

# REFLEXIVITY, SOCIALIZATION, AND RELATIONS TO THE WORLD: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Andrea M. Maccarini  
University of Padova

## **/// Human and Social. Developmental Paths and New Relationships**

This article has a twofold aim. First, it sets forth a realist, relational, and morphogenetic approach to socialization as relational reflexivity. The main thesis is that this constitutes a remarkable advance in theoretical rigor compared to most strands of contemporary theory. Then the argument will be made that some cultural trends are currently challenging the very process through which “healthy” personalities are moulded, thereby changing the once established meanings of “integrity” and “maturity” as referred to adult identities. This may lead human formation processes to what may be called “post-human” outcomes.

The essay is organized as follows. First, I will briefly outline the overarching challenge to which socialization theory must respond, namely the increasing separation between human beings and the social world, and the need for new forms of mediation to inhabit this space. Then I will sketch out the key points of modern socialization theory, to demonstrate that a realist and morphogenetic approach is required. Furthermore, drawing on Margaret Archer’s work, I will show how such a theory meets those requirements, spelling out a sound concept of personal reflexivity and focusing attention on the original relation of concern that connects human beings to the various orders of reality. Finally, I will claim that some emergent conditions, cultures, and lifestyles in late modern societies tend to modify such relations with reality, thereby making the property of reflexivity and

the process of becoming fully human epistemologically and ontologically vulnerable. As a consequence, the very core of what it means to be human may go through unprecedented changes. In addition, I will argue that the identity-building practices that anticipate the dawning of a post-human landscape may well find their *organum* in technology, but are the offspring of a whole cultural syndrome of which education and socialization are an essential aspect. A whole new *paideia* may be emerging, with all technical realizations being just instantiations of a more general transformation in human self-understanding—and indeed self-construction. Although in this essay I will only be able to gesture at concrete education/socialization doctrines and practice, this point is central to my overall argument. In the last instance, the underlying thesis of the article is that a realist, relational, morphogenetic approach to socialization represents a watershed between modern theory and the present societal predicament. It also provides an instructive vantage point from which the facts leading to “post-humanistic” forms of identity<sup>1</sup> may be examined, and indeed a benchmark for their evaluation.

One large “social fact” is currently increasingly clear, namely that global society has caused a major crisis in the ways human beings are trying to connect their lives meaningfully with social forms and dynamics. This predicament becomes apparent in the emergence of new lifestyles within economically and technologically advanced societies, as well as in the decline of the integration capacity displayed by social and political systems in various parts of the world. In both cases, what is being witnessed is a crisis of the co-evolution between social systems and human persons, between institutions and structures on the macro level and on the level of interpersonal relations. On the level of lifestyles, intensely wired individualism is a good example, as is the increasing de-synchronization of individual and social (i.e., organizational and institutional) time schedules, with the decline of collectively organized activities and the related coordination problems. On the socio-empirical level, this makes for a dramatic growth in the credibility of those theoretical hypotheses that emphasize the separation between the human and the social domain, simultaneously indicating

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on the “post-human” is now enormously extended. For the sake of clarity, by such an expression I mean identity-building processes that are not guided by humanistic concerns, in either the ethical or anthropological perspective, and may lead to a self-understanding that questions the radical separation between human subjects and other kinds of entities. For an interesting overview of the main approaches in the debate on post-humanism see Sharon (2014). An important approach to human life-formation “after” humanism can be found in Sloterdijk (2013).

the necessity of new forms of mediation between them.<sup>2</sup> Social systems and human beings—which are each endowed with their own emergent properties—are no longer tailored to fit one another. They interfere, make trouble for each other, transform and redefine each other, and follow their own developmental paths, which are somehow inevitably intertwined, but are increasingly hard to bring back to intentional and meaningful coordination. Along the way, both the human and the social domain become involved in complex reflexive processes, which lead them ever farther from the familiar shores of modern culture and society,<sup>3</sup> and thereby undergo profound inner transformations.

On the social side of the human/social distinction, such a change can be aptly described through the concept of “morphogenic society.” Illustrating this whole perspective would require a long systematic treatment, while I can only provide a concise hint. In a nutshell, this type of society is characterized by the prevalence of transformative over reproductive processes, which in turn gives rise to the following tendencies:

- a) The ongoing emergence and continuous combination of contingent possibilities of action and experience—variety producing variety—and the diffusion of a situational logic of opportunity (Archer 1995);
- b) The acceleration of social processes, i.e., the increasing number of actions and experiences occurring within a time unit (Rosa 2013);
- c) The spatial and communicative saturation (Gergen 1991), and the wider, multidimensional problem of excess (Abbott 2016: 122–159).

This societal syndrome has vast and profound implications.<sup>4</sup> The most relevant for the specific purpose of this essay consists in intensifying reflexivity (Archer 2012), and in a more general pressure upon the human being and his or her personal powers, concerning various aspects of action and experience, and contributing to the emergence of new forms of life—both personal and social (Maccarini 2016a).

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<sup>2</sup> As is well known, this insight was systematized by Niklas Luhmann through the system/environment distinction (e.g., 1987). Within a different paradigm, the issue of the human/social distancing and relationship is also present in Donati (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Prandini (2012, especially pp. 7–26) reflects upon a similar issue. While he deals with changing cultural forms—particularly law—my attention will focus on the connection between society and personality, and on the related changes of the latter.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of morphogenic society has been developed in a series of volumes edited by Archer (2013, 2014, 2015c, 2016). For a more extended discussion of the three trends outlined above, and of the relevant consequences, see Maccarini 2016a.

On the human side, descriptions of this sweeping change are usually shaped into culturally pessimistic, mostly ethically oriented diagnoses. For our special purposes, they could be summarized as follows:

- a) A classic line of thought revolves around “values” and their alleged “crisis,” which is usually attributed to younger generations. In this context, the typical issues concern youth’s relativism, moral indifference, and shallow moral utilitarianism. The problem is why young people seem to be scarcely connected with the sources of moral meta-narratives characteristic of modernity;
- b) More particularly, worried analyses are focused upon the growing incapacity to keep long-term commitments, to establish durable bonds and loyalties, and upon the tendency to develop unstable personalities—ones that are inevitably flawed because of contingency and the de-symbolization of relationships in the public as well as in the private domain;
- c) Beside these fully recognizable streams evoking moral loss and decline, there emerges the theme of a change in the deep self-understanding of what it means to be human. This is manifest in the literature about the “post-human,” which deals with the transformative opportunities provided by technology for individuals to pursue their own paths to “enhancement” and “self-transcendence”—in instrumental as well as expressive directions. This can be seen in many quarters and by exploring different research fields. Many examples might be mentioned. One concerns human enhancement devices and their possible consequences. Another has to do with the changes affecting childhood in some of its main psycho-social features, e.g., identity-building, attention, focus, reflexivity, and so forth. Finally, this perspective prompts us to take a fresh look at the long-debated issue of secularization, from a vantage point that does not just examine the weakening of belief or its public relevance, but the crumbling of a whole manner of making sense of human life, experience, and perception of the world. The issue involves the whole grammar of human relationships and basic attachments upon which the beliefs characterizing the historical religions of both East and West must be predicated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Within a Christian theological discourse, this might possibly be understood as a crisis of assumptions that fall into the classic category of *preambula fidei*—an expanding sphere now coming to encompass notions one would not even think of including in that concept in the past, as they were part of a wider, more basic domain of the taken-for-granted.

