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Reflexivity and social change: A critical discussion of reflexive modernization and individualization theses

Ana Caetano

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIES-IUL, Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract:

The concept of reflexivity has become increasingly important in sociology, in close articulation with the analysis of social change. Scholars such as Beck, Giddens and Lash are key references in this regard, as they place the increase of reflexive processes at the heart of social transformation. This connection between social change and reflexivity has been evoked frequently in the sociological literature of the last decades, especially by authors studying reflexive modernization and individualization. The aim of this article is to discuss these approaches and their main implications for the study of personal reflexivity. It is argued that although the mentioned authors assign an important role to reflexivity, they lack the theoretical and operational grounds necessary to take the different dimensions of the concept into account. The tendency to simplify the past; the overlap between reflexivity and social change; the weak importance given to structure; the ambiguous nature of agency dynamics; and the absence of a solid empirical grounding are discussed as factors that weaken their contributions.

Keywords:

Reflexivity; reflexive modernization; individualization; agency; social change

Introduction

One of the most debated issues in the study of social transformation in contemporary societies concerns reflexivity. The concept is often used to account for the changes brought by modernity, particularly late and advanced modernity. Reflexivity is generally examined at the systemic level, although some studies also emphasize its implications for the individual agency. This article focuses mainly on reflexivity as the ability of each person to reflect upon themselves regarding their social circumstances.

Many of the most noteworthy sociological approaches to the topic highlight as key elements of change the weakening of traditional structures and social ties in increasingly differentiated societies, the globalization of risk and the strong increase in reflexivity. While some theorists emphasize the potential inherent to the emancipation of individuals (Kaufmann 2001; Singly 1996), others are more pessimistic, and focus on their disintegration (Castel 1995; Sennett 1998).

The work undertaken by authors like Beck, Giddens and Lash has become a central point of reference in debates about such processes of change. They combine an optimistic outlook with an analysis of the less positive elements of individualization. Although there is no consensus about the relevance and legitimacy of the views proposed by these authors, they have the merit of placing the concept of reflexivity at the heart of the analysis of social change.

This article stems from a research the main goal of which is to study empirically the social mechanisms of personal reflexivity. Having this concept as the focus of analysis, it is crucial to consider the approaches developed by Beck, Giddens and Lash if a complex, multidimensional and contemporary view of the phenomenon is to be achieved. The article is part of the process of combining different arguments for the elaboration of a theoretical model for the empirical analysis of personal reflexivity. It is a reflection exercise on the main contributions, limitations and implications of the reflexive modernization and individualization theories.

There are already several texts that debate and evaluate these approaches (see, for example, Adams 2007; Alexander 1996; Atkinson 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Heaphy 2007). The drive behind this article is, however, distinct as it focuses specifically on the reflexivity issue, which is many times taken for granted and not considered in all its dimensions and complexity. The existing literature tends to discuss the concept as being one, among many others, of social phenomena regarding social change. This does not mean that reflexivity should be analysed disconnected from social processes and dynamics of contemporary societies. It is far from being the case. But the wide and generalized use of the concept in sociology, especially in the last two decades, asks for an in-depth and thorough discussion of the reflexivity concept in itself. The work of Margaret Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) is a clear example of how the study of reflexivity entails its own challenges and involves more than considering its relation to social change.

It should also be noted that most of the literature on reflexivity consists in theoretical reflections that point to crucial elements of the concept, but that are not always empirically tested (Adams 2006; 2007; Alexander 1996; Bendle 2002; Conde 2011; Heaphy 2007; Pais 2008; Sweetman 2003). And when the concept is discussed in connection with empirical findings it generally draws from the analysis of other social dimensions, such as gender, work, class, identity or biographical transitions (Adams and Raisborough 2008; Adkins 2003;

Atkinson 2010; McNay 1999; O'Connor 2006; Phillips and Western 2005; Plumridge and Thomson 2003; Skeggs 2004; Thomson et al. 2002). Reflexivity is, in fact, crucial in the study of such phenomena; it can be mobilized as a means of explanation, among other social factors. But reflexivity is also a social phenomenon in itself and as such it must be understood in all its components: besides the effects it can have on action, sociology should analyse how reflexivity is formed and exercised. This is what is lacking in much of the existing literature on reflexivity and it represents the ground from which the article stems. The critical discussion of Beck's, Giddens' and Lash's approaches is undertaken bearing in mind the specific focus on the intricacy of the concept of reflexivity.

