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Positional sociology and the material conditions of subjectivities

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ABSTRACT

This article advances a renewed materialist framework through the development of *positional sociology*, an approach that reconnects macro-structural transformations with the subjective experiences through which individuals navigate contemporary capitalism. Building on historical materialism while engaging critically with post-structuralism, subaltern studies and Bourdieusian field theory, the paper argues that position constitutes the key analytical bridge linking structure, history and subjectivity. While positional sociology first emerged within an Italian network of scholars, the *Rete di Sociologia di Posizione*, which has also initiated an editorial series dedicated to this agenda, this article seeks to extend the debate to an international audience by articulating the theoretical foundations of the approach in dialogue with global discussions on neoliberalization, social decomposition and the micro, macro divide. The article shows how positional sociology reframes experiences of precarity, fragmentation and dispossession as materially grounded phenomena, not individual contingencies. By integrating historical analysis, structural dynamics and lived subjectivities, positional sociology offers a coherent lens for understanding the forms of domination and agency that define the neoliberal conjuncture and for rethinking the materialist tradition in contemporary social theory.

KEYWORDS

Positional sociology; subjectivity; neoliberalization; historical sociology; social decomposition; positional ensembles; historical materialism

1. Beyond service sociology

The Covid-19 pandemic marked a historical rupture that exposed, with unprecedented clarity, the structural fragilities of contemporary capitalism and the conceptual limits of sociological paradigms that had long oscillated between technocratic adaptation and moral exhortation. Rather than a transient shock, the pandemic condensed and accelerated trends already well underway: the neoliberal restructuring of welfare and labour markets; the diffusion of precarious, fragmented and hyper-individualized life-worlds; the erosion of collective institutions that once offered stability and recognition; and the intensification of affective pressures that shape how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. For sociology, this conjuncture has not merely reopened the question of its public role, it has profoundly transformed it. It now demands analytical frameworks capable of grasping how large-scale transformations materialize in everyday social experience, reshape cognitive and emotional repertoires, and redefine the conditions under which subjectivities are formed, sustained, and contested.

Classical sociology, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and, in important ways, Simmel, never understood its task as a merely descriptive enterprise. Its aim was to illuminate the constitutive relations of capitalist modernity by examining the interdependence of economic organization, institutional forms, moral regulation, and social conflict. Marx located the dynamics of class formation and exploitation within historically evolving relations of production; Weber analyzed the rise of bureaucratic domination, rationalization, and the ethics underpinning social action; Durkheim explored the forms of solidarity and moral integration that hold societies together; and Simmel examined the qualitative transformations of social bonds in an increasingly monetized and individualized world. Across these traditions, subjectivity was not an autonomous realm but was intimately linked to material conditions, institutional arrangements, and socio-historical inequalities.

Over the twentieth century, however, this integrated perspective was progressively weakened as sociology fragmented into specialized empirical domains and normative discourses that often lacked a coherent

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theory of society. The expansion of professional specialization, the rise of methodological formalism, and the increasing outsourcing of critique to philosophy contributed to the dissociation between structural analysis and social experience. As a result, many contemporary sociological paradigms became ill-equipped to capture the deep interconnections between economic restructuring, institutional reorganization, and the affective dimensions of social life.

The revival of public sociology by Burawoy in the early 2000s sought to counter this fragmentation by reasserting sociology's reflexive vocation and its responsibility toward broader publics (Burawoy 2005a, 2005b). Public sociology aimed to democratize knowledge production, facilitate dialogue, and link sociological research to struggles for justice. Yet despite its virtues, it often remained tied to a communicative model that foregrounded outreach over explanation, leaving the deeper structural and historical dimensions of power insufficiently examined. Its counterpart, service sociology, moved in the opposite direction by reducing the discipline to a technical instrument of governance, policy optimization, and managerial rationality (Perlstadt 2007). Sociologists in this framework became analysts of organizational performance, evaluators of policy, and providers of expertise, often at the cost of losing sight of how neoliberal capitalism reorganizes material conditions and reshapes the terrain of subject formation.

In the current conjuncture, marked by authoritarian neoliberalism, institutional decomposition, entrenched inequalities, and widening forms of social vulnerability, these paradigms appear increasingly inadequate. Public sociology struggles to intervene meaningfully in arenas where publics themselves are fragmented, polarized, or rendered precarious (Stinchcombe 2007); service sociology risks becoming complicit with the very rationalities it ought to examine critically (Castel 2002). The challenge, therefore, is not simply to restore a balance between explanation and critique, or to rehearse the old dichotomies between science and ethics. What is required is a more ambitious reframing of sociological inquiry around the relational production of subjectivities, the material conditions that shape them, and the positional configurations through which individuals and groups encounter, navigate, and contest contemporary capitalism.

It is in this context that positional sociology emerges as a distinctive approach (de Nardis, Petrillo, and Simone 2023).[1] By foregrounding the situated character of knowledge, the historicity of social structures, and the relational pathways through which subjectivities are formed, positional sociology offers a conceptual framework capable of reconnecting macro-transformations with embodied and socially situated experience. It invites sociology to recover its capacity to theorize society as a totality, without abandoning empirical precision, while acknowledging that subjects occupy differentiated, historically produced positions that profoundly condition how power, inequality, and agency are experienced and enacted. In doing so, it provides a rigorous, relational, and materially grounded perspective that speaks directly to the contradictions and fractures of the contemporary conjuncture.

2. Ontological and theoretical coordinates

Positional sociology operates at two analytically distinct, though interrelated, levels. At a general level, it advances a relational and historical ontology of social reality, foregrounding positions as configurations through which material conditions, institutional arrangements, symbolic classifications, and subjectivities are mutually constituted. At a more substantive level, this ontological framework is mobilized to analyse specific historical formations, such as neoliberal capitalism, and the particular configurations of power, inequality, and subjectivation that characterize them.

This distinction is crucial. Accepting the general ontological premises of positional sociology does not entail endorsing a single, fixed interpretation of neoliberalism or any other social formation. Different socio-historical analyses may be compatible with the same relational ontology, depending on how institutional arrangements, political trajectories, and cultural formations are interpreted. In this sense, positional sociology provides a socio-philosophical ontology of social relations, while concrete analyses of neoliberalism operate at the level of socio-scientific ontology, addressing the historically specific nature of particular social formations.

The ontological core of positional sociology rests on the assumption that social reality is irreducibly relational, historically sedimented, and stratified. Social positions are not merely locations within a structural hierarchy, nor subjective standpoints detached from material constraints. They are historically produced configurations in which economic conditions, institutional *dispositifs*, symbolic grammars, and practical

dispositions converge. Positions thus mediate between structure and agency, enabling and constraining action while shaping how social actors interpret their situations, articulate grievances, and imagine alternatives.

