

Individuation and the work of individuals

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Abstract

This article starts by recognizing the growing importance of the conception of the Individual in order to understand contemporary societies, while it focuses on certain impasses arising when socialization and subjectivation strategies are favoured to approach this subject matter. After formulating some criticism to both of these strategies, the article presents and develops the ways in which individuation allows explaining, at the scale of the individual, the main trials in a specific society, and it analyzes how individuals are able to build themselves as subjects within this framework.

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The thesis that the individual is a relevant path to understand contemporary societies has acquired growing importance in the social sciences (Martuccelli, Singly, 2009). The current centrality of the individual in sociology originated in the crisis of the idea of society, and it is a testimony of a deep transformation of our sensitivity – specifically, the fact that the individual is the threshold of our social perception. It is in reference to the experiences of the individual that society may acquire meaning. The central core of this process can be expressed simply. In the same way that, in the past, the understanding of social life was organized from the notions of civilization, history, society, nation, state or class, it now pertains to the individual to occupy this central place of analytical conception. In this context, sociology's main challenge is to explain societal main changes from an intelligence that places in its

horizon the individual and his or her experiences. Nevertheless, even if the individual needs to be placed at the apex of the analysis, that does not imply at all a reduction of the sociological analysis at the level of the actor, but it appears instead as the consequence of a societal transformation that sets the individual at the base of the production of social life. In order to understand the new analytical role that is presently conferred to the individual, we will discuss socialization and subjectivation theories and see that they present an important set of insufficiencies that beckon us to follow another strategy that, stemming from the individuation process, may be able to describe the work of the individual in building himself or herself as a subject.

Let us clarify this point, as socialization has undoubtedly been given great preeminence in the sociology of education. Socialization is not the only way in which the formation of the individuals can be conceived. Along with socialization, at least two other great strategies can be differentiated: subjectivation and individuation. Schematically, socialization studies the social and psychological making of the individual, while subjectivation considers, within sociology, the making of the subject as the result of social and political emancipation. Individuation is interested, from a social and historical perspective, in the type of individual structurally formed in a society (Martuccelli, 2007). In this article we shall defend the thesis that, in order to extract all the promises contained in a sociology of the individual, it is essential to favour individuation as the main strategy to reestablish a macrosociology.

I. Social character, socialization and the theory of society

For a long time, one of the great merits of sociology was its capacity to interpret an important number of diverse social conducts and situations with the aid of almost a single model. In effect, the true disciplinary unity of sociology, beyond schools and theories, ultimately came from this common search, from the project to understand personal experiences based on organized systems of social relations.

1. A classic model

No other model summarized this project better than the notion of social character (Martuccelli, 2002). The social character does not only designate the engagement of an individual in social situations, but to a much deeper level it refers to the will to

make his or her actions and experiences intangible, as a function of his or her social position, in the form of statistical correlations or by means of an ethnographic description of ways of life. In both cases socialization was given an important role, and such perspective defined for a long time the actual sociological grammar of the individual. Each individual occupies a position, which makes the individual both unique and typical of the different social layers. The individual is submerged in social spaces that generate conducts and experiences through a set of social forces (with little regard to the notion used to describe this process, whether system, field or configuration) (Parsons, 1951, 1964; Bourdieu, 1979; Elias, 1990). In short, sociology's most venerable vocation lies in the tireless effort to turn the position occupied by an actor into the main explanatory factor of his or her conducts.

This articulation between social position and actor type, thanks to the socialization theory, was so successful that it centered for decades around an idea of society conceived as an articulation of different levels of social reality, to the extent that actor and system actually seemed to fuse, like two sides of a same coin. The triumph of the idea of society that resulted from its functional articulation between systems and fields –or from the ultimate determination of culture by infrastructure– and the attached notion of social character did not mean at all the suppression of the individual, but the hegemonic imposition of a single perspective. It was around this pair that sociology's analytical core was forged.

2. The crisis of the model

This intellectual project became progressively in crisis throughout decades. The model appeared less and less suitable as the notion of an integrated society fell apart, loosely replaced by the representation of contemporary society –under varying names such as post-industrial, radical modernity, second modernity, post-modernity, hyper-modernity– marked by uncertainty and contingency.

