

Social Groups and the Problem of Persistence through Change

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Abstract

The persistence of social groups through change is a matter of debate in social ontology. While mereological approaches contend that social groups persist if formed by the same members, other accounts leaning towards structuralism find that what ensures the persistence of social groups is instead continuity of structure. The aim of this paper is to challenge the idea that a structuralist account is bound to hold that continuity of structure is necessary and sufficient condition for persistence.

First, I consider membership changes. I argue that for structure-based metaphysics, not all changes in membership are irrelevant to persistence because, for some groups, members' continuity is made necessary by structural constraints on the node-occupiers. Then, I discuss structural changes. The main idea is that social groups can persist through structural changes that fall within the group's flexibility margins. I suggest that one way to determine the flexibility margins is to pinpoint the social factors that ground the group's structure. Finally, I raise two open questions concerning how to identify grounds and how to consider their eventual transformation.

Keywords: Social ontology, Social Groups, Persistence, Social Structures, Membership.

1. Introduction

The persistence of social groups through changes in membership and structure is a controversial issue. While mereological approaches contend that social groups persist if formed by the same members (Hawley 2017), other accounts leaning towards structuralism find that what ensures the persistence of social groups is instead continuity of structure (Ritchie 2018, Sheehy 2016). Greenwood (2019) has recently remarked that both views are of limited scope, focused exclusively and respectively on the continuity of membership and the continuity of structure as if membership/structure were necessary and sufficient condition for the persistence of every social group. The issue raises complex metaphysical questions. My aim here is to challenge the idea that a structuralist account necessarily provides

a one-sided approach to the persistence of social groups, bound to hold that continuity of structure is necessary and sufficient condition for persistence.

By primarily relying upon Ritchie's structure-based metaphysics (Ritchie 2013, 2015, 2018), I will argue that, if implemented with an explanation of social grounds, the structuralist view has the resources to offer more than a one-sided perspective on persistence, responsive to both membership and structural changes. This proposal aims to find in the social factors that ground the group structure limits within which the structure can change, and the group remains the same.¹

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 illustrates the problem of group persistence in social ontology. Then, Section 3 provides an outline of Ritchie's structure-based metaphysics of social groups, focusing on those groups that show some internal organization of the members, such as committees, teams, and music bands. I suggest that the question of persistence is particularly relevant when it comes to organized groups because they are generally recognized as group agents. Hence, asking whether a group is the same before and after a change has metaphysical and ethical implications. Thus, I examine how structured-based metaphysics handles the issue of persistence of organized social groups against changes in membership and structure. My goal is to disprove that the structuralist view is bound to hold that, for an organized social group to persist, the members can easily vary while the structure must be rigid. In Section 4, I contend that for structure-based metaphysics, not all changes in membership are irrelevant to persistence because sometimes members are made necessary by structural

¹ For my purpose here is limited to discuss through what changes social groups can eventually persist, I do not consider the general metaphysical issue of how social groups persist in time. In fact, it can be assumed that it is one thing to ask through what changes social groups persist while it is another thing to ask what it means for a social group to persist through change, whether by enduring, perduring or exduring (Hawley 2001). Because for each of these theories of persistence it is possible to ask what changes can count as alterations (endurantism), what changes are variations of properties belonging to different temporal slices of the same worm (perdurantism), or variations of properties in a series of counterparts (exdurantism), we may say that each view conceptualizes change in some way (Effingham 2009). Therefore, the discussion here proposed on the kinds of changes affecting groups does not require us to favor one notion of persistence over the others. Nonetheless, for what concerns lexical choices and in order to avoid cumbersome, multiple formulations, a kind of endurantism is in the background of this paper. The first reason for this concerns the notion of change. Unlike perdurantism and exdurantism, endurantism allows for the numerical identity of persisting objects bearing incompatible properties over time (Haslanger 2003b). Changes of this kind are called alterations (cf. Haslanger 1989: 3). As I contend that structuralism can account for the persistence of social groups through (some) changes, my point here is closer to that made by endurantism. The second reason regards the anti-reductionism implied by structuralism, which conceptualizes social groups as structured wholes, materially constituted by organized members, and grounded on social factors. On this view, the group can be reduced neither to the set of members forming it at any moment in time, nor to the sole organization between the parties (social groups in fact instantiate but are not identical to social structures), nor to momentary entities that have members and/or structure essentially (it will be argued that, organized social groups survive changes in membership and structure). Noteworthy, endurantism requires non-reductive explanations treating groups neither as momentary objects in succession nor as fusions of slices, but entities that are wholly present at different moments in time. Arguments in defense of endurantism and against the four-dimensionality of objects are provided by Baker 2007 and Haslanger 1989. On the inconsistencies of endurantist-reductionist accounts, see Wahlberg 2014.