These authors are hardly the single references, or even the most recent ones, on the problematic discussed here. But given the scope and influence of their work in the sociological field worldwide it is crucial to direct a critical outlook to their approaches on reflexivity. Most of the subsequent sociological work on the topic quotes and mobilizes these authors and their proposals. For many of the more recent work on reflexivity the stance taken towards the reflexive modernization thesis is a key factor in the theoretical and empirical orientation of the research.

This article does not intend to cover all the dimensions of the work developed by Beck, Giddens and Lash. The main goal is specifically to highlight the most important theoretical features for the analysis of reflexivity. The article does not present an analytical model (that would require an entire article devoted to it); it discusses how these authors' theses can (and cannot) contribute to the elaboration of such a model.

Reflexive modernization

Aware of the many points of convergence between their views, in 1994 Beck, Giddens and Lash jointly presented the theory of reflexive modernization. Their approaches converge on the centrality assigned to reflexivity in configuring social structures and individual life experiences, as well as on the relevance attached to de-traditionalization processes and environmental concerns. The main idea behind the concept of reflexive modernization is that knowledge (and self-knowledge) is embedded in the structures of global systems, and its influence is extended to peoples' daily experiences. Ultimately, the process of reflexive modernization of late modernity societies is defined by the gains of agency over structure.

According to these authors, because individual biographies and identities are not restricted to previously established parameters and externally given factors, they become increasingly self-reflexive and are continuously self-produced. As Beck puts it (1994a: 15), they become 'do-it-yourself biographies'. The crucial contrast with earlier historical periods is precisely the fact that modern orientations compel to the self-organization of personal biographies. In this context, there are fewer aspects of life that individuals are unable to control, or that are not subject to individual decisions. This gives rise to an ongoing process of biographical construction and identity-building based on individual projections and choices. As Giddens states (1991: 81), 'in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose.'

What these approaches suggest is that responsibility for individual trajectories is increasingly determined at the individual level. There are pressures

and expectations for people to become more reflexive, i.e. to deliberate about themselves concerning their social circumstances.

It is worth highlighting, though, that there are notable differences among the three authors in the way they conceptualize reflexivity.

Beck focuses on the growing importance of risk in modern societies (1992; 1994a; 1994b). The author refers to the emergence of risk societies to account for not only the different nature of risks in contemporary life, but also changes in the scale of risks, which are increasingly lived at the global level. In this context, the (systemic) reflexivity of modernity is understood as self-confrontation with the different impacts (the challenges, contradictions and tensions) of risk societies (Beck 1994a: 5-6). The use of the concept in this sense raises some doubts about its real meaning, as it seems to refer more to the notion of reflex than to the idea of reflexivity.

This type of confrontation of the bases of modernization with the consequences of modernization should be clearly distinguished from the increase of knowledge in the sense of self-reflection on modernization. Let us call the autonomous, undesired and unseen, transition from industrial to risk society reflexivity (to differentiate it from and contrast it with reflection). (Beck 1994a: 6)

Beck never clarifies this ambiguity. However that may be, his argument suggests that reflexivity is understood as a reflex response to risk (Archer 2007; Heaphy 2007; Lash 1994b; Pinto 2008). Beck's 'do-it-yourself biographies' are essentially a reflex of the loss of solid identity foundations.