The present situation is characterized by the growing crisis of the idea of the social character in the precise sense of the term, i.e. the somewhat narrow homology among a set of structural processes, a collective path (classist, generic or generational) and a personal experience. Although many sociologists are still working implicitly within the framework of this model, this elegant taxonomy of characters is progressively revealing a growing number of anomalies and gaps. An ever growing

number of individuals are becoming singular, and this background movement becomes independent from social positions, cutting across them and producing an unexpected array of actors that conceive and conduct themselves as being “more” and “other” than what their social position supposedly dictates. Individuals rebel against sociological boxes, as shown –even involuntarily– by the study of one of its foremost representatives (Bourdieu, 1993). The corruption of the general taxonomy is manifestly a matter of degrees and never a matter of “all or nothing”. However, the inflection is strong enough as to prompt us to question the will to understand individuals, if not exclusively at least for the most part, from a strategy that grants a predominant interpretative role to a set of social positions –at the core of a particular conception of social order and society.

Let us consider a simple illustration. Whereas sociology had long considered that culture ensured the correspondence between society and personality (whether for the interiorization of norms or for the incorporation of habits), thanks to socialization the function of culture has become progressively more ambivalent. This confirmation is not a novelty, but in the past most sociologists would only interpret deviations as marginal anomalies. For sociology’s mainstream, as manifestly embodied by Durkheim, culture ensured, by means of a socialization process, the agreement between personal expectations and objective possibilities. The process of individual formation, thanks to the socialization operator, would lead –except in rare cases– to the individual’s progressive adjustment to society. Nowadays, as opposed to what the classic school of thought held, culture appears as a machine that produces an incredible inflation of individual expectations. The reason for this is not found, as some have stated, in modernism (Bell, 1982), but it is a somewhat direct consequence of the effect of the market on social life. The market creates a set of ever growing expectations, generating a structural mismatch between our personal aspirations and our goal opportunities.

This problem is obviously not new. This mismatch was called ‘the anomie’ –the ‘ailment of infinity’– by Durkheim (1995), that is, the fact that the actors structurally have longings that society is unable to satisfy. But that which terrified Durkheim and his contemporaries has become a fundamental element in our reality. Actors have expectations that structurally exceed their realization possibilities, as Pierre Bourdieu (1987) recognized in his last last great theoretical book. Culture creates

desires that the individuals perceive as expectations, causing a social distance and a general frustration, as their desires cannot be satisfied by their social situations. Culture in modern times is no longer *just* an integration factor between the individual and society; it is *also* an active fission factor, increasingly frequent, between one and the other.

The importance of this process is such that the need for new analytical distinctions becomes manifest in specialized literature. Evidently, individuals are still being socialized through cultural factors that shape their personality, but this socialization operates in a social context in which culture plays an ever growing ambivalent role. Culture is no longer the guarantee of a long-lasting agreement between actor and society, as it was in culturally closed or isolated societies, but it appears instead as a permanent agent of differentiation.

There is no clearer evidence of this inflexion than the progressive –and often surreptitious– change of the analytical role given to socialization. Through different stages not only is the idea of the existence of a plurality of cultures at the core of a single society acknowledged, but more importantly, due to the divergence of cultural orientations socialization can no longer act as society's integrating pivot. A long series of interpretations appeared over the last few decades: individuals, depending on the groups they belong to, their subculture, generation or sex, do not interiorize the same cultural models; all individuals, on the other hand, are not correctly socialized; in a society there is a large number of possible conflicts of orientation between purposes and the legitimate means. In sum, socialization is no longer an exclusive integration principle, becoming a process that is subdued to social antagonism.

A detailed presentation of this intellectual history would be very lengthy, but we shall briefly evoke its analytical core: the growing exploration of socialization's plural and contradictory dimensions. In effect, whereas the acknowledgement of the diversity of subcultures did not truly question the single nature of the socialization process, this assumption has progressively been questioned. The true rupture was spurred by Berger and Luckmann (1966) with their well-known distinction between primary socialization (from early childhood) and the series of secondary socializations that all individuals undergo throughout their lives. Socialization is no longer a single process completed at the end of childhood, but an open and multiple reality instead. The time

