



Article

Position, Mediation, and the Architecture of Social Experience

Fabio de Nardis

Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Salento, Via di Valesio, SNC, 73100 Lecce, Italy; fabio.denardis@unisalento.it

Abstract

Contemporary social theory has extensively examined how structural arrangements shape social life, yet the mediating processes through which structural conditions are translated into lived experience remain insufficiently conceptualised. This article addresses this gap by developing an analytical framework that reconceptualises social position as a mediating configuration through which social reality becomes experientially organised. Rather than treating position as a fixed location within social hierarchies or as a subjective standpoint, the article conceptualises it as a historically sedimented relational formation that structures perception, normativity, affect, and practical orientation. On this basis, the article advances an analytical model in which inequality is understood not only as a structural distribution of resources and power, but also as an experiential organisation of social relations, shaping how constraints, opportunities, and recognition are encountered in everyday life. Subjectivity and agency are analysed as emerging within positionally structured relations of power and mediation, rather than as pre-social or purely individual capacities. By articulating social position as a constitutive form of mediation, the article contributes to sociological analysis by clarifying how structure, history, and subjectivity are internally articulated within lived social experience, offering a conceptual framework that moves beyond dualist accounts of structure and agency.

Keywords: social position; mediation; social experience; inequality; sociological analysis; structure and agency; subjectivity; relationality

1. The Problem of Mediation in Social Theory

Contemporary social theory continues to grapple with the problem of how structural transformations, historical processes, and forms of subjectivity are connected in lived social experience. Despite decades of conceptual refinement, the question of mediation—the ways in which macro-level arrangements are encountered, internalised, and negotiated in everyday life—remains insufficiently theorised in ontological terms. Much of the literature still oscillates between accounts that privilege systemic constraint and approaches that foreground meaning, reflexivity, or discourse, without offering a robust conceptual framework for understanding how social reality is actually lived.

Structuralist traditions have typically emphasised institutional logics, objective relations, and systemic constraints, often treating subjectivity as a secondary or derivative effect of structural forces. Interpretive and post-structuralist approaches, by contrast, have foregrounded meaning, discourse, and reflexivity, frequently at the expense of the material and institutional architectures that shape the horizons of possible action. Between these poles, mediation has tended to appear either as a procedural mechanism linking analytically distinct domains or as an implicit background assumption, rather than as a constitutive dimension of social reality itself.



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The enduring influence of the structure–agency debate exemplifies this unresolved tension. The references that follow are introduced here in schematic form as signposts to a broader problem that will be examined more fully in Section 2. Attempts to overcome dualism have produced influential frameworks, most notably Giddens’ theory of structuration and Archer’s morphogenetic approach (Giddens 1984; Archer 2003). In both cases, however, mediation is primarily conceptualised in analytical or procedural terms. Structuration theory focuses on the recursive reproduction of social systems through knowledgeable action, while the morphogenetic framework separates structure, culture, and agency for explanatory purposes. Although these approaches have refined our understanding of social reproduction and reflexivity, they offer comparatively limited resources for analysing how structural relations are experientially mediated in everyday life (King 2010; Parker 2000).

As a result, social theory continues to alternate between deterministic accounts of constraint and voluntaristic accounts of meaning-making. What remains insufficiently conceptualised is how social positions shape the texture, limits, and possibilities of social experience: how institutions are encountered as enabling or constraining, how inequalities are felt rather than merely measured, and how historical transformations are registered affectively, morally, and temporally by situated actors.

Relational and practice-oriented traditions have moved closer to an integrated account of social life. Bourdieu’s theory of fields and habitus, Elias’s figurational sociology, and Foucault’s analyses of subjectivation have shown that social experience is neither purely subjective nor externally imposed, but produced through historically sedimented configurations of power, institutions, and dispositions (Bourdieu 1984, 1990; Elias 1978; Foucault 1982). These approaches demonstrate how actors are positioned within structured spaces of constraint and opportunity, and how social forces operate through embodied practices, symbolic classifications, and institutional arrangements. Yet even within these relational traditions, mediation often remains implicit. Positions are mapped within social spaces, but the mediating architecture through which they organise social experience is rarely theorised in systematic ontological terms.

In much contemporary theory, social position is still primarily understood as a descriptive category. It designates an actor’s location within a stratified structure, a field, or a network of relations, typically defined in terms of class, status, occupation, institutional role, or access to resources. Position, in this sense, functions as a classificatory device that maps individuals and groups onto a pre-existing social topology. Such mappings are indispensable for identifying patterns of inequality, power, and opportunity. However, they remain conceptually limited when it comes to explaining how social experience itself is organised and lived. When position is treated merely as location, it becomes detached from the experiential, affective, and symbolic dimensions through which social relations are encountered in everyday life.¹

This limitation is particularly visible in dominant analyses of inequality. It is commonly measured in terms of differential access to resources, status, or power, while its experiential dimensions—how inequality is felt, interpreted, normalised, or contested—remain under-theorised. Yet social hierarchies do not only distribute material advantages and disadvantages; they also organise differentiated architectures of experience. Positions shape expectations towards institutions, emotional repertoires, moral evaluations, and temporal orientations towards the future. Vulnerability, insecurity, recognition, and marginalisation are not abstract conditions; they are lived through specific experiential configurations that structure how social reality appears and how it is navigated.