It is therefore in the context of such a mutual distancing and such inner transformations that the possible relationships between the human and social spheres must be reconceived—in social theory as well as in the everyday experience of regular folks. One crucial problem concerns the emerging tensions between the two domains. What the two systems expect of each other is rather clear. To give only a few examples, humans expect the social structures they inhabit to provide a safe life, technology, freedom, opportunities, and a wide range of choice, while social systems ask people for growing skills and personal effort, energy, and flexibility. But it is not easy to understand how the resulting tensions could be meaningfully settled, and what the prevailing outcome could be. Will the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999), the cultural industry, the biotech complex, and information-communication technology succeed in reconstructing human subjectivity as volatile, totally flexible, and impervious to long-term commitment? And does this result in a “corrosion of character” (Hunter 2000; Sennett 1998)? Will the high-tech gurus, who have long acted as an anthropological avant-garde, break down every humanistic tradition? Is our civilization bound to produce new forms of human identity and a new, unique version of “integrity”—to put it in Erikson’s (1963) classic words? What is already clear is that the current dynamics are transforming human beings, social structures, and processes beyond recognition. My general thesis is that the current changes are affecting fundamentals. That means they are penetrating even the linguistic and symbolical foundations of the social order, reshaping the hierarchy of positive and negative sanctions structuring social life, and reorganizing the very structures of consciousness and character—tapping into fundamental impulses, emotions, and inhibitions. In sum, the human/social disconnection depends only partially on personal will (or the lack thereof), on the values people believe in (or not), or even on socio-structural conditioning alone. The morphogenesis of human/social distancing generates deep transformations in what we may call “anthropological competence”—a provisional label to mean a set of personal qualities emerging from experience of a given form of the world, which in turn affect the self-understanding of human persons and their capacity to orient themselves toward certain goods.

We should now wonder if the social sciences and humanities appear to be adequate to explain and interpret this large change. The investigations mentioned above are of real and relevant trends. However, they still struggle with significant ambiguities in their proposed interpretations of social facts. Problems would seem to lie with the young, but we often witness

astonishing generational inversions, as it is the adult world that prompts the de-normativization of social relations and deprives institutions of their legitimacy. The problem of European youth appears to be moral indifference and lack of commitment,<sup>6</sup> but extremism and radicalization also beg for explanation<sup>7</sup>—expressing themselves in religiously motivated anti-Western attitudes as well as in revived national chauvinism or xenophobic movements. Truth and the meaning of life are often lost, but they also remain an object of desire. In sum, the scope of change is undoubtedly huge, but its interpretation calls for a higher level of abstraction and analytical robustness, which entail a more general theoretical framework. The exceeding complexity of social reality is evoking an unprecedented cross-fertilization among diverse reflections, disciplines, and discourses, including philosophical anthropology, moral philosophy, evolutionary theory, cultural psychology, and the neurosciences.<sup>8</sup> In such an interdisciplinary field the changing structures of consciousness, socio-anthropological experience, and a discourse on the possibilities of a “good life” tend to overlap and interact in original ways.

What does sociology know about all this? To be sure, socialization theory lies at the core of this complex enterprise, in that it has been the main conceptual tool elaborated by the social sciences to examine the human/social connection, and is the very symbol of that relationship. Unsurprisingly, in the present situation such a theory is going through profound tensions and is headed toward a change of paradigm. Its current mainstream is mostly far from the systematic ambition of the classical tradition, from the founding fathers to Parsons. This makes it even more important to identify the emergent innovations in the sociological domain, as they could provide an essential contribution to rethinking the whole subject matter. My ultimate goal in discussing some of these theoretical innovations, and the new socio-cultural fault lines they help us see, is to suggest that European culture is working out a new kind of *paideia*. With this word choice I do not wish to indicate a unified trend but to highlight some crucial dilemmas around which the practice and the social-scientific interpretation

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<sup>6</sup> The research by Donati and Colozzi (1997) is still relevant in its basic approach. For an overview concerning the French context, see Cicchelli and Germain (2014). Much of the work published in the collection on *Youth in a Globalizing World* (Brill) is relevant to this issue.

<sup>7</sup> And it is genuinely bizarre that such attitudes are often interpreted as forms of “excessive” commitment (e.g., Bronner 2009: 11).

<sup>8</sup> That disciplinary boundaries are increasingly crossed is in itself an indicator of the novelty of the situation, and of the way social science and the humanities are reacting to it. See the different contributions by Habermas (2007), Laidlaw (2014), Narvaez (2014), Rosa (2016) and Tomasello (1999). It is beyond the scope of this article to examine their convergence and divergence.

of identity-building processes revolve. In-depth analysis of some particular lines of thought will only be gestured at, while the field research this essay means to inspire will have to be left for further study. Finally, I will leave it for readers to judge if the present approach could be labelled “amateurish,” and if such an intellectual luxury can still be allowed to the current generation of scholars.<sup>9</sup>

### **/// The Inexact Form: Socialization Theory and the Concept of Agency**

In the first place, it is necessary to understand the way socialization theory grasped the social and cultural changes outlined above within its own endogenous development. The latter may be examined through its central elements, namely the socializing factors, the human subject, and the mediation mechanism.<sup>10</sup> Socialization theory was born under the star of an “original constraint” (*Urzwang*). This means that the starting point of human ontogenesis is assumed to consist of actors and social conditions that “penetrate” the human subject, thereby making constraint (bond, interdiction) an essential part of his or her condition.<sup>11</sup> As it is well known, socialization throughout the twentieth century was principally meant to be a mechanism to guarantee intergenerational continuity and cultural reproduction. The “static” features of one generation were connected to “static” features of the next and conceived within a causal relationship. The expected outcome was the conformity of the younger generation to the roles, norms, values, and ideas of the preceding generation (Kuczynski & Parkin 2007: 259). The emphasis falls essentially upon the control of impulses and energies. Since Freud, the concept of internalization has served to portray the crucial mediating mechanism. To quote a contemporary definition mirroring this historical view of the sociological tradition, socialization consists in “the process through which individuals internalize the values, beliefs, and norms of a society and learn to function as its members” (Calhoun 2002: 447).

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am using the words of Luc Boltanski (2004: 9), who claims to belong to the last generation allowed to ask “big” questions and to venture into complex fields of study, before hyper-specialization and professionalization finally takes hold of the sociological discipline. In this respect, my work is completely subject to the fate of my own generation. Accordingly, I am ready to renounce every expectation of indulgence.

<sup>10</sup> These elements are taken from Geulen (2005), who develops a “subject oriented” theory of socialization.

<sup>11</sup> The word *Urzwang* is used by Klaus Gilgenmann (1986a, 1986b), in the framework of an autopoietic theory of psychic systems.



The great Parsonian synthesis represented an attempt to encompass processes and structures of socialization within a complex, systematic model. As everyone knows, its outcome was widely regarded as the utmost expression of an “over-socialized” conception of the human person (Wrong 1961, 1999). Be that as it may, after Parsons socialization theory undoubtedly tended to lose complexity and conceptual rigor.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, “post-Parsonian” studies surely convey and reflect a different vision—both sociological and ideological—of society, but from the specific viewpoint of socialization theory most hardly constitute as deep a change as is claimed. The main streams along which these studies have developed are the following:

- a) The aim of socialization is redefined as the development of a personal, often idiosyncratic personal identity, even though such a concept may be ambiguous, and may be conducive to narcissism and to unfettered expressive individualism. In this context, the critique of the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950) and other similar contributions translated into the field of family relationships, producing some sort of “democratic” theory of “good parenthood.”<sup>13</sup>
- b) The renewed relevance of Piaget, and above all new readings of Mead in the wake of a pragmatist revival, led to a reconsideration of the conditions for constructing a democratic and rational will (Habermas 1981, 1992).<sup>14</sup>
- c) The idea of the individualization and de-institutionalization of the life course produced a vast literature focused on biographies, which emphasized agency and the freedom of choice individuals enjoy while making their way through structural and cultural conditionings (Arnett 2007; Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991; Mayer 2004).