constraints. Subsection 4.1 considers how social structures might require specific occupiers. Here I elaborate on Ritchie's assumption that organized social groups are structured wholes constitutively dependent on social factors. I consider social factors as ontological grounds and suggest that, as social factors ground the group's structure, they can also constrain nodes making continuity of membership necessary for group persistence. In Section 5, I discuss how a structuralist approach would deal with structural variations and argue that margins of structural flexibility may be provided at the grounding level. My claim is that, as long as the group's structure varies within such margins, it undergoes alterations, and the group persists. Finally, I raise two open questions concerning how to identify grounds and how to consider their eventual transformation. Despite unresolved issues, I hope to show that structuralist metaphysics, inclusive of grounding relations, can offer more than one-sided approaches to persistence.

2. The Persistence of Social Groups

Many examples show that social groups are subject to change: Succeeding Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Amy Coney Barrett was appointed to the Supreme Court; after a referendum held on 20-21/9/2020, the number of members of the Italian Parliament were reduced from 945 to 600; due to the pandemic, major fashion houses converted part of their manufacturing plants to produce surgical gowns and masks. In all these cases, there is a group that exists before the change and a group that exists after the change: the question of persistence is determining whether the two groups are identical to one another.² Here, identity takes on a numerical property as opposed to qualitative property. Meaning that, we will be examining under what changes a social group remains one and the same.³

Therefore, this article is concerned with the numerical identity over time of social groups as subject to change. Admittedly, the issue of persistence has a lot to do with how we conceptualize persisting objects. Indeed, different metaphysical theories have offered different conceptions of social groups that can be classified into two factions according to whether they treat social groups as mereological compounds or as structured wholes constituted by material entities (Strohmaier 2018). The faction I consider here to be broadly akin to mereology is an inclusive group encompassing both extensional and non-extensional mereology (Hawley 2017), setism (Effingham 2010), and stage-theory (Wilhelm 2020). Differences aside, theories of this sort identify organized social groups with their members, assuming social groups have members essentially. In contrast, neo-Aristotelian approaches are prone to metaphysical structuralism and individuate social groups by both structure and matter (Fine 2020, Sheehy 2006, Ritchie 2013).⁴ In general, the structuralist maintains that if we wanted to identify the group only by its material composition, we would lose sight of the function and the nature (kind) of the group. Besides, we would be faced with some metaphysical puzzles. For instance, it would be difficult to distinguish coinciding, non-identical groups

² As my concern is about through what changes (if any) social groups persist, I will assume there is a sense—be it epistemological or ontological—in which social groups are *real*. On realism in social ontology, cf. Laitinen and Schweikard, manuscript.

³ 'Persistence' is thus meant as synonym of 'numerical identity over time'.

⁴ In these pages I refer to the neo-Aristotelian perspective by 'structuralism' and 'structured-based metaphysics'. I use these expressions as synonyms.

or indicate the location of groups based in a certain place and have members scattered elsewhere.⁵ Therefore, structure-based metaphysics assumes that the synchronic identity of a group has as necessary and sufficient conditions to have a particular structure and to have the nodes occupied by a particular set of entities, which are the members.⁶

Concerning persistence, mereology suggests that a group persists insofar as there is continuity in membership. In contrast, structuralism argues that for a group to survive “is for its parts to continue to be organized in the relevant object-making fashion, even when those parts may be subject to replacement through time” (Sheehy 2006: 139) inasmuch as “groups can vary in members across times and worlds” (Ritchie 2015: 316).⁷

An example may help visualize the diversity of these approaches: Consider the editorial board of some journal of philosophy and suppose one of the members retires and is replaced by someone else. By concentrating exclusively on the material composition of the group, namely the members, the mereologist would be inclined to say that after the change, the group is no longer the same as before. The structuralist would instead observe that insofar as the change does not affect the group’s structure, the group can still be considered the same as before. Everyday experience demonstrates that cases like this are widespread, so part of the appeal of structure-based metaphysics is allowing for a conception of changes in membership that explains many ordinary events of persistence.

Despite the advantages, skepticism towards structuralism has emerged because, by bounding group identity over time to the organization of the parts, the account might have to acknowledge that (1) continuity in membership is neither necessary nor sufficient for group persistence, whereas (2) structural continuity is necessary and sufficient condition. In cases where assumptions (1) and (2) were correct, one would be justified in finding structuralism blind to the salience of membership and latched onto structural rigidity.