Recent debates in social theory have increasingly called for a more ontologically grounded understanding of mediation. Contributions on social ontology, relationality, and subject formation have emphasised that social reality is not simply encountered as

an external structure or interpreted through discursive frameworks, but lived through historically sedimented configurations of power, normativity, and material constraint (Dépelteau 2013, 2018; Donati and Archer 2015; Rosa 2019). These perspectives challenge dualist ontologies that separate structure from experience, or objectivity from subjectivity, and point towards the need for concepts capable of capturing the relational architectures through which social life is organised.

Within this theoretical landscape, mediation can no longer be treated as a secondary process or a mere analytical bridge. If social reality is relationally constituted, mediation must be understood as an ontological dimension of social life: the form through which structures, institutions, and power relations become experientially accessible. Social actors do not confront “structure” in the abstract, nor do they simply construct meaning in a social vacuum. They encounter the social world through positionally organised configurations that shape perception, affect, and practical orientation.

This article argues that social position should be reconceptualised as a form of mediation rather than as a mere location within social hierarchies or a subjective standpoint of interpretation. This argument is developed within the broader perspective of *Positional Sociology*, which treats social position as a key analytical lens for reconnecting macro-structural transformations, historical dynamics, and the formation of subjectivity. Drawing selectively on historical materialism, field and practice-oriented approaches, subaltern perspectives, and contemporary debates on social ontology and subject formation, this perspective seeks to overcome both structuralist accounts that reduce agency to systemic effects and voluntaristic approaches that detach subjectivity from material and institutional conditions.² Within this broader framework, the concept developed here is designated as *positional mediation*. The purpose of this concept is to theorise position not simply as a structural location or interpretive standpoint, but as the historically organised interface through which material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and embodied dispositions converge in shaping social experience. In this sense, positional mediation names the mediating architecture through which social reality becomes experientially accessible without being reduced either to structural determination or to subjective interpretation.³

Position is not simply where actors are placed in a structure, nor merely how they perceive their situation. It is a relational configuration in which material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and embodied dispositions converge to shape the architecture of social experience. Through position, social structures are not only reproduced or contested; they are lived. Position constitutes the historically and relationally organised interface through which individuals encounter the social world, interpret its demands, and develop practical orientations towards action.

By conceptualising position as mediation, this article seeks to move beyond the conventional structure–agency dichotomy and to offer a more precise account of how social experience is produced. Rather than treating mediation as a procedural link between separate domains, the argument advanced here understands it as the very condition of possibility of social experience itself. This distinction is analytically consequential. When mediation is conceived merely as an analytical or methodological category, it serves primarily as a conceptual device through which the theorist connects domains that remain, at least initially, external to one another, such as structure, culture, agency, and experience. When it is approached instead as an ontological dimension of social life, the question is no longer how such domains are subsequently related, but how they are encountered from the outset within historically organised configurations of lived reality. Social positions organise access to resources, recognition, vulnerability, and authority, but they also shape emotional repertoires, moral grammars, and temporal horizons. In doing so, they structure

not only what actors can do, but also how they interpret what they endure, desire, and resist (Honneth 1995; Sayer 2011; Rosa 2019).

This reconceptualisation has three main implications for social theory. First, it shifts analytical attention from abstract structures and isolated subjectivities to the relational architectures through which social reality is experienced. Second, it highlights the experiential dimensions of inequality by showing how positional configurations organise differentiated horizons of expectation, recognition, and vulnerability. Third, it provides an ontologically grounded framework for analysing how subjectivity is formed through historically sedimented configurations of power, institutions, and material conditions.

The contribution of this article is deliberately theoretical rather than programmatic. It intervenes in a foundational problem of social theory: how to conceptualise the mediation between structure and experience without collapsing one into the other. By rethinking social position as a mediating architecture, I seek to provide a relational and ontologically grounded framework for analysing the production of social experience across different historical and institutional contexts.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section critically examines the limits of dualist ontologies in social theory, focusing on selected approaches that have most strongly shaped contemporary understandings of the relation between structure, agency, and mediation. The third section reconceptualises social position beyond the notion of location, proposing a relational understanding of position as configuration. The fourth section develops the concept of mediation as an architectural dimension of social experience. The fifth section analyses the relational formation of subjectivity through positional mediation. The concluding section reflects on the theoretical implications of this framework and outlines directions for future research.

2. The Limits of Dualist Ontologies

The enduring influence of the structure–agency dichotomy continues to shape much of contemporary social theory. Despite repeated efforts to transcend it, the conceptual separation between objective structures and subjective action remains deeply embedded in the analytical architectures through which social life is interpreted. Structuralist traditions have prioritised systemic constraints, institutional logics, and macro-level dynamics, often relegating subjective experience to a secondary or derivative status. Interpretive and post-structuralist approaches, by contrast, have foregrounded meaning, discourse, and reflexivity, frequently bracketing the material and institutional conditions that delimit the horizons of possible action. The result is not simply theoretical pluralism, but a persistent ontological fragmentation in which mediation is either proceduralised or left implicit.

The discussion that follows focuses on a selected set of approaches that have been particularly influential in shaping contemporary understandings of the relation between structure, agency, and mediation. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive survey, but to clarify the conceptual limits of those frameworks that have most powerfully informed current attempts to move beyond dualism.