variable, widely rejected or minimized in the previous view, acquires a decisive importance. Let us stress that it is this acknowledgement of socialization's diachronic dimension and of a highly differentiated society that supports conflictual conceptions of socialization, the studies on class neurosis (Gaulejac, 1987) or the recent inflections of dispositionalism arising in France, especially as a heterogeneous set of social habits with a strong interindividual variation (Kaufmann, 2001; Lahire, 1998). In an extremely simplified outline we can state that, in contrast with the canonical version of the social character, these sociological perspectives, especially when centered on the individual, cannot but confirm numerous 'anomalies' or 'dissonances'. Whether through strategies of statutory incongruities, normative ambivalences, contradiction among habits, it becomes more and more evident that, in a growing number of contexts, the individual no longer adjusts perfectly to a specific situation. And as the actor's main traits can no longer be attributed entirely to a social position that is conceived in a single and homogeneous manner, sociologists are forced to focus more on the individual.

Carried out in this manner, however, socialization studies undergo a substantial analytical variation. In the past, socialization was conceived as one of the main mechanisms for the integration of society (it was thanks to socialization that actor and position were matched). Nowadays, socialization appears as a formidable fission mechanism –each individual is the product of an ever more contingent and diverse series of socialization experiences. Facing this process, socialization readily appears to be a dead end path and, deep inside, terribly tautological. Is there any novelty in stating that a highly differentiated society is made up of plural individuals? But above all, what can such a strategy for an in-depth study on the individuals teach us about society?

II. Individuation primacy

The need to recognize the growing singularization of personal paths is progressively imposed. The fact that actors have access to diverse experiences that tend to make them singular, even when they occupy similar social positions, is more and more acknowledged. But in order to understand this transformation we must not turn socialization into the main vehicle of social theory. We need to focus on the individuation process instead, as it is only from the individuation process that the

individual forming process may become the true axis of sociological analysis.

The reason for the individual to acquire such a centrality lies in the fact that his or her forming process allows us to describe a new way in which society is formed. The true reason for the existence of this process is the entry into a new period of history and society. It is because of the crisis of the idea of society that it is necessary to explain social processes by looking for sociology's unity at its base, starting 'from the bottom', that is, from the individuals, aiming to show other dimensions behind the purpose of totalizing systemic conceptions. The challenge actually has a double dimension. On the one hand, against the supporters of the notion of social character, we must agree with current socialization and the ever greater need of a certain sociological perspective. But on the other hand, now against the supporters of a certain sociology of the individual, it is imperative to understand that the present situation cannot be interpreted exclusively from the inevitable plurality of individual dispositions, reducing sociology to the level of the sheer individual, or actually, to cultural transmission and incorporation processes.

The reasons stated above lead us to place the individuation strategy at the center of the study of the individual forming process, making it independent from works on socialization. In effect, in the light of the present changes, we need to be able to explain the individual forming processes on new bases. In this process, sociological adaptations of psychological categories, such as the use of pathologies of the soul to describe the present period (Lasch, 1999; Ehrenberg, 1998), the increase in reflexivity –actually, in instrumental cognitive competencies– (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1991) or the recent articulation between psychoanalysis and sociology (Žižek, 2001; Elliott, 2003) suffer from a common insufficiency. These versions do not quite manage to detach individuation from the socialization theory (Dubet, 1994).

This insufficiency is not new. The reasoning followed by most authors that opted for the individuation path was actually, deep inside, bicephalous. On the one hand, they managed to show the extent to which the individual cannot be dissociated from a set of structural processes that explain precisely his or her different historical profiles (urbanization, monetization...). On the other hand, whenever they left behind the macrosociological level and focused on the effective and more singularizing mechanisms that form actors individually, they would do so by making use of

socialization theories. From Simmel to Giddens, this was the true limit for individuation theories (Martuccelli, 1999). How can this link be established on new bases? As we shall propose, it can be established with a specific mechanism for the study of individuation, through the notion of trial, with a specific version of the work carried out by the individual to form into a subject.

1. The individuation process based on trials

Individuation is, therefore, a specific analytical perspective of study that inquires about the type of individual that is structurally formed by a society in a given historical period. But in order to describe this process we need to focus on a few great structural factors or, as we shall propose in this study, on a set of structural trials that all individuals are submitted to in a society, although from different positions. In this sense, trials are historical challenges, socially produced, culturally represented, unequally distributed, that individuals must face at the core of a structural process of individuation (Martuccelli, 2006).