In this respect, positional sociology shares important affinities with critical realism, particularly its rejection of empiricist reductions and its emphasis on ontological depth (Bhaskar 1998; Archer 2003; Sayer 2005). Like critical realism, positional sociology treats social structures as historically emergent, relatively enduring, and causally efficacious. It also recognizes that agency is always mediated by pre-existing social relations and institutional contexts.

At the same time, positional sociology departs from some strands of *critical realism* by placing greater emphasis on the symbolic, affective, and experiential dimensions through which structural relations are lived and contested. Rather than prioritizing the analytical separation of structure and agency, positional sociology foregrounds their positional mediation within historically situated configurations of power, recognition, and vulnerability. Subjectivity is not treated as a residual category, but as a constitutive dimension of social reproduction and transformation.

This emphasis on positional mediation also distinguishes positional sociology from more formalized ontological approaches. While sharing a concern for relationality, positional sociology remains explicitly grounded in historical materialism and critical theories of power. It focuses on how positions are structured by political economy, institutional arrangements, and social conflict, rather than primarily by discursive or interactional positioning alone.

In this respect, there are notable affinities with the *Social Positioning Theory* developed by Lawson and others (Lawson 2022, 2023, 2025; Slade-Caffarel 2024). Both approaches stress the relational constitution of social reality and the importance of positioning processes in shaping social interaction. However, positional sociology places stronger emphasis on the historical and material conditions under which positions are produced, transformed, and contested, integrating positioning processes into a broader analysis of capitalist transformations, inequality, and subject formation.

A similar distinction applies to Rom Harré's *positioning theory* (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1991, 1999; Harré et al. 2009). While sharing an interest in the situated production of meaning and agency, positional sociology is less concerned with micro-interactional dynamics and more focused on the structural, institutional, and historical conditions that shape positional possibilities and constraints. The aim is not to deny the relevance of discursive positioning, but to situate it within wider configurations of power, material inequality, and institutional ordering.

The theoretical orientation of positional sociology thus combines three core commitments: a relational ontology of social reality, a materialist analysis of historical transformations, and a focus on the positional mediation of subjectivity. This combination allows for an articulation of structure and agency that avoids both structuralist reductionism and voluntaristic conceptions of social action.

From this perspective, analyses of neoliberalism presented in this article should be understood as one possible substantive application of a broader ontological framework. Positional sociology does not prescribe a single interpretation of neoliberalism; rather, it provides conceptual tools for analysing how different configurations of capitalism reorganize social positions, reshape subjectivities, and redistribute capacities for action.

By clarifying its ontological and theoretical coordinates, positional sociology seeks to offer a coherent framework for reconnecting macro-structural transformations, historical processes, and the lived dimensions of social experience, without presupposing abstract subjects or mechanical forms of determinism. Its ambition is not to close theoretical debate, but to provide a generative platform for analysing the shifting relations between power, inequality, and agency in contemporary societies.

3. Genealogies and analytical horizons of positional sociology

Positional sociology rests on the premise that social analysis must reconnect the structural transformations of capitalism with the situated forms of experience through which individuals and collective actors interpret, endure, or resist those transformations. Its foundational intuition is that social life unfolds through positions, historically sedimented, materially structured, and symbolically mediated locations that shape both objective conditions and subjective horizons. Yet positionality is not merely a classificatory device.

It denotes the relational configuration through which structural forces and social experience become mutually intelligible. Although the notion of position has a long and uneven genealogy across the social sciences, it has rarely been articulated as a systematic framework. Instead, it reappears – implicitly or explicitly – in a series of theoretical traditions that have grappled with the interplay among history, structure, and experience, each contributing fragments of a more comprehensive theory of positionality.

In classical sociology, the seeds of positional analysis are unmistakable. Marx's concept of class is not simply an economic descriptor; it is a relational location within the social division of labour that shapes consciousness, interests, and capacities for collective action. For Marx, positions are historically produced and intrinsically conflictual; they embody both objective contradictions and subjective potentials. Weber's notion of *Lage* (life situation) similarly emphasizes the distribution of opportunities and constraints across markets, status orders, and bureaucratic structures, grounding action in differing positional endowments. Durkheim, for his part, assumed that individuals inhabit distinct moral and institutional locations within organic and mechanical forms of solidarity, even if he did not conceptualize position explicitly. Simmel's analyses of the stranger, the poor, and the metropolitan individual likewise suggested that social experience is patterned by positional differentiation within complex webs of interaction. What these classical thinkers share is an embryonic recognition that structural forces shape – and are shaped by – the subjective standpoint of social actors. Yet none fully integrated these insights into a coherent theory capable of explaining how positionality mediates between structure and subjectivity.

A more direct engagement with the problem emerges in the twentieth century. Mannheim's sociology of knowledge introduced the idea of *Standortgebundenheit*, the positional boundedness of thought, arguing that ideologies, worldviews, and critical consciousness originate from the social location of actors (Mannheim 1936). For Mannheim, position is a condition of intelligibility: it gives rise to interpretive schemes that both reflect and contest the social order. Norbert Elias expanded this intuition through his theory of *figurations*, conceptualizing social life as dynamic webs of interdependent positions whose shifting power balances produce both patterned behaviour and evolving dispositions (Elias 1978). In Elias's historical sociology, positions are neither fixed nor static; they are constituted through long-term processes such as state formation, civilizing dynamics, and institutional transformation.

Sartre offered yet another layer by examining how subjects encounter and navigate the *pratico-inerte* – the sedimented material and institutional structures that constrain praxis (Sartre 1960). His reflections on the figure of the intellectual reveal how positionality shapes not only material possibilities but also moral responsibilities and capacities for universalization. Across these diverse contributions, positionality appears as an implicit but persistent motif: a way of understanding how individuals inhabit historically produced structures and how their everyday social experience is conditioned by relational asymmetries.

Bourdieu inherits, synthesizes, and transforms these insights (Bourdieu 1983, 1990, 1993). His *field theory* conceptualizes positions as relational locations within structured spaces of forces that endow agents with differential access to resources, authority, and legitimacy. A position is never merely a point on a map; it is a nexus of relations shaped by historical struggles over capital and recognition. *Habitus* mediates between position and action, embedding dispositions that render certain practices intelligible and others improbable. Bourdieu's contribution is crucial because it demonstrates that positional analysis is not simply descriptive: it is ontologically central to understanding how structures are reproduced and transformed. Positions confer unequal capacities for perception, action, and contestation; they shape both the limits of political imagination and the conditions under which actors can challenge the status quo (Bourdieu 2002, 2015).

More recent debates on subjectivity, biopolitics, and neoliberal governance have reopened foundational questions about how subjects are produced within historically specific configurations of power. Foucault's analyses of disciplinary and governmental rationalities illuminated how institutions shape subjectivity through diffuse mechanisms of surveillance, normalization, and self-regulation (Foucault 1982, 2008). Balibar's reflections on citizenship examined the porous boundaries through which individuals are positioned as insiders, outsiders, or incomplete subjects of political communities (Balibar 2001, 2015). Fraser's work on crisis tendencies and social reproduction highlighted how recognition, redistribution, and political voice intersect to produce increasingly complex forms of social domination (Fraser 2013). Yet despite their contributions, these discussions often oscillate between micro-analyses of subjectivation and macro-diagnoses of structural transformation, leaving underdeveloped the conceptual mediation needed to connect these levels.

