

Routledge Advances in Sociology

FRAMING SOCIAL THEORY

REASSEMBLING THE LEXICON OF CONTEMPORARY
SOCIAL SCIENCES

Edited by
Paola Rebughini and Enzo Colombo



Framing Social Theory

This book proposes a reconstruction of contemporary social theory, focusing on thematic issues rather than on authors or schools of thought. In so doing, it endeavours to bridge epistemological approaches and locate critical claims shared by the main trajectories and notions of sociological theoretical debate.

The book explores the current forms of social science theorization through the key themes of Agency, Anthropocene, Coloniality, Intersectionality, Othering, Singularization, Technoscience and Uncertainty. Focusing on these key themes, it highlights their usefulness for discussions of inequality, neoliberalism, eurocentrism, androcentrism or anthropocentrism – in order to examine these issues in a new light and look beyond the classic divides of social theory.

Intended for an academic audience interested in social theory, scholars and post-graduate students in sociology, social sciences, anthropology, social geography, social psychology and globalization studies will find this book useful.

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Introduction

Paola Rebughini and Enzo Colombo

Topical keywords and thematic nodes

Books devoted to social theory are usually a collection of scholarly essays and classifications of theoretical positions. Sometimes they explain legacies, genealogies and affiliations, especially if they focus on a specific theoretical frame; more frequently, they move forward by comparing and contrasting analytical perspectives. The aim of this book is different, and it is twofold. Firstly, more than resuming theoretical traditions, it intends to highlight eight current topical keywords as analytical notions by conducting a transversal theoretical discussion that extends beyond specific scholars and legacies. Secondly, avoiding a simple encyclopaedic list of popular notions in social sciences, the book aims to frame them by highlighting possible connections, bridging common epistemological approaches.

The choice of eight keywords – Agency, Anthropocene, Coloniality, Intersectionality, Othering, Singularization, Technoscience, Uncertainty – is not random, reductive or related to the temporary popularity of a notion. Certainly, the list could be different, but these keywords have been chosen for their capacity to enable a wider discussion more innovative for social theory; that is, for their capacity to intercept different theoretical traditions and frame them in a new way. This is, for example, the case of a notion such as ‘Anthropocene’ whose meaning, use and criticism as discussed in the literature include different epistemological and methodological references from Marxian materialism to post-anthropocentrism. Even more so, it is the case of the analytical notion of ‘agency’ whose meaning has expanded in recent decades to embrace opposed references such as subjectivation theory and non-human action. By means of these keywords, the book aims to convey the complexity of the current remixing of social theory traditions and the emergence of new theoretical paradigms.

Some of these notions are older and more well-established than others; some are reciprocally related; and others are epistemically more counterposed. The aim of the book is to ‘stay with the trouble’ of social theory, avoiding sealed boundaries and epistemological self-references. Consequently, it adopts each theoretical perspective that deals with this as a problem, as a trouble, not as a solution.

Each of the eight keywords selected represents a potential entry or exit point for the interpretation and understanding of social reality. They are crucial in current theoretical debate not only for their capacity to shed light on specific and important current social issues, but also and especially for their capacity to suggest connections, to enable shifts from one term to the others, to constitute not only a vocabulary with which to talk about the social but also an epistemological and empirical ‘toolbox’ with which to analyse the social.

Indeed, social theory is not a purely speculative exercise; it is always related to social contexts and their social, historical and material transformations. Classic paradigms are today rediscovered in terms of their eurocentrism, androcentrism or anthropocentrism, and they are integrated with the analysis of new areas of research, such as the environment and non-human actors, as well as with the transformation of more classic theoretical frames, such as the critique of neoliberalism or the mechanisms of ‘othering’.

Rather than mapping and reconstructing the landscape of past and contemporary social theories as an ensemble constructed by scholars or grand theories, the book tries to navigate through the constellation of theories by framing them in terms of some emerging keyword and thematic nodes. The aim is to trace the encounter and cross-fertilization between social theories within the frame of a topic notion and thereby shed light on the current merging of theoretical apparatuses formerly kept separate or even treated as conflicting. We consider this as a historical process involving the transformation of theoretical apparatuses as they intertwine with the transformation of social life in its cultural and material aspects, in a world where the experience of complexity, connectivity and instability cannot but concern also the theorization of the social. The keywords selected are certainly not exhaustive, but they are all catalysts of a cluster of different theoretical perspectives highlighting the pluralism, the mutual relationships, and the capacity to look beyond classic dichotomies of modernity.

Outline of the book

The first chapter states the analytical purpose of the book. It explores the current troubles of social theory: that is, the way in which classic theoretical frameworks of the twentieth century are today more frequently reinterpreted and mixed together rather than being counterposed in well-identified schools of thought. Classic authors and different epistemological perspectives can converge to furnish new interpretations of the onset of new issues, such as the environmental crisis, the everyday encounter with difference or the escalation of social inequalities. Starting from a discussion of the alleged crisis of social theory, the chapter explains how working with keywords rather than specific singular theoretical schools is a way to generate and intersect theoretical debates and furnish new grids for the analysis of social change.

The second chapter presents a critical cartography of the notion of agency, of its current transformations, and interdisciplinary intertwining. Whilst in modern

social sciences, agency used to be conceptualized as a property of the subject, and the discussion was focused on the extension of such properties, such as intentionality, more recently agency has been expanded to include other actors and theoretical approaches beyond the boundaries of the humanities and social sciences. The chapter identifies different cultures of agency originating from different theoretical debates and research fieldwork. ‘Agency’ is a concept widespread in social sciences, and it is usually evoked to refer to autonomous action, capacity of choice, human freedom as traditionally opposed to actions determined by structural constraints or interiorized forms of *dressage*. However, although we are accustomed to anthropocentrism, we are still uncomfortable with the evidence that we are losing control of the material and social environment, as highlighted by notions such as Anthropocene and Technoscience. The chapter analyses the intersecting trajectories of these epistemological and theoretical traditions and the new social issues that they highlight.

The third chapter focuses on the notion of Anthropocene. This appeared around the year 2000, quickly raising its status from a technical term and a scientific hypothesis to a keyword – or catchword – of major import in the public debate worldwide. It conveys the idea that humankind has acquired a capacity to intervene in the world which is on a par with – hence directly affects – the biophysical dynamics of the planet. The chapter addresses the Anthropocene as a result of a major transformation in late-modern accounts of reality and agency, largely coincident with the advent of post-Fordism in economics, neoliberalism in politics, complexity thinking in the life, matter and computational sciences, and post-foundationalism in the social sciences and humanities.

The fourth chapter discusses the issue of Coloniality, which is today a popular term in academic and activist circles around the world, albeit with different meanings and purposes. Overall, it is deployed to capture a vast array of contemporary political issues. It speaks, for instance, of the endurance of racism in modern societies; it helps to map the diverse and interconnected faces of oppression in terms of gender, class, race and forms of knowledge. Coloniality allows, as well, for recognition of the epistemic bias of institutions such as universities and cultural industries and to grasp the enduring legacies of colonialism beyond the familiar tropes of postcolonial studies, sharing similar traits with intersectionality and critical race theory. Yet, the more successful coloniality becomes in academic discussions, the more its theoretical specificity gets obscured. The chapter highlights the multiple meanings of this notion, mapping them and offering some interpretative keys.

Chapter 5 discusses the notion of Intersectionality, which today is a fundamental reference in the theoretical debate, far beyond gender studies, and is able to capture a transversal array of analytical issues. Intersectionality as a theoretical tool can be considered a ‘traveling theory’ in a globalized context even though it cannot be detached from its contexts of analysis or used as a free-floating signifier. This automatically involves appropriations, amendments and changes in response to the original meaning, as well as possible connections with other theoretical

discussions such as those on agency, coloniality or racialization. Hence, the chapter depicts some of the current debates engaging with the pros and cons of the global implementation of the concept by dealing with the controversy on master categories. In accordance with the overall purpose of the book, the chapter highlights themes and questions for future lines of inquiry.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the notion of Othering. It does so by starting from its intertwinement with the idea of whiteness. Long before they ventured across the oceans to settle the Americas, Europeans were formulating the foundations of Whiteness. Elite European males institutionalized, or established, Whiteness in an effort to control Blacks, Native Americans, women, and others. Gender-specific laws affecting all racial, ethnic, and class groups helped to sustain White privilege and White normative structures. Considering that philosophy, music, art, language, democratic structures and civilization begin in white space/heterosexual spaces, the chapter examines how this history is made not only by racialization but also by a process of othering people around the globe, particularly within the Americas, and how it resonates with the topic of Coloniality.

The seventh chapter resumes more analytical discussion in regard to the notion of Singularization. The chapter discusses the ways in which the structural processes of singularization at work in very different social spheres transform contemporary societies. It argues that a set of transformations – usually denoted with apparently different and disconnected terms – converges on and communicates with each other, becoming a sort of prism of the current era. This is for example the case of the changes that have occurred at the level of industrial production systems and in services, which break with the parameters given by the old mass society and favour increasingly differentiated goods and services. Or it is the case of the transformations that have occurred at the level of institutions (often analysed from the standpoint of individualization or biopolitics) that radicalize the call for singularity and personal responsibility in their interpellations. The chapter frames the topic of singularity against the background of historical transformations underscored also by other keywords discussed in this book.

Chapter 8 deals with the issue of Technoscience and Science and Technology Studies (STS). It starts with a discussion of the word ‘and’ in this now-classic formulation. Dropping the ‘and’ from the expression ‘science and technology’ therefore means rejecting the distinction between the two terms and affirming that they cannot be treated separately. Because technology is defined as the transformation of abstract scientific knowledge into applicative machines that work in the social context, it can be considered an inner part of society. Following the evolution of technoscience provides an opportunity to reflect on the contribution that this STS concept has made to much-debated issues like the problem of relativism and that of power. At the same time, technoscience has been a concept that feminist approaches and postcolonial studies have used to show how and to what extent science and technology are responsible for maintaining social inequalities. Moreover, technoscience is a concept situated within the ‘hybrids’ realm, another concept that has been introduced and much debated by STS. Consequently,

technoscience is a significant concept that sheds new light also on the fundamental problem of human identity, thus traversing many other sociological issues, some of which are discussed in other chapters of this book.

Finally, Chapter 9 discusses how Uncertainty has come to constitute, both in individual experience and in social research, one of the keys to understanding contemporary social reality. After placing the theme of uncertainty in the broader scenario of transformations related to the development of globalized society, the chapter considers how uncertainty, its effects, its representation, and individual and institutional responses to it, transform relationships and contemporary social institutions. Specific attention is paid to the idea of crisis and emergency, as well as to the rhetoric of threat and fear as guidelines for individual narratives of national biopolitics and, more generally, for contemporary governmental logic. Forms of adaptation and resistance to uncertainty and insecurity are analysed in light of everyday experience. Starting from this specific perspective, and in conversation with other keywords of this book, the chapter analyses how uncertainty and crisis produce new forms of individualization and singularization, new forms of belonging and exclusion, but also new forms of resistance, activism, participation and collective aggregation that indicate new forms of agency.

Staying With the Trouble of Social Theory

Paola Rebughini and Enzo Colombo

Are we dealing with a crisis?

By ‘theory’ we usually mean a speculative abstract construction or a reasonable interpretation and explanation of facts and events. A theory is first of all a ‘gaze’ – a particular way of looking at something – related to the capacity to theorize. Etymologically, the Greek notion of *θεωρία* is an act of contemplation, of seeing and knowing, and it is closely related to the notion of *thauma* (*θαύμα*), astonishment, anxiety, and concern about what is seen and known. In Greek thought, the ability to theorize arises not only from wonder and amazement, but also from apprehension and fear due to the need to understand experience. It stems from the restlessness that induces people to find reasons, in the awareness that what is already known is not enough. Thus, theorizing is an essential necessity of knowledge: that is, the necessity to search for and to make sense of the incontrovertible against the solace of the *doxa* (Severino, 2016).

With modernity and secularism, this necessity has become evident for social knowledge as well, and it is at the core of the research by the classical and contemporary founding fathers and mothers of social thought (Seidman, 2013). By ‘social theory’ is meant the constellation of analytical frameworks used as a grid to interpret social phenomena characterized not only by internal differences of perspective but also by the alternation of core themes. A social theory can have a more analytical and speculative setting, with a more explicit ethical or critical stance, or it can be a range of explanatory approaches and heuristic devices with which to interpret empirical data. The notion of ‘theory’ is used to refer to paradigms developed by individual scholars, as well as to refer to a wider ensemble of perspectives accumulated by a single issue, for example, gender, race, technoscience, or Anthropocene. While theories associated with a scholar can have mixed fortunes in the internationalized and specialized academic debate, theories associated with a theme can have greater or lesser socio-political visibility, federating different and even conflictual perspectives, and they may sometimes have a high degree of interdisciplinarity encompassing philosophical, anthropological, political, historical or technoscientific approaches.

Indeed, a social theory is always closely intertwined with the socio-historical context in which it has been developed, as well as with its cultural orientations. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the complexity and connectivity characterizing current globalization have boosted the cross-fertilization of different social theories developed in the last century. This merger of theoretical frames arising from different cultural and philosophical traditions can be fostered by single scholars or by areas of discussion, such as feminism and gender, or ecology and environmental crisis. As a result, the toolbox of social theory expands to include a mix and a variety of languages and concepts fostering the ability to understand complex phenomena in the different situations in which they occur and are analysed, but also fostering a certain fragmentation of the discipline.

This situation has been frequently described as a crisis of social theory, in terms of the dissolution of schools of thought and of their political influence on public debate and social life, rather than as a historical transformation of the way in which theorizing is conducted. Arguably, this is more evident in the discussion about the role of Marxian thought in social sciences, at least after the Frankfurt School (Giddens, 1979, 1981; Kellner, 1990); but it is also related to an alleged crisis of social theory as a creative means to analyse social change, because of the separation of sociological discourse with political and ethical concerns, and the disconnection of local empirical research with overarching theoretical apparatus (Wardell and Turner, 1986; Hage, 1994; Sica, 1998; Savage and Burrows, 2007; Gane, 2011; Burawoy, 2021).

Such analysis in terms of crisis was originally conducted by Alvin Gouldner half a century ago in his book *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), and even before by Charles Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) which was primarily a cultural critique of the role of social sciences in American society, and an extensive critique of the fetishization of grand theories in methodological and epistemological terms. At that time, in the USA, social theory mainly referred to the work of Talcott Parsons and to the fading hegemony of functionalism, but also to the abstract empiricism of Paul Lazarsfeld. Critical observers like Wright Mills and Gouldner considered the sociology of knowledge to be the core element of social theory. Especially the analysis of Wright Mills on the academization of the discipline, or on liberalism as a ‘theory of society’, was attuned with the analysis of the Frankfurt School (Wright Mills, 1963). Similar analyses on the crisis, or even on ‘the end’ of social theory, continued in America in the following years. They were conducted by influential scholars such as Randall Collins, who saw in the end of systematic explanatory theories an inevitable weakening of sociology as a discipline, especially when compared to kindred ones like economics or history (Collins and Waller, 1994).

Paradoxically, the end of grand theories such as the functionalist paradigm paved the way – not only in the USA but also in Europe and in non-Western countries – to a free interpretation of different theoretical references and to reciprocal influence among the most popular scholars. However, this pluralism of

perspectives and focuses of analysis was still implicitly interpreted as a lack of 'true' social theory, and hence as a useless fragmentation and hyper-specialization of the discipline – a sign of the internal 'disagreement over where the emphasis should lie' (Collins and Waller, 1994: 16).

At this juncture, the sensation of collapse was mainly related to the crisis of the notions of *society* and *social* brought about by the end of functionalism (Touraine, 1981), but also by the emergence of a plurality of critical perspectives rooted outside the Western world in gender and colour gazes, in material and environmental issues, rather than in the abstract and Western idea of society. While, on the one hand, this brings to mind a sort of 'metatheoretical civil war' (Collins and Waller, 1994: 17), on the other hand, it is a sign of effervescence and opportunities.

Unexpectedly, the title of the aforementioned book by Gouldner sounded like a dark prophecy at a time of high dynamism of sociology, closely connected to social movements and to the social change of post-industrial societies. This was an exciting time for social theory: on the one hand, there were attempts to develop encompassing systemic theoretical frames able to overcome the limitations of Parsons' functionalism, such as Luhmann's system theory or Habermas' theory of communicative action; on the other hand, there were the attempts to overcome the classical dualism of objectivism and subjectivism, as in the case of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, not to mention the development of new sections of social theory based on thematic gazes, such as women's studies, African-American studies, cultural studies or postcolonial studies.

And yet, some sort of crisis of social theory – perhaps not in the way prefigured by Gouldner – arrived by the end of the century, together with the crisis of sociology as a whole. The latter was evidenced by material effects, especially in the UK and the USA, such as the closure of social sciences departments due mainly to the decrease of students. Sociology was in trouble and it seemed to have lost its theoretical rationale. Actually, the crisis of sociology prefigured by Gouldner was mainly a cultural crisis. As we shall analyse later, this phase is related to the origin of the discipline within the history of industrial societies and their transformation in recent decades. Moreover, the association of sociology as an academic discipline with political engagement during the 1960s and 1970s is a clear example of this cultural connection, with a more evident emphasis in the English-speaking countries than in continental Europe or elsewhere. The pessimism of American sociologists about the future of social theory usually relates it to the political fortune of sociological issues, and to the political role of social movement cycles. For example, according to Burawoy (2021), nowadays it is no longer appropriate to speak about a crisis of sociology because of a renewal of interest in sociological issues related to the new wave of international mobilizations such as Occupy, Arab Springs, Indignados, Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter, and so on.

From this perspective, social theory and sociology as a whole have, or no longer have, the wind of history to blow in their sails according to the political moment. Moreover, this analysis reduces the entire history of social theory to its effects in America, from the end of World War II to the end of the wave of social

movements and leftist culture on campuses. Certainly, the weakening of interest in sociology in the USA had an international influence, but its effects were less important in Europe and most of all in the non-Western world, where social sciences continued to be more deeply engaged with the analysis of social change and social inequalities, and where the reference to social theory as critical theory remained vigorous.

Nevertheless, the crisis of the attractiveness of sociology – and especially of social theory – is not just related to a lack of interest in critical analysis or in the individualist instrumental reason of the students, today more professionally oriented and less accustomed to theoretical debates. Moreover, the destiny of social theory, and with it of sociology, cannot be analysed solely in contingent terms; and also ‘the wind of history’ influencing theorization has to be grasped in its broader and recursive circulation. Hence, we may consider the end of grand theories in Parsons’ style, as well as the end of personalized schools of thought like those created by the founders of contemporary social theory of the second half of the twentieth century, as an opportunity to regenerate social theory and especially its capacity to furnish tools for critical reflexivity.

On the shoulders of giants

For the advocates of the crisis of social theory, the main current problem seems to be a lack of clarity about the issues that social theory should address and the related credibility of its critical perspective. The theoretical approaches of the golden age generated a constellation of debates – the role of individual action, the ambivalences of social order, the structure of communication processes, the opportunities for social mobility and so on – that framed the discipline and its critical force of interpretation of major social problems such as social inequalities or democratic processes. Today, on the contrary, such theoretical debates seem more confused, scattered, together with the instability of public forms of social criticism.

The fragmentation of social theory, the loss of legitimacy of grand theories, the production of continuous commentaries on the classics, are usually perceived as a trivialization and a path towards the uselessness of theorizing in social sciences. This attitude is perhaps more frequent among those who identify strictly social theory with critical theory. The core idea is that social critics need a strong social theory, a large-scale narrative about the social world (Walzer, 1993). In this case, the notion of critical theory refers usually to the multidisciplinary social critique conducted by the Frankfurt School, and especially by Adorno and Horkheimer, whose work was rooted in the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic. Other forms of critical social thought, like that of Michel Foucault, as well as of postmodern scholars like Jean-François Lyotard or Jean Baudrillard, are often considered to be ineffective forms of critical theory, mainly because of their internal nihilism and relativism, together with their radical critique of the Enlightenment (Habermas, 1987). Compared to the critical apparatus coming from Kant, Hegel, Marx and Frankfurt

School, French post-structural and postmodern approaches with their emphasis on the scattering and dissolving of modern certainties are not considered as real alternatives to social critique or as useful analyses of post-industrial societies. Furthermore, the critical social theorising from these approaches is more clearly opposed to any attempt to produce a unified critique from a single theoretical perspective, such as a theory of capitalism as a socio-historical process. Thus, on the one hand, social theory and social criticism are distinguishable projects; on the other hand, the alleged crisis of social theory can be associated with the crisis of critical theory, since social theory is potentially a critical knowledge of society and of its pathologies (Honneth, 2008).

Still, both classical Critical theory and ‘French theory’ mark the passage from an economistic Marxian critique to a more attentive cultural critique. They both insist on reflexivity, share the aspiration for the unification of theory and practice, are moral critiques of capitalism, and they are focused on privileged objects, of analysis, like consumption and culture industries, communication, or institutional ways to produce individuals. Furthermore, also social theory based on empirical research has frequently adopted a critical tone, even though it does not explicitly describe itself as a critical theory. This is the case of some of the main sociological theoretical apparatuses of the last half-century, like that of Pierre Bourdieu, certainly critical of the neoliberal turn, the weakening of the democratic public space, or the consequences of domination through consumerism (Bourdieu, 1987); this is as well the case of more recent attempts to analyse critique as individual capacity (Boltanski, 2011), or as a way to overcome a merely economic approach to capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). With different focuses, every social theory involves a gaze on society, a prioritizing source of knowledge; and when such a gaze wants to be critical it also implicitly offers an idea of a possible ‘good society’, less dominated, less individualistic, less unequal.

In this book, we shall see that, besides the already classical debate among Critical theory, French theory, Foucault and Bourdieu, other social theories have arisen in recent decades, giving new life to the intertwinement of social theory and critical perspectives. Intersectionality and coloniality are good examples of this. Intersectionality (see Chapter 5) has been proclaimed as a form of critical social theory (Hill-Collins, 2019) because of its intrinsic capacity to investigate, in manifold dimensions, the complexity of domination in current societies, and to explore how oppressed actors produce a self-defined oppositional knowledge. Rather than developing an all-encompassing theory of society – usually associated with the presumption of universal truth – the intersectional approach is based on a methodology of bottom-up theorizing which starts from the experience of subordinated social actors, such as black women, indigenous people or refugees, and on their own capacity to produce critical knowledge. The same applies to Coloniality (see Chapter 4), where critical knowledge and social theory intertwine in the historical analysis of colonialism as a concrete – economic and cultural – basis of modernity, transcending the Western-centric production of social theory, whose

critical stances too often forgot the colonial imprint of most of Enlightenment thought (Bhambra, 2015; Lugones, 2010).

With or without a critical statement, in the spirit of the founders of the discipline, constructing a theory of the social was first of all an endeavour to conceive the social as a new analytical space. It was a way to make possible ‘a connection between individual and society, and it even made possible a conception of how social systems might be shaped by human will’ (Coleman, 1986: 1310). With modernity, values, habits and institutions were understood as human products, and they needed a science capable of studying them. The social theorist was born not as a philosopher but as a public intellectual, someone with the role of shedding light on the doxa. This was the aim from Montesquieu to Marx, from Weber to Bourdieu, who all considered – in the words of the latter – renouncing this committed role to be a sort of ‘failure to provide assistance’ (Bourdieu, 1993). In this view, social theory is the only way to achieve reliable knowledge about the social-scientific knowledge different from both philosophical and journalistic analyses (Martuccelli, 1999).

As again Bourdieu noted, the social space is the basic metaphor of sociology and a core element of social theory, expressed as a system, a structure, as a situated result of social relations or conflicts, as an ensemble of forms of practical know-how; the problem is the nature of the ‘social’. While for Bourdieu the space of the social is mainly a site of hierarchical relations, the degree of abstractedness and constraint of the conceptualization of the ‘social’ is very variable in the landscape of social theories. For example, in an article of 1981 Alain Touraine already suggested to remove it along with the notion of ‘society’ as derivative of it (Touraine, 1981).

Hence, the first historical phase of social theory was characterized by the search for overarching knowledge about the social and by a strong link between scholarship and commitment. The rationale of social theory was not speculative but to make sense of the collective world and of its contradictions, possibly imagining a better future. This was still the legacy of the historical origins of social theory in the philosophies of the Enlightenment and in their ethical and political purposes. From the founding thinkers of the discipline until the 1970s, this was the main *raison d’être* of social theory on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in the non-Western world. This explains why the critical side of social theory was so important, especially among post-war sociologists, and why a theory of the social sought to grasp the intrinsic processes of the social even while observing a specific element of it, such as education, communication or consumption. Such intrinsic processes were those of social action, of social order and domination, or the dispute between micro and macro perspectives on the social.

The crisis that Wright Mills or Gouldner observed was mainly related to the end of this phase, and to the beginning of a specialization of the theory of the social focused on more specific fields of analysis, methodologies and analytical key-notions. This was as well characterized by a self-referential expert culture,

usually nationally or continentally based, with very few scholars engaged in the public debate (Beck, 2007). Reduced to expert knowledge, social theory was a sort of exegetical – or at best hermeneutical – sector of analysis in which classical and contemporary theorists were discussed and commented on. Again, especially American scholars saw this as related to the cultural turn of the 1980s, which is usually considered as a phase of backflow and stasis of the critical attitude characterized by the triumphs of neoliberal ideologies and negative judgements on the ‘excesses’ of the previous years (Seidman, 2013). However, this is only one part of the story.

Whilst in the USA social theory seemed to suffer from this atmosphere, in Europe, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the success of the theoretical proposals of scholars like Bourdieu, Giddens, Touraine, Habermas, Latour, who initiated the renovation of social theory by discussing its long-standing ambivalences such as actor/structure, subjectivism/objectivism, nature/culture. With some exceptions – for example, Luhmann’s system theory or Habermas’ theory of communicative action – these were no longer attempts to discover the overarching principle of the social order or social action – that is, a general theory of society. Rather, they were ‘middle range’ theoretical frameworks, to use Merton’s (1949) term: that is, working hypotheses that evolve during empirical research and the observation of particular aspects of social change, although without renouncing the effort to develop a unifying theory. In this case, some mediating theoretical principles – such as structuration, habitus, historicity or practice – could guide social research. Meanwhile, the philosophies of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, also successfully imported into the USA, were not only stimuli for social theory discussion; they also fostered reflection internal to social movements of women, gays and lesbians, African-Americans, immigrants and postcolonial actors as they explored the topics of identity, body, sexuality, domination and cultural processes; and above all, as they challenged the claims of universal validity of social theories framed by Western, male and middle-class scholars.

Indeed, also outside the western world, postcolonial thought was a fundamental resource for social theory renovation and for a new sociology of knowledge (see Chapter 4). From this vibrancy, new *area studies* boosted reflection on the keywords of social theory. Simultaneously, the correspondence of society with the nation-state was called into question by the emerging discussion on globalization and the transformation of geopolitical equilibriums (Castells, 1998; Beck, 2005). Social theory and its critical range could no longer be based on a national perspective.

This relativization of social perspectives and the pluralism of issues is a ‘crisis’ mainly in the sense of an opportunity for renewal. After the mourning for the all-encompassing grand theories of industrial societies, a new opportunity could be federating the resources and the insights of different theoretical perspectives towards the analysis of themes and topics, which relevance appeared as historically paramount. Social theory is today increasingly multidisciplinary as it reassembles scholars and perspectives beyond sociology, while federative issues, such

as uncertainty, technoscience or Anthropocene, are no longer exclusively sociological. In our opinion, it is mainly across the focus on some topics – such as those discussed in this book – that it is possible to bring social theory back into the public debate, restoring its original social purpose and capacity to discuss the future. This could also be a way to remedy the problem of the too professionalized, and sometimes arcane, language of social theory – today completely marginal in the public discussion – by bringing the ethical vocation of social theory closer to public concerns.

Federating themes and vocabularies

The shift of the accent from the author and the school, much more frequently created by – Western – male rather than female authors, to federative themes introduces new spaces for the expression of social thought. Authors and schools often imply the ability to construct a unitary language, an innovative lexicon within which to selectively frame the phenomena analysed. Within this self-referential vocabulary, social reality acquires a new coherence that allows for specific knowledge. For example, this is the case of the grid of mediating concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu to frame his interpretation of social inequalities and social structure, or the even more all-inclusive analytical apparatus of Niklas Luhmann.

The theory of the single author and of the single school consists of ‘closing’, ‘bordering’ and ‘delimiting’ social reality within an interpretative framework defined by an innovative vocabulary of interpretative notions, such as ‘habitus’ or ‘system’. It is in the knowledge and capability to articulate this specific and specialized language that the space opens up for the interpretation and understanding of social reality. We could say that an authorial and scholastic social theory aims to redefine reality within a specific linguistic and conceptual setting in which the multiplicity of experience is rearranged according to the words and concepts developed ‘within’ the intellectual college of the school itself, and usually under the leading figure of the founder. At first glance, the theoretical thought of the author and of the school is necessarily somewhat exclusive and esoteric: it implies the assumption of a specific vocabulary, only within which social reality manages to appear ordered and understandable.

This typical structure of twentieth-century social theory has profoundly changed in recent decades, with the transformation of sociology as an academic profession and with the generational passage internal to the main schools of thought which expressed the principal currents of social theory from the 1950s onwards. Such transformation seems characterized by the emergence of a social theory focused on federative themes rather than on the author and his school. This suggests a possible transition to a ‘polyglot’ social theory, where key notions originally produced within a specific school and socio-historical context can be used and combined with others to frame and interpret new social problems.

Various contemporary phenomena – from the intensification of globalization processes to the centrality of knowledge and information – reveal a new

contradiction at the basis of contemporary theoretical knowledge: on the one hand, the exponential growth of knowledge implies hyper-specialization; on the other hand, the complexity generated by this growth requires knowledge and communication skills that traverse disciplinary boundaries. The development of separate languages hinders communication rather than increasing the ability to understand. It is often useful to encourage cross-fertilization, that is, the capacity to switch from one language to another, rather than sectorization. Social scientists working in or from peripheral or southern societies increasingly question the reliability of the toolbox offered by mainstream sociological theory – often the result of Western sociology and of insights rooted in Western contexts – for understanding a diverse and plural social world (Arjomand and Reis, 2013; Go, 2016; Santos, 2016; Araujo, 2021).

This new phase, characterized by the focus on federative themes – such as those selected in this book – allows complexity to emerge. It does not consider complexity to be a stumbling block, a noise to be eliminated. Rather, it seeks to understand it as a constitutive element of contemporary social reality. The analytical gaze centred on federative themes stems from the perception that the main challenges faced by contemporary global societies require the construction of a social theory ‘capable of accounting for the interconnectedness of social actors and social structures across time and space’ (Susen, 2020: xv).

This entails the ability to handle a complex, differentiated, not necessarily highly homogeneous theoretical toolbox. It also entails a rethinking of the entire organization of university knowledge: from a ‘disciplinary’ knowledge, which is consolidated in the ability to create distinct scientific disciplinary sectors, to a ‘transversal’, ‘ecological’, ‘border’ knowledge, which favours translations from one disciplinary vocabulary to another which mixes languages to create new communication possibilities. The focus on federative themes fosters a border positioning of the researcher. While the positions of academic power are still firmly linked to the ability to place oneself at the ‘centre’ of a (often self-created) discipline, the cognitive practice oriented to the analysis of federative themes induces researchers to place themselves on the margin, in a ‘dynamic’ position which enables them to better follow the complexity of what is being analysed.

Moreover, the logic of the disciplinary construction is often binary: it defines one’s existence by contrast with what it is not, thus creating an identity distinction (us/them). It involves dichotomous thinking. By contrast, attention to federative issues implies polysemic thinking. However, this does not exclude or nullify the relevance of a theoretical perspective centred on the author and his/her school. These are two different ways to make sense of the term ‘social theory’ (Abend, 2008). Attention to the author and the school tends to consider social theory as oriented to providing a specific *Weltanschauung*, a coherent image of the world that allows one to look at empirical reality from a specific perspective and, thus, illuminate specific aspects of social phenomena. Attention to federative themes, instead, points out a hermeneutic logic; it aspires to providing ‘an original “interpretation”, “reading”, or “way of making sense” of a certain slice of the empirical

world. [It] may shed new light on an empirical problem, help one understand some social process, or reveal what “really” went on in a certain conjuncture’ (Ibid. 178). It does not aim to determine the final ‘causes’ of a phenomenon, but shows, in detail, how it ‘is’, how it ‘works’, how it ‘is produced’, its ‘effects’ and its ‘consequences’.

The current focus on federative themes sheds light on the low plausibility of an all-encompassing social theory – a grand theory – but at the same time, it shows the necessity and relevance of social theory. In this case, theory does not bother to circumscribe what it studies in a well-defined linguistic-conceptual field, but it tracks its own object in its connections, relations, translations and border crossings. It is an invitation to renounce a totalizing theory without renouncing the theory. It is more oriented to highlighting the ‘practical’ relevance of the theory than to expressing fidelity to a specific interpretative orientation.

To obtain this result, a perspective focused on federative themes is necessarily ‘hybrid’. It makes use of different tools to account for the complexity of its field of analysis. Hybridity does not mean incoherence or opportunistic mixing; rather, it constitutes a way to advance generalizations and theoretical interpretations which highlight the complexity and internal variability of the field studied, and which put multiplicity in the foreground rather than attempting to synthesize the multiple into an all-in-one unit.

The orientation towards the analysis of federative themes is configured as a particular space of social theorization, not because it aims to provide a new and updated list of fundamental categories of social thinking, but because, starting from bottom-up themes of contemporary debate, it aims to outline the epistemic and socially problematic space of current social experience, highlighting its connections and complexity. It is, therefore, a question of showing how social thought develops in relation to the need/ability to give meaning to complex experience starting from a set of problems – or federating themes – that impose themselves, in contemporary Western societies, as relevant and significant. In our opinion, Agency, Anthropocene, Coloniality, Intersectionality, Othering, Singularization, Technoscience and Uncertainty are among the crucial issues, but the list could be longer or different. This is a set of issues that represent focal points where different analytical traditions intersect to generate new theoretical debates and furnish a new grid for the analysis of social change.

Reasoning by federative themes does not aim to present a theoretical toolbox that includes the elements essential for sociological analysis. A theoretical reflection starting from the federative themes leads along paths partially different from the attempt to present a fundamental nucleus of ideas that would constitute the founding element of the sociological discipline. This is the exercise performed by other social theory texts, starting with the classic work of Nisbet (1966) which identifies the fundamental categories of sociology in the dichotomous contrapositions between community and society, authority and power, status and class, the sacred and the secular, and alienation and progress. The proposal to reflect on social theory starting from federative themes does not aim to capture the core

of sociological thought; rather, it suggests the usefulness of a way of theorizing that grasps the need for intersections, for translations and the necessity to follow connections. This is a suggestion to make sense of complexity not through the reduction or composition of dichotomous oppositions but by bringing an ecological style of thinking to the fore; a style of thinking that tries to grasp complexity by feeding on complexity and adapting its own set of theoretical tools to this task.

The federative themes in this book discuss inequality, neoliberalism, eurocentrism, androcentrism or anthropocentrism under a new light, looking beyond the classic divides of social theory, and beyond well-established polemics against modernity. Reflecting on social theory starting from federative themes makes it possible to highlight ‘a way of thinking’ as well as to understand complex phenomena and far-reaching transformations. It allows us to highlight a specific way of theorising that places relationships, processes, situations and interconnections at the centre.

Conclusion

We may say that we are not at all confronted by a crisis of social theory; rather, we are living in a promising phase of social thought, where the capacity to theorize is more necessary than ever, and the complex intertwining of social transformations that we witness require the resources of all the theoretical experiences that we have accumulated, also outside the Western world, in order to produce new analytical tools and new framing perspectives. On considering the complexity and the constitutive interconnectedness (Tomlinson, 1999) of current societies, it becomes evident that it is necessary and urgent to widen the field of social theory. Material objects, technology and biology need to be more fully incorporated into social theory so as to go beyond the idea of the purity and independence of the social that informed the early development of sociology as a discipline (Walby, 2021: 28). Voices and views from intellectual and experiential perspectives different from those of the Western tradition become an indispensable part of the social theory vocabulary, problematizing the provincialism of Western social theory and overcoming a too narrow positivistic, anthropocentric, patriarchal and individualistic tradition.

The federative themes – such as those proposed in this book – represent focal points where different analytical traditions intersect to generate new theoretical debates and to offer a new grid for the analysis of social change. They highlight the usefulness and necessity to develop more heterogeneous interpretative theoretical tools with which to analyse the plurality of traditions, practices and perspectives that constitute current, globalized social life. The theoretical tools used to analyse a specific federative theme acquire all their epistemological and hermeneutical force when used in reference to other tools used to analyse other federative themes, promoting a mobile and adaptable scaffolding constituted by the intersection of concepts with which to build better interpretative constructs of the complex and mobile contemporary global reality. This suggests the usefulness

of developing a rhizomatic mode of theorizing that recognizes the importance of interconnections, heterogeneities and multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This is a form of theorizing that recognizes the importance of textures and inter-relationships (Haraway, 2016); of the voice and legacy of reflections on the social developed in historical and social contexts other than Western ones (Viveiros de Castro, 2009; Bhambra, 2015; Santos, 2016; Go, 2016); and of an ecological thought (Bateson, 1972; Code, 2006) that overcomes an excessive anthropocentrism and places the correct emphasis on the role that nature, matter and technology play in defining human experience and existence itself (Latour, 2004; Descola, 2013).

