what we *do* know is little besides a quasi-journalistic collection of disconnected idiographic facts or reports and accounts provided by *ad hoc*, historical empirical investigations. This way, there is no single scientific field of Sociology but rather a fragmented arena, a set of communities that has yet to build a cohesive identity and thus can hardly be taken seriously by outsiders.

Due to divergences in the choice and application of theories, two random sociologists put before the same raw data will likely draw different conclusions and report different descriptions. Faced with the same empirical phenomenon, they could show interest in collecting very different types and amounts of data in order to satisfy the same given curiosity (having a hard time even coming up with equivalent questions from the standpoint of different theories)⁵. Redundant and conflicting perspectives arouse controversy and do not contribute to satisfying curiosity – *they might actually increase it!* If not since Aristotle or Hume, at least according to the findings of modern experiments: Kang et al. (2009) concluded that "curiosity increases with uncertainty", suggesting that "a small amount of knowledge can pique curiosity and prime the hunger for knowledge, much as an olfactory or visual stimulus can prime a hunger for food" (p.972). Kidd and Hayden (2015) found that research subjects

were most curious when they had some idea about the answer but lacked confidence. Under these circumstances, the compulsion to know the answer was so great that they were even willing to pay for the information even though curiosity could have been sated for free after the session (p.451).

⁴ See also the enrollment estimates from *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center* (2024). Cf. "Social sciences and humanities faculties 'to close' in Japan after ministerial intervention" (Grove, 2015). For a discussion on the disagreement among sociologists regarding the meaning of 'theory' and its detrimental consequences, as well as a more philosophical, comprehensive (and amusing) exposition of the challenges to obtaining consensus in Sociology's jargon and conceptual frameworks, see Abend, 2008; 2023.

⁵ Illustrating Sociology's incoherence, Davis notes that replication crises or "conflicts over priority" are impossible "because no two sociologists ever study the same thing" (Cole, 2001, p.180).

The kind of curiosity mentioned here is epistemic (Berlyne, 1954; Loewenstein, 1994) and research clearly indicates that “controversy, compared with no-controversy, leads to more epistemic curiosity” (Lowry & Johnson, 1981, p.31). More curiosity, in this context, means not only the emergence of new curiosities but accumulated, intensified and unsatisfied curiosity, indeed much like a neglected, unmet, growing appetite.

When experts publicly disagree on fundamental matters, non-experts are likely to be left not knowing what to believe, remaining curious and either continuing or abandoning their search for the truth. As complicated as seeking and finding truth really is, to the unspecialized public, this demand regards more a professional-constructivist concern (of reaching out to the experts or sponsoring means to satisfy curiosity) than a philosophical enigma they wish to explore in depth. Whenever scientific knowledge fails to be exactly true, it still is (or must be?) the best available approximation – but without agreement among experts even with regard to that approximation, public curiosity thrives until it eventually becomes numb and hopeless⁶.

Though often concealed from the general public (which is usually spared of such debates), the lack of basic onto-epistemic and theoretical consensus in Sociology cannot be kept secret and obviously has the potential to lead to the perception that sociologists are unreliable. So much so that examining even the single most modest claim selected from the first lines of this paper could provoke a storm of furious disagreement – a spectacle both amusing and disappointing for the layperson to witness⁷. We could not name this show *Theory Wars* because nothing in it resembles a widely mobilized, systematic competition, but *Theory Fight Club* or *Theory Junkyard* would fit nicely – the latter aptly portraying the precariousness that fuels the conflict in the first place.

In describing or explaining phenomena related, for example, to social inequality across diverse contexts, perspectives aligned with conflict theory tend to argue that inequality is driven by class struggles that enforce oppressive power imbalances; functionalist perspectives are prone to claiming it emerges to fulfill societal needs for role and skill differentiation involving incentives and merit; symbolic interactionists tend to explain it as constructed and sustained through individual interactions and labels in micro-level, rather than viewing it as structural or functional; while network theorists attribute it to connections and unequal access to resources across social ties. This list could continue. Each perspective thus offers a conflicting account of the same type of phenomenon, exposing the contradictions and the redundancy within the field, only magnified by the coexistence with yet other specific, ‘middle-range’ or less general, theories.

⁶ Raw demographic data, opinion polls and firsthand or journalistic accounts from actors involved become ultimately the last resort, apart from Sociology and Anthropology, to attempt to mitigate curiosity over social phenomena, lacking scientific rigor, thoroughness, reliability, precision and theory. Historiographic content is another option, but restricted to narration of events or *ad hoc* hypotheses regarding their succession, normally requiring a considerable time-lag and addressing only major historic events.

⁷ Worse and even more confusing is the polite and blasé disregard for any strong schism, a more sophisticated strategy of dealing with self-defeating fragmentation by pretending it is irrelevant. This approach risks encouraging gibberish and cacophony. Instead of engaging in meaningful debate in order to prevail by comparing the actual explanatory merits of their perspectives, advocates of opposing frameworks might just resign themselves to avoiding or ignoring each other altogether.

This pervasive context of theoretical and conceptual controversy is evidence enough of an intense fragmentation, for controversy, ambiguity, redundancy, disintegration and fragmentation are aspects of the same condition – all are serious obstacles to Social Science’s relevance and for the fulfilment of its promise.

About half of all theorizing in Sociology, despite its immense diversity, focuses on ‘social structures’ in such a way that was severely criticized for taking actors as “*cultural dopes*” (Garfinkel, 1967) or stripped of free will. Another large part, equally diverse, concentrates on interaction and agency so much that indirectly threatened to hand Sociology’s object of study entirely to Psychology. Opposite currents of theory entail epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies that are also incompatible with one another. Giddens developed his Theory of Structuration to try to put an end to the “imperialism” of subject (agency-centered perspectives), on one side, and of object (structure-centered perspectives), on the other (1984, p.2). Earlier, Elias attempted to circumvent the problem with the concepts of “habitus” and “figurations” (1978; 2000), theorizing the internalization of social structures, and eventually Bourdieu managed to employ this conceptual strategy in such labyrinthine prose (1977) and with a theory so deliberately devoid of a systematic presentation that the debate had to carry on for those critical or unsure of whether the problem still needed solving.

What must prevail causally in Sociology’s explanation? Does agency determine structures or do structures determine agency? Or, if neither, then what? How would agency and structure feedback onto one another? Although this debate is longstanding and lively (Archer, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2010; Sztompka, 2015; Stueber, 2006), I will reference it here only briefly to introduce an innovative theoretical framework that, by chance, transcends it while providing the means to satisfy any sociological curiosity.

Fundamental theoretical assumptions

Though greatly controversial (Sell & Bolda, 2024), the most essential meaning of social ‘structure’ is that of norms, rules, laws and mores. There are other meanings, referring to influences that limit or determine agency, namely organizations, class, religion, culture, institutions, etc., but these are analogous and can be momentarily ignored. As for ‘agency’, its understanding is more straightforward, concerning actors’ voluntary behavior⁸. Most importantly, when it comes to influencing or shaping behavior and with the exception of scenarios where they are limited to granting benefits unconditionally, norms and all other forms of social structures — whether through sanctions, concessions, restrictions, constraints or so-called ‘internalization’ — can be considered coercive; at least insofar as they interfere with decision-making and lead to behaviors that differ from what would otherwise occur in their absence, with a larger measure of truly spontaneous, unconditioned free will. Thus, we can say that ‘coercion’, in this sense akin to causation, is taken as a very

⁸ In light of Campbell’s (2009) insightful remarks about the polysemy regarding ‘agency’, here I must clarify that I use the category of ‘agency’ as the subset of human action/behavior that is meaningful in a social setting or that is directed towards it, much like what is taken to be Weber’s (1978) classic conception.

important means of influence of social structures onto the agency of subjects. This, in turn, raises the crucial question: *How do norms supposedly emerge with their coercive properties?*

The surprisingly simple answer to this question, as proposed here, holds a key theoretical discovery that I consider a breakthrough for Sociology in particular and Social Science in general. The purpose of this paper is to introduce this discovery and addressing the question above is the chosen path for undertaking this task. This requires constructing a foundational framework of sociological thought with its own postulates or assumptions. Note that I will first answer the question bluntly and proceed to unpack the answer on what follows.

First of all, norms originate in culture for they are based in an understanding that is, to some degree, shared between actors, collectively acknowledged, even if upon disagreement. Purely as ideas of how the world should be or, more precisely, of how actors should behave, norms are devoid of social causal power or proper coerciveness. If the spontaneous will of actors coincides with a norm ('internalized' or not), they might voluntarily orient their agency accordingly without suffering any kind of social coercion. The norm is itself socially powerless unless it merges with and inspires a *virtual* kind of *agency*. While (real) agency is actual behavior, this 'virtual agency' is unobserved expected behavior, *promised behavior*. Thus, to answer the question directly: it is *virtual agency* that provides norms with the likeness of coercive properties because the virtual agency itself is what might be coercive in reality, drawing social and practical consequences⁹.

To fully comprehend that answer, the notion of 'promise', here, must be conceived more broadly with respect to obligations, for it does not require a declaration and is not always voluntary. What justifies the use of the word even so is linked to the effects of and behavior towards promises, besides the convenience of its verbal form. This conception is not as far from ordinary discourse as it might seem (most of all to critics), for promises are commonly recognized irrespective of voluntary declarations – whether metaphorically, as in 'the promises of modern medicine', or anthropomorphically, as in 'the technology is promising', or through presumption, as when people (not least of all politicians) state or confirm they *will do* something and listeners readily take it as a promise; or in the case of Catholic priests, who presumably vowed (promised), at some point, to *always* uphold the secrecy of *all* confessions, however many. That is a short distance from also presuming someone must have, at some point during their education, promised to a parent or authority figure to *always* be polite and honest, respect norms, etc., and thus be held accountable

⁹ For a comprehensive literature review of sociological approaches to theorizing norms and their key aspects, see Horne & Mollborn (2020), who harvest developments from fields as diverse as functionalism, rational choice theory, symbolic interactionism, network theory and constructionism. As will be made clear, the present work considers all norms to involve promises but not all promises to involve norms, meaning promises pertain to a wider category. Although I lack space here to explore their norm framework in detail and despite its status as a middle-range theory of norms, the impressive and interesting overlaps with promise dynamics (elaborated below) are not entirely surprising, as they largely stem from coherence with empirical observations. These suggest potential for seamless assimilation, leveraging their extensive empirical validation, both to be examined elsewhere.

accordingly regardless of verbal promises verified in the present or near past¹⁰. Promises are expected to extend over time, sometimes indefinitely throughout a subject’s lifespan and even beyond.

All norms inspire a promise of fulfillment regarding their content. The typical characteristic of norms is that they inspire an imposed promise, involuntarily contracted by actors. The purely axiological sentence ‘silence is good and peaceful’, plus the commonsense knowledge that silence is conducive to rest and that rest aids recovery, all help inspire the norm ‘be quiet in the hospital’ – norms, in turn, always inspire promises because, devoid of promises, they are only informative, axiological or opinative, not actually normative. Promises manifest in the form of elective declarations but also of less explicit verbal agreements, contracts, handshakes, imposed norms, tasks, goals, laws, morality and etiquette. Even when verbal or voluntary promises are absent, all of those manifestations imply a tacit and/or imposed promise, for all intents and purposes (see fig.1).

Moreover, a loose promise is possibly unilateral and can be fulfilled or broken. In social reality, however, promises are not loose or solitary but tied more or less tightly to other reciprocal promises, always in a two-way, multilateral dynamic. Therefore, reciprocal promises compose dynamic sets that we shall call *compromises*. From this reasoning emerges the *General Social Theory of Compromises* (or G-STOC, systematized in Oliveira, 2021).

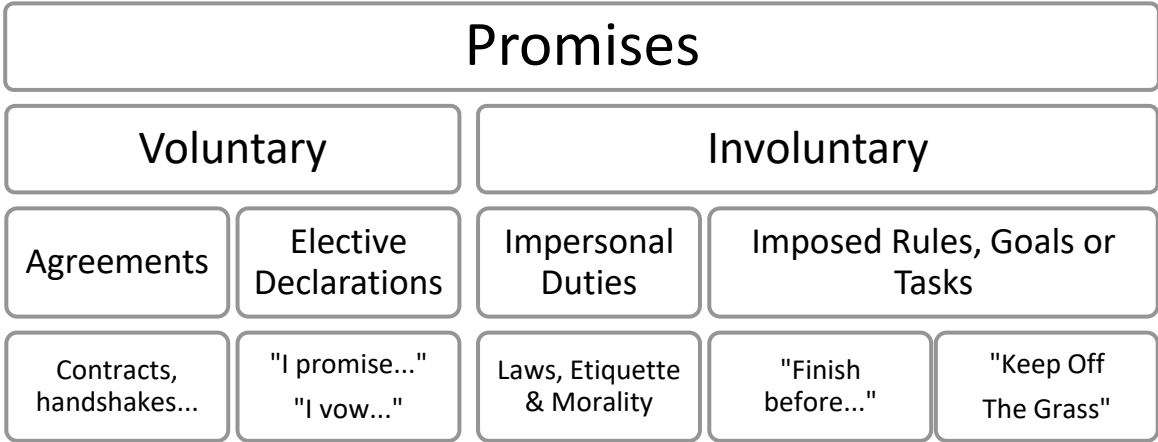


Fig.1 Types of promises (Oliveira, 2021)

Apart from declaring the hopefully uncontroversial notion that norms are cultural, ideal elements, the above three paragraphs contain a chain of important theoretical and conceptual statements that were made in dogmatic fashion (as programmatic assertions [Menziez, 1977, ch.1] or fundamental assumptions) in order to effectively answer the posed question. Those can be summarized as (1) virtual agency is what provides coercive powers to any so-called ‘social structures’; (2) virtual agency must be understood as promised

¹⁰ These pragmatic social presumptions align with theoretical assumptions that can easily be proved or disproved by trivial surveys of opinion: do people believe it is likely that nearly everyone, at least once, during their upbringing or later on, promised to always be polite, honest and respect norms? The same can be surveyed of the examples with priests and politicians. Note also that saying ‘I will’ or ‘I promise I will’ is assumed to be mostly a matter of emphasis and sometimes adding the word ‘promise’ is so redundant that it raises suspicion or is skipped altogether. More than abstract theory, this is arguably how people *already think*.

behavior, in a broad sense; (3) promises never exist in isolated form in the empirical world and are always paired up with counterparts, reciprocally, in compromises. Before advancing to unfold the consequences of this, I will focus on adequately justifying each statement.

The source of coercive powers

Many different types of fictions and conceptual constructs are commonly regarded as possessing social causal powers, which involve social means to provoke behavior. G-STOC posits that only actual agency and virtual agency have such causal powers, separating influences that are properly social from those that are mimetic without being strategic (psychosocial) or more strictly cultural and thus not coercive (ibidem, pp.210-212). While actual agency is real, observable, measurable and effectively happens, virtual agency is also fictional, but not because it does not actually have (or ever have) an empirical outline but because it is conjectural, forecasted. What an actor will likely do, in the future, has likely done or is likely doing, in a remote place, is a type of agency that here we shall designate as *virtual*, in the sense of fictional, presumed, not-actual, forecasted or emulated. The supposed, ghostly actions and influences of forces, rules, institutions, fields, culture, contexts, habits, etc. are fictional in a different and fuller sense because there never are any empirical, measurable, visible instances of that which they imply, apart from their supposed effects (or any tokens, artifacts or other fetishes fictionally associated and conflated thereto, like buildings or pieces of writing). Hence, virtual agency is about the conceived likelihood of actor-initiated empirical events while 'social structures', when not mere collectivities, are completely fictional entities or entities fictionally invested with powers that only agency really possesses. In fact, it is intriguing how 'social structure' could be anything other than actors, their agency (processual or not), their material circumstances and/or their ideas (including ideas about their relationships)¹¹ – and why, knowing which of those it is, it would be deliberately named so vaguely and mysteriously, with so little benefit.