The critique produced within these lines of research has resulted in two main points:

- a) Socialization does not involve linear causality, but must be conceived as a learning process in which children play an active role, reflexively combining the messages they get from different sources. Children’s agency takes centre stage in the theory, emphasizing

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<sup>12</sup> Parsons’s theory of socialization would obviously require a more detailed treatment (see Parsons 1951, 1964; Parsons & Bales 1955).

<sup>13</sup> This context is quickly but effectively reconstructed in Maccoby (2007).

<sup>14</sup> See Maccarini and Prandini (2010) for a discussion of Habermas and of the social constitution of human subjectivity.



a different balance of power and influence in family relationships compared to “traditional” models (Bandura 1986, 2001; Kuczynski et al. 1999).

- b) The reference points in socialization are not only persons but include interactions with symbols and material objects.

These achievements converge to indicate a single direction, synthesized in Bronfenbrenner’s “ecological” approach. Socialization takes place in the meaningful interactions between human persons and their environment, conceived as a space and structured around material, cultural, and social objects (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Grundmann & Lüscher 2000). Thus, the reflections emerging in the field of developmental psychology could be summarized as follows: socialization is

the way in which individuals are assisted in becoming members of one or more social groups. The word ‘assist’ is important because it infers that socialization is not a one-way street but that new members of the social group are active in the socialization process and selective in what they accept from older members (...). In addition, new members may attempt to socialize older members as well (Grusec & Hastings 2007: 1).

Most current definitions, even within sociology, resonate with this.

Two differences between these theoretical “seasons” are apparent. For one thing, in the latter the human subject and his or her agency come to the fore. It has become commonplace to reject the functionalistic notion of socialization as adaptation to the norms of the relevant society or social group, and to maintain that the socialization process may generate a potential of agency that transcends the given social arrangements and institutions. Contemporary social theory still upholds the fundamental insight of any socialization theory, that is, the causal dependence of the structures of consciousness on socio-historical conditions in general, but has now clearly rebutted the idea of socialization as a heteronomous determination, and is placing special emphasis on the human subjects’ autonomy and personal reflexivity. The genesis of personality takes place within specific societal conditions, but people actively participate in the process, which in turn is not determined by particular institutions. On the contrary, socialization proceeds as a lifelong epigenetic process. Second, what is really changing is that the mediation mechanism between human and social is becoming unclear. Reference to internalization is becoming ever fuzzier, but its place

in the theory remains unoccupied. This is the crucial problem of contemporary socialization theory.

In summary, the social sciences have reacted to the changing social and cultural conditions by becoming less and less socio-centric. Emphasis falls more and more on agency and personal freedom. However, the conceptual framework becomes blurry. Empirical data pile up, but theory becomes less rigorous when it comes to specifying the mechanism connecting human beings to social systems. Attempts at theoretical synthesis tend to put forward eclectic views, remaining on a historical rather than systematic level.<sup>15</sup> The crucial point is that all these theoretical reconstructions leave the connecting mechanism between the human and social either untouched or undetermined. As a consequence, theory swings between two poles. On the one hand, some of the “new” models can simply be brought back to the paradigm of internalization, and are just complicating the explanation of the related processes (Grusec & Kuczynski 1997). On the other hand, other models underestimate the social conditionings, either taking on board a new form of neurobiological determinism or optimistically overrating the unlimited free choice individuals are said to enjoy in modern (Western) societies. As a result, in some of the subject-oriented models the human being appears both as *explanans* and as *explanandum*, thereby engendering an inescapable sense of unresolved circularity.

To illustrate this point I will now focus attention on the concept of agency, which comes to the fore in this phase as an essential factor in the currently dominant paradigm of socialization. In contemporary research, agency appears in two fundamental modes:

- a) Bidirectionality. Socialization is described as a bidirectional process of interaction—mostly between generations—which includes the influence of all relevant actors.
- b) Relationships of socialization are interpretive activities, consisting in the construction of meanings on the part of all actors. Innovation (instead of reproduction) is one of the possible outcomes.

In this context, agency appears to be a multidimensional concept, encompassing cognitive, behavioural, and motivational aspects (Bandura 2001). Bidirectionality emphasizes interaction, interdependence, and the complexity of transactions between socializing and socialized actors. However, it should be noted that:

- a) Bidirectionality does not involve agency alone; for example, the impact of children upon their parents’ health and social position-

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<sup>15</sup> In this sense see, e.g., Veith (1995).

ing, marital relationship, participation in community life, future plans, and so forth can not necessarily be attributed to the child's intentional action.

- b) Activities which “go in both directions” (between generations) include participation in everyday practices and routines, which do not necessarily involve reflexive processes.

In sum, children unavoidably mediate all these processes, but their agency is not always involved in such mediation. As regards the two above-mentioned dimensions, the examples in point (a) mostly refer to structural conditioning, while point (b) consists of cultural aspects. In their description of bidirectionality, Kuczynski and Parkin make the following, revealing comment:

the parent's own **internalization** processes remained unexplored. A by-product of unidirectional models of socialization is that parents were implicitly considered to be passive conduits of their own socialization experiences (...). Regarding parents more fully as agents focuses attention on parents' interpretive and constructive activities with regard to their own continuing processes of resocialization and **internalization** (Kuczynski & Parkin 2007: 261) [emphasis added].

Here it becomes quite evident that the concept of bidirectionality does not by any means imply that the notion of internalization is abandoned. Therefore, such approaches as are presented by these authors surely represent important adaptations of the conceptual framework to the conditions in which socialization currently occurs, but their theoretical originality should not be overrated. For as long as the mediation mechanism continues to be conceived as internalization, all research cannot but qualify as honest, perhaps partially innovative, “normal science.” For this reason, the “ecological” approach, when seen in the perspective of the factors spelled out above (socialized subject, socializing actors, mediation mechanism), does not amount to a real paradigm change within socialization theory. Whatever the internalized content of the relational climate, the cultural atmosphere, or the parenting style, socialization is fundamentally still conceived in the same way. Of course, this does not make these models irrelevant, in that they do justice to the fact that different socialization styles are probably conducive to different types of personality. But the levels of discourse should still be carefully distinguished. In the last instance, the human

being—be it a democratic, authoritarian, or libertarian individual—either remains “society’s being” (Archer 2000), or becomes ontogenetically unintelligible. That is to say, what agency may be involved is not examined in its constitutive factors or in its relational components. It is revealed in an absence or in a deviation. It is observed empirically as an “inexact form of conformity and resistance” (Kuczynski & Parkin 2007: 276; Kuczynski & Hildebrandt 1997), as a phenomenon possibly leading the researcher to suspect that something is going on beyond the internalization of norms and values.

|                     | <b>1. Forerunners</b>                          | <b>2. The structural-functional synthesis</b>        | <b>3. Ecologic agency</b>                                      |
|---------------------|--|--|--|
| Socializing Factors | Family and significant others                  | Family, school, work, citizenship (ordered sequence) | Multiple social influences (de-institutionalized life course)  |
| Socialized Subject  | Traditional and/or “authoritarian” personality | Integrated “normal” personality                      | Post-traditional individual                                    |
| Mediating mechanism | Imitation and internalization                  | Internalization (status-role complex)                | Selective internalization (individual blend of social sources) |
| Key concepts        | Behaviour, stimuli and responses, role-taking  | Identification, societal norms and values            | Agency, bidirectionality, life course                          |
| Exemplary authors   | Skinner, Hull, Cooley, Ross                    | Durkheim, Parsons, Erikson, Bourdieu                 | Bronfenbrenner, Bandura, Kuczynski, Goffman, Giddens           |

Table 1. Socialization theory within the paradigm of internalization.