In structuralist literature, the case of the persistence of concrete unified wholes is indeed problematic because, in general, such objects are meant to have interchangeable parts and fixed structure. For example, Koslicki observes that

⁵ On the metaphysical puzzles and shortcomings of (extensional) mereology, see Effingham 2010, Hawley 2017, Hindriks 2013, Ruben 1985, Strohmaier 2018.

⁶ For a definition of organized social groups’ synchronic identity, see Ritchie 2018:11.

⁷ Among the accounts in support of mereology, some have proposed refined theories of persistence. Specifically, Effingham (2010) has developed a form of setism that views social groups as sets of ordered pairs of which the first member is an instant of time and the second is a set of individuals. This allows Effingham to argue that to ensure persistence, the members of the set of individuals can change across ordered pairs, while the set containing all pairs cannot change its members. Recently, Wilhelm (2020) has proposed considering groups as fusions of group-stages. Each stage is a momentary object that has its members essentially. Different stages can have different members. Persistence in this case has to do with the correlation of stages understood as counterparts. Among neo-Aristotelians, persistence has been recently discussed by Fine (2020) in a way that may not be related to all the structuralist theories at issue in these pages. In order to include form (structure) and matter (members) into the metaphysics of social groups, Fine suggests applying the notions of rigid and variable embodiment. Rigid embodiment refers to synchronic group identity by combining the component parts into a structured whole. Variable embodiment concerns persistence: The operation accounts for actual or possible change in the constitution (i.e., form and matter) of the group.

[...] unlike mereological sums, not only are these objects quite obviously capable of surviving changes with respect to their parts, while mereological sums (like sets) have their parts essentially; but, in contrast to the completely unstructured nature of mereological sums, the existence and identity of these objects is also evidently tied to the arrangement or configuration of their parts (Koslicki 2018: 2).

Turning to apply this view to social groups as concrete objects, it would seem that (1) any social group can stay numerically the same despite changes in membership whilst (2) it does not survive changes in the relations among them.

My goal here is to argue that both (1) and (2) are misleading assumptions. To do so, I will present Ritchie's structuralist metaphysics of social groups, in which the problem of persistence has not yet been investigated in depth. I will show how such a metaphysical framework is open to being integrated with explanations regarding grounding relations and then proves responsive to certain membership and structural variations.

3. Ritchie's Structure-Based Metaphysics

To determine if a social group ever survives change and when survival may occur for structure-based metaphysics, it is worth clarifying the meaning of the generic concept 'social group'. Universities, business companies, families, soccer teams, working classes, and religious communities are just a few examples of the sort of entities generally counted as social groups. In an attempt to subsume such variety within a few inclusive categories, Ritchie (2013, 2015) has proposed to divide social groups into two types: Type 1 denoting organized groups and Type 2 applicable to groups clustered around at least one attribute the members have in common.⁸ Critical against the idea that a simple framework can be adequate to capture the complexity of social groups, Epstein (2017) has instead offered several criteria for establishing the most suitable metaphysical profile for each group. Importantly, given that the concept 'social group' applies to heterogeneous contexts, it is possible that if some social groups persist through change, it is not certain that they all would persist and that they would all persist in response to the same changes. Here, for the sake of simplicity, I resolve to focus only on organized social groups (Ritchie's Type 1) like committees, bands, and sports teams and investigate through what changes—according to structuralism—groups of this kind persist. In addition to being a starting point for metaphysical inquiry, the question of organized groups' persistence has ethical relevance because these are the groups that are generally accorded agency abilities (List and Pettit 2011). Thus, knowing whether a group is numerically the same before and after a change also helps us determine whether the group in the present is responsible for an action completed in the past.

Let us focus on the metaphysical question. On Ritchie's view (Ritchie 2018), organized social groups are structured wholes, i.e., social structures realized by sets of entities. More precisely, structures are networks of relations connecting the positions (nodes) and establishing the role of each node in the entire relational complex.⁹

⁸ Further classifications for social groups can be found in French 1984, Gilbert 1989, Gruner 1976, List and Pettit 2011, Tuomela 2007, Young 1990.

⁹ Social structures shape various types of social facts or objects such as the market and the transportation system. Organized social groups are special social objects because they have only individuals or groups as node occupiers.

Entities that occupy a position within the structure are members.¹⁰ What entities may serve as members is specified by (eventual) structural restrictions defining and constraining each position. Regarding structured entities in general, Koslicki clarifies that structures make available slots for objects that meet two sorts of constraints: “(i) constraints concerning the type of object which may occupy the position in question; and (ii) constraints concerning the configuration or arrangement which must be exhibited by the occupants of the positions made available by the structure” (Koslicki 2018: 3). Meaning that, the structural relations affect both the type of object suitable to occupy some node and the overall organization of nodes and node-occupiers.