A specific mode of theorizing emerges from what recurs between one federative theme and another, from intuitions that, generated by specific interests and needs, adapt to new interests and needs, from translations from one lexicon to another, from the intertwining and intersections between different research fields. Rather than being confronted by a crisis of the role and usefulness of social theory, we are dealing with a new way to theorize that, rather than focusing on the author and the all-encompassing effort of a school of thought, focuses on emerging and federating themes; it appropriates what can be useful for understanding or describing a specific situation. This is a polyglot and multisite mode of theorizing that tries to build, from the intertwining of some guiding concepts, a grid of intelligibility useful for the understanding of concrete practices and events. In regard to the current urgency of developing a theorizing capability – that is, far from any ‘exhaustion’ of social theory – this is a way to theorize the social with a more practical orientation which, rather than establishing whether the concepts used are right or wrong in ahistorical and universal terms, is interested in understanding what they allow us to understand in relation to contexts and situations, in relation to the problems of our time and our complex and pluralist societies.

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Agency

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Agency and agents

In worldwide sociological research, *agency* is a familiar and widespread term, frequently used without translation in other languages. When translations exist, they are usually heterogenous and not univocal, and sometimes they introduce slight changes of meaning, as in the case of the French *agentivité*. As a matter of fact, agency is a concept developed and popularized mainly in the Anglo-American sociological debate in order to study the phenomenology of action, while in Europe it has been used mainly in the discussion on the agent/structure dualism. On the one hand, the notion of agency is used to explain, in relational terms, the potential to construct society from a grassroots perspective, where agency is the expression of material practices and communicative performative capacity (Emirbayern and Miche, 1998). On the other hand, the notion of agency is rooted in power relations and in the tension between the single individual and the social structure with its coercive rules; it denotes a person's capability in reference to autonomous action, margins of choice and decision, and his/her capacity to deal with interiorized forms of domestication. Moreover, most of the studies specifically devoted to agency and the agency/structure relationship have considered them as interconnected and recursive, rather than as radically opposed (Giddens, 1984). This has led some scholars, especially in political sociology, to include agency in institutionalization processes (Hay and Wincott, 1998).

As a result, in spite of its widespread use, agency remains a polymorphic concept, whose heterogeneity can be traced back to the foundation of sociology, to the modern philosophical conceptualizations of the subject as *agent*, to the debate between functionalist and interactionist approaches, to the definition of rationality as an individual's capacity for decision-making, to the articulation of agency as performativity of practices, as well as to the association of agency with self-reflexivity (Bratman, 2006). To sum up, the popular and sometimes impressionistic uses of the notion of 'agency' are proportional to its complex and controversial background of approaches.

Arguably, this complexity is due to the intertwining of the idea of agency with that of the agent, and to the variability of their conceptualizations. While

theoretical reflections on the subject as agent subordinate those on agency – considered as a consequential definition – the sociological conceptualization of agency in phenomenological terms usually takes a definition of the subject as agent for granted. Indeed, at least in Europe, the golden era of the sociological reflections on agency, during the 1980s, was immediately subsequent to the discussions on the notion of subject enhanced by French philosophy – and especially by the historical analysis of Foucault (2005), the linguistic deconstruction of Derrida (1974) and the materialistic references of Deleuze (1988), to name only the most influential – and by the German philosophical tradition, with its contrast between Heidegger and the Frankfurt School (Habermas, 1987). Moreover, whilst the European discussion on agency by Bourdieu (1980), Touraine (1998), Habermas (1988), Giddens (1984) and Archer (1996) cannot be isolated from a philosophical background in which the subject's capacity is crucial, the discussion developed in the USA was influenced by different premises. These were rooted in the pragmatist philosophical tradition and connected with interactionist and phenomenologist sociology (Emirbayern and Miche, 1998; Schatzki, 2002), without a specific reference to the discussion on subject, subjectivity and subjectivation (Rebughini, 2011). Furthermore, in the same years, parallel discussions around gender studies, world history and postcolonial approaches, together with the development of science and technology studies (STS), were destabilizing the cultural and ontological premises of the notion of agent, extending its references far beyond the original European modern legacy. Although agency can be defined empirically by observing individuals' behaviours and communication practices, it cannot be separated from an analytical definition of the agent, who is not a neutral entity: the agent has a material body, a gender, a colour, a social position, a culture and a history, can be human or not human.

The aim of this chapter is to focus, on the one hand, on the unresolved issue of agency's intertwining with the definition of the agent, and on the other hand, to shed light on the consequences of this on the possibility of a critical agency. After a cartography of the debate on agency in social sciences, the following sections analyse the entanglement of the theoretical approaches to agency, as the capacity of an agent, with the theoretical definitions of what an agent can do. As we will see, such definitions are connected with other issues discussed in this book, such as the intersectionality of identifications and categorizations, the capacity of individuals to cope with uncertainty and singularization, or the necessity of downscaling the centrality of the human amid the epochal transformation of the Anthropocene.

Agency as human capacity

Most interpretations refer to agency as a capacity, or capability, of human subjects in regard to their social, institutional, political or natural environment: without an agent there is no agency. This capacity to act, in terms of doing or saying, is mainly expressed in relation to social change, or as the individual's opposition to

structural constraints or social inertias. This capacity has been discussed implicitly in terms of *intentionality*, that is, as a cognitive and logical impulse starting from the mind of an individual in a given situation; in terms of phenomenological and relational *situatedness*; or as a *practice*, where the capabilities expressed by an agent are embedded in social relations, routines, know-how, constraints and forms of justification, so that the intentional action can never be separated from its cultural and material environment.

The problem of intentionality

In modern Western thought, most of the theoretical approaches to action – starting from Husserl’s classical phenomenology – are based on the topic of intentionality, and there has been a notable debate on whether the agent’s intentions are the causes of the action, and how this makes the action comprehensible for the agent him/herself and for other actors. For example, intentionality can be related to an aim specified before the action, or to an aim elaborated ‘during’ the action, that is while the person is performing that action (Ascombe, 1963; Davidson, 1980; Searle, 1983). In the Weberian legacy, the teleological structure of agency is explicit; agency as intentional action is connected to a goal, and it is based on a decision related to the assessment of possible options or contextual constraints and opportunities. The agent can give a meaning to the action and can explain it in relation to the past, present and future, so that the intention involves a motivational commitment to action. However, in the phenomenological tradition developed in the USA, under the influence of Alfred Schütz, there is a weaker interpretation of such intentionality, since the observation of successful or unsuccessful agency, and of its appropriateness, is at the basis of the evaluation of the autonomy of that agent (Lyotard, 1991; Joas, 1996).

From a historical perspective, since Hannah Arendt’s unfinished book on the life of the mind (Arendt, 1978), the reference to the intentionality of agency has concerned the association of intention with freedom and autonomy as typical modern issues, unknown to Greek philosophy and developed only during Christianity and modernity. Absolute intentionality was considered nonsense in a culture, like the Greek one, based on the circularity of time. As Arendt noted, it was only with the creation of a linear notion of time typical of monotheist religions that agency arose as a notion related to freedom, choice and responsibility. Intentional action became an autonomous possibility to choose among alternative values, opportunities and risks. However, the tension between the crucial or illusory status of intentionality continued to be present in the history of Western thought. This is explicit in the bifurcation between Spinoza – for whom in a world of necessity, interconnections and becoming, intentionality is an illusion – and Descartes, who considered reason and intention to be the most important faculties of a mind separated from the materiality of the body (Israel, 2001). In the Cartesian version, intentionality became the central issue of modern thought, and the subject was identified by his/her capacity to transform the world. Although

minoritarian, the Spinozist option survived as steady critical approach of the modern subject as an intentional agent, and it was fully rediscovered first by Nietzsche and later by Whitehead, Deleuze, as well as by American pragmatists such as Peirce and James, for whom the meaning of action is given by human interaction in an ongoing situation, so that agency cannot be separated from the contingent doing. Nietzsche's famous claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* – reinterpreted and actualized by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) – was that 'there is no being behind the doing'. The agent is not an essence but a becoming, a continuous process of construction through action.

Overall, the social sciences have adopted a definition of action centred on the intentionality of the acting subject, and on his/her negotiation between opportunities and constraints in a given situation. Action is referred to a goal, and it is based on a decision related to the assessment of possible options. The agent is aware – or has an intuitive awareness – of the logic of the action he/she is performing. In this logic, action becomes *agency* when it is not generally related to an activity, nor to the simple appropriateness of action with respect to its aims, but it has a certain degree of reflexive awareness (Giddens, 1991). This conceptualization of agency is implicitly related to a projective attitude towards the future, and it accordingly refers to the modern idea of the subject as a choosing autonomous agent. This same idea is also apparent in the very first theoretical phase of Talcott Parsons especially in *The structure of Social Action*, published in 1937 and deeply influenced by Max Weber, where action is characterized by purpose and intention.

Because of this focus on of the individual's intention and projective attitude, the sociological debate on agency spread in the midst of the crisis of functionalist, structuralist and Marxist approaches. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was not only a crisis of the self-transparent subject, downsized by post-structuralism and post-modernism, but also a reconsideration of the structure of power characteristic of a post-industrial society. The notion of agency became the topic of a theoretical discussion involving the main voices of social sciences. Bourdieu (1980) and Giddens (1984) were among the best-known participants in such debate, together with Archer (1996), Alexander (1995), Habermas (1987), Joas (1996), Melucci, (1989), Touraine (1988) and Bashkar (1979). All of them sought to define agency, the extent to which an agent is autonomous and can collectively influence social structures, the extent to which an agent is influenced and constrained by social structures no longer those of the modern industrial era.

Reflexivity, as the learning conceived by Giddens or Bourdieu, as well as the 'internal conversation' conceived by Archer, is a fundamental component of agency for all these scholars. These positions can be located on a cline extending from those most interested in domination and interiorized dispositions, to those most attentive to creative and resistant capacities. For example, Bourdieu is more focused on structural developments arising from routines, inequalities and power relations, with specific attention to the power of inertias in everyday life; instead, Touraine mainly considers agency as the product of individual capacity of dissidence from socialization patterns. Midway along the cline, with a more

phenomenological and hermeneutical approach, we find Giddens' and Melucci's recognition that there is not an ontological priority of agency vis-à-vis to the context; nor is there a direct unfiltered struggle between the heroism of a resistant subject and the manipulative structures of a society, but rather a process of self-reflexivity (Giddens, 1991; Melucci, 1989).

Yet, in the popularization of this theoretical discussion in sociological research, the notion of agency continues to be mainly used in opposition to that of domination and structural constraints. At least in Europe, the decades of impassioned debate on subjectivation and domination, on dissolution of the subject and rational choice approaches, have not unhinged a concept of agency that continues to be implicitly associated with choice and initiative, freedom and creativity, from a general basis in intentionality. Consequently, the agency/structure binarism persists as a general framework of reference.

Situatedness, relationality, performativity

In the American sociological tradition, more influenced by pragmatism than by idealism, the notion of agency is more often related to the result of the action itself, rather than to a previous implicit definition of the agent. This is at the basis of a more fluid, situated and communicative definition of agency grounded on the empirical observation of contextualized relational processes of interaction, rather than on the assumption of an intentionality or an ongoing struggle between the agent and the surrounding social structures. The focus is on agency as experience, on its open-endedness in the situational circumstances continuously producing a practical knowledge, appropriate adaptations or contingent objectives in relation to a given context (Goodman, 1995; Alexander, 2003).

In the pragmatist tradition, situatedness and communication have always been important to grasp the margins of manoeuvre available to the social actor in terms of the *conditions* of action. This is evident also in Goffman's idea of *stage* as situation, the place 'where action is' (Goffman, 1969). Rather than being a teleological intentionality, agency is always intertwined with the cultural and material characteristics of the environment (West, 1989). It is the product of human interactions in ongoing situations, where also social order is a flux of adjustments and temporary constraints more than an oppressive and static machine embedded in institutionalized structures (Wright Mills, 1966; Bernstein, 1992). Moreover, the idea of agency propounded by James, Dewey or Mead considers the context and the situatedness mainly as a site of 'problem solving', where actions and practices are responses to everyday problematic situations. For Goffman, Garfinkel, and more generally interactionist sociology, improvisation is a fundamental component of agency against contingency. The epistemological consequence is that, because knowledge and experience are located in a given environment, agency does not have a purely cognitive dimension, and the subject is not opposed to a world of objects that have to be represented (Rorty, 1982). Hence, the subject is part of the environment, of social and material relations where s/he acts.

From this perspective, the opposition between object and subject is not the starting point. In the philosophical environment of pragmatism, the opposition between hard sciences – especially in the case of Darwinian biology – and social sciences was less radical than in Europe, and the notions of experience and agency could be rapidly conceptualized as both mental and physical (Massumi, 2021). The reference to the human subject as an ‘organism’ in the pragmatist literature is proof of an approach based on the interface between body and mind, and of a perspective for which there is no self or agency without social and material relations, as is evident in Mead’s sociology of action (Mead, 1943). More than a resistance against structures and constraints, agency is the result of a circular process of adapting activities in a given context; it is a temporally embedded process of social engagement made by iterations and reproductions as well as by innovations and projections towards the future.

It is not by chance that the connection of the single individual with larger social structures was at the centre of the attention of all the founding scholars of American sociology, and the *meso-level* of social relations, typical of civil society, was a focal point for many of them (Fine, 2021). The sociology of Mead, Goffman, and of the Chicago School was based on an idea of agency as a result of the phenomenology of situatedness and of the contextualized relational processes of communication. Consequently, agency was conceived as relational, rather than individual, and it was likened to a creative opportunity of an agent as part of a specific social context (Joas, 1996). Human action was fully part of the social construction of the social environment, to which it was not opposed but instead sought to transform – as was also argued by Berger and Luckmann in their constructivist analysis (1968). Put in Goffmanian terms, agency is part of the interaction order, and it is not a pure expression of the agent’s intentionality. Agency has a practical evaluative dimension related to the contextualization of actors’ experience, where social references orient expectations, select attention and construct ‘systems of relevance’ (Schütz, 1962), but they can be also negotiated and transformed. Structural constraints cannot be separable from the creativity of action, because any action can potentially create new structural constraints and any action is based on socialization to rules and environments. Creativity and imagination were not considered to be subjective gifts, as capacities present or absent in agents, but as means to evaluate and reconfigure the situation, to deal with a repertoire of references, with local constraints and temporary opportunities to transform the situation. The situated and relational characteristics of agency are associated with the actors’ capacities to make judgments and evaluations, to contingently adapt themselves and to justify their choices.

This interpretation is evident also in how agency has been framed in gender studies. Especially under the influence of the work of Butler (1990), as well as of intersectionality as a theoretical perspective (see Chapter 5), agency has been conceptualized mainly as a situated performativity and a contextualized form of embodied critical knowledge. Because identities and subjectivities are always in becoming, and always in tension with external discourses and categorizations,

agency acquires significance mainly in its contextual and conflictual intertwining with social dispositions, and in its situated performativity as the subjective appropriation or dismissal of such discourses and categorizations. Agency is the capacity to develop a critical relation with the social normativity of such social constructions by differing their necessity, rather than negating them. Agency resides in this paradox. It is related to the subject's ability to justify his/her choices, as well as to his/her vulnerability to the contingencies of the social environment. The focus of gender studies on the body highlights mutual dependencies, as well as the way in which agency – always expressing itself through a body – cannot be associated with illusions of sovereign self-sufficiency. Overall, this is an approach to agency that extends it beyond the mere idea of isolated intentionality or resistance. As Butler maintains, 'agency is neither fully determined nor radically free. Its struggle or primary dilemma is to be produced by a world, even as one must produce oneself in some way' (Butler, 2005: 19). Because it is always situated and relational, agency is within and outside, compliant and subversive, with respect to social laws. This is always a way to separate agency from the modern idea of the sovereign subject and its phantasy of completeness and autonomy. Agency has nothing to do with independence; nor is there a self-inaugurating agency.

Agency as practice

Another attempt to open the 'black box' of agency centres on the topic of practice. Indeed, practice was a mediating concept between subjectivism and objectivism for a generation of scholars such as Bourdieu and Giddens. The focus was on the performativity of actors and the way in which such performativity transforms the environment and the individual at the same time. For Bourdieu, there was a tension between interiorized dispositions (*habitus*) and practice as creative 'sense of the game', but the possibility of change was situated more outside the social actor – that is, in structural historical changes – rather than in agency itself (Bourdieu, 1980). For Giddens, on the contrary, the focus was more on the way in which agency contributes to structuration through individual reflexivity and the capacity to learn from experience and information (Giddens, 1991). Yet, these approaches did not completely unhinge the classic overlap between agency and autonomy: that is, the idea that agency is related to intentionality, while – especially in Bourdieu – practice recalled the inevitable constraints reproduced by societies in everyday life (Schatzki, 2002).

More recently, a new wave of studies focused on the agent as *practitioner* has sought to overcome this impasse by drawing on American pragmatism, as well as on new fields of research like STS studies and other heterogeneous resources (Hui et al., 2016). From this perspective, agency is enacted by a practitioner, an individual doing something, including thinking. Here the notion of practice is a bridge between an acting individual and the material and normative structure where such acting takes place. 'How to do' is already there: it is a knowledge, or

a more general orientation of action, that precedes the individual situated 'acting', even though the individual can modify or innovate the practice (Knorr-Cetina et al., 2000). Again, the reference to agency as practicing underscores that agency is not a pure cognitive process of decision-making. Rather, the issues are to what extent an agentic practice is a reproduction or an innovation; it is a way to follow rules and routines, models, features that people have learned, or an innovative interpretation, in material or normative terms (Reckwitz, 2002).

When agency between interiorized routines and reflexivity is investigated, the focus is not on the agent but on the practice; and the notion of practice frames different elements such as activities, knowledge, cultural orientations and meanings. The sociology of consumption has been one of the favourite fields of analysis (Warde, 2005). Agency can be understood as a *performance of a practice*; and practice is a sort of organized action in a given contingency or field, with given rules, routines and values (Schatzki, 2002; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). This means that any particular action relates to a specific time and space, and to the individual who performs that action. Hence, action is not totally open, because it is embedded in given rules, competences, knowledge, emotional patterns; but it is also free in terms of interpretation and performance. However, agency as performing practice cannot be considered the result of an intentionality; while acting, individuals pursue a goal as a process of doing (or saying), rather than as a teleological end planned by the subject in the isolation of his/her mind. In short, this interpretation of agency as performativity of a practice tends to underscore the continuity among knowledge and action, ongoing learning, and creativity of action.

Working on the idea that agency can be grasped through practices is another attempt to overcome long-standing sociological dualisms (Knorr-Cetina et al., 2000). In a globalized and interconnected world characterized by uncertainty (see also Chapter 9), know-how and internalized dispositions can change according to the environment, to the normativity of a given context; and they can change also according to more suitable aims and goals of who is acting. This includes the possibility of critical capacities based on learning experiences and the sharing of common orientations of action, as highlighted by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999); as well as the possibility to innovate by starting not from one's intentionality but from the objects of the environment, as is evident in research on scientific knowledge and STS studies (Latour, 2005). The general frame adopted by these approaches is that agency is at the same time acting and being enacted. Accordingly, social change, resistance or creativity is never the result of a single intentional and subjective act; nor are they the impersonal result of a chain of modifications. To understand agency through practice requires bypassing the primacy of representation and cognitive teleology of intentions, and concentrating on how individuals are embedded in an ongoing engagement in the world – that is, in contextual, processual and temporal forms of activity where cognitive and material aspects cannot be separated.

What an agent can do: expanding agency

Especially in Europe, the discussion on agency in sociology sought to find a theoretical and epistemological way to overcome the subject/object dualism. This goal was boosted by the so-called *linguistic turn* debate, particularly successful in the humanities departments of the USA during the 1980s, but which originated mainly in European structuralism and post-structuralism as critical approaches to modernity (Rorty, 2007). Bourdieu (1980) claimed to have been inspired by Wittgenstein's well-known affirmation of the non-existence of a 'private language', so that the social context is the only basis of the temporary and linguistic meaning of an action. Taking this standpoint into account, he concluded that even though habitus is not a mere reproduction, social practices acquire their stability from their inscription in linguistic structures. On the opposite side, Touraine (1988) was obliged to utterly bypass the dimension of language to affirm the resistant and creative capacities of the agent. Linguistic structures and communicative dimensions were neglected in favour of a combination of cognitive, emotional and embodied attitudes with which to detect and to oppose forms of domination. Giddens (1984, 1991) approached the reference to language in his structuration theory, with a hermeneutical circularity approach to agency: the deliberate action of individuals makes day by day the structures of society that then determine – by laws, habits and linguistic rules – the possibilities for the expression of agency itself.

Yet, the enduring process of deconstruction and decentring of the modern subject by the linguistic turn, together with the connected criticism developed by gender studies and postcolonial studies, has more recently produced the contention that for too long the focus has only been on communicative and linguistic perspectives, ignoring the material dimensions of the body, of nature and the environment (Lugones, 2010). This has gradually paved the way for new visions in the conceptualization of agency. Indeed, this turn started not only from the exhaustion of the post-modern and post-structural stance and its pivot in language, but even before from cybernetic and complexity theories of the 1970s such as that of Betsen (1979), as well as from internal criticism of existentialist and hermeneutical philosophical approaches to agency (Jonas, 2016).

Again, the focus is on the necessity to bypass the old subject/object, actor/structure, autonomy/domination and culture/nature dualisms. But this time the path is not the search for a linguistic or hermeneutical mutual influence between these poles, but rather the focus on the web of material connections by which agency is composed. In conceptualizing agency as a frame of material and cognitive elements, most of these approaches extend the notion of the agent to non-humans like animals and plants, as well as to inanimate objects such as technological tools (see Chapter 8). Notably, most of the approaches entirely bypass linguistic and symbolic references, and to some extent also history and temporality, all of which are considered only elements of the hybrid networks made by manufactures, laws or biological entities. Put in Marxian terms, there is no longer a spectatorial or prefigurative *theorein* detached from praxis and immediateness of the world.

These theoretical perspectives are usually labelled ‘neo-materialist’ or ‘neo-ontological’, and they range from STS, through the critique of the Western separation between the natural and the cultural developed by anthropological research on indigenous cultures (Descola, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2009), to feminist ecological approaches underscoring that nature has been shaped by cultures and that these are made of ‘natural’ components (Merchant, 1996; Alaimo, 2010). The focus on *matter* – which is never inert matter – is often presented as a theoretical reaction, as a historical pendulum swing, against the previous overemphasis on the Western modern subject and more generally human exceptionalism, but also against logocentrism and linguistic structuralism, representationalism, ideology – in a word, against ‘anthropocentrism’ (Coole and Frost, 2010). This convergence of interests considers the epistemic division of nature and culture, human and non-human entities to be a Western and male-oriented legacy related to the hegemony of this kind of subject over all that has been naturalized – and consequently inferiorized – such as women, native and indigenous people, but also nature as a whole and as a resource to be exploited.

The critique of classical humanism as anthropocentric and Eurocentric implies a critique of notions such as autonomy, independency and intentionality. As suggested by Butler (2005), it implies the recognition of an ontological interdependency, with the consequent necessity of an ethics of cohabitation among cultural and material differences. Including non-humans in the definition of actors is a way to unhinge an anthropocentric social theory, and a subject/object dualism, disguising a western-male standpoint. Current post-human approaches celebrate mainly the dissolution of this implicit point of view, rather than the subject as such, from which the relationship between humans and objects can be evaluated both critically and emotionally (Haraway, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). As also Derrida claimed (2008), the problem is not how we feel in regard to other living beings, as well as tools and machines, but *what we are* together with them.

Certainly, taken to its extreme consequences, the crisis of the agent/structure dualism can drive towards an idea of ‘agency without actors’, where actors are continuously shaped in assemblages of plural entities and mutually constituted (see also Chapters 3 and 8). However, most of the post-anthropocentric interpretations try to save the concept of agency while they abandon any subjectivistic reference to the rational autonomous agent. The relation with the structure is no longer a struggle between intentionality and social constraints, imaginative beings and natural limits, but it becomes an intertwinement of events whose protagonists – the agents – are not exclusively humans. Agency does not stem from a single agent’s will; rather, it is a result or an attribute of a given network of actors. Agency becomes the outcome of recursive events, where humans, non-humans, artefacts and acts themselves are part of a common interplay. Hence, agency is not a prerogative of the human, but instead an impersonal and ever-changing output of enactments that address the question of *what* can become an actor. In this case, agency is more than ever an open empirical question based on the neutral observation of *how* things happen. The focus is no longer on the characteristics of the

agent, as a rational and self-reflexive subject, but on agency itself, as an ensemble of elements and entities involved in a given transformation of reality (Delanda, 2000).

In one of the best-known attempts to de-subjectivize agency, Latour (2007) explains that the result of the modern subject/object dualism has been the creation of an idealistic definition of matter – present also in the phenomenological tradition – while we are made by webs of relations, and our agency is itself the result of multiple relations where the actor is enacted and acts at the same time. ‘Nothing pertains to a subject that has not been given to it’, Latour claims (2007: 213). Again, more than focusing on the agency of non-humans as unique and different from that of humans, the idea is to reconceptualize agency as what humans and non-humans do together. Impersonal forces like weather conditions do not have agency in themselves; instead, in their intertwining with human activities they make humans act, experience, and decide in a given way. Agency is relational not only because it is intersubjective, but also because it is a collective product in relation with material and non-human entities.

The constellation of post-anthropocentric approaches to agency challenges the long-standing cultural processes of human exceptionalism, but certain notions differ among these approaches. For example, in eco-feminism sidestepping the separation between human action as intentional ends, on the one hand, and matter such as technological tools or natural resources on the other, does not imply a radical rejection of intentionality and subjectivation processes. Even though living matter is an actor in itself, and it is able to express its own ends, this does not eliminate the agency and responsibilities of the human agent; rather, the focus is on the ethical advantages of broadening the concept of agency (Braidotti, 2018). While in Latour there is a more explicit commitment to putting an end to the modern approach of intentionality as a ‘black box’, self-constituted in the mind of the subject, the post-humanism of eco-feminism is on the contrary based on the necessity to enlarge the analysis of the connections, to foster the alliances between the human and the rest. In this case, the aim is to reject a causal approach. Actions cannot be studied as simple relations between causes and effects, but instead in terms of immanent assemblages (Ahmed, 2010). In regard to agency, this is also a way to connect this position with other feminist approaches – such as that of Judith Butler – interested in investigating how bodies (not only humans but also those of the natural environment) – are shaped by history. Bringing materiality back into agency is considered a way to overcome a male universalist point of view whereby agency is mainly related to an isolated Ego separated from nature, objects and social relations.

By contesting the separation between nature and culture, these approaches support a different interpretation, where sense-making is no longer the main object of study of a researcher living in a separate *sui generis* entity, such as a ‘society’. For example, conceiving agency within the framework of the Anthropocene – thus, in that not only of inter-subjective relations but also of their material, historical and geological consequences – challenges the phenomenological basis of agency

as intentionality, although this does not necessarily mean radically substituting a subject-centred phenomenology with an impersonal ontological assumption. More than a downsizing of agency, this seems to be a recipe for its expansion.

With different emphases, such approaches do not deny human agency; rather, they do not consider agency as exclusive to humans, and they liken the dependence that humans can have in relation to objects to a form of agency – and as an agency of objects themselves. More than being a project, agency is a multidimensional path where situated knowledge, vulnerability and dependency are taken into account (Braidotti, 2018). It is not possible to see and to act (and hence to judge and to represent) without being seen, involved and positioned. A situated knowledge can be able to recognize the agency of those – humans or non-humans – with which the one who knows is in contact. To recognize the agency of non-human entities is not a mere upside-down of the subject/object dynamic.

Especially feminist epistemology is engaged in an effort to open and to enlarge the possibility of agency to reduce violence and purely utilitarian relations. Agency is vulnerable and never totally independent because it is performed by an unfinished agent, always imperfectly connected to social relations, but also to the environment made up of natural or inanimate material elements (Haraway, 2007; Alaimo, 2010). This is explicitly in contrast with the idea of cumulation of resources for the self and self-positioning as exemplified, for instance, by Bourdieu conceptualization of capital. Far from the logic of the cumulation of being, sense and goods, recognizing the vulnerability of agency is an attempt to dissociate it from any predatory control. Accordingly, overcoming the dualism between passive matter and active mind is considered as necessary to bypass the historical discriminatory use of the idea of matter for gender or colour in reference to the (non-western and non-male) body. The gender perspective and an intersectional gaze are considered sufficient guarantees against the danger of resorting to the classic instrumental use of biology to promote discrimination, as in modern forms of essentialism and biologism (Ahmed, 2006).

Nevertheless, reference to such a wide notion of agency gives rise to various ambivalences. In its strong versions – where there is an ontological primacy of material reality over the epistemic dimension of observation, experience and judgement (Bennett, 2010) – this stance is in contradiction with an analysis of power relations or a conceptualization of critical agency, because with the radical rejection of subjective intentional processes there is also the elimination of the political dimension. In the more moderate versions – even though the constellation of post-humanist, post-anthropocentric and Actor-network perspectives share a common hostility towards intentionality as an idealistic and phenomenological legacy – agency assumes a wider meaning which extends beyond human subjects' actions. This weaker version seems more promising in the critical reconsideration of the self-referential modern subject. Between the Scylla and Charybdis of the underestimation of purposive action, expelling any reference to interpretations, values or judgements, there is the risk of the erasure of agency as a valid analytical concept; there lies the narrow channel that can lead to a new perspective on

agency beyond previous celebrative or auto-confutative stances. This is especially evident when we focus on the critical contents of agency as the possibility of social change or material improvement.

Critical agency's new clothes

Agency is at the core of social theory, and one of the core questions on agency is how it is possible in a world of power relations. In short, the critical resource expressed by agency consists in the way in which it exceeds the power by which it is enabled (Butler, 1997: 15).

Today, escaping the classic dichotomies of modern thought – such as between autonomy and domination – has become a challenge also in conceptualizing agency as a form of critique. In recent decades, two bodies of critical analysis have created new ways to conceive the critical potential of agency, beyond the classic Kantian self-reflexivity: a critique arising from an embodied and not only existential condition of the agent related to gender, colour, coloniality and previous histories of domination; and a critique arising from the inclusion of the material condition of the environment in the definition of critical capacity. Globalization, postcolonialism, feminist movements, as well as the growing embeddedness of technology in everyday actions, have highlighted a detachment of critique from the universalized points of view, from which ensued the unveiling of domination. This has called into question the conceptualization of a critical agency as a privileged moment of rupture, what Dewey called ‘the spectator perspective’ (Dewey, 1929), for which the origin of critical action is external to the environment and rooted in the mind of a cultureless and bodyless critical actor. This interpretation is related to a generalist critical capacity to demystify the false consciousness that tends to be associated with an ‘external’ intellectual knowledge.

In modern thought, criticism is a fundamental component of agency when conceptualized as a subjective capacity. Here, agency as critical capacity is embedded in the ambivalences of Western thought about critique: on the one hand, it is a possibility of ‘negation’, as resistance to potential relations of domination, false consciousness, and reification that have to be unmasked and rejected; on the other hand, agency as critical capacity is based on the search for alternatives, other ways to act and live, and on the possibility to imagine and project the new (Rebughini, 2018). The association of agency with emancipation and autonomy is related to the possibility of negation of what is judged to be wrong, and it stems from the necessity to distance oneself from the given, while critique as a search for alternatives is focused on the unpredictable nature of reality. In modern thought, this search for the new has been expressed mainly in the form of utopian projects, or in terms of creative reaction to the social and material environment (Joas, 1996).

Overall, in recent decades, gender perspectives, postcoloniality and global history, STS and post-anthropocentric approaches have generated a sort of ‘critique of modern critique’, and especially of its expression in terms of negation. Despite

their important differences and internal distinctions, all these theoretical perspectives are intended to overcome dualisms, underscore connections instead of oppositions, pluralism instead of a sole source of critical vigilance in the self-reflexive subject. For example, on the wave of the rise of ‘Global South epistemologies’ (Santos, 2016), scholars have started to discover silenced histories of a different critical agency that does not correspond to the pathway of modern industrial Europe but pertains to other stories of resistance against domination (Bhambra, 2015). This challenges the teleological account of agency as stages of human civilization, where some actors are supposed not to have a critical agency corresponding to the Western patterns, because they do not have a notion of history – in the sense of Western linear time (Chakrabarty, 2018) – or they are judged as pre-modern because they do not conceptualize nature as an entity separate from the human sphere (Viveiros de Castro, 2009).

The modern conceptualization of critical agency, as unveiling action and emancipative intentionality, has been radically shaken by post-subjectivist perspectives, precisely because it is the centrality of the subject, with his/her intentionality, reflexivity and critical capacity, that has been unhinged. Although the positions on the role of subjectivity differ within these approaches, critical agency is disconnected from the capacity to intercept domination and from the critical/uncritical dichotomy. On the contrary, the aim is to underscore how the limitations and the vulnerability of human action should be considered as the starting point of a new conceptualization of critique, where there is no intentional aim of individual autonomy separate from the material experience of the context (Braidotti, 2013; Butler, 2005).

This new conceptualization of critique aims to add to the end of eurocentrism, and to the construction of pluralist spaces of recognition, the assumption that all living beings are involved in agentic processes. The reconsideration of critical agency in a world where the stakes are not only power relations and hegemonic/subalternity dynamics among humans, but also the very survival of life on the planet, becomes a crucial issue. The Anthropocene condition (see Chapter 3) highlights that history is not only a human affair; it also involves other living entities with which humans have always interacted while producing the human sense of separateness from ‘the rest’, whence derives an anthropocentric notion of agency (Haraway, 2007). Most of the ecological commitment of the post-anthropocentric approaches is related to a revision of what it means to be a human in the present condition, with the current potential of human impact on oneself and the surrounding environment. Even though this commitment cannot be realized without reference to a typically human self-reflexive capacity to criticize and deconstruct one’s promethean ambitions, this fosters a further extension of critical agency: Anthropocene implies multi-layered forms of power relations and social injustice, including those related to climate crisis, highlighting that humans are not the only protagonists on the stage. The awareness of being a geological force requires humans to assume new and unprecedented responsibilities

and to make new interpretations of the omission of such responsibilities (Moore, 2015). Hence, the expansion of critical agency's boundaries, beyond the doing, thinking and practicing of the human agent, raises theoretical and epistemological challenges, as well as new horizons for investigation into the meaning and effectiveness of critique. The task is to transform critical agency conceptualized exclusively in subjective terms into a sort of eco-systemic critique where human reflexivity depends on a complex environment of living and non-living entities, rather than on an exclusively cognitive force of resistance or unveiling capacity.

As mentioned earlier, the risk is that a more impersonal idea of agency could undermine the plausibility of critical agency. Post-anthropocentric critique in a world that could exist without human subjects may sound like a metaphysical 'exit' vis-à-vis of the weakness of a political 'voice', and it reveals a sense of powerlessness in front of a catastrophic horizon. While the ecological critique of industrialization was part of modernity itself and was based on reflection concerning the dialectic between human and nature, the accumulation of goods and ecological limits, the current post-subjectivist perspective focuses on a sort of paradox of modern hubris, with humans lapsing into the condition of objects while they are achieving growing control over nature. This sometimes provokes a sort of self-hatred in front of the magnitude of the harm caused by humans and generates mistrust in the effectiveness of human critical capacities. Moreover, this could lead to a theoretical approach to agency compliant with neoliberal culture – also in terms of adaptation, self-government, and positive attitude towards uncertainty (see Chapter 9) – incompatible with a critical stance and an attitude of political vigilance.

Conclusion

In the legacy of modernity, agency is related to the capacity of a subject to act autonomously and reflexively; and critical agency represents the possibility to act in a dissident and innovative way against forms of domination and constraint. Especially in Europe, this idea of agency, always in relation with that of structure or system, has been a central pillar of modern and industrial societies, necessary to frame social conflicts and citizenship struggles within the borders of a nation-state. In other traditions, such as the American one, agency is more often connected to local networks and frames, where agency as practice is fully part of the construction of the social environment. But the notion of agency implies other meanings as well, ones less focused on intention, struggle or creative practices whereby any change is embedded in a wider flux of material transformations, where the individual agency, with its culturally situated differences, is down-scaled to an element of a complex scenario of micro and macro connections, in a chain of events where 'my' agency is only a fragment. The ambitions of the *homo oeconomicus*, or the critique of power as structure materialized in state institutions, become relative and situated episodes of human agency, thus considered

in a wider cultural and historical perspective, especially if situated in the ‘deep history’ of Anthropocene (Chakrabarty, 2018).

In its genealogy, reflection on agency is related to the conceptualization of the agent as a human subject, taking into account his/her uniqueness and cognitive separation from all the rest, even though a persistent underground analytical tradition – which has recently emerged with post-anthropocentric perspectives – conceptualizes agency as a wider network extending beyond the human, and which also comprises the many other living and non-living entities in which the human agent is embedded. Interestingly, all the conceptualizations of agency aim to overcome mediations. In the first case, they seek to unveil social dominations and interiorized dispositions, ideological stances, textual and linguistic mediations. In the second case, they seek to reveal the extreme complexity of interconnections and networks of which agency, as single analytical unit, is composed. Indeed, in Western modern thought, the problem of finding the *immediateness* of one’s agency has been an issue for both materialism and idealism. Conceptualizing agency is a way to gain direct access to the real, and this is a stake for both subject-centred approaches and systemic onto-centred perspectives, for which access to the site ‘where action is’ is not the exclusive result of subjective experience but a more choral process.

In complex and globalized societies facing rapid changes and growing uncertainties, the context where agency develops is seen as a network of growing multiplicities, where not only social and cultural, but also material and natural elements interact, while the human search for freedom and control faces not only institutional frameworks, such as that of the nation-state or of global connections, but also the meta-historical consequences of agency itself on the material environment. Hence, in spite of its polymorphous meanings, agency remains an indispensable conceptual tool with a flexible extent. It can be used to frame analytically the meaning of the action of an individual but also the material consequences of the transformations included in the agential process. Agency is immediateness and situatedness, but it also embeds elements that extend far beyond the lifetime of a single subject, of a generation, or of a social structure. Agency embraces both the situatedness of personal interpretations, decisions and practices, and the downsizing of one’s subjective agency in the perspective of a complex chain of relations where bodies, environment, technological tools are likewise components of the agential process.