The presence of an empty space created by the deviation from social norms—what Luhmann described as the failure of socialization, claiming that sociological theory could not explain it—involves the idea that “another force” must be at work. But whether this is some kind of intentional human action or anything else remains to be seen. Going “beyond bidirectionality” (Kuczynski 2003) requires more radical theoretical innovation.

It should be noted that these reflections are often associated with the notion of “self-socialization” (Arnett 2007; Geulen 2002; Heinz 2002), about which the same considerations could be repeated. Such a concept has been frequently employed to maintain that human subjects do not develop their personality just by following the pattern learned by their family, but autonomously combine influences coming from many different sources. Insofar as such sources multiply and tend to include the subject in multiple and overlapping social spheres, the situation seems to call out a strong agential response on the part of individuals, who thereby go through their life courses as “self-socializing” subjects. In this case too, the problem is that inconsistent normative messages and the complexity of relational networks entail some kind of agency, which then remains under-theorized and unexplained. Table 1 above offers a highly simplified but hopefully clear synthesis of the argument developed so far.<sup>16</sup>

The key point is that the break with the idea of internalization and the search for novel forms of relationship between people and society emerges as the turning point leading toward an emergent paradigm of socialization.

In a nutshell, the evolution of socialization theory tends to distance itself from a “sociologistic” vision, i.e., from sociology as a discipline that “dissolves every interiority” (Rieff 2007: 6). At the same time, it breaks with the idea of *Urzwang*, that is of constraint, conditioning, and bond—which also involves interdiction—as the inner core of human ontogenesis, and ultimately of human culture itself. The key to such a turning point, however, remains unknown.

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<sup>16</sup> I can anticipate the scandal of mentioning Bourdieu together with Parsons (*horribile dictu*). I do not ignore the differences between them, but my argument revolves around the concept of habitus and the ontogenetic process involved. This is what justifies my choice.

### **/// After Internalization? Socialization and the Morphogenesis of Reflexivity**

#### **1. Socialization as Relational Reflexivity**

Sociology is in search of a theory that can keep together interaction with a complex environment on the one hand, and the autonomous elaboration of experience by human subjects on the other. In this search, the concept of agency comes to the fore, but remains underdetermined until further theoretical decisions are made and the corresponding problems are solved. It is initially necessary to spell out the basic assumptions required of a theory that adequately conceptualizes the forms of human/social mediation in a morphogenic society. Discussion must here revolve around two pivotal points.

The first concerns the essential decision indicating the shift to a different paradigm of socialization. As anticipated above, such a decision consists in the break with the idea of internalization. This is the real turning point with respect to the “modern” past. Giving up such a notion has vast and deep implications, which we can only begin to explore. In the Parsonian world, in which it was still possible to think that there was a “central value system,” the development of “healthy” and integrated adult personalities could be conceived as the expected outcome of a complex itinerary through various socialization agencies organized around a relatively consistent normative pattern. The resulting model was meant to explain—and to support—the emergence of “normal personalities” that would be fit to function as good citizens and good workers in Western democratic societies. Sociology has been far less successful when it came to distinguishing social differentiation from individualization in the strictest sense. This line of thought can be traced to George H. Mead (Habermas 1992), and brings a profound ambivalence into the theory. On the one hand, individual consciousness and reflexivity are conceived within the usual conceptual framework of internalization. The “Me” of the American pragmatist is a product of social relations. On the other hand, what Mead calls the “I” appears to be an undetermined pre-reflexive entity, open to random, continuous, highly contingent determinations, which is compatible with human freedom but is ontologically empty. This is all there is beyond the socialized “Me.” This Meadian dilemma effectively highlights the puzzle to be solved by contemporary theory. Once the concept of internalization has been dismissed, are we left with a volatile “I” or with an agency which can only be read in the backlight of imperfect socialization? This is prob-

ably one reason why the theme of reflexivity—which Mead did raise—was not adequately developed.<sup>17</sup>

The second relevant point consists in a fundamental insight, namely that the inner operation of consciousness and the forms of symbolization are closely connected.<sup>18</sup> In other words, there is a strong mutual connection between personal reflexivity and ideas of the Self—and indeed, between reflexivity, worldviews, and visions of the “place of human beings” in the world. Such an insight is necessary in order to tap into the depth of cultural change and to develop a suitable theory of the new forms of mediation (internalization, appropriation) between the human and the social.

These premises introduce the most significant theoretical alternative for studying the processes of socialization that sociology has produced in recent years. Margaret Archer’s systematic contribution is now well known. It is articulated in various volumes (2000, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2015a, 2015b) and raises multiple complex issues. My aim in this article is quite specific. I will first summarize its principal points, and then go on to discuss how the present socio-cultural dynamics are challenging this theoretical innovation. In that challenge, the emergence of a “post-human” cultural syndrome is revealed. Such a two-step argument also corresponds to Archer’s treatment of the two crucial issues mentioned above. I will take up the former here, and discuss the second in the following section (2).

First, the “I”/“Me” dilemma is tackled by a fresh way of thinking about the whole of socialization. Socialization is conceived in terms of reflexivity—as a personal emergent property which generates and re-generates the forms of personal and social identity throughout the ontogenetic process and in the continuous morphogenesis of the human person. The notion of internalization is superseded by a “reflexive relationship with the world,” resulting in a reflexively mediated *modus vivendi*. From the perspective of the present essay, the points to be highlighted are the following:

- a) The starting point is provided by the inescapable human condition, which consists in being-in-relation with the world in its natural, practical, and social dimensions. Such an option, of course, entails

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<sup>17</sup> Archer (2015a: 123, 126) could agree with this statement, but her critique of Mead is centred on his concept of “generalized other.” I believe that it is also his underlying personal ontology, as well as his notion of relations with the social and non-social world, that make his view of reflexivity problematic. This is consistent with Archer’s argument in other parts of her work.

<sup>18</sup> Awareness of this may help to connect the social scientific arguments about identity to the humanistic discourse on cultural forms and to research on the evolution of human consciousness in a systematic, fruitful, and non-reductionistic way. Here I can only point to some potentially interesting contributions to such a perspective. Beside the authors cited in note 6 above, see, e.g., Donald (2012) and Jung (2012).



important meanings, controversial assumptions, and relevant consequences. What must be underscored here is that such a relationship—not just human subjects with their perceptions or representations, and not just social structures with their overwhelming pressure—lies at the origin of the human condition, and it has the specific form of a “relation of concern” (Archer 2000; Sayer 2011). That is to say, it is constituted by the human concern for the world, which embraces the double meaning of what is pressing us (urging, striking, worrying) and what we care about—what is important to us, what we want to devote ourselves to, investing our lifetimes and energies.<sup>19</sup>

- b) The way the world is structured then encounters the human being with his or her own properties and inclinations. The world represents the context in which human beings are involuntarily placed. Nonetheless, it is only through the encounter with human beings and their emotions, concerns, and existential plans that such a context really becomes constraining or enabling. At the same time, most personal properties and powers, despite being rooted in the species’ own potentialities, only fully emerge through relations with the social and non-social world.