The opposition of agency with its so-called 'virtual' alternative implies that what stands against agency differs from it only in modality, temporality and, obviously, authorship, not in substance. Virtual agency differs from actual agency due to its subjunctive modality and/or future temporality. In contrast, what any 'social structure' does is introduce an entirely new and essentially fictitious, ornamental causal category, with no real scientific necessity, ignoring that it solely constitutes a bridge or a means to channel other forms of

¹¹ In this comprehensive ontological list, consider that (1) actors, through agency (actual or virtual), exert *social* influence whereas (2) ideas (of all types, cultural or otherwise) result in *psychological* influence and (3) material circumstances yield *ecological* influences. Also, note how the category of 'agency' includes both actions committed and suffered, of *ego* and *alter*. How individuals mentally interact with ideas is of interest to Philosophy and Psychology. However, a *sui generis* science is required to address subjects' conception, apprehension and mental interaction with a specific type of ideas involved in decision processes, ideas that relate to and imply virtual agency, hereby named 'promises'. Ideas can also concern actors' beliefs and intuitions about their supposed *relationships*, as do compromises. Relationships, directly, could also be regarded as an ontological possibility of correspondence with 'social structure', but they are always directly inaccessible and ultimately require the mediation of ideas. In the G-STOC framework, when something is said to exist *between* actors, relationally, its ontological admittance is primarily ideal, in correspondence with supposed relationships. Moreover, while ideas can be thought and thoughts can be reported, relationships, apart from their supposed effects, have no empirical substance – they are relational, not substantial.

agency or possible agency and that there is nothing to *socially* 'determine' agency other than *more agency*. Therefore, it is not a matter of agency versus structure but of agency versus agency (with a relativistic opposition of authorship between *ego* and *alter*), in whatever combination of modality and temporality. A simplistic manifestation of this fundamental opposition between observed and unobserved or real and virtual is that between present and future agency. Therefore, we can say that what *socially* determines agency, in the present, if anything different from *agency-from-the-past*, is *agency-from-the-future*¹². Sociological theory has ignored for way too long that the future is as important as the present – and sometimes even more important. G-STOC leverages and builds upon this paradigm-shifting insight and, once it becomes clear that 'structures' are nothing but unobserved agency, Sociology can be fundamentally reimagined, turned upside-down and inside-out, by focusing more on the future, instead of seeing only the past and the present, and concentrating on the relational rather than the substantial.

Suppose Max is a car driver. If Max stops his car at a traffic light, that is actual agency. If he complains about it, it is also actual agency, of a discursive kind. To parody Weber's colliding cyclists¹³ (1978, pp.23, 1375): the thought that, if Max ignores a red traffic light and speeds past it, other drivers' cars and his will likely collide is due to virtual agency, because Max believes he knows *what other drivers will do* while their light is green and *what they will expect* of him when they believe his light is red. The fear of being fined for running a red light is also due to virtual agency, as Max believes *he knows* what traffic enforcement officers *will do* if they see him running a red light. Likewise, when soldiers on the battlefield believe they *must* fire their weapons, they are often motivated by the *likelihood* of receiving a dishonorable discharge or being considered misfit and inept – both examples of forecasted, unobserved, virtual agency – if they choose to flee combat or otherwise ignore training, failing to exhibit the appropriate aggressive, offensive, defensive or protective behaviors that include opening fire. The same with the use of language: the thought that others will not understand my words (and maybe frown at me) if I pronounce them too quickly, disregard grammar or use mumbo-jumbo with preposterous meanings is due to virtual agency and because of that belief I tend to be mindful of common sense and of all the rules of speech that I know. The fact that I respect grammatical rules in my speech is actual agency¹⁴.

In simpler terms, the coercive power eventually constraining individuals comes from the predictable consequences of their actions or inaction, *as likely to be caused by opposing actors*, be they individuals or collectivities. Calling that 'social structure' of any kind is not

¹² Again, agency can, of course, also be determined by material circumstances and ideas, but then that determination is not properly social, as understood here, unless it is a long lasting or indirect product of agency. See the previous note on ontology.

¹³ While Weber states that social action does not occur when cyclists collide accidentally, I will show that, in this framework, that accidental act of colliding is indeed social and itself a social phenomenon (because it means breaking a promise, noncompliance with a compromise).

¹⁴ Despite serving to make an excellent point in parallel with the notions of social structure and agency, Saussure's (1959) *langue* et *parole* dichotomy (of universal language rules as opposed to individual speech performances based on such rules) also tends to lead to reification of something with ghostly powers and other than actors' actions (actual or conjectural), which is both inadequate and unnecessary in face of the notion of virtual agency. In the G-STOC framework, *langue* and *parole* are parallel to culture and agency.

parsimonious and not useful, heuristically. It is not useful at all, except (as wanted Durkheim [1982]) to inaugurate some sort of ontology supposedly exclusive to Sociology (hence the reified, ghostly, entirely abstract entities, apart from the individual subjects: because individual subjects had already been claimed by Biology or Psychology). This hints at epistemological insecurities and institutional interests related to the justification of a stand-alone academic discipline – a concern better addressed by properly understanding the characteristics of promises and the role they play in forecasting virtual agency.

Promises and virtual agency

Why promises?

Primordial and elementary, promises have a long history and constitute an important chapter (in Law and) in the arcane knowledge of Philosophy with respect to society (Owens, 2013; Sheinman, 2011) – arcane in that it largely escaped sociological appreciation, despite countless implicit uses of the notion and also loose employments of the term and its variations. While sociologists and other experts have discussed promises in various social contexts — such as trust (Simmel, 1950; Sztompka, 2003; Cook, 2001; Buskens et.al, 2020), credit and debt (Carruthers, 2022; Graeber, 2011), organizations (Bankins, 2014; Rousseau, 1995)¹⁵, Science and Technology studies (Borup et.al, 2006), and expectations (Beckert, 2016), among others (Burgess, 2014; 2015; 2022) — there is no established theory or even a precise conceptualization of promises in Sociology¹⁶, let alone a systematic sociological framework that positions them as the core artifice of social reality. Instead, promises are typically treated as cultural scripts, rhetorical strategies or discursive framings rather than foundational and ubiquitous social elements. In other words, lacking their own entry in Sociology dictionaries, they are considered contingent or regular social phenomena rather than being fully theorized as pervasive and essential elements in social dynamics.

Here, we need not explore the eminently philosophical, contractualist or linguistic and ethical discussions of promises, carried out by thinkers such as Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Kant and, more recently, Austin (1962), Searle (1969; 1995) or Scanlon (1998); to them, the prominence of the concept for social life is obvious, however sidelined by contemporary sociological theorists. Having already introduced the notion above, let us continue to approach promises in a sociological and theoretical perspective and leverage the existing gap to do it free of prior conceptions.

With regard to doing something or respecting a norm, a moral tenet or a tradition, one can either effectively do it or promise it. It is obviously also possible to ignore it,

¹⁵ These two authors are cited here despite *not being sociologists* because I take their work to be, at least in part, sociological, though carried out in the field of business management.

¹⁶ Regarding sociological definition, Carruthers (2022) is remarkably more detailed but remains largely anecdotic and mainly borrows the conceptions of Philosophy, deploying them with historical and socioeconomic focus concerning financial credit and debt in the United States. Graeber (2011), on the other hand, uses 'promises' to define 'debt', which is his central concern, with a historicist perspective of comparative Anthropology. Burgess (2014; 2015; 2022), to be discussed later, applies promises as a universal key for all or at least a great deal of social dynamics, Physics and Computer Science, but his approach is cybernetic instead of sociological.

effectively *not* do it or even to promise *not* to do it. The positive cases, anyway, are basically do it and/or promise it. The present time is instantaneous and immediate; the past can influence but no longer be influenced; the future, in comparison, represents limitless possibilities. The present is like the sharp, fine point of a needle, while the past is as its long body and the future is as an endless space surrounding it. To promise is to attract the effects of the future into the present¹⁷ – or, likewise, from remote locations to nearby. Though it is obvious that the future matters, it is not so easy to estimate how much. A completely unpredictable and therefore unknown future is a scary thing, usually disturbing and posing severe existential threats to actors. Also the prospect of having *no future*, such as in apocalyptic or fatal scenarios, is very often distressing. The idea of life after death is consoling, implying that the future does not cease to exist for those who die. If we regard a *social order* to be the full behavioral result of actors in society (Oliveira, 2021), then the predictability of the *future* social order is what brings its security and stability. That is just how much the future matters to people – and actions wished for in the future can only be promised, as that is as close as they can come to effectively occurring in the future. Valid, acknowledged, actions in the future are virtual and entirely promised, as it is only through promises that they become valid, believable or reliable, allowed to have effects in the present – even while not yet existing. From the metaphysical realm of potentiality, of that which has yet to come into existence, effects of supposedly future (or otherwise unobserved) actions are conjured up into the present. As the future is, in some sense, larger than the present¹⁸, agency in the future, emulated through promises, is often more meaningful than agency in the present, and so even the current social order must be defined considering promises, or else be taken to be merely fleeting and unreliable. If a society is to survive over time it is based on reliable promises, implying trust. Without promises, only present and fugacious interactions or accidental exchanges take place and that is so temporary, contingent and fragile that it cannot really be regarded as the result of a society proper – at least not for long.

Moreover, it is remarkable – and akin to an empirical discovery as groundbreaking as natural selection was to Biology – that any and all disappointment and anger (including dislike and besides any degree of surprise), however subtle or severe, *are essentially reactions that point to broken promises* – be it voluntary, verbal promises made at some point in time by an actor (or entity), or promises that are involuntarily and tacitly imposed upon them (ibidem). Clearly, both discoveries — natural selection (i.e., that life forms with hereditary traits best favoring reproduction tend to prevail in their population) and this

¹⁷ Tentatively. Obviously, what starts as transmission of effects from the future to the present will eventually become a transmission of effects from the past to the present: once the transmissible effects are completely transmitted from the future, the transmission (of effects) switches to be from-past-to-future or from-past-to-present. That is, when a promise (of future, virtual, agency) is made and accepted, something is effected in the present and once that effect takes place, it fades from the present and shifts to the past, whence it begins to influence the future or new present because that is when the past promise must be fulfilled.

¹⁸ Believed to be larger. Most of all because the present is a single fleeting moment and the future is, hopefully, comprised of many such moments.

broken-promise principle — can be seen as platitudes¹⁹. However, only biologists have already managed to fully appreciate the implications of theirs, which are far from trivial.

When we are angry with some other actor or when populations display disappointment towards their government, it is rather easy to realize that expectations (i.e., promises) were frustrated²⁰. But even when someone is angry at the weather, they act as if nature, the sun, the clouds or a weather-god *owed* them some type of (promised) consideration and favor, yet did not come through. In an extreme case, someone might be infuriated by bad weather or because they tripped on a rock and go about cursing it quite *instinctively* (as if they did it to another social actor – a blatant form of anthropomorphism). Like promises, ‘owing’ refers, in its origin, to the future and implies a promise of due payment in order to justify an anticipated (present or past) consequence. In that sense, it imports a promise of present behavior in exchange for future behavior, however uncertain, but it could also mean an exchange of present or immediately successive behaviors. Even when this exchange is apparently immediate or simultaneous, the only way someone can owe something to somebody else is *before* paying the debt or if that debt will extend infinitely, which is precisely why the future temporality, however subtle, comes into play, along with the notion of promise.

In another example, when someone is angry upon receiving the result of a medical test confirming a viral infection, what promises are involved? Are they angry and disappointed because they *should have been* more careful in order to not catch the disease? That would be a promise to oneself that was broken, leading to reflexive, self-disappointment. Is it because others *carelessly* transmitted the virus? Then it would be a regular broken promise. Is it because the test *should have* favored them (anthropomorphism again) but did not? Or due to it implying having to endure a quarantine and they resent that? This last reason resembles the example above about bad weather. Besides anger towards who imposes the quarantine-norm itself, it could mean being angry *at life* because it ought to be without quarantines and other boring duties, a form of anthropomorphism with regard to 'life' (or some religious entity, etc.) having obligations (promises) towards oneself. These are extreme examples relating to inanimate objects or entities. Such cases could be avoided by restricting the claim to anger and disappointment in social settings, but it is found to hold even in those exceptional cases that do not clearly involve social actors, suggesting, quite

¹⁹ By merit of an extensive survey of the full spectrum of sociological theory, Turner incidentally captured the essence of this broken-promise principle (in exposing the triggers or likelihoods of positive and negative emotions in “encounters”) as principle number 19 from a total of 29 in the *microdynamics* section of his theory (2010b, pp.321-322; cf. Lawler, 2001; Collins, 2004, ch.3). I posit that none of the other 28 principles are as ubiquitous or meaningful as that one in that it reveals in itself the key to understanding, explaining and describing any and all social dynamic. Also, note that we cannot replace ‘broken promises’ by ‘frustrated expectations’ in the above assertion because frustrated expectations also lead to plain surprise, without anger or actual disappointment. Finally, although we need not elaborate on it here, it is equally true that all joyful surprise comes from a favor beyond what is considered promised or despite nothing being promised. Analogous reasoning applies to shame, repentance, fear, guilt, pride, etc.

²⁰ Kemper’s (1990, p.227) *social structural assumption* in the sociology of emotions is close to this realization. In that field, it is a rather common assertion that if “failures to meet expectations did not arouse emotion, humans would all be sociopaths; and as a result, the social order would not be possible” (Turner, 2002, p.89, cf. Stryker, 2004).

trivially, that this logic of promises is universal²¹ and deeply rooted in human cognition with respect to frustration (and prescription), separately from how the unfulfillment of mere expectations tends to elicit surprise²².

Though we could do without an even more exact and formal definition, the following provides one: *promises are prescriptive conjectures of unobserved behavior, useful as temporary substitutes, and/or as evaluative criteria, for observed behavior* (see figures 1 and 2). 'Unobserved behavior' relates to virtual agency, promise-of-agency. Unpacking the definition: promises are conjectures. Therefore, ideas. Conjectures that are prescriptive. Conjectures of action or inaction (often expressed with 'should', 'must', 'ought', 'will'). They are useful (and come empirically at play) at least in two main ways: as substitutes of agency and/or evaluative criteria of agency. In the first case, figuring as a virtual kind of agency or emulation of agency. This broad definition fits all the types of promises in fig.1, which implies neatly encompassing the usual, more restricted, sense of promises as elective declarations, as in the below example:

I promise I will send you the book you ordered tonight by mail [or I promise that I sent it yesterday or that I am sending it right now] and that it will soon be in your hands. So you can go ahead and make the payment right now.

Above, the notion of 'unobserved' is clear, whether in the future, the present or the past. The attempt of using a virtual or unobserved action (that was promised) to replace an actual or observed behavior (all but conjectured) is equally present. If the buyer in that example eventually complies and makes the payment preemptively, the promise will (have been used to) effectively replace and anticipate, however temporarily and virtually, the delivery of the purchased item. Whether or not the item is received on time, that will be *judged* against the promise made earlier. The alternative promise with regard to the past or the present ('I promise I sent' or 'that I am sending') is also prescriptive, besides affirmative, because it implies promising that the statement *must* and *will* be verified to be true in due course.

Much like a wildcard in a card game, which can be used to fill any role within the rules, or stem cells in Biology, which hold the potential to transform into any specialized cell in an organism, promises exhibit an extraordinary capacity for flexibility and universality in social engagement, transcending the constraints of time and context. To promise is by no means a regular action insofar as it is an action about another, supposed or virtual, action. As meta-action or second-degree action, promising introduces beliefs about actions, therefore never standing alone or being enclosed in itself. Promises are vehicles for action; like vehicles without travelers, they are meaningless without the actions they refer to and are supposed to fetch and deliver.

²¹ Anecdotally, even domesticated animals can act disappointed or upset when people fail to reward them the way they are used to being rewarded (or how they apparently believe people *ought* to reward them). Perhaps having animals assimilate this social dynamic of *promises* with humans is the essence of domestication.

²² That suicide is one of the most extreme responses to enduring or intensive frustration, anger and disappointment, all of which involve (broken) promises that, in turn, can play a central role in sociological theory, might be coincidental but is also quite meaningful and reassuring of Durkheim's tradition in studying suicide (1951). That violence involved in conflict and punishment is yet another response is equally insightful.

Every ought-to-do and ought-to-be have in (present) not-being the only alternative to fulfillment. What ought-to-be is subjunctive and refers to the future or to the remote, presently inaccessible. There is no better way to refer to this than as a 'promise'. The fact that, upon being disrespected, the norms, mores or laws usually incite social and practical consequences also neatly corresponds to the regular understanding of a broken promise and the aforementioned emotional component of anger or disappointment (however subtle). These (virtual) consequences, as forecasted by chained reciprocal promises, carry the coercive aspect of norms.

The reciprocal setting of promises

Promises are effected and understood in chains, never in isolation. This aspect of promises was, in a way, anticipated in propositions with regard to reciprocity in social exchange. Thus, Social Exchange Theory (SET), perhaps the most sociological branch of Rational Choice Theory and parallel to both Game Theory and Social Contract Theory, might be wrongly considered a precursor connected to this promise-centered framework. Therefore, in demonstrating how reciprocity manifests in promises, it is important to first distinguish and oppose the concept to that of exchange.