Lash's approach (1993; 1994a; 1994b; 2003) differs substantially from Beck's. Although he recognizes the points of convergence with Beck and Giddens, he distances himself from what he considers to be their more utilitarian view of reflexive modernization. According to this author, the cognitive dimension of reflexivity should be complemented by an aesthetic dimension that refers to 'an entire other economy of signs in space', consisting of mimetic and conceptual symbols (Lash 1994a: 135-36). Lash argues that in the contemporary world, reflexivity is anchored in information and communication structures, through which symbols, signs and images, as well as knowledge, flow. Social differentiation is thus defined by the positioning in these new communicational structures. It is the access to information that creates what Lash defines as 'winners of reflexivity'. The exclusion from these informational systems creates therefore a class of 'losers'.

Of the three scholars of reflexive modernization, Giddens (1990; 1991; 1994a; 1994b) has the most complex and multidimensional view of reflexivity, so it is important to ensure a deeper understanding of his contribution by examining the body of theory he has developed.

Giddens pays special attention to how increased institutional reflexivity has affected individuals' experiences. According to the author, both the self and its institutional context are constructed reflexively (Giddens 1990; 1991). The reflexivity of modernity, as part of the very basis of the social system's reproduction, 'refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge' (Giddens 1991: 20). But the self also incorporates the reflexivity that characterizes late modernity. Giddens (1991: 5) proposes the notion of reflexive project of the self, 'which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives'.

The work of revision (at the systemic as well as individual level) and self-production, permeated by knowledge, takes place in a context in which

new relations of trust are being established. Trust is intimately linked to the sense of ontological security that is:

[...] basic to a 'protective cocoon' which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality. It 'brackets out' potential occurrences which, were the individual seriously to contemplate them, would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment.

(Giddens 1991: 3)

According to Giddens, in pre-modern societies, family relations, local communities, religion and tradition played a fundamental role in the creation of an atmosphere of trust and ontological security. By contrast, in late modern societies, this environment of trust relies essentially on abstract systems, particularly on expert systems.

This perspective stands in marked difference with Beck's approach, in which reflexivity means freedom and even some degree of mistrust in expert systems. For Beck, the origin of the increasing reflexivity in contemporary societies is not, as Giddens posits, the new context of choice and knowledge which has replaced tradition. Rather, it lies in the welfare institutions of industrial societies such as the educational system and the labour market that de-contextualized individuals and then re-contextualized them in a new framework of biographical self-production (Atkinson 2007a: 541).

Giddens's view on social change (1990; 1991) differs somewhat from the author's previous work (1979; 2004 [1984]), particularly concerning the role of structures in the explanation of action (Atkinson 2007a; Alexander 1996: 135; Pinto 2008). However, his approach on reflexive modernization gains new contours when framed and articulated with his theory of structuration. This approach, which is based on the duality of structure theorem, accounts for the mutual dependence between structure and agency. According to Giddens, structures are both a condition and a result of human action. They should therefore not be understood as barriers to social practices, since they act both as factors of enablement and constraint. The notion of structuration takes on two fundamental meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the standardization of conducts through the activation of structures as means for action. On the other hand, the standardization of social systems takes place through the structured action that reproduces them.

According to this conception, social actors are endowed with competences of reflexivity. Human beings are understood as agents who have reasons to act in a certain way and who can, if required, reflect discursively on those reasons. Giddens (2004 [1984]: 5–14) approaches individual action through a stratified model that distinguishes the reflexive monitoring of action (the knowledge that agents have of what they do), from the rationalization of action (the reasons to act in a certain way) and also from the motives of action (which may or may not be conscious). Reflexivity implies, in this sense, the monitoring of action (of one's own and that of others) and of the broader context in which those actions take place.

This monitoring process reveals that intentionality is a routine feature of human action, but this does not mean that actors have always consciously defined aims when they act. According to the author, human conduct is also based on tacit knowledge, which actors are usually unable to explain discursively. Thus, Giddens distinguishes between three levels of conscience: the unconscious, practical consciousness and discursive consciousness. Human

conduct can be prompted by goals of which individuals are unaware, but it can also be shaped by practical consciousness (action organized by routines) or by discursive reflexivity, through which actors justify why they act in a certain way.