If agency is the transcendence of the ‘I’ in the material and symbolic relationship to the world, together with other bodies and entities, it cannot be the result of a single unit or of an isolated intention. Instead of pursuing the self-downsizing and anti-foundational shift of a radical anti-subjectivism, the challenge is to take into account both the modern legacy of the subject, with the related capacity of interpretation and resistance, and contemporary reflections on the material, environmental and technological consequences of human agency, and thereby also expand the range of critical agency and its ethical potential.

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Anthropocene

Luigi Pellizzoni

Introduction

The chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer coined, or better revived,¹ the term Anthropocene in the early 2000s (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Crutzen, 2002). The notion has since met with growing success, and controversy. Discussion has reached beyond the earth and life sciences involving philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities – and the media as well. From a scientific issue the Anthropocene has become a keyword, or catchword, of broad public appeal. The question is why, and with what implications.

The idea advanced by Crutzen and Stoermer is that human action should be considered on a par with geological forces, as it affects the (remarkably stable) climatic conditions – the Holocene era – established at the end of the last glaciation, conventionally placed 11,700 years ago. The scientific issue is therefore whether the modifications in the chemical composition of the atmosphere, in particular the levels of carbon dioxide, the traces of radioactive fallout from nuclear experiments, the presence in sediments of seeds and pollens of cultivated plants or of bones of bred animals, and other evidences of human environmental impact are enough to justify the claim that the Holocene has been replaced by a new geological era; and, if that is the case, when such era has begun. To find an answer the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) has launched a research programme in 2009, yet to date, neither the ICS nor the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) has officially approved the term Anthropocene as a subdivision of geologic time. Regardless of this, the argument has gained growing traction. For many specialists, human action – which includes ‘the development of diverse products, including antibiotics, pesticides, and novel genetically engineered organisms, alongside the movement of species to new habitats, intense harvesting and the selective pressure of higher air temperatures resulting from greenhouse gas emissions’ (Lewis and Maslin, 2015: 172) – can actually be regarded as the most relevant evolutionary force in the Earth’s dynamics since the onset of the Holocene.

So far so good. Problem is that the Anthropocene has become much more than a scientific issue. As climate change and other global environmental threats like

biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and the proliferation and global dispersion of materials such as concrete and plastics have gained growing public attention, instigating major mobilizations like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, the social and political implications of the acknowledgement of the existence of the Anthropocene and of its dating have become a field of heated discussions. While specialists point to reach an agreement, first of all about the legitimacy of talking of the Anthropocene, the broader debate seems to expand on the terms of disagreement, first of all about dating. This, as we shall see, depends on how dating the Anthropocene affects the allocation of responsibilities for ecological problems, the calls for intervention and the type of actions deemed sensible. Said differently, when addressing the Anthropocene issue scholars in the natural and in the social sciences and humanities – and ostensibly the public at large – have different preoccupations and goals (Nichols and Gogineni, 2018).

A preliminary question, however, is whether the connection between scientific and social-political debates is to be seen as just one-way. In the traditional account, science ‘proceeds’, questions arising and answers being found according to research, and society ‘responds’ to such advancements. Yet, for the science historian Fleck (1979) there is a close connection between scientific work and social milieu. The latter affects to various extents which scientific issues gain saliency in a given historical period, and the way they are formulated. Likewise, Foucault (2000) talks of ‘problematization’ to refer to a ruling framework of meaning that, in a certain historical moment, allows for certain types of questions to arise and certain types of answers to become thinkable. This means that contrasting positions may share a deep-seated affinity. To make one example, those who call for more technology as a solution to the ecological crisis, such as the ecomodernists (see later), and those who call for a return to ‘simpler’ ways of living, such as Degrowth scholarship (see later, again), take generally for granted the rationale of science and technology that established itself in modernity, especially since the late eighteenth century, as if it was a necessary rather than a historically contingent development, making the possibility of alternative takes on the biophysical world – which the likes of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin regard as entirely sensible, and indeed crucial (again, see later) – to appear an empty question.

Yet, if in the Anthropocene debate scientific and social-political questions are entangled together, we may be confronted with neither a pure scientific issue nor a mere political one, but rather with a governmental apparatus (*dispositif*) in Foucault’s sense: a juncture of expert knowledges, veridictive procedures, institutional arrangements and political strategies that allow for governing conducts in a particular way. The discussion that follows explores this hypothesis. I start with accounting for the debate over the dating of the Anthropocene and its political implications. I then show that divergent standpoints end up with a similar recipe. To make sense of that I reflect on the emergent ontology of reality and agency, as differing from both modern naturalism and post-modern culturalism, and being shared by both theoretical debates and governmental practices. Finally,

I ask whether and how it may be possible to escape from the ruling problematization of the Anthropocene, arguing that insights from scholars like Benjamin and Adorno are precious and ongoing ‘prefigurative’ practices are worthy of careful consideration.

Dating the Anthropocene

As hinted, outside specialized debates in the earth and life sciences the issue of dating has gained special relevance, for its political implications. Four main narratives can be distinguished, according to the factual elements stressed and the normative conclusions drawn.

The first narrative is that the Anthropocene starts about 10,000 years ago with the beginning of agriculture, that is, of humans’ systematic transformation of their biophysical milieu. The Anthropocene, in other words, corresponds to the affirmation of the human species. The political implication of this case is that one can hardly do anything about the Anthropocene, however dire the present ecological situation may be, apart from embracing it, enhancing our ability to transform the environment. We have to point to a full-fledged ‘stewardship’ of the planet, increasing technical efficiency in the use of resources and possibly handling climate dynamics by way of ‘geoengineering’ techniques such as carbon capture and storage or solar radiation management (Keith, 2013). The thesis of a planetary stewardship has been advanced, among the others, by the very proponents of the Anthropocene concept (Crutzen and Schwägerl, 2011) and by so-called ‘Ecomodernists’. In the Ecomodernist Manifesto – a text undersigned by a group of scholars of different disciplinary provenance (Breakthrough Institute, 2015) – one reads that farming, energy extraction, forestry, settlement and other activities must be intensified via ever-more powerful technologies, as spurred by capitalist competitive dynamics, pointing to a ‘decoupling’ of society from the biophysical world, in the sense of making the nature/society interface ever-more technologically mediated, hence rendering society increasingly independent from the vagaries and limitations of nature. In this ‘good Anthropocene’ technology will prevent ecological crises while ensuring that growth proceeds undeterred, with elements of ‘pristine’ nature possibly spared for aesthetic or spiritual reasons.

A second narrative locates the Anthropocene in the age of the great travels, colonies and plantations; a process which, according to some scholars, was of no lesser, and possibly greater, importance than land enclosures in triggering the onset of capitalism. Though the long-term result of worldwide colonization and trade would be a massive intensification of resource extraction and an erosion of biodiversity, its initial effects were a wide-scale swapping of species between continents and a decline in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Evidence of a major dip has been detected in core samples of Antarctic ice datable around 1610, arguably caused by the extermination of around 50 million people (mostly farmers) as a result of warfare, enslavement and infectious diseases entailed by the colonization of the New World, with ensuing growth of forests and sucking of carbon dioxide

out of the atmosphere (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). The political implication of this argument is that, more than with the human species, the Anthropocene has to do with capitalism as a world economy (Wallerstein, 1979), or, more appropriately, a world ecology (Moore, 2015), as accumulation crucially depends on expanding the frontier of commodification by appropriating and putting to work allegedly valueless raw material: land, energy, food, labour (slave and reproductive). In this view, tackling the Anthropocene means tackling – getting off – capitalism and coloniality. The latter has to be understood not as a historically circumscribed phenomenon but as a systematic devaluation and subjection of peoples and places (Go, 2016) that becomes especially important whenever capitalism faces a crisis of realization of value; whenever, in other words, the accumulation mechanism finds a limit in the established organization of the means of production. Supporters of this narrative have therefore proposed notions alternative to Anthropocene, such as Capitalocene (Malm, 2016; Moore, 2015) or Plantationocene (Haraway, 2015), to stress how ecological impacts are not a destiny of the human species but a matter of social and more-than-social domination, which urges a move in the direction of environmental justice. The very positing of the Anthropocene as a universal humanitarian issue, it is noted, is instrumental to depoliticizing ecological threats, presenting the ruling order as beyond dispute (Swyngedouw, 2010).

A third narrative is that the Anthropocene begins with industrialization and the burning of fossil fuels. Crutzen (2002) himself has suggested that the new era begins in the late eighteenth century, in coincidence with the introduction of James Watt's steam engine. Even scholars who stress how the Anthropocene can be narrated in different ways, according to the selected historical thread, indicate this period as the starting point of the story (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016). Of course, the industrial revolution should not be seen as a mere matter of technical advancement, being intimately related with capitalism. Namely, there is a core relationship between the capitalist notion of labour as an abstract capacity to deliver a result (the average, or 'socially necessary', labour time to produce a commodity, to borrow Marx's terminology) and the development of the thermodynamic notion of energy.

Prior to its emergence in thermodynamics, energy did not have a strong association with fuel, nor a scientific definition. . . . Energy became tightly bound by the governing logic of work, [while] work increasingly came to be governed through the metaphors and physics of energy.

(Daggett, 2019: 3–4)

Thermodynamic theorists like Watt, Carnot, Thomson and Joule 'organized their new concept of "energy" around the emerging idea of industrial labour, especially how to control it and maximize its benefits for factory owners' (Lohmann and Hildyard, 2014: 28). Energy – namely, fossil energy² – and labour came to be seen as flows of equivalences that can be composed, decomposed, moved freely in space and time, just like money. Marx's notion of 'labour power' builds on

this very assumption, and current physics textbook definitions describe work as the application of energy and energy as the capacity of a physical system to do work. This circularity or fluidity between nature and culture, metaphor and reality, abstract and concrete, is what allowed capitalism, quite literally, to ‘put the world to work’ (Daggett, 2019: 12). So, capitalism is certainly relevant to this account of the beginning of the Anthropocene. However, compared with the one formerly described, there is a shift in focus: at the centre of attention lies fossil fuel-based technology (e.g., Malm, 2016). The key call, thus, is for reorienting industrialization, replacing as much and as quickly as possible fossil energy with ‘clean’ and ‘renewable’ one. A stress on technological solutions to the ecological crisis is thus what this narrative shares with the first one. Whether technical advancement should occur within, and by way of, capitalist relations or entails an exit from capitalism, is instead a matter of contention. Ecomodernists, as said, firmly believe in the virtues of capitalism. ‘Accelerationists’, on the other hand, build on a Marxian imagery of traversing capitalism to overcome it, making a case for ‘speeding up’ capitalist dynamics of innovation up to the point where capitalist relations will prove to hamper further advancement, being wiped out as a result (Srnicsek and Williams, 2015). In this account, thus, change in the means of production is deemed conducive to change in the relations of production. Both ecomodernists and accelerationists, however, concur that a transition to a good Anthropocene is compatible with, and even demands, a relentless expansion in the transformation of the biophysical world. This ‘productivist’ position clashes with the view of other people concerned with the ecological crisis, such as Degrowth scholars and activists. Yet the case for Degrowth does not build so much on a critique of modern science and technology, as on a downsizing of throughput based first and foremost on a cultural shift, away from competition and the lure of consumption and towards conviviality and self-limitation (Latouche, 2010; Kallis, 2019).

The fourth narrative about the Anthropocene is that the beginning of the new epoch is to be located in the mid-twentieth century, with the ‘Great Acceleration’ – technological, industrial and demographic – that followed World War II. There is actually major empirical evidence in support of this claim. The rise in the environmental impact of human activities in the last decades has been impressive, with ever-intensifying use of chemicals in agriculture, greenhouse gases emissions of industries, rampant urbanization and infrastructure construction, to say nothing of radioactive debris embedded in sediments and glacial ice (Steffen et al., 2015). Strikingly, the process has proceeded at a growing pace well after climate change was recognized as a major issue. For example, half of the emissions of the companies involved in the extraction, refinement and sale of fossil fuels have been released since 1986 (Rich, 2019; see also Heede, 2014). The case for a coincidence between the Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration is therefore strongly advocated by specialists in stratigraphy (Subramanian, 2019). Yet, its political implications do not seem to differ dramatically from those already described, where the Anthropocene is basically acknowledged as a matter of fact and the question is rather whether and how – with what distribution of loads to achieve what type

of societal arrangement – it is possible to actualize a ‘good’ version of it. There is however an emphasis on the most recent phase of capitalism: the triumph and crisis of Fordism, the advent of post-Fordism and globalization (largely as a result of neoliberal reforms), and the third (IT and biology-based) industrial revolution. Much depends, therefore, on the extent to which the current phase of capitalism as an ‘institutionalised social order’ (Fraser, 2014) is felt to differ from previous ones. Some, for example, stress a major rearrangement of the political conflict occurred in recent times, the left/right cleavage losing relevance compared with the distribution of the risks and opportunities of globalization (Azmanova, 2020). Yet one has to consider also the novel take on reality that, as we shall see, characterizes late capitalism. Both aspects gain relevance in making sense of the debate described so far.

Making sense of the debate

Evidence that traditional lines of division are losing their discriminating capacity emerges quite clearly from the preceding account. The positions described, in fact, do not seem to align with well-proven oppositions, such as between capitalism and anticapitalism or between modernism and antimodernism. Ecomodernists and Accelerationists agree on the need to intensify technical innovation to get out of the dependence on nature and therefore to further enhance the Anthropocene, just as advocates of Degrowth, despite the sarcasm of detractors about their case for a ‘happy downsizing’, do not adhere to the antimodernist positions of some fringes of traditional ecologism, pursuing instead the line of an intensification of the process of individualization – the quintessence of the modern – through an ever-greater self-control and self-determination. In other words, despite the diversity of positions, Ecomodernists, Accelerationists and even Degrowth scholars make sense of the present in a fairly similar way.

It may well be, therefore, that the conflict over dating, whatever its political implications, obscures another issue: namely, the performativity of the very notion of the Anthropocene; what its acceptance, and to some extent even its rejection, entails. We have seen that for many the issue is not whether the Anthropocene exists, but how to enact a ‘good’, ecologically sustainable, version of it. Ecomodernists believe that becoming aware of the role – or the destiny – of humans as makers of their own world is preliminary to moving at a growing pace towards a technological future where the ‘planetary boundaries’ (Rockström et al., 2009) – defined by essential Earth system dynamics involving biodiversity, biogeochemical processes and concentration of chemicals, atmospheric and ocean composition, use of land and freshwater – will be virtually expanded through increasing resource efficiency. Perhaps expanded even materially: for example, as noted already, via geoengineering; but also via ‘human enhancement’ technologies (including human–machine interfaces), capable of making the body more resistant to adverse climate conditions (Buchanan, 2011). The overall case here is for conceiving of a ‘post-natural’ sustainability (Arias-Maldonado, 2013),

understood as leverage over a fully plastic materiality open to endless (benign) transformations. This view is basically shared by Accelerationists, even though the latter insist especially on automation (Srniczek and Williams, 2015).

That traditional lines of political division do not show a major discriminating capacity regarding the views on the Anthropocene is confirmed by other data. Consider the position taken by Dipesh Chakrabarty, a historian known internationally for his contributions to postcolonial studies and therefore not suspected of sympathy for capitalist globalization. For Chakrabarty, the advent of the Anthropocene concerns humanity as a species which, in the face of the climate crisis, is subject to a shared vulnerability and charged with a common responsibility. This, he claims, determines ‘the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history’ (Chakrabarty, 2009: 201); which does not mean denying the latter but recognizing that the Anthropocene is a fact that changes profoundly the relationship between humanity and the planet, thus the reading of human affairs. The position expressed by Chakrabarty (and many others) has been sharply criticized from different standpoints. Authors writing from a postcolonial or decolonial perspective claim that the case for the Anthropocene and the geological knowledge and lexicon on which it builds express colonial and racialized concerns about damages that are today threatening white liberal communities but to which extractive economies have exposed for long time marginal, ‘valueless’ peoples and places, and for addressing which without touching existing power relations a phantom ‘we’ is evoked (Yusoff, 2018). Marxist-oriented authors likewise contend that claims about the human species prevent attributing differentiated responsibilities for climate change and commensurate burdens for mitigation or adaptation (Malm and Hornborg, 2014; Malm, 2019).

A criticism of ‘oversimplification’, however, may be addressed to Marxist positions as well. According to Moore (2015, 2016), ‘cheap nature’ is by now virtually exhausted, engendering a terminal crisis of capitalism or at least a crisis of a novel type. This diagnosis does not seem to adequately take into account some important issues. One is the intensification of the ‘real subsumption’ of nature – an expression some scholars use by analogy with Marx’s notion of real subsumption of labour – made possible by new genetic biotechnologies. To recall the point, Marx defines real subsumption of labour the situation, typical of the Taylorist factory, where workers become cogs in the assembly line, their contribution to production being reduced to mere bodily-psycho energy. This contrasts with the formal subsumption of labour occurring in early industrialization, where workers entered a wage relation with capital while retaining their own skills, hence a creative control over the labour process. So, nature can be said to be subsumed ‘formally’ when capital exploits resources by adjusting to their own features (as with mineral, oil or coal extraction and the inanimate world in general), and ‘really’ when the living world is ‘(re)made to work harder, faster and better’ (Boyd et al., 2001: 564) in order to enhance accumulation. The point, then, is that the capacity for a real subsumption of nature has changed dramatically. Traditional agricultural practices found limits in the need of a cross-breeding of whole organisms, which

was possible, and not always working, only between very similar species. These limits are overcome by the capacity of transferring single genetic traits, identified as carriers of specific, valuable functions, from one type of organism to another.³ This far greater technological power can hardly be dismissed, as it discloses the possibility of a potentially unlimited (or at least much deeper) real subsumption of living matter, making the end of cheap nature more uncertain than Moore claims.

Another noteworthy issue in this respect is the expansion of the economy of 'ecosystem services'. These are defined as the benefits biophysical systems give to humans, from resource provision to regulative and supporting functions like carbon sequestration, waste decomposition, soil formation, crop pollination (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Crucial to the realization of transactions concerning these services is a functional abstraction whereby 'classifiable similarities between otherwise distinct entities [are identified] as if the former can be separated out from the latter unproblematically' (Castree, 2003: 281). The intriguing aspect in this is that a portion of nature seems to become a commodity not through human labour, a transformative work over it, but through a mere symbolic gesture, a cognitive interpretation, or, if one wishes, an ontological redefinition. Of course agronomists, economists and other specialists involved in the identification and evaluation of ecosystem services perform a cognitive labour, yet differently from classic industrial applications where cognitive labour identifies natural forces to funnel them into artefacts, such labour does nothing but analyse ecosystem vitality to bring to light its, as yet unrecognized, commodity character. Said differently, it looks like the frontier of commodification is penetrating further into nature without actually *doing* anything to it, just acknowledging its actual status of commodity. This explains why the character of the value ascertained is controversial (is it rent, that is, revenue obtained thanks to property rights over a resource that others demand, or should one call it profit obtained by putting nature straight to work?), as controversial is the character of subsumption (is it formal, as nature's performance is left untouched, or is it real, as nature is refashioned as a commodity?) (Pellizzoni, 2021, 2022). Whatever the answer, one is faced with a sort of direct integration of nature into the capital circuit (Leonardi, 2019), making Marx's famous claim that 'the waterfall, like the earth in general and every natural force, has no value, since it represents no objectified labour' (Marx, 1981: 787) look dated. Again, one wonders if the case for the end of cheap nature has been made too in haste. For sure – thinking also of other issues, from geoengineering to human-machine interfaces or precision agriculture (big data applied to farming) – there is hardly any conclusive evidence that limits to a further 'horizontal' expansion of capitalism over biophysical materiality cannot be more than compensated for by the increase in its 'vertical' integration (Smith, 2007).

For Marxist authors, in any case, the notion of Anthropocene is problematic not so much in itself – as a descriptor of the current and prospective condition of human living on the planet – but because it leads to obscuring socio-ecological unbalances and injustices. This perspective is shared by scholars who do not

endorse a Marxist approach. A most significant example is Donna Haraway. In the book *Staying With the Trouble*, Haraway distances herself from the forces that, she claims, disrupt the constitutive relationships between humans and other terrestrial beings; forces condensed in the terms Anthropocene and Capitalocene, against which she proposes the notion of Chtulucene. The latter conveys ‘a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in responsibility on a damaged earth’ (Haraway, 2016: 2), overcoming expectations of technical fix and claims of comprehensive understanding of the world, and allowing that unexpected kinships, unpredictable, non-hierarchical and continuously changing assemblages, be generated.

Haraway’s perspective is not isolated. In recent years, references have multiplied to the ‘intrusion of Gaia’ in human affairs (Latour, 2017; Stengers, 2017); to the need to inaugurate a ‘geological politics’ (Clark and Yusoff, 2017) that builds on the recognition of ‘geopower’ (Grosz, 2011; Povinelli, 2016), namely, an ensemble of terrestrial forces and dynamics with which political power has to deal. Of course, one thing is to conceive of earthly entities and processes in terms of an invitation to ‘taking care’ of the world (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), recognizing affinities and building bonds with the infinite variety of the non-human. Another is to conceive of geopower as a supreme indifference for human affairs, which manifests itself in geological and biological phenomena such as hurricanes, earthquakes, viruses and bacteria; an ‘inhuman’ nature (Clark, 2011) with which it is not possible to cultivate any relationship, much less of care, the question being rather of recognizing the yoke of a ‘form of sovereignty, . . . a power that dominates the heads of state’ (Latour, 2018: 84), to which it is necessary to bow, being clear that ‘there is no other politics than that of humans and to their own benefit’, and no possibility of living ‘in harmony with so called “natural agents”’ (Latour, 2018: 86–87). Yet, in any case, the acknowledged condition with which to come to terms is precisely that for which the notion of Anthropocene has come to work as a signpost, and the rejection of which in favour of alternative concepts does not question but rather confirms. Said otherwise, the point is not so much whether one feels comfortable with the notion of Anthropocene or prefers another one, capable of pointing to what one thinks most relevant – the socio-ecological disruptions of capitalism, or a dominative take on the nonhuman world increasingly unable to govern in its own terms the situation it has engendered. The point is that the situation is problematized in much the same way.

The ruling problematization

Let’s elaborate on this. As it appears, both those who endorse the Anthropocene and those who attack the notion assign it a veridical function: namely, of sanctioning the definitive shelving of the modern account of the relationship between human agency and biophysical materiality. An account whereby mind is at once separate from the material world and capable of accessing it – as it actually is (Descartes) or as filtered by human perceptual capacities and structured according

to the a priori categories of cognition (Kant). Note that in both versions the correspondence between knowledge and reality is ensured, and with it the possibility of a successful handling of the biophysical world, understood as a passive, or passively reacting, materiality.

The attack on this sense-making of reality and human agency ostensibly begins with the rise of complexity and non-equilibrium theories between the 1960s and 1970s. These account for a much more intricate connection between human action and the world acted upon than previously conceived,⁴ leading to concepts like ‘trans-science’ (Weinberg, 1972), that is, scientific questions (such as the long-term handling of radioactive waste) that cannot be addressed through usual lab-confined experimental procedures, but only in the open, as ‘real life experiments’ (Krohn and Weyer, 1994). As far as the social and human sciences are concerned, the attack becomes massive with the so-called ‘ontological turn’: the rise of ‘new materialisms’ (Coole and Frost, 2010) in the late 1990s and their growing success in subsequent years. Direct target of criticism is the ‘excessive power . . . to determine what is real’ (Barad, 2003: 802) granted to language by postmodernists. Yet all western ontological dualisms (mind/body, subject/object, natural/artificial, sensuous/ideal, living/non-living, masculine/feminine, active/passive, and so on) are criticized as theoretically untenable and morally and politically blameworthy for their dominative implications, any binary entailing the pre-eminence of one pole over the other. A variety of theoretical sources are brought to the forefront, including non-western ontologies (Viveiros de Castro, 2014; Descola, 2014). Yet new social science outlooks are often perceived to be instigated by changes in scientific accounts of reality (Coole and Frost, 2010; Kirby, 2011). Though one should more appropriately talk of a conceptual cross-fertilization between the social/human and the biophysical sciences (Pellizzoni, 2014), the claim is that the deconstruction of the mind/body or language/matter binary is ‘in line with contemporary science and with contemporary turns to life and living systems’ (Colebrook, 2011: 3), where phenomena are increasingly conceptualized in terms of porous boundaries and blurring distinctions, entailing for matter (both organic and inorganic) to be conceived as agential, inventive, generative, and for reality as made of ever-changing assemblages (Barad, 2007; Grosz, 2011).

The emancipatory implications that much of such literature draws from the demolition of dominative polarities and fixed identities is however contradicted by the contemporaneous ‘turn’ one can detect in capitalist economy and neoliberal regulation. We have seen how capitalist commodification thrives on intensified forms of subsumption. Such intensification goes hand in hand with the overcoming of traditional dualisms. With biotech ‘life’ becomes simultaneously matter and information, thingness and cognition, presence and pattern, real and virtual, moving fluidly from living cells to test tube, to digital databases (Thacker, 2007). Biotech patents cover at once matter, for example seeds, and the genetic information these contain. And, by saying that the biotech industry are doing not only what humans did for thousands of years but what nature always did, if less precisely

and competently, corporate narratives bluntly claim that nature and technology are just one and the same thing (Pellizzoni, 2020).

This claim puts in full light the meaning of the Anthropocene outside specialist debates, the reason for its rapid success among broad audiences and the dubious effectiveness of critiques that build on similar ontological grounds. The latter aspect gains further evidence when one considers the recipe for the future proposed by different positions: capitalist and anti-capitalist; calls for decoupling from the biophysical world and invitations to care and kinship. The case is invariably for a politics of trial and error, constant experimentation, self-government, preparation to surprise, resilience and adaptation to the unpredictable and uncontrollable. This politics is consistent with the neoliberal understanding of the unplannable character of reality (Taleb, 2012) and with its approach to regulation, advocated and practiced at any level: from personal ‘responsibilisation’ (Rose, 2007) for life choices to corporate management in turbulent economic conditions (O’Malley, 2010). This governmental logic seems at odds with the case for a ‘stewardship’ of the planet based on keeping (or restricting) societal taps and sinks within boundaries capable of ensuring a ‘safe operating space for humanity’ (Rockström et al., 2009). Planetary boundaries, however, are just another name for geopolitics. And given the complexity of planetary processes and the speculative aspects entailed in any attempt to grasp them, a trial and error approach is hardly ruled out, and indeed may result mandatory. One can actually observe a torsion in the very notion of control. Pretty much as the volatility and unpredictability of financial markets do not permit any proper control, even in terms of probability estimates, but only non-predictive decision-making based on experiential judgement, rules of thumb, intuition and so on, so tackling planetary dynamics such as climate and weather turbulences⁵ by means of techniques like spraying sulphates into the stratosphere or seawater into the air to increase solar radiation reflection, or even sinking huge amounts of carbon dioxide in repositories with the constant threat of their sudden liberation in the atmosphere, means adding chaoticity to an already chaotic system, making it impossible to predict with any degree of reliability the actual short and long-term impact of such applications (Macnaghten and Szerszynski, 2013). One is confronted, in other words, with a strange type of control; something that controls by non-controlling, namely by letting loose(r) a system in view of reacting and adjusting on the spot to the swerves it has contributed to elicit (Pellizzoni, 2016). In short, it seems that the idea of ‘stewardship’ should be updated compared with traditional understandings. Riding uncertainty, rather than trying to reduce it, is the governmental style of the Anthropocene era.

Conclusion

With the Anthropocene, one may say, the ecological crisis is definitively acknowledged, yet no longer as a threat to be tackled but as a condition to be embraced – to make money or kin, according to personal inclinations. In this sense, the

Anthropocene partakes in an emergent declension of the very notion of crisis which, contrary to the modern tradition (Koselleck and Richter, 2006), does not correspond to a contingent situation asking for a decision but to a permanent condition asking for management (Gentili, 2018). Crisis, one may say, is no longer a political but an economic matter. Moreover, the very notion of Anthropocene reaffirms, by declaring it over, the western dualistic conception of society and nature (Görg, 2022), ambiguously evoking at once their separation and indistinctness without touching the dominative relation of the former over the latter.

These considerations give support to the claim that, before than a scientific hypothesis or a narrative of mediatic appeal, the Anthropocene is a governmental *dispositif*, capable of orienting sense-making towards assertions that may diverge in the evidence considered relevant and the social, cultural and political implications drawn, but are unable to really question the global order. In this view, its rise and success are hardly coincidental. The notion of Anthropocene is the epiphenomenon of something broader and deeper: the sense of reality and of individual and collective destiny enacted and enforced by the transformation of capitalism begun some decades ago and proceeding at a growing pace. Though waiting for a full understanding, the destructive effects of such process – the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is a telling example – are increasingly hard to deny.

Escaping from a problematization that joins together defenders and a host of contestants of the ruling order has therefore become an urgent task. For reasons that should be evident from the previous discussion, one has neither to forge ahead, embracing technological hype and a regime of ever-unfulfilled promise (Pellizzoni, 2020), nor to point to a return to the past – whatever this may be taken to mean: from mythical, and concretely often oppressive, premodern ways of living to reassuring, and often misleading, Cartesian or Kantian accounts of the world and human agency. One is rather to move laterally, giving the notion of Anthropocene – if one wishes to keep it – a new meaning.

To this purpose indications coming from scholars like Benjamin and Adorno are precious, and ongoing experiences in the global North and South are worthy of careful consideration. Adorno's (1998) case for the primacy of things over thought and for the need of complementing the logical element of conceptualizations with the acknowledgement of the uniqueness of each encounter with the human and the non-human Other helps grasp that uncertainty has not to do just with the ever-perfectible state of scientific knowledge. Indeed, rather than suggesting caution, the assumption of perfectibility has legitimated and encouraged taking decisions as if the knowledge available at any given time was sufficient for handling the world in full accord to purposes. The results are under our eyes. Uncertainty should instead be seen as a constitutive condition of cognitive incompleteness and value incommensurability to which action should conform, leading to criteria of efficiency sensitive not just to the maximization of some performance, established according to abstract parameters, but to the reversibility of choices, local conditions, even the meaningfulness of a 'not doing' of technical possibilities. This position is often mistaken for technophobia, but it has rather to do with Adorno's and Benjamin's claim that it is possible to conceive of a different science and technology; 'a kind

of labour which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials' (Benjamin, 1969: 259). And that, contrary to what both the liberal and the Marxist tradition have assumed, human emancipation is not necessarily dependent on the exploitation of the biophysical world – quite the opposite, indeed: the instrumentalization of nature triggers and implies the instrumentalization of humans, and vice versa.

Thinking of another Anthropocene, in the sense of another take on social and more-than-human relations based on humbleness and respect, is not empty utopia. There exist today plenty of 'real utopias' (Wright, 2010), or 'prefigurative mobilizations' (Yates, 2015), where alternative ways of relating among people and with biophysical materiality are experimented: from participatory plant breeding (researchers cooperating with farmers to adapt varieties to local ecosystems, rather than the opposite: see Ceccarelli and Grando, 2009), to frugal innovation (products and processes reworked to reduce material and financial costs, rather than increase performance or profit: see Khan, 2016); from permaculture and other forms of regenerative agriculture to farmers' markets based on 'just price' (buyers paying beforehand farmers to support their work, in return for an agreed amount of product – or even variable, depending on harvest results). Admittedly, these and comparable experiences are presently fragmented and faced with 'extraordinarily strong counter-flows of power' (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016: 174) that struggle for the maintenance of the status quo. Their capacity to trigger major changes is uncertain – contingent events, climatic or of other types, might play a catalysing role. Yet they constitute the most credible way to a liveable Anthropocene.

Notes

- 1 Crutzen and associates trace the origin of the term in the late eighteenth century (Steffen et al., 2007); others (Lewis and Maslin, 2015) in the early twentieth. That the notion has gained traction now indicates in any case how it captures or aligns with the spirit of the time, as marked by unprecedented technological capacities and environmental threats.
- 2 Andreas Malm (2016) notes that the capitalist organization of economy was key to the shift from water to coal in the early industrial period.
- 3 Think of the 'FlavrSavr' tomato (the first commercialized transgenic plant, in 1994), modified to make it more resistant to rotting, or the 'AquAdvantage' salmon, genetically modified to grow quicker; or else of the 'Roundup Ready' soybean, a genetically engineered crop resistant to glyphosate (a powerful herbicide).
- 4 The idea of a reciprocal affection between observing and observed entities is of course crucial to quantum physics, which emerged much earlier, at the beginning of the twentieth century. However quantum physics did not question the traditional concept of experiment as a decontextualized test of reality.
- 5 These are in fact the subject matter of some financial derivatives (Cooper, 2010).

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Coloniality

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Introduction

The western-centric epistemic monopoly of theoretical thought, with the related theoretical vocabulary, has been brought into question since the second part of the twentieth century, mainly in an attempt to highlight the global and transcontinental genesis of modern thought for so long time almost completely blind to colonialism. This questioning has been conducted by different disciplines, from literary studies to history, from philosophy to sociology, and it has been transversal to diverse themes. For example, the de-neutralization of social theory is just as paramount for gender studies as it is for the constellation of postcolonial and decolonial studies (Bhambra, 2007, 2016). The analyses of racism, patriarchy, stereotyping, and naturalization of all subjects different from the white, male, bourgeois, Western model converge in many ways on the necessity to pluralize and supersede the classic dualisms of social thought. Indeed, while only some post-/decolonial¹ approaches have explicitly placed the intertwining of modernity and coloniality at the very centre of this discussion, the entire constellation of these studies recognizes the basic notions of theoretical modern thought – such as subjectivity, civilization or emancipation – as intellectual products entangled with the historical relations between Europe and the rest of the world, rather than as exclusively endogenous products (Bhambra, 2009).

As a result, post-/decolonial studies arise from the apparently incoherent intersection of analyses that originated in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles with the analytical tools of Western theory, especially those used to analyse social struggles in the West. This produced a globalized intellectual approach, deeply rooted in this paradoxical gaze, able to investigate the extent to which the development of sociological theory has been a geo-cultural product. Indeed, only recently has world history helped to better situate social theory in a specific and not universalizable narrative, highlighting that the way in which the notion of the subject or the idea of emancipation has been conceptualized – within the framework of European Enlightenment, Marxian critique or the liberal approach – is not automatically applicable elsewhere and needs some sort of cultural translation (Dussel, 1996).

This observation is not as trivial as it might seem. Even when it is not explicitly at the forefront of the analysis, the post-/decolonial critique has opened a space within social theory for reflexive thinking about the genealogy of its fundamental categories. The existence of academic labels like ‘post- and de-colonial studies’ evidences the need for an external gaze, while the real issue at stake is not that of ethnocentric distinctions among continental, national or local traditions, but on the contrary the capacity to highlight the impact of history, particularly of colonial history, and of other social actors, different from Western ones, on disciplinary frameworks and theoretical elaboration. In terms of sociology of knowledge, the main concern of the post-/decolonial turn is to highlight how the understanding of the present is based on conceptual tools configured at a time where the only voice was the Western one. Consequently, the way in which we learn to think about agency, universality, identifications, or about the best moral qualities, are rooted in a geohistorical time characterized by the different phases of globalization and by the encounter of the Western world with other cultures. As long as colonialism was a globalized experience creating a set of notions based on original contradictions (Dirlik, 2007), a post-/decolonial perspective could only be achieved by putting the varieties of colonial histories at the centre of the theoretical understanding of the present, ‘working backwards in terms of reconstructing historical representations, as well as forwards to the creation of future projects’ (Bhambra, 2022: 231).

Even though it is impossible to describe in a few pages the rich and heterogeneous ensemble of post-/decolonial studies, as well as to establish boundaries which are extremely porous in thematic and theoretical terms, it is possible at least to underscore the role that they have in questioning the foundations of Euro-American social theory. In the following sections, we outline post-/decolonial studies and their specific role in rethinking social theory.

Epistemological challenges

Despite their heterogeneity, post-/decolonial approaches employ a common set of conceptual tools and have a recognizable core of critical observations on how Western societies imposed their system of domination and their epistemological canon. They ‘have been constituted to interrogate hegemonic knowledges and thereby develop new research agendas and conceptualize new ways of thinking, recast the old and create new methodologies and present new paradigms’ (Patel, 2021: 18).

In line with the cultural turn in the social sciences, post-/decolonial theory alleges that the Western system of domination concerns not only the economic dimension but also, and above all, the political and cultural ones (Young, 1990, 2001; Go, 2013; Gandhi, 2019). Colonialism was not just a form of physical violence, exploitation and appropriation of the material resources, labour and lives of the colonized; it was also a form of symbolic violence that imposed the Western

world view – partial and rooted in specific historical experiences – as a universal model, the ‘true’ and ‘right’ interpretation of reality. It instituted a form of cultural and intellectual domination by the Global North that imprisoned the lives of the subalterns in representations of the world that diminished them, deprived them of value, and forced them to assume as their own the categories of thought of the dominant group; categories of thought that legitimized the forms of Western domination (Fanon, 1986).