In the case of organized social groups, examples of structures are the patterns of relations fixing the players’ roles in a baseball team, kinship ties in a family, and the system of offices shaping an institutional organ. Relationships can be of various types: they can be symmetrical (being married to) or asymmetrical (being mother of), hierarchical (being the leader of) or non-hierarchical (being partners), intentional (being wife of), or unintentional (being son of). The network of relations defines the role of each party in relation to the others and incorporates the function of the entire group. Importantly, social structures can be multiply realized: insofar as the requirements of the nodes are met, various sets of entities can realize the same structure.¹¹ This implies social structures shape but are not identical to social groups, as social groups are specific realizations of social structures. Therefore, an organized social group is normally made up of members who are organized based on some specific relational pattern.

Let us now return to the question of persistence and ask how we can approach the subject of change through the structuralist framework. The question is: Within structure-based metaphysics, what changes (if any) are organized social groups meant to survive? There are two cases that we propose to analyze: changes in membership and changes in structure. The reason for this choice is that for structuralist metaphysics, membership and structure are necessary and sufficient conditions for the synchronic identity of organized social groups. As this does not imply that such conditions play the same role for diachronic identity, my goal is to understand whether and when changes in membership and structure are relevant for persistence. In doing so, I will reject the position that deems member continuity irrelevant and structural continuity necessary and sufficient for persistence.

4. Change in Membership

First, consider membership: Experience proves that members of organized groups are replaceable in most cases, just as the editorial board’s members discussed above were replaceable. Soccer teams change players; political parties change components; companies hire and fire people. Regarding such circumstances, a structuralist metaphysics observes that as long as the group’s structure remains the same, the social group remains the same. Some have noted that considering

¹⁰ By virtue of being a functional status, membership is not the same as parthood. For example, Supreme Court Judge x is a member of the Supreme Court whereas x ’s arm is not. The case shows that, as opposed to parthood, membership is not transitive. See Uzquiano 2004.

¹¹ An illustrative case is analyzed in Uzquiano 2004, in which it is argued that the Supreme Court is not the same as any specific set of Supreme Court Justices.

structural continuity necessary and sufficient for persistence risks blinding the account to cases where membership continuity appears necessary (Greenwood 2019). Take the example of the band ‘Florence and The Machine’: The group consists of the vocalist, Florence Welch, and the musicians, currently keyboardist Isabella Summers, guitarist Rob Ackroyd, harpist Tom Monger. Since its formation in 2007, Florence has always been a member (specifically, the singer) of the group while the musicians have changed—for example, in 2018 drummer Christopher Hayden left the band, and new collaborations were started. Despite changes to membership, fans seem to regard the group as the same as before 2018, and this acknowledgment confirms the structuralist thesis that members of organized groups are replaceable and therefore irrelevant to group identity over time.

But what would have happened if the person leaving the group was Florence? Intuitively, as a fan, it seems reasonable to assume that the band would no longer be the same without its lead vocalist. By contrast, structuralism would not seem to validate intuition as it does not consider groups to have members necessarily.

It may be that a fan’s intuition does not suffice as a philosophical argument, but it indeed urges us to delve into the topic of membership changes, for which Ritchie’s structuralism suggests a solution. Although the continuity of membership in general and in itself is not a necessary and sufficient condition for persistence, it may be that some members are necessary for group identity in some cases, in conjunction with structural constraints. As mentioned already in Section 2, the possibility for understanding group persistence lies in the understanding of every position in a structure being defined by the relations between nodes and eventual restrictions on the node-occupier (cf., Koslicki 2018: 3, Ritchie 2018: 7). Because the latticework of relations fixes the characteristics required by each node, if the node requires a specific person to occupy it, then the presence of that member will be necessary to the identity of the group: “As a limiting case a node might require that it be occupied by a particular person. For instance, if bands are structured wholes, some band structures might require that specific individuals occupy particular nodes” (Ritchie 2018: 10). If the requirements on a node-occupier are instead neutral regarding the person covering the position, the occupier can change without implications for group persistence.

As structuralism provides that sometimes, and based on structural features, specific members are necessary for group persistence; the eventual rigidity of membership cannot be used as a source of counterexamples to the account. This would explain how, although the musicians of ‘Florence and the Machine’ have changed without affecting the group’s identity over time, the replacement of the vocalist would have probably created discontinuity.

Further examples of members that are made necessary by structural constraints are highly personalistic groups in which the restricted node is often that of the leader (e.g., perhaps the political party ‘Forza Italia’ and its leader, Berlusconi) and by creative groups in which the originality and style of some, eventually all, members are central to group identity (The Beatles).