Giddens places special emphasis on reflexive consciousness as a feature of all human action, but he also refers to the non-conscious aspects of individual conduct. Indeed, he argues that not all the effects of human action are intended by individuals, and action can have non-intended consequences that shape future practices. In essence, Giddens states that actors may have an idea of what they are doing, but they may not know what they have actually done, in the sense that the knowledge they hold may not adequately describe the conditions that shape their actions, or the consequences of their conducts.

Individualization, fragmentation and de-structuration

The intensification of so-called processes of individualization is largely at the root of reflexive modernization's dynamics as described by Beck, Giddens and Lash. Above all, the empowerment of agency, to which these scholars refer, means individual action is anchored, more than ever, on the ongoing production by agents of their biographies. Processes of individualization are based precisely on this notion of the universalization of choice and biographical self-production.

According to this view, the main implication of the empowerment of agents is the loss of structural integration. Indeed, given the marked and intense transformations of the last decades, the relevance and continuity of social structures in late and advanced modern societies has been increasingly called into question.

Of the three theorists of reflexive modernization, Beck has placed the greatest emphasis on these processes in his theory of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2006 [2001]). The author recognizes that individualization is not a new concept in sociology. He uses it to account for how individuals cope with the intense flow of social change, as well as for the implications of these transformations on agents' biographies. In a context of advanced modernity (or second modernity), individualization means, for Beck, freedom from social constraints and traditional roles. There are two phases in this process: 'first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves' (Beck 1994a: 13).

In this context, family, social class, work or gender lose their framing power, and the work of defining identities becomes almost exclusively an individual task. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim state (2006 [2001]: xxii), individuals turn out to be the basic unit of social reproduction, so that individualization itself becomes the social structure of second modernity. Beck does refer to re-contextualizing dynamics, and is at pains to note that individualization does not happen in an institutional vacuum. However, rather than emphasizing institutional integration, what he wants to get across is the idea that the key institutions of modern society are increasingly embedded in individuals rather than in collectivities: hence the term 'institutionalized individualism'.¹

Beck, along with Giddens and Lash, refer constantly to notions of reflexivity, individualization, fragmentation, de-structuration, deinstitutionalization and disintegration. These terms are not necessarily used as synonymously but the links between them reveal their mutual implications as they refer to the same processes of social transformation.

¹ In response to critics of his approach, who mainly dispute the idea of the decline of social class (Atkinson 2007b), Beck (2007) has sought to clarify the notion of individualization in his recent work on cosmopolitanism (2006; Beck and Grande 2010). In Beck's view, individualization should be understood as a macro-structural process that can be observed not through individual conduct but in the way that the State conceives of subjects, as expressed through labour market legislation, rights and regulations affecting individuals rather than collectivities. However, these considerations have not altered the essence of Beck's argument.

Critical notes

In order to analyse personal reflexivity it is essential to look at theories that emphasize the central role of reflexive deliberation in contexts of intense change. But these theories also raise a broad number of crucial problems (some more than others) regarding the definition and operationalization of the concept. By accentuating Giddens', Beck's and Lash's common ground ideas (which does not mean minimizing their singularities and differences) the implications of reflexive modernization and individualization approaches can be summarized conjointly as follows:

1. *Tendency to simplify the past.* The complexity ascribed to contemporary societies sometimes leads to a simplification of the past and of previously existing social structures (Alexander 1996). Although individualization is usually associated with modernity, it is important to remember that it is not exclusive of contemporary societies or even a product of the latter. As stated by Norbert Elias (1991 [1987]: 59), there is no 'ground zero' for individualization in human social organization: 'Society not only produces the similar and typical, but also the individual.' As early as 1893 Durkheim (1997 [1893]) referred to these processes when discussing the division of labour. What Beck, Giddens and Lash wish to highlight is the fact that individualization becomes more accentuated in highly differentiated societies. But when comparing societal forms in different historical periods, these authors tend sometimes to underestimate the effect of individualization processes in social organizations prior to those of late modernity.

