

Documentality and Social Reality

The thesis underlying the theory of documentality is that what keeps society together must be sought in the sphere of the fixation of actions and the construction of social objects. In the perspective of documentality these insights are systematized by the constitutive law of social objects *Object = Recorded Act*: a social object is the result of a social act that takes place between at least two people, or between a person and a delegated machine, and which has the characteristic of being recorded on some surface, including the minds of the social agents. This constitutive law is articulated in four levels.

1. Recording is what allows for social objects - things like promises, bets, assignments, money, which require acts of communication, but must set themselves as recordings, otherwise they would remain empty words. A stock exchange session without price lists, a marriage without registers, a sale without a contract, a trial without a sentence would all be nothing but frivolous exercises, and I doubt you would have bothered reading this paper if you knew you'd forget everything you read. Indeed, the acts we produce acquire meaning only if inscribed, and once inscribed they are extremely powerful: think of signatures deciding for war or peace, or typos causing stock market crashes. This is why documents are so crucial, this is why we queue to get them and are desperate if we lose them - this is why documentality is an important ingredient of society.

2. There is another sense in which people's deep motivations and initiatives depend on texts. The role of documentality in the constitution of intentionality also concerns - in the most obvious and elementary sense - the benefits coming from sharing plans in the management of collective intentionality. Acting on the basis of written documents is the secret of military effectiveness, but more extensively it is the foundation of social action, as demonstrated by the importance of bureaucracy in the formation and management of power.

3. More decisively, documentality is the condition for the genesis of individual intentionality. It is not true that first we have intentions that then can be fixated in documents. The opposite is true: the human being becomes such through an education that involves learning a language, rituals, and attitudes - i.e. document apparatuses that precede, not follow, the formation of conscience and moral responsibility.

4. This becomes particularly evident in highly mediatised societies, as evidenced by the documedial revolution, which is the best observatory to grasp the dynamics of documentality. Behaviors and feelings (consider the role of literature, films and songs in the definition of love) are strongly oriented by documentality.

¹ Ferraris 2005.