4.1 Constitutive Dependence

The argument presented so far makes a point in support of structuralism, remarking that sometimes groups have specific members necessarily by virtue of their ontological structure. Now, we must explain how it is that social structures eventually impose constraints on the nodes. In this regard, Ritchie’s theory offers an

interpretation of the metaphysical foundation of social structures that is decisive both to understand better how group structures can make continuity of membership necessary and envision the possibility of persistence in the face of structural variations. The argument rests on the constitutive view of social reality, according to which social structures constitutively depend on social factors like practices, attitudes, and norms.¹² Following Haslanger (2003a), Ritchie holds that only structures that depend constitutively on social factors are social.

By ‘constitutive dependence’, Ritchie means a relation between some social structure *S* and more fundamental social factors:

- Structure, *S*, constitutively depends on social factors just in case
- (i) in defining what it is to be *S* reference must be made to some social factors or
 - (ii) social factors are metaphysically necessary for *S* to exist or
 - (iii) social factors ground the existence of *S* (or the fact that *S* exists)
- (Ritchie 2018: 6).¹³

Ritchie’s definition of constitution can be rephrased (though not necessarily) in terms of grounding relation (iii); I will treat constitutive social factors as the metaphysical grounds of social structures.¹⁴

So, assuming the structure of ‘Florence and The Machine’ is constitutively dependent on social factors, to grasp the grounds of the group’s structure (including membership constraints) is to specify what social factors ground the structure of the group. The list of social factors might encompass elements like social practices, habits, beliefs, intentions, agreements, and action patterns. According to Ritchie, social factors can be internal or external to the group. Internal social factors concern the node-occupiers just like intentions and agreements among the members; external social factors concern external facts such as norms, institutions, and non-members. In most cases, more than a single social factor contributes to the foundation of a social structure. To say that the structure of the band is partly or fully grounded on some internal social factor(s), such as the agreement between the members, means that the factor contributes to the construction of the group’s structure, i.e., the group is shaped the way it is partly or fully due to the members’ agreement. Similarly, to assume that the record contract partly or fully grounds the group’s structure is to hold that the social factor lays the foundations for the existence of the group’s structure.

Whenever the grounds set up a social structure, as with ‘Florence and The Machine’, any set of entities realizing that structure will form the band ‘Florence and the Machine’. Moreover, if the structure is grounded in the band’s vocalist

¹² In acknowledging that Ritchie does not provide any definition of what social factors could be, I will use the notion as she does, that is, in a general way. Here are two lists that Ritchie offers in different parts of the article (2018) for the purpose of illustrating some examples of social factors: “social behavior, patterns of action, habits, beliefs, intentions, processes, practices, activities, rules, laws, norms, and arrangements” (3); “social practices, patterns of interaction, agreements, beliefs, and so on” (15).

¹³ Constitutive dependence is a form of non-causal dependence (Diaz-Leon 2013) and can be understood either theoretically or metaphysically. Ritchie’s definition holds together in disjunction both the theoretical notion of constitutive dependence (Audi 2012, Haslanger 2003a) and the metaphysical notions of necessity and grounding relation (Griffith 2018): For constitutive dependence to occur, it is sufficient that one of the three disjuncts applies.

¹⁴ On grounding relations and constitutive construction, see Griffith 2018.

being Florence, then Florence will have to be a necessary part of any set of entities realizing the band's structure.

5. Persistence through Structural Change

Section 4 has demonstrated that a structuralist account has the means to recognize that continuity of membership is occasionally a necessary condition for persistence. Now, the question must be asked whether, according to structuralist metaphysics, continuity in structure is a necessary and sufficient condition for the persistence of organized social groups. By establishing that continuity of membership is also required in certain cases, we have already proved that structural invariance is not always sufficient:¹⁵ necessity must now be considered.

The issue is of paramount importance. In fact, if structural fixity were to be considered a necessary condition of persistence, many social groups that we generally regard as surviving (at least some) change in structure should instead be regarded as non-persistent. Examples of ordinary structural changes include shuffling tasks and shares among the members of a group (as is often the case among a company's shareholders), modification in the group's function (as when the responsibilities of a police department are extended) or functioning (as exemplified by eventual adjustments in the decision-making procedure of a committee), increase or decrease in the number of nodes (as happens whenever a family welcomes a new child).