By developing the concept of hegemony introduced by Gramsci (2011) and articulating it with Michel Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge (2020), the aim of post-/decolonial approaches is to show and denounce how the modern hegemonic knowledge system was built by appropriating the knowledge of colonized peoples and the epistemologies of the Global South (Santos, 2016). Although the current hegemonic knowledge system presents itself as the autonomous evolution of Western thought, it is instead the result of an imperial science which constantly plundered data, information and knowledge produced in the colonies. ‘Information from the colonized world was crucial for the growth of – among other fields – botany, linguistics, geography, geology, evolutionary biology, astronomy, atmospheric science, oceanography, and of course sociology’ (Connell, 2018: 399). As Go (2020: 87) observes, ‘The modern West and its imperial metropolises were classified as the source of all objective and universal knowledge, and the rest of the world was condemned to serve as sites of empirical excavation to validate the former’. Moreover, colonialism is not only at the basis of Western scientific development; it is also central to its identity – as opposed to the ‘difference’ of those who constitute the ‘Rest’ (Hall, 1992) – and its social organization, with the institutions of democracy (Gordon, 2010), welfare state (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018) and capitalism (Blaut, 1989).

This epistemological denunciation – flanked by feminist theory (Rajan and Park, 2000), deconstructionism (Bhabha, 1990) and critical social theory (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008) – is focused on the internal contradictions of the Global North’s universalism and wages open war on its ‘canon’ (Derrida, 1974), which reduces the plurality of voices and experiences to a single normative and normalizing model. Therefore, key notions of modernity such as progress, development, science or emancipation are accused of a parochialism concealing the needs of the male, white, Western, bourgeois symbolic domination. The implications of this criticism are twofold. On the one hand, it recalls the value of ‘other knowledges’ excluded from the logic of the Western epistemological domain, and it highlights their capacity to provide cognitive tools indispensable for understanding human experience and for expanding our knowledge. On the other hand, it helps to provincialize the West (Chakrabarty, 2000), to show

how exotic [the West’s] constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how

their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the world.

(Rabinow, 1986: 241)

The search for universal, trans-societal and totalizing theories is accused of being ‘an imperialistic will to power that fails to acknowledge the socially-situated, embodied incomplete or “ambivalent” character of all knowledge’ (Go, 2013: 34).

This literature also underscores that this hegemonic epistemic power produced ‘captive minds’ (Alatas, 1974), uncritical and imitative attitudes that were dominated by an external source, unable to achieve autonomy and independence because they could only use the language and the concepts of the dominators. It produced pathological identities, sick minds, forced to make unhealthy choices between becoming what the dominant model would like – but always seeing their own irreducible difference and inferiority reproached – or claiming, in turn, a superiority founded in tradition and valuing their own diversity, but thus only ending up by reinforcing the dichotomy and therefore favouring the hegemonic logic (Fanon, 1986). This created structural forms of social discrimination that outlasted classic forms of colonialism and became integrated into current social orders in postcolonial societies. Decolonial Latin American studies describe this as the *coloniality of power* (Quijano, 2000). More particularly, in this process of othering (see Chapter 6), the idea of race was – and still is – a way to produce social classifications for the unequal distribution of social, political, material and symbolic resources and assuring privileges for those who exercised hegemonic control over the production of those classifications. To sum up, post-/decolonial critique is inseparable from a critique of Western historicism and the representations of otherness that it has produced to assert its superiority (Martuccelli, 2017).

Epistemological troubles: a nuanced cartography

Besides more general epistemological denunciations, post-/decolonial studies can be related to specific topics such as literature or historical research, or they may focus on the events of a geographical area. While most of these studies originated from anti-colonial struggles after World War II, some of them are rooted in different historical events; this is the case of postcolonial approaches in China or Japan, as well as decolonial studies in Latin America, which are rooted in a different experience and timing of colonization. Certainly, for all of them, decolonization processes were a crucial moment of reflection about how they were using Western references to think about themselves or organize political struggle.

To outline the contribution of post-/decolonial studies in social theory, we can start by adopting the geographical gaze, but warning that such spatial references are faint and blurred, and that they mainly relate to the specificities of the colonial past in each region. Also, alongside local perspectives, at the beginning of the interest in coloniality there was a wider international interest in social theory led

by some scholars who opened up the field of discussion. At the end of the 1970s, Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) was a first turning point. The international success of this book fostered a debate on a postcolonial translation of modern theoretical tools – such as the Marxian interpretation of emancipation – and an alternative gaze on modern history. Published just one year before Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, *Orientalism* was in tune with the linguistic turn of that time. The focus shifted to the discourse of modernity, to symbolic forms of hegemony rooted in the narratives and aesthetics of the past, to scientific rhetoric and falsification practices, as well as to the 'epistemic violence' of a model of education entirely based on the Western one (Spivak, 1988). The Gramscian notion of hegemony became paramount in almost all the analyses, from more psychological investigations (Nandy, 1983), to the more economic and historical ones of Subaltern Studies. This provoked polemics with other postcolonial approaches more rooted in Marxian economics legacy and in the analysis of global inequalities (Mohanty, 2003; Chibber, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s the importation and translation of Foucault, Gramsci, Derrida, mixed with Fanon's and Du Bois' legacy, psychoanalysis, and literary studies, marked a first phase of postcolonial studies mainly rooted in American universities and their departments of humanities. Thereafter, postcolonial thought spread around the world mainly as a form of critical cultural analysis (Bhabha, 1994). However, this way of doing postcoloniality was profoundly different from the ones that were arising in other parts of the world, such as in India with the Subaltern Studies group, in Latin America with the first studies on decoloniality, or in Africa with reflection on the cultural displacement and the racial legacy left by colonization. As already mentioned, these different standpoints often discussed similar theoretical references – such as Marx, Gramsci, Foucault and other modern and contemporary European philosophers – but blended them with a literature related to local problems, such as nationalism and the role of local élites in India, or theories of development and world-system in Latin America. The result was a specific discussion of theoretical references that were simultaneously under scrutiny in Europe as well, albeit with different aims and results. Post-/decolonial studies are a too scattered field to be considered a theoretical frame in itself, but they at least converge on some common topics such as the necessity to decentre the question of humanities and the modern thinking about the subject, or to foster critical reflection on globalization and its forms of human and environmental exploitation.

The coloniality of subjects

These convergences are probably more evident in the way in which postcolonial studies discuss the problem of 'race' and blackness, its intersection with class in creating political subjects, and hence more explicitly in the analyses of scholars interested in postcolonial Africa, Atlantic diaspora, Caribbean cultural connections (Virdee, 2019).

Here, any critical reflection on coloniality starts by taking into account the chasms of 'race', colour line and the legacy of slavery and the plantations economy (Mbembe, 2003; Gilroy, 2010; Appiah, 2014). In the cultural *Black Atlantic* space, connecting the African and American continents in the same history (Gilroy, 1993), the main analytical focus in the discussion of social theory is that of the status of the black subject, where colour becomes a catalyst of alienation (Appiah, 1992). Such questioning had already started with the seminal works of Fanon (1952) and Du Bois (1903): the black subject cannot merely imitate the white one, or think of her/himself as a lacking subjectivity awaiting Western emancipation. Discussion of the black subject must necessarily start by analysing the connection between black and white identifications and the history of violence behind that relation. Of all the historical colonial figures, the black subject is the one that has been most violently affected by dehumanization and images of abjection; as Fanon claims, the black person lives in a 'non-being zone'. Consequently, the way in which we conceptualize the subject, his/her rationality, autonomy and emancipation cannot be separated from reflection on racialization, and on the way in which these notions have been elaborated in dualisms, such as mind/body, which have been drawn on the black/white dualism, where the black subject is first of all a disposable body (Mbembe, 2013, 2000).

The universalistic ideal purity of the modern subject cannot be critically analysed without taking the background of colonial racism into account. More than being a simple auto-refuting critique of the subject – as it is in the European post-structuralism and deconstruction of logocentrism – the critique arising from the historical role of the black subject has similarities with the analysis of the position of *homo sacer*, reduced to bare life, always poised between exploitation and extermination (Agamben, 1998). According to Mbembe (2000), behind a discussion on biopolitics and necropolitics, the question posed by the black subject is first of all a way to unhinge the Western illusion of a self-referential subjectivity. In this case, the postcolonial contribution centres on a conceptualization of subjectivity arising from contradictions, dispersions and ambivalent encounters, rather than being a linear pathway emerging from a local form of enlightenment. Basic theoretical notions such as emancipation or subjectivation cannot be univocal, rooted in binarisms, or extrapolated from their historical context.

Again, following the seminal work of Fanon, where the body of the black person was the starting point of all questions (Fanon, 1952), this section of postcolonial studies – in a similar way to what happened in gender studies – put the naturalized and racialized body at the core of a new idea of the subject. Only by superseding the binarism between a productive, reproductive and sexualized body, on the one hand, and a creative cultivated mind on the other is it possible to deconstruct and sidestep the symbolic and physical violence always intimidating the subjective construction of the non-white person (Mbembe, 2013).

It is for this reason that the Atlantic diaspora is not a concern for only black subjects, but is genealogically part of the modern conceptualization of the emancipated subject. This places the notion of emancipation, the story of globalization,

immigration, multiculturalism, creolization, social struggles outside the Western world (Gilroy, 2010). This reading of subjectivation processes sheds light on the close interweaving between radical violence and progress; and it seeks to offer new perspectives beyond auto-confutative attitudes characteristic of the Western self-criticism of modernity. Listening to the voices of black subjects, recognizing their rights, condemning past and present discriminations is necessary but not enough. This is not a matter of problem-solving: the historical experience of black subjects is an issue for the entire contemporary system of social relations and globalized production (Mbembe, 2013).

The coloniality of knowledge

Similar ambitions to outline a theory of power/knowledge, but from different standpoints and with different aims, can be found in the tradition of Latin American decolonial studies that, starting from more political and economic analysis, have attempted ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2009) mainly by focusing on the ‘epistemologies of the South’ and the ‘ecologies of knowledges’ (Santos, 2007, 2009), where different bodies of cultural knowledge can be reassembled to address old issues like social inequalities, and emerging ones like the environmental crisis. As a whole, the decolonial approach is the one most focused on the critique of eurocentrism and occidentalism as the informing principle of the construction of cultural and historical narratives, although it is also the one more open to and interested in theoretical relations with other areas of postcolonial studies adopting other continental perspectives, fostering the notion of ‘transmodernity’ (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Taking into account the history of the Latin American area, and the earlier colonization in the sixteenth century, this analysis considers Europe – and then the Euro-American space – as an entity simultaneously within and outside the construction of the analytical tools with which Latin American scholars analyse the history, social relations and economic situations of the continent. Key notions of modernity such as emancipation, progress, enlightenment, rationality, critique cannot be adopted as such by simply importing them from European theoretical discussion. They have to be analysed in terms of their genealogical intercultural production, as well as their local translations (Dussel, 1996; Bhabra and Santos, 2017). In analytical terms, the aim is to highlight a history of inequalities in the genesis of theoretical tools related to academic centralities and peripheries, in a sort of geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), or a ‘coloniality of knowledge’ that must be recognized when theoretical tools are used (Connell, 2007, 2015).

The first Latin American decolonial analyses began soon after the academic success of postcolonial humanities in American universities but followed local paths. An early focus was on the violent transformative aspirations that arrived with colonization, through the discussion of development and dependency theory and world-system theory (Wallerstein, 1984). Hence, a part of decolonial analysis

is focused on a revision of the Marxian legacy in the investigation of social and economic inequalities in the Latin American continent and the latter's relations with the Western world (Dussel, 2000; Quijano, 2000, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007; Escobar, 2007). In this case, one of the main theoretical issues – besides a more specific discussion of the Marxian analytical apparatus – is to analyse the relation between coloniality and modernity, for which there is no modernity without coloniality. The term 'coloniality' – often presented as *modernity/coloniality* – was first suggested by Annibal Quijano, who, on considering the early history of colonization of the area, including the Caribbean region, raised the problem of a power/knowledge rooted in the link between race and class – that is, in a 'racial axis' of capitalism characteristic of colonial culture (Quijano, 2000). Whilst in the African and African-American perspectives on postcolonialism the focus is more on the subject and his/her body, in this case it is instead on the systemic notions of development and growth, with their genealogies of oppression and where the ambivalences of conceptual tools such as emancipation or civilization play a central role. Through the analysis of Marx, Gramsci, Braudel and Wallerstein's world-system theory, there is the enucleation of their original Western locus and the effort to reveal how the analysis of hegemonies and inequalities must necessarily start from a critical history of relations between the Euro-American and Latin American areas (Quijano, 2007).

With some variations, this path has been followed by Latin-American scholars working in different countries of the continent and forming a loose network of committed scholars. The presence of some of them in American universities has fostered the internationalization of the perspective initially outlined mainly by Quijano, strengthening the epistemological and cultural critique alongside the socio-economic critique of capitalism. Moreover, the analysis of decolonial practices, and the 'coloniality of knowledge', is related to past and present mobilizations in an attempt to establish new conceptual foundations, where key notions of social theory could be analysed in a context different from the Western one. It is for this reason that the observation of local practices is considered as a basis for a new theory/practice relation where decoloniality is signified by the everyday practices of specific actors (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). In comparison to other areas of postcolonial studies, the decolonial approach conducts a much more generalized analysis of the five centuries of 'coloniality of power', often considering them as a compact legacy rather than an intertwining of responsibilities. Yet, given the ambitiousness of the endeavour, the attempt to construct a 'pluriversal knowledge' is more often announced than realized; in spite of the research on local cultural production, such as *Buen vivir* or indigenous *Vincularidad*, in many cases the epistemological investigation remains focused on a denunciation of eurocentrism, and on the original sin of capitalism in Western modernity, a critique to some extent outdated by current forms of globalization and geopolitical superpowers, where many hegemonic actors and capitalist approaches are no longer exclusively Western (Martuccelli, 2017).

The coloniality of history

A last and even more heterogeneous area of postcolonial studies pertains to the Asiatic continent, where various powerful cultural traditions have reacted, first to colonial aggression and Western cultural hegemony and then to the new equilibriums of globalization, in very different ways. Reassembling Eastern postcolonialities in a single framework is more an analytical fiction than the definition of a precise theoretical perspective, even though at least some general common features can be identified. As said, the discursive critical examination of *Orientalism* has been the first step towards a postcolonial analysis of the historical-cultural encounter between Europe and the East; and the success of Said's book has triggered postcolonial discussions in this part of the world. Nevertheless, Middle-East regions, India, China or Japan have developed very different approaches to a critical dialogue with Western modernity that can by no means be summarized as an 'Asiatic' postcolonial approach.

Reflections similar to those developed by Latin American decoloniality are present also in the Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Malaysian universities, even though they are not always related to a colonial past (and sometimes to an intra-continental coloniality), but rather to the strong influence of Western culture since the nineteenth century, including the influence of American social sciences, especially on Korean and Japanese universities, on the wave of the Americanization that followed World War II. This has fostered discussions on a 'post-Western' social science, in terms of a dialogue between different epistemological traditions and ways of treating common issues, such as capitalism, globalization, instrumental rationality or social inequalities, where, for example, Confucian analysis can be compared to the Weberian one (Lizhong and Roulleau-Berger, 2017; Yu, 2018; Roulleau-Berger, 2021). This also includes discussions on the psychological assimilation of Western culture, such as in Alatas's analysis of the 'captive mind' (Alatas, 1974), or Nandy's investigation of 'psychological colonialism' (Nandy, 1983).

In organizing a post-Western approach, this area of Asia has developed its own sociological space, with associations and networks, able to develop an internal discussion on the theoretical tools coming from European social sciences, intertwining them with similar local analytical notions related to local philosophical traditions. However, the internationalization of these debates is still limited, at least compared to the resonance achieved by scholars in India, who – also for linguistic reasons – have been present on the international stage since the beginning of postcolonial discussions.

As a former colonized country, India was obliged to develop a much closer relation with Western culture and its theoretical notions; the country was introduced to sociology very early on, almost at the same time as Europe, together with other classic academic disciplines such as philosophy and history, so that Indian intellectuals were imbued with Western humanities while they were developing their national struggle for independence (Patel, 2017). Colonial modernity

was criticized mainly with analytical notions taken from Europe, even though the figure of Gandhi represented a fundamental turning point in the capacity to rediscover local intellectual notions, such as *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*, in discussing power relations and political issues.

The ambivalence in using theoretical notions imported from the West clearly emerged with the discussion on the colonial legacy fostered by the Subaltern Studies group. Based mainly on historical analysis and a transversal critique of nationalist anti-colonial rhetoric, the main aim of the research programme inaugurated by Guha (2002) was to shed light on the experiences, the voices and the capabilities of the most silenced actors, such as the peasants and the Dalit community. The inability to take into account these actors – that is, the majority of the Indian population – demonstrated the complicity of Indian academic élites with a colonial governmentality based on a Western conceptualization of history and social analysis (Chatterjee, 2012; Guha, 2002; Prakash, 1994).

Indeed, the success of Subaltern Studies was related to the loss of reputation of many Marxist scholars during the 1970s (Prakash, 1994). In this case, the discussion of Marx, Gramsci, and history from below, was a way to appropriate analysis that originated in Europe in order to study the specificity of the Indian case; but it was also an opportunity to suggest an analytical use of these theoretical tools free from a cultural dependency that Subaltern Studies recognized in the political interpretation of socialism by the government élites. Thus, the concern was to reject historicism and a Western idea of modernization by offering a localized analysis of social problems like the caste system. The notions of hegemony and subalternity taken from Gramsci were ‘Western’, but the problem was not only to denounce their European parochial origin but how to translate this vocabulary for an independent analysis of local situations; in this case, to get rid of the British historiography of India, including some of its Marxian versions.

In spite of Spivak’s underscoring of the ‘epistemic violence’ of the British colonial legacy (Spivak, 1988), this perspective acknowledged the necessity to recognize both the indispensability and the inadequacy of the modern theoretical frame of analysis (Chakrabarty, 2000). Even though Indian subalterns would fully regain their voice, this would be a hybrid cultural product born from a transnational colonial history. What matter is to bring to the fore the voices of the periphery. Spivak’s well-known question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ is also a matter of ‘what’ can be said – from what knowledge-base – as well as a question of being heard. Hence, the analyses generated by the individual work of scholars, originally gathered around the Subaltern studies collective, were all shaped by a cultural and interdisciplinary pluralism whose aim was to critically interact with a set of theoretical tools, from linguistic deconstruction to Anthropocene, that were in themselves a product of a globalized history.

Overcoming dichotomies and binary thinking

As the foregoing ‘cartography’ highlights, one of the pillars of the epistemological hegemony rooted in the history of modernity is the interpretation of reality

based on the use of dichotomies, of a binary thought system that builds knowledge through radical oppositions and exclusions such as nature/culture; modern/traditional; civilized/savages; Us/Them; the West/the Rest; global/local. The logic of dichotomous thinking consists in reducing complexity and variability to a series of oppositions in which – as Durkheim already noted – one side assumes a moral value, that is, sacred and superior, while the other is residual, profane and inferior. When applied to the production of Otherness, the construction of dichotomies not only builds the moral value of one of the two parts of the distinction but also creates identity, a sense of inclusion and reasons for exclusion. The boundary that defines the binary distinction tends to create a sense of homogeneity and unity for everything that lies within that boundary and increases the sense of difference, distance and threat of what is excluded. It creates the identities of Us and Them in an antagonistic way, transferring to the identities thus created a moral judgment: Us as superior to Them (Said, 1995).

In addition to the deconstructive side, which tends to highlight the provincialism of Western interpretative concepts and how they represent constitutive elements of the privileges and dominant positions of the Global North episteme, post-/decolonial theories have produced a rich set of concepts that enhance the understanding of contemporary societies and human experience.

It is possible to identify some linking themes that underlie the theoretical development and the proposal of a different epistemology of the postcolonial perspective. They can be summarized in the re-characterization of global culture and human experience – in terms of relations (Go, 2013), flows (Appadurai, 1996), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), double consciousness (du Bois, 2008), intersectionality (Bartels et al., 2019) and interconnections (Tomlinson, 1999) – in order to undermine the simplistic colonizer/colonized (Us/Them) dualism, and more generally, binary thought. These are all useful concepts with which to highlight heterogeneity as a basic category of social reality and to introduce contingency and uncertainty into what the epistemic hegemony of the Global North tends to represent as sovereign, uncontaminated and incontestable categories.

These concepts constitute the contents of a theoretical toolbox that aspires to produce an ‘ecology of knowledges’ (Santos, 2007): the recognition of the complexity and coexistence of different forms of knowledge, as well as the need to study their affinities, divergences, complementarities and contradictions in order to maximize the effectiveness of the understanding of human existence and undermine the reductive and discriminatory hegemony of the epistemology of the Global North.

Recognizing complexity, variability and relationships, however, requires full awareness of the asymmetries among positions. The dimension of power and its implementation in the form of symbolic and cultural hegemony become essential elements of the analysis. Overcoming binary thinking requires both exploring the porosity, fluidity and instability of boundaries created to define dichotomies and recognizing the effects of domination, exclusion and inferiorization that such creation defines. Applying a post-binary perspective involves both critically analysing how the knowledge, representations and languages that define social reality

are constructed, and critically analysing the power relations that sustain and are sustained by epistemological hegemony. This entails recognizing that ways of understanding, organizing and experiencing reality are embedded in the dynamics of power/knowledge, which in turn are defined by the asymmetrical relationships that structure the possible relationships between dominants and subordinates.

Contrary to the representation of the colonized as passive, post-/decolonial thinking explores the forms of agency that subordinates put in place to resist forms of domination (Spivak, 1988). Western hegemonic epistemology tends ‘to conceive of agency as transcendental, disembodied, and rationally mediated quality of the human subject’ (Susen, 2020: 11; see also Chapter 2). The post-/decolonial perspective, on the other hand, highlights the social and situated character of agency and conceives it as the complex result of the interaction between different forces – among which power relations have a major role – and different entities – the complex relationship with other subjects but also with material, environmental and technological factors. Agency is explored as a capacity that emerges from the situation, strongly influenced by practices, structures and symbols that are culturally variable and asymmetrically organized by inequalities of power.

This idea of agency also influences the conception of identity. The latter is no longer seen as an essence, a founding characteristic of subjectivity, but instead as the mobile and continuously negotiated result of the relationships that are established with other subjects and with the context. Identity becomes the unstable result of different forms of belonging and of the specific social position that is assumed in the relationship. It is a constantly adapted, stratified and multiple identity, the result of power relations and the possibility of resisting them, rather than being a manifestation of the autonomy of people (Gilroy, 1993). To grasp the complexity and flexibility of identities in a postcolonial context, it is necessary to adopt an intersectional perspective (see Chapter 5) that highlights the joint effects of multiple social forms of categorization in asymmetrically shaping the possibility of acting in a specific situation in a specific power relationship.

Rather than focusing *exclusively* on ‘race’, ethnicity, nationality, and/or culture, post/decolonial analysis explores the degree to which these elements of modern life forms *intersect* with other sociological variables – such as class, gender, age, and ability. Arguably, all of these factors have to be taken into account if one seeks to paint a comprehensive picture of both colonial and postcolonial types of domination.

(Susen, 2020: 8)

More than unity, the characteristics of subjective experience are hybridity, constant mixing, transformation as reactions to situations and contexts, to power relations and social positioning. Because hybridity avoids the pitfalls of essentializing binary thinking, it is a particularly important concept with which to grasp the tactics that subordinates implement to restructure and destabilize forms of power. Moreover, it is an important concept with which to combat the domination of one

canon, one voice, one mode of thought, a single identity, and exclusive belonging (Prabhu, 2007).

The concept of 'hybrid' links identity and agency to contingency; it refers to specific social locations resulting from power relationships and intersections among different categorizations. It links the historical dynamic – the persistence of the past – with the spatial dimension. The hybridization process involves an encounter among different trajectories in a specific social place. Indeed, the emphasis on the spatial dimension is an epistemological contribution of the post-/decolonial perspective. It highlights the importance of social location by emphasizing the margin (bell hooks, 1991) as a 'Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994): a place of encounter and confrontation, of mixage and exchange, of knowledge and change. The marginal position enables a specific form of 'border thinking' (Mignolo, 2012): that is, the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the point of view of people in subordinate positions. Border thinking is a 'tool' used in the critical evaluation of Western hegemony. It allows the adoption of an eccentric, oblique gaze that re-elaborates, in an original way, the taken-for-granted, the languages, the rules and the hegemonic beliefs.

The emphasis on the local dimension is also a useful conceptual tool with which to localize the global. It highlights how the general must be understood from a local, situated perspective, and suggests that global processes must be analysed in their specific historical-spatial location in order to grasp the dynamics – always different – that define specific intersections of categorizations and power with which social actors must cope in their actions and their interpretations of reality. Hence, intercultural relations and globalization cannot be analysed using the category of development or progress. They do not constitute an inevitable linear process; they are instead the result of hybrids, resistances, conflicts and agreements that take shape in specific situations within global flows. It is especially in the 'third space' created by the colonial experience that it is possible to highlight the dynamics between global and local and to grasp how hegemonic tendencies are reworked to adapt them to local contexts, thus contributing to their contestation and transformation.

New challenges for social sciences

The critique of social sciences is an integral part of the post-/decolonial critique of the Western canon. It interrogates the categories and classification systems used by social scientists to reflect on their own disciplines and comprehend how these are related to Eurocentric assumptions. What is at issue, in this case, is not simply the denunciation of the hegemonic and privileged positions of the Global North built through the symbolic and material violence perpetrated on the Global South. Rather, it is a question of critically evaluating the role that the social sciences have had and continue to have in defining colonial relations in many areas of the world, and of discussing whether and which theoretical concepts developed in the West can be applied to understand the contemporary postcolonial and global reality.

The knowledge, epistemology and methodology developed by social sciences to understand and support the social development of the Global North are presented as universally applicable and, in this way, they conceal and repress other experiences and forms of knowledge (Gamage, 2018). The problem, in the post-/decolonial perspective, is how to adapt contemporary global sociological theories to the different contexts and situations in the Global South. Simplifying, it is possible to identify two ways to answer this question. On the one hand, a more radical position tends to consider the social sciences as inevitably situated in Western experience and therefore as unsuitable for understanding the socio-historical experience of different contexts. This position tends to suggest the necessity of rejecting Western social sciences totally and starting a different form of social knowledge from scratch – from local knowledge based on local problems. On the other hand, a less radical position considers how to rework or integrate the social sciences to strip them of their universalistic claims and make them suitable for understanding postcolonial reality. This position urges the integration of Western social sciences with *local* knowledge by mixing, translating, recovering other voices and knowledge.

In its most radical formulation, the post-/decolonial perspective holds that the social worlds are ontologically different and that the social sciences are nothing more than the appropriate interpretative tools with which to understand the Western experience. Societies are ontologically different because there are no fixed factors that limit how human beings organize the way in which they live together. Social life is an open possibility: it can assume infinite different forms, and how it is concretely constructed depends only on the socio-historical processes of its construction. Therefore, every society is ‘unique’ and cannot be interpreted or understood ‘outside’ its unique process of establishment. When the specific set of concepts and ideas developed by Western society to interpret its changes and to legitimize its actions are used to interpret other realities and experiences, it becomes evident that it is an ideological weapon used by the West to exert power over the Rest (Mignolo, 2002, 2007). A post-/decolonial, post-Western, social science should give voice to tacit histories, repressed subjectivities, subaltern knowledge and languages to generate a new set of concepts with which to understand the uniqueness of each society.

In the words of Mignolo (2014: 595),

The social sciences emerged to solve problems in Europe and contributed to make Europe what it is in terms of institutions of knowledge, actors, and categories of thoughts. It contributed to European and US imperialism. It is doubtful the social sciences would be of help to non-Europeans who want to solve their problems, one of them being Western imperialism economic, political, cultural, and epistemic. Thus, de-westernizing and decolonizing knowledge (and knowing) means to delink from the belief that there is one way of knowing and therefore of being.

From this perspective, the social sciences, as we know them today and as they are taught in undergraduate and doctoral curricula around the world, are a specialized discourse promoted by Western élites to explain the Western experience of social transformation and global colonization (Mignolo, 2009). This means that the specific field of social science as an institution – that is, an organized form of social discourse production consisting of specific words, practices, rules, methods, concepts, specialists, organizations, objects and subjects – has been established by the Western elites, using their own vocabulary. Accordingly, it has defined a specific regime of truth entitled to produce coherent and true discourses on the social. From this perspective, the social sciences are the means with which Western societies have described and legitimized their experience of modernity and their project to control and manage populations for imperial purposes. Proponents of this position warn that it is necessary to recognize that there is no single path to change, a single trajectory that sets the direction in which all societies must inevitably converge. They advocate the development of different theories, words and concepts with which to grasp the particularity of the different societies (Al-e-Ahmad, 1984).

As a matter of fact, such positions consider social sciences to be ideologies: discourses that are more prescriptive than descriptive; that justify and legitimize what they presume to study. There is no need for Western social science because there is no need for a social science at all. As Mignolo (2014: 286) bluntly concludes, ‘People around the world have been and continue to be good thinkers without recourse to the “social sciences”’. The very idea of possibility and necessity for a global social science is a deception. It is an example of academic dependency (Alatas, 2003): to be popular and accepted as part of standard curricula in universities, social science theories must be ‘global’ (i.e., Western). Emerging theories in subaltern spaces, despite their potential to provide contextual interpretations for indigenous ways of life, are ignored or devalued and find no way to enter mainstream disciplines unless they translate their language into the dominant language (i.e., Western) of the discipline (Omobowale and Akanle, 2017).

A less radical perspective proposes a selective use of Eurocentric concepts, theories and methods, integrating them with ideas stemming from the colonial encounter and the specific position on the margins of colonized subjects (Go, 2013). As Raewyn Connell writes (2007: 228), ‘it is helpful to think of social science not as a settled system of concepts, methods and findings, but an interconnected set of intellectual projects that proceed from varied social starting points into an unpredictable future’.

In this case, Western social sciences are not completely rejected. However, there is a need to extract those Western concepts, theories and methods that can be of use within ‘subaltern’ societies. This entails recognizing that social theories are all partial and specific, and that it is not possible to obtain universal and objective knowledge about the social. ‘All social knowledge is provincial’ (Go, 2020: 91).

In particular, postcolonial scholars consider the current social sciences inadequate to the task of understanding non-Western postcolonized cultures. They think that as long as the Western social sciences – as a historically constructed field of knowledge and power – remain the only possible reference frame for evaluating the truth and plausibility of a statement about the reality of the world, other non-canonical voices can only be interpreted in terms of absence, lack or incompleteness which results in inadequacy (Chakrabarty, 2000: 32).

It is possible to re-elaborate the social sciences to have conceptual tools with which to understand postcolonial realities by following at least two distinct paths (Go, 2013). A first possibility consists in the ‘indigenization’ of the social sciences (Alatas, 2006, 2014; Sitas, 2006). Scholars who propose this path recover ‘subordinate’ – and therefore excluded from the Western canon of social sciences – concepts and authors such as Ibn Khaldūn, José Rizal, Said Nursi, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati or Benoy Kumar Sarkar (Alatas and Sinha, 2017). Another proposal for the indigenization of the social sciences consists in the recovery of concepts developed by non-Western philosophical traditions. Examples are the work of D.P. Mukerji who searched Hindu/Sanskrit texts to develop a sociological perspective able to capture the reality of postcolonial India (Mukerji, 2002; Kuman Bose, 2014) or the works of Akinsola Akiwowo, who recovers the visions of society contained in tales, myths and proverbs Yoruba (Akiwowo, 1999; Patel, 2021). A more general example is the introduction into the social sciences of the concepts of *ubumbo*, *pachamama* or *buen vivir* as different formulations of society and development (Chingangaidze, 2022).

A second possibility consists in promoting ‘connected sociologies’ and connected histories (Bhambra, 2010, 2014); that is, in linking mainstream Western sociology with other forms of social thought arising from the experience of pre- and postcolonial societies (Patel, 2021). This proposal concerns the promotion of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls a ‘diatopical hermeneutics’ (Santos, 2002): that is, a space for dialogue between different philosophical and political traditions that enables us to broaden our understanding of social reality. The proposed example is a diatopical hermeneutics conducted among the *topos* of ‘human rights’ in Western culture, the *topos* of ‘dharma’ in Hindu culture, and the *topos* of ‘umma’ in Islamic culture to conceptualize a space of multicultural coexistence. As Go (2013: 40) observes,

In this approach, at stake is not just whether we study colonialism or whether our theories are ‘European’ but also whether our studies overcome sociology’s analytic bifurcations. The idea is straightforward enough: if one of the limits of conventional sociology is that it analytically bifurcates social relations, a postcolonial sociology might also seek to reconnect those relations that have been covered up in standard sociological accounts – regardless of whether those theories are of the north or of the south, or whether they are about colonialism or not.

This perspective urges the development of a solidarity-based epistemology (Banerjee and Connell, 2018) oriented not simply to deconstructing Western social thought and to removing the scoria of colonial thought within the social sciences, but also to grasping the reciprocal constitutive interconnection between the creation of social thought and colonial history.

To conclude, in spite of a certain lack of analytical clarity, the interest in post-/decolonial approaches lies in their subversive potential to renew the theoretical apparatus of notions that originated in Western modernity. While the critique of Eurocentrism can be considered acquired, a stimulating and regenerating set of theoretical inspirations could come from the discussion and inclusion of non-Western analytical notions and from the contamination of analyses coming from different historical experiences of globalization. Post-/decolonial studies are not just a set of criticisms of the hegemonic role of Western modernity in the construction of knowledge; rather, they are important protagonists of the effervescence of current social theory, and they actively stay in its trouble, where also new forms of hegemony can emerge. Knowledge from non-Western countries is no longer subaltern or provincial, and it plays an important role in the discussion of the main global issues like gender inequalities, racism or climate change. The productive trouble of a social theory constructed on themes and issues, transversal to theoretical tradition, is also the effect of a global social theory that can no longer be conceived in binary terms and instead emerges from intercultural dialogues and multi-layered perspectives. The potential generated by such connections is part of the transformation and translation of the theoretical tools that we have inherited from the past.

Note

- 1 We use the term ‘post/decolonial studies’ to denote the ensemble of these studies, and occasionally the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ when referring to more specific cultural areas of investigation.

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Intersectionality

Helma Lutz

Capturing multiple oppressions

The term intersectionality originates from the US law professor Crenshaw (1989); it appeared in her seminal article about the entanglement of multiple forms of discrimination, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’. Crenshaw used this metaphor in her analysis of a 1976 court case *DeGraffenreid versus General Motors* to show how anti-discrimination law limited to *one single category only* overlooks the shifting intersection which was in place when General Motors laid off black women workers: they did not fit into the category of white women or into that of black men.

Using the metaphor of a traffic interchange where different roads intersect, Crenshaw coined intersectionality as an alternative to what she called a ‘framing problem’ of the then-existing law. Starting with race, gender and sexuality, she later expanded the triad with other roads like the ‘classism-, transphobia-, ableism-, heterosexism- and xenophobia-roads’.¹ Intersectionality, thus, became her remedy to the shortcomings of a single-axis antidiscrimination law.

While the struggle of Black Women for suffrage can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when the Anti-Slavery feminist activist Sojourner Truth campaigned for an electoral law that would include male and female Black people (see Brah and Phoenix, 2004; May, forthcoming), the attention paid to what is now called intersectionality is more recent. A brief look at the history of the term shows that it came into being via what was known as the race-class-gender debate, receiving its main impulses from US Black feminism and anti-racist activism in the 1970s. One early documentation of this is the manifesto of a Boston-based Black lesbian feminist organization, the Combahee River Collective which in 1977 highlighted the futility of privileging a single dimension of oppressive experience, be it the category race or the category gender:

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions.

(Combahee River Collective, 1977: 277)

Their plea for a ‘development of integrated analysis and practice, based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking’ (ibid.: 272) was followed, echoed and elaborated in the work of a number of Black feminist scholars: Angela Davis, bell hooks, Valerie Smith, Gloria Hull and Patricia Hill Collins are some of the main protagonists. For example, Hill Collins (1990) attempted to capture the multidimensional nature and complexity of Black women’s experience by developing the model of a ‘matrix of domination’, which she characterized as ‘interlocking systems of oppression’.

Since the early 1990s, an awareness has evolved of the fact that three categories may not be enough to understand social inequalities in societies all over the world and that the three categories *race-class-gender* cannot be treated as distinct and isolated realms of experience. McClintock (1995) has emphasized that, on the contrary, these categories come into existence through contradictory and conflictual relations to each other. The feminist philosopher Young (1990) has argued not only for a *pluralization* of the category of oppression (which usually appears in the singular) but also against ‘separate systems of oppression for each oppressed group: racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism and so on’ (1990: 63). Instead, she presents a theory in which she characterizes *five faces of oppression*: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (ibid.: 64). Young considers these criteria helpful for determining whether or not groups or individuals are oppressed; she adds: ‘But different group oppressions exhibit different combinations of these forms, as do different individuals and groups’ (ibid.).

From the 1990s onwards, this debate made its way from the US into the British academic debate. Since its conceptualization as multiple oppression theory, *race-class-gender*, then understood as non-additive and not originating from the same sources, the triad has been amended with the addition of other categories of social exclusion such as nationality (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992), sexuality (McClintock, 1995), and other markers of discrimination, racism and othering (for an overview, see Amelina and Lutz, 2019: 11).