These first theoretical moves make it possible to shift from the *Urzwang* to a more comprehensive view. In the beginning there is not (only) an interdiction or a constraint, and also not just the anxious need to reduce complexity. There is a pressing-and-engaging relationship. Thus the social domain is both a limit and an object of attachment—a possibly unpleasant determination of the self as well as a horizon for personal fulfilment.

- c) Reflexivity operates in this relation to the world, initially distinguishing a person’s self within the natural order as an object among other objects, then within the practical sphere as a subject that can act causally upon objects, and finally in the social domain as a subject among other subjects—that is, other entities that can be thought to be endowed with intentionality and with properties and powers similar to one’s own.
- d) Accumulating experience is stratified in a process involving the phases of discernment, deliberation, and dedication. Through that process people identify their concerns, decide upon a personal manner of prioritizing them on the ground of an ultimate concern, and shape a *modus vivendi*, a lifestyle oriented to achieve that con-

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<sup>19</sup> For some considerations about such a theoretical option see Maccarini and Prandini (2010).

stellation of concerns and existential goals. Reflexivity constitutes the medium within which all of this happens, in continuous interchange with the world and in the corresponding, ongoing revision of priorities, and the exchange rates between different goals and life plans.

- e) Therefore, human individuals do not either act upon internalized social norms or swing their way forward between a socialized “Me” and a wildly contingent “I.” Human personhood is ontogenetically stratified. In relation with the world, “I” reflect upon the situation of the “Me,” and through relationships with “Us” come to develop a “You” which articulates my role in society. This in turn entails a changing “I” and a different “Me,” which I examine anew within a new round of personal morphogenesis. “I,” “Me,” “We,” and “You” are constantly changing in the process (Archer 2015b: 101–103).

Archer’s theory effectively articulates ontology and history.<sup>20</sup> In the framework of critical realism and the morphogenetic approach, an ontologically grounded view of the Self is developed. On the other hand, the resulting theory of socialization is not only conceptually sound, but also particularly suitable for studying socialization in the present social conditions. Therefore, it represents a considerable advance compared to the other strands of contemporary theory mentioned in section 2. My following discussion will deal mainly with the social and historical dimension, because the latter is the focus of the challenge I want to illustrate.

## **2. New Forms of Unity? Ontology, Time, and Sociality in Unfettered Morphogenesis**

The keystone of my argument is what Archer calls the “necessity of selection.” As she clarifies, the main features of a morphogenic society—especially the multiplying opportunities of action and experience and the incongruity of the messages coming from less and less consensual socializing agents—involve the necessity for people to select their possible actions, experiences, and life courses in such a way as to prioritize their goals and to establish the related compatibilities. Such a selection results in “giving one’s life a shape” (Archer 2000, 2012, 2015b: 128ff.). Since there is no generally accepted social norm or institutionalized coherence, such a selection

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<sup>20</sup> These two strictly related aspects of Archer’s work appear connected and distinguished with great effectiveness and synthesis in Archer (2015a, 2015b).

and harmonization can only be enacted by persons based on their concerns. Drawing on Charles Taylor's well-known work (1989), Archer explains that the need to shape a life corresponds to a more general "need of unity" in order for life to make sense. Her work may also be understood as a full-blown sociological argument about the forms in which such a unity is generated, through social relationships and the related reflections within, upon, and in regard to them (Archer 2015b: 135–142) on the part of socialized agents who are also "strong evaluators" (ibid.: 126).

The relevant point now is that such a relational reflexivity also unfolds in connection to a cultural repertoire, i.e., symbolical resources that can be appealed to in order to make sense of experience.<sup>21</sup> And these resources can come either from educational doctrines or from the cultural industry, or from other symbolical foci of society. In any case, culturally established ideas of the human individual closely interweave with the morphogenesis of the Self. Archer sheds light precisely on this point when she claims that

the spread of an epistemology of dissolution can have serious repercussions for one of our most distinctive human properties and powers—our reflexivity. Although our continuous sense of self is, I will argue, ontologically inviolable, our personal and social identities are epistemologically vulnerable. (...) Both then can be undermined by a reflexivity which repudiates concern as anything other than ephemeral, and which thus repulses the solidarity of self and its solidarity with others, which is necessary for commitment (Archer 2000: 2).

With this statement Archer is clearly pointing to the need for a cultural theory of socialization<sup>22</sup> (Arnett 1995). Her phrasing is quite effective, although I am more pessimistic (or optimistic, depending on one's anthropological options) about the possibility of crossing the boundary between epistemological and ontological vulnerability on the part of the scientific-technological complex. The thesis I will just begin to lay out here is that the very self-perception and self-understanding of human subjects

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<sup>21</sup> Joas also emphasizes that experience is articulated in the immediate emotions experienced, the subjective interpretation of experience, and the culturally established meanings of various social groups and communities (2009: 47–61).

<sup>22</sup> Although this insight is not systematically developed in her theory, I regard it as fully consistent with her whole theoretical fabric. When Archer mentions an "epistemology of dissolution," she is referring to the postmodernist views that tend to deconstruct any idea of a human subject. The whole book *Being Human* is dedicated to countering such a trend.

may change, involving memory and the deep structures of conscious operations.

From the vantage point of socialization theory some crucial issues can be raised. The essential question is: what is it that could presently “undermine” personal reflexivity, and what would be the consequences? It is here that personal ontology interacts with some special features of the contemporary socio-historical formation. And here the connection between structures of consciousness and forms of symbolization also comes into play. My tentative response starts from the claim that we may be witnessing the emergence of biographies and forms of life that tend to escape the necessity of selection and to reject the idea that life can (and indeed must) have a shape. Is it not possible that the morphogenic society “taken seriously” may disclose “another side” of its constitutive features, one that challenges the concern-oriented type of personal reflexivity? Following Taylor’s theme, it is well known that the transformations of modern identity resulted in a fundamental fragmentation, and in the opposition between experience and identity whereby the idea of a unified Self allegedly comes to an end—fading in an unintegrated flux of expressivity (Taylor 1989: 456–465). Taylor’s famous argument becomes relevant here in two particular respects. Firstly, in the same pages he also hints at “new forms of unity” of the Self, corresponding to new ways of inhabiting time—which are then left fundamentally unexplored. This prompts us to investigate new modes of self-understanding and personal reflexivity, which are not just residual and caused by reflexive failures. It is, of course, true that some features of the morphogenic society may result in agents becoming passive, and in the growth of expressive reflexives or distracted people through digital surfeit. That this whole cultural trend may result in more “casualties” of reflexivity is a possibility by no means to be dismissed. But the real novelty I want to highlight is that beyond the category of the “fractured reflexives” (Archer 2003, 2007)—who are unable to articulate purposeful plans or a real quest for unity of life—a peculiar type of reflexivity may be emerging which underpins genuine “forms of unification of the Self” in their own right.