The notion of trial proposes an articulation between societal processes and personal experiences, but the instances in which the socialization theory tries to establish necessary links (and at times even to infer microsociological conclusions from macrosociological considerations), the study of the individuation process based on trials aims to leave this interrelation always open, and hence problematic. As we shall see, this process bears decisive repercussions when describing each individual's singular process in becoming a subject.

Trials have four great analytical characteristics (Martuccelli, 2006; 2007). Firstly, the notion of trial is inseparable from a narrative dimension. It assumes the existence of a perception mechanism from which actors experience and understand their lives as submitted to a set of specific problems or challenges. Actors in these processes do not face 'one decisive moment' as in the heroic visions of antiquity, but they are forced to confront a countless number of experiences in which they are constantly tested. The description of trials implies, therefore, pulling from a specific narrative structure from which life is understood as a permanent sequence of trials. This narrative, following Simmel (1986) and Berman (2006), is peculiar to modernity and because of it life is lived as a permanent adventure.

Secondly, trials suppose a type of individual that is forced, due to structural reasons,

to face such challenges. This conception is open enough as to allow operationalizations from different conceptualizations of the individual, even though attention must be paid in all of them to what the individual perceives, not in order to allow access to the individual's subjectivity, but because this aspect, and its perception at an individual scale, explains a collective phenomenon from a different perspective. At any rate, social life is more and more marked by a series of challenges (school, work, relationships...) that constantly and structurally put individuals to test. These experiences are so difficult as to be perceived as intrinsically personal.

Thirdly, trials are linked to evaluation processes. Trials imply the existence of a system for selecting people which, without invalidating the weight of social positions and the differing opportunities associated to them, leaves the final result of the process open. This way, the notion of trial restores contingency to the people-selecting process, avoiding excessive emphasis on the way in which actors overcome or fail such challenges (as done in resilience studies). Selective trials are of a different nature. Some of them are strongly formalized (regarding school or work); others not to a great extent (urban or family related), while others may even bear no formality (existential or intersubjective relations). But in each and every one of them actors may evaluate themselves as 'passing' or failing, as succeeding or not. Trials would thus explain the differential game linked to the different social characteristics of the individuals (in terms of class, gender, age, health, material and symbolic resources, etc). However, in the analytical application of the notion of trials, it is not important to quantify the resources available to each actor, but to study *in situ* and in action, according to the type of trials faced and the differing responses among them, the specific modalities in the use of such resources.

Lastly, trials do not designate any type of life issue or challenge, but they circumscribe a set of great structural challenges, particularly meaningful, within a society. Therefore, in order to describe how individuation occurs in a society, we need to identify a reduced and meaningful number of trials. In effect, even when it may be possible to identify a great diversity of social mechanisms, the study must be limited to a small number of trials, considered relevant for a specific social and historical reality. On some occasions, depending on the type of society, trials of an institutional nature shall be favored (school, work, family); on other occasions, trials related to social bonds (the relationship to collectives, norms, and to others) will be

more relevant; but in all cases trials will have a specific, distinctive form for each society. In sum, describing the standardized system of individuation trials is equivalent to describing a historic society in its unity. An individuation process will only exist insofar as it is alive in the trial system that creates it.

The study of individuation by means of a standardized set of trials allows building an analysis strategy capable of describing a social and historical whole based on coordinates other than those proposed by the idea of society, and especially by the theory of systems (Luhmann, 1995). In these later versions, as it is known, society may no longer be described in a unitary way, nor can individuals be described from it, as society is but a juxtaposition of autopoiesis systems without a central principle. On the contrary, the standardized set of trials tries to describe, at the scale of the individual, a historical society.

2. The declination of trials

The notion of trials allows us to restore to society its elastic nature (Martuccelli, 2005), so we can analyze the nonuniform diffraction of social life's practices and phenomena, thus avoiding the direct inference of microsocial consequences from a macrosociological vision. At this point, it is imperative to insist on the fact that a narrow, unidirectional link among the various social levels no longer exists (Latour, 2006).