Soon after Gouldner's inspiring "*The Norm of Reciprocity*" (1960), many developments from prominent scholars recognized as major contributors to SET (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964) tended to significantly limit the explanatory range of the concept of exchange, as they worried it would be too broad to be useful. In that regard, Blau, for instance, stated:

The broad application of the notion of exchange raises the question of *tautology*. There is a great temptation to explore the fruitfulness of the concept by extending its scope and applying it to all social conduct. But the assumption of exchange theory that social interaction is governed by the concern of both (or all) partners with rewards dispensed by the other (or others) becomes tautological if any and all behavior in interpersonal relations is conceptualized as an exchange, even conduct toward others that is not at all oriented in terms of expected returns from them. To be sure, much conduct that appears at first sight not to be governed by considerations of exchange turns out upon closer inspection to be so governed [...], but this makes it still more important to specify a criterion that *restricts the concept of exchange* and precludes its use in tautological fashion. Social exchange [...] is limited to actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions from others and that cease when these expected reactions are not forthcoming. Ultimately, however, a negative answer to the question of whether the theoretical principles are *tautological* depends on the possibility of inferring *empirically testable hypotheses* from them [...]. (1964, p.6, italics added)

It is clear that Blau was concerned that the proposition that social relations involve exchange might be deemed unfalsifiable (Popper, 1959) since the (theoretically-oriented) interpretation of all empirical findings could necessarily confirm the proposition, rendering it "tautological". Focused on empirical testing and deductive explanations in a positivistic

manner, it seems Blau and others in his time²³ were less interested in establishing important and ordinary theoretical presuppositions, ignoring that they would empower Sociology and resolve major explanatory deficits, not to mention remedy the rather detrimental epistemological and ontological disarray that has evolved and been aggravated to date. The strategic limitation of the 'exchange' concept as proposed in SET seems designed to make it a middle-range theory in the sense of Merton (1967) and prevented it from approaching universal application. Overall, this directly opposes the proposed general (and long-range) heuristic use of promises (and compromises) in G-STOC, and so that constitutes a primary distinction.

A second important distinction is that an exchange is an event (possibly a planned or even promised event), whereas a promise is itself an idea, whether communicated explicitly or not. In that sense, promises can be used to prescribe exchanges, but the reverse is not true. Promises are abstract and separate from their fulfilment in ways that exchanges, more concrete, are not. Promises can take precedence over *any type* of action because they have the peculiar characteristic of referring to and emulating or virtually anticipating those actions (G-STOC discovers not this trivial fact but its full and profound implications²⁴). The term 'exchange' implies an instantaneous *quid pro quo* that either *happens* or not, while promises entail significant temporal displacement between actions. It is also more difficult to conceive of an exchange that regards (promises of) inaction or prohibition, that constitute quite commonplace social obligations – that makes for a third distinction. Furthermore, the ephemeral nature of events poses as an obstacle to empirically analyze their properties in minor detail, perhaps leading to greater scrutiny of single instances of exchange (as opposed to promises that persist over time) and also contributing to shift the focus to that which is actually exchanged. Though 'exchange' and 'promise' both seem to be relational concepts, the former more closely relates to a concrete, substantial interaction, thus readily understood as just one type of interaction. The personal and micro-sociological aspect of interactions make it difficult to see exchanges between diffuse collectivities or in more impersonal, abstract settings. Such subtle differences, stemming from semantics, have a disproportionate impact on the usefulness of the two concepts for description and explanation of social phenomena. When exchanges are taken to be significantly more than I

²³ In his "Notes on the Concept of Commitment", Howard S. Becker (1960) (cf. Howard P. Becker who had just introduced the expression *homo reciprocus* [1956]) manages to discuss many typical characteristics of promises, mentioning behavior "consistent over time", persons "being committed", having "made a commitment" and even cites "bets" and "side bets", all observing that 'commitment' was being used loosely, without theory, in the literature. He just barely missed the very akin notion of promise. He was worried, like Blau and most positivists of his time, with tautological employment of concepts because such concepts would have "the same flaws as those psychological theories which explain behavior by referring to some unobserved state of the actor's psyche, this state deduced from the occurrence of the event it is supposed to explain" (p.35). We need not discuss such deeper matters of epistemology here but, obviously, even in watching an apple fall to the ground, we do not actually *observe* (like Becker and Blau seemed to demand) the Force of Gravity itself (which is but a conjectured relationship). Instead, we observe an empirical consequence of one such force, *theoretically* posited by Newtonian Physics.

²⁴ Perhaps the most notorious of said implications, the Thomas Theorem (1928) figures as a precedent to the realization that *if people define virtual agency as sufficiently likely, it will be real in its social consequences*. What Thomas termed "situations" (that could be defined as real), further developed in symbolic interactionism, can be interpreted as a reference to a complex web of reciprocal promises and their dynamic, also involved in what constructionists and others called 'framing' (e.g., Goffman, 1974; Esser & Kroneberg, 2015).

granted above, they are being confused or conflated with promises-of-exchange, plans-of-exchange and other reflexive appraisals, before any *actual exchange* takes place, which is unsurprising and generally unacknowledged. Unsurprising because promises are unavoidable in analyzing social behavior, though often unnamed and undertheorized. An exchange-of-promises, in turn, would either simply be an idle exchange of present verbal statements or not properly an exchange but, instead, a mutual promise of future exchange, equating, in the G-STOC framework, to a compromise. Encompassing the prescription of exchanges and being so essentially different from them, compromises merit a central theoretical role. Even with the developments of SET towards social networks (Emerson, 1972) and the later contributions regarding trust and exchanges that happen repeatedly or over time (Cook, 2001), the aforementioned limitation of SET remains fundamentally within the very concept of exchange and its reduced explanatory scope. Instead of using the space to elaborate further on the distinctions between ‘exchange’ and ‘promise’, I will get back to the reciprocal characteristic of promises.

The fact that ‘exchange’ supposes reciprocity in a very straightforward manner is perhaps the only advantage of such terminology over that which centers on ‘promise’. Promises are similarly reciprocal not only because breaking them implies consequences (punitive or otherwise, however subtle or overlooked) but also because they are never really gratuitous as their fulfillment always entails some form of compensation, not necessarily symmetrical. This is not only a regular theoretical assumption of G-STOC but, most importantly, an actual derivation of the conceptual difference, in this framework, between ‘promise’ and plain ‘expectation’ (see fig.2).

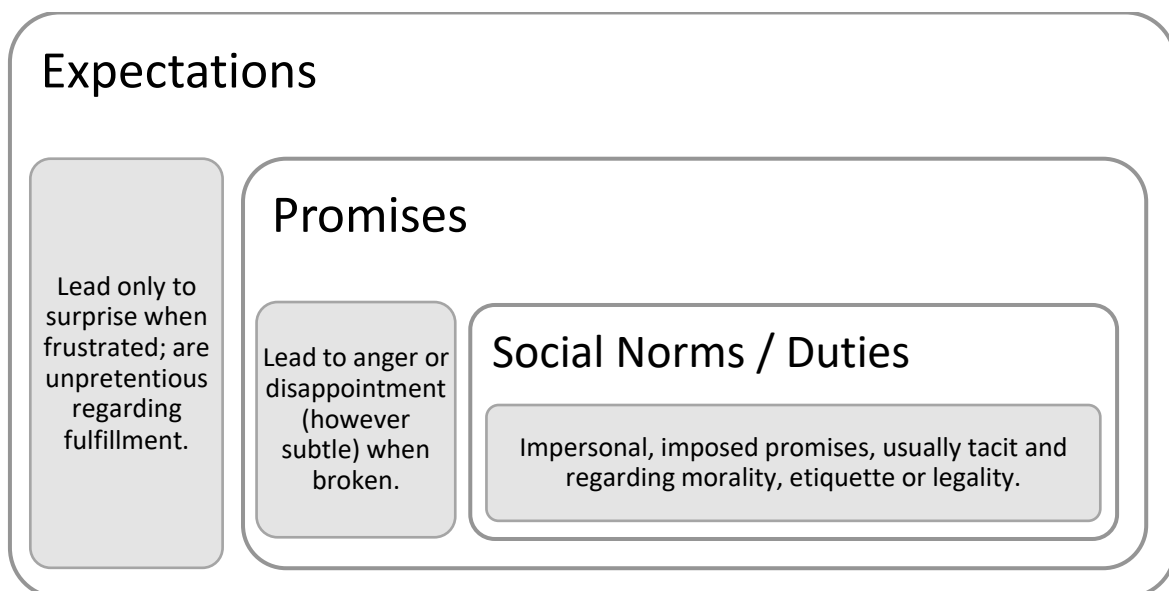


Fig.2 Promises as a subset of expectations; norms as a subset of promises (Oliveira, 2021)

As many before have suggested (e.g. Dewey, 1922; Schutz, 1951; 1959; Mead, 1932; 1934), ordinary, motivated, strategic actions involve “rehearsal” or intensive “anticipation” of consequences and future events. It is expectations that make agency foreseeable, when it is foreseeable at all. Some expectations are also taken to be promises and that bestows them with peculiar properties.

All promises involve expectations but not all expectations involve promises, similar to how I posited before that all social norms involve promises but not all promises involve social norms. Anger and/or disappointment are intricately linked to norms because normativeness implies a deontic sense, a promissory sense of duty, in contrast to mere opinion, expectation or suggestion. Therefore, failing to comply with norms is bound to elicit such feelings, insofar as the norm is genuinely shared and enforced, not just known. When expectations are devoid of promises, their frustration leads only to neutral surprise, if at all. As stated earlier, when expectations evolve to actual promises, their frustration leads to varying degrees of anger and/or disappointment. In this simple conceptual operationalization, the necessity of promises being always reciprocal emerges. Anger and disappointment motivate reactions that range from dislike, apathy, retreat, disapproval or a simple and discrete frown to various more intensive forms of punishment, sabotage and disengagement. If all those milder reactions comprised a set, their opposite would be the regular display of everyday kindness or peaceful, cooperative and neutral behavior. That means to say that the least reciprocity a promise implies is kindness (or neutrality and tolerance in overall interaction). Unlike frustrating a plain expectation, breaking a promise tends to, *at the very least*, affect the maintenance of the reciprocal promise of kindness and even justify its full or partial, temporary or permanent cessation, possibly in moral or legal grounds. Even if the reaction to a broken promise is very discrete, like a momentary frown, a complaint, an acknowledgement of disapproval or simply assuming a behavior that is disinclined to ulterior engagement or future interactions with the same actor, it is always present as consequence of noncompliance with the original promise, necessarily.

When consequences (more broadly: outcomes, reactions, feelings) other than mere surprise are entirely absent upon unfulfillment, we are not before an actual promise but a regular, unpretentious expectation. In that sense, a promise and an exchange are similar for being necessarily reciprocal, even if sometimes only subtly so, in a setting that can be so extremely abstract as to involve neutrality, kindness or simple tolerance (of presence and engagement), behaviors pervasive in any society. Surely, more consequential and practical outcomes are very usual in fulfilling or breaking promises.

That very reasoning regarding reciprocity is what implies that promises are never isolated and always exist in reciprocal, dynamic sets called 'compromises'. It must be clear that promises are building blocks for compromises and that compromises are the central concept in this theory, not promises.

Compromises and social phenomena

The word 'compromise' comes from the Latin *compromissum*, meaning 'a mutual promise', derived from *com-* (together) and *promittere* (to promise). By finally arriving at this concept, we close this short excursion into justifying the answer proposed to the question about the supposed coercive power of norms.

When norms, rules, laws, duties or mores of any kind seem to acquire their coercive and obligatory property it is because they compose promises inside compromises. Their supposed coerciveness emerges through (and is actually merely borrowed from) the

apprehension of virtual agency (agency not yet realized but predictable and prescribed) and that virtual agency is a conclusion arrived at by reasoning with compromises in mind. An obvious example of this is when a rule is effective because subjects know that violating it (breaking promises) will trigger consequences (i.e., because of virtual agency predicted through compromises). (Oliveira, 2021, pp.122-23).

It is not surprising that coercion derives from actors' intent to prevent undesired events, behaviors and interactions from taking place *in the future* (immediate, near or distant future), since this future constitutes a possible (or virtual) present coming their way. Reiterating the importance and ubiquity of promises: if something will no longer happen in any *future instant* (and that is acknowledged rationally and emotionally), it cannot be intimidating in any present instant. Any threat (or fear), as opposed to actual harm, corresponds to circumstances necessarily in the future, being presently subjunctive, as is all that is avoidable, because what already happened cannot be avoided. For example, being whipped once in the present, or having been whipped a number of times in the past, *cannot be coercive unless it implies being whipped again in the future*. As a firearm that runs out of ammunition during a shootout, if any given whip, in the present or in the past, is definitely considered to be the last, then whipping ceases to be coercive completely. It can only be coercive if the count of whips *in the future* is possibly greater than the count of whips in the past or so far, in the present. This is because all social coercion is essentially promissory²⁵, related to virtual agency, however inspired in actual agency and its likelihood, as well as in the very action of promising or threatening.

As any aim, goal or objective is always future-oriented insofar as it still remains to be reached, pursued or accomplished, I could even argue, given sufficient space, that something that is believed to not happen in any future instant cannot be *motivating* in the present and that all present actions ultimately have future-oriented motivations – but that is not required here, most of all because actions in the present will obviously influence only the future, never the already known past nor the instantaneous present itself in which they occur²⁶. Insofar as goals in general, before completion, cannot be confined to the instantaneous present (imminently fated to become part of the past), they necessarily correspond to the *future*, even if pertaining to changing or preserving the present or investigating, exposing, reinterpreting or simply enjoying memories of the past. For example, even if one wants to know what happened *yesterday*, they can only hope, in the present, to learn about it in the future, starting the next instant. The present can only be changed or preserved in the future and any action concerning the past aims at providing a *future*

²⁵ Here we must clearly differentiate social from physical coercion, since being pushed around and thrown in prison, for example, is a physical coercion being inflicted in the present and not a properly social coercion. On the other hand, the possibility (and the promise) of being kept in prison instead of being freed (in the future) is social coercion.

²⁶ One interesting implication of this is that coercion and obedience must decrease as *future actions* become unlikely or impossible. For example, once the world or one's existence approaches its apparent end, the less obedience and coercion should be expected. No future, no promises, no coercion. Empirical surveys to substantiate this claim would be fun but trivial: it would be surprising if the public rejected the pervasive suggestions of Hollywood movies that picture ongoing apocalypses along with social anarchy and disengagement. Beliefs in various forms of (future) afterlife are the negation of the premise, obviously. Also, the absence of future nullifies any goals and, ultimately, even prevents obedience due to lack of time in which to obey.

experience with respect to it (of clarification, remembrance, etc.), regardless of entailing further – hence also *future* – intended or unintended consequences (e.g., compensation, punishment, etc.). Reaction to an event requires its previous verification. Because verification takes time, the present cannot be verified (or elicit reactions) before it becomes the past. Hence all decisions are made in the present aiming *the future* and using the past, if at all, merely as a guide, fallible and inductive. If what matters to actors is always ultimately the future, how could sociologists avoid acknowledging the central role of virtual agency, promises and compromises?

Apart from a whimsical type of plain mimesis and from the purely volitive effects of culture, all supposedly social influences that are not simply agentic are coercive in one way or another²⁷. Hence, if all coercion is provided by (actual or) virtual agency, and virtual agency is revealed to actors by way of their own reasoning with compromises in mind, then all kinds of ‘social structures’ that differ from mere actors and their agency cease to be necessary in any description of the social universe or any explanation of social phenomena. It follows from this that *all sociological explanations can be sought and accomplished through research and analysis focused on compromises*.

Disbelief is expected upon this bold, universal claim that is underlying G-STOC as a logical implication of theoretical assumptions, so I will now proceed to demonstrate its cogency.

At the outset, an ontological and disciplinary matter becomes important: culture, its origins, contents and transformations. It must be clear that the rather awkward idea that Anthropology is somehow concerned with ‘the exotic’ and Sociology with ‘the urban’ or ‘the modern’ is definitely not adopted in this framework. *Culture*, while present in the social universe, influencing the wills of actors and constituting the contents of their shared beliefs and parameters (learned or innate), is decisive in many respects and inspires compromises pervasively; but the thorough explanation of cultural elements and cultural phenomena, in the G-STOC framework, is reserved to Anthropology, a sister of Sociology under the same

²⁷ The broad sense of ‘coercive’ was earlier highlighted in the section on fundamental assumptions. Moreover, the influence of so-called ‘internalization’ could be problematized as being neither agentic nor coercive, but here it falls into a different category of influence, namely cultural, effected through mechanisms that are eminently psychological. The motivations to adhere to cultural elements are often social rather than merely psychological or volitive and, in being social, those motivations are, again, either coercive or agentic. In the G-STOC framework, whatever prescription is internalized, whether or not it originates in culture, becomes an integral part of a subject’s spontaneous axiological values, but obligations or promise arrangements that are just usually taken for granted as ordinary must never be mistaken with internalized values. The notion of ‘internalization’ is subordinated to culture in this framework. Only what actors take to be due, natural and spontaneous *also outside of any social setting or vigilance* – that is, the conduct most comfortable or efficient to self regardless of social contingencies – can ever be considered genuinely internalized (if not innate) and done so through learning or imitation, often in social contexts. Bodily routines and their fixation as well as mannerisms, whenever disconnected of class identities and from the strategic mirroring of outcomes, are here taken to be an eminently psychological phenomenon of psychosocial influence. Compliance with norms due to evaluative, inertial or traditional motivations are all ultimately linked to identity affirmation regarding being placed in the class of actors who are good, normal, traditional, etc. and being entitled to (or being promised) the corresponding treatment (Oliveira, 2021, pp.258-260).