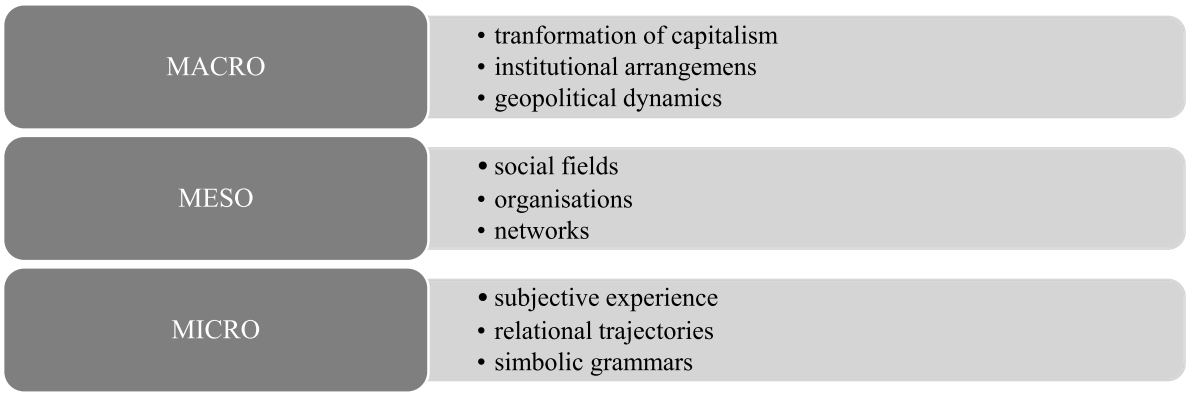

Figure 1. Methodological horizon for positional social inquiry.

It is precisely this gap that positional sociology seeks to fill. Instead of treating structure and subjectivity as separate or reducible domains, positional sociology understands them as mutually constitutive through historically situated positions. A position is not a static place within a hierarchy but a dynamic configuration of relations, constraints, and possibilities. It comprises material resources, institutional attachments, symbolic classifications, social recognition, moral expectations, and affective economies. It is both a site of constraint and a horizon of action. Positions evolve as capitalism restructures labour markets, reorganizes social reproduction, transforms welfare institutions, and reshapes political authority; but they also evolve as individuals develop dispositions, meanings, and practices that stabilize or contest these transformations.

Positional sociology thus offers more than an epistemological orientation: it delineates a methodological horizon for sociological inquiry. It requires a form of analysis capable of holding together (Figure 1):

1. the macro-transformations of contemporary capitalism, including institutional reorganization, economic restructuring, and shifting geopolitical dynamics;
2. the meso-structures (fields, organizations, bureaucracies, infrastructures, and networks) through which these transformations materialize;
3. the subjective experiences, dispositions, temporal orientations, and interpretive repertoires that arise from the specific positions individuals and groups inhabit.

Foregrounding position as the analytical hinge enables this approach to avoid the pitfalls of structural determinism and voluntaristic conceptions of agency. It recovers the classical sociological intuition that social life must be understood relationally and historically while integrating contemporary insights from theories of power, recognition, and subjectivation. Above all, positional sociology offers a coherent framework for analysing how material inequalities, symbolic hierarchies, institutional orders, and affective regimes converge to produce differentiated forms of subjectivity in neoliberal capitalism. In doing so, it reopens the possibility of a sociology capable of reconnecting structural analysis with socially situated experience – precisely the task that much contemporary theory has either fragmented or abandoned.

4. Reconnecting structure, history, and subjectivities

The central claim of positional sociology is that social analysis must reconcile three dimensions that much of contemporary theory has treated in isolation: 'structure', understood as the ensemble of material relations and institutional forms; 'history', as the long-term trajectories and conjunctural ruptures that configure social orders; and 'subjectivity', as the embodied, affective, and interpretative dimension of social experience through which individuals and groups inhabit, negotiate, or resist their social world (Tilly 1981, 1984). These dimensions are not simply analytically adjacent; they are mutually constitutive and continually shape one another. Yet a number of influential sociological currents, structuralist, interpretive, post-structuralist, and pragmatist, have tended to privilege one dimension at the expense of the others. This

privileging has produced recurring analytical asymmetries, either reducing subjectivity to structural determination or dissolving structure into voluntaristic accounts of meaning-making. As a result, much contemporary theory struggles to account for how actors are positioned within historically specific forms of domination, vulnerability, and possibility (Figure 2).

Classical materialism foregrounded the structural dynamics of capitalist development and the historical conditions that produce class antagonisms. However, in its more orthodox variants, subjectivity was often conceptualized as a secondary or derivative effect of material relations – a reflection of structural conditions rather than a constitutive dimension of social reproduction. Such accounts left little room for understanding how consciousness, aspiration, narrative, and affect mediate experiences of exploitation or sustain forms of political commitment, refusal, or collective mobilization. Conversely, hermeneutic and micro-sociological approaches placed meaning, agency, and interpretative creativity at the centre of sociological inquiry, yet frequently bracketed the enduring material constraints and institutional architectures that shape the horizons of possible action. Similarly, critical theories of subjectivation, from Foucault's analytics of disciplinary and governmental power to Balibar's reflections on *transindividuality*, illuminated the productive, relational nature of the self but sometimes risked underplaying the political-economic organization of capitalism and the constraints produced by inequality, precarity, and institutional coercion.

Positional sociology seeks to overcome these long-standing asymmetries by positing position as the analytical hinge that links structure, history, and subjectivity (de Nardis 2014, 2020). A position is not merely a structural location in a hierarchy; it is a historically sedimented nexus of material, institutional, symbolic, and affective relations. As such, it embodies access to resources, patterns of recognition and misrecognition, degrees of vulnerability, classificatory schemas, moral grammars, institutional attachments, and affective dispositions. Positions emerge from long-term historical processes (class formation, state-building, labour-market segmentation, welfare retrenchment, colonial and postcolonial ordering) but they are also lived, interpreted, and contested through subjective repertoires that confer meaning, legitimacy, and resistance. In this sense, positions are simultaneously objective and experiential, structural and interpretive; they are sites where social forces take shape within consciousness and where subjective interpretations feed back into structural arrangements.