The fact that structural trials undergo a diffraction process means that not all actors are equally exposed to these structural trials. Not all social actors are, for instance, equally exposed to the hazards of globalization (Robertson, 1992; Held *et al*, 1999), which implies a wide range of possible declinations that will vary according to the society they live in (South and North societies), gender (differences between men and women), social position (low-income sectors or middle-upper classes), work status even within a same social position (self-employed or on salary, different work contracts, etc). Although trials are common to all actors in a society, they are diffracted according to their different life contexts.

What is more, trials at the core of every singular life vary through time, which implies that individuals are forced to operate their lives differently through time, according to the results obtained at each point in life, and thus among the growing set of trials they have lived. The series of trials is not produced by surprise, being relatively

standardized in modern societies (especially in regard to the bonds school-work-family). But at the individual level, the inscription under personalized sets of trials is the fruit of a markedly singular life path: stages that combine errors and successes, fate and fortune, opportunities and dominations, accidents and conditionings. In this sense, once more, there is no direct flow among levels. On the one hand, we need to recognize and respect what appears as contingent at the level of a personal life (the result of trials for each actor in the singularity of his or her personal experience), and on the other hand, take into account the standardized social-chronological profile of the series of trials at the level of society. Its resolution at the individual level will define his or her individuation process.

Thus conceived, the notion of trial allows us to singularize the sociological analysis without breaking away from a broad structural view. Indeed, the notion of trial becomes relevant as it considers the differential resulting from interpersonal variations. This differential would explain the fact that individuals with same resources and similar social positions, confront trials in very different ways (Sen, 1992). In an opposite sense, actors that have disadvantaged social positions from an objective point of view may manifest, in subjective terms, experiences of greater personal realization or control –as shown, for example, in some studies in Chile regarding women’s experience (Guzmán *et al*, 1999). In sum, trial-based individuation explains individual paths in social contexts that are marked by diverging tendencies that simultaneously cause homogenization and differentiation.

III. From individuation processes to the work of the individual

In order to reach a complete understanding of the singularization of paths, we need to complement the trial-based analysis with a detailed study of the work leading from the individual to the individual. The recognition of society’s very consistency, its elasticity, will allow us to approach this analytical space in all its complexity. In effect, an interpretation of the individuation processes that acknowledges the plurality of social diffraction phenomena raises a wide range of questions regarding the specific work that the actor performs throughout the individuation process (such as the specific ways in which a narrative is built, and the modalities in which resources are used to confront them in a specific context of structural determinations). Thus understood, we need to find out how to address what is played in the actor himself or herself, and

what that brings to the explanation of the actor's own path. More specifically, we face the issue of finding out which analytical and conceptual tools will allow us to get closer to the work of the individual, without psychologizing –focusing on deepening our studies on interiorization or inscription processes– and without falling into a normativism that applies notions produced for certain historical and social realities to other realities –e.g. turning personal autonomy and choice into a general model,, as proposed in the individualization thesis (cf. for a review, Araujo, 2009a). In all cases, it is imperative to break away from the sociological analysis tendency of leaving out of the study the issue of the subject, in the precise sense of the term (Schimank, Volkmann, 2007). How can we approach this dimension? How can we specifically approach this work?

1. Subjectivation limits

The issue that we have presented is not new, having received special attention in studies on the formation of the individual from different subjectivation perspectives. Foucault (1975, 1976), for instance, emphasized that the subject is a product of power mechanisms of institutional and discursive nature. This production occurs by means of various techniques, historically determined, that contribute to the main goal of disciplination. Theorists inspired in Lacan's work (Žižek, 2001; Miller 2005) focused on the transformations of the Symbolic, especially on its weakening, and on its effects in the formation of subjects. As long as the subject is conceived as an effect of the Symbolic (and maintained in the Symbolic, though stimulated by what is Real and intertwined with the Imaginary), structural variations at this level are considered directly responsible for the characteristics taken by subjectivities. Finally, the contributions from a post-modern perspective or with a deconstructivist inspiration (Butler 2001a, 2001b; Braidotti, 2000; Lyotard, 1979) have stressed on the non-identical nature of the subject, conceived as a multiple flow in permanent movement, responding with imitative processes to language games and identificatory offers. In this view, the subject's movable and performing nature is highlighted.