Over the last three decades, the term intersectionality has left the USA and travelled not only to Europe but also to other parts of the world. As a concept, it has gone far beyond gender studies and has been taken up in many social science sub-disciplines. One can say that intersectionality has made a multi-disciplinary global career and became a ‘buzzword’ (Davis, 2008). The Dutch gender studies scholar Davis (2008) believes that the term intersectionality has the advantage of open-endedness, which provides adaptability to diverse contexts. Intersectionality, thus, can be compared to other globalized metaphors like Erving Goffman’s *back-stage and frontstage* (1959) or Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* (1992). The US sociologist Myra Marx-Ferree suggests another reason for the broad acceptance of intersectionality as a ‘label’: Unlike the USA and Britain, after World War II many European countries (Germany in particular) avoided using ‘race’ or racism as a social science concept. Therefore, intersectionality ‘combined an appealing level of abstraction with a comforting appearance of value-neutrality’ (Marx Ferree, 2013: 379). The question of why intersectionality seemed to be the right term for

many scholars still needs to be answered. Today, it may be possible to draw the interim conclusion that intersectionality seems ‘to do the work’ for scholars in many disciplines (see Davis and Lutz, forthcoming). Its rapid dissemination in legal and social inequality studies was certainly also helped by the fact that the originator, Kimberlé Crenshaw, was a legal scholar and a political activist. During the UN World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001, her idea of invisible entanglements of oppression categories found global resonance and had a major impact on the concept’s rapid dispersion. The debate on human rights and global justice, first discussed in various committees of the United Nations, was taken up by, for example, the European Parliament. In the process of the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation, lawmakers needed a methodology that would help to facilitate the implementation of measures designed to counter multiple discrimination. The adoption of the European Non-Discrimination Directives into the member states’ national law triggered debates about multiple discrimination legislation (Schiek and Lawson, 2010), and ‘intersectional discrimination’ became part of the law (European Commission, 2007).

Disputes about intersectionality’s journey

While according to Ange Marie Hancock intersectionality theory needs to be characterized as the most significant intellectual contribution of gender studies to the world (Hancock, 2007), there have been heated disputes about the use of the concept in the USA and elsewhere. When intersectionality travelled to Europe, it was taken up at different times in different places. As we know from Edward Said’s work (1983, 2000), change comes with the journey when texts and theories travel. In his work on travelling theories, Said convincingly argued that rather than treating an original (theoretical) text as a cultural dogma, it is more efficient to follow up its transformations (Said, 1983: 247). In the following, I will give a summary of these transformations, characterized as: *amendments, appropriations, new metaphors and future developments*.

Amendment

Based on their respective research questions, many intersectionality scholars have advocated the expansion of the categories. The advocates of *amendment* argue for an inclusive conceptualization of inequality categories, always open to further expansion; they have suggested the extension of the three basic categories *race-class-gender* by adding *sexuality, generation/age, health/disability* and *space* (for an overview of these seven main and seven subcategories, see Amelina and Lutz, 2019: 11). Critics like Alice Ludvig, on the other hand, have rejected this openness and characterized the arbitrariness and incompleteness of this procedure as the ‘Achilles’ heel’ of intersectional approaches (Ludvig, 2006: 247). Indeed, the question of which positionality should be considered as most salient for a social inequality analysis requires an answer. One suggestion is to

view 'race, class, gender' as a 'minimum standard' which can be extended by the addition of other categories, depending on the context and the respective research problem (Leiprecht and Lutz, 2005). In addition, a clear emphasis on the contradictory and conflicting relations *between* the respective positionalities is required. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the notion of intersectionality can or should be considered a free-floating signifier; rather, it is important to embed intersectionality in the respective (historical, social, cultural) context in which it is used. However, this *context-conscious approach* needs closer examination. Some European scholars are concerned with the lack of attention to the importance of historical differences in the conceptualization of 'race' and 'class' in legal and social science discourses between the USA and Europe (Marx Ferree, 2011; Knapp, 2005); they regard 'ethnicity' as a more appropriate category than 'race' (see also below). So far, in European discourse 'race' is often connected to anti-Semitism, the racial ideology used as legitimation for the murder of the six million Jews executed by the German Nazi regime. On the other hand, a consideration of the long shadows of previous versions of race-making and racist ideology in European colonial state policies, with their enormous impact on population, legal and social sciences, have long been ignored. Instead, the category 'race' is considered baggage belonging to the past, a term that cannot be used in a positive way like in the USA and Britain. As a result, unfortunately, not only is the term 'race' avoided but 'racism' as an analytical category is often dismissed altogether. A growing number of researchers, in particular in migration studies, have claimed that 'ethnicity' carries a similar baggage of 'othering' and hierarchization to an extent that – often in connection with 'culture' – it becomes a powerful tool of (symbolic, political and social) exclusion (Lutz et al., 2011: 10 ff.). Today, many critical race theory scholars prefer the word 'racialization', which indicates that subject and group positions are effects of racist exclusions and that 'race' is the result of racism, not the other way round. The British scholar Robert Miles argued already in 1991 against the use of race in sociological research. In Miles' view, the term race should be relegated to the 'garbage heap of analytically useless terms' (Miles, 1991: 97), because naturalizing and biologizing associations can hardly be avoided whenever it is used.

Reinforced by the current debate about colonialism, the disputes about whether 'race' should be re-introduced into the European debate continue to be virulent and sometimes point in a different direction, as in the case of the German Constitutional Law.² Linked to the argument about whether the term 'race' should be adopted in the European debate is the question of whether 'race' must always be considered the most important category and necessarily included in every analysis. When the concept of intersectionality was introduced, some gender studies scholars were at first reluctant to work with it for fear they might lose gender as the master category and, thereby, disavow and weaken gender studies; they saw this as something that could easily be politically misused to abolish gender studies altogether (Bereswill and Neuber, 2011: 62). Others, like the Danish-Swedish scholar Lykke (2010), rejected this position and noted that feminists urgently need

to engage in dialogues ‘beyond the comfort zone’, asking questions about each other’s differing positionings in which gender must not necessarily be considered the most important category (see also Lykke, forthcoming).

Moreover, for many authors dealing with the analysis of social inequality, class as a master category is not in question. In terms of class, there are other parallels to the debate about race. The US gender studies sociologist Marx Ferree (2011), comparing debates in Germany and the USA, has warned against the equation of the term ‘class’ in the US context with the European meaning of the term (Marx Ferree, 2011). It is evident that, on their journey around the world, categories can acquire a (slightly) different meaning in different contexts, and that prioritizations of master categories are connected with this.

Looking at ongoing work about the amendments of the categories, the last word has not yet been spoken. Although there is no question that the adaptation of concepts to historical, social, and political differences and deviations in the respective national or geographical context is necessary, it is not always clear whether and how this transmission shakes the foundations and principles of the original.

Appropriation

A passionate and partly destructive debate arose about what was described by some as the *inadequate appropriation* of intersectionality by ‘white’ scholars. The 2009 Frankfurt conference with the title *Celebrating Intersectionality? Debates on a multi-faceted concept in Gender-Studies*³ is often mentioned in texts by those who level this accusation. The Canadian sociologist Sirma Bilge criticized the conference for its alleged intention to ‘whiten’ intersectionality by erasing its Black feminist theory beginnings:

[t]he appropriation of a whitened intersectionality needs to be countered by insistently emphasizing intersectionality’s constitutive ties with critical race thinking and (re)claiming a non-negotiable status for race and the racializing processes in intersectional analysis and praxis. Re-centering race in intersectionality is vital in the face of widespread practices that decenter race in tune with the hegemonic post racial thinking.

(Bilge, 2013: 413)⁴

On the same lines Lewis (2013), referring to the same conference, contends:

For feminists in some parts of Europe to seemingly uncritically reproduce the position that race is unutterable and without analytic utility in the contemporary European context, can be experienced as an act of epistemological and social erasure – erasure both of contemporary realities of intersectional subjects and of the history of racial categories and racializing processes across the whole of Europe.

(Lewis, 2013: 880)

As one of the organizers of this conference, I can report that the debate by no means avoided the category of ‘race’ altogether. There were, however, disputes about its transferability to the European context, on which point Bilge commented that continental European feminists have a ‘certain propensity toward overly academic contemplation’ (Bilge, 2013: 411)

Over the following years, the argument that Black women, as victims of multiple discrimination, must be fundamentally considered as *the* reference group for intersectionality became the focus of many disputes. Crenshaw, for example, rejects the transference to other groups and worries that as a consequence Black women will be excluded:

There is a sense that efforts to repackage intersectionality for universal consumption require a re-marginalising of Black women. This instinct reflects a fatal transmission error of ‘Demarginalising’s’ central argument: that representations of gender that are ‘race-less’ are not by that fact alone more universal than those that are race-specific.

(Crenshaw, 2011: 224)

Here, the question arises whether anti-Black feminism can function as a universal form of *all* expressions of racism or should rather be seen as a *particular* expression of it. This question is important, because next to Anti-Black racism there is a whole range of other racisms less present in the USA, such as anti-Muslim and anti-Sinti/Romani racism and others (see various articles in Lutz et al., 2011).

Germany may be a particular case, but like Germany, many European countries denied the persistence of racism/anti-Semitism after World War II. The sociologist Theodor W. Adorno, who conducted extensive research in post-National Socialist Germany from the early 1950s onward, noted collective tendencies towards ‘historical slander’ and ‘guilt defense’ among the German population. Farsightedly, he noted that the ‘genteel term culture’ was increasingly replacing the frowned-upon term race, and that after this act of renaming the use of culture meant something similar to race (Adorno, 1955). The German educationalist Leiprecht (2001: 28) has described this process of replacement in the following way: ‘Culture has increasingly become a *terminological hiding place* for race’. Currently, culture is often used as a blueprint for constructions of the ‘otherness’ of large groups; this allows for a series of interlinked mechanisms very similar to those of the ‘race’ doctrine: essentialization, dichotomization, homogenization, determinism, stereotyping.

The insistence that intersectionality must necessarily and always be used in reference to Black women has been rejected by a couple of authors from different perspectives. The British sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis finds it problematic that

the construction of ‘black woman’ is automatically assumed, unless otherwise specified, to be that of a minority black woman living in white western societies. The majority of black women in today’s world are black women in

black societies. This has major implications for a global intersectional stratification analysis.

(Yuval-Davis, 2011: 162)

Another demurrer comes from the US gender studies scholar Nash (2008, 2016, 2019). Nash criticizes Black feminists arguing for the centrality of the ‘race’ category, as they hold captive intersectionality in the face of an imagined dangerous critique. As an answer to the question of ‘Who owns intersectionality’, she argues that Black feminism should not insinuate that intersectionality is under siege and must be saved: ‘Moreover, it is the ongoing conception that black feminism is the exclusive territory of black women that traps and limits black feminists and black women academics who continue to be conscripted into performing and embodying their intellectual investment’ (Nash, 2019: 5).

Nash believes that an adequate intersectionality theory must necessarily include all those who are racially discriminated against, including black, white and non-black scholars of colour (*idem*). She rejects the ‘sanctification’ of the original text/model and argues that such an approach prevents rather than promotes a closer examination of Black feminism. She also pleads for more openness towards the changes that theories undergo when they travel. From her analysis, one can deduce the conviction that debates about intersectionality and social inequalities can no longer reduce the analysis of gender, class and race to notions of *oppression and discrimination* and that the consideration of ‘*privileged*’ positionings within and between them are crucial. The US legal scholar Carbado (2013) agrees with her. He warns against the reduction of intersectionality to the position of Black women because it forestalls a broader understanding of *privilege*. Instead, he argues that an adequate analysis of oppression must not omit *privilege* as its counterpoint. This approach, he adds, renders white, heterosexual masculinity an appropriate subject for intersectional analysis.

A critique from a different angle focuses on the danger of intersectionality’s embedded Eurocentrism. The Dutch scholar Sara Salem, for example, argues that ‘[w]hen intersectionality moves to different parts of the globe, the question of Eurocentrism becomes even more pertinent’ (Salem, 2018: 407; Osome, forthcoming). Critics – in particular post-/decolonial scholars working on social inequalities in the Global South – have resisted equating race with categories like ‘caste’ and ‘indigeneity’ (see Spivak, 1988).

Nikita Dhawan and Maria do Mar Castro-Varela (forthcoming) warn against the investigation of entanglements of different factors and categories *across different temporalities and spatialities*. They point out that the equation of caste with race not only overlooks the singularity of the experiences of disenfranchisement but differences in (colonial) history are ignored when caste is subsumed under race.

Finally, and more recently, the concept of intersectionality has been questioned from a very different angle. The Austrian sociologist Stögner (2021) criticizes intersectionality, the concept as much as its proponents. Stögner argues that anti-Semitism cannot be adequately analysed with the intersectional triad race, class,

gender. She argues that in recent years, intersectionality has increasingly become a political slogan and ideology that delegitimizes Israel in alliance with the activism of the *BDS* campaign and the *Black Lives Matter* and *All Lives Matter* campaigns as well as the Pink-washing allegations expressed by queer activists and theorists (e.g., Puar, 2013). Stögner considers intersectionality as used by Black activists to be an anti-Semitic concept. She accuses Angela Davis, for example, of anti-Semitism as, in a speech for the *All Lives Matter* movement, she listed a multitude of (forgotten) groups whose lives have been extinguished but she did not mention the Holocaust (Stögner, 2021: 78).⁵ Stögner, then, defines anti-Semitism as a prime example of an intersectional ideology in which moments of racism, sexism, nationalism and homophobia amalgamate into a distorted explanation of the world (Stögner, 2021: 83).

In reaction, the question arises of whether anti-Semitism should be theorized as a category separate from race. In my own work, I have argued that the specificity of anti-Semitism should not be undercut, but that racism should nevertheless be theorized in the plural as *racisms* and thereby include anti-Semitism (see Lutz and Leiprecht, 2021), a position that is supported by a transnational group of Jewish scholars who recently published the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. They argue: ‘It is racist to essentialize (treat a character trait as inherent) or to make sweeping negative generalizations about a given population. What is true of racism in general is true of antisemitism in particular’ (Jerusalem Declaration, 2021, paragraph 1).⁶ A question that is also in the room here is of course the *connection between antisemitism and whiteness*, which is often neglected in debates about ‘race’ in the US tradition where whiteness is equated with a privileged subject and Black with a discriminated one. In many parts of Europe, it is not only black or brown skin colour that serves as the marker for culturalization/racialization; names, appearance, modes of dress (headscarves and veils) are also used as markers of ‘othering’ in discrimination processes. A conceptualization including the multitude of racisms is, therefore, an important requirement for the further development of the concept.

I have tried to summarize the most important disagreements about the appropriation of intersectionality over the course of time, which have been caused by the concept’s traveling to other parts of the world. It is fair to say that there is still a lively debate about whether intersectionality must follow the original or move away from it by expanding the canon.⁷ Scholars from the USA, Europe and the Global South continue to criticize the adherence to a sanctified original as ‘originalism’ (Nash, 2016). Puar (2013) goes even further by stating that adherence to Black women as reference category of the theoretical perspective cannot do justice to the multiple intersectional subjectivities of racialized women, and puts this even more strongly by saying that it reifies this subjectivity in the ‘difference from white women’. Davis (2020: 123) agrees with Said’s analysis of traveling concepts in that travel does not guarantee that a theory will remain critical or subversive. In some cases, she adds, theories, upon gaining wider acceptance, may become ‘dogmatic reductions of the original version’ or be appropriated by

institutions. The latter argument has been made repeatedly with regard to intersectionality's relation to 'diversity studies': Marx Ferree (2013: 11), for example, argues that 'the idea of intersectionality as a moment of resistance to mainstream erasure of inequalities has been converted into the idea of "diversity" understood as a positive, albeit neoliberal approach to social inclusion'. Quite obviously, she overlooks the fact that *critical diversity research* has been around for a long time, dealing with power relations, discrimination, and the effects of privilege (see Steyn, 2007).

Before I move to the future development of intersectionality I will discuss another debate, which deals with the in/adequacy of the metaphor.

Arguments about the metaphor

The use of metaphors is part of people's daily conversations; they are important for almost all academic social and political sciences, philosophy, history and literary studies; techno- and natural sciences cannot do without them. As illustrations of an analytical object, they convey and visualize complex relationships. They are an important auxiliary tool for humans' daily communication. They function, as Amund Hoffart (forthcoming) writes, by reconfiguring a known notion of a concept through characterizing something else with the same designation. He underlines, however, that with regard to intersectionality, it might not be easy to recognize the metaphor easily.

Seen from this angle, it is even more astonishing that intersectionality has made a global career. Since its inception, critical remarks have been made about the inadequacy of this metaphor. Many have criticized the idea of 'intersection' for being one-dimensional and rigid in its visualization: oppression and discrimination 'roads' overlap, but then keep moving on as independent streets. Such a metaphor, critics say, fails to see that stratification and positionalities are better depicted as a matter of relations to each other rather than as categories.

The philosopher Frye (1983) used the idea of a *birdcage* to illustrate the constrictions of marginalization of an oppressed person: each wire in the cage represents a different aspect of oppression. Another feminist philosopher, Ann Garry, has written:

Although I yearn for a rich concept of intersectionality that can be visually captured, it is, in fact, difficult to find visual images that both capture all the features of intersectionality and are simple enough to help explain the concept.

(Garry, 2011: 833)

She strives to find a metaphor which somehow illustrates 'that privilege in one respect can mitigate or modify oppression in another' (ibid.) and proposes to understand intersectionality as '*intermeshing*' or as '*running liquids*' like 'milk, coffee, nail polish, olive oil, beet bortsch, paint in several colors' (Garry, 2011: 833).

In his analysis of the whole breadth of new intersectionality metaphors, Hoffart (forthcoming) points to the fact that many of the alternative metaphors are centred around the ingredients of life and, therefore, use food metaphors. To name only a few, intersectionality is visualized as a ‘*basket of apples*’ (Jorba and Rodó-Zárate, 2019); as ‘*sugar*’/‘*sugar cookies*’ (Ken, 2008); as a ‘*stew*’, which aims to illustrate the various ingredients of a person’s social identity; or as a ‘*batter*’ (Bowleg, 2013) in which the various elements of oppression are mixed and no longer recognizable as separate parts.⁸

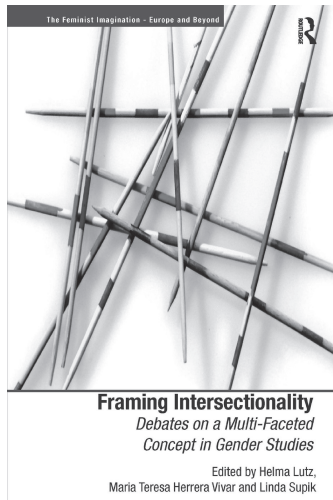
It is obvious that these proposals refer primarily to the question of how intersectionality can shape subjectivities through social subjectivation and lead to a subject’s becoming.

These suggestions, then, will not do for social inequality researchers or legal scholars, since Crenshaw’s basement metaphor, understood as (institutionalized) cemented elements of discrimination, is absent.

Other proposals to visualize seemingly complex patterns use nature metaphors (e.g., a tree, hurricane, or human lung) or economics. Lykke, for example, has come up with the botanical image of the ‘*rhizome*’, underground plant stems that move horizontally in all directions and bear both roots and shoots (Lykke, 2011: 211).

None of these proposals so far has replaced intersectionality, but it is likely that the search for a better metaphor will continue for a long time.

Among the many illustrations offered as visualizations of intersectionality in the early 2000s was a Mikado game, which we used for the cover of the book ‘*Framing intersectionality: Debates on a multi-faceted concept in Gender Studies*’ (Lutz et al., 2011).



Cover of the book ‘*Framing intersectionality: Debates on a multi-faceted concept in Gender Studies*’. Routledge 2011

The players of this game take turns in lifting a stick without moving or touching other sticks. While this illustration⁹ can map the fragility of the various axes (as sticks), it cannot visualize the complexities of what the sticks stand for and cannot display the content of their interaction. A look at a Google picture search shows that since then a myriad of illustrations have tried to illustrate intersectionality in a more dynamic and fluid way.¹⁰

Quo Vadis intersectionality? Further developments

Despite the disputes discussed earlier, intersectionality has been adapted in many social science (sub-)disciplines to the respective disciplinary conditions.

Over the past 30 years, debates have taken place about the proper use, conceptualization and application of intersectionality, asking whether it is a *theoretical paradigm*, a *method* or an *epistemological approach* (Hancock, 2011; McCall, 2005).

In her seminal article, McCall (2005) proposed a differentiation between *inter-categorical*, *intra-categorical* and *anti-categorical* approaches. The inter-categorical approach (used predominantly in quantitative studies), which she stands for, analyses social categories less in terms of their social constitution than in terms of their interactions. The users of an intra-categorical approach are portrayed as scholars who wish to identify the effects of overlapping or interwoven categories of inequality, and therefore work with a qualitative perspective, regarding social positionings as largely stable. In contrast, the anti-categoricalists use a poststructuralist perspective which considers that intra- and inter-categorical approaches make use of essentializing views. From their point of view, social life is irreducibly complex, multiple, fluid and always in change with regard to subjects and structures. From my perspective (see Lutz and Amelina, 2021a), the model of three different methodological approaches is somewhat simplistic and the representation of the superiority of quantitative research is problematic. The inter-categorical approach takes three social positionings, gender, class and 'race', and explores their mutual imbrication. There is, however, no guarantee that this approach avoids essentialization in as far as gender, ethnicity/race and class are considered attributes of groups that are regarded as 'natural' and static. Moreover, favouring quantitative research above any of the other two strands would ignore a variety of interesting and creative studies from the intra- and anti-categorical approaches. The intra-categorical approach tries to do justice to the fluidity and transformation processes of categories and acknowledges their modifications over time, location and space. It is important to note that the anti-categorical approach also provides important impulses for the reconfiguration of categories and the questioning of 'truths'. Researchers working with this approach insist that taking into account the difference between structure and action is important, and therefore the result is always unpredictable. It is also unlikely that these approaches can be as neatly separated as McCall suggests, because in many projects different

approaches are combined with each other (see Amelina, 2021; Lutz and Amelina, 2021a, 2021b).

New impulses for the field of social inequality and critical migration research have come from the British sociologist Floya Anthias. Anthias suggests a multi-level analysis that works on four levels: a) the level of discrimination (experience); b) the actor's level (inter-subjective praxis); c) the institutional level (institutional regimes); d) the level of representation (symbolic and discursive). While in her work on belonging (Anthias, 2013) she demonstrates the interrelation between social positionality and the narratives of collective identity, in her latest work Anthias (2021) shows how bordering and belonging, nationalism and racism, violence, intimacy, gender and social class are entangled in complicated ways. The concept of *trans-locational belongings* allows her to describe how positionings of (mobile) individuals are marked by multiple positioning in terms of sometimes contradictory social positions in the sending and the receiving countries. Following her argumentation, Amelina (2017, 2021) argues that *intersectionality understood as assemblage* is a helpful tool for the analysis of cross-border social mobilities and the investigation of the transnationalization of inequalities. Building on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Anthias, Amelina defines assemblage as 'reproduced by the interplay of classificatory narratives, social practices and material elements as configurations that temporarily interconnect diverse social principles to a relational nexus' (2017: 74). She proposes that patterns of cross-border inequalities should be studied as entangled hierarchies. This implies closer attention to domain-specific premises of hierarchization (scientific authority within science, capital accumulation within the capitalist economy, etc.) and axes of inequality (gender, ethnicity/race, class, etc.) to trace the interplay of various/dissimilar logics in the processes of cross-border hierarchies.

In the field of social inequality studies, migration, racism and transnationalism studies an intersectional methodology is indispensable for the analysis of transnational life-worlds (see Amelina and Lutz, 2019; Lutz and Amelina, 2021a, 2021b).

With the three levels of intersectional analysis (Lutz and Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2011) we have tried to demonstrate that a suitable analysis of the situation of migrant live-in transnational care workers from Eastern Europe needs a multi-level framework based on an intersectional perspective. This includes an identification of three different intersecting regimes. On the macro-level, gender and care regimes, which distribute care responsibilities between the state, the family and the market. Migration as part of the labour regimes promotes or prohibits the employment of migrants in private households or is silently tolerated (see Lutz and Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2011; Lutz, 2017). On the meso-level employers recruit migrant care workers either through informal networks (friends, colleagues, doctors, pastors, etc.) or through globally and trans-nationally acting private placement agencies. Analysis of the growing (informal and transnational) care market renders visible the precarious work situation of 24-hour live-in care givers from sending countries (Aulenbacher et al., 2021). On the micro level, it becomes visible that care-providing chains (see Parennas, 2001) include both a

care drain, as migrant workers leave gaps in care provision for their spouses, stay-behind children and elderly parents, and a *care gain* on the side of the employer families, who have access to an extremely flexible and low-cost group of employees and profit from the ‘emotional added value’ (Hochschild, 2000). On every level of this analysis, any of the approaches unfolded by McCall is helpful and can/should be used.

An intersectional methodology has been developed with regard to the analysis of biographical narrations. The use of an intersectional approach has been demonstrated with the investigation of an interview with the famous anti-apartheid activist, scholar and politician Mamphela Ramphele (see Lutz and Davis, 2005; Davis and Lutz, forthcoming). We distinguished the reciprocal effects between structural resources and structural discrimination. By using Matsuda’s (1991) ‘other question’ (Which kind of oppression is visible/invisible and in what relation are these to each other?) we established that three levels must be distinguished in this analysis: a) to situate oneself as researcher prior to beginning the analysis, b) to discover and make sense of blind spots that emerge during the analysis, and, c) to complicate thinking about power relations.

These examples represent only a small part of a series of further developments of the intersectionality approach. As I have already mentioned, new and interesting research developing the intersectionality concept in different directions has come from researchers from the Global South. The study of post-/decoloniality and the diversity of racisms and anti-racisms will play an important role in the coming years (see, e.g., Gutierrez Rodriguez and Reddock, 2021).

It becomes apparent that the use of intersectionality as a theoretical tool must go beyond a pure assessment of the co-construction and mutual constitution of categories of social positioning. Because not all categories of difference are equally salient, their impact on social positioning can be extremely dissimilar. It is therefore important to investigate differences in the context of power relations and to analyse in detail which of all possible differential facets makes the ‘difference’ and creates identities, and to analyse the reciprocal effects between structural resources and structural discriminations.

Along the way, Nancy Fraser’s advice is very helpful. Fraser assumes that multiple and mutually transverse axes of disadvantage intersect in the life course of individuals. The analysis of these intersections reveals that, as a rule, on some axes it is a matter of oppression/discrimination/disadvantage and, at the same time, on others of privilege. In modern regimes, she writes, struggles are waged for recognition (see Fraser, 2003: 80).

Notes

- 1 See www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality/transcript.
- 2 The new German government has stipulated in its draft governmental program (Dec.2021) that the term race should be removed from the Constitutional Law.

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Othering

Rodney D. Coates

Introduction

Recently I came across an interesting story, where Robert Sapolsky, a professor of biology, neurosurgery and neurology explains how herd animals tend to stay in packs. Sapolsky, trying to understand this behaviour, decided to tag one wildebeest they were studying with a red spot. They were surprised that animals so tagged were killed by predators repeatedly (Sapolsky et al., 2003). Predators, often not able to distinguish individual animals in a herd, responded to this marking. As we will see in this chapter, such markings also apply to what we call othering and has the same effect.

Strange, the very reason for racial and ethnic markers is to make human groups stand out so they can be targeted. But even further, the targeting within groups serves to mark those whose actions serve to single them out for even crueller victimization. Hence, we note that during slavery the favoured slaves might be made to wear an earring, while those in less favour might have been branded with hot irons. Favoured slaves might wear distinctive, colourful garb (as the butler, cook or carriage driver) while field hands – discarded, often badly torn, clothes. (Sidebar: The fact that blacks made such clothing into fashion statements remains as a cultural innovation even today. Consider Hip-hop clothing.)

As pointed out by Szasz (1971), there is a long history of marking those deemed outside the norm. These markings served to marginalize, dehumanize, delegitimize, humiliate and often punish certain individuals for being different. We have used such terms as evil, heretic, subhuman, bestial and insane to justify what Szasz refers to as a ‘rhetoric of rejection’. This rhetoric of rejection, he demonstrates, can be traced to the so-called father of modern Psychology Samuel A. Cartwright – as drapetomania or the wilful manifestation of belligerence, arrogance or rebellion of slaves leading to their seeking to escape from their slave masters. The masters were therefore justified in using excessive force in to return the slave to the normal state. Consequently, those slaves that chose to speak out were also more likely to be marked with physical scars, even gelding and the loss of fingers, ears etc. to serve as a pointed reminder to both free and slave what

happens when one dares to violate the rules. In later years, such things as lynching, imprisonment, expulsion from schools, capital punishment were continually to racially justify the continual marking of those who choose to deviate from the norm and be others. In this chapter, I shall explore the many dimensions of this othering that has left an indelible mark on our Nation.

Racial tropes – amnesia versus racial ignorance

I start with a premise: We all are or have the capacity to be bigoted, sexist, homophobic, racist and elitists. Here I am mindful of the Stanley Milgram experiments that demonstrated that we all could have been Nazis, particularly if we blindly obey authority, or do not regularly challenge our assumptions and ideas. We all have the capacity to harm others, that we do not know or that we believe are not one of 'us'. And we all have times when we are either clueless or purposefully ignorant as to when we are being bigoted. And these times range from what I choose to label Racial amnesia on one extreme and racial ignorance on the other. Racial amnesia is what many today experience, as they choose to be oblivious of what has transpired before in our country. Such amnesia is a strategy for those who would like to claim innocence when confronted with the bigotry of their actions. Most adults in the USA, reasonably educated and with a modicum of common sense, will attest to the reality of this nation's genocidal, racist, homophobic past. But many ultra-conservatives today choose to ignore this; they choose to be ignorant and fainne racial amnesia. King (1963: 46) condemned those who choose to be ignorant when it comes to issues of race, bigotry. Then there are those who are racially ignorant, naively such individuals walk around in bliss consistently surprised when they encounter racism in its many manifestations. In horror, they dismiss such as being exceptional, a freak or rare occurrence. And they claim that this certainly is not standard or normal in their beloved America. Racism, for both groups, is either a thing of the past or something that really is not that big a deal and folks should just get over it. Both groups seek to claim innocence as they either were unwilling or unknowing participants/observers of various racist events. Let me help both groups. Racism is not about individual behaviour, it's about structural outcomes. One is not a racist as an individual, but as an agent acting within a corporate/institutional structure. Racism takes bigotry plus power to exist. We are all bigots, but we are not all racist for most of us lack the institutional or structural power to enforce our bigoted ideas. Now if within my capacity as a professor, I use that power to affect the grades/life chances of students based upon my affinity to students of colour then I would indeed be racist. This is the issue, and when racial amnesia or racial ignorance fail to gain absolution . . . ignorance (whether real or created) is no excuse and why we have DEI training programs and must develop strategic plans that incorporate equity within the very structure of our institutions. To understand how to move forward, we must look back as to how we got to this racialized here.

Racial realities: How we got to this racialized here

Long before they ventured across the oceans to settle the Americas, Europeans were formulating the foundations of Whiteness. English colonists arrived in America with decidedly racist stereotypes about Africans, Native Americans and others, assuming that members of these groups were savage, indolent and sexually promiscuous (Jordan, 1968). In fact, the Europeans who settled in the Americas believed it was their destiny to extend Christian civilization and White supremacy around the globe. Elite European males institutionalized, or established, Whiteness to control Blacks, Native Americans, women and others. Women, across all socioeconomic statuses and racial groups, typically received harsher punishments than their male counterparts for violating sexual or marriage taboos. Gender-specific laws affecting all racial, ethnic and class groups helped to sustain White privilege and White normative structures. White privilege results from laws, practices, and behaviours that preserve and (re)create societal benefits for those people identified as White. White normative structures are those norms and institutions that obscure the racial intent of such laws, practices and behaviours, creating the illusion that White privilege is natural and normal.

One of the first recorded instances within the English colonies in which judicial processes decreed differential judgments along both racial and gender lines occurred in 1630 in Jamestown, when colonist Hugh Davis was ordered to be ‘soundly whipt’ for dishonouring God and shaming Christianity by sleeping with a Black. Ten years later, also in Jamestown, another White man was ordered to do penance for impregnating an African female, while the African female was sentenced to whipping. So, even though the interracial relationship was condemned, the more extreme punishment was shifted to the Black female. Over the next few decades of the seventeenth century, the pattern of race, gender and status inequities was replicated repeatedly. While all women experienced unique discrimination and bias, racial hierarchies were also gendered. White women, given authority over all other women through their connection to White males, were given authority over Blacks. White women could lose their status if they married or had intercourse with African, Native American or Asian men. Colonial laws did not protect either Black or Native American women from rape. Laws also preclude them from defending themselves, either directly against their attackers or through the courts. Females of colour were often cast as seducers.

Minoritized Identity groups are required to coexist in white spaces, or spaces defined in conjunction to white, heterosexual norms typically expressed as binary opposites. Therefore, in educational spaces, they are taught a Eurocentric/American history that strips Native Americans, Africa/the Middle East, India and often China of its history, and the People of Colour of their identity. Africa starts with the European ‘discovery’ of the slave, and the slave encompasses the origins of identity of the African. People of colour (Black, Brown, Red, Tan) come into being juxtaposed to whiteness. And to question the normalcy of this means

to question the sanity of the structure. Consider further that philosophy, music, art, language, democratic structures, and civilization 'writ large' begins in white space/heterosexual spaces, in the annals of European history.

Today, as not only many blacks, but other people of colour and gendered identity groups try to reconcile the insanity of their lived experiences, they are often forced to either conform to the insanity or be deemed 'crazy'. What kind of insanity you ask?

Many people of colour and gendered identity¹ groups are required to coexist in white spaces, or spaces defined in conjunction to white, heterosexual norms typically expressed as binary opposites. Therefore, in educational spaces, they are taught a Eurocentric/Americentric history that strips Native Americans, Africa/the Middle East, India and often China of its history, and the People of Colour of their identity. Africa starts with the European 'discovery' of the slave, and the slave encompasses the origins of identity of the African. People of colour (Black, Brown, Red, Tan) come into being juxtaposed to whiteness. And to question the normalcy of this means to question the sanity of the structure. Consider further that philosophy, music, art, language, democratic structures and civilization 'writ large' begins in white space/heterosexual spaces, in the annals of European history. No significant accomplishments are attributable to others, or at least rendered suitable subject matter in the first 12 years of high school by anyone who is not or was not white, male and privileged. Any who challenge this are relegated to the sub-specialized knowledge structures euphemistically referred to as 'identity' studies. The fact that European/American identity studies are considered the norm, the hallmark and the core of educational excellence only becomes further reified through the process.

The history of these processes has systematically targeted African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Indigenous bodies through genocide (physical, cultural, psychological, etc.), assimilation and indoctrination. Challenging these different structures or refusal to play according to these games means expulsion, incarceration, or often to be designated as strange, queer, crazy or unassimilable.

Societal institutions have been historically created to reward compliance and sanction non-compliance. Learning to navigate these spaces has been not only an art form but necessary for survival. How one keeps their sanity in such an insane environment requires developing a unique form of craziness. Or more succinctly, being crazy in an insane world often results as one must choose between conformity and insanity.

Most other People of Colour (POC) and those in various gendered identity groups that I know have had moments when they have had to ask, another POC or gendered identity person 'Did that just happen, or am I crazy?' The response: 'No it just happened, and you would be crazy to not see it'. Consider the following. During the campaign and throughout the Presidency of Barack Obama several false conspiracy theories questioned the legitimacy of Obama's status as a citizen. Accordingly, because he was not a natural-born citizen of the USA, he was ineligible to be President of the USA according to Article Two of the

US Constitution. These theories question the birth certificate, claiming that they were a forgery and that he had indeed been born in Kenya, not Hawaii. These theories, referred to as ‘birthers’, even sought court rulings to declare him ineligible. Although none of the claims were successful, the political damage, the scepticism expressed by those within the Republican Party, even called some to propose legislation to require him and other candidates to provide irrefutable evidence to prove their eligibility. And the reality that not one white, presidential candidate regardless of birthplace, has ever been challenged demonstrates the oddity and insanity of this process. As responded by Michelle Obama ‘The whole birther thing was crazy and mean-spirited, of course its underlying bigotry and xenophobia hardly concealed. But it was also dangerous, deliberate meant to stir up the wingnuts and kooks’ (Breuninger, 2018). And for those asking: ‘Are we insane?’ My response: ‘No my brother, you are not insane, but maybe a bit crazy – Hell Yeah’.

In the next section, I shall some of these moments, as red, black, brown, tan, yellow and other bodies defined by gender/sexuality consistently find their sanity challenged and they are forced to choose to be crazy or go insane. The typical patterned response to these situations is to react, to reciprocate and to seek retribution. Such responses, I argue, while providing what appears to be some immediate relief, fail to restore or in many cases re-establish a sense of order, and fails to restore harmony. Therefore, I shall conclude by offering an alternative to retributive justice in the form of restorative justice.

A thousand paper cuts

Zahiem Salahuddin, a 13-year-old 8th grader, this past summer was playing with friends in a basketball court in Grays Ferry, Pa. Several kids had plastic toy guns that shot an orange plastic ball. One kid, a white one, was hit with a ball; it was unclear which of the dozen or so kids (white and black) shot it. On the way home later, Salahuddin, now on a bike, was stopped by men in a black pickup truck that told him he had shot a Philadelphia police officer’s son. Police in marked cars soon swarmed Salahuddin and arrested, charged and held him for three days. For playing with his \$3.50 toy, he faced assault, reckless endangerment and possession of an ‘instrument of crime’. After public outrage, threats of civil suit, the charges were ultimately dropped. But these types of stories continue to assault us, as police are called because of suspicious black college kids sitting in their dorm rooms, strange black people trying to get into their apartment, black men babysitting white children, walking to their place of employment (and the list goes on and on) (Dean 2018).

Lingchi is an ancient Chinese form of torture (900 CE until banned in 1905) involving the slow slicing or methodical removal of body parts over an extended period that aimed at causing a slow, painful and agonizing death. Today, *death by a thousand paper cuts* refers to the thousands of bad things that happen, though not fatal in and among themselves, which eventually lead to the slow and often

painful demise of an individual. Although the current utilization rarely actually leads to physical death, the psychic death and damage is no less prevalent, albeit less noticeable. My friend and colleague, William A. Smith and others point out, the thousand cuts of microaggressions in race, gender, disability, LGBTQ, religion, class etc. have become almost endemic of the current Trump era as we 'make America Great Again'. Microaggressions, unconscious bias, implicit bias, covert (racism, sexism, etc.) now seem to be pervasively observed in education, politics, housing, income, employment, health and social mobility.