This dual character is crucial for understanding the contemporary conjuncture. Neoliberal restructuring has not merely deepened inequalities: it has reorganized the very grammar of social experience. Precarity, responsibilisation, indebtedness, meritocratic pressure, the intensification of performance metrics, and the fragmentation of collective solidarities have generated new positional configurations marked by chronic uncertainty and competitive individualization. These configurations cannot be reduced to economic deprivation alone. They involve affective states (anxiety, fear, exhaustion, burnout); moral narratives (self-blame, resilience, deservingness, entrepreneurial self-stylisation); and political orientations (withdrawal, resentment, fragile mobilization, intermittent participation). To analyse these phenomena meaningfully, sociology should treat positions as relational assemblages shaped by institutional and structural pressures

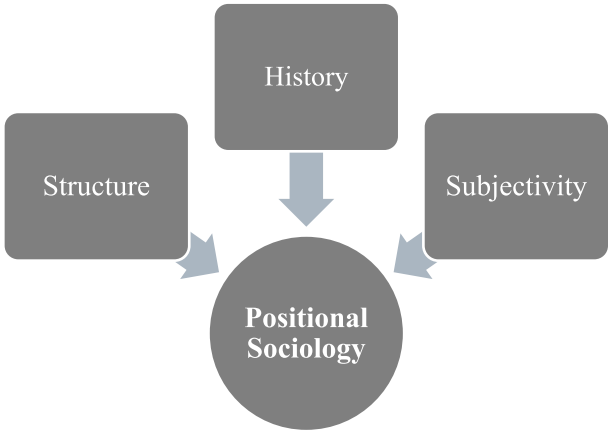

Figure 2. The three dimensions of positional sociology.

but lived and reproduced through subjective interpretations that infuse them with emotional and symbolic weight.

Reconnecting structure, history, and subjectivity therefore requires renewed attention to temporal dynamics. Positions are not static entities: they evolve through conjunctural shifts, crises, and long-term transformations in political economy (Stinchcombe 1978). Following a Gramscian intuition, positions can be understood as elements within broader hegemonic configurations that organize social groups, institutions, and symbolic hierarchies into relatively coherent blocs (Gramsci 1971). In moments of crisis (financial collapses, state restructuring, environmental disasters, public health emergencies) these hegemonic configurations destabilize, producing positional dislocations in which the coordinates of social life are reordered. Such dislocations open spaces where new identities may crystallise, old ones fracture, and previously marginalized subjectivities become newly visible. The Covid-19 pandemic, the surge of authoritarian neoliberalism, the intensifying turbulence of global capitalism, the power-driven statecraft that takes shape in the ever-present threat of new wars are precisely the kinds of conjunctures in which positional analysis becomes indispensable, revealing how structural contradictions resonate within everyday social experience.

Finally, positional sociology foregrounds subjectivity not as an autonomous psychological domain but as a historically situated and socially produced phenomenon. Subjectivities emerge within positions, yet they also intervene in their reproduction or transformation through practices of appropriation, reinterpretation, resistance, refusal, and resignation. This resonates strongly with insights from Subaltern Studies, which demonstrate how subalternised groups develop specific forms of agency intelligible only within their positional constraints (Spivak 1988; Guha and Spivak 1988), and with Bourdieu's analyses of symbolic power, which illuminate how embodied dispositions can simultaneously reproduce and destabilize structures of domination (Bourdieu and Chartier 2010). Subjectivities, in this sense, are neither fully determined nor free-floating: they express the tensions, contradictions, and potentials inscribed within positions.

Positional sociology therefore offers an integrated framework for understanding how structural transformations shape the social world, how historical trajectories configure the distribution and meaning of social positions, and how subjectivities operate as active mediations within these processes. By reconceptualising the interdependence of structure, history, and subjectivity, positional sociology equips contemporary social theory with the analytical resources necessary to grasp the contradictions, tensions, and emergent possibilities of the present conjuncture. It thus contributes to reconstructing a sociological imagination capable of situating social experience within the broader configurations of power and inequality that define our time, while recognizing that these configurations are themselves dynamic, contested, and historically open.

5. The material conditions of subjectivity

If positional sociology provides an analytical lens capable of reconnecting structure, history, and subjectivity, its theoretical foundation must rest on a renewed and more expansive engagement with materialism (Anderson 1976; Burawoy 1982). The materialist tradition, whether in its classical formulations or its later reinterpretations, has furnished some of the most powerful tools for analysing the organization of capitalist societies and the dynamics of domination, conflict, and reproduction. Yet materialism has also struggled, both in orthodox and more sophisticated variants, to articulate with sufficient clarity how material structures shape not only social relations but also the formation of subjectivities, dispositions, temporal orientations, and interpretive repertoires. A critical re-reading of materialism is therefore indispensable for understanding the positional production of subjectivity under contemporary capitalism, where economic, political, and affective forms of power intersect and reinforce one another.

Classical historical materialism located the driving force of social change in the contradictions between the forces and relations of production. This conception placed material conditions at the centre of social analysis, yet it often reduced subjectivity to a 'reflection' of structural interests or to a derivative effect of objective class positions. Even where Marx himself recognized the complexity of consciousness, ideology, alienation, and the reproduction of social relations – especially in his early writings – the tradition that followed frequently hardened these insights into deterministic schemas that left little conceptual space for the dynamics of interpretation, emotion, and experience (Marx 1842–43, 1844, 1845, 1846–47, Marx and Engels 1845–46). The experiential dimension of domination – its affective, symbolic, embodied, and temporal

expressions – thus remained under-theorised or relegated to the superstructure. Consequently, the transformation of subjectivity was typically interpreted as a secondary moment, rather than as a constitutive element of capitalist reproduction and crisis.

Later efforts sought to correct these limitations. Gramsci's theory of hegemony expanded the scope of materialism by showing that domination is always mediated through cultural practices, moral grammars, pedagogical processes, and everyday forms of common sense (Gramsci 1971). His analysis of the integral State and the formation of collective wills implicitly recognized that the reproduction of social order is impossible without the alignment of subjectivities to specific institutional and material configurations. Yet while Gramsci opened the door to a more nuanced understanding of how subjects are formed, the precise articulation between structural positions and subjective experiences remained more suggestive than systematic. Similarly, Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation foregrounded the role of institutions in constituting subjects, but it paid less attention to the material organization of everyday life – labour, reproduction, security, temporality – upon which the efficacy of ideological apparatuses ultimately depends (Althusser 1971). The materiality of social reproduction and the affective textures of ordinary life remained only partially integrated into the theory.

Positional sociology tries to take up these unresolved tensions and advances a form of materialism that is simultaneously structural and experiential, historical and embodied (Bhaskar 1998). Material conditions, in this expanded sense, are not reducible to economic variables or institutional rules. They include the organization of work and social reproduction, access to welfare and public goods, exposure to insecurity, debt, violence, and administrative surveillance, and the uneven distribution of dignity, recognition, and institutional protection. These conditions shape not only opportunities and constraints but also the affective and cognitive repertoires through which individuals interpret their place in the world. The materiality of subjectivity is not a metaphor: it refers to the concrete assemblage of forces, practices, and embodied dispositions through which subjects are produced within positional fields marked by inequality, historical contingency, and differential vulnerability.