Attempts to reconcile these dimensions have produced influential frameworks. Giddens' theory of structuration sought to overcome dualism by conceptualising structure and agency as mutually constitutive moments of social practice (Giddens 1984). Structures, in this view, are both the medium and the outcome of action, reproduced through the knowledgeable conduct of social actors. While this formulation represented a significant departure from deterministic models, it tends to privilege the procedural reproduction of social systems over the differentiated experiential conditions through which actors encounter them. Mediation is treated primarily as a recursive process, rather than as a relational architecture that shapes how social reality is lived.⁴ As several commentators

have noted, structuration theory offers a sophisticated account of social reproduction, but a comparatively thinner account of how structural relations are experientially mediated in everyday life (King 2010; Parker 2000).

Archer's morphogenetic approach offers a more analytically differentiated account by insisting on the temporal and causal autonomy of structure, culture, and agency (Archer 2003). Her later work on the reflexive imperative in late modernity further develops this concern by foregrounding the ways in which agents deliberate upon structural and cultural conditioning, while still leaving partly unresolved the question of how such conditioning is experientially mediated through social position (Archer 2012). By separating these domains for analytical purposes, Archer aims to preserve the explanatory power of structural conditioning while recognising the reflexive capacities of social actors. Yet this separation also risks reifying the very dualism it seeks to overcome. Mediation appears as an interaction between analytically distinct entities, rather than as a constitutive configuration through which social experience is organised and rendered meaningful. While the morphogenetic framework clarifies causal sequences, it leaves under-theorised the experiential architectures through which agents encounter structural constraints and cultural expectations in their social life.

Critical realist interventions have further refined the ontological vocabulary of social theory by emphasising depth, emergence, and causal powers. Social structures are understood as relatively enduring, historically produced formations that exert real effects, even when they are not directly observable (Bhaskar 1998; Elder-Vass 2010, 2012). This perspective has been influential in resisting both empiricist and voluntarist reductions. However, critical realism often remains ambivalent about the experiential mediation of structure. Subjectivity is acknowledged as socially conditioned, yet the specific ways in which structural forces are lived, internalised, and negotiated through everyday experience tend to remain analytically marginal. Mediation, in this sense, is treated more as an explanatory linkage than as an ontological dimension of social reality.

Post-structuralist and discursive approaches have addressed this gap by focusing on the productive dimensions of power and the constitution of subjects through discourse, norms, and practices. Foucault's analyses of governmentality and subjectivation, for instance, illuminate how institutional rationalities shape forms of selfhood, conduct, and moral orientation (Foucault 1982). His lectures on security, territory, and population further show how governmental rationalities organise conduct through dispositifs that connect institutions, populations, spaces, and practices of regulation (Foucault 2007). Power, in this perspective, operates through dispersed dispositifs that organise conduct and self-relation. Yet the emphasis on discursive production sometimes risks attenuating the material and institutional infrastructures that sustain these processes. When mediation is conceptualised primarily in symbolic or discursive terms, the material architectures of inequality, vulnerability, and constraint can recede into the background (Jessop 2016).

Relational sociologies have moved further towards an integrated account of social life by conceptualising action as embedded within networks, figurations, and fields of interdependence. Elias's figurational sociology and Bourdieu's field theory both demonstrate that social actors are positioned within historically structured configurations of power that shape dispositions, perceptions, and practical orientations (Elias 1978; Bourdieu 1984, 1990). Emirbayer's influential *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* called for a shift from substance-based to relational thinking, emphasising that social actors and structures are constituted through dynamic processes rather than static properties (Emirbayer 1997). A further refinement of this relational critique can be found in Emirbayer and Mische's account of agency as a "temporally embedded process of social engagement", articulated through iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions (Emirbayer and Mische

1998, p. 962). Their intervention is especially important because it shows that agency cannot be reduced to a flat or undifferentiated capacity for action, but must be understood in relation to shifting temporal orientations through which actors engage structural contexts. At the same time, however, their analysis remains centred primarily on the temporal articulation of agency rather than on the mediating role of position as the historically organised interface through which institutional, material, and symbolic conditions are lived. Yet even within these relational frameworks, position often remains a descriptive category rather than a fully theorised ontological principle. Positions are mapped within social spaces, but the mediating function through which they organise social experience is rarely conceptualised in systematic terms.

More recent theoretical contributions have explicitly addressed these limitations by calling for a more ontologically grounded account of relationality and mediation. [Dépelteau \(2013\)](#) has argued that the “relational turn” risks becoming analytically superficial if it does not engage more seriously with the ontological status of relations themselves. Donati’s relational sociology is also central to this debate, since it treats social relations not as derivative connections between pre-constituted individuals, but as emergent realities endowed with their own generative properties ([Donati 2011, 2018](#)). [Donati and Archer \(2015\)](#) have proposed a theory of the “relational subject” that seeks to overcome individualist and structuralist reductions by conceptualising subjectivity as emergent from relational configurations. [Rosa’s \(2019\)](#) theory of resonance further highlights how social relations shape experiential orientations towards the world, emphasising that social reality is not merely structured but affectively and temporally mediated.

Despite these advances, a systematic conceptualisation of mediation as an architectural dimension of social experience remains underdeveloped. Mediation continues to appear either as a methodological bridge or as a residual category linking pre-existing domains. What is missing is a concept of mediation that treats social experience itself as relationally and positionally organised. Without such a concept, social theory continues to oscillate between explanations that prioritise systemic constraint and those that privilege subjective meaning, without adequately accounting for how the two are fused in social reality.