Microaggressions was first utilized by Harvard educator and psychiatrists Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe the innumerable slights, marginalizations, denigrations, dismissive behaviours, jokes that targeted blacks in everyday life. Derald Wing Sue in the *American Psychologists* (Sue et al., 2007): Microaggressions are seen in everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental snubs, slights and insults, either covert or overt, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages that target individuals because of their identity within a marginalized group. Many well-intentioned people learn these microaggressions as they grow up, they appear to be invisible to most of us, and uncovering them is the first step in helping to overcome our prejudices. As the definition suggests these can be directed towards women, LGBT persons, those with disabilities, religion, race, etc. In many cases, the subtle message of these microaggressions is that marginalized people do not belong, they are untrustworthy, or more particularly not worthy to be here. They are intended to invalidate the experiential reality of the target persons, demean them, or in some cases even threaten or intimidate them. The more subtle forms of microaggressions typically can often be ignored. Let us consider the three forms.

Microassaults: Conscious and intentional actions or slurs, such as using racial epithets, displaying swastikas, or deliberately serving a white person before a person of colour in a restaurant.

Microinsults: Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a colleague of colour how she got her job, implying she may have landed it through an affirmative action quota system.

Microinvalidations: Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of colour. For instance, a white person often asks an Asian-American where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land.

Let us look at some of these.

Microassaults

Imagine having two classes where in one the kids are encouraged to be loud, think outside the box and be inventive, while in the other students are required to

conform, sit in rows, be quiet and follow the rules. Then imagine that 1 is white and the other is black. Now you can imagine what Micro assaults look like.

Imagine that two colleagues – one Asian-American and the other African American board a small plane. They are told by the flight attendant that they can sit anywhere they choose. They decide to sit in the two adjacent seats up front so they can talk to each other across the aisle. Then, three white males board at the last minute and are seated in the seats in front of them. Shortly, before the plane takes off, the flight attendant, who happens to be white, asks the two colleagues if they would mind moving to the back to better balance the load. Both react with anger, arguing that they are being asked to ‘sit in the back of the bus’. When approached, the attendant, indignantly denies the charge, and says she is merely trying to ensure the flight’s safety (DeAngelis, 2009). She has no clue that she has just committed a Microassault.

Microassaults typically are both deliberate and purposeful, yet they can also be subtle. Several examples can be identified:

- 1 Racial slurs hurled by white motorists to minoritized persons walking down the street.
- 2 Excessive surveillance in stores, on streets, or in other public places.
- 3 The subject of jokes, banter, and other racially/sexually charged comments at casual office or other social gatherings.
- 4 When whites are greeted as they enter the store or check out, and the minoritized persons are not.
- 5 When evidence of deviance is automatically assumed for CIS gendered, or racially minoritized individuals (females especially).
- 6 When we divide the world into binary constructs of white/black, strait gay, good bad, rich poor, etc.
- 7 When European, white middle-class norms are presumed to be the standard.
- 8 When victimization is automatically used to define victims as hopeless failures, and whites as automatically guilty.

In 2018, anti-Semitic incidents have risen by 57% in the USA as the very humanity of Jews is being challenged. This represents the largest single-year increase since the Anti-Defamation League reported this data in 1979. Some 457, nearly doubling for the second year in a row, of these incidents have occurred on non-Jewish colleges and school campuses. According to Jonathan Greenblat, ADL national director, ‘Less civility has led to more intolerance’ (CBS/AP, 2018). According to the FBI, in the past year, as a result of the pandemic, we have seen the greatest spike in hate crimes since 2001. Anti-Asian incidents increased significantly, as roughly 43% targeted those of Chinese descent. But these are likely to be under-reported, as many Asian Americans feel ‘uncomfortable’ reporting hate-related incidents. But the largest increase was those targeting Black or African Americans who accounted for 50% of hate crimes (Golgowski, 2021).

Microinsults

Imagine, if you will, a teacher giving a young student the following compliment: ‘You’ve really accomplished a lot, particularly given the community you are from’. Or, ignoring the boys in the class, the teacher asks the girls to ‘Help straighten the room’. Or the corporate exec, asking the female intern ‘to get some coffee for the group’. Which oddly includes male interns. These, my friends, are examples of Microinsults.

Microinsults are verbal and nonverbal messages that subtly demean, convey rudeness and insensitivity to an individual because of the group to which they identify. When Joe Biden ‘complimented’ President Barack Obama for being a ‘clean and articulate black person’, many saw the not-so-subtle insult suggesting that most blacks were neither clean nor articulate. Consider the list (Raphen, 2019):

- Assuming that diction, clothing or other mannerisms are not endemic or exceptional for the person.
- touching a colleague’s hair, without permission.
- Excluding capable people from career growth opportunities, job searches or networking
- Providing more support to white members of team
- Implying that minoritized people got job because of diversity action or quota
- Assuming minoritized individual are incompetent, junior, or lower status
- Not attempting to say a name because it is unfamiliar
- Implying that because of skin, colour, or dress that one does not belong
- Automatically assuming that skin colour does not match racial designation

The problem with Microinsults is that they are not only frustrating, but also typically seen as minor, insignificant, and even harmless. What they do not recognize is that these do, over time, represent significant attacks that accumulate and damage both physical and mental health. Women, young and old, are frequently being told that they are being too sensitive and taking offense for things when no offense was intended.

Consider the following: ‘But you are Asian! Shouldn’t you be great at math?’, or ‘You’re black, male and 6 feet tall, what position do you play – centre or guard’. Or consider a set of posters recently hung in a Career Development Office – one for males and one for females. The female one showed a young black woman in professional and unprofessional dress. Many blacks get it quickly. The professional side showed her with naturally curly hair as straight and smooth, and the other quite differently.

Farfetched, consider that many black women are told to straighten their hair to get good jobs. (Rodionova, 2017) Research continues to demonstrate that hair discrimination is a constant complaint of minoritized women. African American

women, wearing locs, braids and natural curls are 30% more likely to be perceived as less professional (Crown Coalition, 2019).

Microinvalidations

Microinvalidations are a form of microaggressions that excludes, negates or nullifies a person's existence, identity or existence. It exists in many forms, from verbal to environmental cues that limit or attempt to relegate identity into specified racial/gendered/sexual/class niches.

Some Microinvalidations also suggests what the real, true, correct identity should be, such as:

Real men/women/blacks/gays (etc. identity) are _____.

These serve to not only reify stigmas and stereotypes but also delegitimize or invalidate other forms of identity expression. Typically, this is buttressed by the 'model' token, spokesperson, etc.

Several examples of Microinvalidations can be identified as Black women and women of colour have been frequently left out of the labour and feminist movements. Often, what should be allies become the chief architects of some of these Microinvalidations. For example, early feminist Anna Howard, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, charged that Black women, during the early suffrage movement, worked to 'put the ballot in the hands of your black men, thus making them political superiors of white women'. Often ignored are black women in the labour movement. For example, Mississippi's first Labor Union was established by a group of freed black women working as laundresses in Jackson, Mississippi. One of the first strikes in this country occurred in 1881 as thousands of black laundresses in Atlanta went on strike to demand state officials grant them higher wages and better working conditions (Branigin, 2018).

As we consider science, particularly the Renaissance and so-called scientific revolution, we are frequently told of the insights offered by Galileo Galilei often referred to as the 'father of modern science'. But few discuss how Islam, Christianity and Judaism merged to produce the basis of science, art, medicine and philosophy during the tenth and eleventh centuries that made the scientific revolution even possible. Rarely does one discuss Al-Haytham, born in Iraq in 965, or his experiments in light and vision thus not only creating the scientific method but also laying the foundation of modern optics. Or the mathematician, astronomer and geographer al-Biruni, born modern-day Uzbekistan in 973, whose 146 works and over 13,000 pages laid the foundation for not only the sociological but the geographical study of India. And let us not forget Ibn Sina, physician and philosopher (modern Uzbekistan) born in 981 who compiled the first medical encyclopaedia used as a textbook in the premier European medical schools until the seventeenth century (Overbye, 2001).

More specific forms of Microinvalidations occur as persons of colour are suspect, and must constantly prove their competencies, civility, worthiness, innocence and their right to be at the table of humanity. So rather than being afforded the benefit of the doubt, they share the burden of race as everything they do is first filtered through this abhorrent crucible. Several examples of these tendencies can be identified. For example, throughout October, the President of the USA, and major conservative news organizations such as Fox News, repeatedly described refugees fleeing violence in Latin America as being ‘criminals and unknown Middle Easterners’. The Department of Homeland Security Twitter account ‘confirmed’ that the caravan consisted of ‘gang members or (those) have(ing) significant criminal histories’. And while there has been no evidence to support these charges, James Mattis, Defense Secretary, ordered hundreds of troops to the border (Serwer, 2018).

Who gets to claim identity, and which identities are deemed legitimate has frequently been utilized to invalidate individuals and groups. Historically, we can identify our use of First Nation or Indigeneity as a means of certifying or decertifying which Native Tribal groups are ‘authentic’. Within the USA, so-called ‘Indian Termination’ policies (mid-1940s to mid-1960s) were intentional policies and laws whose aims were to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society. The House Concurrent Resolution 108 of 1953 officially articulated the federal termination policy. It covered the immediate termination of the Flathead, Klamath, Menominee, Potawatomi, and Turtle Mountain Chippewa, as well as tribes throughout the states of New York, Florida, California and Texas. Such policies, harkening to those days when we honestly believed that we needed to ‘kill the Indian, to save the man’ have been the basis of policy for centuries. Congress established these specific policies, with or without consent, which allowed the USA to terminate tribes. The policy ended the US government’s recognition of sovereignty of tribes, trusteeship over Indian reservations, and the exclusion of state laws applicable to natives. The effects of these invalidations impacted the tribes directly by making them ineligible for educational, health and economic benefits. Thus delegitimized, these peoples have gone into our collective memory as a people that once was (Walch, 1983).

A major form of racial stress, with impacts upon both mental health and well-being, often is associated with racial identity invalidation, others’ denial of an individual’s racial identity, particularly of multiracial individuals. Typically, such individuals are challenged, and invalidations attempted because of behaviour, phenotype or identity incongruent discrimination (Franco and O’Brien, 2018). Now imagine a biracial student, attempting to affirm her black identity, yet being rejected as black by your black peers. As reported by one middle scholar, we shall name Stephanie, several strategies had to be developed to ‘prove her cultural identity’ (Khanna, 2011: 126).

When I was in middle school, like I said, they used to tease me a lot. And it was an all-black school, so all my friends were black then. Like, it was

weird, I remember the [the white band] *SNYNC being out when were in, like, the seventh or eight grade and my friends listened to them and I hated that. I hated any music that wasn't black. I hated any clothes that black people didn't wear. Like, I hated all of that. . . . I felt like I had to stress to people that I was black. It wasn't a gray area. Biracial didn't exist then. It was either you're white or you're black. So, I felt like, okay, 'I hate *NSYNC. I hate this white music.' They would realize that I'm down, you know? . . . I was trying to prove I'm not white. And since I can't be biracial, then the only thing I can be is black. So let me just be black.

Similarly, sexual-minoritized identity may become overemphasized or tokenized in efforts to delegitimize minoritized LGBTQ individuals. Sexual-minoritized individuals experience stress and the perceived inability to express their sexual identity in those settings where their racial identity is perceived at risk (Goldberg and Kuvalanka, 2018).

Retreat from civility

The 60s with so much promise was soon dwarfed as the racial state re-emerged with a vengeance. The retreat from civility associated with extreme right-wing politics pushed the nation sharply to the right. Ultra-conservative candidates such as Barry Goldwater articulated the need to return to the racial state and helped articulate a modern version of the white identity politics. Driving both processes was what has since been termed Angry White Male Syndrome (AWMS) (Kimmel, 2013).

It's been around for some time, you know, Angry White Men. But some may think it a new phenomenon. Angry White Male Syndrome (AWMS) has been part and parcel to the USA almost if there has been a USA. It has manifested itself most force-ably in many episodes of violence and mayhem targeting 'others'. These episodic situations typically are preceded by significant challenges to white, male identity, privilege, status and power. In the past, these episodes have been cleverly masked within several foils such as Nation Building, White Man's Burden, and Family Values. In the process, we almost annihilated the Indigenous people of this continent, fostered slavery and colonialism resulting in the devastation, genocide and exploitation, and the justification for sexual violence, homophobia and gendered discrimination. AWMS has also given rise to various movements, euphemistically called wars such as the war on poverty, war on drugs and more recently the War on Terror. Strangely, these so-called wars have targeted women, minorities, and Muslims, respectively, and have done little to decrease poverty, the availability of illegal drugs, and the rising tide of terrorism. What they have accomplished is the preservation of a system that protects fragile white, male egos, status, power, privileges and status.

Politically, AWMS has given rise to several quite effective campaigns where candidates have been able to manipulate and capitalize upon these pent-up

frustrations. George Wallace, during the early 1960s articulated their views when he declared ‘In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this path, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever’. This was what Ronald Reagan described as a ‘silent majority’ which was neither silent nor a majority. This ‘silent majority’ represented the disenfranchised core of Americans who rejected civil rights and women rights, and were staunchly pro-American defenders of militarism, capitalism and imperialism. In 1992, Ross Perot and Patrick Buchanan tried to ride this wave of white male paranoia into the House. Newt Gingrich and then George Bush would also tap into this fear, or what Jude Davies calls a ‘crisis of representation’ where at the core one finds discontent by perceptions of being displaced by ‘others’. The current manifestation of AWMS is being played out in the current political climate.

Donald Trump was pushed into office as many white, particularly white males, believed that their America was quickly disappearing. For many, Trump’s pledge to make America great again is likened to the world of Archie Bunker where we return not only to a more conservative but also a vastly whitened America (Reiner, 2017). For those who remember, in the 1990s our nation seemed consumed with paramilitary-style ‘Patriots’. Further, Trump’s rhetoric, policies, and late-night ‘tweets’ have fuelled a drastic rise in hate groups, radical right activities and attacks. For two straight years, radical right groups, encouraged by the candidacy of Trump, have risen. Nationwide, over 100 groups targeting Muslims have come into being since 2015 alone. Hate violence has spiked, where nearly 1,100 bias attacks have been recorded by the SPLS. Among these, 37% make direct reference to campaign slogans, statements or President-elect Trump’s infamous sexual assault remarks (Chen, 2017). Clearly, something more than talk must be done. We must have a strategic plan where we can begin to reframe the discourse.

So, what is to be done – diversity must become a reality

At the core of truth and justice is empathy, equity and community. People, groups, communities, even nations responding to fear, pain and insecurity often set aside their high morals and revert to defensive or offensive postures that target and attack others. Thus, principal is replaced with practicality, and these become normative destructive cycles of these spaces, we fail to recognize that they are inter-related, intersectional and irreducible to its various parts. In addition, the trend is to paint these conversations in terms of victims and victimizers. We name and shame, we raise up some standard as the Holy Grail, and condemn all those who fall short of perfection. In addition, as often is the case, white straight males tend to be isolated, castigated, and cast as the ultimate (implicitly or explicitly) victimizers. Alternatively, we relegate all others to the status of victims, rarely seeing how they too may be both agents and enablers. Such conversations rarely produce anything more than a mild sense of accomplishment, while all parties retreat to

their respective safe zones – until another incident happens when we must have yet another discussion regarding diversity.

Living, working, and interacting within various institutional settings, where memberships are constantly fluctuating, means that we are constantly being challenged to incorporate increasingly diverse sets of identities. This means that we will constantly have various types of episodes that are a natural part of change. Rather than seeing these as natural, we typically respond as if they are adherent aberrations that must be condemned, sanctioned, controlled and immediately remedied. I would argue that these are logical and tied to the dynamic nature of our institutions. Therefore, our response is to view these as teachable moments. As teachable moments, they become not something to stigmatize, but to embrace and recognize that it is part of who we all are. How should we proceed?

Our responses across this country, in our communities, in our universities and our schools has been to have more discussions, more lectures, more evidence – in the hope that as more people become aware of the problems, equipped with even more sophisticated knowledge we will develop the will to fix the problems, fix the system, or fix the individuals. Such hope has been in vain. Moreover, if, as attributed to Einstein continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result is the definition of insanity, how our efforts might for these last decades be characterized. If we want to change the outcomes, we must change how we do things. I would suggest that getting past the hurt, we must replace retributive with restorative justice.

Note

- 1 While I am making explicit reference to People of Color, I am also cognizant of the fact that it also frequently applies to gendered identity groups. But I do not want to presume that one size fits all, therefore while I intend to include such groups, I do not want to marginalize them by the suggestion of inclusion, while nullifying the distinctive differences between gendered groups' experience.

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Singularization

Danilo Martuccelli

Several venerable diagnoses of modernity (rationalization, quantification, industrialization, standardization, commodification, massification) predicted the decline of singularity, of the qualitative, of heterogeneity.¹ The main surprise of contemporary times is not only that this decline did not happen, but that the process of singularization is becoming the central feature of society. We will understand singularization as a set of processes by which singularity is produced, valued and represented. The important thing, therefore, is to identify the possibilities opened by social transformations and the plurality of singular organizational paths that they potentiate. In other words, there is no sense in isolating the singular from the whole with which it is linked. We will come back to this feature at the end of this text, but all singularities have that in common. Our main concern is to identify the plurality of singular arrangements made possible by the processes of singularization.

In this chapter, we will analyse how the structural processes of singularization at work in very different social spheres transform contemporary societies. We will argue that a set of transformations – usually designated using different and apparently unrelated terms – converge and intersect in shaping a new type of society and a new social question around singularity, which thus becomes a key for understanding the current era. Five major social transformations will be analysed and discussed. In a second segment, we will show what this involves as a challenge for social life.

Structural trends and transformations

Production, consumption, work

The changes that have occurred at the level of industrial production systems and in services break with the parameters provided by the old mass society, to the benefit of increasingly differentiated goods and services. In view of the specific history of industrial society, the change is remarkable.

Over a long period, the effective capacities for standardization of the social world have been diminishing, and industrial society has assumed a decisive shift

in this reality. The question of singularities has gradually taken a new form of the supposedly aristocratic or deviant resistance that accompanied the major central tendencies towards a mass society. In some ways, the Romantic Revolt was a leap against that reality.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, but especially between the 1920s and 1970s, the basic structure of society has worked to diminish singularities. This was clearly visible at the level of production, consumption, politics and narratives, but also at the level of the broad profiles of collective subjects – the mass, the class, races, states, nations. Political totalitarianism, the standardization of consumption above all, the levelling of mass society, have often been theorized as ineluctable threats. Yet, as an extraordinary ruse of reason, it was through the detour of mass society and the very rise of industrialization, that the question of singularity gradually became a social issue.

Fordism was the reign of standardized mass production. Productivity growth was associated with an economy of scale operating through the homogenization of products, uniformity of wages, deskilling of labour and the consumption of identical products. We are largely done with that world. After a long period of strong product standardization, we have moved to an industry that tends to de-standardize and even to personalize as many consumer products as possible. We are far removed from Henry Ford's quip in the 1930s that Americans could choose any car any colour they wanted as long as it was black!

The transformation is deep and visible in all areas. Just to stay with this example, the movement is present in the automotive industry, where the combinations of parts or elementary functions – within certain technical limits – have significantly increased the differentiation of products beyond a wide range of colours, brands or models. One of the major objectives of companies everywhere is to detect, support and guide the volatility of consumer tastes. To cope with this, a distillation of the production in small ranges, constantly under renovation, is being set up, thus accentuating the inevitable differentiation between consumers. Processes which will be deepened by 3D printing and the possible generalization of prototypes which, from their conception, will meet the different wishes of individuals.

But it is not enough to produce in small batches and without excessive stocks, it is also necessary to be able to act upstream and downstream of demand. Downstream, because once the purchase has been made, it is important to build customer loyalty by learning to understand customers better, and by personalizing the client relationship through the quality of after-sales service. Upstream, because it becomes essential to learn about consumers' personality, so that they can be sent more personalized advertising, which stimulates the development of new research techniques. Thus, the diversification of singular products is accompanied by new and highly distinctive advertising and marketing strategies.

These trends were already visible as early as the 1970s (Toffler, 1970), but the topic of industrial massification has largely prevented them from being understood and partly continues to do so. Apart from strictly ideological reasons – criticism

of the massification of our world has been a major topic of social criticism for decades – one reason for this difficulty stems from a too narrow and exclusive association between singularity and pre-industrial craft production, or with specific sectors (Karpic, 2007), which inhibits recognition that we have entered an era of singularized *industrial* production.

This diversification of production is accompanied by more singular consumption practices. Personalized mass commerce is the basis of a new sales revolution, marked – beyond the effects of the development of the ‘long tail’ – by the multiplication of consumer micro-niches, the resurgence of segmented and differentiated stores, and especially by the expansion of personalized customer care (Moati, 2011). The personalization and customization of consumer objects are becoming frequent practices (Sacriste, 2017).

The transformation is remarkable in the consumption of culture. Different ways of appropriating the products of the cultural industry are now so generalized that two distinct analytical moments can be differentiated. Recognition that there are differential reappropriations of mass culture based on the diverse social identities of individuals – the moment of Cultural Studies – was followed by a range of singularized expertise and the affirmation of multiple personalized tastes between amateurs and fans (Glevarac, 2019; Flichy, 2010). Alongside a production that is still geared to a hegemonic vocation, various markets are developing for minority audiences.

Probably in no other area has the change been so significant as in the media. At the end of the twentieth century, some worried about the demise of the general public due to the proliferation of thematic television channels and the specialization of audiences (Wolton, 1990). This is not what really happened. Of course, many individuals are now watching programmes at their own pace on a computer or tablet, depending on their hourly availability, even catching up on a programme or film that they missed when it was released. More individualized viewing has resulted from the singularity of viewers’ interests and has contributed to the exponential diversification of programmes. Similar practices are also spreading at the level of reading (decontextualized fragments, hypertexts, singularization of browsing journeys on the Web), which leads to an increasingly individualized appropriation between actors. However, none of this eliminated the sharing by individuals of a set of common information and references. We will return later to this point: singularization does not mean the disappearance of the common.

These trends towards singularization are also present in work, where careers and salaries may be clearly individualized and evaluations highly personal. The increasing individualization of wages within a collective (sometimes for equal work) goes hand in hand with the ordinary acceptance by consumers of a price difference for the same service (in planes, hotels, etc.). With a rare intensity, the workplace is a scene of powerful tensions between cooperation and competition, where singularity is caught in a web of tensions around the recognition of talent, excessive personal involvement, the blurring of the border between the person and the role.

The digital revolution

A second major trend we are witnessing – the rise of new mass-personalization technologies – is just as significant or even more so. By means of algorithms, artificial intelligence and Big Data, these new technologies generalize a singularized treatment of behaviours and profiles, thus introducing us to a new era in the relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative.

This trend towards singularization started before the introduction of Big Data techniques and is irreducible to them. Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, the latter are part of previous structural trends, which these techniques have indeed reinforced and generalized. The market-driven expansion of hyper-personalized products, but also the emergence of a new ‘extractivism’ and the processing of individual data for commercial or political purposes (micro-targeting, data mining, etc.) are good illustrations of this.

Even more, the transformations introduced by ICT (information and communication technology) have made the outer world available for individuals through personalized applications. At the same time, with the help of a complex socio-technical architecture each individual has the feeling of becoming the centre of the whole. Everyone has the impression, looking at each other on social media, that the ‘world’ revolves around them. The experience of one’s own singularity is turned upside down.

The bottom line is that thanks to these transformations, we have gone beyond the opposition between the quantitative and the qualitative. This opposition (of romantic inspiration) no longer does justice to what is happening, since today singularization owes its greater depth to the extension of quantification and the intensive use of algorithms (Martin, 2020). In its own way, this turning point is clearly visible at the level of statistics: points far from the average were once largely ignored, but now outliers are treated, in their singularity, like any other profile. Large numbers are no longer opposed to the singular (Rouvroy and Stiegler, 2015). Graphic representations and maps allow new methods of generalizing analyses, in which the quantitative is combined with the qualitative in the perception of social positions and their territorial locations. Behind these techniques, a new stage of social control is produced: the processing of data by algorithms calls into question the opposition traced by Foucault (2004) between individualized disciplines and biopolitical practices intended for populations (economy, demography). We are witnessing the emergence of a large set of policies that allows the implementation of new personalized monitoring and controls. Digital applications allow real individualized control of the mass. In fact, the whole universe of tracking – all actions that leave digital traces or recorded images – is what produces new methods of governing individuals.

Quantification becomes a tool at the service of singularity. At the level of individual representation, a Quantified Self means a radical change. Quantified and individualized measures of the Self are linked in the progress made in facial or behavioural recognition of each of us. Everywhere, the rise of quantification leads

to an infinitely more individualized grasp of each individual. No longer is introspection the main or the only access route to subjectivity, as it was in the West since Saint Augustin, Now, it is through digital traces that the singular profiles of individuals can be identified that set them apart from large group identities. But it is also through a multiplication of regular quantified data on themselves that individuals aim to self-regulate (beats, weight, heart rates, the number of daily steps). Everywhere counters single out individuals by recording the different number of ‘views’, ‘followers’, ‘likes’, ‘friends’, shortly differentiated rankings through which the quantitative is supposed to produce another form of self-knowledge. The rise of the quantitative generalizes comparisons between individuals.

The new articulation between the quantitative and the qualitative is also visible in the study of public opinion, where we are also witnessing, despite some difficulties, the development of new methodologies distinct from the polling techniques specific to industrial mass society (Blondiaux, 1998). New attention is being paid not only to ideological polarizations and to small groups distant from dominant representations, but also to the possible effects of a few actors – not at all representative from a statistical point of view and largely in a minority – but whose activism is capable of influencing electoral trends (Kotras, 2018).

Simmel’s (2004) remarks opposing the quantitative and the qualitative are no longer valid a century later. Even at the level of money – where for a long time it was supposed that money erased the qualitative differences between products and services by valuing them using a quantitative yardstick – studies show the diversity of subjective and qualitative meanings of money (Zelizer, 1994). Rather than a unidirectional undermining of the qualitative through quantitative processes (rationalization, merchandizing), we are everywhere witnessing a more complex situation. Yesterday’s frank opposition is giving way to a whole series of situations where the articulations appear more complex, where paradoxically standardization can become a source of singularity, and where prescriptions for singularity, by becoming radicalized, border on the stereotype.

Institutions and sociability

The transformations that have occurred at the level of institutions (often analysed from the thesis of individualization) place a greater burden on individuals to account for themselves in terms of singularity and personal responsibility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Each individual must become the master of his life, he must build a story about himself, in the form of a CV, skills assessments, and he must take personal responsibility for his fate.

Many social assistance institutions are driven by this logic of intervention, making the actors themselves responsible for their difficulties or their failures, by personalizing the assistance to which they can have access. This personalization is also observable in the individualized follow-up of the sick, the unemployed, or of students. The notion of ‘populations’ becomes meaningless in view of the complexity of the individual situations that must be dealt with (Otero and Roy,

2013), undermining, as we have already pointed out, the idea of a simple shift from disciplines to biopolitics (Foucault, 2004). New controls of populations and risks have stabilized a treatment of social problems based on the management of individual particularities (Castel, 1981).

This push for singularity is also manifested at the level of demands for justice. What yesterday symbolized the very nature of justice – the fact that it is blindfolded – sometimes becomes one of the defining criteria of contemporary injustice – when judicial actors fail to take sufficient account of personal and contextual variants. It becomes obvious that, since individuals are singular, it is essential to treat them differently to establish their true equality. Of course, any breach of equality is always judged negatively, but at the same time the simple application of common and standardized rules, the same for all, seems deeply insufficient, even abusive, given the wish that singularities be recognized. What matters is no longer that the particular be correctly subsumed under the general rule, but the ability to reach an agreement considered to be right because it is perfectly suited to a particular situation. Far from the long impersonal relationships that individuals have maintained with institutions, there now appear personalized demands for trust or even more specific normativity (Giddens, 1991; Dubet, 2002). In the same way, the individualization of the social issue makes caring for others an increasingly concrete matter that requires a set of institutional care practices that combine personalized interactions with social protections (Tronto, 1993).

The good institution is one that can personalize interventions and offer more individualized follow-up to users and citizens. Many institutions are, of course, currently far from this ideal of singularized treatment. Yet it is now the truly collective ideal. And, given institutions' inability to generalize access to singularized treatment, it is often a class privilege. The more resources and social power individuals have, the more singular are the social or commercial services to which they have access.

The heightened sensitivity towards singularity can also be seen in our sociability, where affinity logics between individuals are gradually being asserted to the relative detriment of logics of social obligation (de Singly, 2003). The growing singularization of exchanges, for example, between different generations within the same family – between grandchildren and grandparents, for example, who can now, thanks to ICTs, empower their relations compared to the intermediate generation of parents – goes hand in hand with the quest for a more elective social life. This process reinforces an aim for affinity logics to the detriment of the social logics that bind relationships between groups, to the point that even within the family the valued relationships between individuals take precedence over the sole obligations of lineage or kinship. If the idea of a chosen parentage still seems excessive, the desire to be able to 'choose' our relations is growing.

Within families, the recognition of each person's uniqueness becomes a requirement. As soon as the economic situation allows it, for example, for each child to have a room of their own is a largely legitimate request; as is also accepting the diversity of food tastes within the same family, which often requires preparing

several dishes for a single meal (Ascher, 2005). More broadly, the very meaning of education is changing – we must help children to become themselves. This aspect is just as visible in the couple, where we can see the importance given to the well-being of individuals alongside statutory obligations – some even advocating a confluent love regime and pure relationships, even cold intimacies, low emotion intensity in order to preserve the singularities of any fusion (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007).

In these processes and changes, all is not virtuous. The singularity and empowerment of the actors that they encourage reinforces and deepens selfishness and indifference, potentiating more than ever the free rider mentality, opportunism towards collectives, and a perverted shrinkage of the world around the self. However, it is singularization that structures all these changes.

Cultural and moral representations

The development of new ethical and aesthetic ideals of singular exemplarity transforms the relationship with norms and authority.

In art, a new contemporary paradigm emerged (distanced from the modern paradigm) allotting a crucial role to the artist's discourse in producing the work's singularity. Already valued in the paradigm of modern art through the notions of originality, avant-garde, the immeasurable, singularity continues to be valued in the paradigm of contemporary art; the difference is that it becomes inseparable from each artist's discourse about their work's very singularity (Heinich, 2014). It is the artist himself who positions his work as singular independently of its recognition (or not) by critics. Visibility is imposed as a new criterion of evaluation, both at the level of people and their works, transforming the very status of narcissism. Once classified as a disease in the DSM-V (the well-known manual of psychiatry in the USA) narcissism has now become a mere syndrome, reflecting how concern for small personal differences has become widespread.

The process of singularization is particularly visible at the level of our modalities of cultural representation. For a long time, the individuality of fictional characters was largely subordinated to the representation of a character type or social position. This was the world of Shakespeare or Balzac in which, at best, singularity could only be a form of originality, deviance or exemplarity. We no longer live in this universe of representation. For several decades – and as we can see very clearly now in television series – many fictional characters have been elusive, incomprehensible at times, capable of many feats, and of baseness as well. They are infinitely more complex and singular (Barrère and Martuccelli, 2009).

Moreover, in contemporary fiction the modern idea gains depth that the life of another may not only be mine somewhere because of the fundamental equality of beings, but above all is worthy of being told. Ensemble dramas clearly reflect this turning point: they narrate common situations and singular responses. Without overestimating their importance, it is important to recognize what the proliferation of ensemble dramas seems to indicate. Under their gaze, war, for example,

ceases to be only a theatre for great men and becomes a collective enterprise in which characters (large or small) are gripped by events and act heroically or anonymously, each contributing to the collective enterprise to the point at which it is often impossible to determine their individual contribution to the final result. Ensemble fiction is a particular attempt to compose the world in which the focal point – the gaze or the camera – moves from one character to another, changing the tones of the story as it does so. The epic of the anonymous (in other words, singular) individuals in the ensemble plot does not massify the experiences; on the contrary, each of them is the object, to a greater or lesser extent, of singularized attention. This goes hand in hand with the importance asserted in supporting roles: their erasure, so often the rule in past fictions, contrasts with the greater attention they now receive.

These changes in cultural representations can also be seen in the dynamics of social life. No one is really and fully in the ‘right box’ anymore. This is not anecdotal. Social roles no longer frame our experiences or do so less and less. Doctors, teachers, police officers, bosses: nobody feels in their place anymore, or rather, each one occupies it in their ‘own’ way, indifferently undermining social conventions by his ‘own’ behaviour. All actors, to varying degrees, overflow given role constraints and strive to enact their singularity. Under the influence of this rise in singularities, social relationships are increasingly seen as human relationships, in other words, relationships between individuals. The weakening of social roles transforms the perception of many conflicts of interest into problems between individuals.

These transformations at the level of our cultural representations have similarities with what is observed in our ethical models. Certain works thus explored a new ethical universalism starting from judgements formerly reserved exclusively for the aesthetic domain. Thus, every work – every life – is as it should be: the rule is valid only for one particular case and for that case alone. But for that particular case, it is universal in the sense that, in the exemplarity achieved, it is the only rule that had to be fulfilled (Ferrara, 2008). These valuations of exemplarity proposed a re-founding, based on the singular, of a normativity with universal validity freed from any contextual particularism.

This, in turn, transforms the link between singularity and imitation. For a long time, the main enemy of the moderns in the quest for singularity has lain in their refusal of imitation. Imitation of others has been associated with delusion, leading to alienation, self-loss or massification. Now, understood in this way, singularity is an impossible social horizon. The question is not the creative originality of each subject, but the ways in which each organizes his normative adherences. The choice of ethical conduct is not based on abstract values but on exemplarity, embodied in a singularity that triggers an aspiration to approach this ideal (Gomá, 2014). The question is not whether to imitate someone else, but who we should imitate and for what reasons. With their singularized and selective imitation of moral prototypes, individuals do not aim for originality or expression of their subjective world, but to be an expression of an ethical model. The exemplarity sought

is singular, but as a figure of exemplarity it is a generalizable model. It is thus a question of re-founding ethical normativity on exemplarity; each life can be the expression of a concrete universal, of an exemplary singularity.

Identities and existence

The transition can also be seen in social identities. Over the past 50 years, we have experienced the end of the hegemonic grip of social class in favour of many other identity profiles. Gender, ethnicity, regionalisms, generations, sexual diversity have come to emerge both as essential aspects of the person and as alternative grammars of social relations. Difference has often become the major political operator of this reality (Wieviorka, 2001), giving shape to specific challenges of identity fragmentation and closure.

The shift from a hegemonic social identity to the multiplication of differences is now extending in a new direction, around singularity. Uniqueness is not difference. The strength of this distinction is apparent every time there is a temptation to homogenize a social group: whenever it is a question of sacrificing the inevitable heterogeneity of singularities to the homogenizing diktats of difference. From a singularity perspective, it is a misconception to suppose that all members of a community adhere without fail to a tradition. A statement of this type is never true, either for traditional communities or for modern societies. Singularity expresses another sensibility regarding identity: it forces us to recognize the presence of heterogeneities within groups. Singularity recreates difference at the very heart of difference, by refusing to accept the reclusion of individuals in a community presented by its leaders as the necessary home of their identity. Even a movement like politically correct can be partially read from this inflection. The desire to recognize another's uniqueness, beyond a respect for their identity, fuels an extreme sensitivity to the negation of self that results from stereotypes of race, sex, age or class.

Recalling what we said earlier about fictional characters, our social classifications or identities become blurred as our sensibility to personal singularities grows. This sensibility is once again induced by structural changes. Within industrial society it was common, if we believed the (questionable) narrative of classical sociology, for lives to unfold in homogeneous universes: after their birth in a village, individuals went to the only local school, married a neighbour (from no further than the village next door), worked in the main factory in the area, enjoyed a sociability restricted to the villagers, and consumed highly standardized products. Today, although such experiences have not disappeared, the structural process of singularization has gained force. It is more and more difficult to come across sociological clones (i.e., individuals who have had the same experiences as ours, at the same time and in the same places, in short, individuals with twin trajectories to ours). Nowadays, and even if social and positional similarities have not disappeared, diversification of experience is the rule: within the same social

category, interpersonal differentiation increases due to the variety of experiences (cultural, social, etc.) to which everyone is exposed. However, there is no difference between the sociological genius of our ancestors and ours, but where the process of individuation tended to emphasize homogeneous identities, it now accentuates structural singularization. In its own way, intersectionality is a way of apprehending this reality.

These shifts are also noticeable in terms of our conceptions of existence. The irreducible singularity of each existence resides in the personal access to the world that is specific to each being. An 'other access' which is independent of any aim of originality, difference or exemplarity. It is quite simply the access that everyone has. New existential conceptualizations, in the tradition of the concrete universal, underline the peculiarity of singularity.

Even if intellectual debts are not always recognized or manifested, this conceptualization of the singularity of existence, as valuing a person's irreplaceability, is a new avatar of the dignity of the person, of the valuation in the Christian tradition of the singularity of the individual soul and of human rights (Joas, 2013).

Conversely, nothing shows better the importance of this tradition in the existential conception of singularity than the (badly named) technophile project of Singularity. Basically, beyond its whimsical side, what is striking behind what appears to be the simple result of increasing technical complexity and the advent of an augmented humanity, is the classic character of the power stakes and a new negation that social relationships will always be more complex than a series of algorithms (or a smartphone). Strangely, this new augmented humanity is hardly singled out.

