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Relational reflexivity: a processual approach

Abstract: Reflexivity has become an indispensable concept in the social science toolbox. Also thanks to its polysemy, the concept is helpful for exploring and analysing both epistemological and socio-political issues. The theoretical sociological development of the idea has often fluctuated between two poles. On the one hand, a notion of reflexivity as an individual capacity (often the capacity of the researcher) and linked to the concepts of awareness and agency. On the other, a notion of it as a structural dimension of the "second modernity". The article explores the advantages of conceiving reflexivity as processual and relational, neither the result of individual will or personal skills nor of external constraints of society. The article supports the usefulness of a dialogic conception of reflexivity which is characterized by its constant elaboration in interaction with others and with contexts.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Agency, Reflexive modernization

1. Reflexivity: a polysemic term

Questioning the relationships between individual action and reality and the connections among perception, personal knowledge, and the constitutive characteristic of the external world is perhaps an essential characteristic of the human being, and it has always been an issue of substantial and problematic importance. The verb *to reflect* denotes this particular human action. However, it does so generically, and not without confusion. In fact, in everyday language, "reflection" has at least three distinct planes of meaning – all relevant to this discussion, but which should be kept separate on the analytical level. In the first place, it denotes the act of questioning the status of reality and one's own actions. It takes on the meaning of meditation, examination, and evaluation; it refers to the cognitive ability to be aware of one's own performative capacity and the linkage among desires, action, and results. Secondly, it expresses an assessment of the nature of the relationship that is assumed to exist among desires, knowledge, action, and reality. In this case, the term can assume two different meanings: this relationship can be understood as an immediate, direct, and faithful correspondence, as when the term "to reflect" is used in the sense of "to mir-

ror" or "to manifest". But it can be presented in a more problematic, partial, evocative form: for instance, when the meaning of "letting it shine through" is highlighted, bringing to the fore the unavoidable difference between the object and its reflection.

The polysemy of the term "reflect" is echoed in the concept of reflexivity, which, in the social sciences, is used to explore and analyse both epistemological and socio-political issues. In the former case, reflexivity proves to be a concept useful for monitoring and evaluating biases that limit the validity of knowledge claims. In the latter case, reflexivity is used to refer to a more or less high degree of awareness that knowledge, discourses and practices co-produce the socio-political reality to which they refer [Alejandro 2021, 151].

The semantic plurality of the term and the different ways in which it is used highlight that any discussion of reflexivity inevitably refers to a complex field of related issues; a field that defines a space within which to give meaning to epistemological questions (how we come to know what we think we know), to questions of agency and structure (what role the social actor has in defining reality, how much action can be considered linked to the subjective will and how much to structural constraints), to identity issues (how I can recognise – re-know – myself in my thoughts and actions), to political issues (how the representation of reality and the practices of knowledge delimit the form, the consistency and the very experience we have of reality, defining hierarchies, privileges and exclusions).

Despite the difficulty of defining with precision the meaning and the field of reflexivity (or precisely because of this difficulty), the concept has become central in the social sciences on both the theoretical level and on the epistemological and methodological one.

In the former case, the development of the concept of reflexivity is linked to the superseding of systemic and structuralist paradigms, as well as to the importance given to action and agency. Reflexivity is used to depict social subjects as active producers of their world in constant interaction with each other and with their environment. The success of the concept is also linked to a reassessment of the sociology of action (Weber) and of subjectivity (Simmel) incorporated into the micro-sociological perspectives of the 1960s to 1980s: ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, critical anthropology and, more generally, the affirmation of a social constructionist perspective.

On the level of epistemological reflection and sociology of knowledge, the success of the concept can be traced back to the social criticism developed by the new social movements and, in particular, to the feminist movement that introduced specific attention to subjectivity, relationships and emotions. Starting from a critical posture oriented toward social transformation, these movements have criticized a detached social knowledge and a view "from above" and "from nowhere" [Haraway 1988], which claims to grasp the complexity and variability of the social while ignoring power relations, interests, and unconscious factors that orient and limit our ability to select reality. Reflexivity becomes a useful conceptual tool with which to point out the "situated gaze" inevitably involved in every possible interpretation of social reality and the need to criticize the implicit bases of knowledge that re-produce a specific vision and organization of social reality that favours the point of view of the powerful and the privileged.

The theoretical sociological elaboration of the concept of reflexivity has often fluctuated between a notion of reflexivity as an individual capacity, connected with awareness and agency [Archer 2010], and a notion of it as a structural dimension of the societies of the second modernity [Beck 1992; Giddens 1990]. Much effort has been made to find a point of convergence between the two perspectives so that they are not considered as mutually exclusive [Akram and Hogan 2015; Caetano 2019; Lumsden 2019]. Often, however, these interpretations do not provide a clear and solid explanation of the social foundations of reflexivity. They locate the origins of reflexivity either in the minds of the subjects – albeit stimulated by social experience – making it an individual gift, or in the structural constructions of late modern society – which favours the development of a certain type of subjectivity: reflective, autonomous, and entrepreneurial.