(singular) Social Science umbrella²⁸. Culture is a datum that Sociology often needs (and can legitimately investigate) in order to understand the inspiration of compromises and how actors do or do not engage with them; meanwhile, it is the very object of study of Anthropology. Alternatively, compromises can exert a strong reverse-influence on culture, in which case the resulting cultural transformations also end up explained by Sociology. In general, however, the explanations of the (cultural) ideas that actors *share*²⁹ – including why and how much they share them over time – are anthropological and the explanations of the events and behaviors they inspire in social settings – always through compromises, as further discussed below – are sociological, though constantly connected (ibidem. pp.184-187). That is the broad and well demarcated sense in which I wrote ‘*sociological explanations*’ above. With that in mind, given that Sociology aims to describe and explain social phenomena (in line with the original promise of satisfying curiosity about these phenomena), declaring that the research and analysis of compromises suffice to explain them requires, first, a precise understanding of what social phenomena are and, second, an acknowledgment of what constitutes proper research and analysis of compromises.

Due to its exceptional heuristic importance, the conception and definition of ‘social phenomenon’ must align with regular intuition, of sociologists and non-sociologists alike. The concept must encompass totally or approximately all things commonly considered to be social, while also dismissing what is clearly not social. Provided what we already know of promises and compromises, one such definition can be devised with their support, for every single phenomenon that is intuitively social, per common sense, can be found to involve compromises³⁰. In order to realize this, we must consider that compromises (and social action) can be present in five different *categorical situations*, namely (ibidem, p.246):

- (1) *Compliance;*
- (2) *Noncompliance;*
- (3) *Alteration or negotiation (including rejection);*
- (4) *Creation or elimination or yet*
- (5) *As long-lasting social results.*

In other words, whenever an intuitively social phenomenon (or action/behavior) occurs, compromises are either being fulfilled, unfulfilled, altered, created, eliminated or have left

²⁸ To the extent that they are known and shared, compromises, as ideas, are also an exceptional part of culture. Along with expectations of behavior, they are the only part of culture that implies virtual agency and, through agency, social influence. In that they have exceptional properties, they are justifiably sociological, beyond anthropological.

²⁹ It is important to emphasize that some cultural elements may have an innate origin, hard-wired in human brains, and that they remain cultural, shared and of anthropological interest regardless of their origin or whether their existence is explained by assumptions of Evolutionary Psychology. The supposedly biological or evolutionary origin of cultural elements (e.g., the axiological statements ‘*pain is bad*’ and ‘*sex is good*’ or the common sense knowledge ‘*babies need care*’) says little about its latest transformations, manifestations, pervasiveness over time and any attempted rejection, and much less about its interactions with other, more or less pervasive, cultural elements. As for evolutionary explanations of ‘natural’ social behavior, what better way is there to socially and artificially shape it and maybe suppress its egotistical and instinctual drives than with promises and accountability?

³⁰ In this resides yet another assumption, though more conceptual: a phenomenon not involving promises directly or indirectly will likely not be intuitively considered social.

effective residues as long lasting results, particularly in the thoughts and behaviors of actors, through learning. This proposition should hold true (and I propaedeutically assert that it does³¹) across all social research scenarios, provided that an intuitive conception of 'social phenomenon' is applied. Moreover, inverting this logic of validation, the presence of compromises in any categorical situation becomes a suitable operationalization of the encounter with a social phenomenon. In fact, compromises are not just incidentally present but are definitive to understanding the occurrence of such phenomena, effectively composing their detailed scientific description. This invites an example.

Suppose the principal of a middle school calls a meeting to order the notification of all staff and students that new guidelines for school garden preservation will be adopted, which include measures such as keeping off the grass carpets at all times. It is useful that this example simultaneously relates to (1) the birth of an organizational rule as well as (2) an interaction between concrete actors and (3) the agency of a collectivity (the school staff and students) being influenced through its leadership (the principal). The establishment of new rules and guidelines and, specifically, the enforcement of the new 'keep-off-the-grass' norm are in themselves social phenomena, as well as the fact that the staff recognized the leadership of the principal and accepted the initiative (complying with a compromise that demands their obedience). From then on, whether students refrain from stepping on the grass or continue to walk over it will be other social phenomena. The new rules, when imposed, represent the creation of compromises containing, for example, the promise 'keep-off-the-grass' paired, say, with the opposing promises 'be considered a rule-abiding student or staff member' or 'be left alone' or even 'be recognized as a role-model citizen of the school yard' and 'be free of detention'. These promises, forming a set inside the compromise regarding the rules of the school yard, are reciprocal and opposing and can be analyzed as costs and benefits for the students in one pole and the school staff in another; but also between students, if, for example, they help enforce the rules on their peers. In this context and in many others, besides plain deviance, problems of indirect, tacit communication regarding promise arrangements (compromises) are obviously plenty, with consequences ranging from laughter and personal embarrassments to divorce and world wars.

It is easy to imagine how the same logic would apply to countless other settings, social events and interactions. For instance, when one makes a purchase, they accept a compromise implying having to pay for an item (a promise often fulfilled immediately) and receiving, in reciprocity, the product, its rightful possession, the recognition of being a regular customer, a warranty of the product's quality and/or functionality (in accordance to promises contained in packaging, merchandising and advertising), etc., all promised, regardless of when delivered. In yet another example, when someone makes a disrespectful joke and is rebuked or indirectly reprimanded, they are before a compromise in a state of noncompliance, perhaps pertaining directly to (the promises of) kindness, engagement and tolerance, thus demanding, in return, a long list of conformities (promises), one of which is

³¹ Empirical testing is welcome, but, in the G-STOC conceptual framework, this is rather unfalsifiable, as is Darwinian evolution (as Popper himself once admitted [1974, p.82,137]) or Freud's Oedipus complex or Marx's historical materialism, in their respective frameworks.

to be mindful of certain jokes, avoiding irreverence towards particular themes. Children are often taught to conform by knowing when and if they *will* be grounded or reprimanded (promised punishments for noncompliance, more meaningful in the future than in the past because only in the future can they intimidate). Committing a crime means breaking the law, itself a promise – often composed by legislators, judged and monitored by the judiciary, imposed and fulfilled, if necessary, by the executive branch of government.

Furthermore, the dials and hands of clocks, along with the parameters of many other types of timekeeping devices, abound with promises, are infused and empowered by them. Clocks and calendars represent two of the most ubiquitous instruments of social collaboration, coordination and coercion, always depending on reciprocal promises that give meaning to their graphic display of dates, hours and minutes. They measure not only the passage of time but the imminence of certain time-bound promises being finally enforced, in diverse temporal scales, according to the validity term (see below) of each compromise of which they are a part. We involuntarily promise to keep track of temporality with cultural, shared parameters and that allows for long-distance, tacit, laconic, *quasi*-telepathic relationships with all actors (billions?) who also involuntarily promise to abide by the same temporal standards³².

As mentioned before, even language itself is established through a compromise where all actors, in this case interlocutors, diffusively and involuntarily promise to submit to grammar, spelling, semantic and phonetic rules in order to achieve the resultant benefit of (promised) clear communication. Similarly, donations, that would perhaps seem intuitively unilateral, even if charitable or affectionate, display the same latent reciprocal logic (as notoriously pointed out, for instance, in Mauss, 1954), since rejecting a donation thoughtlessly, apart from making the donation itself impossible, can easily provoke anger or disappointment, thus evidencing a broken promise, perhaps to be grateful and mindful of generosity³³ or agreeable to what is taken by the giver to be beneficial to the receiver. Two more examples would be a politician directly promising to a large audience that he will change a nationwide public policy if elected and a college sweetheart breaking up with her boyfriend (proposing the end of a compromise that established an amorous relationship with promised costs, benefits, dos and don'ts). Even when someone offers practical instructions as to how to achieve a social outcome ('book an appointment', 'wait in line', 'turn in paperwork', 'be charming and ask her out on a date') they are essentially and indirectly, in part or in whole, describing compromises that must (in the future, according to said instructions) be observed in order to obtain or attempt to obtain the desired result (likely promised in return).

In identifying compromises and sketching their dynamic, there is no considerable difference when the empirical situations involve organizations, institutions or even larger collectivities in a macrosocial level (such as metropolises and colonies) except for

³² After Durkheim and Elias, the sociology of time has gathered followers (Hassard, 1990). In the G-STOC framework these quasi-telepathic relationships are regarded as arising from "indirect communication" (Oliveira, 2021) made possible through the diffusion and imposition of cultural elements.

³³ Displaying charitable generosity is a strategy of identity and class affirmation, to be discussed later. Generous people do what generous people *must*, which also involves promises.

methodological procedures and interdisciplinary approach. Large-scale cultural transformations, in turn, impact compromises (as their inspirations) through changes in morality, values, goals, knowledge, etc. Again, researching the origin and history of cultural transformations (e.g., that involved in the so-called modernization) requires additional anthropological methodology (Oliveira, 2021, ch.3). For instance, macro-societal aspects of the French Revolution can be described as a dramatic reconfiguration of compromises: the monarchy's implicit promise of stability and protection, upheld by subjects' reciprocal pledges of loyalty and obedience³⁴, faltered amid burdens like taxation without representation and famine. As these promises broke — unmet by the crown — anger and disappointment fueled popular reprisals, ultimately leading to the collapse of the old order through the rejection and replacement of its foundational power-legitimizing compromises (and the execution of the monarchs who previously imposed and profited from them). In its place, new compromises arose: the Republic promised liberty and equality, matched by citizens' commitments to civic participation. In a final example, what is *secularization* if not a decremental change in the patterns, cultural inspirations, content, influences, scope and quantity of *compromises* that certain actors hold with religious institutions or in accordance with their doctrine? And what is a *moral doctrine* if not a cultural element that, while inspiring intervening or *modelling* compromises, shapes, restricts and/or enforces specific compromise arrangements?

At this point, while additional examples could be offered, I will conclude by asserting (and promising) that any claim suggesting the total absence of compromises in interactions or any other clearly social phenomena can be readily refuted through closer inspection³⁵. Any pursuit of outcomes, including satisfaction or resolution of problems³⁶, through actions in the empirical world, that is not carried out by an individual in an absolutely autonomous or solitary fashion, is attempted through compromises which oppose reciprocal promises (promised costs and benefits, investments and outcomes) and expose how they are related, thus answering “*why* subjects act as they do, at least as far as its promises are concerned” (ibidem, pp.294-295) – yet this is not to say that solitary individuals are completely devoid of the influence of compromises. A logical implication of the conceptual framework, this constitutes a major theoretical principle. If we only listen to actors' accounts of what they did or do in social settings or interactions and diligently ask *why*, we will inevitably, sooner than later, find very pertinent and more or less intuitive and unbeknownst references to

³⁴ For distinctions between the G-STOC approach and that of SET or Game Theory, see the previous section on reciprocity and the following section on explanation.

³⁵ Which, again, can also be said of the first law of Newton, with respect to the search for theoretically necessary unobserved unbalanced forces, be it or not considered unfalsifiable. I could also rhetorically invite challenges to this assertion, but epistemological and ontological clarity prevent me from conceiving it possible. Promises and compromises are ideas, they pertain to actors' reasoning, however pragmatic, incomplete and subconscious, but indeed they *can* be investigated and confirmed empirically through regular research methodology. They are just part of the very logic of social reality, as determinism and causality are part of the logic of the natural world, at least as we ordinarily experience it. Newton's first law implies that there is *always* one or more unbalanced *forces* acting upon a body that is not in perfect inertia. Here I say there is *always* one or more *compromises* involved in social phenomena. When forces or compromises seem missing where they should be present, we must look harder (or else falsify the statements). Even if one or both these assertions are considered unfalsifiable or tautological, they are far from trivial because of their deep implications.

³⁶ Also the problems involved in what Turner (2010a) termed “selection pressures”.

promises and compromises. Proving that they are always present in social life equates to proving the evident fact that normative opinions and beliefs about how events, behaviors and situations *should or should not, must or must not, ought or ought not*, take place are always provided by actors, even if reluctantly or in a setting of uncertainty and negotiation. Again, promises are not just formal agreements; they are also the specific type of unspoken expectations that shape how we navigate the social world, rooted in beliefs about what is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or not, and about how the future (and everyone's behaviors in it) must be. Mutual promises, woven into compromises, shape the dynamics of all social bonds.

Those still skeptical of the universality of this approach are invited to consider again that all social *prescriptions* are dependent on promises and, consequently, all social behavior to be *judged*, in the present or in the past, and to be *expected and required* in the future (perhaps anticipated in the present) are equally dependent. Covering past, present and future social behavior expresses the posited generality without any sort of reductionism, as no aspect, dynamic or influence is neglected. That a particular social order is or was in force solely for one instant of time is not meaningful as any social order so described extends minimally over time, even if changing, and thus (unless it extends accidentally) must rely on promises, all the more so because the *prescription and predictability* of its stability or change require promises. In short, all the fundamental social purposes of communication, collaboration, discrimination, regulation, standardization, competition and innovation – to mention just a few – are accomplished through compromises, as are all conflicts and all purposeful violence (from glares and insults to slaps and murder) related to their definition, imposition and compliance (Ibidem, pp.99-101) and all thanks, complaints and apologies related to promises that are made, kept, proposed, fulfilled, acknowledged, waived, broken or involved in identity affirmation (Ibidem, p.213). This implies that the key concepts in other major theoretical traditions in Sociology, such as conflict, stability, exchange, interaction, etc., all neatly translate into promise dynamics.

A social phenomenon can involve behaviors from many actors. All social behavior, too, can be described as either fulfilling, proposing, breaking, accepting, rejecting, negotiating, altering, eliminating or probing compromises, and/or as their long-lasting social consequences. 'Social phenomena', ontologically speaking, generically admits the existence of static and dynamic social entities (objects and events) and their properties (ibidem, p.249). So far, the lack of a single and widely adopted universal and unifying ontology made the world of social phenomena seem "heterogeneous" and therefore prone to require being analyzed at multiple levels with also multiple (and likely incommensurable) kinds of processes (Little, 2016). This presumed ontological heterogeneity drives skepticism towards the claim that one single theory can indeed encompass all social phenomena, whether micro, meso or macro, as well as personal, professional, familial, amorous, political, legal, religious, commercial, etc., be they conflictual, cooperative, competitive or otherwise. The revelation that all supposedly heterogeneous social phenomena are actually homogenous in that they uniformly share the presence of compromises in whatever categorical situation (or the influence of actors who consider them) is an ontological principle or finding that triggers

a decisive epistemological shift. This shift allows rejecting the idea that Sociology requires multiple, disparate theories or piecemeal, eclectic explanatory approaches.

Compromises and explanation

Once we accept that all social phenomena have underlying compromises that define them, in what sense, then, does analyzing and researching compromises contribute to explaining social phenomena?

As sets of promises, compromises are dynamic because they have internal settings or “terms” (Oliveira, 2021, pp.94-98). Therefore, the minimal description of a compromise will contain:

- (1) *Costs or duties (promised by each party);*
- (2) *Benefits or rights (promised to each party);*
- (3) *Parameters of rigor and compensation of costs by benefits;*
- (4) *Conditions of validity;*
- (5) *Applicability to parties and types of parties and*
- (6) *Prevision of consequences of non-compliance and rescission.*

When coupled with empirical data about the categorical situation of the compromise, the six terms above provide sufficient information to begin understanding the corresponding social relationship. Regarding further classification and analysis, 16 variables provide much insight concerning social dynamics (ibidem, pp.295-356, see fig.3).

Amplitude	Inspiration of terms	Importance to the social order	Types of parties
Laterality	Symmetry	Type of compensation	Communication of and agreement upon terms
Formality	Degree of rigor	Form of contraction	Temporal validity
Punishability of non-compliance	Terminability	Combination	Sphere of belonging

Fig.3 Sixteen main classificatory variables of compromises. Considering the values each variable can assume, millions of valid combinations are describable

Besides the kind of graphs regularly used in network analysis, detailed sociogram designs specifically crafted for depicting compromises are also useful for analysis, reporting, comparison and communication (see table 2). The analysis of empirical data in order to produce explanations must encompass not only the terms of compromises and their situation but also everything that influences them, their cultural or egocentric inspiration, their changes over time and the level of engagement of actors (motivated by evaluative, inertial, traditional, coercive and/or utilitarian factors [ibidem]).