Take the standard case of a committee switching from majority voting to unanimity. Undoubtedly, this is a change regarding the functional organization of the parties, and thus, the structure of the group.¹⁶ Therefore, if structuralism assumed structural continuity was provided by group identity over time, we would have to conclude that, after the change, the committee would no longer be the same. For a group to survive this change, it would mean "for its parts to continue to be organized in the relevant object-making fashion, even when those parts may be subject to replacement through time" (Sheehy 2006: 139). Along these lines, Ritchie has taken the identity over time of organized social groups to be based on structural continuity—whereas "groups can vary in members across times and worlds" (Ritchie 2015: 316). However, in Ritchie 2018, we read that

¹⁵ One might object that, on the account I propose, continuity of structure is indeed a sufficient condition for persistence because membership is subsumed by structural continuity. Although I take membership conditions (if any) to be specified in the structure of the group—and, in this sense, they might be regarded as structural aspects—I would not go so far as to say that structural continuity is a sufficient condition for group persistence. In fact, while retaining the same structure and thus the same membership conditions, a group can still vary its material composition. Further, only a few material components are suitable for the realization of the group structure. It can be that, at time *t*, group structure *s* is realized by a set of individuals satisfying *s*' membership conditions, while, at time *t'*, *s* is realized by a set of individuals that fails to meet such requirements. Thus, the group at time *t'* is not the same as the group at time *t*. Cases like Florence and the Machine prove that sometimes structural continuity is not sufficient for group persistence and illustrate to what extent material continuity is also necessary, although it is made so by structural constraints.

¹⁶ Since by 'group structure' I mean the network of relationships that define and connect the nodes, any change in the pattern of interaction is to be regarded as a structural change. So, a modification in the decision-making procedure counts as a structural change because it affects the relationships among the nodes and the operations required from each (or some) of them.

“the [structure-based] view allows for groups to persist through changes in members and through changes in structure” (Ritchie 2018: 11). Thus, one wonders to what extent *the relevant object-making fashion* is a flexible parameter and what changes in structure (if any) are compatible with the persistence of social groups. The issue is an open question as Ritchie has not offered any explanation for that.¹⁷

In what follows, I will analyze cases of structural change by considering the group’s ontological grounds. The aim is to show that, by complementing the organization of the nodes with explanations about the grounds, it is possible to delineate margins of structural flexibility within which the structure can change, and the group can persist. In other words, the investigation is meant to demonstrate that one way to assess whether organized social groups survive at least some structural changes is to consider the grounds, i.e., the social factors, on which the group’s structure constitutively depends.¹⁸ In fact, if it is true that social structures are metaphysically dependent on social factors, then it may be that what social structures are—the way they are shaped—is not necessarily rigid but may have margins of flexibility consistent with their nature, i.e., consistent with their being structures grounded on some specific social factors. More specifically, there may be cases where certain structural variations are equally compatible with the set of social factors that ground the structure.

Let us now return to the case of a committee switching from majority voting to unanimity. The group is responsible for deciding the winner of a competition. First, consider the scenario in which the committee’s structure is grounded in a charter that explicitly stipulates that the unanimity voting system is not allowed. This implies that the organizational structure of the parties cannot incorporate an unanimity-based decision-making procedure. The group members might still have the shared intention to change the voting system from majority to unanimity, but the implementation of such a change would lead to structural modifications not conceded by the group’s structure. Unless the charter enables the members to change the rules, that ability to change the structure is not available to them.¹⁹ An eventual change from majority voting to unanimous voting would therefore contradict the group’s foundations and likely incur sanctions. Most importantly, the event would be a change which—based on the structuralist framework—the committee could not manifest through persistence because a structure that includes a unanimous voting mode would be contradictory to the kind of structure that has the charter as its ground. A group that votes by unanimity at time t' will therefore be numerically non-identical to the group that at time t voted by majority.

The case would be different if the charter grounding the group’s structure establishes that decision-making can happen either by majority or unanimity. In this scenario, inscribed in the group’s structure is the possibility of specific

¹⁷ Rather than arguments, Ritchie offers hypotheses: “The view allows for groups to persist through changes in members and through changes in structure. Causal origin plausibly figures in the persistence conditions of organized groups. A theory of the persistence of organized groups might also involve member intentions and the intentions of authoritative non-members. Other conditions might vary widely across organized group types. The view sketched here could be developed in various ways for different sorts of organized groups and according to one’s general views of persistence” (Ritchie 2018: 11).

¹⁸ I mentioned that the study of grounding relations is one way of approaching persistence because explanations of other kinds, especially causal explanations, could direct us onto equally promising tracks.