In this article, I explore the advantages of conceiving reflexivity as processual and relational. In the following part, I critically discuss the views of reflexivity as the result of an "internal conversation" or a generalized by-product of modernity. I then develop a relational and processual conception of reflexivity that highlights its recursive and practical nature. In the final part of the article, following Bakhtin, I propose a dialogical idea of reflexivity that highlights its character as (i) an ongoing construction in interaction with others and contexts, and (ii) a social construction grounded neither in the "inside" of individual consciousness

nor in the external constraints of society, but in the relational confrontation with others' perspectives and experiences.

In the discussion that follows, I privilege the conceptual dimension over the strictly historical one of the developments of the concept of reflexivity. The positions I present do not necessarily follow one another in time but constitute different directions of interpretation. It would be misleading to think of a linear evolution of the concept. Nor do I seek to develop an exhaustive exegesis of the texts of the authors cited. I recognize that some of them have much more articulated and refined positions than my reconstruction of the field, and the space allowed in an article can convey. What I seek to do is to map the space that the concept of reflexivity has come to occupy in sociological reflection and to highlight the necessity and usefulness of a processual and relational perspective that overcomes some of the limitations of a vision of reflexivity that is confined to explanations related, on the one hand, to agency or, on the other, to structural constraints.

2. Reflexivity as individual competence

The ability to reflect on oneself and one's own practices is essential to develop an awareness of the constructed and processual character of social reality and the knowledge that we acquire of it.

On the level of social theory, the idea that the foundation of reflexivity must be sought in the individual characteristics and in the development of the capacity for "inner dialogues" that make subjects aware of the context in which they act and of the relationship they establish with it has often led to an overlap between the concept of reflexivity and that of agency.

Margaret Archer conceives reflexivity as a precondition for agency. In her definition [Archer 2007, 4], reflexivity is "the regular exercise of mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa". Reflexivity is a property of the subject, part of human biological hardware and of how human beings come into contact with the world. Reflexivity mediates between agency and structural constraints: it is the way in which, through "internal conversation", individuals deliberate about their will, desires, and aspirations, tak-

ing into consideration the restrictions and enablement of the social context [Archer 2012]. Courses of action are grounded in the concerns and interests of individuals and are carried out through reflexive deliberations. Reflexive first-person awareness and a sense of self are indispensable in any society "because without [them], no rule, expectation, obligation and so forth could be incumbent upon anyone in particular" [ivi, 2]. Without reflexivity, there would be no culture and no society [*Ibidem*]. This idea has its roots in classic American pragmatism [Mead 1934], which sees in the capacity for inner dialogue the main factor in the creation of subjectivity and the possibility to take a detached and objectifying view of oneself. It is an ability that is the basis of autonomous action. To be reflexive is to recognise one's capacity to shape the social context in which one is to act; it implies the capacity to adopt a critical standpoint and take relationships, contexts, and circumstances into consideration rather than merely react to them. It concerns the capacity to reflect on actions; it involves thinking about what one does; and it requires the conscious effort to question personal attitudes, assumptions, values, and habitual actions in order to be aware of the complex ways in which one interacts with others and contexts and the effect that one's actions have on them. Reflexivity is contrasted with routines. The latter consist of mechanical and preconscious repetitions of activities, favouring an unconscious reproduction of the existing; the former consists of conscious deliberations, and it favours innovation, change and critical evaluation.

The idea of reflexivity as self-awareness and interior dialogue has been particularly fruitful in terms of methodological and epistemological reflection in the social sciences. It makes it possible to bring the process of doing an activity into the purview of that activity as a feature of it [Ashmore 2015]. It helps to reflect on what it means to do social research and on how the actions taken, the analytical categories that social researchers apply in their interpretations, the questions that drive their research, and their personal characteristics – age, gender, institutional location, belonging to recognizable social groups (ethnic, religious, political, cultural) – influence what they can observe and the kind of social knowledge they are capable of producing. This type of reflexivity has contributed greatly to enriching the methodology of the social sciences, discrediting the simplistic positivist idea that it was possible and sufficient to observe social processes in a detached and rational way, from above, to be able to grasp their "true" meaning.

Although at times it runs the risk of being exhausted in '*egology*' (a reflection by the subject on the subject; a folding of research on the observation of the researcher him/herself) [Wacquant 1992], a certain degree of self-reflection by the researcher contributes to placing him/her – with his/her characteristics, body, emotions, prejudices, likes and dislikes, and interests – in the research process, producing a constant reflection on what s/he does and what s/he is, and on the relationship that these characteristics have with the knowledge that is produced.