Let's return to the singularity of existence. A set of works particularly well represented in contemporary Italian thought (Martuccelli and Rebughini, 2017) underlines the irreducibility *and* banality of each existence. Singularity becomes a question of belonging, and not of identity or excellence (Agamben, 1990). This displacement is important: it is a question of understanding singularity as it exists and is formed, from its place in a whole. Re-read from this characterization of the singularization process, recognition of singularity is open to the (impersonal, anonymous) forces that constitute it (Esposito, 2007). It is therefore a question of underlining not only how concrete each singularity is (Bodei, 2013; Crespi, 2004), but also its ineradicable relation to others. Being is both singular and plural: singularity is inseparable from a plurality but at the same time the singular implies its singularization and therefore its distinction from other singularities (Nancy, 2013: 52). The recognition of existential singularity is thus part of the passage from a solipsistic conception of consciousness towards a dialogical conception of the subject.

The result is that our growing collective sensibility to singularity slyly modifies our public debates. We argue collectively over a singular story of euthanasia, or a rape, or the body of a dead child found on a European beach, but also for the life of an orangutan in a zoo. We focus on singular cases, not only because the

individual case stands in for a collective problem, but because we are interested in this singular case as a singular case. In the light of the singularity, we are learning to live and perceive social life differently. The rise in generality, the need to subsume a personal problem in a more general question – once an exclusive requirement that has not disappeared – gives way to other ways of representing and organizing the collective and the individual, in which experience and first-person testimony become a powerful persuasive factor.

The social challenge of singularization

Let us stop the list at this point – it could be extended at will. The process of singularization describes the ordinary, plural and structural production of singularity in contemporary societies (Martuccelli, 2010, 2017). Singularity is no longer a sign of genius or excellence; but the banal manifestation, because common to all, of a social experience. Of course, all these realities are different from each other and there is no question of amalgamating them. However, the rise of singularity both as a structural reality and as a normative horizon outlines one of the greatest contemporary challenges of living together.

- [1.] The processes of singularization we have summarily presented are not unequivocal. For each of them, there are, if not counter-tendencies, at least collective conditions of possibility. Alongside more individualized consumption, collaborative or responsible forms of consumption are also spreading, for example, that allow the common and the singular to mesh in new ways (allowing potential excesses of individual consumption to be regulated). In the field of medicine, care practices alternate between standardized treatment protocols and more personalized, or even genetic, medicine. While individuals read or watch cultural products in a more personalized way, spaces for mediation have been rebuilt around certain platforms, while the consumption of information deemed ‘important’ is still shared. In organizations, despite the expansion of new modalities of managerial control, individuals are able to recreate more or less autonomous spaces, whether collective (informal work groups) or strictly individualistic (free-market-logic riders). At the level of religious belief, the tendencies of believers to affiliate or re-affiliate to a community go hand in hand with more individualized relationships, and not in opposition to them (Hervieu-Léger, 1993; Roy, 2004) – a relationship to beliefs which is also visible in knowledge, each individual claiming the legitimacy of his point of view, his convictions, his knowledge of experience (the generalization of an ‘epistemological Protestantism’).
- [2.] The above provides the framework for the current challenge. Singularization does not conspire against collective life; produced by a set of structural transformations, it introduces new requirements into living together. We have entered a period in which it is often with reference to the singularity that is achieved and permitted that institutions and their standardization are judged.

Standardization was never really a value, but it was meant to ensure some expansion of equality. Now the ancient ambivalence has turned into a largely unequivocal critical judgement. Standardization is increasingly called into question by the obstacles it poses to the development of singularities.

Singularity and the recognition of heterogeneity have become real collective values. This shared target nevertheless poses many problems. Singularity (as a quest for originality) formatted by institutional injunctions ('to be oneself'), for example, becomes a disciplinary norm. But the main challenge lies elsewhere. The idea that heterogeneity and singularity are values questioned a certain conception of social integration and even of the common world. If for 50 years the articulation of equality and difference was at stake, and not without tensions, we now confront a new dilemma around the articulation of equality and singularity (Rosanvallon, 2011). The path from one dilemma to the other passes through a reconceptualization of the common.

[3.] All this draws upon a set of new relationships, inevitable and problematic, between singularities and what is common in all areas of social life. This requires recognizing the scope and centrality of the notion of interdependence. Singularities are inseparable from the processes of singularization that make them possible. In the outstanding result of a few individuals (achieved through merit) it is essential to recognize that this result is a collectively organized possibility, the fruit of various inheritances, the usufruct of common properties. A singular achievement must never (as in the ideology of merit) allow people to forget what it owes to collectives – including in environmental and ecological terms. All individuals always draw on the collective for the resources needed for their existence.

Far beyond the question of merit, the rise of singularities confronts the need for recognition of the legitimacy of, and therefore support for collectives, for various grammars of life. Of course, not all unique explorations are equal; but it is essential, however difficult, to separate issues of individual ethics from those of collective morality. Not only to recognize the legitimacy of a diversity of lifestyles, but also, very concretely, to make as many unique explorations possible. How can we collectively ensure for all the possibility of each person's singular existence? In this goal, negative freedom (being free from political arbitrariness) is just one condition for the exercise of singularity, among many others.

[4.] Gradually a new division is emerging between supporters of homogeneity and those of heterogeneity. Of course, the structural expansion of singularity means that no one is a true partisan of homogeneity anymore. Someone will defend this perspective on certain issues (conservatives, ethno-nationalists, nativism, supremacists, anti-gender perspective, religious fundamentalists, etc.) but on many other issues, the same people are fiercely jealous of their

singularities. In fact, they are trapped in difference. Difference – like homogeneity – sets groups against each other and imposes the idea that within difference (or homogeneity) all are the same. The actions of identity entrepreneurs always point explicitly in this direction.

Singularity poses challenges in other terms: it divides those who want to permanently fix positions and identities on one side, and on the other those who, on the contrary, try to forge, with difficulty, a policy of singularities, that is, to successfully recognize shifting social divisions. The stakes are highly plural: in an increasingly heterogeneous society, it is difficult to define the actors in a sustainable and homogeneous manner. As more fluid, diverse and plural arenas of conflict emerge, alliances and oppositions vary in function of different issues.

Present-day societies face increasing divisions. Each time, individuals act with strong passions and personal convictions, each one around themes that are close to his heart and rejecting those of others, but often around ideological positions which no longer always form a system. What once ideological containers had managed to suppress (personal idiosyncrasies) are exploding in broad daylight. For the moment, caught by the inertia of the old ways, political associations do not fully understand this. We continue to struggle to create new hegemonies around The People, or we despair when we see the contradictory explosion of demands. Imagination is currently lacking in the building of a hegemony of singularities, that is in tune with the new collective sensibility.

[5.] All of this confronts the need to build a new conception of being together, one that recognizes that heterogeneity is not the problem, but the solution. A century and a half ago, it was necessary to accept social differentiation as a constitutive feature of modern society, to stop aspiring to a social world blessed by weak social division, and based on this imperative to imagine new forms of integration. Today, we must recognize singularization as a structural feature of current societies, and this requires accepting, beyond inter-group differences, the irreducible existence of intra-group singularities. If differentialist demands – especially minority ones – build separations among people, wishes for singularities promote cohesion, in as much as the singular aspirations of each one, beyond the diversity of the forms they may take, are common to all.

The rise of singularities presupposes moving towards a new collective ideal. The ideal of living together must succeed the integration of society. For this, we must accept to make heterogeneity itself into a value and accept that individuals often live and act side by side rather than amalgamated in social life. In an exponentially increasing number of situations, the coordination of actions is guaranteed by a socio-technical continuum which allows a collective regulation that is largely disinterested in the projects and beliefs of each one. The articulation of singularities comes at this price: many conceptions of the common world prove impracticable.

The use of platforms, applications, tracking devices and automation is essential to ensure the management of insoluble normative problems (given the diversity of orientations between actors) and of practical issues (because of the enormous complexity of situations). This is the necessary foundation for a free deployment of singularities. On this basis, it will be necessary to invent new collective grammars for singular lives. The challenge is considerable: nothing less than to give shape to a society oriented towards the maximum realization of all singularities.

Note

- 1 The academic literature being inexhaustible on each of the points addressed in this text, we have decided to limit the references to literature that is less known or less available in the English language. For more references, cf. (Martuccelli, 2010 and 2017).

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Technoscience

Federico Neresini

Science and Technology Studies (STS) has made the word ‘and’, which is often considered of little relevance, into a very important one, although not as a conjunction but exactly the opposite: what it requires as a premise is actually a disjunction, since a separation is needed for allowing the construction of a link. It indeed makes a considerable difference whether this ‘and’ is a comparison between two substantives or otherwise. For example, saying ‘science and technology’ or ‘science and society’ means framing science, technology and society as objects to be analysed by the social sciences from a very specific perspective. What is tacitly accepted, in fact, is that these three elements are assumed to be ontologically separated and this starting point orients the analysis in a very specific way: how can we describe their relationship? Which is the *explanans* and which is the *explanandum*? Is society transformed by technology? Does technological innovation derive from scientific discoveries? Is science conditioned by society? Is there too much technology within scientific laboratories?

But seeing science, technology and society as three separate bodies is not compulsory; quite the opposite, the fact that we usually consider them distinct aspects of reality should be explained.

Dropping the ‘and’ from the expression ‘science and technology’, hence, means rejecting such a distinction and affirming that they cannot be regarded separately, at least as a starting point.

The long journey of technoscience

The term *technoscience* has required quite some time to take up its place in the STS field and become part of the latter’s ordinary lexicon. It is not my intention to examine the history of this process in too much depth here and I will limit myself to noting that the word’s use in the first edition of the *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (Jasanoff et al., 1995) was extremely sporadic, whilst it had been entirely absent from the first systematic collection of studies on science and technology around 20 years previously (Spiege-Roesing and de Solla Price, 1977). In this latter, in fact, science and technology were discussed mostly as

separate objects, although their increasing connections and mutual dependency were repeatedly examined.

It was not until the 2008 *Handbook* that *technoscience* was accorded many index entries (Hackett et al., 2008), showing that the concept had now entered the language of the field, its diverse and not always compatible nuances notwithstanding. This state of affairs persisted in the years that followed, as the next edition of the *Handbook* (Felt et al., 2017) confirms.

Meanwhile, *technoscience* began to expand well beyond the confines of STS. In a quick search on Scopus or Web Of Science repositories, the term crops up in a range of research areas from linguistics to medical anthropology, sociology to organizational studies, cultural studies to design, geography to communication, to cite just a few. As might have been expected *technoscience's* success has not brought with it corresponding shared, established affirmation as a concept and, even in the STS context itself, discussion on its meaning is ongoing so that 'science and technology' remains an expression often used as a synonym of *technoscience*, and vice versa.

The word has anyway been around for some time. Certain scholars have, in fact, found traces of its use well before the advent of STS and attribute its first use to Heidegger, Lyotard or the Belgian philosopher Hottois (Cozza, 2021). There is no doubt, however, that its popularity as a concept designed to get past the distinction between science and technology remains an outcome of Latour's work.

In the STS, in fact, Latour uses the concept for an extremely clear purpose, that is looking for a way out of the impasse the social sciences find themselves in when they address the problem of scientific knowledge on the basis of the assumption that science and technology are to be considered two ontologically distinct entities. It is only by observing what goes on in research laboratories not constrained by such an initial preconception that at least two features become fairly visible. In the first place, that the scientists are 'only a tiny group among the armies of people who do science' (Latour, 1987: 173) and, secondly, that science is in no way confined to the laboratories and develops by generating networks whose heterogeneity stands out right away. The extent of these networks varies, but their breadth is always in any case such as to make them impossible to contain within the narrow confines of a laboratory.

Technoscience works in this way: its predictable character 'is entirely dependent on its ability to spread further networks' that take shape in and around laboratories. Thus, 'facts and machines are like trains, electricity, packages of computer bytes or frozen vegetables: they can go everywhere as long as the track along which they travel is not interrupted in the slightest' (Latour, 1987: 249–250). For this reason 'every time a fact is verified and a machine runs, it means that the lab or shop conditions have been extended in some way'. For example, 'you can very well claim that Ohm's law . . . is universally applicable in principle; try in practice to demonstrate it without a voltmeter, a wattmeter and an ammeter' (Latour, 1987: 250) and outside the practices associated with its use.

Now, it is crucial to keep the difference between two mechanisms in mind, Latour observes, as mechanisms which work on different planes while remaining complementary to a scientific fact's successful consolidation. The primary mechanism is that which progressively builds up networks by marshalling and aligning actors via translation processes, namely stratagems, compromises, agreement or forcing, through which these assemblages act coherently despite the various actors' sometimes very different, even conflicting, motives and interests.

The second mechanism is a matter of attributing responsibility to a few, if not just one, of the actors emerging from the primary mechanism, as occurs, for example, when it is said that Pasteur discovered microbes or Edison invented the incandescent light bulb. The outcome thus turns the proportions between the forces deployed on the field:

among the million people enlisted by scientists or enlisting them, and among the hundreds of scientists doing applied research and development for defence and industry, only a few hundreds are considered, and to them alone is attributed the power to make all the others believe and behave. Although scientists are successful only when they follow the multitude, the multitude appears successful only when it follows this handful of scientists!

(Latour, 1987: 174)

The expression 'science and technology' is thus a deceptive one because it implies attributing

the whole responsibility for producing facts to a happy few. . . Then, when one accepts the notion of 'science and technology', one accepts a package made by a few scientists to settle responsibilities, to exclude the work of the outsiders, and to keep a few leaders.

(Latour, 1987: 175)

This, then, is the basis on which the introduction of the *technoscience* neologism as well as the decision to treat the science and technology pairing as a contingent expression in the ongoing network in which a multitude of heterogeneous actors take part is justified. Citing Latour once again,

I will use the word technoscience from now on, to describe all the elements tied to the scientific contents no matter how dirty, unexpected or foreign they seem, and the expression 'science' and technology', in quotation marks, to designate what is kept of technoscience once all the trials of responsibility have been settled.

(Latour, 1987: 174)

Note the subtlety: the distinction between science and technology is not fully denied and its use is allowed social scientists solely when it is accompanied by an

awareness that they are dealing with a product and not two starting elements. If this distinction is markedly prevalent in everyday parlance, then it is clear not only that it exists, but also that whilst it is a construct its consequences are real. All this is in homage to Thomas's principle and the need not to confuse the meaning of the adjective 'constructed' with that of 'ephemeral'. Everything that is constructed can, in fact, become solid and resist change, and this applies equally to a house or a rental contract (Hacking, 1999).

Technoscience is hence the right word for social scientists interested in science and technology, but it cannot be denied that science and technology are regarded as two separate domains in our culture and that we act consequently.¹ This is also a profound act of humility by the social sciences to their 'object of study': from many points of view, all social analysts do is what the people they study do, that is, build and incessantly re-construct the social, although 'with different instruments and for different professional callings' (Latour, 2005: 34).² In any case, modesty comes at a cost, because it exposes social scientists to the risk of getting entangled in the network and the point of view of its actors. Consequently, 'it becomes difficult to sustain any kind of critical distance from them. We take on their categories. We see the world through their eyes' (Law, 1991: 11).

At the same time, this downsizing of the social sciences and their claim to a privileged position from which to observe social phenomena is the premise that correctly frames another of *technoscience* scholars' programmatic declarations: 'following the actors'. If *technoscience* refers to assemblages in which many heterogeneous actors can be seen to be involved in reciprocal relationships, we should, first and foremost, reconstruct these assemblages and doing this requires following what actors do within their networks. This methodological suggestion 'is a way of generating surprises, of making oneself aware of the mysterious. This is because it tends to break down "natural" categories – I mean some of those distinctions and distributions "natural" to the sociologist' (Law, 1991: 11).

Even if the 'following the actors' precept is unavoidably problematic (Collins and Yearley, 1992; Callon and Latour, 1992; Waytt, 2008; Jansen, 2017), it should not be forgotten that its primary function is to invite social scientists to take actors' points of view seriously in their approach to *technoscience* and allow them to show how their networks function instead of imposing interpretative categories on them from the outside. Focusing on 'science in action' implies 'follow scientists and engineers through society' (Latour, 1987) in an attempt to discover how society is made, how technoscience is 'society made durable' (Latour, 1991), instead of explaining technoscience through society. Therefore, STS's argument in favour of leaving the distinction between science and technology behind in favour of a nonhyphenated *technoscience* also works for another taken-for-granted separation, that between science and society.

Technoscience is thus revealed to be a relevant concept on two levels: that of the processes through which scientific knowledge and technological artefacts are constructed, and that concerning the general relationship between science, technology and society. This is not solely because social relationships – however

structured – are fully innervated by technoscience, but also because such relationships are also constitutive of what happens within laboratories or in the R&D departments of industries in such a way that they are intrinsically bound up with what is going on outside their walls.

In fact, the term technoscience refers to the need to tackle scientific knowledge issues on the basis of the seamless network formation between human and non-human actors – for example scientific and other artefacts of various sorts present in laboratories – assuming that the only admissibly distinctions among science, technology and society are those of common parlance. But an approach of this sort offers interesting opportunities also for the analysis of other social phenomena as well and casts doubt on facile assumptions taken too much for granted by the social sciences (Latour, 2004). Getting past viewing sociology as the ‘science of the social’ and seeing it as the study of association processes (Latour, 2005) is, in fact, one of the main aims of Latour’s theoretical approach, encompassing the concept of *technoscience*.

Heterogeneous networks

It is clear, at this point, that no discussion of *technoscience* can be complete without reference to the *network* concept, as the former necessarily implies an approach to the social from the perspective of the latter. On the other hand, analysis of *technoscience* within the STS context, as well as its dissemination as a concept outside this latter, have contributed to the network approach’s success within the social sciences. But exactly for this reason, some caution is required in any examination of the networks bound up with *technoscience* as the meaning accorded this term by the social sciences varies significantly in accordance with the theoretical context within which it is used (Latour, 2005; Venturini et al., 2019). As we know in the case of *technoscience*, this context is primarily that of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). The primordial bond between *technoscience* and ANT once again shines the spotlight on the word ‘and’, which is yet again an element of disturbance or rather distortion in the social sciences vision.

One of the key ideas marking out the theories of Callon, Latour and Law relates, in fact, to the inopportune nature of separating out actors and networks in any analysis of their interaction. In this way, ANT moves away ‘from a simple network because its elements are both heterogeneous and are mutually defined in the course of their association’ (Callon, 1986: 32). There are thus neither actors nor networks, but only actor-networks. At least two further aspects worthy of further attention thus emerge.

In the first place, arguing that actors are inseparable from the relationship networks they belong to implies the predominantly process-related nature of the two: if there are only actor-networks then it is the relationship process which is the basis for their existence, which ‘collapses’ them into one another. As Venturini has observed, in the actor-network expression ‘the hyphen stands for an equal: actor=network’ (Venturini et al., 2019: 8) and obviously vice-versa. To use

another of Latour's analogies, it could be said that actor-network is like dance: 'if a dancer stops dancing, the dance is finished. No inertia will carry the show forward' (Latour, 2005: 37). The same is true for social groups or categories; so 'if you stop making and remaking groups, you stop having groups' (Latour, 2005: 35). And, it is also worth noting that social scientists are deeply involved in this process of assembling what they consider the objects to be analysed, that is, social phenomena, as well.

Adopting a perspective in which 'reality is a process' (Callon, 1986: 207) might perhaps suggest potential correspondences with other theoretical approaches developed by the social sciences, such as, for instance, Simmel's formal sociology. For the latter, in fact, society is not substance but event, what happens when individuals associate, with the destiny and form of each depending on the others (Simmel, 1917). But these similarities between Simmel and ANT are actually misleading, especially in consideration of the fact that Simmel's sociology remains a 'dual level' perspective with a sociological analysis assuming that

a basic dualism pervades the fundamental form of all sociation. The dualism consists in the fact that a relation, which is a fluctuating, constantly developing life-process, nevertheless receives a relatively stable external form. . . . These two layers, relation and form, have different tempi of development; or it often is the nature of the external form not to develop properly at all.
(Simmel, 1908: 527)

ANT, by contrast, underlines that

by presupposing that there exist two levels, they might have solved too quickly the very questions they should have left open to inquiry: What is an element? What is an aggregate? Is there really a difference between the two? What is meant by a collective entity lasting in time?
(Latour et al., 2012: 591)

Hence *technoscience* is not an established network connecting multiple previously existing elements but rather a label with which to refer generically to many different – and therefore contingent – instantiations that are continuously shaped and reshaped as assemblages of heterogeneous elements, except that such elements exist only within that network (Law and Hassard, 1999; Law, 2004). And, at the same time, each network owes its existence to the interaction of these elements. This is why ANT suggests the adoption of 'the one-level stand point', so that the problem of what comes first – elements or networks, individuals or collectives, subjects or objects – is not solved, but simply bypassed. This is how the statement 'reality is a process' by Callon is to be understood, namely as a constant invitation not to exchange its stability with a sort of crystallization of the relationships from which it is incessantly constructed and reconstructed. This foundational character of the relationship is also to be found in Barad's suggestion

that inter-action should be replaced with intra-action, with this latter referring to ‘mutual constitution of entangled agencies’. That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’ which assumes that separate individual agencies precede interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through their relationship. It is important to note that the ‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not absolute, sense, that is, ‘agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements’ (Barad, 2007: 33).

In some ways, Latour’s return to Tarde’s sociology would seem to move in the same direction, in the sense that it is an attempt to give a processual foundation to the phenomena observed by the social science. What especially attracted Latour to Tarde’s work was, in fact, the latter’s sociological rereading of Leibnitz’s monad concept and the consequent idea by which society is a matter of ‘reciprocal possession in many highly varied forms of every other’ (Tarde, 1893: 149). What defines each element in a relationship is thus an ownership whole conferred by the whole of relationships it forms part of but, at the same time, the network of relations is made up of the attributions it is subjected to by its elements. The hollow abstraction we call being someone or something becomes, in Tarde’s perspective, ‘property of something, of some other being, which is itself composed of properties and so on to infinity. . . . Being is having’ (Tarde, 1893: 150, 159).

Thus, in Latour’s interpretation, each of the elements identifiable within an actor-network is to be understood as a monad which, however, ‘is not a part of a whole, but a point of view on all the other entities taken severally and not as a totality’. It can similarly be said that ‘the whole is always smaller than its parts’ since an aggregate is contained in each of its parts and ‘each attribute is nothing but the list of actors making it up’ (Latour et al., 2012: 598, 599). Still following Latour, therefore,

agents cannot be said, strictly speaking, to ‘interact’ with one another: they are one another, or, better, they own one another to begin with, since every item listed to define one entity might also be an item in the list defining another agent. . . . In other words, association is not what happens after individuals have been defined with few properties, but what characterize entities in the first place.

(Latour et al., 2012: 598)

Thus, the elements interacting in a network are themselves the network because they are defined on a case-by-case basis by the characteristics attributed them in virtue of their belonging to a network. The actor-network can thus be envisaged as a social media profile (Latour et al., 2012), which does not exist per se and prior to or outside the network, but embodies a point of view on the network defined by the characteristics of the network itself such as, to remain with the social media metaphor, the links, followers, friends and likes which reiterate its existence and measure its reputation.

In the case of *technoscience* we might say that a scientist's existence depends on citations of his or her work, the grants assigned him/her, his or her belonging to a research group bound up with this, the scientific tools used and the scientific institution belonged to. At the same time, a scientific tool is a specific point of view on other entities identifiable on the network, such as the researchers using it in their experiments and mentioning it in their articles, the firm producing it, the technicians installing it and repairing it when necessary, the functioning standards it accords with which are, in turn, drawn up by other articles in which earlier research set the foundations for the acceptance of this standard.

From this perspective, doubt is cast on the notion of 'social context' too. An expression such as 'technoscience's social context' is thus meaningless as anything technoscientific takes shape as a specific local contingency. However, that there are many local places where technoscience takes place does not mean that what counts is 'the face-to-face encounter between individual, intentional, and purposeful human beings' since the local 'has to be re-dispatched and redistributed' as well (Latour, 2005: 192): *technoscience* is the local configuration of processes that immediately and inevitably lead away from the local. Focusing on situated circumstances or displacing *technoscience* in its local instantiations implies recognizing that

the conditions of the situation are in the situation. There is no such thing as 'context'. The conditional elements of the situation need to be specified in the analysis of the situation itself as they are constitutive of it, not merely surrounding it or framing it or contributing to it. They are it.

(Clarke and Star, 2008: 128)

These locally configured processes can be described, instead, as assemblages in which heterogeneous actors are involved and through which action is distributed. This not only means that action is spread out among several actors (human and non-human, individual and collective), but also that it 'consists of sequences whose order can vary depending on the events (distributed action is organized but cannot be reduced to a preestablished plan)', and that 'none of the participants in the action can be considered independently of the others' (Callon, 2008: 35). Technoscientific assemblages, therefore, can be conceived of as socio-technical *agencements*, where

the word *agencement* has the advantage of being close to the notion of agency: an *agencement* acts, that is, it transforms a situation by producing differences. The modifier 'socio-technical' underscores the fact that the entities which are included in the *agencement* and participate in the actions undertaken are both humans and non-humans.

(Callon, 2008: 38)

From this point of view, *technoscience* can be also interpreted from an ecological perspective, that is ‘by analogy with an ecosystem, and equally important, all the components that constitute the system’ (Star, 1995: 2). It can likewise be regarded as a social world, that is a group of ‘actors “doing things together” . . . and working with shared objects, which in science and technology often include highly specialized tools and technologies’ (Clarke and Star, 2008: 113), even if once a social world is defined as a ‘universe of discourse’, non-humans tend to be marginalized or considered passive instruments depending on humans for their involvement in the action’s processes. On the contrary, technoscience as theoretically framed by ANT recognizes the agency of objects and other non-human actors, despite the fact that such agency is not a quality of the actors but an attribute of the network or, even better, of the actor-network. In this way, the ‘missing masses’ (Latour, 1992) constituted by artefacts, machines, living organisms, cultural products and material elements take up full citizenship within the social phenomena domain. This is why the ‘principle of generalized symmetry’ was brought into STS, that is, the idea that human and not-human must be seen as equally relevant agents within the processes by which actor-networks are assembled (Callon, 1984; Callon and Latour, 1992; Latour, 2005; Law and Hassard, 1999).

It would thus be misleading to see *technoscience* as having the same meaning within different theoretical frames of reference. Nevertheless, the various STS approaches which use the *technoscience* concept – even if with varying scope – share a wider vision designed to recognize the heterogeneity of the elements involved in assembling it. Each of them belongs to different categories with which we have organized and ordered our relationships and built our reality: not only human beings – considered singly or in collectives of various degrees of formality – and their cultural products (norms, texts, artistic work), but also objects, artefacts, machines and natural elements. In sum, everything which can be encompassed by the expression ‘non-human’, whatever the boundary line between this and ‘human’ might be considered to be.³

It is thus not only a matter of recognizing only the ‘proliferation of hybrids’ as a distinctive feature of our society, but also of treating the classifications underpinning this latter as a product rather than a taken-for-granted starting point for sociological analysis.

Hybrids and cyborgs

The progressive affirmation of the *technoscience* concept in the social sciences can also be interpreted as an exemplary case of the *translation* mechanisms to which ANT attributes the assemblages within which both scientific knowledge and technological innovation take shape and consolidate (Callon, 1984; Callon et al., 2001; Latour, 1987, 2005; Law and Hassard, 1999). Essentially, a concept’s success also depends on its capacity to shift from one field of application to another and the interpretive adaptability it has subjected itself to precisely in order

to be usable in ways differing from those initially conceived of by its designer. Its original meaning is thus ‘betrayed’ in a more or less marked way, but this betrayal is the basis of its success.

One of the principal *technoscience* translations is due to Donna Haraway, who declared an interest in using such a concept, ten years on from its advent in STS, ‘to designate dense nodes of human and nonhuman actors that are brought into alliance by the material, social, and semiotic technologies through which what will count as nature and as matters of fact get constituted for – and by – many millions of people’ (Haraway, 1997: 50). The feminist scholar highlighted, however, that, in the context of her thinking on modernity this term ‘also designates a condensation in space and time, a speeding up and concentrating of effects in the webs of knowledge and power’ (Haraway, 1997: 51). In doing so, Haraway moves in some regards away from ANT. She clarifies that

shaped by feminist and left science studies, my own usage works both with and against Latour’s. In Susan Leigh Star’s terms, I believe it less epistemologically, politically, and emotionally powerful to see that there are startling hybrids of the human and nonhuman in technoscience – although I admit to no small amount of fascination – than to ask for whom and how these hybrids work.

(Haraway, 1997: 50)

That is to say that *technoscience* analysis should not remain confined to a descriptive level, simply observing the formation of the networks for which the engagement of heterogeneous actors is required, but has to move on to more politically relevant questions such as those capable of showing that such networks are neither neutral nor what we might call ‘flat’.

Moreover, as *technoscience* entails a call for both human and non-humans to be considered actors in networks, it also contributes to setting up the premises on which Haraway developed her well-known *cyborg* figure. In her words, in fact,

the cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a fusion of the organic and the technical forged in particular, historical, cultural practices. Cyborgs are not about the Machine and the Human, as if such Things and Subjects universally existed. Instead, cyborgs are about specific historical machines and people in intraaction that often turns out to be painfully counterintuitive for the analyst of technoscience.

(Haraway, 1997: 51)

On the basis of such a definition, she is able to show that the landscape of our everyday life is populated by many cyborgs, and therefore that these supposedly ‘strange creatures’ are not solely a matter of science fiction but, on the contrary, a lively demonstration that the categories usually taken-for-granted by modern societies are constantly blurred, as happens in the case of *technoscience*.

As well as *technoscience*, the cyborg is thus a particular instantiation of hybridity, that is, the general topos which occupies a preeminent position within the STS conceptual pantheon. Hybrids echo the proliferation in post-modern societies of entities which are difficult to categorize. This is the case, for example, of artificial intelligence, genetically modified organisms and bodies increasingly enmeshed with technoscientific devices, both mechanical – not only implanted prostheses, but also smartphones, to cite just one of many – and chemical – like drugs – or those shaped through surgery or genome editing techniques. *Technoscience* is thus a concept capable of shedding new light on the fundamental problem of human identity too, thereby intersecting with many other sociological issues, some of which are discussed in other chapters of this book.

‘Flattening’ technoscience

But putting things together – that is, overcoming any distinctions resulting from socially constructed categories, and therefore assuming that technology and science cannot be regarded as separate realms – should not be confused with saying that everything is the same, that matter and cognition, or nature and knowledge, or being, so to speak, at the centre of the network or at its periphery, are the same or that everything can be considered equal. This issue, one that can usefully be labelled ‘the flatness problem’, has been attributed by many authors and in many ways to STS, and to ANT in particular.

Summarising a complex and intriguing debate, it can be said that this problem corresponds to the following question: does refusing to approach technoscience as a set of activities that can be explained, interpreted or simply described as the result of hidden forces – and thus resorting to a more or less sophisticated apparatus of concepts like structure, capitalism, power, interests, domination and so on – mean removing the capability (and willingness) to take a critical stance from the social sciences’ horizon?

This is also a problem with *technoscience* that Haraway addressed, as we have seen.

Here again *technoscience* acts as a sensitizing term, highlighting both a problem and its possible solutions, or at least the importance of taking the issue seriously.

The ‘flatness problem’ has been posed in two main ways. On one hand, it has been disputed that the STS concept of *technoscience* ends up obscuring the fact that society is organized around and through inequalities. Consequently, the traditional line-up of concepts usually deployed by the social sciences to address power cannot be dismissed.⁴ On the other hand, a more subtle critique has been advanced by a number of feminist STS scholars who have observed that the Latourian concept of *technoscience* as a contingent outcome of human and non-human actor assemblage leaves out a truly relevant fact, that is, that something is still lacking even when the ‘ready-made causal explanations’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011: 91) provided by social sciences are recognized as useless if not dangerous for understanding *technoscience* too.

The New Political Sociology of Science (NPSS) can be used as an example of the first kind of criticism towards the analytical flatness supposedly introduced by the STS approaches to *technoscience*. This means that the question comes – we might say – from outside STS. According to these authors,

constructionist approaches in social studies of science have been primarily descriptive, often showing how knowledge practices unfold at the local level. NPSS acknowledges the contingent and constructed character of scientific knowledge but also insists that construction processes are neither random nor randomly distributed.

(Frickel and Moore, 2006: 9)

STS, hence, would not be capable of recognizing that power plays a central role within social processes.

This same line of reasoning has been adopted by others, such as Keller (2017), who stresses the need not to dismiss social science's critical vision, as Latour seems to be doing when he maintains that what we need is not to reveal how facts are constructed by social forces, but to show how they are assembled within a network of actors concerned with being part of it. Or, at least, this is what has been attributed to his well-known plea for moving from 'matter of facts' to 'matter of concerns' (Latour, 2004).

But both critiques would seem to be based on a misleading interpretation of its target.

First and foremost, it can be said that, in general terms, STS analyses *technoscience* by highlighting its situatedness and with a frequently descriptive approach, but this in no way implies that *technoscience* can be understood purely within laboratories or that descriptions of the heterogeneous assemblages it is part of recognize neither differences nor inequalities. If anything, the opposite is true: as we have already stressed, the very notion of *technoscience* leads outside the laboratories right away, demonstrating that what happens within these is closely bound up with a wide network of actors much of which extends outside these. It is precisely in describing the composition of actor-networks that this very internal/external distinction disappears and that, consequently, their heterogeneity necessarily implies diversity.

In particular, what Latour proposes is fundamentally to avoid indulging in easy explanations of social processes, introducing second-level explanations which makes recourse to the conceptual paraphernalia of sociological theory, of the sort that Keller is asking for (Keller, 2017) and which takes us a long way away from these processes, from what actors do and their relationships, to confine them within preconceived interpretative cages and thus hypersimplify our explanations. It is rather a matter of keeping close to the facts (Latour, 2004), namely taking the actors and their relations seriously. Good sociological analysis thus means avoiding the two extremes of scientific determinism on one hand and social determinism on the other.

But how can we keep close to the facts without falling into the determinism or essentialist realism trap? Latour's solution consists in taking what happens and what can be observed seriously without for this reason giving up the peculiarities of the sociological vision which should, however, add facts rather than replacing them with concepts which reduce their relevance – and thus align actors in long relationship chains. The 'facts' we are talking about are thus not 'objective scientific truth' assumed to be valid in an acritical way, but rather a network of relations between 'interested' actors defining what is to be considered 'objective' and what is not, what is to be considered and what excluded, through being 'in relationship'. In this sense, the invitation is to move from a 'matter of thing' to a 'matter of concern'.

Is good social research enough to maintain a critical stance?

Is there thus no room for power, that is, for differences or disparities between actors? There certainly is, but these inequalities are not starting point assumptions but rather analytical finishing lines for social scientists, while the opposite is true for interested actors because for these latter inequalities are taken-for-granted starting points on which to build personal action repertoires (Latour, 2004). Without taking account that ANT has enabled great attention to be paid to *technoscience's* controversial side and staked its claim to be an approach capable not only of describing its characteristics but also of considering its political implications (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe, 2001; Venturini, 2010).

What the STS approach to technoscience has brought out is a general sociological issue: can an effective analysis of reality alone, according to the ANT approach, for example, bring with it a critical dimension – that is, the ability to highlight non-equal relations, namely power relations – or does it need to be supplemented with a conceptual apparatus concerned with theorizing power relations starting from analysis? Latour tends to the former solution. But others do not. This time they are those who take an STS perspective and rather than adding a second analytical plane they seek to widen the scope of Latour's proposals. Puig de la Bellacasa, for example, is moving in this direction when she proposes an approach to matters of facts/concerns which also encompass the care dimension, with the intention not only of respecting diversity, and what is marginal or even excluded from the contingent configurations potentially assumed by technoscience, but also getting involved in these and their becoming. Her notion of 'matters of care', hence, 'stands for a version of "critical" STS that goes further than assembling existing concerns, yet resists the pitfalls identified by Latour: ready-made explanations, obsessions with power, and the imposition of moral or epistemological norms' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011: 100).

This further hybridization between ANT and feminist approaches is designed to achieve a twofold result. On the one hand to recognize the relevance of 'ask[ing] critical questions about who will do the work of care, as well as how to do it and

for whom' and, on the other hand, to pay 'attention and worry for those who can be harmed by an assemblage but whose voices are less valued, as are their concerns and need for care' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011: 91–92). But even more important it means not adding ready-made explanation categories but rather extending the analytical gaze by including the awareness that concern should not be structured solely in terms of interests, motivations and worries, but also of care for both others and things. And this would seem to accord fully with the idea of criticism supported by Latour, when he maintains that it is

not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather . . . , the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.

(Latour, 2004: 246)

The question mark over the capacity of the social sciences to continue to exert a critical function regarding what they observe remains open all the same. As argued, among others, by Pellizzoni (2015), we should ask ourselves whether showing the blurring of the distinctions between science, technology and society, between subject and object or language and matter and thus recognizing the processual status of reality in itself implies that we cannot take a distance from what happens and therefore lose the potential for imagining alternative futures together with a less unequal present. But, at least in the case of *technoscience*, it might be enough to recognize that the hybrids generated by *technoscience* raise constant questions about the status and structure of the sociotechnical assemblages they form part of and which they contribute to (re) producing. As a consequence, asking who benefits from such assemblages, who is excluded by them and what stance have the social scientists studying them and thus participating in shaping them should come naturally.

Notes

- 1 The same line of reasoning is to be found in the 'technological determinism' discussion proposed by Sally Wyatt (2008).
- 2 The correspondence with ethnomethodology is here very evident. This communality of perspective and intention between ethnomethodology and ANT is, in fact, explicitly acknowledged by the latter. Ethnomethodology has made a highly significant contribution to the development of STS itself, thanks, for example, to the work of Micheal Lynch and Steve Woolgar.
- 3 Technoscience's especially significant contribution to the development of the debate and research hinging on what is known as 'new materialism' is evident here (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Pellizzoni, 2015; Fox and Alldred, 2017).
- 4 But this is a critique that has in general been directed at the STS constructivist approach; see, for example, Winner (1993).

