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No View from Nowhere

Relations, Polarization, and Fraternity

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"Fraternidad: miradas multidisciplinares"
Los desafíos de la fraternidad en tiempos de polarización
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We are here to think about fraternity in a time of polarization, and I come to this question from an unusual place, as a philosopher of science. My starting point is a picture of how reality is structured that comes from quantum theory. What I want to ask is whether this picture can help us see more clearly what polarization does to us, and what fraternity would have to be in order to resist it.

01 What kind of inference this is

Before I begin, I have to say what kind of inference this is, because a path from physics to society can easily look reductionist, as if social life were nothing more than physics applied to many bodies. I do not claim that society has the structure of quantum theory, and I do not deduce anything about society from physics.[1] I take from physics a structure that is precisely defined, and I use it as a lens. The idea is simple: if we look at social life through this structure, some distinctions that were blurred may become sharp, and some phenomena that we usually study separately may turn out to be related.

In particular, the lens may help us understand what polarization does to us, and say what fraternity would have to be like, if it is to fit the relational structure in which we live. Whether we ought to be fraternal at all is a further question, which I leave open.

02 Four theses

Let me start from relational quantum mechanics, a contemporary interpretation of quantum theory proposed by Carlo Rovelli.[2] I take four theses from it.

The first thesis is that the properties of a physical object do not exist in themselves. They exist only in relation to another object. An electron does not have a position in an absolute sense; it has a position relative to the system it interacts with. Two things follow. Since an object is in relation with many other objects, it has many properties, and it can have different properties relative to different systems.[3] Moreover, each of these properties can be a matter of degree: the theory allows measurements that do not answer with a sharp yes or a sharp no, and whose answer is closer to “in part”.

The second thesis is that no observer sees everything from above. Every description of the world is given relative to some physical system, and so every perspective is partial. This is not a limit of our instruments, which better technology could one day remove. It follows from the first thesis: if properties exist only in relation to a system, there is no system relative to which all properties are given at once. There is no view from nowhere.[4]

The third thesis limits the second. To say that every perspective is partial is not to say that everything is relative. The theory keeps track of all the relations, and of how they constrain one another. When two observers compare what they have found, the theory guarantees that their accounts fit together. We can think of this as a large record, which makes the different perspectives comparable.[5] But the record is not itself a higher point of view: it makes comparison possible, and it does not observe anything.

The fourth thesis is that an object is not the sum of its relational properties. The object exists in its own right, and some of its properties belong to it independently of any relation. The spin of the electron is an example: every electron has the same spin, whatever it interacts with. And these are the very properties that determine what the object can enter into relation with.

03 From physics to social life

I now bring these four theses into social life. There are many conceptions of fraternity, political and religious, and I do not claim to choose among them. Instead, I would like to suggest that the four theses point to four requirements that any adequate conception of fraternity should satisfy.

Each requirement has a double justification. The first is ontological: if social reality has a relational structure, then a concept that applies to it has to respect that structure. The second is diagnostic: each requirement is the negation of one of the forms in which polarization violates that structure. As a first approximation, then, fraternity is a non-polarized relation. I take the requirements in the order of the theses, because each requirement is the social counterpart of one thesis.

04 Four requirements

The first requirement concerns identity, and it is the counterpart of the first thesis. There, the properties of an object exist only in relation, are many, and come in degrees. The same holds for us. Each of us is in relation with many others (a community of faith, a group of colleagues, a territory, a political side), and so each of us is more than one thing, as an object has different properties relative to different systems. Moreover, in each of these things we are what we are only to some degree, as a quantum property can hold "in part". Polarization acts on this structure as a forced measurement. It does to a person what a sharp measurement does to a property that was not sharp: it isolates one belonging and demands a yes or a no, so that one is either entirely inside or outside. Political scientists call the result the alignment of identities.[6] The requirement is therefore that a fraternal relation must let each person remain many things, and be each of them in their own way.

The second requirement concerns perspectives, and it is the counterpart of the second thesis. In the theory, no observer sees everything from above, because every description is given relative to some system. In social life, nobody sees society from above, because each of us describes it from within the relations in which we stand. Disagreement is therefore normal, and polarization does not arise from disagreement. It arises when one partial perspective takes itself to be the view from nowhere, which the theory excludes. At that point, those who think differently can no longer be people who see from somewhere else: they can only be people who refuse to see, and so they become enemies. The requirement is that a fraternal relation must survive disagreement, and must recognize in the other person another perspective on the same world.