A conception of reflexivity as an individual characteristic based on the subjects' ability to carry out an inner dialogue that allows them to objectify themselves and to take a critical and detached stance on themselves and on the contexts in which they are to act has several limitations. The idea that reflexivity is the result of an individual act charges the subject with responsibility and makes reflexive capacity an element of possible moral evaluation. Reflexivity becomes a value, something that people, to be truly such, must be able to implement. There is thus a risk of making reflexivity a form of moral imperative; being reflexive becomes a personal duty, and not being reflexive becomes a fault, an individual shortcoming. The dimension of structural constraints, of social conditions that facilitate or inhibit reflexivity, takes a back seat, so to speak. It is contended that people can, with will-power, self-control, and rationality, overcome contextual and structural constraints and arrive at a detached view of themselves and their actions. Reflexivity is seen as "separate from and antithetical to the social construction of identity in the context of structural processes, ignoring existing evidence about the continued significance of wider structures such as class in shaping the forms of reflexivity available to modern subjects and promoting a disembodied and socially disembedded view of modern subjectivity" [Farrugia 2013, 284].

A step forward in connecting the capacity of individual introspection to social structure can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu [1990; 1991; 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992]. In his discussion of epistemic reflexivity as a process in which the positions of the observer are subjected to the same critical analysis to which the object of analysis was subjected, Bourdieu [2001] insists that it is necessary to go beyond a reflection on the individual characteristics of the knowledge producer to focus on the structural conditions and power relations that define the researcher's position in the field of research. Reflexivity, in

this case, entails a systemic exploration of the "unthought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought" [Bourdieu 1990, 178] while guiding the practical implementation of social research [Wacquant 1992, 33]. According to Bourdieu, reflexivity requires not so much an intellectual introspection as a permanent sociological analysis and control of the practice of research and production of knowledge. Reflexivity entails, in this case, a reflection on the social conditioning of speakers/researchers/writers, recognizing the influence that their social position has on what they produce as social knowledge. It implies recognizing the social foundation of the categories that are applied to social reality in order to analyse it; recognising that these categories have a situated socio-historical genesis: that is, they are inevitably coloured by the habitus – by the internalization of the structural conditions – of the researcher.

For Bourdieu, reflexivity (*epistemic reflexivity*) mainly concerns the sociologist whose work consists in reconstructing the field of conditioning that determines the behaviours and the structure of social reality [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992]. Reflexivity is a specific professional competence that ensures that the sociologist has privileged knowledge about the social world. For Bourdieu, in order to acquire objective (but not positivist and ahistorical) knowledge about the social, sociologists must "come back to themselves": that is, apply the critical tools of the social sciences to themselves and their work. This entails the ability on the part of social researchers to employ the research tools typical of the social sciences to objectify their own position in the field of research and their own research work [Bourdieu 2001]. The epistemic reflexivity proposed by Bourdieu consists in the practices through which social science, taking itself as an object, uses its own conceptual tools to understand and control itself. This type of reflexivity is a way to distinguish social research from the processes of production of social reality, of which it is a part, placing it on a different, more "objective" and "critical" level of reflection. Applying epistemic reflexivity means including in the analysis of the social sciences observations and considerations about the researcher, his/her theoretical models, training in the discipline, relationship with the object of the research, and position in the academic field. This type of epistemic reflexivity – which invites the researcher to conduct constant self-analysis of his/her practices and thoughts – as well as the more political reflexivity – which invites him/her to

take into account his/her social position and the power relations that structure the field of social knowledge – promote a constant process of reflection, comparison and verification of the purposes of research in order to learn how researchers learn and to use this knowledge to improve their practices and their knowledge [Morley 2015]. It is a process that promotes awareness of the researcher's characteristics and how these necessarily influence what s/he knows – allowing him/her to see and know some things and not others, favouring certain types of relationships with his/her research object and hindering others. Epistemic reflexivity is useful for gaining awareness of the situated and partial character of all social knowledge, which necessarily accounts for a specific and partial part of the complexity, ambivalence, and contingency of social processes. It also helps one to take a critical view, questioning the implicit assumptions that move research and the interpretation of situations, the categories of common sense, interests and power relations that orient the researcher and define his/her position within the field of research.