This broadened materialism resonates with Bourdieu's insistence on the embodied nature of social domination, where the habitus internalizes objective conditions and renders them subjectively meaningful. It also aligns with Fraser's argument that contemporary capitalism operates simultaneously through economic exploitation, cultural devaluation, and political misrecognition, producing multidimensional injustices that cannot be reduced to class alone (Fraser 2013; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). The material organization of neoliberal capitalism – including labour flexibilisation, welfare retrenchment, financialisation, the expansion of algorithmic governance, and the commodification of care and subjectivity – reshapes the positions individuals inhabit and the forms of selfhood they are compelled to embody. Under these conditions, inequalities are reproduced not only through resource distribution but also through the moralizing and affective infrastructures that shape how individuals understand their failures, aspirations, and possibilities (Figure 3).

Under neoliberalism, subjects are increasingly positioned within regimes of responsibilisation, competition, and self-optimization that translate structural vulnerabilities into personal deficits (Chicchi and Simone 2022). Precarity functions not merely as an economic condition but as a temporal and existential horizon: it shapes expectations, emotional states, rhythms of daily life, and the capacity to project oneself into the future. Debt, monitoring, uncertainty, performance rankings, and the constant demand for adaptability become material forces that mould subjectivities from within (Lazzarato 2012). In these regimes, the boundary between structure and experience grows ever more porous: structures shape positions, positions

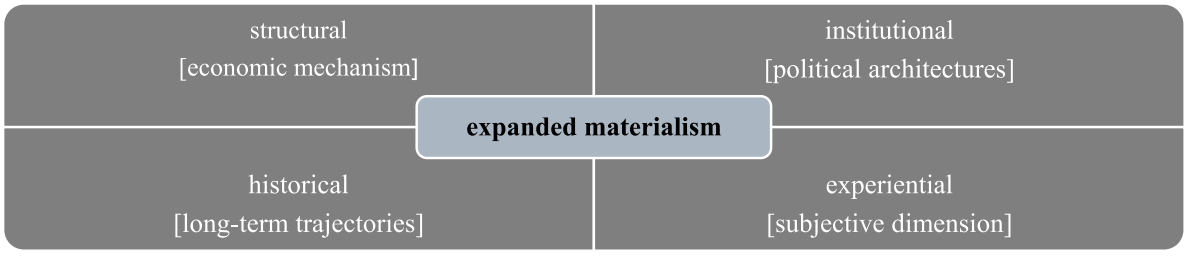

Figure 3. Revisited materialism.

configure interpretive and affective repertoires, and these repertoires in turn reproduce or destabilize structural arrangements. Subjectivity thus becomes a crucial site of capitalist governance, where economic pressures and affective injunctions converge.

Revisiting materialism through the prism of positional analysis therefore allows us to grasp how domination operates at structural, institutional, and subjective levels simultaneously. It reveals that the reproduction of capitalism depends not only on economic mechanisms and institutional architectures but also on the production of compliant, anxious, ambivalent, or exhausted subjectivities whose positional vulnerabilities inhibit collective organization and political agency. At the same time, it highlights the possibility that positional dislocations, contradictions, and crises may generate alternative trajectories of subjectivation: forms of indignation, collective identification, refusal, or solidarity that unsettle the dominant affective and moral economies of neoliberalism. An expanded, relational materialism is thus essential for understanding both the resilience of contemporary capitalist orders and the emergent possibilities for their contestation. It allows sociological analysis to attend to the specific ways in which subjects are produced, constrained, and potentially transformed – and to recognize the profoundly material conditions under which alternative futures may become thinkable.

6. Neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and the reconfiguration of social positions

Neoliberalism is often described as a political–economic project aimed at extending market logics into an ever-expanding range of social domains. Such a characterization, while not incorrect, remains analytically insufficient and increasingly inadequate to grasp its contemporary mutations. Neoliberalism is not simply an ideology, a bundle of economic policies, or a technocratic rationality; it is a historically specific mode of governing populations, a dispersed yet coherent form of power that reorganizes institutions, reshapes social relations, and penetrates the very processes through which subjectivities are formed and sustained (Harvey 2005). To understand its effects, it is essential to examine how neoliberal rationalities reconfigure the positions individuals and groups occupy within society. Positional sociology provides a particularly incisive perspective because it foregrounds the relational, embodied, and affective dimensions through which neoliberal governance materializes in everyday life and generates distinct forms of experience, vulnerability, and agency.

Early accounts of neoliberalism emphasized deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity, and the retreat of the welfare state. Yet subsequent analyses have shown that the neoliberal state does not withdraw; rather, it retools itself, transforming its modes of intervention from direct provision into mechanisms of discipline, responsibilisation, and performance management. Neoliberalism produces an 'entrepreneurial self' compelled to act as a competitive firm in virtually every sphere of existence: education, employment, welfare, citizenship, even intimate and affective life. This imperative is not merely normative; it is deeply positional. Individuals are inserted into competitive, hierarchical, and increasingly punitive systems, labour markets, educational institutions, welfare regimes, bureaucratic apparatuses, within which they must navigate insecurity, indebtedness, and the permanent demand to demonstrate value. These pressures are internalized and translated into self-surveillance, self-optimization, and relentless comparison with others.

These dynamics generate not only new inequalities but novel forms of social vulnerability. Precarity becomes a generalized condition, extending beyond the labour market to affect the capacity to plan, imagine a future, or maintain durable social bonds. It is within these fractured temporal, affective, and relational landscapes that neoliberal subjectivities are produced. The neoliberal subject internalizes the competitive demands of the system while simultaneously enduring its destabilizing effects. Fear, exhaustion, anxiety, ressentiment, guilt, and self-blame are not incidental psychological by-products; they are positional consequences of structural transformations. They reflect the embodied effects of austerity, the erosion of collective institutions, and the dissolution of solidaristic infrastructures that once mitigated the harshness of market relations.

The neoliberal project has increasingly assumed authoritarian inflections (Bruff 2014; de Nardis 2025). In contexts of crisis – economic, ecological, epidemiological – states have intensified coercive measures, curtailed democratic participation, and strengthened executive authority. Authoritarian neoliberalism reflects a growing reliance on discriminatory enforcement, moralizing discourses, securitarian governance, and the

delegitimisation of dissent (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). Yet these developments cannot be understood at the institutional level alone. They are rooted in shifts in the positional distribution of power: the erosion of working-class organization, the fragmentation of popular blocs, and the weakening of collective institutions have created social landscapes in which coercion and discipline can be deployed with relative ease and minimal contestation. As positional configurations become more unequal, authoritarian interventions find fertile ground in the fears, frustrations, and exhausted compliance of precarised subjects.