To completely define a social phenomenon, a description must include where and when it occurs (as precisely as possible), as well as the compromises involved and their modality or categorical situation (ibidem, p.411). This allows for a summarized notation of phenomena as in table 1.

Phenomenon's Nomination: Breaking up with Anna (to start dating Suzy)	
Temporality: Last night	<p>▶[Compromise 1: Romantic relationship with Anna] ([GCAC: CI-M121.112.122.242.1P]: [Modality: Termination]) ([Reprisals from Anna to John]: [CPDC: P1223241])</p> <p>▶[Compromise 2: Dating Suzy] ([GCAC: CI-A221.111.332.223.1P]: [Modality: Creation])</p> <p>▶[Compromise 3: Loan from Anna] ([GCAC: CI-M321.224.112.334.2E]: [Modality: Alteration])</p>
Spatiality: John's place	
Actors: John*; Anna; Suzy	

Through nonverbal cues and body language, John continued signaling to Anna that he was unhappy with their engagement and unwilling to spend time with her. When questioned, he declared his intention to break up and part ways amicably. Angered and disappointed, Anna slapped John in the face, accused him of cheating, demanded immediate repayment of money she had lent him and stormed out the door without clearly acknowledging the definitive end of their engagement. To John, the termination was sufficiently implied and he felt shaken but relieved for being free to date Suzy.

Table 1 Summarized description of a social phenomenon

The amount of compromises to consider related to any particular phenomenon will likely depend on the empirical scope selected by the researcher, as normally a large number of compromises can be seen as intervening in any given event. Prosaic descriptions of the summarized phenomena, narrating events, must also be attached.

The *General Classification and Analysis Code* (GCAC in tables 1 and 2) is an alphanumeric sequence that represents values for the 16 main variables listed in fig.3, allowing easy comparison of compromises and enhancing the perception of their decisive characteristics. Regarding the more detailed description of particular compromises involved in the exemplified phenomenon, table 2 presents a hypothetical corresponding sociogram containing all the defining terms, as listed earlier.

Again the GCAC is represented, along with similar classifications of each of the promised costs and benefits (CCCB) and of the due consequences for non-compliance and rescission (CPDC). The asterisk by the name of John in tables 1 and 2 is to signal that the classifications and analysis were made from his standpoint and interpretation, possibly different from Anna's. Special attention is also dedicated to the inspiration of the terms of the compromise, in this case, cultural elements related to widely shared morals and etiquette.

In summarizing the phenomenon in table 1, note many other compromises could be added, like the ones corresponding to the new non-romantic friendship relationship between John and Anna (that John supposed should follow from the breakup) and also the possibly impacted relationships with Anna's parents and mutual friends. From then on, after the events described in table 1, should Anna continue to demand promised benefits from

John regarding their engagement, another phenomenon would arise in the form of a *conflict*, as John would consider the engagement previously terminated whereas Anna would consider it currently in force but in a situation of noncompliance. Other inquiries and curiosities can be explored, for instance, regarding John’s motivations and detected dissatisfaction or unhappiness or *disappointment* towards the relationship, which remarkably pertain to the promises he would rather not keep and decided to withdraw and/or that Anna, in his view, failed to fulfill in an earlier context.

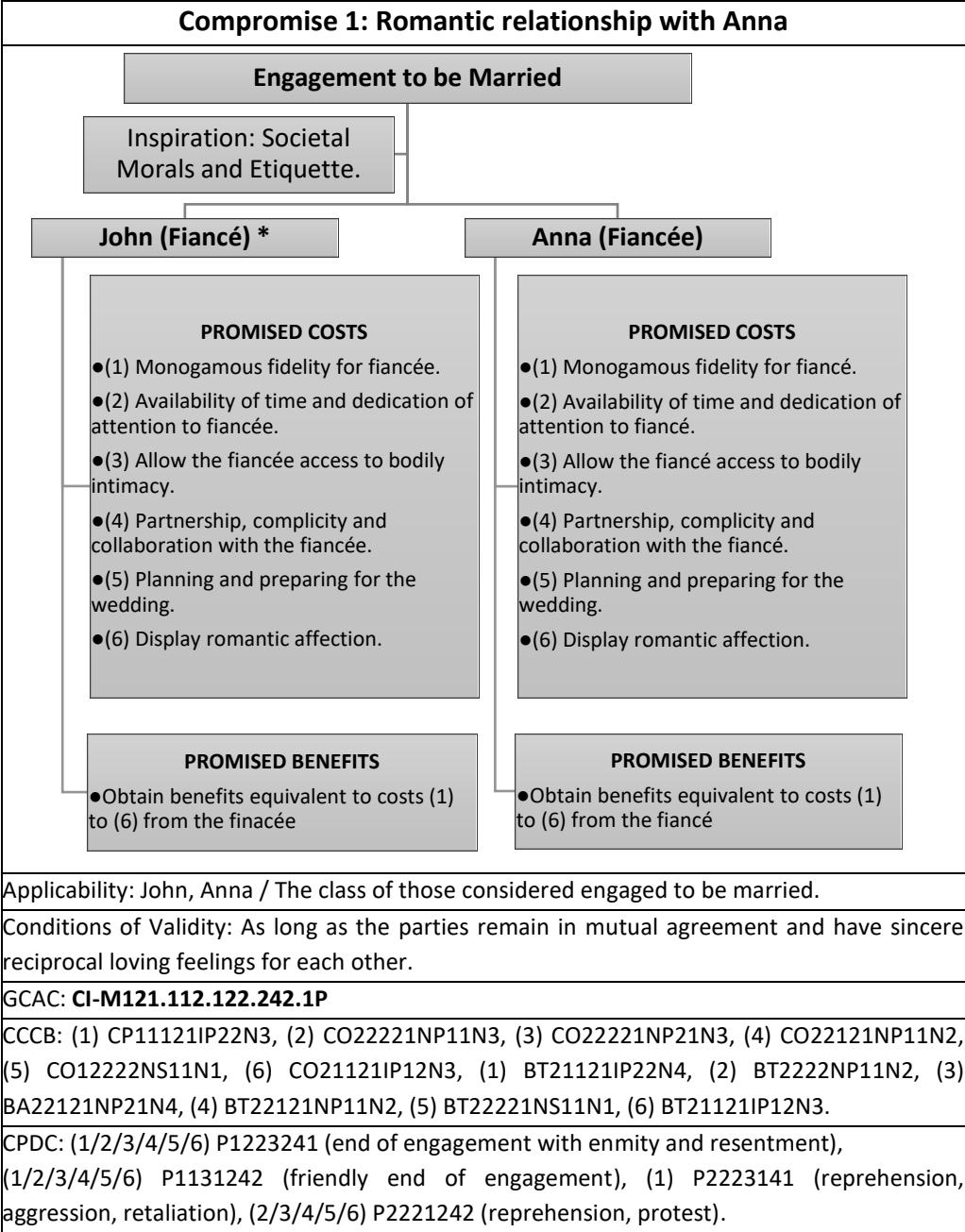


Table 2 Example of a Sociogram used to describe a compromise

Though the portrayed example is interpersonal, microsocial and dyadic, the same descriptive tools can be employed to a wide range of phenomena across compromises of different scales and number or types of parties, all the way to those between diffuse collectivities, such as entire countries or an institution and large populations.

For example, the spread of hoaxes or false information involves compromises related to honesty and due diligence in verifying facts and possibly also concerns (due, promised) control over algorithms and editorial filters in news platforms and social media. Apart from that, hoaxes and false information might directly involve reports on compromises in any categorical situation and the behavior of corresponding actors – all scandals do and many newsworthy facts tend to imply at least an indirect responsibility of actors or their placement in specific social classes corresponding to sets of typical compromises (we will return to this point later). Even a hoax of an earthquake or hurricane, despite concerning natural phenomena, can also in many ways relate to compromises and their applicability and validity or at least serve to distract from unwanted compromises by competing with them for limited amounts of time and attention. In summary, hoaxes can (1) be about false compliance and/or proposition of compromises and their consequences (covering something that someone did or did not do), (2) involve compromises pertaining to honesty and communication, (3) involve compromises prescribing suspicion or due diligence in fact-checking and (4) be a subterfuge useful to divert from unfavorable compromises, among other possibilities. Why false information spreads *instead* of being promptly debunked or discredited has to do with psychological factors and, perhaps most of all, with the absence or ineffectiveness of compromises that are supposed to enforce the suppression of hoaxes. Why it eventually spreads *despite* being (supposedly) debunked implies matters of social class, regarding the (promised) attribution of trustworthiness to different actors providing different versions of facts, and/or strategic deception aiming reaching favorable outcomes through deliberate lying³⁷. Those aspects and others are liable to relevant and conclusive sociological analysis, which can be further enriched by psychological and anthropological insights.

The survey of compromise content is conducted through research with interviews, observation, polls, etc., almost always questioning expectations, demands, prerogatives, duties and all else related to the six defining terms and categorical situation, however indirectly and, if necessary, through subjects' assumptions and what they presume to be the consequences of behaviors³⁸ (Oliveira, 2021).

To what extent does this description of compromises, however detailed and precise, equate to an *explanation* of social phenomena?

Explanations may refer to concrete social and natural phenomena but also to meanings, feelings and purposes (Salmon, 1998, p.83). The word 'explanation' is used so intuitively that even in scholarly work it easily evades precise definition. This becomes evident as one surveys the literature in the epistemological and meta-theoretical discussions in Social Science and particularly in Sociology. One reason for this may be that, beyond the vague adherence to positivist (deductive-nomological) or hermeneutical (interpretive) concepts, discussions of 'causality' are traditionally prioritized, often exhausting the interest

³⁷ More about this in a forthcoming note on lying.

³⁸ It is interesting to note how hypothetical questions in interviews or polls may be (imperfectly) analogous, sociologically, to experiments in controlled laboratory conditions, as conducted in the context of Natural Science.

in further exploring ‘explanation’, which is also regularly confused with simple ‘understanding’ (ibidem, pp.3-4).

Few have approached the subject of ‘explanation’ guided by the meanings, intents and intuitions underlying its use in ordinary language – in other words, to venture into devising an *illocutionary* concept of explanation (Achinstein, 1983). In reviewing one such attempt, Horwich (1985) questioned:

[...] is there any reason to expect that the class of ‘explanations’, as the term is ordinarily used, has a uniform NATURE – or that there exists ANY definition at all of ‘the act of explaining’? (p.586, original emphases)

Merely to suggest that

[...as] spelled out by Wittgenstein and Quine [there are reasons] for supposing that such endeavors CANNOT succeed. (p.588, original emphasis)

Nevertheless, through the epistemic framework carefully designed to support G-STOC, we discover that explanations *do* have a uniform nature and, therefore, a meaningful, non-trivial, non-tautological definition for the act of explaining *indeed can* be devised. The connections between ‘curiosity’ and ‘knowledge’ (or ‘truth’), between ‘knowledge’ and ‘explanation’, between ‘explanation’ and ‘theory’ and between ‘theory’ and ‘science’ are vital and hopefully evident. I have already touched some of these and will soon reach what remains. For the limited purpose of this paper, I am less interested in the numerous types of explanations and explanatory strategies and more interested in the very nature and proper conceptual definition of ‘explanation’, universally.

To put it briefly, explaining requires identifying or conjecturing relationships between objects³⁹ and/or events, often of cause and effect but also logical, of premise and conclusion, answering questions that can usually be phrased with ‘why’ or ‘how’. A cause, for instance, exists only within a cause-and-effect *relationship*, for, devoid of effects, causes do not exist as such. It follows from this that the relational element must be emphasized in order to identify and perform *any explanation* in and out of the field of *any science*, be it natural or social. Something is explained if (and only if) its *relationship* to its cause (or premise) is described or presumed (or deduced), thus elucidating what supposedly contributes to its occurrence (the why) and, perhaps even more importantly, *how* it comes to occur. Hence, *to explain is to describe relationships*⁴⁰.

Although I do not have the space here to refute supposed counterexamples, this formulation encompasses all causal, mechanistic, teleological, purposive, functional and

³⁹ Not only empirical but also ideal objects and events. When explanations refer to ideas, the relationships tend to be logical (deductive, inductive, abductive) instead of plainly causal. Ideal objects may be meanings, feelings, purposes (Salmon, 1998, p.83). Ideal events are, for example, implication, oblivion, alteration, emergence or creation.

⁴⁰ Tentatively. I am aware this sounds somewhat paradoxical – most of all because relationships are not substantial and therefore cannot be observed or properly described (only conjectured, supposed by way of theoretical appreciation) but also because explanations are usually very strongly opposed to plain descriptions. Still, it must hold true to the examination of any and all instances of explanations, through a reasoning detailed in length elsewhere (Oliveira, 2021, ch.1).

deductive types of explanation, among others. That explanations universally refer, explicitly or implicitly, to relationships between objects and/or events (empirical or ideal) is regarded as an axiom (in that it is self-evident – albeit not trivial – and holds true across all instances of what constitutes a proper explanation). Within and beyond the G-STOC framework, this is established as the epistemic *principle of relationality*, with clear and decisive implications for Science in general and for what it means to explain social phenomena (Oliveira, 2021). If to explain is to describe relationships, then sociological explanation is the description of compromises, their status and their endogenous and exogenous influences.

Besides being heuristic devices, for both researchers and actors to make sense of social settings, compromises are precisely (and not by chance) *tentative descriptions of social relationships* between actors – and, therefore, explanations! In fact, they underlie all social relationships and point to the virtual agency that often serves as the cause for actual agency. While compromises are themselves descriptions of *social* relationships, there might also be relationships (e.g., logical, causal) between compromises and resulting behavior to be exposed narratively in sociological explanations, like sketched in table 1. That is because relationships interact with one another similar to how forces in nature interact. In Physics, forces are the *effects* of natural relationships (transmitted by causes); in Sociology, compromises are the *description* of social relationships. If *energy* is the underlying essence or ultimate reified measurement of forces in Physics, the underlying essence of compromises are *meanings* and *rationality*. As matter is made of atomic particles and molecules, society is composed of promises and compromises⁴¹, from which emerge all social phenomena as well as explanations (and predictions) of these phenomena.

Therefore, researching, analyzing and describing compromises, their dynamic, influences, inspiration and changes over time equates to satisfactory sociological explanation – satisfactory in that it effectively allows for full understanding, answers questions and quenches curiosity about social phenomena universally, fulfilling the sociological dimension of the mission or original promise of Social Science.

The G-STOC framework

Having covered the core notions, the definition and articulation of some more usual peripheral concepts must follow for purposes of demonstration. Before that, however, a few words are warranted about contexts where this framework could be situated, while maintaining its distinct approach and general scope.

Clearly transcending the domain and assumptions of economic sociology (e.g. Zelizer, 2012; Carruthers, 2022), G-STOC could be considered essentially part of Sociology's recent *relational turn*, very well summarized by Vandenberghe (2018), who acknowledged the concept of "relation" as a "magical operator" with the power to "integrate the various approaches into a complex social theory" – but one that is somehow *not* universal and *not able* to eclipse all other perspectives⁴² (pp.36-37). Though eminently relational, G-STOC remains disconnected to the other approaches in this turn and does not subscribe to an

⁴¹ Note that a society exists between its agent members just as a partnership exists between partners.

⁴² Not aspiring to that which appears unattainable may be a virtue or a vice. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

agenda that requires the “magical”, rather Sisyphean effort of integrating redundant, conflicting theories. ‘Relationism’, as opposed to functionalism or structuralism, is a broad umbrella term suitable to encompass its perspective⁴³.

Sharing a similar outlook of the problematic scenario in Sociology, there are other recent, ambitious and inspiring efforts dedicated to formulating a “Grand Theory”, remarkably from Turner (2010a, 2010b, 2012). It is important to note, however, that, in order to afford an all-encompassing sociological set of concepts and tenets, G-STOC does not follow the tortuous, often misleading path of theoretical synthesis of diverse and/or competing perspectives but instead trails the very swift, iconoclastic and subversive path of disruptive innovation⁴⁴. Although swift and by virtue of being revolutionary, that path requires the leverage of theoretical novelty and the rather unusual merit of superior heuristic power and long-range scope. It is also remarkable that a viable general social theory, in order to be convincing and persuasive enough to become widely accepted, must not be excessively complex and thus demands finding explanatory power that has been hiding in plain sight since forever (more below). As Hoffman (2013) eloquently (yet pessimistically) put in his amusing and insightful essay “*Who needs a general theory of social reality?*”: no small trick!⁴⁵

⁴³ Sociology is so often about what actors will do, won’t do, should do, how they will react, should react, won’t react, etc. that the discipline itself and this particular perspective could also be called *futurology*! But that name is already taken. Note that when Sociology is concerned with present or past actions, they are always analyzed and explained bearing in mind the forecast of then-future consequences as motivations.