Although Bourdieu's epistemological reflexivity tends to draw an excessive distinction between the researcher – who must seek to establish an epistemologically detached relationship, aware of his/her own positioning in the academic field and critical of his/her own conceptual tools – and the persons observed – ordinary individuals, who apply, in the logic of practical reason, a constant objectification of their knowledge – it introduces important points that complicate the assumption that reflexivity is attributable to the individual capacity for reflection. Bourdieu insists that reflexivity should not be about the "I"; rather, it should be an interrogation of the analyst's membership of a field of knowledge [Sweet 2020, 926]. From this perspective, reflexivity does not presuppose a reflection by the subject of the subject but a reflection on the colocation of the subject in relation to the field of analysis and the social institutions that produce and legitimize knowledge and the ways in which these have effects on the type of knowledge that the researcher is able to produce. It also entails careful reflection on the recursive character of the knowledge produced: on the inevitable circularity and performativity of the construction of social knowledge – especially in the *doxa*, in the world of practical reason, in everyday life – which seems to describe social reality while it in fact constructs that reality and thus creates the conditions for its own verification as an objective reality.

3. The inevitability and banality of reflexivity

The idea that reflexivity should be understood as a recursive action rather than as personal reflection and interior dialogue finds its most radical formulation in the ethnomethodological perspective.

Ethnomethodology uses the term "reflexivity" to denote the "embodied" character of social practices: that is, the fact that "the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'account-able'" [Garfinkel 1967, 1]. The concept refers to that special characteristic of social actions for which, in order for a social action to be possible, recognizable as such and endowed with meaning, the conditions for its production must be presupposed. In its turn, such production contributes to the construction of a shared sense within which to place and recognize this action. Put otherwise: it indicates the necessary circularity that binds each action to its contexts, underlining that there is a full equivalence between describing and producing an action, between understanding and the expression of this understanding. To describe a situation is to construct it, and constructing a situation is possible only under a series of assumptions – which in most cases necessarily remain implicit – which make such a construction "orderly", understandable, and feasible. This means that, in order to be able to act practically, it is always necessary to "know" the situations in which one acts from the outset. In other words, it is not possible to act practically without taking for granted a body of shared practical knowledge and common sense that enables acting actors to recognize, demonstrate and make observable to each other the rational and orderly character of their practices. The reflexivity highlighted by ethnomethodology is "essential" because it is inevitable, constitutive of every practice and every explanation [Lynch 2000]. It is also "mundane" because it is a fundamental and essential part of what everyone knows or is presumed to know, and it is "devoid of interest" for those who are actively engaged in the action and the production of explanations because it is generally not considered necessary to question the taken-for-granted. Reflexivity in this case is completely different from the ability to reflect on one's own actions: those who act often do so without being aware of the reflective nature of their practices; nor are they interested in scrutinizing their actions and the prac-

tical contexts in which they are implemented. Every type of practice, description and interpretation – from that of people acting in their everyday lives to that of analysts or researchers interested in studying those particular practices – is necessarily and inevitably reflexive, recursively linked to worldly definitions, common sense and shared assumptions. This entails that it cannot be definitively explainable (*account-able*) outside the context in which it is produced.

Ethnomethodological suggestions foster distrust in the possibility of obtaining "objective" explanations and practices that are universally valid regardless of their context. They also foster scepticism about an alleged substantial difference in practices, methods and truth between the knowledge produced by common actors and by expert observers. The latter may have specific interests, i.e. they may be interested in detecting endogenous reflexivity (how common actors construct their reality through practices and explanations), but they cannot escape referential reflexivity (how observers construct their practices and their knowledge) [Pollner 1991]. Although the ethnomethodological point of view does not deny the cognitive importance of a capacity for reflection, even radical, which is able to analyse the practices of knowledge as embedded in processes, concepts and practices that are taken for granted and constitutive of the context within which they become explainable and plausible, it considers this same critical reflection as irremediably reflexive, that is, immersed in a context of presuppositions and practices from which it is impossible to escape and which cannot be described in an autonomous and exhaustive way. It can be usefully pointed out that a particular practice actually produces the objects that it deals with, but even this critical analysis cannot escape its reflexive character.

Ethnomethodology has had the merit of highlighting the iterative and procedural character of reflexivity. It is an "open" process. It is constantly possible to subject actions and interpretations to reflexive criticism, but this cannot be done in a solitary way. This is the second important contribution of ethnomethodology: subjecting the foundations of our actions and thoughts to reflective analysis requires some sort of "breach" of the taken-for-granted. Subjects immersed in their own thinking-as-usual are not able to conduct a reflexive analysis of their actions because the understanding of these actions is based on a series of assumptions that evade the actors' awareness.