While these scholars do not view contemporary life as representing a break with previous social configurations, they do present late modern societies as contrasting markedly with traditional or, to a lesser degree, with simple or 'first' modern societies, particularly concerning the role of reflexivity. According to these authors, the way in which societies and individuals perceive themselves today cannot be dissociated from the central role played by knowledge and information in contemporaneity. This implies that social and individual reflexivity were non-existent, or very limited, in previous social arrangements, since strong social integration and trust in social ties did not favour its development. But even if one agrees that reflexivity has increased in late-modern societies, it cannot be solely considered in its connection to knowledge and information.

The problem is not solved with the alternative 'aesthetic reflexivity' proposed by Lash, which complements the cognitive dimension of reflexivity grounded in knowledge. As Giddens states (1994b: 197), it is difficult to conceive of a reflexivity based on an economy of signs that operates independently of cognitive symbols.

There is undoubtedly an important connection between reflexive deliberations and knowledge. But restricting the broader definition of reflexivity to specific socio-historical conditions is too limiting as it fails to take into account all the dimensions of the concept. Independently of their temporal context, social relations are permeated by mechanisms of reflexivity. Norbert Elias's 1939 analysis of the civilizing process is a clear example of this. He highlights many substantial changes in various circumstances of negotiation and self-control in daily practices.

2. *Overlap between reflexivity and social change.* It is implicit in reflexive modernization and individualization theories that reflexivity means change. Although these two concepts are not necessarily considered synonymous, their meaning is often confused in the arguments presented by the above mentioned authors. When referring to the empowerment of agency enabled by increased reflexivity, these scholars mean agents can conceive of action removed from structural conditions. In other words, individuals can 'do things differently' in the sense that they are not constrained by structural forces, and therefore lack pre-defined orientations.²

But why is the capacity to change a direct result of knowing more and having more choices available? Self-knowledge can, indeed, increase the will and competences of individuals to transform certain aspects of their lives in specific social circumstances, insofar as it gives agents the capacity to examine themselves and their social conditions, and to identify the existence of other possible paths. But this is not always the case. Reflexivity, agency and change are not synonymous, even if they are intertwined in certain circumstances. Reflecting on a particular issue does not necessarily lead people to act upon it and change it; not least because reflexivity does not take place in a social vacuum. Such changes can only be carried out by making use of the structural resources that agents have available, and with due consideration for the contexts in which they operate.

3. *Weak structural component.* This leads to another key limitation of these authors' approaches, namely the weak importance (or even absence) assigned to structural elements in the explanation of action. The reading of these theories suggests there is a zero-sum game between structure and agency: increasing one weakens the other. In late modern societies the empowerment of agents prevails over weak structures. In traditional societies the situation was reversed: structural frameworks were strong and agency enablement weak. To the extent this is true, the causality of both structure and agency cannot coexist; one must choose one or the other.

According to these approaches, the choices and decisions involved in biographical self-production are disconnected from the availability of resources to implement them. This has been one of the main criticisms directed to the theory of reflexive modernization and individualization thesis (Adams 2007; Adkins 2003; Atkinson 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2010; Bendle 2002; Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Devine et al. 2005; Heaphy 2007; McNay 1999; Melo 2009; Pinto 2008; Savage 2000; Skeggs 2004). Individual experiences are universalized and thus are not distinguished according to their structural surroundings. Social changes affect everyone in an undifferentiated way. Some critics note that the experience of the middle classes is generalized, particularly in Giddens's work (Atkinson 2007a; Savage 2000; Skeggs 2004).

Theories of individualization and reflexive modernization do recognize the existence of social inequalities. Lash, for instance, refers to two polarized social groups: winners and losers. Beck sees social class as a zombie category,³ but reinforces the importance of growing social inequalities that emerge as a result of intense social change: 'the end of social classes is not the end of social

² It is true that Beck (Adams, Beck and Loon 2005 [2000]: 218) acknowledges that in contemporary societies the increase of risk creates an environment of powerlessness that can lead to inaction. Giddens also refers to a general atmosphere of impotence because individuals may feel they have no control over the world. But even in this kind of social background, permeated by risk and uncertainty, individuals still have to make choices and to produce their own biographies: they are forced to do it. So, those considerations don't change substantially the analytical focus of both authors on the empowerment of agency. Beck's and Giddens's subjects are not inactive, but creators of their own trajectories.