In all the above important critical perspectives there is, however, a certain limitation. For Foucault, the analysis is subordinated to an interpretation that assigns an extremely broad power to historical-cultural production strategies in the formation of subjectivities, generally placing the subject in a binary game frame, valid but extremely

limited, shaped by domination and emancipation. The issue of the subject is excessively associated to the issue of subjection: the Weberian heritage is manifest both in the pessimism of a new version of the 'iron cage' and in a strongly individual ethical and moral way out (Martuccelli, 1999; Schroer, 2000).

In the contributions of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this level of analysis of the subject is excessively autonomized, which prevents the proper explanation of the subject's historical and incarnated nature. Although the dimension of the contingency at the level of the individual is at the core of its interpretations (the vicissitudes in the encounters with the Real, resulting in a pluralization of the modalities of subjectivation), this contingent dimension disappears as the perspective is placed next to the symbolic structure itself which precedes the subject. Expressed simply, if the subject is conceived with a certain degree of malleability, the structure that forms and contains the individual is conceived with a very high degree of homogeneity and rigidity.

Finally, it has been difficult for post-modern and deconstructivist proposals to be translated or to resist the contrast with the advance in social studies, particularly proposals by those who work from the perspective of identity production, integration, or the issue of the quality of the social link. On the one hand, the proposal of a smooth flow and permanent movement of the subject stumbles upon the evidence of constrictions and discursive imperatives both institutional and social, which are expressed in refined homogenization tendencies. On the other hand, the lack of a minimal consistency in the subject leaves some questions open regarding the sense of social action and the viability of political action.

There are three indications derived from this criticism for coming closer to the issue at stake in the use of the notion of subject to understand the work of the individual, namely: the restitution of the agency, the respect for the socially and historically incarnated nature of the subject, and the incorporation of a certain stability intrinsic to the subject.

2. The work of the individual to form into a subject

In order to advance beyond these impasses we need to recognize that the intelligence of social action is never the result of a direct relation between the individual and social and cultural determinations. It is, in all cases, a relation

mediated by a representation of the subject. Nevertheless, this subject can neither be conceived as a purely normative effect – of symbolic commands, mechanisms and discourses –, nor as the effect of pure contingency – whether derivative or interactional –, but as a result of the permanent work performed by the individuals. The work of the individual to build himself or herself into a subject, however, is not the result of his or her conscious and autonomous will, but it is conditioned by the simultaneous action of the social experience and the social ideal. In other words, it does not derive from the individual's free will, from the project to heroically incarnate a figure of the subject (Sartre 1943; Touraine, 1997), or to follow a political tradition (Bellah, 1985), or to articulate his or her identity from various moral sources (Taylor, 1989). Instead, it is originated and developed in the crossroad (always contingent, never completely at random) made up of ideals and social experience (Araujo, 2009c). The subject that each one can become is defined in the interreign formed by the ideals that guide the individual and by the guidelines drawn from social experience regarding advisable and efficient ways to conduct oneself in social life. In this manner, far from a substantive view or a pure nomadic flow (Derrida, 1967; Braidotti, 2000), the subject needs to be understood as a configuration. These subject configurations perform in the individuals the function of guiding and legitimizing his or her actions in the world, but we must insist that they are, at the same time, the effect of the individual's work and of the ways the individual responds to the different trials he or she faces in a society (Araujo, 2009b).

We need to clarify that, when we mention the action of ideal in this work about oneself onto himself or herself, we do not refer to the action of every or any ideal, but to the ideals that have reached their inscription in the individual, as in psychoanalytical proposals (Freud 1974a, 1974b; Lacan, 1980). Even in this case, the process cannot be understood as direct or without mediation. Social ideals do not act mechanically in the configuration and action of concrete individuals, which explains the plural and unequal action of social ideals when they are considered from the individual perspective. Hence, what is important at this level of study, is not to analyze the big ideals (or figures of the subject) present in a society, but to trace the effective ways in which some of these ideals have managed to be inscribed in individual actors. In other words, and drawing from psychoanalytical terms, we need to find in what way and under which modalities some of these big ideals are a part of

the idea of the Self of each actor, that is, of the place “from which we look at ourselves in a way that we find ourselves kind, worthy of love” (Žižek, 1992: 147).