4. The systemic and structural dimensions of reflexivity

The recursive character of reflexivity is at the heart of the reflection on late modern society (or second modernity, postmodernity, or, precisely, reflexive modernity), influenced in various ways by the ethnomethodological perspective. The idea developed, albeit with different emphases and nuances, by Giddens, Beck, Lash, Melucci, and Bauman (to cite only the most well-known authors) posits the constant scrutiny of knowledge and activities and the constant inclusion of the products of this knowledge and activity in subsequent courses of knowledge and action as the main characteristic of tardo-modern societies. In this case, reflexivity is not a feature of the observer, but a structural feature of the modern social system. The condition of contemporary modernity constitutes a radicalization of the processes underlying modern society. Following Weber, modernity can be characterized as a process of disenchantment with the traditional world, a constant application of rationality to areas previously governed by tradition, affection, and the *pianissimo* of personal relationships [Weber 1919]. Since the Second World War, modernization in Western societies has assumed a reflexive form [Beck 1992]: today, disenchantment (which in early modernity targeted class privileges and religious images of the world) turns its critical gaze to the ways in which science and technology construct their knowledge, subjecting to constant analysis the foundations of classical industrial society (the very idea of progress and development), the forms of family and working life, gender roles, rationality and coherence as values. In reflexive modernity, the sciences are confronted with their own products, their defects, and their side-effects. In late modernity, so the theory of reflective modernity argues, we are witnessing a de-monopolization of science's claims to knowledge and the simultaneous proliferation from below of "other" knowledge, which is widespread, rooted in practices and experience. The "objects" of scientific research also become its "subjects"; the recipients of knowledge become its active co-producers. The distinction between observer and observed becomes more nuanced and complex. It is not the observer who, thanks to his/her own skills and the privileged position from which s/he looks at the observed, monopolizes the understanding of reality. Rather, it is their relationship that constitutes both the object and the product of observation [Melucci 1996]. Reflexivity – the recursive return of knowledge and practices to themselves and the constant

incorporation of what is socially produced into future social products – is the organizational principle of late modernity. Reflexive modernity requires and produces processes of individualization [Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001] and the development of personal skills [Melucci, 1996]. These concepts underline that individuals are driven, by the very logic of modernization, to become entrepreneurs of themselves [Bröckling 2016; du Gay 1996], to become self-reflective, to constantly monitor their actions, to make choices, and to consider that their actions and destinies as consequences of their choices rather than of the structural forces that regulate power relations within society [Atkinson 2010].

On this view, reflexivity is not an intrinsic, "natural", and inevitable characteristic of the subject, but a systemic effect, a structural characteristic of contemporary societies: their specific *modus operandi*. The reflective individual is the result of the institutional organization of current societies. S/he is the final step of applying the logic of modernity to modern society; s/he is the result of the constant application of the critical gaze to what s/he does and the results s/he achieves. Reflexivity, in a reflexive modernity perspective, does not mean more individual awareness or a more conscious life. The notion does not refer to an increase of mastery and consciousness, but to a heightened awareness that complete control is impossible [Beck, Bonß and Lau 2003, 3]: reflexivity entails a growing awareness of the inevitability of uncertainty and the attitude to include it in individual and collective courses of action. Reflexive modernization has not to do with more knowledge; instead, it is characterised by "reflexive non-knowledge" [Beck 2009, 122]. Being reflective is imposed by the structural functioning of late-modern societies that need active subjects able to take decisions and make choices in order to function. The subjects end up being considered the mere results of structural injunctions, the outcomes of the institutional forms of discipline that lead to the construction of subjectivities functional to systemic structural needs. In order to function, tardo-modern societies need active subjects: those suited to meeting the needs of global, neo-liberal capitalism [Schirato and Webb, 2002]. In order to engage with the wider world and survive in it [Giddens 1994, 7], individuals must be creative, flexible, adaptable, and able to reflect on the possible result of their actions and choices because they bear sole responsibility for their own destinies [Bröcking 2016; Carbajo and Kelly 2023; Reckwitz 2020]. As Farrugia [2013, 284] observes,

"the reflexive modernization approach has no theory of the subject, meaning that it provides no account of the way in which subjectivity is related to the social, and no insight into the means by which reflexive practices may contribute to the ongoing production of different structural relationships".

Unlike Bourdieu, the idea of reflexivity developed in the perspective of reflexive modernization lacks indications on how the individual capacity to be active, make choices, and critically evaluate situations is connected to the constraints imposed by the different situations in which subjects find themselves acting and the differences among their social locations. In this way, no emphasis is placed on positionality and on how social positioning – the constraints and resources related to social class, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. – influence the ability/possibility to develop different degrees and different forms of reflexivity.

5. Beyond self-dialogue and institutional impositions

"Reflexivity" is a polysemic term, and this is one of the reasons for its usefulness. The various facets of the term highlight different aspects of the processes through which human beings act and give meaning to their reality.