³ In other words, it is a reality that no longer exists but which is still conceptualized in sociology (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2006 [2001]: 202–13).

inequality, but the beginning of radicalised inequalities' (Beck 2007: 680; see also Beck 2013). According to Giddens (1994b: 187):

In some circumstances, burgeoning reflexivity is emancipatory. In other respects, and in a diversity of contexts, it produces the contrary: an intensifying of stratification. Lash is quite right to emphasize this point. Increasing freedom for some regularly goes along with, or is even the cause of, greater oppression for others.⁴

However, for these authors, inequalities are not organized by and do not materialize in social groups as in previous historical periods. The fluidity of structures does not allow for the kind of static positioning inherent to the notion of class structures; rather, structures promote a kind of social positioning that is ambivalent, precarious and always subject to change and relocation.

The over-emphasis on the empowerment of agency vis-à-vis structural causality is contradicted by many empirical studies, which confirm the continued framing power of traditional social structures such as class, family or gender. In Portugal a significant body of work has been developed the results of which point precisely in this direction. These studies do it, however, without neglecting the agency dimension of practices. There is indeed a strong tradition in Portuguese sociology to combine and complement structure and agency in the analysis of social phenomena, be it about social inequality in general, be it more specifically about social class, education, gender, youth, ethnicity, lifestyles, cultural practices and identity (see, for example, Abrantes 2013; Costa 2012; Lopes 2000; Mauritti 2009; Torres 2002).

Over the last decade, much research has also been undertaken, especially in the United Kingdom, following the theoretical framework proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) with the goal of elaborating an empirical grounded critique of these theories of social change (Atkinson 2010; Bennett et al. 2009; Devine et al. 2005; Savage 2000; Skeggs 2004). According to these studies, social structures have changed, but the role that structures such as social class play in shaping individual experiences persists, even though their impact may occur in new parameters. The complexity of social structures cannot be reduced to a polarization between winners and losers. If one agrees with Giddens that the reflexive monitoring of action is part of individual practices, it makes little sense to say, as Lash does, that a sub-set of agents is excluded from the exercise of reflexivity.

Sometimes the criticism of de-structuration processes tends to reproduce the very principles on which it disagrees. This is the case for Atkinson's work (2010), which criticizes the excessive emphasis ascribed to individual agency but then swings to the other extreme of the zero-sum game regarding structure and agency. One of the main conclusions of Atkinson's research is that personal reflexivity is a 'faux reflexivity': it is a spontaneous sociology produced by individuals' practical consciousness, that creates the illusion of knowledge, but in reality it cannot account for the real causal effects of structures. This is so because it consists merely in the consideration of available options circumscribed by the objective field of possibles. In other words, there are no unlimited and totally open choices, and people do not consciously consider all the relevant social factors that shape action when making a decision. Atkinson's agents are ultimately Bourdieu's agents (1984 [1979]).

⁴ Giddens' position on the matter is more ambivalent than that of the other authors, particularly if his early work (1979; 1981 [1973]; 2004 [1984]) is taken into account (Alexander 1996; Bagguley 2003). Nonetheless, the idea that social classes have lost their framing power is present in his subsequent work on modernity and social change (1990; 1991).

On this view, structure and agency seem to be mutually exclusive. Their coexistence is in fact impossible if the concept of reflexivity is understood in the same way that Beck, Giddens and Lash conceive it, i.e. as synonymous with the lack of structural constraints on action. Atkinson's (2007a; 2007b; 2007c) critique of a concept of a weakened structure is of great relevance, but it does not have to imply the opposite – the decline of individual agency.

There is no empirical evidence to support the idea that structure and reflexivity cannot coexist, and cannot jointly affect human conduct. Beck, Giddens and Lash, as well as their critics like Atkinson have yet to prove this incompatibility conclusively. Processes of individualization are not irreconcilable with ongoing dynamics of integration and reintegration; indeed they work together. This contradicts the theories that view individuals as being lost, isolated and lacking any kind of symbolic points of reference.