¹⁹ On the abilities (powers) of organized social groups and members, see Hindriks 2008.

structural changes that are established by the charter: Switching from majority to unanimity would be a change that alters the metaphysical structure of the group as designed at the grounding level. Meaning, the committee is grounded on a charter that provides the social structure. It would not matter if the committee adopted a system of majority or unanimity voting because both arrangements are consistent with the kind of structure set by the grounds. For this reason, we might argue that switching the procedure is a change that the committee can survive according to structure-based metaphysics. For a variation of this scenario, imagine that the charter leaves it up to the members to determine which decision-making mechanism is the most suitable from time to time. In this case, although the list of possible options is not explicitly provided, any variation made by the members in this area would be consistent with the grounds and would therefore represent a structural alteration through which the group persists.

Let us now consider a slightly different case: the election of a spokesperson. We will assume that the charter does not describe any node as a spokesperson and that the introduction of this role is members' initiative. As the structure is grounded in a way that makes it indifferent to have a spokesperson, its election is just an unexpected change. The issue here concerns whether structuralism could ever view organized social groups as surviving unexpected structural changes.

Presumably, groups do not survive unexpected changes when these contradict the grounds. The issue is complicated especially when, in the context of a structure with multiple grounds, some change is neutral, relative to the structural features fixed by one ground but contradictory relative to some other(s). For example, a committee could be based on a charter that sets the decision-making mechanism (ground 1) and an external authority that decides the appointments (ground 2). Having the members appoint a spokesperson could be neutral to ground 1 though at odds with ground 2. By contrast, if there were no grounding relation aimed at excluding the possibility for the members to designate a spokesperson, we might consider this structural change to be an alteration of a persisting group.

In general, the analysis illustrates that the question of persistence through structural changes must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, in consideration of the grounds of the group's structure.²⁰ Specifically, insofar as a change implies structural variations consistent with the spectrum of structural flexibility provided by the grounds, the group undergoing such change can legitimately be considered the same group before and after the change. If the change is an event that does not fall within the spectrum of possibilities for that structure, the group that exists

²⁰ Each social group has unique relationships with the social context. This causes each social group to have conditions of persistence that are specific and not entirely generalizable. We might admit that groups of the same kind have minimal conditions of identity over time related to the kind; however, it is likely that those conditions can be realized differently depending on the group. Thus, to provide an accurate explanation of group persistence, it might be worth implementing the metaphysical analysis of the kind with an empirical investigation of concrete particulars. For example, it is plausible to think that every institution is grounded on some statute. Also, we can assume that among institutions, all graduation committees in Italian Universities are based on the same bylaws. Yet, any university may present specificities or some additional, internal regulation supplementing the national one. The suggestion here is that if we want to discuss the persistence of a specific committee, we can get oriented by first considering the grounds that generally characterize the kind 'graduation committee'. A complete analysis will then require us to specify the grounds of the concrete group.

after the change is not the same as the one that existed before. Regarding unexpected changes, we can say that if such changes lead to structural arrangements consistent with the grounds, then organized social groups subjected to such changes will persist through them.

In brief, adopting a form of structuralism that upholds a constitutive view about social structures allows us to argue that organized social groups can persist through structural changes that fall within the group's flexibility margins. I have argued that one way to determine the flexibility margins is to pinpoint the foundation of the group's structure. On this basis, structuralism cannot hold that structural continuity is a necessary condition for the persistence of every social group.

This account gives us the means to assess the persistence of organized groups that commonly undergo structural changes, such as those mentioned at the beginning of this section. First, we observed that companies often undergo changes in the distribution of shares. Now, we can safely assert that, by considering the bylaws of a specific company, we may be able to tell whether the group survives such changes. Presumably, the bylaws will contain a regulation for those acts in conjunction with a description of the admissible procedures for implementing the reshuffling. Then, the study of the grounds might allow us to determine whether an expansion of the responsibilities of a city's police department to surrounding geographic areas makes the group not the same department as before the expansion. The statute that grounds the institution, along with its departments, may indeed clarify the point. In addition, we can apply the explanation of the grounds to the persistence of organized social groups subject to change in the number of nodes. Consider the Italian Parliament, which has recently undergone a 345-unit cut. Since the reduction and the enacted procedures are compatible with the Constitution, we can conclude that the change has been an alteration of a persisting group.²¹ As for the addition of nodes, take the case of a nuclear family, which at time t consists of two adults—married to each other—and one child, their daughter. Assume that at time t' the family acquires a new member with the second child's birth. According to the explanation of the grounds, we may assume that the family is the same before and after the newborn, if and only if, it is contained in the definition of a nuclear family that the number of children can vary. And insofar as this is the case, the family persists despite the structural alteration.²²

6. Conclusions and Open Problems

From the considerations made so far, we can conclude that if there are organized social groups (and we assumed there are some) and if some of them persist through change (and we assumed there are such cases), deciding what changes are compatible with the persistence of the group requires an explanation attentive to both members and structure which also considers the ontological grounds of the social structure realized by the group. I have argued that a structure-based metaphysics of social groups is fit for this purpose.²³

²¹ The compatibility of the reduction of MPs with the Constitution is enshrined in the Constitutional Law No. 1 dated October 19, 2020, which includes amendments to articles 56, 57 and 59.