The idea of reflexivity as the ability to subject one's own work and thought to critical and detached analysis through constant inner dialogue gives importance to agency and provides an image of social actors active in the construction of social reality and able to introduce change beyond routines, habits, and structural constraints. But it has to deal with Bourdieu's [1986] observations and feminist reflection [Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981] on the relevance of social positioning. Reflexivity cannot be understood solely as a personal achievement. It can be usefully conceived as the result of the constant interaction between the subject and the social conditions in which s/he finds him/herself acting. However, social conditions do not function as insuperable constraints, and it is useful to continue to conceive reflexivity as a way to overcome and transform existing reality. The theory of reflexive modernity has the advantage of highlighting the recursive character of reflexivity, placing the emphasis on the process of constant inclusion of social products in the facticity of reality. But, by positing

reflexivity as an institutional injunction, it risks conveying a passive image of social subjects. The latter would be forced by the logic and institutional dynamics of late modernity to be reflexive; that is, to be active, creative, capable of choice, entrepreneurs of themselves. But their capacity for action is confined within precise limits. They can, and are forced to, be reflexive and choose between uncertain options, accepting the possibility of unexpected effects and accepting the results of their choices, but they cannot actually produce major changes. They can choose among predefined options that they cannot change and that they did not help define. The possibility of defining which options are possible remains beyond the reflexive and acting capacity of the subjects. The ethnomethodological perspective introduces a further element of caution in conceiving reflexivity as a personal achievement. It points out that reflexivity cannot be understood as a form of "higher" understanding of oneself and of social reality; it does not lead to greater awareness because a person's ability to understand and account for the real is based on worldly, mundane reasons [Pollner, 1987], on a series of taken-for-granted assumptions that cannot be completely overcome, but revised and relocated within different taken-for-granted assumptions. As Melvin Pollner suggests, worldliness is a universal and inescapable condition that affects our presence in the world, and even people and research that reflexively examine the basis of our knowledge of social reality cannot overcome this condition. This implies that reflexivity cannot be evaluated on the basis of a unitary scale distinguishing between more or less high levels of individual reflexivity; it must always be placed in the contexts in which it is produced and manifests itself. Once again, the emphasis is on the situated and relational character of reflexivity, which is not in the heads of individuals but in social relations. The inner dialogue, however profound and attentive it may be, does not make it possible to overcome the taken-for-granted on which it is based. For this taken-for-granted to emerge, it is necessary – as stressed by ethnomethodology – that there be "breaching" events, unexpected facts that no longer allow thinking-as-usual. This cannot happen in the solitude of the inner dialogue; it can only do so in the relationship with others, with the unexpected outcome of one's actions. Reflexivity entails and requires some form of otherness, a confrontation with the unexpected. The knowledge and action favoured by reflexivity arise in the relationship that the subject has

with the contexts of action – with an "external" world made up of both living beings and material substances – and with the uncertainty that characterizes this relationship. The human capacity for reflection is relational, and human "understanding is to utterance as one line of dialogue is to the next" [Voloshinov 1973, 102]. The sense of self, the capacity for agency, and the stimulus for inner reflection arise from the relationship with the "external" world; a world that has its own consistency and has an unexpected and unpredictable ability to respond and react to (reflect) our actions and our will. The unexpected response of the context to our actions and our interpretations stimulates/produces reflexivity and knowledge that are always the result of a relationship, a dialogue [Bakhtin 1982; Todorov 1981], an interrogation, or an unexpected question. Taking a relational perspective means recognizing that the term "reflexive" applies not to the subject but to the relationships that the subject has with his/her own contexts of experience. Reflexivity is therefore not completely exhausted either in the capacity for introspection or in the capacity to make one's own position explicit. Rather, it is the outcome of a relationship that temporarily breaks the flow of worldly reason and confronts a possible different way of doing or thinking that requires attention and evaluation. A relational perspective also leads to considering reflexivity as an open process. It encourages a constant revision of the assumptions that underpin people's actions and their interpretations of reality. It is how personal experience, understanding of the world, and the ways of relating to it are continually adapted to the unpredictability of contexts, to the "facticity" of reality and to the multiplicity of forms of interpretation and experience of reality. Hence, reflexivity is deeply and inevitably social.

6. Towards a processual and relational reflexivity

Reflexivity has become a concept indispensable for understanding and accounting for the social processes of producing knowledge about the social. The emphasis on the processes of self-reflection linked to the capacity for inner dialogue makes it possible to highlight the human capacity to go beyond routines and to introduce constant change. It directs attention to how personal characteristics, social posi-

tion, interests, and passions affect people's relationship with reality and how they understand and explain it. The emphasis on the structural dimension highlights how reflexivity is connected to specific ways of how institutions think [Douglas 1986]. It underscores that the possibility of individual thinking is determined by pre-existing institutionalized common knowledge. Rather than linking reflexivity solely to individual capacities for thought and action – to the introspection that precedes or accompanies action – it emphasizes the significance of recursion and iteration. From this perspective, an act is reflexive when the act is itself a factor that may materially alter its outcomes. The emphasis is on the constant inclusion of the processes of social creation in the facticity of reality rather than on the capacity for introspection and evaluation of how feelings, motives and personal assumptions influence the mode of acting and thinking.