Far from this being the case, as traditional ties have weakened it is no longer possible to think about individuals belonging indisputably and solely to one or to a limited number of social groups. As scholars such as Bernard Lahire (2003; 2011 [1998]), have pointed out, identities tend more and more to emerge from different kinds of belonging, different forms of identification and differentiation – depending on the social relations in which agents take part – that may even contradict each other. Thus, it is not the case that individuals have a fixed, essential and permanent identity. Identities are historically constructed by means of an ongoing and never fully finished process. The empowerment of agency does not occur in an institutional vacuum; it takes place in dynamic contexts of pluri-socialization, which both constrain and enable human action.

4. *Ambiguous nature of agency.* The agency empowerment in reflexive modernization societies presupposes liberated individuals, who are free to choose, to decide and to produce their own biographies. However, it is difficult to reconcile this idea with the view that processes of change generate isolated individuals who struggle against the unpredictable and negative effects of new social configurations. 'On the one side, we can easily discern new opportunities that potentially free us from the limitations of the past. On the other, almost everywhere, we see the possibility of catastrophe' (Giddens 1994b: 184).

Reflexivity is seen as freedom but also as a force victimizing agents, insofar as they are forced to be reflexive. Beck goes so far as to state that individuals are victims of individualization (Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003: 24). How can one render compatible the notion of individuals who are in control of their lives with the idea that the world is a hostile place filled with dangers that agents cannot control? How can one reconcile the notion that actors are empowered with the idea they are victimized? It makes sense to think individuals feel uncertain and insecure regarding the paths they might take in a context of broader choices. But it is less clear how agents supposedly gain greater control over themselves living in a world out of control. Giddens mobilizes the notion of unintended consequences of action in order to acknowledge and to problematize possible unexpected outcomes of practices, but Beck and Lash never clarify this paradox.

At the root of this issue is, for Beck, the use of a concept of reflexivity stripped from its real meaning. Citing Latour, Beck states that: "Reflexive" does not mean that people today lead a more conscious life. On the contrary, "reflexive" signifies not an "increase of mastery and consciousness, but

a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible” (Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003: 3). It is hard to understand such an ambiguous concept and to see how it contributes to elucidate processes of change in modernity.

5. *Absence of a solid empirical grounding.* One of the main weaknesses of the theories of individualization and reflexive modernization is a fragile empirical grounding: ‘the individualization thesis has become so commonly accepted in the social sciences that it is neither tested nor operationalized adequately through appropriate research designs and conceptualization’ (Brannen and Nilsen 2005: 413).

Various studies have disputed the basis of these theories by operationalizing and empirically testing them (Adams 2007: 51-52). These studies point to the importance of the role that social structures play in sustaining identity-forming processes and in the organization of individual and societal experiences (Atkinson 2010; Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Mills 2007; O’Connor 2006; Phillips and Western 2005; Plumridge and Thomson 2003; Skeggs 2004).

In addition to a lack of empirical grounding, it should also be noted that Beck’s, Giddens’s and Lash’s approaches refer essentially to large-scale changes particularly observable in specific national contexts, and it is not always easy to transpose (much less directly) their findings to different social realities. Sociological concepts are not a-historical and cannot be applied in a decontextualized manner. For instance, the analysis of national contexts, such as the Portuguese one, characterized by the coexistence of late modernity traits and modernization deficits (Almeida, Costa and Machado 1994; Almeida et al. 2000; Machado and Costa 1998), in the light of reflexive modernization theories requires a thorough process of adjustment. In this sense, the approaches of Beck, Giddens and Lash should be contextually nuanced. It is crucial to reflect upon the pertinence of the concepts according to the analytical object, doing adaptations and using complementary perspectives that address the contextual particularities. That is also why the empirical work is so important.