At the same time, neoliberalism governs through the affective management of populations. It produces emotional regimes that normalize insecurity and individual failure, interpreting structural vulnerabilities as personal shortcomings. Shame, guilt, anxiety, and compulsory resilience become disciplinary mechanisms that reinforce positional hierarchies (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Subjects are compelled to manage, optimize, and rebrand themselves through continuous self-surveillance: productivity, employability, adaptability, flexibility, performativity. These injunctions correspond to concrete positional imperatives within labour markets, bureaucratic institutions, and welfare apparatuses increasingly organized around evaluation, ranking, and conditionality. The political-economic restructuring of institutions thus becomes inseparable from the affective restructuring of subjectivity (de Nardis 2017).

Neoliberal transformations also extend to social reproduction, shifting the burden of care from public institutions onto households, communities, and – predictably – onto gendered and racialised groups. These shifts generate new positional asymmetries along classed, racialised, gendered, and migratory lines. Migrant labourers, precarious workers, domestic workers, and care providers occupy positions that are simultaneously indispensable to the reproduction of society and structurally devalued. The labour they perform is essential yet treated as infinitely replaceable. Here, feminist and postcolonial insights intersect with the materialist impulse of positional sociology: subjectivities emerge not only from labour processes but also from the unequal organization of reproduction, mobility, legal status, and dependency. Positional analysis thus clarifies how neoliberalism exploits long-standing hierarchies while generating new fault lines across the social body.

Moreover, neoliberal restructuring produces positional dislocations – moments in which established social coordinates destabilize and new forms of political contestation become possible. Crises – financial, ecological, epidemiological – expose the limits of neoliberal rationalities and open spaces for alternative subjectivities, solidarities, and collective practices. Yet these openings are unevenly distributed. Positions shaped by chronic insecurity may inhibit mobilization, fostering resignation, apathy, or defensive individualism. Conversely, positions embedded in more stable institutional niches may be better equipped to articulate critique, construct counter-narratives, and organize collective action. Positional sociology provides a framework for analysing these unequal capacities for indignation, articulation, and mobilization, revealing how neoliberal crises produce heterogeneous political effects.

Understanding neoliberalism through the lens of position ultimately transforms our conception of power. Neoliberal power is structural, institutional, symbolic, and affective; it operates through coercion, incentives, moral classifications, and emotional economies. But it also depends on the positional capacities of subjects – their resources, vulnerabilities, dispositions, expectations, interpretive repertoires, and affective states. To analyse neoliberalism is therefore to analyse the positional conditions through which it endures, mutates, and becomes contestable. Power functions not only through institutions but through the positional interiorization of narratives of merit, responsibility, and failure – narratives that make domination appear as the natural consequence of individual deficiencies.

By reconnecting the material reorganization of capitalism with the everyday social experiences of individuals, positional sociology offers a distinctive perspective on the contemporary conjuncture. It highlights how neoliberalism reshapes both the objective and subjective dimensions of social life, producing positions that are structurally unequal and experientially divergent. It reveals that subjectivity is not merely an effect of neoliberal power but also a terrain on which alternative possibilities may begin to emerge. In the fractures opened by crisis, contradiction, and positional misalignment lie the potential foundations of new solidarities, new political imaginaries, and new forms of collective agency.

7. Positional agency: the political potentials and limits of subjectivity

If neoliberalism reshapes social positions and the subjectivities that emerge from them, the pressing question concerns how these positions condition the possibilities of political agency. Agency cannot be conceived as a purely voluntaristic capacity, nor can it be reduced to a mechanical consequence of structural determinants (Archer 2003). It is the contingent outcome of the positional interplay between material conditions, institutional arrangements, symbolic horizons, and the embodied, affective dimension of social experience of individuals and groups. Positional sociology thus invites a reconceptualisation of political action that is neither subject-centred nor structure-centred but grounded in the dynamic and historically situated relation between the two. Agency becomes the emergent product of positions, structured yet open, constrained yet not fixed, in which subjects are embedded.

Agency arises from positions, yet positions do not mechanically dictate outcomes. Rather, they delineate a set of positional affordances, configurations of potentialities, constraints, vulnerabilities, and interpretative repertoires that enable or inhibit action. These affordances vary across social fields, institutional settings, and historical conjunctures. Under stable conditions, positions tend to reproduce established norms and hierarchies, sedimenting orientations that favour routine compliance, incremental adjustment, or passive endurance. Under conditions of crisis, rupture, or dislocation, positions may destabilize, revealing contradictions that open new political possibilities or ignite latent grievances. What matters is not simply the distribution of material resources but the configuration of positional pathways, the trajectories through which individuals navigate the social world and construct meaning in relation to their place within it.

This conception departs from classical models of agency in two significant respects. First, it avoids reducing political action to strategic behaviour or rational calculation. Agency is always more than instrumental: it is affective, embodied, and interpretive. Emotions such as indignation, fear, disappointment, or hope are not secondary but central to understanding how individuals respond to their positional constraints. Second, positional sociology recognizes that domination operates not only through external constraints but also through internalized dispositions, affective states, and socially embedded modes of self-understanding. Structural inequality becomes effective through the subjectivities it produces: dispositions of fatalism, shame, competitiveness, or self-blame are not merely psychological states but positional effects that shape the capacity to imagine alternatives or to act upon them.

Under neoliberalism, the positional distribution of agency becomes sharply uneven. Individuals situated in precarious, insecure, or marginalized positions often experience diminished capacity for collective action. The erosion of stable employment, the fragmentation of solidaristic ties, and the intensification of competitive pressures produce subjectivities marked by anxiety, resignation, self-blame, or fatalism. These affective and cognitive dispositions hinder the formation of collective identities and render political engagement intermittent, fragile, or easily redirected into populist, identitarian, or authoritarian channels (Honneth 1995). Conversely, actors embedded in relatively protected institutional niches – academic, professional, bureaucratic – often retain a greater capacity to mobilize resources, articulate critique, and intervene in public debates. These asymmetries do not reflect individual differences but positional configurations structured by material and institutional conditions.

Yet positional constraints do not eliminate the possibility of alternative subjectivities. Crises (economic, ecological, epidemiological) create moments in which established positional hierarchies destabilize and everyday social experience becomes dissonant from the normative expectations of neoliberal capitalism. This positional dissonance can generate critical reflexivity, affective indignation, or practices of refusal that challenge dominant positional assignments. Such experiences of contradiction, between what individuals are expected to be and what their conditions allow them to be, can catalyze new forms of subjectivation. The resurgence of feminist, anti-racist, labour, ecological, and anti-authoritarian mobilisations illustrates how positional grievances can be transformed into collective projects once they become articulated within broader structures of meaning and organization. In these contexts, subjectivities that were previously confined to private suffering or individualized frustration acquire a public, political voice.