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Uncertainty

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Introduction

Uncertainty seems to be the hallmark of the contemporary era. In current Western societies, it seems to be everywhere. Apparently, it is impossible to speak about health, economics, politics, environment, work, love, personal relationships, everyday life and the future without taking into consideration that we – Western subjects – are not able to predict with a certain degree of certainty the evolution of the situation and to control the outcomes of our choices. Public and political discourse, experts and media headlines seem to assert that things are uncertain, and increasingly so (Scoones, 2019). The question of uncertainty seems to have invaded the Western world, which – it is assumed – lived more stably and securely in the past.

From an existential point of view, we could say that uncertainty is part of how human beings experience existence (Nowotny, 2016). It constitutes features of human nature: the fact that human awareness is relational; and the need to interact with an ‘external’ world – made up of both living beings and material substances – which has its own consistency, logic and structure. This ‘external’ world is constitutive of self-perception and personal agency, and it has an unexpected and unpredictable ability to respond and react to our actions and will. Uncertainty is the correlate of the radically relational character of the experience of oneself and reality. It is part of the human mode of experiencing and expressing awareness of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962) and of always being in relationship with others and with the environment. In general terms, we may say that uncertainty is connected to the social character of human experience, to the fact that our ability to relate to experience is always relational: it is always a being-with-others within a material context. It is in this unavoidable and ineliminable experience of relationality (with other human beings and with the material context) that we can locate the existential and experiential dimension of uncertainty. Its relational nature means that the horizon of the possibilities of experience always remains inevitably open because the meaning that we attribute to experience is always the result of a relationship, of a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Todorov, 1984). If we embrace the idea that ‘any true understanding is dialogic in nature’ and that

'understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next' (Voloshinov, 1973: 102) then the ability to understand and make sense is always open to the future and uncertain. It depends on what comes next, on what others will say or do, on how the context will resist, react or change. If the understanding – of oneself and reality – is always 'dialogic', 'open', it is also necessarily uncertain. It contains a certain amount of unpredictability; it can never be fully controlled because it 'depends' on what is not under our full control; it is never in the here and now but comes into existence in the relation, in the time spent waiting for an answer, in what comes next.

However, the growing centrality assumed by the question of uncertainty cannot be fully understood from only an existential point of view. If it is plausible that uncertainty can be considered a constitutive aspect of human experience, it is probably equally plausible that the meaning that it assumes in experience is linked to historical and social conditions.

More than being a 'fact' of the world, uncertainty is an interpretation and an account of the person's experience of the world. As such, it assumes more or less significance according to the specific conditions of the society concerned and of the persons who use it to make sense of the world (Zinn, 2008). Given these premises, the purpose of this chapter is not to analyse the ontological consistency of uncertainty. It does not investigate what uncertainty really is; it does not explore its relations with knowledge and ignorance, danger and risk (for this reason, the terms 'uncertainty', 'risk', 'danger' and 'precariousness' are often used interchangeably throughout the chapter). Nor does it aim to suggest how to tackle or cope with uncertainty, how to reduce, harness, tame, control and exploit it. Instead, it considers how uncertainty is perceived and used, who uses it and for what purposes. It analyses how and to what extent uncertainty is part of the toolbox of contemporary social sciences and becomes part of the discourses people use to make sense of their social experience in their specific socio-historical contexts, how it is conceived, addressed, promoted or problematized for specific purposes by different actors.

Any sociological analysis of uncertainty should be rooted in specific socio-historical contexts, avoiding excessive generalizations. For this reason, this chapter mainly analyses how uncertainty has been, and still is, used to make sense of experience and reality in Western societies; societies in which discourses on uncertainty have become pervasive as ways to understand reality and as political means to manage, control and regulate individual and collective behaviours.

A modernity yearning

Developing a specific sociological perspective on uncertainty requires putting in the foreground how, in a specific historical and social context, it is defined, interpreted and endowed with meaning. This involves focusing attention on by whom, how, when and for what purposes reference is made to uncertainty in order to describe, interpret or judge the social situation and reality. We can say that each

era, each social group and each situation has its forms of uncertainty, its discourses on how to recognize and control it, and specialists and institutionalized systems for its management (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Lupton, 2013). The definition of security or insecurity is always deontic (it is never simply descriptive; it is not a matter of pure rationality). It implies a specific worldview: it is a declaration of how we would like our world to be.

Classical Western modernity was particularly obsessed with uncertainty. In several respects, it could be said that one of the central guidelines of classical modernity was the aspiration to eliminate uncertainty, take full control of the world, tame nature to serve human needs, plan and design to predict the future, and eliminate unwanted negative effects. In the logic of classical modernity, eliminating uncertainty was tantamount to taking control of the world and making human beings fully masters of their destiny (Bauman, 1990, 2000).

The modern desire to eliminate, or at least to control, uncertainty is rooted in its radical destruction of old certainties. One way to deal with the ‘melting into the air’ of what was solid – the traditional European feudal society – caused by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution was to develop forms of control and management. Advances in science, technological innovation, the bureaucratic and rational organization of work, the army and the state, control of the economy and the population through data collection, statistics and probabilistic calculus: these are all examples of both the constant production of uncertainty and the effort to reduce or control it. ‘Progress’ is the term that summarizes the modern aspiration to control the world and, in doing so, to constantly produce change. The widespread idea in classical modernity was that, through scientific knowledge, it would be possible to eliminate uncertainty and take full control of human destiny. The idea of progress implies a specific conception of time and history, and it defines a clear hierarchy among human beings. Time is conceived as an arrow, as a vector along which human beings move from a state of present knowledge towards a future state inevitably marked by more knowledge. It also represents a way to locate the different groups and individuals on the vector. Those who are lower on the arrow of progress have less knowledge – they are less modern and less civilized; they still live in the past – than do those who are higher. The degree of uncertainty experienced in the present is a sign that the modern project to eliminate uncertainty is not yet complete and requires harder work; however, there is the certainty that, under the guidance of those at the highest level of civilization, with further efforts, the goal will be achieved, that new knowledge will guarantee more control and more safety.

To fully understand the idea of progress, the tension towards the elimination of uncertainty and the simultaneous production of constant changes that undermine certainties, it is necessary to consider the close link between modernity and colonialism (Bhambra, 2007; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018, 2021; Santos, 2018).

Uncertainty and precariousness have constituted the reality of the peripheries, guaranteeing greater stability and certainty at the centre of the colonial system. Colonialism was able to promote security for the colonizers by producing

uncertainty, terror and exploitation in the colonies. The hierarchical and unequal treatment of the colonies enabled Western countries to control the uncertainty at the centre. The appropriation of the colonies' resources allowed the development of science and technology. It generated prosperity and enabled the development of the welfare state in the centre by causing or allowing famine, natural and social destruction in the periphery (Davis, 2001). The exploitation of the colonies freed a substantial part of the colonizers from material needs, allowing for greater social activity which resulted, for example, in the institutionalization of the bourgeois family unit and coffee houses (around the middle of the seventeenth century, tea, chocolate and coffee, typical colonial products, had become the common beverages of at least the affluent inhabitants of European cities) as places to create public opinion necessary for the development of democracy (Habermas, 1991). Moreover, it encouraged artistic production and entertainment – the flourishing of music, theatre, literature and painting (Barker, 2017). Colonial control made it possible to test and put into practice techniques of political and police control, to develop the bureaucratic machine (Quijano, 2007). These skills were then re-imported to the centre and used both to increase the security of the middle class and to control and repress the 'dangerous classes'. The colonial system guaranteed internal security and well-being by exporting uncertainty to the colonies: criminals, poor people, redundant labourers were transformed into colonizers – making the 'miserable', the 'dangerous classes' of Europe, sovereigns and masters of others (the colonized) more miserable and dangerous than they were. At the same time, the techniques tested to produce control through terror and uncertainty were re-imported and applied to the management of internal marginality (Procacci, 1993; Castro-Gomez, 2002; Magubane, 2013). Racial classifications were reused to define internal hierarchies and criteria of citizenship (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991; Hall, 2017).

As Fanon argued with narrative and critical force in his works, the colonial relationship was not limited to material expropriation; it also aimed at the annihilation of the colonized by creating 'an atmosphere of certain uncertainty' (Fanon, 1986: 110–111): a situation that allowed full control thanks to the ability to constantly produce uncertainty for others. The imposition of the colonial economic and political model shattered forms of popular action and solidarity, introducing generalized insecurity with regard not only to the unpredictability of the situation and the action of the colonizers but also to the capacities and identities of the colonized themselves (Fanon, 2004).

Part of the security of the Western world is linked to this constant ability to produce some external uncertainty. The idea of progress, the myth of classical modernity of achieving, through knowledge, planning and measurement, the mastery of the future and the elimination of negative contingencies was rooted in colonial exploitation. It can be said that colonialism promoted the illusion of eliminating – or, at least, controlling – uncertainty by exporting it to the margins of the empire (Sowa, 2020).

Late modernity and risk society

The myth of classical Western modernity of full security and control (Castel, 2003) gradually lost its credibility. After World War II, it became increasingly evident that a series of transformations had radically changed social relations and the structure of society, and that ‘the institutionally enforced program of modernity, its cultural promise of making the world controllable, not only does not “work” but in fact becomes distorted into its exact opposite’ (Rosa, 2020: 19). A series of terms was introduced to signal this transformation: ‘late’ or ‘second modernity’, ‘postmodern’ or ‘postindustrial society’, ‘risk society’. Beyond their specific differences, these terms converge to underline a profound change in the social meaning attributed to uncertainty and to the role it assumes in social experience.

The shock caused by the use of the atomic bomb, the horror and shame of the Shoah, the protests of young people and the postcolonial struggles, as well as recurrent economic crises, awareness of environmental damage, the hazards produced by scientific knowledge and industrial production, and the issue of climate change: all of these phenomena contributed to solidifying the belief that the promise of modernity had not come true. The development of knowledge did not install humanity in a universe of deterministic and omnipotent knowledge such that it was able to dominate nature and the future; on the contrary, the twentieth century marked the end of the positivist ideal by throwing human beings into uncertainty created by their anxious desire for control and progress. This did not mean the total collapse of rationality and the return of irrationality, but rather the development of multiple forms of new rationality in the search for new ways to cope with and use uncertainty. The intensification of globalization processes created a dense network of interconnections (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999) which made it more difficult to find an ‘outside’ in which to expel the uncertainty created without suffering its negative side effects. The ‘horizontal’ distribution system of insecurity that had enabled classical modernity to maintain an acceptable degree of security at the centre was no longer easily feasible. The demand for security required the development of new forms of ‘vertical’, scattered and internal distribution of protections and guarantees. The social sciences contributed to dismantling the certainties of classical modernity by emphasizing how any understanding of human experience should be situated and should take contingency and ambivalence into account (Lash and Urry, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Bauman, 1992). As a result of all these changes, the meanings attributed to uncertainty changed.

Over the past 40 years, the focus of discussion in Western societies has shifted from how to eliminate uncertainty to how to control and use it (Bammer and Smithson, 2009). An important contribution in this regard has been the work of Beck (1992), who suggests that, in the second half of the twentieth century,

Western societies witnessed a break with classical modernity, forging a new form: ‘late modernity’ or the ‘risk society’. In late modernity,

the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts relating to distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced risks.

(*Ibid.* 19)

The risk society is one aspect of reflexive modernization (Beck et al., 1994). The main assumption of this thesis is that modernity has entered a second phase: *the modernization of modern society* (Beck et al., 2003: 1). While in classical modernity

privileges of rank and religious world views were being demystified; today the same is happening to the understanding of science and technology in the classical industrial society, as well as to the modes of existence in work, leisure, the family and sexuality.

(Beck, 1992: 10)

‘Reflexive’ does not mean that modern individuals and societies today lead a more conscious life. On the contrary, the constant questioning of the knowledge and forms of organization of society increases the awareness that full control of unwanted side effects, the elimination of uncertainty, and a perfect forecast of the future are impossible. As Giddens (1990: 39) contends,

Modernity is constituted in and through reflexively applied knowledge, but the equation of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived. We are abroad in a world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised.

The constant production of risks has, for Beck, two main sources. On the one hand, scientific, technological and industrial development multiplies the possible negative and unwanted outcomes. On the other hand, late modernity promotes a constant social drive towards individualization which, by freeing human beings from the social forms of industrial society (in particular, class, family and gender), makes them responsible for creating their own forms of life – but without the possibility to evaluate their effectiveness in advance.

The techno-scientific and industrial improvements of the means with which to reduce uncertainty have themselves become producers of uncertainty. New threats have been produced by advances that make it possible to use nuclear energy, manipulate stem cells, map the human chromosome, rapidly process a

huge amount of information, track human movements and behaviours, create genetically modified organisms, new molecules, new drugs and mRNA vaccines. The long-term negative effects on the environment and the survival itself of living beings on the planet are less and less predictable while they appear more and more certain. Late modernity adopts an ambivalent attitude towards technoscience: it combines the need to question the already given and the already known to improve human existence with the desire to prevent and reduce possible damage. It creates tension between the need to take risks and the desire to reduce risk (Zinn, 2020). The idea that the advent of a new era – which some have started to call the ‘Anthropocene’ – in which society endangers itself and its environment does not imply a generalized distrust of science or, even less, a generalized return of irrationalism. Rather, it promotes the awareness of having to live with uncertainty and the attempt to transform it into risk – that is, a situation in which it is possible to calculate a certain distribution of the probabilities of the outcomes, and therefore to foresee the measures to cope with them. Uncertainty becomes something to live with rather than something to be eradicated. It becomes a political issue: the question is what risks are worth taking and how to distribute the potential dangers. The widespread awareness of living in a situation of omnipresent risk makes uncertainty an element ever-present in social and political discourse. It generates a spiral in which ‘the higher the safety/security level and the safety/security requirements, the more uncertainties and the more “new” uncertainties are discovered, which require more effort during the production of safety, security and uncertainty’ (Bonß, 2013: 11). There are no decisive counter-measures against risks; rather, the solutions envisaged are always much less than optimal because they generate new uncertainties, whether they are real or only imagined.

The processes of institutionalized individualism constitute a second main source of uncertainty. They create the conditions in which risk management is increasingly construed as a matter of private choice and responsibility. People face socially generated risks individually, making choices that cannot affect the choice options available. They are compelled by the mechanism driving current forms of modernization to make themselves the masters of their destinies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). They are forced to decide for themselves how to plan their existence, education, work, family, and every other aspect of their lives, choosing among the many options that late modernity makes available. However, they cannot rely on models used in the past, which are no longer viable. Late modernity has freed people from the institutions of classical modernity. This has increased individual autonomy, but it has destabilized many of the models used by people to orientate themselves in regard to the future. Routines are increasingly replaced by choices, while choices can no longer rely on unquestioned ideal models (Zinn, 2020: 55). What individuals will be able to do with their lives in concatenating their choices remains their sole responsibility. As Beck observed (1992: 137): ‘How one lives becomes the *biographical solution to systemic contradictions*’. But this remains a paradoxical possibility: systemic problems require

systemic solutions, and individual actions and choices are unable to significantly modify the conditions that create risk and uncertainty.

Beck's idea of the risk society has been criticized for taking a deterministic stance towards technoscientific progress (Dean, 1998; Blackman and Featherstone, 2015). For Beck, the risks are real, and they are genuine dangers created by advances in science and industrial production. However, he recognizes that how the risks are defined and who is made responsible for addressing them are social constructs (Best, 2008).

An excessively deterministic interpretation of technoscientific development risks underestimating the political and cultural meanings that the control of uncertainty and the correlated social distribution of risks possess in contemporary societies. The current concern of Western societies with risk and uncertainty, critics argue, stems from a different cultural awareness and sensitivity, rather than from the fear that technology is running out of control (Furedi, 2006, 2019). The excessive focus on the technological aspects of the late-modern transformation – so the criticism continues – leaves unexplored

the possibility that today's far-reaching social transitions have occurred as a result of a broader crisis, one that involves not only the spiralling of risk, but also the shattering of modernist culture, the breakdown of enlightenment faith in progress, the collapse of European imperialism, the globalization of capital, and such like.

(Elliott, 2002: 310)

A cultural interpretation of risk (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 2013) stresses the symbolic meanings that different societies attach to uncertainty. The recognition of risk and uncertainty does not end with the objective recognition of an external threat. Instead, it is a way to interpret reality, affirm values, denounce what is not in line with the established order or social desires, and blame those who are perceived as violators of rules. It is a widely used way to explain deviations from the norm, misfortunes, and frightening events. When referring to uncertainty, people emphasize human responsibility and assume that something can be done to prevent misfortune (Lupton, 2013). The symbolic bases of people's uncertainties are the anxiety created by disorder, the loss of control over their bodies, over relationships with others, the lack of confidence in the sufficient stability of their daily routines and the loss of their deepest beliefs.

Melucci (1996) argues that contemporary global society is increasingly characterized by complexity, which means differentiation, the high speed and frequency of change, and the broadening of opportunities for action. People find themselves living simultaneously in several contexts, where different rules and languages apply, where different interlocutors have different interpretations of the situation and different expectations. The ability to pass from one context to another without being excluded becomes, especially for the younger generations (Colombo and Rebughini, 2019), a fundamental skill. Unable to rely on patterns and routines

inherited from the past, people are constantly forced to choose. This constitutes both a constraint and a resource. It is a resource because people are freer to choose their own paths and the relationships that are most congenial to them; it is a constraint because every choice creates a specific kind of psychological pressure: it can turn out to be less satisfactory than expected, wrong or negative, and, inevitably, choosing one option among the many available implies not implementing the others, which could prove to be equally, if not more, useful or rewarding. As Melucci (1996: 44) notes,

complexity provides opportunities that in their scope far exceed the effective capacity for action of individuals or groups. We are constantly reminded that the field of action laid out before us remains far wider than what can be conquered of it through the opportunities that we are actually able to seize. In terms of everyday experience, the outcome of these processes is that *uncertainty* has become a stable component of our behaviour.

Neoliberal appreciation of uncertainty

Positive aspects of uncertainty are emphasized by neo-liberal capitalism (O'Malley, 2015). Following Foucault (2008: 66), we can say that the motto of neoliberalism is: 'live dangerously'. Economic thought has always stressed that uncertainty can be a potential source of gains. The ability to take advantage of uncertainty has always been an important profit opportunity: capitalist entrepreneurs are those who expose themselves to risk, who step out of the established terrain to explore and discover new fields of business. Uncertainty may be creative, generating profit and wealth (Lehtonen and Van Hoyweghen, 2014). Exploration and innovation can lead to significant losses; but if they are positive, they ensure an advantage over competitors. The positive attitude towards uncertainty has become a constitutive part of the spirit of neoliberalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). For our present purposes, we can briefly define neoliberalism as political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, competition and constant technological change (Springer et al., 2016). Furthermore, the neoliberal perspective envisages a reduction of intervention by the state in economic matters, so that it is restricted to being the guarantor of internal and international security and respect for the laws on private property, protecting citizens from aggression, theft, breach of contract and fraud. It conceives civic society as an arena in which individual entities relate to one another as competitors pursuing their self-interest. Finally, the neoliberal perspective places particular emphasis on individual responsibility and advocates the extension of the logic that drives competitive markets to all sectors of society, including the economy, politics and daily life.

Neoliberalism conceives uncertainty as a resource that should be cultivated and exploited. It contends that too much social security encourages irresponsible behaviour and generates 'perverse effects' among its beneficiaries. The real

antidote to uncertainty, it maintains, is personal initiative and the assumption of the risks and responsibilities that derive from one's actions. Neoliberal thinking recognizes the existence of a trade-off between security and freedom, between security and autonomy, and it values the latter more than the former (Börner et al., 2020). People should pursue their ambitions and live their lives according to their ideas, taking their distance from social constraints, even if this means being constantly exposed to uncertainty. Being a free and autonomous subject implies knowing how to live with uncertainty, knowing how to rationally calculate risks and knowing how to seize the opportunities created by change and complexity (Bargetz, 2021). A society freed from the bonds of tradition and the pastoral control of the state favours individual freedom. It enables people to independently pursue their propensities, to develop their abilities. Acquired freedom and autonomy imply the ability/need to make choices, expose oneself to inevitable risks and take responsibility for one's successes and failures. The neoliberal antidote to the inevitable anxiety that accompanies greater freedom is keeping oneself busy, being active, seizing the moment and not waiting for help from others.

Uncertainty is also an incentive to seek greater knowledge and a stimulus of critical thinking. The awareness of not knowing, or that what we know is partial, incomplete, destined to be superseded by new knowledge, and awareness of not being able to plan the future without margins of error, stimulate a critical distancing from the taken-for-granted. Uncertainty induces people to give importance to agency and to recognize that social reality is not given in a definitive, universal and immutable way by some transcendental force, but instead depends on human actions and choices. It helps people to recognize that the reality in which they live could be otherwise. It promotes new forms of relationship, political participation and cooperation.

To respond to complex uncertainties, citizens cannot just be customers of standardised insurance products, nor passive citizens of supposedly benevolent technological states – they must take on new roles, as part of collectivities that are based on the principle of solidarity, where care and collaboration are central.

(Scoones and Stirling, 2020: 19)

Furthermore, uncertainty stimulates the sense of identity, the idea that there is continuity and stability beyond constant change and the multiplicity of alternative options that are always possible. 'It is in the productive, ever-changing tension between the two poles of a dynamic spectrum, of being in control and exposed to uncertainty, that personal and collective identities are formed by seeking continuity in defiance of what might happen next' (Nowotny, 2016: 1).

The positive assessment of uncertainty promoted by neoliberal ideology transforms uncertainty itself into a value and stimulates a new opportunity-directed form of individuality (Shilling and Mellor, 2021). Knowing how to expose oneself to risk, avoiding negative effects, becomes a test of maturity, a necessary skill.

As Lyng's (1990) analysis of 'edgework' illustrates, engaging in high-risk leisure activities can be a way to assert and strengthen a sense of personal identity. Voluntary involvement in risky recreational activities (e.g., bungee-jumping, off-piste skiing, skydiving, wild water rafting and kite surfing) highlights that uncertainty is not always synonymous with anxiety and that people may be willing to voluntarily risk their health and well-being because they believe that embracing risk is a positive virtue. Voluntary exposure to risk – without suffering negative consequences – becomes a source of gratification and excitement, even though the people who engage in these activities devote significant effort to risk management to reducing the likelihood of dangerous outcomes. As Lyng (2008: 130) maintains,

in the risk society, indeterminacy and uncertainty are the overriding qualities of the dominant social reality and successfully negotiating the uncertainties of daily life becomes the key challenge for many social actors. Doing edgework in this context is not focused on transcending the dominant reality, when the reality of everyday life bears a fundamental resemblance to the reality found at the edge. Rather than representing a form of 'counter-agency' in late modernity, edgework must be seen as the purest expression of the agentic qualities demanded by the risk society.

Demonstrating that one is not afraid of risk – or, rather, exposing oneself to a controlled risk and emerging unscathed – strengthens the sense of self. It makes one feel 'fit', invincible and omnipotent, a person of worth. Exposing oneself voluntarily and playfully to controlled risk is an apotropaic rite; it removes the fear of uncertainty as well as constituting a sort of training for the tasks required by the neoliberal society.

From governing uncertainty to governing through uncertainty

Beck (1992) maintained that being exposed to risk is an unavoidable feature of contemporary experience. He argued that in the risk society, social classes and other classic forms of social stratification no longer obtain. Risks can affect different people in different ways, but no one is safe from them.

Sooner or later the risks also catch up with those who produce or profit from them. Risks display a social *boomerang effect* in their diffusion: even the rich and powerful are not safe from them. The formerly 'latent side effects' strike back even at the centers of their production. The agents of modernization themselves are emphatically caught in the maelstrom of hazards that they unleash and profit from.

(Ibid.: 37)

This perspective ends up supporting the idea that the distribution of modern hazard is blind to inequalities, that risk and uncertainty are democratic, and that we are all at risk notwithstanding our social position, wealth, education, gender, ableness, ethnicity and power. However, we are not all at risk and certainly not to the same extent (Furedi, 2006: 65). Dangers, hazards and uncertainties do not constitute the same burden; nor do they have the same effects on all people. Being able to handle uncertainty requires resources and skills. Knowing how to deal with uncertainty often means having the possibility and material resources to wait for the best opportunity, not being pressured by the need to make an immediate choice. It also involves having the information necessary to weigh the pros and cons of the uncertain situation and be able to make the best use of it.

Uncertainty not only has different effects on people in different social positions; it also manifests itself as inequality (Atkinson, 2007). Uncertainty is not democratic; it creates the condition in which the privileged experience enormous opportunities for enrichment, self-fulfilment and gratification, while the least advantaged are exposed to the negative side effects of uncertainty and risk, so that their impoverishment, their precariousness and the consequent damage increase (Curran, 2016). In many respects, we can say that one of the main cleavages in current Western societies is the different exposure to uncertainty and (negative) risks. The intersection among the categories that define the social distribution of privileges and oppression – class, gender, education, ethnicity, ‘race’, ability, age, etc. – defines specific social positions that make uncertainty and the ability to cope with it a significant source of differentiation (Giritli Nygren et al., 2020).

The intersectional perspective seems ‘particularly helpful in detailing how conceptualizations of risk are shaped simultaneously by race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and other social divisions, and how risk-based policies and the governance of risk have varied and unequally affected, diverse populations’ (Olofsson et al., 2014: 419).

Reflecting on uncertainty as a form of unequal distribution of social burdens and privileges makes it possible to place the question of power at the centre of the analysis. It enables one to question who uses uncertainty, how, on what occasions and with what results. It highlights that the question of uncertainty in contemporary societies is not to be found (only) in the risk that technology and scientific knowledge will spin out of control, or in the impossibility of calculating risks and predicting their consequences. Rather, it resides in the use of the concepts of uncertainty, risk, crisis and emergency to legitimize control and disciplinary practices functional to the social order.

The entwining of uncertainty and power is the analytical focus of scholars who, assuming a poststructuralist stance and mainly influenced by Michel Foucault’s work, consider uncertainty to be a central aspect of current governmentality. The critique of neoliberal thought highlights how, in late modernity and in the new spirit of capitalism that characterizes it, uncertainty is positively evaluated as a potential resource if it is adequately controlled and managed. Neoliberal thinking and practices no longer aspire – as was the case in classical

modernity – to eliminate uncertainty. What they want and pursue is constant control over uncertainty, the possibility of distilling its advantageous and positive aspects without having to pay for the undesirable and negative consequences. They aspire to turn uncertainty into something that can be controlled and managed (Power, 2007; Samimian-Darash and Rabinow, 2015). In late modernity, characterized by the hegemony of neoliberal thought, uncertainty is organized (Power, 2007), made calculable. Commitment to the government of uncertainty becomes one of the sources of political action and its legitimacy. Governance of uncertainty becomes a necessary and positively assessed skill on both an individual and collective levels.

Specific governmentality is established which aims to manage uncertainty by regulating conduct. Following Foucault (2007: 389), governmentality is understood here as the ‘conduct of conduct’, that is, the ways in which the techniques of government are deployed to produce social order through the production of governable subjects (Dean, 1998, 2010). It focuses on the dispositives, discourses, techniques and power relations through which government is achieved; that is, how problems and subjects are conceived, what solutions to problems are invented, what ends are imagined as ideal outcomes, how reality is experienced and understood (O’Malley, 2008: 56).

The control of uncertainty becomes the ‘logic’ of the intervention on individuals and society that legitimizes and justifies government action and helps fabricate particular forms of identity, agency and expertise (Ewald, 1991: 201–202). As Foucault (2008: 65–70) observes, uncertainty, instability and ephemerality define the neoliberal world, and they represent the other side of free human existence. This tension is constitutive and cannot be completely overcome. It follows, however, that liberalism requires a security that it can never ensure: the search for security and the incitement to ‘live dangerously’ are the building blocks of liberal governmentality. Taking actions to control uncertainty becomes the main task of the state and the commitment of every single citizen. It is the claim that government action is endeavouring to control uncertainty that makes it justified, legitimate and widely accepted. Any agency that admits that it is unable to keep crucial uncertainties in check would lose legitimacy and authority (Scoones and Stirling, 2020). As an effective formula for controlling uncertainty, the neoliberal model promotes the extension of market logic to every aspect of public and private life. Competition, entrepreneurial spirit, individual initiative, self-directed action, cost and benefit calculation are presented as vital and constructive capacities of an autonomous and fully realized self.

The governmental logic oriented to the management of uncertainty has significant impacts on the social structure and social relations of contemporary societies. It acts both at the level of control of conduct and at the level of political management of the society.

In the former case, neoliberal governmentality emphasizes the need to learn to live with uncertainty and to exploit the possibilities that it makes available. This happens not by forcibly imposing models of behaviour, but by educating,

convincing, seducing people to acquire soft skills that help them to live with uncertainty without being subject to anxiety and frustration. By instructing individuals to live in uncertainty, drawing the maximum possible benefits from it, neoliberal governmentality constitutes a form of subjectification: it constructs a form of identification and a form of discipline at the same time. It disciplines people to exercise a well-regulated autonomy (Kelly, 2013).

The forms of institutionalized individualism promoted by neoliberal logic have the entrepreneurial self as their model. The entrepreneurial self is constantly required to demonstrate creativity, innovation and the willingness to take risks. 'The call to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life produces a model for people to understand what they are and what they ought to be, and it tells them how to work on the self in order to become what they ought to be' (Bröckling, 2016: xiii).

The logic of the entrepreneurial self induces individuals to constantly feel themselves 'on the edge of change', trying to adapt to, but also coping with, the feeling that there is about to be a breakthrough, an advancement, a new opening of possibilities (Christiaens, 2019). It invites people to live in the present, to get busy, ready to seize opportunities. The experience of living in a rapidly changing world, where nothing can be considered certain, stable and secure, defines a specific form of agency: reflective, entrepreneurial, quick, tactical, creative, self-centred, malleable and adaptable to contexts. The neoliberal person, disciplined in dealing with uncertainty, is significantly different from the self-confident, rational and calculating subject of classical modernity and rational choice. S/he is a subject capable of acting with speed and elasticity in a situation of constant uncertainty, a subject who takes risks, who acts before s/he has all the useful information for a rational choice (now impracticable); a subject who calculates not the best, the perfect outcome, but the least bad one.

The tendency to develop an entrepreneurial self is constantly balanced by concerns about control over uncertainty. A constant tension emerges between the injunction to be, on the one hand, active, creative, open to change and moderately risk-taking, and on the other hand, to prevent, anticipate and not to expose oneself to unnecessary risks (smoking, eating fat, gambling, being sedentary, engaging in behaviour that increases the risk of catching an infectious disease, etc.). O'Malley (2000: 461) observes that uncertainty constitutes a

characteristic modality of liberal governance that relies both on a creative constitution of the future with respect to positive and enterprising dispositions of risk-taking and on a corresponding stance of reasonable foresight of everyday prudence (distinct from both statistical and expert-based calculation) with respect to potential harms.

Uncertainty, the logic of the entrepreneurial self suggests, should not be managed through perfect rational calculation. Instead, it requires specific forms of control and invites liberal subjects to exercise the most contextual and common-sensical skills of reasonable foresight and prudence (Best, 2008).

Being an entrepreneur of oneself means taking responsibility for one's actions and choices. Those who fall victim to the negative effects of uncertainty can only blame themselves: they have not been sufficiently skilled, provident, prepared and cunning. The negative effects of uncertainty are not attributed to the social structure; nor do they lead to a commitment to social change.

Instead, desires for change are directed away from the socio-political sphere and turned inwards. Social critique is transformed into self-critique, resulting in a prevalence of self-doubt and anxiety. Competition too seems to be self-directed, suggesting that entrepreneurial subjects compete with the self, and not just with others.

(Scharff, 2016: 108)

At the level of political management of society, neoliberal governmentality is manifest mainly in the constant construction of situations of crisis and exception (Agamben, 2005) in which the threat of uncertainty is amplified in order to implement and legitimize political actions aimed at its elimination or its control. Producing normality through the constant production of exceptions, of intrinsically unstable, precarious and uncertain situations, constitutes one of the most effective aspects of contemporary power. Political élites are interested in creating security and protection from uncertainty as a problem. By means of the so-called 'grammar of security' (Buzan et al., 1998) any social issue can be addressed as a 'problem' that requires exceptional measures (such as immigration or terrorism). 'This then allows for exceptional measures through a centralized authority (usually the government). Securitization, here, means calling something a security problem, and, through this, triggering the political measures to deal with it' (Banai and Kreide, 2017: 906).

Insecurity allows politicians to present themselves as necessary, as useful saviours of the community. It fosters 'rallying around the flag', strengthening people's feeling that they share a common destiny threatened by uncertainty. This, in turn, fosters a culture of blame: the objectification of insecurity in the form of otherness, of an external entity that would be the cause of the threatening and negative aspects of uncertainty. The process of 'othering' is favoured by the constant production of situations of crisis and exception: it is a way to create an (ephemeral) safety zone for some by producing others as threats, differentiating between individuals 'at risk', who should be protected, and individuals who are 'a risk' and should be controlled, expelled or eliminated. As Agamben (2005) observes, the state of exception is a political way to introduce uncertainty. It consists in the suspension of the normal, the usual, the expected, the taken-for-granted, what people are normally endowed with, and the introduction of the aleatory, of new rules and laws.

In a context of uncertainty, all manner of interventions, which at other times or in other circumstances might be considered intrusive, oppressive,

discriminatory or paternalistic, can be justified as being for the protection of the ‘at risk’ individual and ultimately of benefit to ‘society’ as a whole.

(Petersen, 1996: 56)

The state of exception is a way to produce ‘worthless Others’, who can be treated unequally, who do not have the same rights as Us. It is a way to produce a legally (justifiable), unnameable and unclassifiable – that is, uncertain, unknowable – being. Identifying an Other responsible for uncertainty, on the one hand, reduces anxiety by unloading frustrations onto an external enemy, and on the other, allows those who hold political power to present themselves as those who, by fighting the threat of the Other, are champions of the defence of the community. In new forms, but according to the classical modern and colonial logic, neoliberal governmentality tries to create the feeling of being able to control the negative aspects of insecurity by increasing insecurity for others (Agamben, 1998).

The constant endeavour to control the negative effects of uncertainty leads to the constant development of prevention and control techniques. Measurement, observation, surveillance, profiling, registration, data and information collection are some of the main governmental technologies of ‘normalization’ and control of conduct. As Castel (1991: 288) observes, the technologies implemented for the control of uncertainty and the prevention of the resulting risks promote a new mode of surveillance: that of systematic pre-detection. These preventive policies dissolve the notion of a subject or a concrete individual and replace it with a combination of factors assembled in a form deemed significant through the application of complex and anonymous algorithms. Through the construction of categories derived from algorithms – from a huge series of data produced in the most diverse contexts – surveillance can be practiced without any contact with, or even any immediate representation of, the subject under scrutiny. What the new preventive policies primarily address is no longer individuals but factors, statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements.

Conclusion

Western modernity has among its constitutive features the continuous questioning of what is constituted, the continuous change and the increase of scientific and technological knowledge. As a side effect, it produces uncertainty. The myth of the possibility of controlling uncertainty, if not of completely eliminating it, was possible in the period of classical modernity thanks to the possibility, through violence and force, to export it ‘outside’ and impose it on ‘Others’.

In the middle of the last century, a series of changes – the intensification of globalization processes, the crisis of the Fordist model of production, the evidence of the risks inherent in scientific progress and industrial production, anti-colonial struggles and new protests by social movements, awareness of environmental damage and the negative imprint of human activity on the fate of the planet – challenged this myth, and uncertainty became one of the main stakes of political

action. The distribution of risks became as central as the distribution of material resources, information and knowledge. The management of uncertainty – also through its constant production – became one of the tools of political power, of the production of order, of the formation of subjectivities.

In this way, uncertainty has become a constitutive and structural feature of Western neoliberal societies.

As an important theoretical notion with which to understand current social dynamics, it is important to conceive uncertainty as closely connected with complexity and power.

Recognizing the links with complexity means considering uncertainty as an aspect of the ineluctable contingency that constitutes the framework for human action; not as something to ‘eliminate’ or ‘keep under control’, but rather as an aspect of the relationship that human beings have with their experience and their contexts of action. Recognizing uncertainty means recognizing the complexity and irreducibility of reality and social experience to linear models. From this perspective – and differently from the classical modern ideal – uncertainty should not be understood as a problematic situation that must be resolved, a lack of certainty, order or understanding. Rather, it constitutes the horizon within which human action takes place, the inevitable immanent, situated, indicative character of action and social existence.

Recognizing the links with power means recognizing the socially constructed nature of uncertainty. It means recognizing that, in contemporary Western society, uncertainty has become a political tool that legitimizes specific forms of order, governmentality and control and produces specific identities – the entrepreneurial self and the threatening Other. The efficacy of this political tool makes its proliferation ubiquitous. The necessity to constantly produce discourse on emergency and uncertainty produces a reality of emergency and uncertainty. This creates a context in which regardless of what one does, regardless of one’s actions, abilities and intentions, one is not sure of the result, one is not sure of the outcome of one’s choices, one has the feeling of always being on the brink of a worse future, exposed to possible disillusionment. Furthermore, uncertainty becomes a way to produce new hierarchies, to transform social uncertainty into individual uncertainty, especially for those who are constructed as marginal, alien, precarious and risky.

Today, not uncertainty *of* (something), but uncertainty *per se* has become *the* problem. Uncertainty is not connected with clear, stable, objective issues; it migrates from one issue to another and becomes a general (abstract) condition, a form of experience, the context in which we (make sense of the situation in which we) live.

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