The problem, therefore, is not simply theoretical disagreement, but ontological incompleteness. Dualist frameworks struggle to explain how social structures are not merely imposed upon actors, nor merely interpreted by them, but are encountered through historically sedimented positional configurations that shape access to resources, recognition, vulnerability, and authority. These configurations do not operate at the level of abstract structure or individual consciousness alone; they organise the very conditions under which social experience becomes intelligible, emotionally charged, and practically consequential.

To move beyond this impasse, mediation must be reconceptualised not as a secondary process but as an ontological dimension of social life. This requires shifting analytical attention from isolated domains to the relational architectures through which structures and subjectivities are co-constituted. Social position, understood not as a fixed location but as a dynamic configuration of relations, offers a promising conceptual entry point for such a reorientation. By theorising position as mediation, it becomes possible to articulate how social structures are lived rather than merely reproduced, and how subjectivity is formed through historically organised architectures of experience.

3. Position Beyond Location

If social position is understood merely as a location within a stratified social structure, its analytical function remains largely descriptive. Positions are mapped in terms of class, status, occupation, institutional role, or access to resources, allowing sociologists to identify patterns of inequality, power, and opportunity. While such mappings are indispensable

for empirical analysis, they offer only a limited account of how social reality is actually experienced. When position is treated as a fixed coordinate within a social topology, it becomes detached from the relational, affective, and symbolic processes through which social life is lived.

This descriptive understanding of position tends to abstract individuals and groups from the historically sedimented configurations that shape their practical orientations, moral expectations, and experiential horizons. It captures where actors are located, but not how they inhabit their location. As a result, position appears as a static attribute rather than as a dynamic configuration through which social experience is organised.⁵

A relational reconceptualisation of position requires moving beyond the notion of location towards an understanding of position as configuration. This reconceptualisation also requires distinguishing the notion of position developed here from the tradition of positioning theory, which has primarily analysed how selves are discursively situated within conversational, moral, and narrative contexts (Davies and Harré 1990; Bamberg 1997; Harré and van Langenhove 1999; Harré 2012). While this literature is important for showing that subjectivity is relationally and interactionally produced, the argument advanced in this article treats position in a broader ontological sense: not primarily as a discursive or narrative accomplishment, but as a relational configuration in which material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and embodied dispositions converge. Positions are not simply occupied; they are produced through historically structured relations among material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and embodied dispositions. These elements do not operate independently, but converge to shape the practical, affective, and interpretive dimensions of social experience. Position, in this sense, is not a point in space but a relational formation that organises how social reality is encountered and navigated.

From this perspective, social positions function as mediating configurations between macro-structural arrangements and everyday experience. They shape how institutional constraints are perceived, how inequalities are interpreted, and how possibilities for action are imagined. Positions organise access to resources, exposure to risk, and relations of authority, but they also structure emotional repertoires, moral grammars, and temporal orientations. Through these mediating configurations, social structures become experientially accessible rather than merely abstract.

Bourdieu's work provides an important point of departure for such an argument. His account of habitus, capital, and field makes clear that practices can only be understood relationally, through the interplay between incorporated dispositions and historically structured social environments (Bourdieu 1984, 1990). In this sense, position is already more than a neutral coordinate: it is bound to class condition, social conditioning, and the structured relation between embodied dispositions and field-specific constraints. Bourdieu's well-known formulation of practice as emerging from the relation between habitus, capital, and field is especially relevant here, because it suggests that actors do not merely occupy positions, but encounter the social world through historically formed configurations that shape perception, evaluation, and conduct.⁶

At the same time, however, habitus alone does not fully account for the mediating role of position as developed in this article. Bourdieu's framework is primarily oriented towards the logic of fields, the distribution of capital, and the generative role of embodied dispositions in practice. What it leaves less fully theorised is position as a mediating architecture of experience in its own right: that is, as the interface through which material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and embodied dispositions converge in shaping how social reality is lived, interpreted, and rendered intelligible. Moral evaluations, experiences of recognition or stigma, and temporal orientations towards the

future are also shaped by institutional and symbolic configurations that cannot be reduced to habitus alone.

Similarly, figurational and relational sociologies have shown that social actors are embedded within networks of interdependence that shape their opportunities, constraints, and orientations (Elias 1978; Emirbayer 1997). These approaches emphasise process, relationality, and historical contingency, but often retain an implicit understanding of position as a descriptive location within a social space. What remains under-theorised is how these relational positions function as mediating architectures of experience.

Reconceptualising position as configuration rather than location allows social theory to capture this mediating function more precisely. Positions organise not only structural relations, but also experiential horizons. They shape how actors interpret institutional demands, how they evaluate their own social worth, and how they orient themselves towards others. In this sense, position operates as an interface between structural arrangements and social experience, integrating material, institutional, symbolic, and embodied dimensions into a coherent relational formation.

This reconceptualisation also has important implications for the analysis of inequality. It is not only a matter of unequal distribution of resources or power; it is also a matter of differentiated experiential conditions. Positions shape what individuals expect from institutions, what institutions and social instances expect from them, how they interpret setbacks and successes, and how they imagine possible futures. Experiences of vulnerability, insecurity, or marginalisation are not abstract states; they are mediated through positional configurations that structure perception, affect, and practical orientation.

By treating position as a relational configuration rather than a static location, social theory gains a more nuanced account of how social structures are lived. Position becomes the form through which historical processes, institutional arrangements, and power relations are translated into everyday experience. This understanding prepares the ground for a more systematic theorisation of mediation as an architectural dimension of social life, which the next section develops in greater detail.