⁴⁴ There is great and largely unassessed usefulness in the effort of extracting, condensing and systematizing empirical regularities from decades of research into generalizing principles, as ventured by Turner. Proper theoretical synthesis of a large scope is another matter, rarely focused by social theorists. It takes geniality and, most of all, heroism (both absent in me) to stitch or weave together and accommodate a multitude of perspectives into a grand theoretical chimera or a sociological *Frankenstein*. Still, attempts of that inspiration have been overlooked. In order to rescue Sociology (even when it resists salvation), perhaps one must be willing to take on the role of a ruthless supervillain, willing to demolish old theories, wielding existential threats and defiance of the *status quo*, imposing their vision with the iron fist of compelling reasoning. In his twisted way, Marx did this once, implying that other theories were no more than bourgeois ideology and that capitalism was doomed, all the while calling for socialist revolution (Marx, 1990; Marx & Engels, 1970; 2002). Despite the nefarious influences and intents, his essential supervillain-strategy produced a profound impact not only in Sociology but on the whole world. It can be done again, hopefully with a positive result. Here, I claim that other theories are broken and that Sociology is nearly doomed, all the while calling for a scientific, theoretical revolution. Unfortunately or not, supervillains usually never win by the end of the story! I would rather see the arrival of Sociology’s Carl Sagan (after Sociology is ready) than the rise of another supervillain. But, oh well... maybe the former needs the latter. Should *break-throughs* not imply rupture?

⁴⁵ His “[...] main point is that for a theory to become truly grand, in the sense of a commonly-accepted framework that seeks to capture all or at least most of social reality, it will need to do more than just explain. It will need to be loved. A loose recipe for this trick, then, might look something like the following: exhibit the epistemological subtlety of *Distinction*, the insight of *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, approximate the networks forged by Bourdieu and the Center for European Sociology, possess the broad sweep of, say, Shmuel Eisenstadt, be unafraid to move across units of analysis like Randall Collins (or Jonathan Turner), surprise and delight readers with both theoretically [sic] portability and empirical precision — and in doing all this capture the imagination of influential and energized followers capable of elaborating concepts across historical time and space. No small trick.” (ibidem, p.53). I deem the recipe Hoffman describes to be at least partially wrong for it would indeed make the “trick” nearly impossible to perform – most of all for me, but also for any social theorist alive.

With regard to explanatory power hiding in plain sight, the amount of scholarly books and articles on trust, risk and cheating that even use the word ‘promises’ repetitively without ever suspecting the concept’s full heuristic potential is remarkable. Sztompka (2003) thoroughly surveyed the literature on trust, profusely citing eminent works of authors such as Luhmann, Giddens, Merton, Coleman, Fukuyama and many others, systematizing nearly everything concerning trust – *except promises*. The 17 contributors to *Trust in Society* (Cook, 2001) similarly missed it, as well as others in more recent volumes (e.g., Buskens et.al, 2020). The fulfillment of or compliance with promises can be trusted or not trusted, but promises are clearly not the same as trust. Especially when promises are voluntary and elective, trust is particularly decisive, but, in all other cases, another major concern is whether promises are valid and legitimate, whether they exist, are acknowledged and are imposed or not. Be it as a feeling, a belief and/or a disposition (Simon, 2020), trust is acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of social life, but promises are, up to now, largely overlooked by Sociology, despite constantly present. On the other hand, trust receives almost no mention here, but there is no shortage of sociological literature on the subject and all the available knowledge around it can no doubt enhance G-STOC. There is more sociological literature revolving the term ‘compromise’ (e.g., Brewer, 2018, always on a very different, restricted conceptualization) than on the term ‘promise’, which seems quite abandoned in this field⁴⁶, despite referring to ideas that have, for all intents and purposes and through the perspective of G-STOC, the social importance of (fallible) agency emulators. ‘Promises as emulators of agency’ or ‘Promises as virtual agency’ could indeed compose alternative titles to this paper.

Furthermore, it is significant that a conceptual and heuristic reasoning similar to that supporting G-STOC, concerning explicit and implicit obligations or "psychological contracts", appears to have been inevitable also in the field of Business Administration (Conway & Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 1989, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2010, 2015), supposedly a cross-disciplinary influence of SET (though rarely citing sociologists). However, these are also entirely parallel and independent endeavors, as the theorizing on “psychological contracts” is mostly restricted to workplace scenarios and matters of employment relations⁴⁷. That the term ‘promise’, in the broad sense of obligation, is also used for theorizing in this context of contracts and agreements (Bankins, 2014) is an unsurprising coincidence. What is surprising and unfortunate is that it happened only outside Sociology, as with Gilbert’s “joint commitments” (2014), which I take to having foreseen, however vaguely, the effects and dynamics of what is here termed ‘compromises’.

It is also noteworthy that, in an ontologically much broader sense and originally aiming the field of Computer Science and cybernetics, Burgess (2015; 2022) has theorized promises and trust pertaining to all kinds of entities and their supposed “intentions”, from atoms and kitchen tables to humans and information systems. Burgess’ strand of “Promise Theory” strongly and essentially diverges from G-STOC by defining promises (1) as always

⁴⁶ Again, one notable exception is Carruther’s (2022) more historical and socioeconomic-focused book, *The Economy of Promises*, which, despite fascinating, advances little, if any, generalizable sociological theory.

⁴⁷ Language-Action Perspective (Flores 1982; Flores & Solomon, 2001) resonates with Psychological Contract Theory, as both emphasize the critical role of promises — whether as "contracts" or "commitments" — in driving organizational coordination, trust and effectiveness.

voluntary, (2) as implying mere intents and (3) as being distinct from obligations and impositions. In contrast, G-STOC (1) admits not only voluntary but also involuntary promises that (2) always imply virtual agency and that (3) encompass impositions and obligations. Despite these major differences, part of Burgess' insights align superficially with some of the assumptions and tenets introduced here, such as the ubiquity of promises, their possible states (or categorical situations), promise-anthropomorphism, etc. Nonetheless, G-STOC is from an entirely different genealogy of theorization of promises, one that is strictly sociological and not extrapolated from Computer Science, where 'promise' is commonly used to describe and code asynchronous software collaboration and information exchange (MDN, 2025) unrelated to social dynamics. A trained physicist, Burgess describes the goal of "Promise Theory" as "to be a generalization of methods of physics to describe things that happen, applied to the human world of purpose and intent" (Bergstra & Burgess, 2014, fn.2), proposing that 'trust' is a "scaled" form of 'energy', as used in Physics (Burgess, 2022). Hence, he has also decided to advance his proposition as a foundation for "Social Physics" or a new Social Science (ibidem), which is, in principle, commendable, but also far too disconnected from present-day Sociology, as he decidedly ignores or dismisses extant social theory as mere moral philosophy to be left behind (ibidem, p.2,30). In fact, Burgess does not seem willing to salvage even the major notions and methodologies, apparently reluctant "to open the door to endless pontification" concerning conceptual controversies and terminological disputes (ibidem, p.12). Ultimately and despite mathematical efforts, the complexity, eccentricity and obscurity of Burgess' ideas when applied to social phenomena (blending Physics, Computer Science and Philosophy) resemble that of Luhmann's and might render his work esoteric, inaccessible and, therefore, ineffective to many who are genuinely willing to scientifically address curiosity concerning the social universe.

Articulating concepts

Shifting now our focus to the larger outline of this framework and to the periphery of its core notions, while social phenomena require description *and* explanation, at times the social universe and its objects require plain description in clear conceptual and terminological grounds. G-STOC seeks to fully grasp the social universe and posits compromises "as the central, organizing principle with which the enterprise of Social Science must be undertaken, in theoretical, methodological and substantive terms" (Oliveira, 2021, p.98). With the pivotal theoretical presuppositions that come along with the major heuristic and conceptual innovation sponsored by G-STOC, matters of epistemology, ontology⁴⁸ and methodology are thoroughly reviewed and adapted. There is not enough space available here to showcase that or to demonstrate how this framework defines and neatly articulates the concepts of society, social order, social change, conflict, religion, culture, power, politics, social action, socialization, discrimination and more. All of these concepts conclusively benefit from the framework's integrated ontology centered on compromises as a common

⁴⁸ This includes matters of academic disciplinary demarcation, especially regarding Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science. Hence I preferred, at times, to use 'Social Science' instead of 'Sociology' and swung with 'social' and 'sociological'. Here, Social Science must not be confused with *applied social sciences*.

denominator. Here, I will briefly discuss only a couple of these concepts, exposing the overall reasoning with which all others can be analogously defined.

Social class, for instance, is a key concept in G-STOC and the way it is articulated with compromises is perhaps not the most obvious. Classes are groups of actors identified as suitable to specific compromise profiles. Reversing that: when specific compromise profiles are considered appropriate for a particular group of actors and not others, such group constitutes a social class. The 'applicability' term of compromises and their cultural inspiration are crucial to understanding this. Due to personal, economic or historical traits, actors are discriminated as either apt or inapt for engaging in specific types of compromises with others⁴⁹. Classes possess inductive and/or deductive indicators of belonging that more or less promptly signal the appropriate set of compromises in force with regard to them, resulting in differentiated treatment and interaction as well as selective engagement (ibidem). That is why everyone is expected to refer to individuals wearing white coats and stethoscopes inside hospitals as 'doctors' and trust their medical expertise (as if they promised it). Physicians therefore make up a class of actors that are entitled to differentiated treatment in comparison to janitors, for example, and are able to engage, or are tacitly considered engaged, in very different types of compromises with patients inside a hospital. The same happens with the 'keep-off-the-grass' norm of the earlier example: the class of firefighters or rescuers acting in emergency situations stays out of the applicability term of the compromise pertaining to the school's guidelines for garden preservation. Similarly, emergency drills in general are also out of the situational or temporal validity term of the compromise establishing that rule, since then all would be allowed and even encouraged to take the faster paths to safety, regardless of stepping on the grass.

Notably, the mechanism of class placement based on past behavior (a historical trait) is paramount to understanding adherence to norms, as it complements actors' motivations with the intention to preserve a reputation – and perhaps even a corresponding *social identity*⁵⁰ – of being norm-abiding and also avoid the future placement in an opposite class of actors who are not trustworthy or conscientious and therefore not qualified for various types of compromise-engagements, thus being excluded from future opportunities⁵¹. What

⁴⁹ In that sense, 'trustworthy people', 'men', 'rich people', 'alcoholics' or 'young people' all make up social classes. Not always voluntarily, since class identities might mismatch class placements and designations, possibly considered unfair, as is obviously the case with racism.

⁵⁰ One's identity is linked to some variation of the imposed and generalized promise that others (with sufficient information) must acknowledge who one essentially is or how one usually behaves. When this tacit identity-recognition promise is broken, disappointment and anger arise, perhaps manifested as a feeling of injustice. The way how it is verified to be broken is easily traced to a mismatch of selective engagement in compromises, thus linked to compromise applicability and social class. There are abundant parallels of this dynamic in sociological literature.

⁵¹ It is also remarkable, as Goffman (1959) or Bourdieu (1984) would probably agree, that all purposeful or deliberate *lying* is either an attempt to ascertain social class placements, however frivolous, or to otherwise strategically affirm compliance, noncompliance, proposition, rejection, etc., relative to valid compromises. In the most frivolous example, when we lie to a diviner, say, about a name they are trying to guess, we are indeed establishing whether they *must* or *must not* be treated as possessing supernatural psychic abilities, for that would imply their placement in a very special (and perhaps frivolous) social class of mysterious people who might possess superhuman powers and must be indulged with our attention, curiosity and further scrutiny (which often costs money). Even in the context of comedic pranks, lying involves momentarily placing the

often appears as spontaneous alignment or the internalization of norms — conduct performed regardless of foreseeable social consequences — can still be under social influence insofar as the prospect of being misjudged or correctly acknowledged (again a forecasted, unobserved, virtual agency related to reputation), due to any behavior, either disturbs or reinforces (however subtly) actors' identity and sense of self, thus motivating preemptive action (see the previous note on internalization). Additionally, practical acknowledgement and enforcement of social identities are dependent on the acceptance, compliance, imposition and/or applicability of compromises because of the behaviors they prescribe: acknowledging someone as a student or 'good student', for instance, becomes a duty (an imposed promise) once certain criteria (corresponding promises) have been met by the candidate.

This conception of social class invites two extreme examples that further demonstrate the pervasiveness of compromises in the least likely of events: herd behavior in panic settings and strategic imitation. Much like learning to dress up instead of standing naked in public, one usually learns, starting in childhood, to give way to instinctual fears of significant dangers and accept the swift protective reactions they trigger. Being paralyzed, lacking reflexes or suppressing instincts of self-preservation upon what seem like serious threats — such as an incoming bus at high speed or a sudden avalanche rushing in one's direction — is typically taken as foolish or inept. Repeated and *unjustified* failures in this regard (and even in assessing real danger) tend to be reprimanded (as a broken promise) and can easily lead to someone being unfavorably classified as stupid (and treated accordingly, as member of the 'class of stupids'). Alternatively, averting such dangers or reacting to them with alarm and acknowledging alarm from others generally has one classified as normal and cautious. Most importantly, the opposite class placement would likely entail unfavorable compromise arrangements, appropriate only for those who are not-normal, not-cautious or just stupid. Actors definitively placed in this class might be less likely to be invited to (or admitted in) high-risk rewarding activities such as a wilderness expedition, a competitive team sport or an emergency response unit. Even in apparent chaos, such as a panicked stampede, this reflects a tacit compromise: actors fulfill the promise to react instinctively amidst danger, preserving their placement among the 'normal' rather than the inept. This suggests that even the release of erratic, instinctual or emotional behaviors in chaotic and panicked situations is possibly bound by compromises (as is the distress and shame associated with one's own inappropriate nudity in a public space, when accidental), constituting a social norm to be followed, thus being potentially sociological — even if it arises as part of apparently random crowd behavior. Similarly, strategic imitation,

victim in a social class of naïve, gullible or foolish people, or consists of asserting falsely (and often surprisingly) that someone has complied or failed to comply with a compromise. Alternatively, pathological lying can hardly be considered deliberate. Most other cases of deliberate lying are more obviously related to compromises, for instance, when one lies about having made a promised payment or about the intervening reasons that could legitimately postpone such a payment by making the compromise definitely or temporarily invalid (again, according to its 'conditions of validity' term, as described above). In other words and simplifying, deliberate lying is fundamentally an act of tampering with (or outright adulterating) compromises (considering class placements are aimed due to interest in the corresponding compromise profiles). Subject to empirical scrutiny, this claim derives from the earlier mentioned theoretical principle regarding purposes and identities, in social settings, being necessarily mediated by and pursued through compromises.

even in scenarios of incomplete information, is often aimed at mirroring observed or expected outcomes as prescribed by compromises whose existence might be only suspected, presumed along with the belief that role-model actors under observation know better in order to behave as they do. In other words, imitation is often an attempt at compliance, implying compromise-engagement. “There is coercion and virtual agency involved in the belief that not imitating certain behavior of other actors” or not belonging to the same class as they do “will result in not accessing the same (promised) benefits they enjoy or seek” (Oliveira, 2021, p.152).

Moving on, *Institutions*, in turn, are collectivities that differ from simple organizations due to the fact that they are specifically recognized as having the task, the prerogative or the power to perform *social engineering*, the engineering of compromises in a certain category, aiming for an artificial type of *social change* (ibidem). The task of social engineering is conducted with modelling or meta-compromises, those that shape other compromises, imposing and regulating valid or invalid, good or bad, lawful or unlawful arrangements of promises. That is what happens, for instance, when a government forbids so-called predatory commercial practices in exchanges, making certain transactions illegal, or when parents disapprove of their young teenage children engaging in intimate amorous affairs with persons twice their age. Institutions aim the conservation or alteration of the social order through surveillance and interferences in compromises, especially in their cultural inspiration (moral, legal, etc.) and in incentives for engagement. This was mentioned earlier in the secularization example. Clearly, institutions are not ghostly: they are collectivities that can act through their leadership and their operatives, be it the head of a family and the adults residing in the same household or the Pope of the Catholic Church and the clergy below his authority.