Secondly, if Taylor’s basic assumptions are accepted, then it also becomes clear that the impulse to reject the selective imperative and the need to shape a life represents no “critique” of Archer’s theory of socialization and identity. The latter provides a sociological conceptualization of those “inescapable frameworks” within which “normal” (or “healthy”) human identities grow. It is the attempt to break out of that symbolical landscape which constitutes an unprecedented cultural and practical challenge—one

that possibly leads human reflexivity and identity toward the unknown land of the post-human.

The task of this essay is to sketch an outline of that challenge. Such a brief outline will revolve around three dimensions, namely, ontology, time, and sociality. The culture of society—the educational doctrines and practices as well as any other symbolical source of the self—can be interpreted with reference to those domains. When a person reflects on his or her identity and on what he or she cares about, he or she is always referring—at least implicitly—to the type of entity he or she believes he or she is, to what other people mean for his or her self-fulfilment, and to how he or she sees her life over time. Being materialistic and utilitarian “middlescents”<sup>23</sup> rather than community-oriented or spiritually sensible persons, and reaching any form of mature integrity, involves specific differences in all those aspects. People interact with the natural, practical, and social layers of reality along those vectors. Therefore, they are also the unavoidable focal points of every discourse on education/socialization that aims to indicate an “ideal” for persons to pursue. Along these axes I would like to pinpoint—although in a still modest and introductory way—a few boundary lines separating the emergent identity-building processes from a concern-oriented type of reflexivity.

## 2.1. Morphogenesis and Personal Ontology

At the level of personal ontology, an emergent and increasing tendency is the “naturalistic” view of the human person. Broadly speaking, such a standpoint is ultimately rooted in various versions of neuroscience and in the profound revision of human self-understanding it has fostered. In particular, it challenges the notion of human reflexivity as the expression of a consciousness endowed with distinctive properties, including free will. In this respect, a useful starting point for discussion is provided by Habermas (2007), who emphasizes that “first person” experience may be very hard to reconcile with the supposed “enlightenment” produced by neuroscience. While the former leads to belief in the irreducibility of one’s personal consciousness, the other sharply denies it. The idea of responsible agency entails the capacity to reflect, distancing oneself from concrete situations, and to deliberate regarding the goods involved. Further, it implies the ubiquitous ability to decide in different ways, be-

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<sup>23</sup> This word is often employed in research on adulthood to indicate a type of personality that presents some features of adolescence in middle-aged persons (“middle-aged adolescents”).

cause no compelling reason acts upon consciousness in the same way as a natural cause does. In the wake of neuroscientific discoveries, such a responsible agency risks being reduced to a mere language game and being deprived of any validity. One example is the increasing spread of naturalistic explanations in the domain of criminal law, which threatens the idea of personal responsibility. If this trend were to lead finally to a paradigm change, the impact would be immense. Habermas notes that such an enlightenment crosses the conceptual threshold into human “self-objectification,” because the shift in the naturalization of the human mind “dissolves the perspective from which alone an increase in knowledge could be experienced as emancipation from constraints” (2007: 24). He is thereby indicating a performative limit of the naturalistic semantics. If the “lights” of new knowledge dissolve the very notion of the human person, they also remove the self-reference to any real Self that could be enlightened. Thus, Habermas wonders whether it would be possible to “adapt one’s normatively molded consciousness to an objectivating self-description, according to which one’s own thoughts, intentions, and actions are not just instantiated by brain processes, but completely determined by them” (ibid.: 23). Would it be possible for subjects to develop the capacity of “harmonization” and “articulation” (*Sagbarkeit*) of what is emerging from unconscious processes, and should be recognized as such, with conscious reasons? Habermas reminds us that Wolf Singer—an accomplished supporter of the new semantics of the human—has employed the term “maturity” to qualify such an awareness, but goes on to ask what this word could mean in the present context (ibid.). To this I would respond that such a form of “maturity” could lead to the embrace of a brand new sense of being human. This would amount to some updated version of Charles Taylor’s famous “Victorian courage”—an attitude that emerged in the West after the devastating revolution in human self-understanding prompted by Darwin’s work. That existential attitude essentially consists in the “heroism of incredulity,” which Taylor describes as “the deep spiritual satisfaction one derives from facing the truth of things, although this may be bleak and discouraging” (Taylor 1989: 404). In the present case, the truth about ourselves would be our non-existence as persons, our being nothing more than “what” (not “who”) we are. The highest performance allowed to our species would be to realize this, and to try to coordinate the unconscious impulses with the “superstructural” reasons that appear to consciousness. As Niklas Luhmann would conclude, we are a close, self-referential, self-reproducing network. “And there is nothing more to

say” (Luhmann 1986: 325).<sup>24</sup> The meaning of such words as maturity and emancipation would then change radically, in that they would refer exclusively to removing the limits of what it is possible to experience.<sup>25</sup>

The Habermasian mention of a “normatively molded” consciousness evokes socialization, which is the fundamental process through which such a “moulding” is achieved. The naturalistic view is not limited to the sphere of the research professions— which would really represent nothing new. Beyond those social groups that we could define as the “anthropological avant-garde,” a similar perspective is beginning to affect the educational discourse as well. Educational doctrines and programmes may already be influenced by the kind of reductionism we have just discussed.<sup>26</sup> The idea of removing the limits to what can be experienced, and thereby developing an original notion of “mature” identity, may be part of the current educational discourse. And the loss of meaning on the part of the young people who should be enlightened by such doctrines could be the related “collateral damage.” The current techniques and practices that might lead to human enhancement—about which a hugely extended literature already exists—must be meaningfully connected to such shifting self-understanding, and to its roots within the educational discourse as well.

The alternative Habermas proposes, despite misgivings and qualifications, would be to conceive of human beings in terms of a layered ontology of emergent properties (2007: 40). In doing this he indicates an important path. But two further steps are necessary to explore it. First, such a model must include personal properties and powers in the strict sense. On the contrary, Habermas thinks in terms of a two-layer model, going from the biological level straight to grammar and communication rules. This is likely to be an insufficiently layered ground to escape reductionism, in that it does not really account for those properties one would want to reassert. Second, as Habermas himself notes, the relationships connecting the various layers must be spelled out. If these are totally contingent, it becomes impossible to avoid self-objectification. All of this calls for a realist view of

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<sup>24</sup> See also Luhmann (1995, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Emancipation would then coincide with “morphological freedom” (Rodotà 2012). For a brief discussion see also Maccarini (2016b).

<sup>26</sup> This occurs in many health education and sexual education programmes (and other programmes that are loosely connected to various aspects of personal or social identity) fostered by the relevant ministries in various European countries. They produce a vast quantity of materials—books, videos, etc.—to be used in actual teaching environments. It is impossible here to present an analysis of this vast array of documents. For examples, one might look at the interesting documents produced by the Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA), Department of Sexuaufklärung, Verhütung und Familienplanung. See also the reflections by Sullivan (2012).



the human being—one, Habermas believes, for which we are left “without representation” (2007: 40).