4. Mediation and the Architecture of Social Experience

If social position is understood as a relational configuration rather than a mere location, mediation can no longer be conceived as a secondary or procedural mechanism linking structure and agency. Mediation must instead be approached as an ontological dimension of social life: the relational architecture through which social reality becomes experientially accessible, intelligible, and actionable. Mediation is not what happens between structure and subjectivity; it is the form through which their interdependence is lived.

In classical social theory, mediation often appeared as an implicit assumption rather than as an explicit conceptual category. Marx's analysis of class relations demonstrated how economic structures shape social consciousness, yet the experiential pathways through which exploitation is perceived, normalised, or contested were not systematically theorised. Similarly, Weber's account of social action linked meaning to institutional rationalisation, but left largely unexplored how institutional orders are lived through differentiated experiential conditions. In both cases, mediation was present as an intuition: social reality was understood as neither purely objective nor purely subjective, yet the relational architecture through which it was experienced remained analytically underdeveloped.

Later theoretical traditions brought mediation closer to the centre of analysis. Critical theory, phenomenology, and relational sociology emphasised that social reality is not encountered directly, but through historically sedimented forms of interpretation, normativity, and embodiment. Adorno's negative dialectics, for instance, insisted on the non-identity between concept and object, highlighting the mediated character of social experience (Adorno

1973). Yet even here, mediation often appeared primarily as a cognitive or cultural filter, rather than as a materially and institutionally structured architecture of experience.

Reconceptualising mediation in ontological terms requires shifting attention from interpretive processes alone to the relational configurations that organise social experience at multiple levels. Mediation is not merely symbolic. It is also institutional, material, affective, and temporal, with the latter two dimensions becoming especially important in the formation of subjectivity, as discussed more fully in Section 5. It structures how individuals encounter authority, vulnerability, recognition, and exclusion; how they experience security or precarity; and how they orient themselves towards the future. Social experience, from this perspective, is not a neutral encounter with the world, but an architecturally organised process shaped by positional configurations.

The notion of architecture is particularly useful because it captures both structure and contingency. Architectures organise space, movement, and visibility, yet they remain historically variable and socially produced. In a similar way, positional architectures organise the experiential contours of social life without fully determining them. They channel perception, constrain action, and enable certain forms of agency while rendering others improbable. Social actors inhabit these architectures, navigate them, and sometimes seek to transform them, but they rarely encounter social reality outside of them.

This architectural conception of mediation allows for a more precise understanding of how inequality operates experientially. Inequality is not only a matter of unequal distribution of resources or power. It is also a matter of differentiated experiential horizons. Positions shape what individuals expect from institutions, what institutions and social instances expect from them, how they interpret setbacks and successes, how they perceive authority, which repertoires of action become available or legitimate, and how they evaluate their own worth. Vulnerability, insecurity, and marginalisation are not abstract conditions; they are lived through specific experiential architectures that structure emotional repertoires such as anxiety, resignation, resentment, or fragile hope.

A brief example may help to clarify the analytical purchase of this perspective. Consider the case of labour precarity. From a conventional distributive standpoint, precarity is typically understood in terms of unstable employment, insecure income, and reduced access to social protection. A mediational approach does not displace these dimensions, but re-specifies their sociological significance. Precarity appears here not simply as an objective condition of disadvantage, but as a positionally organised architecture of experience through which institutional unreliability, temporal contraction, and fragile recognition are lived in everyday social experience. It shapes how individuals relate to work, what they expect from public institutions, how they interpret interruption or failure, how they experience limited success or temporary stabilisation, and whether they understand uncertainty as a personal inadequacy or as a socially produced condition. In this way, positional mediation makes visible how the same structural condition may generate not only anxiety, self-disciplining adaptation, or resignation, but also, under specific relational and organisational conditions, forms of political subjectivation in which shared vulnerability becomes collectively interpreted as injustice. What is analytically gained, therefore, is not an illustrative supplement to the study of inequality, but a more precise understanding of how structural conditions are translated into practical orientations, moral evaluations, and, at times, emergent forms of contestation.

Importantly, mediation does not simply reproduce domination. Positional architectures can also generate identification, alignment, and structure-conforming forms of consciousness, as well as dissonance, contradiction, and critical awareness. They may support accommodation no less than tension, and may sustain justificatory orders through which actors come to inhabit institutional demands as legitimate, desirable, or simply

self-evident. This is particularly evident in neoliberal contexts, where market rationalities reshape institutions, subjectivities, and forms of citizenship, encouraging actors to interpret insecurity, competition, and responsibility as individualised conditions rather than as socially produced relations (Brown 2015). At the same time, when experiential expectations collide with material realities—when promises of mobility, recognition, or security are systematically frustrated—mediation can become a site of tension rather than accommodation. Such tensions may give rise to alternative interpretive frameworks, affective orientations, and forms of collective identification. In this sense, mediation is not only a channel of social reproduction but also a potential terrain of transformation.⁷

This perspective also resonates with recent debates on normativity and critique. Jaeggi's (2018) argument that social critique must be grounded in immanent evaluations of forms of life highlights how social arrangements succeed or fail in enabling meaningful practices. From a mediational perspective, such evaluations are always positionally structured: what counts as a "good" or "failed" form of life depends on the experiential architectures through which social actors encounter institutional and material conditions. Normativity itself, therefore, is mediated through positional configurations.