Finally, adding that a *society* is the set of all the compromises of a *societariate* (ibidem), this framework allows to assertively answer the questions posed in the beginning of this paper, representing some scarcely satiated fundamental curiosities⁵². G-STOC marks a breakthrough for Social Science insofar as it discovers the unlimited potential of new heuristic and explanatory strategies and allows operating a full and conclusive apprehension of the social universe and its contents, finally enabling social scientists to explain it all with one plausible and integrated set of scientific concepts and methods grounded in sound epistemological foundations. This achievement is further underscored by G-STOC’s unique combination of sufficiency, cogency and efficiency — epistemic qualities (to which we will return later) that arguably set it apart from any other theoretical alternative or previously failed explanatory panacea.

Relevance, refutation and curiosity

There are some perspectives, especially those arising from the study of the history of Science, according to which reforms of scientific fields, theoretical syntheses or large and

⁵² Note that definitions were also provided here for ‘social order’ and ‘social phenomena’, besides this one for ‘society’. An ontology for Sociology, regarding what it is supposed to study, was also proposed. More or less implicit notions of ‘theory’ and of sociological explanations are also present here (see below).

ambitious innovative paradigmatic proposals are only successful, welcome, accepted or productive if they resolve a persistent and relevant empirical question, previously unexplained, or a “common theoretical challenge of a specific nature” (Freitas & Figueiredo, 2009, p.742, translated) or a “challenge of empirical nature” (Freitas, 2017, p.148, translated). Anything different from this would be mere and idle “supply without demand” (ibidem, p.156, translated) or solutions without a problem, doomed to irrelevance. Now, what empirical problems *are not* theoretically challenging? It is reasonable to assume that they are those that available theories already explain satisfactorily. Therefore, ‘challenging’ is equivalent, in this context, to something currently inexplicable, in whole or in part. It turns out that there is nothing inexplicable or entirely mysterious in Sociology because actors themselves are readily aware of and have some intuitive explanation for their own behavior⁵³. A more important reason, besides this, is that, given the persistence of theoretical fragmentation, explanations abound in diverse narrative and interpretative modes, maintaining more or less coherence with empirical evidence, therefore being readily available as sociologists turn to study any social phenomenon. If there is (1) the unexplained-as-of-yet and (2) the inexplicable due to theoretical or knowledge limitations, in Sociology only the former is found – there is no mystery or empirical enigma that can withstand the chaotic multitude of existing theories and methodologies. In the specific case of Social Science, it is the excess, redundancy and contradiction of explanations that sabotage the satisfaction of curiosity, therefore the problem – and the main criterion of relevance – cannot be the matters that remain absolutely unexplained. Depending on this, Sociology will never achieve syntheses or great theoretical innovation, as attempted by Giddens, Turner or other thinkers who present new theories as valuable and useful for their heuristic potential, regardless of their immediate application to treat specific empirical problems, mysteries or enigmas – except, of course, the classic meta-theoretical problems (such as the opposition between agency and structure). Would it then be enough for theoretical proposals to be built around great empirical examples like suicide, the 'spirit' of capitalism or bureaucracy? I have outlined something similar by focusing this article around promises.

To demand that theories address something that is unexplained-as-of-yet, but not necessarily inexplicable, would amount to a frivolous demand for novelty in examples, avoiding those already published. Otherwise, if what is demanded is not that it addresses something (A) *inexplicable* nor necessarily (B) *unexplained-as-of-yet*, but that any (or otherwise 'challenging') empirical phenomenon (C) *be effectively explained* during the presentation of these proposals, then what is asked is no more than indulgence with empirical examples, a stylistic imposition that is also frivolous and arbitrary, somewhat lazy or unimaginative. For this reason, I exclude these possibilities (B and C) and continue with the most coherent justification that requires addressing something previously 'inexplicable', as occurred in the history of Biology (ibidem) and other sciences. As stated before, this is an

⁵³ In contrast to what G-STOC proposes to be social scientific explanation, the type of intuitive explanation or understanding of social phenomena that the involved actors themselves are familiar with and more or less consciously consider is usually devoid of a systematic or generalized reasoning, being more *ad hoc*, historical, atheoretical, particularistic and path-dependent, though greatly drawing from the pragmatic knowledge of compromises.

unfeasible requirement for Sociology at present. Therefore, such a criterion of relevance, success and/or theoretical pertinence becomes fallacious, ready to discredit any proposal.

This perspective is very similar to others from which any new theory is questioned: *what difference does this or that clarification, concept or methodology, this or that generality make compared to what was previously done without this theory?* This is equivalent to asking what can be explained with a new theory that could not be explained before without it, drawing from a kaleidoscopic menu of available theories that already coexisted. Should we always adopt this biased criterion, it could also lead to a general disdain for sociological theory in favor of journalism, with extensive descriptive documentaries on phenomena of interest, clarifying without abstractions and considering as sufficient the *exposition* of the versions and explanations of the actors involved themselves. How can we expect explanations to be lacking and mysteries to persist when the actors generally have their own explanations for their behavior and when theories that never mix are conveniently fished out of the moldy and inharmonious soup that bubbles in an immense and overflowing cauldron?

In social science, the only empirical mystery that persists is not explanatory but predictive: to predict, with efficiency, precision and systematicity, the occurrence of some complex types of social phenomena. If this remains out of reach⁵⁴, those who demand that

⁵⁴ Sharing the same theoretical reasoning, explanations are retrospective and predictions are prospective – the former investigates causes and their relationships to observed effects, the latter foresees effects given determining causal factors. Theoretically informed mathematical equations can make physical phenomena precisely predictable given exact initial circumstances and isolated, measured, interferences. This predictability equates to making a physical phenomenon an obvious or logical implication of its physical causal circumstances, under theoretical appraisal. Because of the opacity of calculus, researchers and the public are generally estranged from the obviousness that exists in a mathematical syllogism, between premises and conclusions, or in the equivalence between opposite sides of an equation. That way, the empirical confirmation of predictions by Physics can be exciting more often than those by Sociology, most of all because researchers deal with behaviors the likes of which they can also cause and therefore empathically understand from a motivational perspective, a familiarity that contrasts with the mysteries of nature. In social settings, if the meanings, consequences, inspirations and other decisive factors are all isolated, the outcome is also obvious and predictable and there is no opacity whatsoever to hide that obviousness. Isolating causal factors, in Physics, or decisive and motivational factors (which are causal), in Sociology or Psychology, are endeavors that offer very different degrees of challenge. That is for a simple reason: decisive and motivational factors, for subjects, are *subjectively and actively selected*, whereas causal and influential factors in physical phenomena are all supposedly fixed and previously given as properties of nature. That is to say that when predicting subjective behavior, not only one but two steps are actually necessary: (1) determining what factors the subject will *select* to evaluate in order to decide and (2) how such factors are associated to behavioral alternatives and how they interact and are measured up in the decision-process, be it or not consciously rational. This is so even if sociological and psychological theory can previously establish a fixed set of categories of factors that can be taken into account, since then the data must be collected about what exactly the subject is considering (or shall consider) in order to make a decision. Out of a number of possible factors that a theory posits, the subjects might be considering only half. How many factors will they consider? That itself is still prone to prediction or effective data collection. Theoretically, we can posit that actors consider (1) their desires, objectives and needs, in accordance with information and beliefs about non-social circumstances, (2) the compliance with compromises in force, (3) class placements that can be affected in the context, (4) consequences of non-compliance with compromises in force. Or, in short, desires and compromises – the ordinary flux of social action (Oliveira, 2021, pp. 206-210). Still, which particular compromises will be considered? Will any pertinent compromises be, by chance or neglect, *forgotten*? What desires are sincerely reported and which are too embarrassing to confess? The obstacles in the path of sociological prediction are methodological, not theoretical. Should sociologists have access to the full set of pertinent compromises of subjects and trust

innovative theoretical proposals explain, through empirical research, something specific that was previously impossible to explain must be content with the complete theoretical stagnation of Sociology. Hence, through this perspective, one soon arrives at the convenient conclusion that a field that has eliminated and continues to eliminate all empirical mysteries with its current configuration *does not need* any reform. That is another reason, rarely acknowledged, why the perspective according to which Sociology must advance and has always advanced (?) in the same way as other sciences is disconcerting: it can become the fallacious trivialization of the current state of affairs.

The problem is that, in Sociology, the explanations that resolve the mysteries of specific empirical problems are fragmented, contradictory and given by redundant theories that are never conclusively refuted. Therefore, even though nothing is inexplicable, curiosity remains unsatisfied in the face of countless conflicting perspectives and interpretations due to the lack of a single, minimally accepted general theory. Note that, in the absence of refutation, subdisciplinary specialization does not solve this dilemma of curiosity: experts in specialized niches can study all the different perspectives pertinent to a particular subject until they decide to adopt one that pleases them (their intellect) the most and then pose as oracular authorities giving the last word on the subject, but only until their fellow experts disagree or ignore them and freely point in entirely different directions, according to a different perspective.

Theories can be conclusively refuted by prediction failures or explanation failures. The former happens when events do not occur as predicted; the latter, when required causes and/or effects are not present. Social scientists have reasons to abstain from social predictions or to not be interested in them because producing them scientifically is inefficient or unnecessary⁵⁵. That saves social theories from refutation by prediction failure. As for explanation failure, when a theory deals with causes and/or effects that are ideal or relational (such as compromises, motivations, reasoning, beliefs, preferences, etc.), their absence is impossible to ascertain beyond doubt. That is often the case in Social Science. While relationships are *between* cause and effect (Oliveira, 2021, pp.43-44), they can also, in turn, *become* a cause or effect, when linked by another relation to its causal counterpart (it

reports of their desires (and, indirectly, of their beliefs and of the information they possess), presuming nothing will be neglected, predictions would be impressively straightforward yet trivially precise. The data required for precise sociological predictions are too extensive and make the predictions too obvious and perhaps no better than the subjects' own reports on their plans. That means, after all, that journalism is arguably more *efficient* in the *prediction* of social behavior than Sociology (the same is obviously not true with respect to explanation). In contrast, predictions made by statistical correlations are a separate matter, possibly devoid of properly sociological theory. Nonetheless, every compromise description is, in fact, already a prediction, a forecast of likely behavior, promised behavior, a set of reciprocal promises, also including the predictable consequences of breaking them. Besides deriving from the knowledge of compromises, predicting behaviors might also involve *asking actors directly* about conduct that is already planned or that can be rehearsed, anticipated and simulated. This applies just as well in settings of diffuse collectivities. Again, two levels of prediction concerning social phenomena are possible according to the behavior/agency of actors involved: (A) what likely happens *following* the effectuation of each behavioral option or chosen course of conduct and, first and foremost, (B) what options will actually be made or what courses of action will effectively be taken. Both consider the reciprocal dynamic of promises (valid in case of compliance) and the corresponding consequences for noncompliance.

⁵⁵ See the previous note on predictions.

is in that sense that compromises, being a description of relationships, can also be a causal factor for a social phenomenon or its effect). The entities that G-STOC posits to exist (compromises) are relational and not substantial (relations, not objects) and are thus undetectable, making explanation failures (as in required causes and/or effects that are not present) impossible to confirm. Hence, as refutation by failures of prediction or of explanation is unlikely to many social theories, they do not replace one another or are required to be abandoned like in Natural Science, where Kuhnian revolutions (1962) or Lakatosian research program shifts (1978) occur, thus indefinitely encouraging fragmentation and redundancy as opposed to revolutionary scientific innovation. This demands a different criterion of theoretical selection, prevalence, pertinence and relevance, one able to complement resistance to refutation when it alone is not conclusive, as is so often the case in Sociology.

For the aforementioned reasons, I suggest that the ultimate pragmatic criterion of theoretical relevance and pertinence should not be solely resistance to refutation nor the explanation of what was previously inexplicable or mysterious, nor the overcoming of any “common theoretical challenge of a specific nature” (Freitas & Figueiredo, 2009), but rather *the measure of satisfaction of curiosity and its efficiency, across subdisciplinary fields and types of phenomena*. This does not imply a subjective preference or degree of intellectual satisfaction but more instances of curiosity effectively addressed, more generally – therefore, an objectively greater amount of total curiosity addressed. A theory that is consistent with empirical data (surviving any possible experimental refutation) and that satisfies, at once, a greater quantity of curiosity with fewer resources, more parsimony, will not only be general but also the best, most relevant, most efficient and most pertinent, deserving to replace its competitors⁵⁶ and annex middle-range theories as its subordinates. Sometimes that annexation will require some resetting and conceptual replacement, other times it can happen seamlessly, as aspects and dynamics of the social world focused by middle-range theories are acknowledged as aspects and dynamics of compromises or surrounding them, seeming disconnected only when they are ignored.

Concluding remarks

Besides addressing the general experience with promises, this article did not focus on particular social research questions, being instead concerned with theoretical fragmentation in Sociology, a rather disciplinary problem. Surely, theoretical fragmentation in the field can be itself regarded as an empirical problem for social research, but my goal above was less to explain it scientifically and more to help resolve it. How to actually resolve it is seen here as an epistemological question, a philosophical curiosity, not a sociological one, though sociological aspects are obviously present. So, although it is true that none of the empirical

⁵⁶ Sociological theories today are seldom made to compete for prevalence, since they are supposed to coexist in an already crowded environment. Will Artificial Intelligence (AI) ever enable sociologists to equip an automated research process with specific and ontologically incommensurable methodological and theoretical toolsets in order to compare and find which set gets the most useful, consistent or convincing results? That should not be necessary, but it might come to that someday if sociologists continue to refrain from engaging in outright theoretical competition.

examples throughout this text represent sociological phenomena that remained unexplained or undescribed before, a crucial problem of theory was addressed, namely, theoretical fragmentation, redundancy, disintegration and universality in Social Science.

Explanations of specific types of empirical phenomena can be produced with dozens of respectively specific, disintegrated, middle-range theories. However, once a universal ontology (i.e., promises and compromises) is discovered across all types of phenomena and powers a single, cogent, general and parsimonious scientific theory, that disintegration ceases to be accidental and meaningless and becomes problematic, comparatively symptomatic of an ontological frailty, uncertainty or undefinition. This discovery reveals that Sociology's tolerance of ambiguity stems more from a lack of ontological clarity than from any inherent necessity. The urge for a general theory is thus more epistemic and instrumental, due to broad curiosity and parsimony, than properly regarding specific types of empirical phenomena that remain unexplained by numerous largely disconnected specific theories.

The brief and partial articulation of concepts presented amounts to an introduction of a general theory which implies that compromises underlie all social phenomena and that their description equates to the description of the fundamental relationships concerning such phenomena and thus, ultimately and in context, to sociological explanation and full comprehension of the social universe and its characteristics. Combined with the adaptation and assimilation of the myriad of middle-range theories available in the literature, the methodological and conceptual toolset that accompanies G-STOC (ibidem, ch.3-5) is bound to enable social scientists to overcome old dilemmas (more below) and advance towards exciting new developments in the twenty-first century, acquiring renewed public relevance, satisfying curiosity and providing deep understanding systematically like never before.

We can summarize the breakthrough announced in the title of this paper in eight main takeaways that are simultaneously ontological, epistemological and theoretical:

- (1) Social coercive powers derive from actual or virtual agency;*
- (2) Virtual agency derives from promises;*
- (3) All anger and disappointment derive from broken promises;*
- (4) Promises are always in dynamic reciprocal sets called compromises;*
- (5) Compromises are heuristic devices underlying all social relationships;*
- (6) All social phenomena involve compromises;*
- (7) To explain is to describe relationships and*
- (8) Sociological explanation, therefore, derives from the description of compromises, their influences and their history.*

Combined with epistemic insights regarding curiosity, the above tenets begin to outline a powerful and coherent framework whose appreciation ought to have a profound impact in Social Science, enabling it to reach its *"theory of everything"* sooner than Physics⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ Unlike in Sociology, the current major theories in Physics – General Relativity and Quantum Mechanics – are not redundant in application and therefore not generally contradictory, but have yet to be reconciled or

Note that topics 1-6 could be stated as scientific and empirical laws. Their implications are analogous to those of laws in other sciences. If acceleration or deceleration is observed in a material object in nature, testing the first law of Newton implies one should search for unbalanced forces *and will find them*, as they are theoretically required or predicted. Likewise, if anger, disappointment, coercion, social relationships or social phenomena are observed or reported, one should search for promises and compromises through regular social research methodology and those will be found for an analogous theoretical reason. This, of course, must be done *within* the respective conceptual framework of each theory, where terms like 'acceleration', 'deceleration' and 'forces' or 'promises' and 'compromises' hold their specific meanings; *outside* the corresponding framework, the terminology is negated along with the enunciation of the laws it supports. In this sense, despite the possibly subtle distinction setting them apart from the regular assumptions from which they can emerge, laws are useful because they summarize theoretical and empirical knowledge into concise, testable, meaningful and insightful, universal statements. Discursively and regardless of mathematical translation, scientific 'laws' might also have been particularly useful in imposing beliefs as undisputable and uncontroversial, especially to non-experts, which is simultaneously misleading (or oppressive) and beneficial – beneficial at least insofar as it helps drive a productive scientific consensus.