Positional sociology also underscores the heterogeneity of subaltern positions, which traditional theories often treat as homogeneous. Subaltern groups do not share identical experiences or capacities for action (Sayer 2005): their positional configurations vary across class, race, gender, citizenship status, spatial and

institutional location, and exposure to coercive apparatuses. Agency must therefore be understood as unevenly distributed across different kinds of subalternity, each shaped by distinct constellations of material deprivation, symbolic exclusion, and institutional vulnerability. In this respect, Subaltern Studies offer a crucial insight: agency does not emerge despite domination but through the situated negotiation of the positional constraints that constitute subalternity. Agency is present even when muted, clandestine, fragmentary, or illegible to dominant frameworks; but its forms and possibilities are deeply conditioned by the material and symbolic violence inherent in subaltern positions.

A further implication concerns the role of collective organization. Positions become politically consequential not simply through individual dispositions but through their articulation within institutions capable of aggregating grievances and directing them toward collective ends. Historically, trade unions, political parties, community organizations, and social movements provided the infrastructure through which dispersed positional experiences could be transformed into coherent political projects. The erosion of these mediating institutions under neoliberalism has contributed to the fragmentation of positional agency, leaving individuals to confront structural inequalities in isolation. Yet the proliferation of grassroots organizing, mutual aid networks, community assemblies, and transnational activist platforms suggests that new forms of positional articulation are emerging, albeit unevenly and precariously. These emergent formations show that even in contexts marked by fragmentation, positional grievances can be collectivized when they encounter organizational infrastructures capable of sustaining them.

Finally, positional sociology compels us to rethink the conditions of political imagination. Neoliberalism's temporal logic – rooted in short-termism, insecurity, and permanent crisis – undermines the capacity to envision or plan alternative futures. Political imagination is not an abstract cognitive faculty but a socially produced capacity dependent on positional stability, collective belonging, and affective dispositions such as hope, trust, and solidarity. Rebuilding political imagination therefore requires transforming the material and symbolic conditions that structure positions: guaranteeing livelihoods, reconstructing institutions of solidarity, and cultivating spaces (material and discursive) in which alternative ways of living can be rehearsed, imagined, and enacted. Without such transformations, agency remains trapped within the narrow horizons that neoliberal positionality imposes.

In this sense, positional sociology does not merely describe the constraints imposed by neoliberal capitalism; it provides a framework for understanding the emancipatory potentials embedded within positional contradictions. When subjectivities misalign with their assigned positions, when aspirations, expectations, and everyday social experiences diverge, new horizons of political agency may emerge (de Nardis and Galiano 2025). Agency becomes possible not by escaping positionality but by transforming the conditions under which positions are lived, interpreted, and contested. It is within these tensions – between what subjects are and what they might become – that the political potentials of positional agency reside.

8. Positional sociology as an analytical framework

To consolidate its theoretical architecture, positional sociology must also clarify its analytic scope and methodological orientation. Its ambition is not to replace existing sociological paradigms but to offer an integrative lens capable of reconnecting what much of late-modern sociology has progressively fragmented: the material organization of society, the historical formation of structures, and the subjective experiences through which social actors interpret, negotiate, and contest their worlds (de Nardis, Petrillo, and Simone 2023). By foregrounding the relational and historically situated character of social positions, positional sociology seeks to provide a unified conceptual vocabulary for analysing contemporary capitalism in its structural, symbolic, and experiential dimensions, while remaining sufficiently flexible to accommodate empirical complexity.

At its core, positional sociology proposes a shift from objects to relations, from attributes to trajectories, and from static categories to dynamic positional fields. It conceptualizes social life as constituted by an ensemble of differentiated and historically sedimented positions whose interdependence structures opportunities, constraints, forms of vulnerability, and capacities for action. This analytical move entails three fundamental methodological commitments, relationality, historicity, and the centrality of subjectivity, each of which grounds positional analysis in a theoretically coherent and empirically generative manner (de Nardis and Simone 2022).

8.1. Relationality

The first commitment concerns the relational nature of social life. Positions do not possess meaning in isolation; they derive their significance from their location within broader configurations of social relations that organize access to resources, recognition, security, autonomy, and influence. While this resonates with field theory, positional sociology extends this insight by insisting that relations are never simply synchronic but always embedded in temporal sequences, crises, and institutional transformations.

Relationality thus becomes not merely a descriptive principle but a methodological orientation. It requires investigating how positional relations evolve through episodes of destabilization, political contestation, organizational restructuring, welfare transformations, or shifting regimes of social reproduction. Analyzing relations in motion – rather than mapping social hierarchies as fixed structures – allows positional sociology to capture processes of reproduction, displacement, and recomposition that are constitutive of contemporary capitalism.

8.2. Historicity

The second commitment is historicity. Positions are not abstract social coordinates; they are historically sedimented formations shaped by long-term processes such as class formation, state-building, labour market segmentation, colonial and postcolonial trajectories, welfare retrenchment, and changes in global political economy.

Positional sociology therefore requires attention to conjunctures, moments in which multiple historical trajectories converge to generate specific configurations of domination, vulnerability, and possibility. This conjunctural sensitivity draws on historical sociology and the Marxian tradition while avoiding teleological narratives of linear progress or decline.

History appears here as a field of contingent struggles in which positions are continually reorganized, resignified, and re-aligned. This perspective enables the analysis of how crises disrupt established positional hierarchies, producing dislocations that reshape both structural arrangements and everyday social experience.

8.3. Subjectivity

The third commitment is the centrality of subjectivity. Positional sociology rejects the dichotomy between structural analysis and interpretive approaches: subjectivity is neither an autonomous psychological domain nor a mere reflection of objective structures. Rather, it is a constitutive dimension of social life, shaped by positional conditions and, in turn, shaping how those conditions are embodied, interpreted, resisted, or normalized.

Emotions, moral grammars, affective dispositions, cognitive schemas, and interpretative categories are not internal mental states but positional effects grounded in material and institutional arrangements. Understanding subjectivity requires analysing the positional environments that make certain experiences plausible and others improbable, while also recognizing that subjective practices can stabilize or destabilize positional configurations.

By integrating these commitments, positional sociology delineates an analytical framework capable of linking large-scale transformations with micro-level social realities, thereby offering sociology a renewed conceptual architecture for interpreting the contradictions and emergent possibilities that define the contemporary conjuncture.

9. Towards a materialist theory of positionality

This article has argued that grasping the contemporary social order requires a renewed conceptualization of the relationship between structure, history, and subjectivity. Neoliberal capitalism has profoundly reshaped not only the organization of production, governance, and social reproduction, but also the forms through which individuals experience, internalize, and contest these transformations. The conceptual vocabulary inherited from classical sociology, while still valuable, proves increasingly insufficient to capture the depth, heterogeneity, and temporal complexity of these processes. Positional sociology has been proposed

here as a framework capable of addressing this insufficiency by situating subjectivities within historically constituted and materially organized positions that mediate the entanglement of macro-transformations and social experience.