Understanding mediation as an ontological dimension of social life thus reorients the analysis of subjectivity. Subjectivity is not an interior domain detached from social structures, nor merely the product of discursive interpellation. It is formed through the positional architectures that organise social experience. These architectures shape how individuals interpret their situation, relate to others, and imagine possible futures. Subjectivity, therefore, is neither autonomous nor fully determined; it is relationally and positionally mediated.

By theorising mediation in this way, social theory gains a more coherent account of how structure, history, and experience are fused in social reality. Mediation is not a bridge between separate domains, but the very condition through which reality becomes experiential. Position, understood as a relational architecture, is the form that this mediation takes.

5. Subjectivity and Positional Mediation

If mediation constitutes the architectural form through which social experience is organised, subjectivity must be understood as one of its central outcomes. It does not emerge in isolation from social structures, nor does it simply mirror them in a mechanical fashion. Rather, it is formed through the relational configurations that constitute social positions. These configurations shape not only what individuals can do, but how they interpret their circumstances, experience vulnerability, perceive possibility, and orient themselves towards others and towards the future (Donati and Archer 2015; Rosa 2019). Subjectivity, in this sense, is neither an autonomous interior realm nor a passive effect of external forces, but a relationally mediated formation.

Much of social theory has struggled to conceptualise subjectivity without falling into either psychologism or structural reductionism. Subject-centred approaches often treat subjectivity as an interior domain of meaning, identity, or reflexivity, insufficiently anchored in material and institutional conditions. Structuralist perspectives, by contrast, tend to conceptualise subjectivity as an effect of objective relations, leaving little room for the experiential, affective, and normative dimensions through which social life is experienced. A positional conception of mediation offers a way beyond this impasse by situating subjectivity within historically sedimented configurations of power, recognition, material constraint, and institutionally structured possibility, including the unequal conditions under which mobility, circulation, or declassification become thinkable and attainable.⁸

From a mediational perspective, subjectivities are formed through positional architectures that organise access to resources, exposure to risk and opportunity, relations of

dependence and authority, and field- or position-specific repertoires of action. These architectures shape what individuals perceive as normal, legitimate, achievable, or out of reach. They also structure affective dispositions such as confidence, resignation, anxiety, indignation, or aspirational attachment. Emotional orientations are not merely personal states; they are relational effects of the positions individuals occupy within social fields (Holmes 2010; Wetherell 2012). Experiences of insecurity, marginalisation, or symbolic devaluation are not simply felt internally; they are mediated through institutional arrangements and social classifications that render certain lives more precarious, more exposed, less recognised, or less able to convert effort into durable social advancement than others (Standing 2011; Vallas and Hill 2012).

Recent theoretical contributions have emphasised the importance of linking subject formation to relational and normative structures. Rosa's (2019) theory of resonance conceptualises subjectivity in terms of affective relations to the world, showing how social institutions shape experiences of connection, alienation, or indifference. Similarly, Jaeggi's (2018) account of forms of life highlights how subjectivity is shaped by participation in socially organised practices that can be experienced as enabling, constraining, or failing. These approaches converge on the idea that subjectivity is not merely cognitive or discursive, but deeply shaped by relational architectures of experience.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus captures an important dimension of this process by showing how social conditions are embodied as durable dispositions that shape perception, taste, and conduct (Bourdieu 1990). Through habitus, objective structures become incorporated into practical orientations, shaping everyday action without requiring conscious reflection. Yet habitus alone does not exhaust the complexity of positional mediation. Subjectivity is not only a matter of embodied practice; it also involves moral evaluations, emotional repertoires, temporal orientations, and socially available repertoires of action that are shaped by broader institutional and cultural configurations. Recognition, stigma, and symbolic valuation contribute to shaping how individuals relate to themselves and others.

Honneth's theory of recognition provides a particularly useful lens for understanding these processes. Experiences of respect, esteem, and misrecognition play a central role in the formation of self-relations and moral expectations (Honneth 1995). His later reflections on the "diseases of society" further extend this perspective towards a diagnosis of institutionalised forms of social pathology, where distorted relations of recognition become embedded in the normative organisation of social life (Honneth 2014). However, such experiences are not evenly distributed across society. They are structured by positional inequalities that determine who is recognised, who is marginalised, and whose claims are considered legitimate. Recognition, therefore, is not merely an interpersonal phenomenon; it is mediated through institutional arrangements, legal statuses, and cultural classifications that shape the experiential architecture of subjectivity (Fraser 2000).

Relational formation also involves a temporal dimension. Positions organise not only present experiences but also expectations about the future. Access to stable employment, institutional protection, symbolic recognition, and credible opportunities for advancement shapes whether individuals can imagine long-term projects, anticipate social mobility, or experience chronic uncertainty and possible declassification. Temporal horizons are thus positionally structured (Bourdieu 2000; Adam 2004). Precarious positions tend to generate short-term orientations, heightened anxiety, and fragile forms of hope, while more secure positions enable longer-term planning and greater confidence in institutional continuity.

Importantly, positional mediation does not imply uniformity of experience. Even within similar structural locations, subjectivities may vary depending on institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and relational trajectories. Gender, race, legal status, and generational position intersect with class and occupational status to produce differenti-

ated experiential configurations (Crossley 2011). Subjectivities are thus shaped by multiple, overlapping positional architectures that organise vulnerability, recognition, authority, and access to legitimate repertoires of action in complex ways.