In total, this introduction should raise many other questions that I cannot touch here but have attempted to answer over the years, reaching conclusions condensed in *The Social Universe* (Oliveira, 2021), meant as a theoretical and methodological handbook.

With regard to old sociological dilemmas, it is noteworthy that, in the current context of fragmentation, heated debates over objectivity and scholarly activism are the worst possible grounds to assess Sociology's shortcomings. They serve as distractions from the discipline's true challenges: the severe disarray and precarious state of its ontological, epistemic and theoretical foundations. When genuine explanation, guided by theory, is neglected and even impeded due to this scenario, and because pure description, as sometimes seen in Demography and other descriptive statistical studies⁵⁸, falls short of Social Science's explanatory mission, a tendency arises to replace scientific inquiry with normative discourse about how the social world ought to be (that is to say, regular scholarly political activism, the excess of which is but a symptom of the idleness provoked by heuristic

reformed in order to support a truly universal and fundamental framework (Greene, 1999), compatible with a variety of other middle-range theories focused on specific aspects and phenomena of nature. In Sociology, many have yearned for such unification or grand theoretical solution in the past (Parsons, 1951; Merton, 1968; Gouldner, 1970; Bottomore, 1974; Alexander, 1982; Giddens, 1984; Turner, 1984; Zald, 1991; Greenfeld, 2004), but the wait has been so long and the failures so numerous that the hope seems to have diminished to a point where a breakthrough is today seldom expected. Hopelessness and resignation are yet other obstacles for any new proposition. For Sociology, the perhaps counterintuitive ubiquity of promises mirrors the also counterintuitive notion that space-time can bend in modern Physics: the implications are, with all due modesty, revolutionary. Many Physicists initially repelled and later struggled with the theoretical innovations of modern Physics, so something similar might be expected to happen with sociologists. Can physical space-time bend? Are promises pervasive in social contexts? These questions carry equivalent implications in their respective scientific fields.

⁵⁸ See note 6.

degeneration). As theoretical fragmentation remains and as discourse concerning the world is confined to either describing and explaining *what is* or prescribing *what ought to be*, this shift becomes practically the only logical alternative to retain relevance, or else face a complete halt, with embarrassing silence, or a full descent into counterproductive *heteroglossia* (the latter option being favored by many, though also resulting in irrelevance due to reinforced fragmentation). This explains why this article does not focus on such matters and instead begins by discussing the neglect of curiosity and how central curiosity is to Science. The primary debate should not be whether Sociology is a science. Wherever there is a set of ideas (true, false or neither) enabling a researcher to systematically and repeatedly devise (more or less hypothetical) explanations, there is *theory*; and wherever there is parsimonious⁵⁹ theory about the empirical world, there is *science* (ibidem, ch.1), either good or bad. Good science is usually tested, validated, fruitful, collaborative and advanced with skepticism, etc. As for objectivity, wherever there are explanations regarding the empirical world, there cannot be rigorous objectivity because explanations are necessarily as transfactual and conjectural as the relationships they correspond to (ibidem). Relative value neutrality is a different matter. So much for one of the dilemmas, but there are others that shall also spontaneously dissipate in the face of a truly general theory, such as the ones involving the micro-macro link or the discussed agency versus structure problem.

Redundant, incompatible or contradictory theories coexist because they fail to harness the explanatory power to overcome one another (Kuhn, 1962; Lakatos, 1978). Every single new, naïve and hopeful proposal of integration or replacement is evidence of this. The current lack of theoretical, ontological and epistemological consensus in Sociology stems less from a shortage of goodwill and more from the absence of a comprehensive, general theory capable of adequately addressing *all types* of research scenarios, constituting one common explanatory language useful for all social scientists. Despite some social theoretical frameworks having been advanced as general, of universal applicability, they were likely either (1) not *sufficient* (not general enough or lacking philosophical foundations), (2) not *cogent* (simplistic, too limited, implausible, refuted) or simply (3) not *efficient* (so complex, obscure and/or demanding that few can afford to employ or even understand them). We need not cite abundant literature in support of this claim because the logical alternatives are thus exhausted: either (A) Sociology's theoretical fragmentation (and more or less tacit rejection of general theories that could reverse it) is *optional*, deliberate and somewhat stubborn⁶⁰ (which I would rather not believe) or (B) it is *not* optional and actually due to any combination of those three very comprehensive epistemic problems – the first of which includes the thought that a useful and *truly general* theory is unavailable or would not support its middle-range subordinates. While this three-dimensional gap – of sufficiency, cogency and efficiency – continues to exist, competing and redundant theoretical proliferation in different directions is expected. G-STOC was designed to close this gap and

⁵⁹ While an undetectable gravity-demon would be part of a non-parsimonious theory, a simpler *force-of-gravity* could compose a parsimonious one.

⁶⁰ If general theories do not have epistemic problems at all and are still rejected optionally, one cannot help but find the reason spiteful. Why else? All other conceivable reasons ultimately equate to an epistemic problem.

to offer non-redundant middle-range theories a common ground, a hub where they can all be plugged after properly adapted⁶¹.

If that applies to old and mature propositions, it is impossible to ignore another pervasive challenge in the field of Sociology: the difficulty of gaining recognition and engagement also for *new* theoretical contributions. Among all social theorists proposing overarching, all-encompassing frameworks, I was uniquely unaware that my work could never thrive and become widely accepted in the current academic scenario, regardless of its merits. This reflects a broader issue within the academic community, where the acceptance and validation of new theoretical propositions are often hindered by deeply entrenched social dynamics.

Unable to fully explain this without the pertinent data, we can at least outline a hypothesis: impactful theoretical propositions aim to provoke cultural transformation inside the academic community, inevitably affecting compromise arrangements of all kinds within it. That which *ought to be* considered in scholarly life pertains to a *promise* (as in a duty), and a new theory to be taken into account signals a change in the content of compromises, likely inciting resistance by diverse motivations related to the comparison of forecasted outcomes and demands. As there currently is no compromise applying generally to all subjects regarded as social scientists concerning the acknowledgment, adoption or recognition of any specific full theoretical framework or its constellation of sociological concepts with precise definitions and relationships, scholars in this field enjoy a considerable amount of theoretical, methodological and heuristic liberty, because where compromises are scarce or scarcely engaged, freedom is plentiful and can be highly valued even in spite of scientific security, efficiency or productivity (Oliveira, 2021, pp.142-149). In other words, accomplished experts might tend to resist a proposition that redefines their fields, affecting their conceptual framework and research methodology, inconveniencing them by jeopardizing their comfortable vantage point and eventually requiring that they reassert their expertise. Apart from that, pointing out broken promises — especially those that are tacit and involuntarily contracted, as this article does with respect to Sociology's mission — is often perceived as making accusations. In this case, so-called accusations may even be exaggerated to the point of appearing to place some in a social class of *pseudo*-scientists, which obviously does not match the social identity of most. The typical response to such critiques is often to reject or hide from the charges, defend against them regardless of facts, or even immediately retaliate due to having taken offense. Because this paper problematizes fragmentation and advocates for an epistemic and theoretical revolution, those who hold privileged positions within the current academic *status quo* may view it as mere iconoclasm or, less explicitly, as a threat to their intellectual comfort or institutional standing, not to mention as the imposition of a significant effort required for adaptation. The institutional position and prestige of authors of new propositions also incite selective engagement due to dynamics of social class, resulting in many not being taken seriously. Regrettably, the predisposition to silence these ideas can occur even at the expense of the broader public,

⁶¹ G-STOC is to general and foundational medical knowledge what middle-range sociological theories and their knowledge-collection of accumulated empirical regularities are to a cardiologist, a specialized expert who also relies on foundational medical knowledge to practice effectively, left clueless without it.

which seeks what Sociology should be able to provide but, at present, sadly fails to fully deliver.

Sociology scholars who are busy with the routine of *publish or perish* and have grown accustomed to the epistemic disarray or have carved out a comfortable research niche to occupy until retirement might believe they have no need for the solution I present in this paper. Content with the middle- or short-range theories (perhaps adopted out of methodological convenience), they may find it wiser to ignore lofty theoretical developments or to refuse acknowledging the flaws of their community, pretending all is well. Faced with the daunting task of validating and refining an innovative, unprecedented framework, many prefer the comfort of more familiar approaches, however limited, even as the discipline's theoretical foundations remain shattered and fracture even further over time. Most academic sociologists adapt to this fragmentation, creatively interpreting, trivializing or relativizing it⁶², sometimes denying it and sometimes calling it by the name of 'pluralism', but ultimately betraying — if not outright disavowing — their original promise. Students disillusioned by the discipline's explanatory shortcomings often simply choose to leave (like I did) when they fail to appreciate and settle for the narrow career paths amidst the gibberish, the Babel-like cacophony and all the fights in the *Theory Junkyard*. Public officials who recognize the unreliability of sociologists simply stop listening, following the lead of the journalists and ordinary citizens who have long since done the same. Meanwhile, college administrators, confronting declining enrollments, will do what they have to do — plus whatever it takes (administratively) to make Sociology more attractive and fundable, often by encouraging political activism that exploits the available resources. In short, if your conscience never weighed on you and you have fewer than 20 years left in your career, you might be tempted to stay the course. But if your horizon stretches further or you understand that minding your own business while continuing to dismiss the importance of teamwork, broader theoretical collaboration and academic synergy cannot suffice, it is imperative to begin the effort of fundamentally reforming Sociology — once and for all. I am afraid that, unless we jump off the shoulders of our supposed giants and innovate to effectively steer away from fragmentation, social theory will end up left out of the curriculums.

Reforming the field starts by admitting that *all science exists because of curiosity*. Directed towards demarcated parts of the empirical world, obviously⁶³. Even Science's technological applications derive from instrumental and motivated, problem-oriented

⁶² Many have observed that scholars and universities are increasingly being "forced to become more accountable to society", seeing this as part of the commodification of knowledge and, even more dramatically, as the postmodern "end of knowledge" (Delanty, 2001, ch.7). In this context, few social science scholars seem to be looking inward to find the root of the problem concerning the theoretical fragmentation of their field and the consequent dissatisfaction of its 'clients' or 'users'. Instead, common diagnoses involve the regular vicissitudes of academic specialization or the crumbling of an "Enlightenment framework" (ibidem) that seemed to previously justify (unconditionally) all (more or less methodologically random) efforts to seek and produce knowledge, however contradictory or limited that knowledge turned out to be. Others (like Abbott, 2001) contend that Sociology develops and progresses non-cumulatively, by its own eccentric rules, trends and fads — it sounds like denying a car is wrecked and instead saying that it is designed to fume, make loud noises, shake all over and move rather slowly due to its peculiar fabrication, because of safety concerns or whatever.

⁶³ *Social Science*, in turn, exists because of curiosity about social phenomena and the social universe — to reiterate the modest claim in the first lines of this paper.

curiosities; that is to say, they arise from *questions* about how particular feats can be accomplished, often through engineering, which yields technology. Sometimes the obvious must be restated because it is often forgotten: it is curiosity, comprising *all needs and desires to know*, that makes knowledge important in the first place, for the purpose of knowledge is to satisfy curiosity — not merely the curiosity related to intellectual pleasure, but also the goal-oriented, strategic curiosity involved in intents that *require* learning, active pursuits and problem-solving, rather than just idle wishing. Intelligent beings are curious not only due to intellectual appetites or aspirations but also *because* of the more concrete things they desire, as they must work to acquire them and cannot do so without curiously *exploring, learning or knowing* how. Curiosity is the scientific aspiration par excellence, separate from all other aspirations, most of all those that concern making desires come true *in the world* (as curiosity is driven towards knowing the truth *in the mind*). As argued earlier, the acknowledgement of curiosity's central role in the mission of Science leads to the need to overcome controversy and fragmentation, entailing a rejection of the rather detrimental strategy of nurturing them *ad aeternum*. This stance on curiosity favors the proposition and competition of cogent general theories until the fittest one prevails as a consensus starts to emerge, albeit forcefully and only because it is agreed that some consensus *must* emerge (if not for a better reason, at least in order to satisfy curiosity) — much like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The opposite of this reform is not the pluralistic ideal contained in the saying 'let a thousand flowers bloom' — it is condemning all flower-buds to die in the desert without ever blooming, for having a thousand sociologies (or numerous conflicting answers to the same question) is counterproductive and unaffordable, a luxury we cannot sustain because it costs the death of coherent discourse and the defeat of Science by regular curiosities which, in this context, become insurmountable. With too many different answers to the same question, curiosity persists! Besides, why should the public, governments or markets sponsor and support or even reach out to a science that cannot satisfy curiosity because its respective actors decided to foster multiple redundant and conflicting, incompatible and controversial, theoretical perspectives? If all remains equal, either Sociology is fated to end (regardless of Demography, journalism or some other atheoretical endeavor eventually usurping the name) or Science and its knowledge is not about curiosity after all (and the latter makes no sense, at least to me).

Secondly, particular conceptual and/or theoretical recommendations issued by prominent, representative figures in the departments, journals and associations (published and pinned for extraordinary visibility, for a long duration of time) could start sparking the interest for cohesion, consensus and unification — as long as it does not fuel furious disagreement, by virtue of initially being *only* particular and *only* recommendations, taken as a prerogative (perhaps opinative) of prominent, representative figures in positions of authority or leadership. Beginning with the endorsement and recommended adoption of only basic, elementary concepts (e.g. society, social order, social change, conflict or social phenomena), entire theories are eventually favored or directly implied in at least part of the

researches⁶⁴. Early career researchers or students can commit to recommendations rather stubbornly, which is ultimately good in our chaotic context, even if initially driven by inexperience and insecurity. Tiny and discrete gestures and measures like that one can, over time, achieve great results. Other, much bolder, strategies could also be adopted (needlessly feared by counter-reformists – a dictionary is not that dangerous!), but that is a subject for another paper. In the end, the availability and diffusion of one plausible, coherent and universal social theory is a necessary condition.

Lastly, it is a sheer and ironic coincidence that the first chapter of Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (2000) is titled "The Promise" and that this article adopted a similar title to propose what he could have sarcastically labeled as a "Grand Theory" in that same book. What Mills thought of sociological theory and what he supposedly believed to be the promise of Sociology are both unhelpful, except to explain the further fragmentation and deterioration of Sociology that continued in the following 65 years (and counting). As much as logical abduction, imagination is obviously necessary for effective reasoning, for conjecturing and for understanding, but it cannot replace or match the potential of the best theory without itself becoming a theory, for the best theory is too a product of imagination, in fact a powerful combination of disciplined and systematic reasoning, conjecturing, understanding and research. So much for his cynical and celebrated dismissal of theory. As for his view of the promise of Sociology: public engagement and liberation through awareness and knowledge are legitimate and likely good, but only collateral to properly scientific purposes, relating to curiosity, and often only attainable through theoretically informed explanation. In criticizing one very flawed theoretical project and its context, he made unwarranted generalizations about overarching social theories. In his defense, Mills might have believed no general and sufficient social theory would ever be possible or efficient (p.46-47), hence suggesting we carry on working without one (and even drop the credential of science [p.18]). If so, his premise was wrong – especially as he failed to see beyond Parsons and hurried to embrace the trendy methodologies hardly concerned with systematic theorization that helped bring Sociology to the precarious and critical tipping point where it is today.

Invitation

In a journey fraught with challenges, it is through persistent inquiry and open debate that we can continue to advance our understanding of the social universe. My main goal here was to give a modest tour of the G-STOC framework, which is a candidate to succeed where other theories have failed. I hopefully conveyed that it offers a novel and *promising* approach (no pun intended) with implications that cannot be easily exhausted. Let us engage with it critically and constructively, striving towards a more comprehensive, unified and properly scientific field of study.

⁶⁴ *Theory and Society* journal's new *theory briefs* and *forum articles* initiatives could find their way into also being helpful for building conceptual consensus or cohesion. The editorial directives introduced in 2024 by this journal, though introduced very moderately, are a beacon of hope for the field. In order for any initiative to flourish in a direction opposite to fragmentation, theorists must eventually unite and convince other researchers to stop ignoring the resources they offer.

To me, even if quite privately, this theory represents the fulfillment of Social Science's original promise. I cannot recall the last time reading social theory surprised me or sparked *eureka* moments — that is ultimately what G-STOC is supposed to provide. All those curious and interested in an ambitious, fresh perspective on social theory are invited to correspond and take part in the agenda of exploring, debating and improving this proposition.

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