Concluding remarks

All of the discussed weaknesses constitute serious limitations on using these theories to operationalize the concept of personal reflexivity. But it is enriching to discuss them since they can be thought as the ground from which to think critically about the dynamics of change in the contemporary world and the role that reflexivity plays within it.

From the group of authors discussed above, the main contribution can be found in Giddens’ work, especially in his previous studies to the analysis of social transformations, where he developed central ideas such as the differentiation between levels of consciousness, as well as the reflexive monitoring of action as an integral part of human conduct. But the importance of these theories lies above all in the fact they place reflexivity (whether as cause or effect) at the heart of the analysis of social processes. Furthermore, they provide theoretical instruments to think about the profound impact systemic changes can have on individual experiences.

The arguments deployed by Beck, Giddens and Lash become more relevant when they are articulated with studies that analyse other dimensions of personal reflexivity. Scholars such as Alexander (1988), Archer (2003; 2007; 2012), Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), Lahire (2011 [1998]) and Mouzelis (2008, 2010)

allow for a further discussion of this concept. The analysis of reflexivity can be enriched when the debate around the empowerment of agency described by theorists of reflexive modernization is combined with studies (1) that place greater emphasis on structural components; (2) that focus on the less conscious aspects of action; (3) that highlight the importance of interaction; (4) that examine the relationship between the internal and external environments of action; and (5) that study the specific social mechanisms that generate reflexive deliberations.

The combination of some elements of the reflexive modernization approach with these different analytical elements makes it possible to elaborate a more complex and multidimensional research model (Caetano 2011; 2014). Studying personal reflexivity requires, first of all, the acknowledgment that social reality has both a material and a mental existence. Social structures should not be understood only in their external component to individual consciences. The causal effects of structures, constraining or enabling individual projects, also take place internally. Bourdieu's dispositionalist theory (1984 [1979]) gives us important analytical tools to reflect on these internal-external dynamics. In another sense, Archer's work (2003; 2007) is crucial to understand how reflexivity is exercised, through internal conversations, in a personal space of mental privacy. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between external and internal dimensions of action (Alexander 1988; Mouzelis 2008).

The concept of reflexivity is, at many levels, connected to the notion of individual autonomy. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the exercise of reflexivity is inseparable from the social positioning of agents regarding the distribution of different types of resources. In line with the reflexive modernization approach, social actors have a thorough knowledge of their social realities: they are creative; they make choices; they have relative autonomy in the definition of their pathways; they give meaning to their actions; they are intentional and have reasons and motivations for acting; they make plans and projects; and they have causal powers. But all of this does not mean absolute control over their social conducts. The degree of autonomy they have does not arise in social conditions of their choosing. Thus, in order to understand actors' reflexive deliberations, we have to take into account that agents are embedded in structural frameworks that limit the objective possibilities of their actions (Alexander 1988; Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; Lahire 2003; 2011 [1998]; Mouzelis 2008).

The inner life of individuals is not composed solely by conscious dynamics. Subjects are not in a permanent state of alert. It is true that the analysis of personal reflexivity requires special attention be given to the more conscious mechanisms. But the interiority of each person is also constituted by processes that take place without individuals being aware of them. The concept of dispositions makes it possible to account for that pre-reflexive component of human action (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). As Lahire (2011) states, subjects can take dispositions as objects for reflection, but they tend to operate without being questioned.

It is also important to note that even though reflexivity is mainly a mental process and does not necessarily have any external manifestation, it can still be exercised discursively in interaction contexts (Mouzelis 2008). In co-presence situations individuals define, negotiate and rework their goals and projects. These social events may trigger mental processes, but also the exercise of what Giddens (2004 [1984]) calls discursive consciousness.

So, reflexivity should not be analysed only in its relation to social change. The transformations examined by Beck, Giddens and Lash in late modern societies

must indeed be taken into account considering their effects on individual agency. But personal reflexivity is not limited to these processes of change, nor does it overlap the continuous dynamics of social reproduction. Agreeing with Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) that personal reflexivity is a general ability of all human beings, its constitution, definition and exercise are also anchored in the continuity and stability features of individuals' daily lives and biographical trajectories.

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