At the same time, positional mediation does not foreclose the possibility of reflexivity or critique. Subjectivities are not simply moulded by social positions; they may also develop interpretive frameworks that problematise or resist the conditions in which they are formed. However, the capacity for critique is itself positionally conditioned. Access to resources, education, institutional platforms, and symbolic legitimacy shapes who can articulate dissent, whose voices are heard, and which forms of critique become socially consequential (Celikates 2018). It also shapes the costs of critique: whether dissent jeopardises the stability of one's position, closes down opportunities for circulation, or exposes actors to downward mobility, exclusion, or sanction. Agency, therefore, cannot be understood apart from the positional architectures that enable or constrain it.

This also bears directly on the question of political subjectivation. Positionally mediated experiences of insecurity, subordination, or misrecognition do not automatically generate collective action. Under certain relational and organisational conditions, however, they may acquire interpretive coherence and affective resonance, allowing dispersed experiences of vulnerability to be rearticulated as common grievance and collective contestation. This dynamic is visible, for example, in certain migrant labour mobilisations, where legally precarious and socially subordinated workers have transformed shared conditions of exploitation into forms of collective self-activity.⁹ In this sense, protest consciousness does not emerge outside positional mediation, as if political agency were simply added to an otherwise pre-political social world; it emerges through the very architectures of experience within which domination is lived, interpreted, and, at times, collectively challenged.

From a mediational (and positional) perspective, agency is not the expression of an abstract capacity for choice, but the situated ability to navigate, reinterpret, and sometimes contest the architectures of experience through which social reality is encountered. This understanding avoids both voluntarism and determinism by situating agency within relational configurations of power, recognition, material constraint, and institutionally structured possibility (Jaeggi 2014).

Tensions between experiential expectations and material conditions do not merely produce dissonance or frustration, but may also generate critical orientations and collective forms of contestation. When positional architectures render contradictions experientially visible, mediation can become a site in which social arrangements are problematised and alternative interpretive frameworks emerge. In this sense, mediation cannot be understood solely as a mechanism of social reproduction, but also as a potential terrain of critique and, under specific conditions, social transformation.

By conceptualising subjectivity as relationally formed through position, social theory gains a more nuanced account of how social structures are lived rather than merely imposed. It is neither an autonomous interior realm nor a passive reflection of external forces. It is the outcome of mediated social relations that organise experience, affect, orientation towards the world, and access to socially available possibilities. Position, in this sense, is not only a site of constraint but also the condition through which subjectivity becomes socially intelligible.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that the persistent dualisms of social theory—most notably the opposition between structure and agency—continue to limit our understanding of how social experience is organised, lived, and rendered meaningful. Although influential theoretical traditions have offered sophisticated accounts of systemic constraint, interpretive agency,

and relational embeddedness, the problem of mediation has often remained conceptually underdeveloped. Mediation has typically been treated as a procedural linkage between analytically distinct domains rather than as a constitutive dimension of social reality.

By reconceptualising social position as a form of mediation, this article has proposed an alternative ontological framework for analysing the organisation of social experience. Position, understood not as a mere location within social hierarchies but as a relational configuration of material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, embodied dispositions, and historically structured possibilities, functions as the interface through which social structures become experientially accessible. It is through such positional configurations that inequality is not only distributed but also lived, interpreted, affectively registered, and translated into differentiated horizons of expectation and action.

This reconceptualisation advances social theory in three interrelated ways. First, it shifts analytical attention from abstract structures and isolated subjectivities to the relational configurations through which social reality is encountered in everyday life. Rather than treating experience as a secondary domain of interpretation, the article conceptualises it as a positionally mediated form of social existence. Second, it provides a more precise account of how inequality operates experientially, showing how social hierarchies organise differentiated horizons of expectation, recognition, vulnerability, moral valuation, and institutionally structured possibility (Honneth 1995; Rosa 2019). Third, it offers an ontologically grounded framework for analysing the formation of subjectivity without collapsing it into either voluntarism or structural determinism (Archer 2003; Bhaskar 1998).

Reframing position as mediation clarifies how social experience is neither a direct reflection of objective structures nor a purely subjective construction of meaning. Experience is organised through historically sedimented positional configurations that shape perception, affect, practical orientation, and the sense of what may realistically be hoped for, endured, or pursued. These configurations structure how individuals encounter institutions, evaluate authority, interpret both setbacks and successes, and imagine possible futures, including prospects of mobility, stability, or declassification. Subjectivity, in this sense, is not an interior realm detached from social relations, but a relationally formed mode of being in the world (Donati and Archer 2015; Rosa 2019).

This perspective also refines our understanding of agency. It does not consist in the abstract capacity to choose, nor in the mechanical reproduction of social structures, but emerges within positional architectures that enable certain forms of action while constraining others. The ability to reinterpret social conditions, articulate critique, imagine alternatives, or pursue institutionally available opportunities is itself positionally mediated, shaped by access to resources, recognition, symbolic legitimacy, and socially available repertoires of action (Jaeggi 2018). This also implies that the capacities through which social actors develop protest consciousness, render grievances collectively intelligible, engage in forms of contestation, or convert effort into durable advancement are themselves positionally mediated, and therefore unevenly distributed across the social world. Agency, therefore, must be understood as a situated and relational capacity rather than as an individual attribute.