## 2.2. Morphogenesis and Lifetime

A concern-oriented kind of reflexivity generates and entails a particular way of inhabiting one’s life time. Archer projects the process of morphogenesis of the Self upon this axis, providing an instructive scheme for our argument (see Fig. 1 below). Its rationale can be explained as follows. The “Me” (i.e., the “past selves”) is represented as a sequence of adjacent, higher and higher rectangles, indicating accumulating experience and determinations. The active, dialogical “I” drives the evolution, whereas the “future selves” indicated as “You” are graphically represented as squares of equal dimensions. Archer makes clear that such a “You” changes over time, “be it only because its potential is diminished” (2003: 112). Therefore, the Figure might need to be amended to illustrate how in various ages of life the possible future selves make first an expanding, then shrink-

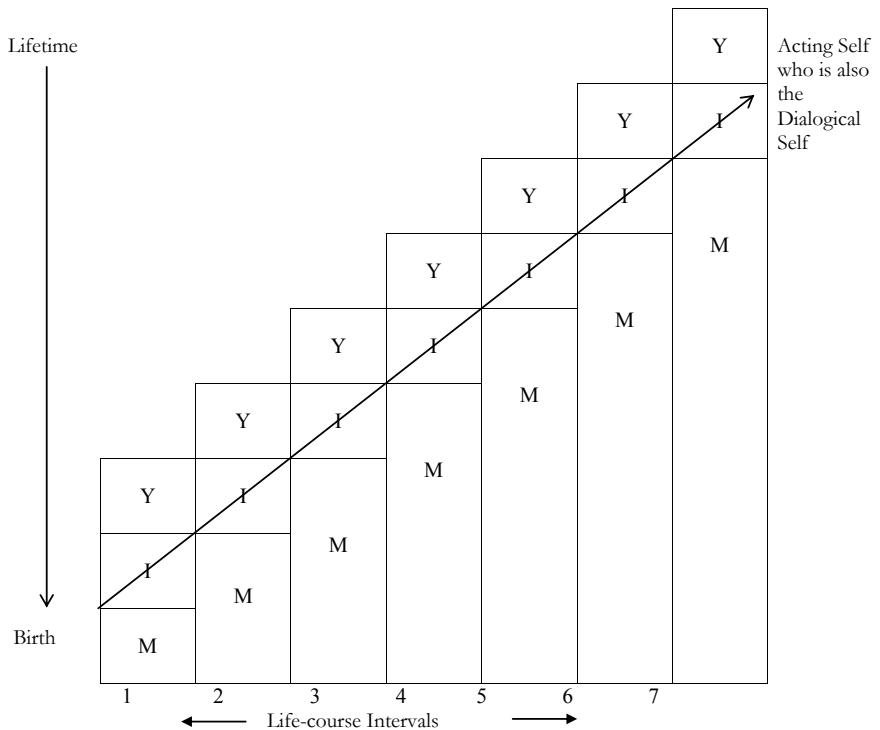


Figure 1. Phases of the Self over time (Archer 2003: 114).

ing, horizon—until the time comes when the human potential to “become other things,” to make choices, to undertake other roles, and to tread new paths diminishes until it is finally nullified. In any case, the scheme mentioned above is quite important, in that it shows a planning, reflexively linear view, which accepts the irreversible character of time, the accumulation of memory, and its relation to the future. The connection of this scheme to Archer’s theoretical bulk consists in the fact that such characteristics of time are contingent upon the two key factors stressed above, the necessity of selection and the need to shape a life. The notions of selection and shape conceptually imply an approach to time such as I have just outlined. In this respect, there is an interesting analogy between this perspective and the well-known argument Erik Erikson made about integrity. Integrity would involve “accepting one’s unique life cycle as what it had to be, which necessarily did not admit of any substitution” (1963: 268). Lack of self-integration is revealed by the “fear of death: the one and only life cycle is not accepted as the last in life. Despair expresses the feeling that time is now short, too short to try to start another life and to try alternative ways to achieve integrity” (ibid.: 269).<sup>27</sup> In Archer’s terms, this could be phrased by saying that despair occurs when one’s *modus vivendi* has been a failure, and by now time is perceived as too short to evaluate new experiences and start a new cycle of discernment, deliberation, and dedication. From a sociological standpoint, Archer’s approach should not be morally overburdened, since the concerns embraced by the subjects can widely differ in moral quality. Concerns should not be confused with “values.” But it is still true that relational reflexivity along the vector of time may lead to personal maturity and integrity, whereas denial of this engagement with the world—characterized by relations of concern and by the orientation to take care of things as well as of other people—is likely to result in a “desperate” self.

Arguably, the morphogenic society nourishes different views and practices, which can be respectively traced to either perspective. An example comes from life-course research. That life courses are contingent and deinstitutionalized, and that identities and existential goals may change rapidly, has been known for a long time. All of this is not a new problem. The model of the morphogenesis of the self by no means involves a slow, static, or highly ordered biography. Contingency and personal instability represent nothing but the intensification of the modern identity game. There

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<sup>27</sup> This culminates in the following “generative formula”: “healthy children will not be afraid of life if their parents have sufficient integrity not to be afraid of death” (Erikson 1963: 269).

are, however, three sets of phenomena which could be taken as indicators of the emergence of a substantially different temporal logic.

First of all, social acceleration fosters the accumulation of experience, deceptively translating temporal contingency (e.g., the rapid change in one's identity) into some kind of simultaneous "fullness," whereby identities and experiences appear to be reversible, so that one may "recall" them at any moment. This dismisses sequential temporality and alters the very notion of memory. That social acceleration may be taken as a functional equivalent of transcendence, i.e., as a different way to search for "fullness of life," has been claimed by Rosa (2013), drawing on Blumenberg's work (1986). I would add that this may happen precisely through the accumulation of experience and the effort to keep all options with us, making our life as reversible as possible in terms of choices, decisions, and experiences.

Secondly, field research has revealed a growing indetermination in regard to what "adulthood" really means, making it increasingly hard for society to attribute a clear meaning to this age of life. There are authors who blame this difficulty on the market, which has been accused of reshaping and "selling" again the old myth of eternal youth (Blatterer 2010). Be that as it may, this highlights a clear complication in the time line.

Finally, the field of study that has been known as thanatology is clearly indicating deep cultural changes in the way death and immortality are conceived (Bryant 2003). In this domain, research is showing that the need for immortality continues to lie at the basis of many human attitudes and behaviours—individual and collective—while many of these tend to exceed the symbolical forms typical of the old humanistic cultures.

### **2.3. Morphogenesis and Human Sociability**

In the social dimension of meaning numerous facts should be taken into account. First and foremost, there is a lack of value commitment—which has been made the object of a lot of empirical research, particularly concerning young people.<sup>28</sup> This topic includes political and civic commitment and orientation, as well as a broader emphasis on the inclination to

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<sup>28</sup> Citations would be superfluous, in that their number would be huge, and their results would probably be quite repetitive. Such studies are obviously important, particularly in regard to the future—e.g. the future of democracy, citizenship, or civil society—but if the underlying assumption is that youngsters represent a particularly problematic part of the population, then it would make little sense. It is now clear that the dynamics of commitment do not simply separate the young from older people, but follow more complex paths, along which generations can only be defined in relation to each other, to their cultural heritage, and to their historical context.

assume durable, long-term commitments. Such studies produce relevant outcomes in various domains. One example is the way commitment (and the lack thereof) may affect economic and financial decision-making.<sup>29</sup> Another regards the sphere of intimate relations, where the inclination to establish bonds that transcend individuals' momentary gratification has a profound influence upon reproductive behaviour—with the related consequences at the macro level of demographic trends. Indeed, the whole manner of imagining and experiencing parenthood needs fresh analysis.

Another relevant issue about the social dimension of meaning bears upon formal and informal associations, friendly networks, and the way people experience loneliness in late modern society. Both the structural, objective dimension and the subjective ways in which people make sense of their social bonds should be carefully examined.