Now, just as we cannot assume a linear and mechanical relation between action and social ideal, neither can we do so in regard to social experiences. Social experiences deliver the basic supplies for guiding oneself in the world because they contribute to the interpretative work of the situations, and even more so because they help to reestablish the context of possibilities and impossibilities from which the individual may confront the different trials. But not all experiences have a similar weight for the individuals, nor is each experience enough to guide their actions. What takes part in guiding individual action are not social actions, but the knowledge about what is social that is decanted from them.

While for social ideals it is essential to consider their inscription as mediation, when it comes to experiences we need to take into account the ‘filtering’ process they are submitted to. The orientations taken by individual actions are the effect of multiple and varied experiences. However, and given the profusion of these experiences and the diversity of their incorporation modes, both conscious and unconscious, it is impossible to turn this process into the core of the study –as dispositional studies on socialization would propose. Strictly speaking, it is the decantation of these multiple experiences that will produce a knowledge about what is social, but what must draw our attention is not the sedimentation of dispositions (that is, the accumulative history of interiorization or inscription processes, as proposed by socialization), but the work that from them, and thanks to particular ideals, the individual will carry out to become a subject.

This way, and aiming to describe the work by which each individual becomes a subject by confronting trials, we need to account for the simultaneous action of the inscribed ideal and the social experience decanted into knowledge. The configuration of the subject is a product of social experiences and of the action of ideals. This duality explains, on the one hand, the provisional nature of the individual –because of being forced, by social experiences and by variations in the inscription of ideal, to produce and reproduce the configuration work as a subject, On the other hand, it accounts for the ‘family atmosphere’ maintained throughout time -as the ideals inscribed in the ideal of the individual Self and the sedimentation of the experience aim at a relative stability. The configuration of the subject is not crystallized, but it is

not open either to infinite modifications. In spite of its malleability, we must consider the resistance of the material, made up by the footprints of experiences and the action of the ideal. The configurations of the subject are contingent but not at random, modifiable but not volatile, kaleidoscopic but not formless.

Ideals appropriate consciousness completely and they are not the basic material in the production of the subject, since experiences, developed in a social world of elastic consistency, support the function of social reproduction but also act as a barrier to it. Individuals do not act purely according to the ideal, although their acts cannot be interpreted as an automatic effect of social experience either. Social experiences are not enough to explain individual paths, as they are not conformed in a void, but produced in the horizon of the ideals. Incorporating the variability of ideals, insisting in the fact that their efficiency depends on their inscription, and attributing a significant role to social experiences, we can consider this proposal as a valid option to grasp the individual beyond a normative interpretation, and conceive the work of the individual in the individuation process as woven by social and historical reality.

IV. Two study strategies and a dialog

Facing the deadlocks of social theory and of subjectivation or socialization strategies, the proposal presented in this article pretends, as a common horizon, to study societies from the individuals, though emphasizing the individuation processes. On the one hand, by starting out from trials, we need to understand the profile of a society (thanks to the standardized set of trials). And on the other hand, we need to analyze historically how individuals form themselves as they respond to them. It is a conversation on two autonomous levels, though communicating with each other: “upward”, a matter of making the individual relate to the societal register –and allow isolating the specific standardized set of trials for a society; “downward”, a matter of opening the effective study by which the individual forms himself or herself as a subject –which demands considering this work as historized in a particular way by the notion of trial.

The two levels focused on are not mutually excluding, but on the contrary, they open possibilities to enrich the intelligence of the object that is studied. In a specific way, far from the ambition to reach a combination of perspectives, what is at stake is the will to

reach a dialog procedure. A dialog that is possible and productive, which is worth highlighting, in the framework of the simultaneous and concrete study of a same process.

Historically, the adaptation between the individual's ordinary forming process and the subject's normative horizon was analyzed essentially through the articulation among various socialization and subjectivation theories. The best efforts in the twentieth century were marked by this attraction (especially in the articulations between the works of Marx and Freud, in the framework of the Frankfurt School, or more recently in the renewal of the discussion between sociologists and psychologists around the pragmatism and the work by G. H. Mead). Facing the hegemony of this association, the individuation perspective was not able to propose a sufficiently autonomous and solid alternative.

What is needed in the following years, and following the crisis of the idea of society, is to make of individuation the true axis of macrosociology's study, and to describe its framework, the personalized formation processes of individuals into subjects.

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