²² Further examples can be found in Fine 2020.

²³ Some might wonder why in addressing the issue of persistence in relation to social groups I have not mentioned theories of personal identity over time (Olson 1997, Parfit 1971, Rovane 1998, Schroer and Schroer 2014). Although I do not intend to rule out this

As crucial as this remark is for developing a theory for the persistence of organized social groups, many aspects are in need of clarification. In this last section, I will concentrate on two issues: the identification problem and the transformation problem.

The identification problem is concerned with determining the ontological grounds of a specific social structure. The task is difficult because while some grounds are explicit and institutionalized, such as the record contract and the charter mentioned in our examples, others may be implicit and uncoded, like beliefs and habits.

The class of social factors is highly heterogeneous, but most of the time, social structures are also based on a multiplicity of social factors. For example, it can be the case that in addition to being partly grounded in the record contract, the structure of a band is built on the intentions, emotions, and behaviors of the fans who listen to and buy the band's music.

The identification problem might be approached by shifting the focus from grounding relations to what Epstein has called anchoring relations, that is, relations that determine why social structures are grounded the way they are (Epstein 2014, 2015, 2016). Although grounding and anchoring are different from each other from a metaphysical point of view, investigating the anchors of a certain structure might shed light or give us a criterion for establishing what social factors to include among the grounds. For example, suppose it is convention that social factors like charters and statutes constitute the structure of a committee. Accordingly, considering occasional individual intentions as grounds would be unfitting.²⁴

In addition to the identification problem, it is worth mentioning the transformation problem, which emerges from the fact that some social factors change over time. Some cases are straightforward, having a standardized procedure for amending the grounds. An example is when the statute of a company (ground) is modified through the unanimous decision of the members (anchor): assuming consensus is what makes the statute the foundation of the group's structure, unanimous decisions might fittingly arrange the modification of the statute.²⁵ In other

possibility, my concern is that the analogy with personal identity would require restricting the discussion to those groups that can be qualified as persons. In the literature on social groups, it is generally accepted that organized groups with abilities for decision-making, reasoning, and agency are good candidates to be considered as agents or performative persons (List and Pettit 2011). Analyzing the eventual similarities is beyond the scope of this article. In addition, further developments could consider how the explanation of group persistence differs from theories of persisting individuals. Indeed, the former would require (at least in some cases) an empirical investigation into the social world that might not be so decisive in adjudicating the case of individuals' persistence.

²⁴ Conventions are only one type of anchor for charters and statutes. According to Epstein (2014, 2015), social facts of the same type can be anchored by social factors of different types. Comments on anchoring pluralism can be found in Guala 2017.

²⁵ Grounding social factors changing in compliance with the anchors resemble the problem of structural changes inscribed in the grounds so that we could suggest a similar approach: As long as the change is expected or just consistent with the anchor, then the change is such that the grounds constitute a structure, which, once realized by a set of members, generates a group that is the same as the one existing before the change at the grounding level. Contrariwise, if the change is prevented by or inconsistent with the anchor, then the social structure—and so the group—will not persist through the modification of the grounds.

cases, change is the result of slow, unintentional, and unforeseen transformative processes affecting the grounds. Although the grounds are often repeated and stabilized social factors, it may be the case that they change in exactly the way they have become stable, that is, through social interaction (cf., Griffith 2018: 395). For example, collective beliefs and practices grounding (at least in part) the structure of organized social groups like families may change over time and thus impose variations on the social structure of the respective group: Sometimes families change their structure as a result of some transformation in the relationship between the partners, who may, for example, separate but remain legally married.²⁶ Because interpersonal relationships are intrinsically fluid, their evolution over time is a process that could hardly be crystallized into some code.

The identification and transformation problem reveal complex issues that deserve further investigation. Concerning persistence, providing deeper explanations of grounding relations and social factors might serve to clarify the range of changes through which social groups persist. Moreover, acknowledging identification and transformation questions shows how articulate the metaphysics of social groups is and how deep-rooted social structures are in the social context. While not being full-fledged arguments in favor of structuralism, these considerations seem, at least, to call for an anti-reductionist social ontology ready to analyze organized social groups for their being complex entities tied to the social context in which they are located and rooted.

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²⁶ Frequently, phenomena of transformation are not intentionally planned, they just happen. The study of grounds can serve the purpose of ameliorating social structures by operating on underlying practices and norms (Haslanger 2012).

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