By conceptualising mediation as an ontological dimension of social life, the article contributes to broader debates on relationality, experience, and normativity. Rather than treating mediation as a secondary analytical tool, it is understood here as the form through which social reality becomes experientially accessible. Position, as a mediating architecture, integrates structure, history, subjectivity, and practical orientation within a single analytical framework.

Rather than advancing a programmatic agenda, this article has sought to intervene at the level of social–theoretical foundations by rethinking the status of mediation itself. By

conceptualising social position as a relational architecture of experience, it has proposed a way of grasping how structural conditions, historical processes, and forms of subjectivity are not merely correlated, but internally articulated within the lived organisation of social reality.

Future research can extend this framework in several directions. Empirical studies may investigate how different positional architectures shape experiential horizons across fields such as labour, welfare, migration, education, and political participation. Comparative analyses may explore how historical and institutional variations produce distinct forms of positional mediation, including different regimes of recognition, security, mobility, and exclusion. Theoretically, further work may refine the relationship between position, power, normativity, and institutionally structured possibility, as well as the temporal and affective dimensions through which social experience is organised.

What remains clear is that mediation cannot be relegated to the margins of social theory. If we are to understand how social reality is not merely structured but experienced, inhabited, and acted upon, mediation must be treated as a central ontological category. Reconceiving position as mediation offers a coherent way of addressing this task, enabling social theory to move beyond dualist frameworks and towards a more integrated account of the organisation of social experience.

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Notes

- ¹ In much empirical research, social position is operationalised through indicators such as occupational status, class location, educational attainment, or institutional role, often within stratification models or field-analytical frameworks. While such approaches are indispensable for mapping inequalities and power relations, they tend to treat position as a fixed coordinate within a social structure rather than as a relational configuration shaping lived experience (Bourdieu 1993; Goldthorpe 2000; Savage et al. 2013).
- ² For broader formulations of *Positional Sociology* and its dialogue with historical materialism, field theory, and contemporary debates on social transformation and subject formation, see de Nardis and Simone (2022), de Nardis et al. (2023), Sorice and Viviani (2025) and de Nardis (2026a, 2026b). Although initially elaborated within the Italian academic context, this perspective has been explicitly developed in dialogue with wider international debates on neoliberalisation, social decomposition, and the micro–macro relation in contemporary social science.
- ³ The notion of *positional mediation* is intended to identify the specific analytical contribution developed in this article within the broader horizon of *Positional Sociology*. It designates the mediating process through which historically constituted positions condense material conditions, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, and embodied dispositions, thereby shaping the experiential organisation of social reality. In this sense, the concept aims to clarify how structure and subjectivity are internally articulated in lived experience without collapsing mediation into either a merely procedural linkage or a purely interpretive standpoint.
- ⁴ Although Giddens' structuration theory is often credited with moving beyond rigid structural determinism, it has also been criticised for foregrounding processes of recursive reproduction at the expense of the differentiated ways in which social life is subjectively experienced. Within this perspective, mediation is conceived primarily as an operational mechanism rather than as a constitutive architecture, thus providing only limited analytical resources for grasping how social relations are embodied, perceived, and interpreted across asymmetrical positional contexts (Parker 2000; King 2010).
- ⁵ In stratification scholarship, social position is typically apprehended through metrics such as class location, income levels, educational credentials, or labour market status. While such indicators remain essential for identifying structural asymmetries,

they tend to reify position as a fixed social slot rather than conceptualising it as a dynamic relational configuration through which social experience is mediated, differentiated, and lived (Goldthorpe 2000; Savage et al. 2013).

- 6 Bourdieu's account is especially relevant here because it allows position to be understood not as an isolated coordinate but as a relationally constituted element within the interplay of habitus, capital, and field. In *Distinction*, he explicitly formulates practice in terms of the relation [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice, while also insisting on the systematic unity linking class condition, social conditioning, and lifestyle formation (Bourdieu 1984, p. 101). At the same time, however, the principal mediating emphasis remains on habitus as the incorporated history of objective conditions, rather than on position as a mediating architecture of experience in its own right.
- 7 The architectural metaphor foregrounds the idea that social experience is configured through historically sedimented arrangements that orient perception and action without fully determining them. Positional mediation, in this sense, unfolds within a relational space where structured constraint coexists with contingent openness.
- 8 Subject-centred and structuralist approaches often reproduce the very dualism they seek to overcome by either isolating subjectivity from social structures or reducing it to their effects. A relational conception of position makes it possible to analyse subjectivity as a mediated outcome of historically sedimented configurations of power, recognition, and material constraint, without collapsing agency into voluntarism or structure into determinism.
- 9 An illuminating example is provided by the 2011 mobilisation of migrant agricultural workers in Nardò, in southern Italy. There, extreme labour exploitation did not operate in isolation, but through a broader positional configuration combining legal precarity, racialised segmentation, gangmaster-controlled recruitment, depressed piece rates, and spatial concentration in segregated living conditions. These conditions structured not only material deprivation, but also workers' everyday experience of dependency, uncertainty, and institutional abandonment. At the same time, the concentration of workers in a shared space, together with the circulation of practical repertoires of labour resistance, made it possible for dispersed experiences of exploitation to acquire collective intelligibility. What emerged was not a spontaneous political awakening, but a process through which shared vulnerability was progressively rearticulated as injustice and collective grievance. In this sense, the case illustrates how positional mediation may, under determinate historical and organisational conditions, become a basis for political self-activity rather than merely for subordination. See de Nardis and Galiano (2025); Ciniero and de Nardis (2026).

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