Despite the importance of these theories, they fail to explain how personal reflective analysis skills and institutional injunctions effectively link in creating concrete opportunities for the development of a reflexivity that is not purely creative or reactive but allows for change and detachment from the taken-for-granted. This shortcoming can be, at least in part, remedied by adopting a dialogic and constructionist approach that views reflexivity as a social process. It is a matter of highlighting that all knowledge of social reality has an iterative, recursive and relational character, and that it is precisely in this circularity that its ability to give meaning consists of. It may be possible to define processual and relational reflexivity as the capacity to plan, analyse, interpret, and implement actions deriving from some form of social knowledge about the context of action and stimulated by the distance between the habitual and mundane flow of experience and some form of resistance or dissonance with the context. It also implies that the results of the actions taken on these bases have the capacity to influence the action itself and its contexts, and that they are incorporated into the facticity of social reality in the subsequent interpretations of the context and in the actions that are undertaken in it.

Understood in this way, reflexivity is located neither within the subjects nor in the mere functioning of the institutions, but in the dialogic space created by the situated subjects that enter into a relationship. Following Bakhtin, we can look at reflexivity as the result of a dialogue understood as a concrete relationship with an "outsider" – made up of both other individuals and material agents – who "re-

spond" to our actions, desires, and expectations. The reflexive capacity does not reside in the mind reflecting on itself. Instead, it is activated by a relationship with what is able to jeopardize thinking-as-usual, to impede the flow of doxa and give an unexpected and surprising new interpretation. Without otherness – understood as the experience of a possible difference between our will and our actions and the concrete result of our action – it is difficult for reflective thinking to develop. As Bakhtin [1984] argues, meaning lies in the response, in what comes next, in what others will say or do, and in how the context reacts, resists or changes. In this perspective, reflexivity is a dialogic process that is necessarily "open" and relational. It cannot be fully controlled by the subject because it depends on what is not in the subject's full control; it is activated by surprise, by the experience of a stumbling block, of a different, alternative, and unthinkable mode of thinking or doing. Individuals can never fully see themselves; the other is necessary to complete – if only temporarily – the perception of oneself, which the individual him/herself can only partially accomplish [Bakhtin 1982; Todorov 1981]. The relational dimension of reflexivity is also supported by the ethnomethodological observation of the impossibility of escaping from the spiral of assumptions necessary to make every act accountable. The impossibility of avoiding taken-for-granted assumptions implies the impossibility of "getting out" of one's own vision of the world; the impossibility of critically detaching oneself from the implicit assumptions that make every action and interpretation possible. Also in this case, reflexivity arises from a "break", from an impediment to acting-as-usual. This is a relational perspective which is further strengthened by Bourdieu's observations on symbolic violence [2001], i.e., the acceptance of that set of fundamental, pre-reflective assumptions that social actors bring into play simply by taking the world as obvious, and finding it to be natural as it is because they apply cognitive structures derived from the structures of that same world to it. In this way, the naivety of believing that one can overcome the presuppositions of the doxa with simple personal reflection is emphasized. Furthermore, Bourdieu's perspective highlights the diversity of the weight of symbolic violence on the basis of social position. This helps to see reflexivity as a process which is not equally distributed, and which is not produced equally. The dialogue that produces reflexivity is not necessarily a dialogue between equals; nor do setbacks, resistances and "breaks" have the same effects on people who have different social positions.

Adopting the perspective of processual and relational reflexivity entails recognizing that social knowledge – as well as the ability to act that derives from it – is an open process. Rather than the acquisition of universal knowledge capable of deterministic explanations, social knowledge allows for different local interpretations, which are more or less suitable for accounting for the questions that have generated them. Such interpretations are the result of active selections that highlight some elements and hide others. This brings to the fore the situated character of knowledge about the social, that is, the fact that the position from which the observer looks, his/her social characteristics, power, expectations, interests, and sensitivity define the type of dialogue that can be established and have an effect on the definition of the reality that s/he intends to observe or interpret. The perspective of processual and relational reflexivity invites us – in line with feminist theory [Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Sweet, 2020] – to consider the different positions not as equivalent, but as marked by asymmetries of power and disparity of resources, and structurally better equipped to see some aspects and to ignore others. Reflexivity thus appears to be generated in a conflictual relational context in which the elements subjected to reflexive scrutiny are always part of the implicit assumptions, the result of agreements, clashes and mediations between different positions and interests. The reflexive process implies a "break" with the doxa that is generated mainly in a dialogue in which the positions and interests are different. The reflexive process is activated mainly when one is called to question one's knowledge, when one is questioned and pushed to provide good reasons for one's own interpretations and actions. This entails recognizing the social, public character of reflexivity. The opening and maintenance of a dialogic space that allows a processual and relational reflexivity can hardly be guaranteed by the simple will of the individual subject. Rather, it is a question of favouring collective conditions that allow a continuous confrontation of the production of social knowledge.