To cut a long story short, there are emergent trends within our cultural system which stand in clear contradiction to the necessity of selecting and shaping a life. To the extent that those trends make their way into the educational discourse and practice— and more generally in people's lifestyles—they may result in a profound transformation of the ontological, temporal, and social structures of personal and collective life. If this were to prevail, the logic of opportunity that characterizes the morphogenic society would translate into a deep change in identity-building processes and outcomes.

### **/// Conclusions: Hypotheses on Human (Trans)formation**

Having taken all these things into consideration, it is now time to draw some provisional conclusions about socialization in the morphogenic society.

First, the approach to socialization as relational reflexivity represents an essential theoretical innovation intended to make sense of contemporary social dynamics. It combines two crucially important insights, namely the break with the concept of internalization and the connection between types of conscious processes and forms of symbolization—particularly ideas of the Self. Consequently, it can sustain the complexity that is necessary for a theory to function as the sociological reference point in the context of interdisciplinary reflections upon human transformation. Furthermore, it constitutes a considerable advance not only compared to clas-

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<sup>29</sup> See Richard Sennett's well-known *The dizzy life of Davos man* (1998), which indicates the characteristic human type of the financial elites.

sical socialization theory but also with respect to contemporary ecological approaches and developmental psychology, which emphasize the role of agency and subjectivity.

However, the role of culture must be more systematically integrated in the theory. A cultural theory of socialization involves the study of the emergent symbolical resources that are available within the cultural system to develop concepts of the Self. The latter in turn may well modify the forms of personal reflexivity. From this vantage point it becomes possible to highlight the different socialization processes and types of reflexivity that are likely to coexist within a morphogenic society. Some of these processes differ in that they constitute divergent ways to instantiate and institutionalize the logic of opportunity that characterizes unfettered morphogenesis. The morphogenic society not only fosters a reflexive imperative and nourishes a concern-oriented type of reflexivity, it is also the playground of cultural trends that deviate from the necessity of selecting and shaping a life—two necessary assumptions underlying a reflexive theory of socialization. To the extent that these ideal trends play a role in education/socialization—both in doctrines and practice—and are drawn upon by human subjects in their reflexive deliberations about themselves, they may explain the loss of touch with a whole range of moral emotions and the development of a brand new self-understanding of the human being and experience. Reflexivity is itself called into question in such a situation, and may undergo dramatic change. The whole self-understanding of human beings, down to their deepest emotional, perceptual, and symbolical structures, may alter.

A third conclusion is that the significance of such a transformation cannot be downplayed, even by lumping it in the big bag of postmodern deconstruction. Here I could only provide a quick—and by all means unsatisfactory—outline, organized around a few changes in the framework of human self-representation in the ontological, temporal, and social dimension of meaning. Nevertheless, such allusions have hopefully been sufficient to convey the message that a new, specific meaning of self-fulfilment is emerging—i.e., a particular way of searching for the “fullness of life” and the unity of experience. This is happening “after” deconstruction and, for all the possible connections, cannot be identified with it. Therefore, it is possible to speak of a new *paideia*, insofar as these symbolical features—elaborated by elites and avant-gardes endowed with economic, technological, political, and pedagogical resources—could coalesce and crystallize

new ideals of the Self. What is happening then is not just de-symbolization, but an emergent meta-narrative with its own mythology and symbolism.

Fourth, it is obviously still hard to describe the substantive features of the dawning forms of identity. The model of concern-oriented reflexivity may serve as a useful framework against which those emerging forms could be seen as “deviations.” This does not amount to turning such a model into a normative ideal. But there is an undeniable connection between a particular type of process and the likeliness to tap into certain goods, individual and collective. Indeed, such goods become visible for a given type of person, who has certain skills and capacities. One central element in the emerging self-representation seems to be the rejection of a given shape and definition—which may leave something outside the range of one’s individuality. This could be conducive to a personal ontology entirely determined by the desire of ever-contingent self-definition. In this symbolical landscape, (a) expressive and instrumental traits interweave in unprecedented ways, and (b) the typical conflicts of modern identity and socialization reappear in new guise, in a symbolical catastrophe blending and fusing opposite poles together. For example, individuals may turn out to be radically de-socialized and confused within hugely extended social networks. They may develop into lonely beings who tend to swallow other entities and to appropriate their typical forms of experience, or they may establish original forms of sociality and connectedness.

Fifth, it becomes clear that in the present societal and cultural predicament the struggle for developing “within a human form” will also depend upon capacities and competences that are themselves culturally/epistemologically vulnerable. The capacity to reflect upon oneself in relation to the world (and vice versa), to understand oneself as a unified being, to evaluate one’s emotions, to discern, deliberate and commit oneself to a given lifestyle —although based on universally human dispositions—is not something that just happens, but requires particular competences—particularly within an overall socio-cultural context in which such a process cannot be taken for granted. This once again calls education into question, in that such competences can be taught and learned. Therefore, the integration of Archer’s theory of reflexivity with some strands of competence-oriented thinking about education/socialization must be part of the agenda for future research.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> An example is provided by the tentative connections between the educational discourse on “character” and theories of social and emotional learning. For an introductory discussion see Maccarini (2016a).

Finally, the underlying hypothesis that has inspired my argument is that the emergent semantics of the Self reveal a manifest convergence with the ideological offshoot of the scientific-technological complex. This reflects the fact that human agency is increasingly inscribed within systems of action, communication, and social regulation that are technically shaped and controlled. Such new ways of self-understanding anticipate identity-building processes and outcomes that may be called “post-human.” If I had to choose a single message that I want to convey in the present essay, it would be the need to understand that education and socialization are among the protagonists in the profound anthropological change we are undergoing. To a great extent, and in a more literal sense than in past times, human beings will be what they are taught to desire.

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### /// Abstract

This essay deals with reflexivity and socialization processes in late modernity. First, it is argued that within the societal frame of “unbound morphogenesis” socialization theory is most adequately articulated into a realist-morphogenetic approach, which conceives of socialization as a reflexive, concern-oriented, relational process. However, the so-called morphogenic society involves profound cultural change, impinging upon the idea of the self and its fundamental need to “shape a life.” When such changes are integrated within socialization theory, it becomes clear that different identity-building processes co-exist, including ones that would bring about deep transformations of human reflexivity and challenge its “regular” operation. A brief outline of such a challenge is provided, along the dimensions of personal ontology, time, and sociality. Finally, the need is indicated to develop Archer’s model further, and some provisional conclusions are drawn concerning the possible developmental paths of human personhood depending on these dynamic factors.

Keywords:

socialization, reflexivity, identity, concern, morphogenesis

/// **Andrea M. Maccarini**—full professor, department associate chair, and programme director for graduate studies at the Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies, University of Padova, and head of the Class of Social Sciences in the Galilean School of Higher Studies. He is affiliated with the University of Bologna and has been a visiting scholar at UCLA, Boston University, Humboldt-Universität Berlin, and other universities. He is a board member of IACR, a collaborator of the Center for Social Ontology, an associate chair of OECD-Ceri, and on the editorial board of various journals. He is a co-author in the recent “Social Morphogenesis” series, and has published extensively on education policy, socialization processes, and identity-building. He is engaged in research into adolescent character skills and millennials, is writing on the connection between war, violence, and human rights in the twenty-first century, and working on a book about post-human cultural trends, reflexivity, and socialization processes.

E-mail: [andrea.maccarini@unipd.it](mailto:andrea.maccarini@unipd.it)