At the center of this proposal is the claim that social life is constituted by positional ensembles, configurations of material conditions, institutional dynamics, symbolic grammars, affective dispositions, and relational trajectories. These ensembles both enable and constrain action: they shape how individuals navigate the social world, the forms of sense-making available to them, and the horizons within which agency becomes possible or foreclosed. By foregrounding position, this framework advances a relational and historically grounded perspective for analysing the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. It illuminates how inequalities, vulnerabilities, and capacities are produced not merely by structural location but by the interplay of material, symbolic, and experiential forces that sediment over time.

Revisiting materialism has been essential in articulating the theoretical foundations of positional sociology. A renewed materialism must extend beyond a narrow focus on production or the distribution of economic resources. It should attend to the organization of social reproduction, the institutional infrastructures that pattern everyday life, and the symbolic and affective modalities through which domination is enacted and internalized. It should also recognize that subjectivity is not an immaterial supplement to structural processes but a constitutive dimension of social reproduction, shaping how structures endure, mutate, or encounter resistance. Positional sociology thus reframes materialism as a theory of the conditions of possibility for experience, interpretation, and action (Figure 4).

A key insight emerging from this analysis is that neoliberalism operates through a profound reorganization of positions. Precarity, indebtedness, responsibilisation, competitive individualization, and the fragmentation of solidaristic bonds have become structural features of social life. These dynamics shape not only the distribution of opportunities and vulnerabilities but also the emotional landscapes, moral grammars, and political capacities available to actors. The weakening of collective institutions and the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism further intensify these processes, producing positional configurations marked by insecurity and chronic exposure to coercive or disciplinary mechanisms. In this sense, neoliberalism must be understood not only as an institutional project but as an affective regime and a positional order that orchestrates the conditions under which subjects make sense of themselves and others.

Yet positions are not merely sites of domination; they are also potential sites of possibility. Positional contradictions – dissonances between normative expectations and everyday social experience, between aspirational trajectories and material constraints – can generate cognitive rupture, affective dissonance, or critical awareness. These moments disclose the fragility of neoliberal rationalities and open spaces in

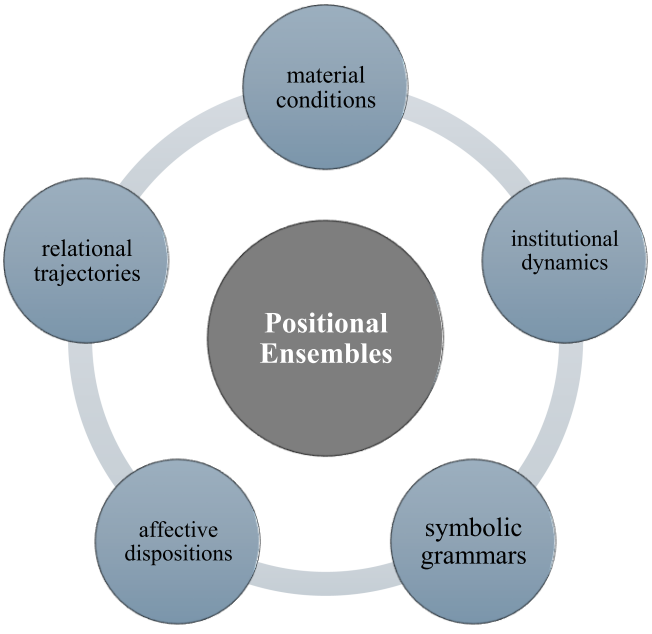

Figure 4. Positional ensembles.

which alternative forms of subjectivity may emerge. Agency arises not outside positionality but through it, as individuals and groups negotiate the tensions between their structural conditions and their aspirations. Understanding these tensions requires a theory that situates subjectivity within positional formations shaped by historical trajectories, institutional designs, and material inequalities.

Positional sociology therefore carries both analytical and critical significance. Analytically, it synthesizes disparate strands of sociological theory (materialism, field theory, historical sociology, critical theories of subjectivation, into a coherent framework capable of grasping the multilayered dynamics of contemporary capitalism. It enables a multilevel approach that connects macrostructural transformations with meso-institutional configurations and micro-experiential processes. Critically, it reveals the conditions under which positional configurations become unstable, illuminating the opening of pathways for collective mobilization, political re-articulation, or transformative agency. It identifies points at which structural contradictions are experienced as subjective strain, where affective discomfort becomes interpretive recalibration, and where interpretive recalibration may crystallise into political action.

For sociology as a discipline, the implications of this perspective are far-reaching. The long-standing divisions between explanation and critique, between institutional analysis and the study of subjectivities, between structural determinants and interpretative practices, appear increasingly untenable in the face of contemporary transformations. The present conjuncture demands forms of knowledge that are historically situated, theoretically ambitious, empirically grounded, and reflexively attuned to the positional conditions from which they emerge. Positional sociology responds to this demand by articulating a mode of inquiry that is not only scientifically rigorous but also politically responsive, capable of identifying how inequalities and vulnerabilities are experienced, reproduced, and contested within everyday life.

Finally, positional sociology should be understood as an open and evolving project rather than a closed theoretical system. Its conceptual architecture is sufficiently robust to guide empirical research across fields such as labour, migration, welfare, inequality, social reproduction, political participation, urban transformation, and institutional change. At the same time, it remains flexible enough to incorporate new insights as social conditions evolve, as crises reconfigure positional hierarchies, and as emergent forms of subjectivity alter the contours of collective life. Its promise lies not in offering a definitive key to social reality but in providing a generative framework for analysing the shifting dynamics of power, vulnerability, and agency in the twenty-first century.

In this sense, positional sociology is not only a theoretical proposal but a contribution to the broader effort to renew critical social theory. It invites scholars to reconsider how social positions are constituted, experienced, contested, and transformed, and to recognize that understanding these processes is indispensable for addressing the inequalities, crises, and struggles that define our time. By articulating a materialist theory of positionality, it offers sociology the conceptual resources needed to confront a world marked by deepening inequalities, fractured solidarities, and new configurations of domination – yet also by emergent possibilities for collective reimagination and political transformation.

Notes

1. The project of positional sociology initially emerged in the Italian context during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a group of sociologists with neo-Marxist and post-structuralist orientations promoted a collective appeal 'for a sociology of position'. The appeal was endorsed by hundred junior and senior scholars and led to the formation of the *Rete di Sociologia di Posizione* (Network of Positional Sociology). The network has since organised a biennial itinerant conference and developed an editorial series with the Italian publisher Meltemi, divided into a 'Studies and Research' section and a 'Positionings' section, the latter consisting of short pamphlets aimed at public sociological intervention on contemporary social issues. While rooted in the Italian academic context, the project is explicitly situated in dialogue with international debates on neoliberalisation, social decomposition, and the micro–macro relationship in contemporary social sciences (de Nardis and Simone 2022; de Nardis, Petrillo, and Simone 2023; Sorice and Viviani 2025).

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