Relational and processual reflexivity – understood as the ability to base one's action on taking a critical distance from one's constructions and on the awareness of the constructed character of social knowledge – is not a trait "intrinsic" to human cognitive abilities; nor can it be activated simply on the basis of individual will or self-analysis. Relational and processual reflexivity is a socio-historical product. It is not a necessity, and it does not arise spontaneously. It is a social

product favoured by open social contexts which generate dialogue and comparison between different perspectives and experiences. Encouraging this type of reflexivity implies building multicultural, multidisciplinary, and multi-vocal social contexts in which there is space to experience different perspectives, thoughts not even imagined before, and unforeseen actions. The confrontation with otherness allows the opening of spaces of criticism and interpellation that oppose the stabilization of the doxa, the formation of thoughts, habits, actions and relationships that assume the guise of normality and can exercise their symbolic violence by reducing the possibilities of resistance. The ability to construct social contexts favourable to the development of relational and processual reflexivity is not concerned with achieving "better" or "more scientific" knowledge of social reality. Rather, it is a matter of helping to create a specific form of society that maintains fluidity in the process of reviewing the knowledge that it produces, and in the effects of the actions generated by that knowledge. A society that generates opportunities for the development of a reflexive awareness of the limits of social knowledge, in order to ensure that the implicit assumptions of every action and interpretation do not become undisputed elements of the doxa. When this happens, when the possibilities of relational and processual reflexivity are reduced, it is difficult to think otherwise. It then becomes difficult to remain an active subject, a conscious builder of social reality and take charge of the consequences of one's constructions, and therefore at risk of remaining subject to worldly reason.

7. Conclusion

Reflexivity is an indispensable concept in the social science toolbox with which to understand contemporary societies. The polysemy of the term makes it useful for understanding different aspects of the complexity of the social. The focus on the capacity for self-reflection enriches methodological reflection and highlights the human capacity to act beyond routines and habits. The underlining of the recursive character, incorporated in institutional practices, which embeds social products in the facticity of reality by influencing future productions, gives an account of the historicity of reflexivity by placing it in specific social contexts.

It makes us cautious in believing that we can overcome, by simple reflection or simple individual will-power, bonds that are collective and whose change requires collective action. The proposed conception of reflexivity that highlights its processual and relational character intends to enrich the semantic and heuristic space of reflexivity without denying the importance of different perspectives. The central feature of relational and processual reflexivity consists in focusing attention on the conditions necessary for the development of a certain degree of critical reflection on one's own interpretations and actions, emphasizing the importance of the relational and dialogic dimension that derives from a comparison with other interpretations and actions that present themselves as a "rupture", an unexpected fact, an unexpected event that forces us to rethink our assumptions. Reflexivity is thus conceived as a relational fact: it does not reside in the heads of individuals; it does not develop as a virtue but is the result of specific social relations capable of questioning, interpellation, calling to give reasons of one's actions and thoughts. Dialogic relationships are not symmetrical, and they make reflexivity a potential instrument for social differentiation and for the creation of symbolic violence. Assuming the perspective of relational and processual reflexivity entails opening a space for reflection on the social conditions that make reflexivity possible – that is, able to create a critical distance from one's own assumptions. As evidenced by ethnomethodology – but even earlier by Marx and Freud – it is not possible to escape one's worldly sense with a simple act of will or introspection. Reflexivity requires a dialogue with otherness, confrontation, conflict, a break with thinking and acting as usual. This is favoured by a social context that provides spaces for experiencing surprise, confrontation with others, being asked to provide good reasons for one's actions and assumptions. Spaces that ensure the possibility of dialogue even for the faintest voices; spaces that recognize and contain asymmetries of power; spaces that allow the expression of dissent and admit a wide range of languages and options. This is not because in this way we necessarily achieve a more just society or greater knowledge of the social but, more humbly, because we can recognize the partiality and historicity of our assumptions on the social, leaving open the possibility for unexpected actions and thoughts, in order not to remain subject to parochial assumptions that present themselves as indisputable, universal, and eternal.

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