The third requirement concerns what we hold in common, and it is the counterpart of the third thesis. In the theory, a record makes the perspectives comparable, and it is not itself a point of

view. In social life, the record is made of institutions, language and shared facts, which make our points of view comparable and are not a subject. Polarization can violate this structure in two opposite ways. It can deny the record, as in echo chambers, where each group ends up with its own facts; then the perspectives are no longer comparable, and everything does become relative. Or it can appropriate the record, as in the populist logic that claims exclusive representation of the "real people";[7] then the record is turned into a point of view above the others, which is exactly what it must not be. The requirement is that a fraternal relation must preserve what is held in common, without making a master of it.

The fourth requirement concerns the person, and it is the counterpart of the fourth thesis. Just as an object is not the sum of its relational properties, a person is not the sum of his or her identities. Beneath them there is the person, who exists in his or her own right, and who shares with every other person something that no relation grants and no relation can revoke. Polarization confuses these two levels: it makes the recognition of the other depend on the other's position, and at the extreme it dehumanizes the adversary. A fraternal relation would instead recognize the other on the basis of what we have in common, before what distinguishes us.

FOUR THESES, FOUR REQUIREMENTS

	Relational quantum mechanics	Requirement on fraternity	What polarization does
1	Properties are relational, many, and a matter of degree	**Identity.** Let each person remain many things, each in their own way	Alignment of identities
2	Every perspective is partial: no view from nowhere	**Perspectives.** Survive disagreement; see another perspective on the same world	A partial view taken for the whole
3	A record makes perspectives comparable, and is no point of view	**What we hold in common.** Preserve it, without making a master of it	Echo chambers; populism
4	An object exists in its own right, beneath its relations	**The person.** Recognize the other on the basis of what we share	Dehumanization of the adversary

05 What we have in common

The four requirements, however, do not yet tell us what fraternity is. They ask that a relation rest on something we have in common, but they do not say what this is. A tolerant society, for instance, also shares institutions and facts.

If what we have in common is only a set of rules, we have tolerance: plurality is preserved, but the bond is thin, and it tends to break when disagreement becomes deep. If what we have in common is an identity, one culture or one language, the bond is strong, but plurality is lost: we become brothers by becoming alike.

Fraternity, I would suggest, lies in a third possibility: what we have in common is not a belonging at all. Following Baggio, I read it as our common humanity, a common origin that religious traditions read as a common filiation.[8] Since it is not one identity among others, it does not compete with our belongings, and no group can claim it as its own. This is why such a fraternity does not merely tolerate the plurality of belongings: it needs it.

Two features follow. The first is parity. A bond that rests on a common origin is a bond among equals who remain different, as among brothers and sisters, who do not choose one another. In relational quantum mechanics, too, there is no privileged observer. Relations of authority, or between parents and children, are not wrong, but they add an asymmetry that the common origin does not contain. The second feature concerns degrees. Like the spin of the electron, our common humanity cannot be made greater or smaller by any relation, while concrete relations can be more or less fraternal. As a condition, fraternity belongs to all; as a practice, it is achieved more or less fully.

06 Conclusion

Let me conclude. If this picture is right, polarization and fraternity may be read as two ways of living the same relational structure: polarization collapses it, either into a single identity or into separate worlds, while fraternity keeps it open. Some concrete indications would follow: to protect the plurality of belongings, to multiply the places where people who think differently meet, and to take care of the institutions that serve as our common record.

Text of the talk delivered at the plenary session “Fraternidad: miradas multidisciplinares” of the VIII Seminario Internacional de la Red Universitaria para el Estudio de la Fraternidad (RUEF), “Los desafíos de la fraternidad en tiempos de polarización”, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, 20 October 2026. Slides and further notes at marcosanchioni.com.

Notes

1. In this I distance myself from approaches that take social life to be quantum in a literal sense, such as Wendt (2015). Here only a conceptual structure is borrowed, and only as a heuristic.
2. Rovelli (1996). The interpretation is the subject of a lively debate, and not everyone would accept the four theses in the form I give them here; see Rovelli (2025) for an overview and Pienaar (2021) for some objections. A careful discussion would require more than a note, and it is not needed for the use I make of these ideas here.
3. This is a simplification. An object has distinct degrees of freedom, such as position and spin, and so distinct properties relative to the same system. Moreover, relative properties are not simply accumulated: a new interaction can replace an earlier one, as when the spin of an electron is measured again along a different direction, and the value obtained before is no longer a property of the system. I leave these details aside here.
4. The expression is Nagel’s (1986), although I use it here in a different sense.
5. This should not be read as the postulate of cross-perspective links proposed by Adlam and Rovelli (2023), which is the subject of a debate of its own. What I have in mind is more modest: the total quantum state can be read as a bookkeeping device for the relations among subsystems.
6. Mason (2018).

7. On the populist claim to an exclusive representation of the people, see Müller (2016).
8. Baggio (2007; 2013).

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